

AMY HARMON

A
DIFFERENT
BLUE

*A
Different
Blue*

~ A Novel ~

By Amy Harmon

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Amazon Edition

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To Mom and Dad

Because of you,
I've always known who I am.

Prologue

AUGUST 1993

The heat was stifling, and the little girl tossed in the back seat. Her face was flushed, and the blanket she laid on had ridden up and her cheek lay against the plastic seat. She slept on, seemingly unbothered. She was amazingly resilient for such a tiny girl. Didn't cry often, didn't complain. Her mother rolled down the windows all the way, not that it helped all that much, but the sun had gone down and it no longer beat against the car. The darkness was a relief, even if it was still over 100 degrees outside, plus it made them less conspicuous. The air-conditioner worked well enough as long as the car was in motion, but they had been sitting in a wedge of paltry shade watching the truck for two hours, waiting for the man to come out.

The woman behind the wheel bit at her fingernails and debated whether or not to give it up. What would she say to him? But she needed help. The money she had taken from her mother hadn't lasted long. Ethan's parents had given her \$2,000, but gas and motels and food ate it up quicker than she would have ever believed. So she'd done a few things along the way she wasn't proud of, but she rationalized that she did what she had to do. She had a kid now. She had to take care of her, even if it meant trading sex for money or favors. *Or drugs*, a little voice whispered inside her head. She pushed the thought away, knowing she wasn't going to last long. She needed another hit.

She had come so far. She couldn't believe she had ended up here, not that far from home. A few hours is all. And she had been halfway across the country and back with nothing to show for it.

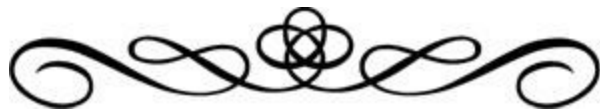
Suddenly, he was there, walking back toward the truck. He pulled his keys from his pocket and attempted to unlock the passenger door. He was met by a scruffy grey and black dog that had been sleeping beneath the vehicle, waiting, like she was, for the man to return to his truck. The dog circled the man's legs as he jimmied the handle back and forth. She heard the man curse under his breath.

"Damn thing. Gonna have to replace that handle."

The man managed to yank the passenger door open, and the dog leaped up into the seat, confident of his place in the world. The man shut the door

behind the dog and wiggled the handle once more. The man didn't see her watching him. He just walked around the front of his truck, climbed in behind the wheel, and eased the truck and trailer out of the parking space he had occupied for the last few hours. His eyes slid right over her as he rumbled past, not pausing, not hesitating. Wasn't that just typical? Not even a second look. Not even a second thought. Anger welled up inside her. She was tired of being looked over, passed by, ignored, rejected.

She started her car and followed him, keeping far enough back that he wouldn't get suspicious. But why would he? He didn't even know she existed. That made her invisible, didn't it? She would follow him all night if she had to.



AUGUST 5, 1993

The call came in just before four o'clock in the afternoon, and Officer Moody was in no mood for it. His shift was about to end, but he told dispatch he would respond and pulled into the parking lot of the Stowaway. If the name was an indicator, only stowaways would want to stay at the dumpsy motel. A neon traveler's trunk with a head poking up out of the lid fizzled in the afternoon heat. Officer Moody had lived in Reno all of his twenty-eight years, and he knew as well as anyone that a good night's rest wasn't the reason people frequented the Stowaway. He heard the wail of an ambulance. Obviously the desk clerk had made more than one call. He had had a gurgling gut ache all afternoon. Damn burritos. He had wolfed them down gleefully at noon, loaded with cheese, guacamole, shredded pork, sour cream, and green chilies, but he was paying for it now. He really needed to go home. He desperately hoped the desk clerk was wrong about the guest in an upstairs room and he could wrap things up quickly and be done with the day.

But the desk clerk wasn't wrong. The woman was dead. No mistake. It was August, and she had probably been closed up in room 246 for 48 hours. August in Reno, Nevada was hot and dry. And the body reeked. The burritos

threatened, and Officer Moody, without touching anything, made a hasty retreat, telling the paramedics hurrying up the stairs that they wouldn't be needed. His supervisor would have his head if he let them trample all over the scene. He closed the door to room 246 behind him and told the curious desk clerk that police would be swarming all over the premises and that they would need her assistance. Then he called his supervisor.

"Martinez? We've got a woman, obviously dead. I've secured the scene. Paramedics have been turned away. Requesting assistance."

An hour later, the crime scene tech was snapping pictures, police were canvassing the area, questioning every guest, every nearby business, every employee. Detective Andy Martinez, Officer Moody's supervisor, had commandeered the surveillance camera. Miracle of miracles, there actually was one at the Stowaway. The coroner had been called and was en route.

When questioned, the desk clerk claimed they had not been renting out the room because the air conditioner was broken. Nobody had been in or out of the room for more than two days. A repairman had been scheduled, but fixing the air conditioner had not been a huge priority. Nobody knew how the woman had gotten into the hotel room, but she definitely hadn't signed in and used something as helpful as a credit card to pay for her stay. And she didn't have any ID on her. Unfortunately for the investigation, the woman had been dead for two days or longer, and the hotel wasn't one that attracted long stays. The Stowaway sat just off the freeway on the outskirts of town and whoever may have seen or heard anything from the night she had died was no longer at the motel.

When Officer Moody finally made it home at eight o'clock that night, he felt no better than he had earlier, and they still hadn't made an identification of the woman found dead with nothing with the clothes on her back to guide the investigation. Moody had a bad feeling about the whole thing, and he didn't think it had anything to do with the burritos.



AUGUST 6, 1993

“Any luck making an ID?” Officer Moody hadn't been able to get the woman out of his head. It bothered him all night. It wasn't his case. Patrolmen didn't head investigations. But Martinez was his supervisor and was willing to share, especially when the case seemed to be coming to a rapid close.

“Coroner rolled her prints,” Detective Martinez offered.

“Oh, yeah? Any luck?”

“Yep. She's got a few priors, mostly drug related. Got a name, an old address. Just turned nineteen. August 3 was her birthday, actually.” Detective Martinez winced.

“You mean she died on her birthday?”

“That's what the coroner says, yeah.”

“Drug overdose?” Officer Moody didn't know if he'd get an answer on this one. Detective Martinez could be pretty close-mouthed.

“That's what we thought. But when the coroner rolled her, the back of her head was bashed in.”

“Ah, hell,” Officer Moody groaned. Now they were looking for a murderer, too.

“We don't know if it was the drugs or the head wound that finished her off, but someone tried to do the job. It looked like she'd taken a little bit of everything from some of the paraphernalia at the scene. She probably had enough crap in her system to down an entire cheer leading squad,” Martinez was forthcoming.

“Cheer-leading squad?” Moody laughed a little.

“Yeah. She was a cheerleader at a little school in Southern Utah . It was in the police report. She apparently shared some Ecstasy with her teammates and was caught and charged with possession. Only reason she wasn't locked up was because she was a minor and it was her first offense. And she was sharing, not selling. We've touched base with local authorities there. They're going to notify the family.”

“You get anything off the surveillance tape?”

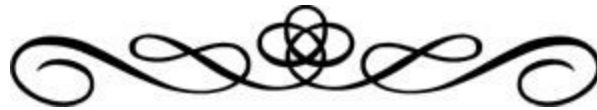
“Yep. Just as plain as can be. We have her walking into the lobby about midnight and climbing through the reception window, over the front desk, right into the office area. Desk clerk claims she usually locks everything up when she has to step away from the desk, but she had the stomach flu and rushed to the bathroom without buttoning things up.” Officer Moody thought

briefly of his bout with the burritos as Martinez continued.

“Camera shows the girl rifling around and grabbing a key. They still use the actual keys, you know. No modern key cards for the Stowaway. Desk clerk says the key had been pulled and set aside because of the air conditioning problems. There was a work order with the key. Girl wasn't a dummy. She took the key knowing she could probably hang out in the room for the night and nobody would know. And that's not all. The camera shows her car coming into the motel with her in it and leaving an hour later with a man at the wheel. We've got an APB out on that car.”

“That's great. Looks like you got it just about locked down then,” Moody sighed, relieved.

“Yep. Looks like we'll be able to put this one to bed pretty soon,” Detective Martinez agreed.



AUGUST 7, 1993

“All right. Listen up.” Detective Martinez lifted his hands and waved everyone quiet for morning briefing. “We just got word from the authorities in Southern Utah that the woman found dead at the Stowaway last Friday, August 5 is reported to have a two-year-old child. You have a description and a picture of the woman on the flyer in front of you. At this point, we have had no indication that a child was with her in the hours leading up to her death. There was no sign of a child in the surveillance video nor any sign that a child had ever been in the motel room. The family of the deceased had not seen the woman or child in over a year, so we have no way of knowing at what point the woman and her child parted company.”

“Media has been contacted. We have also notified the appropriate agencies as well as inputting this information in NCIS. We need to start canvassing the area again with the flyer. Let's get this woman's picture out as fast as we can. See if anyone remembers seeing this woman and whether or not she had a child with her. We have no current pictures of the toddler, but the

grandmother gave us a basic description. Child is believed to have dark hair and blue eyes. Ethnicity: Native American, although the father of the child is believed to be white, which may account for the blue eyes. The mother has been dead now for five days, and we all know how transient the clientele at the Stowaway is. We've lost some precious time and need to work fast. Let's get on it, people."

Chapter One

Bold

SEPTEMBER 2010

The bell had rung ten minutes ago, but I wasn't too worried. Actually, the truth was I didn't care, so why would I worry? The first day of school was useless anyway. Most of the teachers didn't mark tardies on the first day or yell at you in front of the class. It was the last period of the day, and my mind had already left the building and fled out over the desert and into the hills in search of shapes and silhouettes. Already, I could feel the wood beneath my hands. Reluctantly, I forced my mind back to my body and straightened my shoulders so I could make an impression as I walked into class, which was usually my goal. Partly because I enjoyed the attention but mostly because I knew if people were intimidated by me they would leave me alone. Teachers left me alone, overly friendly girls who wanted to be BFF's left me alone, but the guys were usually at my beck and call if and when I wanted one of them.

I whipped back my long black hair as I entered the room. My eyes were heavily made up, and my jeans were so tight that sitting down was highly uncomfortable, although I'd perfected the art of slouching so they didn't pinch . . . too much. I cracked my gum and slid one eyebrow up disdainfully as I looked for an empty seat. All eyes swiveled toward me as I sauntered up the center aisle and slid into the seat right in front, dead center. Damn. Being late had its downside. I took my time taking off my jacket and dropping my purse to the floor. I hadn't even deigned to look in the direction of the new teacher whose voice had faded to silence at my arrival. A few people snickered at my nonchalant display, and I shot a venomous sneer in the general direction of the laughter. It stopped. Finally, I slid into my seat and raised my eyes to the front of the classroom, sighing deeply and loudly.

"Carry on," I droned, with another toss of my hair.

"Mr. Wilson" was written across the whiteboard in capital letters. My eyes locked on him. He was staring at me with a furrowed brow and a slight smile. Dark hair in need of a haircut curled above his ears and fell onto his forehead. It looked as if he had tried to tame it into respectability, but his mop had

obviously rebelled at some point during his first day at Boulder High School. I raised my eyebrows in amazement and tried hard not to snort out loud. He looked like a student. In fact, if he hadn't had on a tie, knotted hastily over a blue button-up dress shirt with a pair of khakis, I would have thought he was some kind of teacher's aid.

"Hello," he said politely. He had a British accent. What was a guy with a British accent doing in Boulder City, Nevada? His tone was warm and friendly, and he seemed unbothered by my purposeful disrespect. He looked down at the roll that was sitting on a music stand to his right.

"You must be Blue Echohawk . . ." His voice trailed off a little and his expression was one of muted surprise. The name tends to throw people. I have dark hair, but my eyes are very blue. I don't really look like an Indian.

"And you must be Mr. Wilson," I retorted.

Laughter rang out. Mr. Wilson smiled. "I am. As I was telling your classmates, you may call me Wilson. Except when you are late or disrespectful, in which case I would appreciate the Mr," he finished mildly.

"Well in that case, I guess I'd better stick to Mr. Wilson then. Because I'm usually late, and I'm always disrespectful." I smiled back sweetly.

Mr. Wilson shrugged. "We'll see." He stared at me for another second. The set of his grey eyes made him look slightly mournful, like one of those dogs with the liquid gaze and the long expression. He didn't strike me as a barrel of laughs. I sighed again. I knew I didn't want to take this class. History was my least favorite subject. European History sounded about as bad as you could get.

"Literature is my favorite subject." Mr. Wilson's eyes left my face as he launched into an introduction of the course. He said the word literature with only three syllables. Lit-ra-ture. I wiggled myself into a mostly comfortable position and stared crossly at the young professor.

"You might wonder, then, why I'm teaching history."

I didn't think anyone cared enough to wonder, but we were all a little transfixed by his accent. He continued.

"Remove the first two letters off the word history. Now what does it spell?"

"Story," some eager beaver chirped from behind me.

"Exactly." Mr. Wilson nodded sagely. "And that's what history is. A story. It's someone's story. As a boy, I discovered that I would much rather read a

book than listen to a lecture. Literature makes history come to life. It is maybe the most accurate depiction of history, especially literature that was written in the time period depicted in the story. My job this year is to introduce you to stories that open your mind to a broader world – a colorful history – and to help you see the connections to your own life. I promise to not be too dull if you promise to attempt to listen and learn."

"How old are you?" a girl's voice rang out flirtatiously.

"You sound like Harry Potter," some guy grunted from the back of the room. There were a few giggles, and Mr. Wilson's ears turned red where they peeked out beneath the hair that curled around them. He ignored the question and the comment and began handing out sheets of paper. There were some groans. Paper meant work.

"Look at the page in front of you," Mr. Wilson instructed, as he finished distributing the sheets. He walked to the front of the classroom and leaned against the whiteboard, folding his arms. He looked at us for several seconds, making sure we were all with him. "It's blank. Nothing's been written on the page. It's a clean slate. Kind of like the rest of your life. Blank, unknown, unwritten. But you all have a history, yes?"

A few kids nodded their heads agreeably. I looked at the clock. Half an hour until I could take off these jeans.

"You all have a story. It's been written up to this point, to this very second. And I want to know that story. I want to know YOUR history. I want you to know it. For the rest of the class time I want you to tell me your story. Don't worry about being perfect. Perfect is boring. I don't care about run-on sentences or misspelled words. That's not my purpose. I just want an honest account – whatever you are willing to divulge. I will collect them at the end of the hour."

Desk chairs scraped, zippers were yanked opened in search of pens, and complaints were uttered as I stared down at the paper. I ran my fingertips down it, imagining I could feel the lines that ran in horizontal blue stripes. The feel of the paper soothed me, and I thought what a waste it was to fill it with squiggles and marks. I laid my head down on the desk, on top of the paper, and closed my eyes, breathing in. The paper smelled clean, with just a hint of sawdust. I let my mind linger on the fragrance, imagining the paper beneath my cheek was one of my carvings, imagining I was rubbing my hands along the curves and grooves that I'd sanded down, layer upon layer,

uncovering the beauty beneath the bark. It would be a shame to mar it. Just like it was a shame to ruin a perfectly good sheet of paper. I sat up and stared at the pristine page in front of me. I didn't want to tell my story. Jimmy said to really understand something you had to know its story. But he'd been talking about a blackbird at the time.

Jimmy had loved birds. If woodworking was his gift, bird watching was his hobby. He had a pair of binoculars, and he would often hike to a high spot where he could observe and document what he saw. He said birds were messengers and that if you watched them closely enough, you could discern all sorts of things. Shifting winds, approaching storms, dropping temperatures. You could even predict if there was danger nearby.

When I was very small it was hard for me to sit still. It actually still is. Birdwatching was hard for me, so Jimmy started leaving me behind when I was old enough to remain at camp alone. I was much more responsive to woodcarving simply because it was so physical.

I must have been seven or eight the first time I saw Jimmy get really excited about a bird sighting. We were in southern Utah, and I remember where we were only because Jimmy remarked on it.

"What is he doing in these parts?" he had marveled, his eyes fixed on a scrubby pine tree. I had followed his gaze to a little black bird perched halfway up the tree on a thin branch. Jimmy went for his binoculars, and I stayed still, watching the little bird. I didn't see anything special about it. It just looked like a bird. Its feathers were solid black – no flash of color to draw the eye or brilliant markings to admire.

"Yep. That's a Eurasian Blackbird all right. There are no blackbirds native to North America. Not like this guy. He's actually a thrush." Jimmy was back, his voice a whisper as he looked through his binoculars. "He's a long way from home, or else he's escaped from somewhere."

I whispered too, not wanting to scare it away if Jimmy thought it was special.

"Where do blackbirds usually live?"

"Europe, Asia, North Africa," Jimmy murmured watching the orange-billed bird. "You can find them in Australia and New Zealand too."

"How do you know it's a he?"

"Because the females don't have the glossy black feathers. They aren't as pretty."

The little yellow eyes peered down at us, fully aware that we were watching. Without warning, the bird flew away. Jimmy watched him go, tracking him through the binoculars until he was beyond sight.

"His wings were as black as your hair," Jimmy commented, turning away from the bird that had enlivened our morning. "Maybe that's what you are . . . a little blackbird a long way from home."

I looked at our camper sitting in the trees. "We're not a long way from home, Jimmy," I said, confused. Home was wherever Jimmy was.

"Blackbirds aren't considered bad luck like ravens and crows and other birds that are black. But they don't give up their secrets easily. They want us to figure them out. We have to earn their wisdom."

"How do we earn it?" I wrinkled my nose up at him, baffled.

"We have to learn their story."

"But he's a bird. How can we learn his story? He can't talk." I was literal in the way all kids are literal. I would have really liked it if the blackbird could tell me his story. I would keep him as a pet, and he could tell me stories all day. I begged for stories from Jimmy.

"First you have to really want to know." Jimmy looked down at me. "Then you have to watch. You have to listen. And after a while, you'll get to know him. You'll start to understand him. And he'll tell you his story."

I took out a pencil and spun it around my fingers. I wrote, "*Once Upon a Time*" across the top of my sheet, just to be a smart ass. I smirked at the line. As if my story was a fairy tale. My smile faded.

"*Once upon a time . . . there was a little blackbird,*" I wrote. I stared at the page. "*. . . pushed out of the nest, unwanted.*"

Images gathered in my head. Long dark hair. A pinched mouth. That was all I could remember of my mother. I replaced the pinched mouth with a gently smiling face. A completely different face. Jimmy's face. That face brought a twinge of pain. I moved my inner eye to his hands. Brown hands moving the chisel across the heavy beam. Wood shavings piled on the floor at his feet where I sat, watching them fall. The shavings drifted down around my head, and I closed my eyes and imagined that they were tiny pixies coming to play with me. These were the things I liked to remember. The memory of the first time he had held my smaller hand in his and helped me strip away the heavy bark from an old stump rose in my mind like a welcome friend. He was talking softly about the image beneath the surface. As I

listened to the memory of his voice, I let my mind trip back across the desert and up into the hills, remembering the gnarled claw of mesquite I had found the day before. It had been so heavy I'd had to drag it to my truck and hoist it, one side at time, into the truck bed. My fingers itched to peel back the charred skin and see what was beneath. I had a feeling about it. A shape was forming in my head. I tapped my feet and curled my fingers against the paper, daydreaming about what I could create.

The bell rang. The noise level in the room rose as if a switch had been flipped, and I jerked from my reverie and glared down at my page. My pathetic history waited for embellishment.

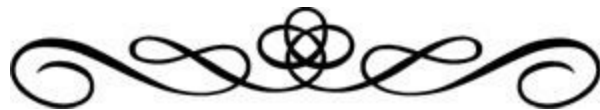
"Turn your papers in. And please make sure your name is at the top! I can't give you credit for your history if I don't know that it's yours!"

The room was empty in about ten seconds flat. Mr. Wilson struggled to align the stack of papers that had been shoved in his hands as students exuberantly vacated his classroom, eager for other things. The first day of school was officially over. He noticed me still sitting and cleared his throat a little.

"Miss . . . um . . . Echohawk?"

I stood abruptly and reached for my paper. I crumpled it into a ball and tossed it toward the trashcan beneath the white board. It didn't quite make it, but I didn't retrieve it. Instead, I grabbed my purse and the jacket that was completely unnecessary in the 110 degree heat that awaited me outside the school. I didn't look at my new teacher as I strode to the back of the room and swung my purse over my shoulder.

"Later, Wilson," I called out, not even turning my head.



Manny was waiting by my truck when I reached the student parking lot, and seeing him there made me groan. Manuel Jorge Rivas-Olivares, aka Manny, lived in my apartment complex. He and his little sister had adopted me. They were like the stray cats that would hang around your door and meow pitiously for days on end until you finally gave up and fed them. And

when you finally fed them, it was over. They were officially your cats.

So it was with Manny and Graciela. They just kept hanging around until I finally took pity on them. Now they thought they belonged to me, and I didn't know how to make them go away. Manny was sixteen and Graciela was fourteen. Both were small-boned and fine-featured, and both were incredibly sweet and annoying. Just like cats.

There was a bus that ran to the complex, and I made sure Manny's mother knew all about it and even assisted her in getting Manny and Graciela registered to ride it. I really thought this year would be different now that Graciela was in ninth grade and would be riding the high school bus too. Guess not. Manny was waiting for me with a big smile and an armful of books.

"Hey, Blue! How was your first day? Big senior year, Chica! I bet you'll be homecoming queen this year. The most beautiful girl in the school should be homecoming queen, and you are definitely the most beautiful girl!" Very sweet, very annoying. Manny spoke a mile a minute with a slight Hispanic accent and just a hint of a lisp, which might have been the accent but was more likely just Manny.

"Hey, Manny. What happened to riding the bus?"

Manny's smile slipped a little, and I felt bad for asking. He waved my question away and shrugged.

"I know, I know. I told Gloria I would take the bus, and I made sure Graciela caught it . . . but I wanted to ride home with you on the first day. Did you see the new history teacher? I have him for first period, and I can tell he's going to be the best teacher I've ever had . . . and the cutest too!"

Manny had recently started calling his mother Gloria. I wasn't sure what that was about. I also considered telling him he might want to reconsider calling Mr. Wilson cute. I assumed that was who he was talking about. I didn't think there were two new history teachers.

"I love his accent. I hardly heard anything he said all period!" Manny slid daintily in the passenger side when I unlocked my truck. I worried about the kid. He was more feminine than I was.

"I wonder what he is doing in Boulder? Ivy and Gabby are sure he is, like, MI-6 or something." Manny had dozens of girlfriends. In fact, the girls all loved him because he was so non-threatening and fun, which made me wonder again why he couldn't ride the bus. It wasn't like he didn't have

friends.

“What the hell is MI-6?” I grumped, trying to maneuver through the crush of vehicles leaving the school. I hit my brakes as someone cut me off and then hung his middle finger out the window as if I was the one who pulled out in front of him. Manny reached over my arm and pounded on the horn.

“Manny! Stop! I'm the one driving, okay?” I commanded, knocking his hand away. It didn't even faze him.

“You don't know what MI-6 is? Freaking James Bond? Chica, you need to get out more!”

“What would someone from MI-6 be doing at Boulder High School?” I laughed.

“Beats me, but he's British, he's hot, and he's young.” Manny ticked his points off on graceful fingers. “What else could it be?”

“You really think he's hot?” I questioned doubtfully.

“Oh, definitely. In a very naughty librarian kind of way.”

“Oh, sick, Manny. That only works when the librarian is female.”

“Fine, a naughty professor then. He's got sexy eyes and floppy curls and his forearms are very well-developed. He's a hottie in disguise. Totally MI-6. Do you have to work tonight?” Manny bounced to a new subject, having clearly proven the new Mr. Wilson must be a spy.

“It's Monday. Monday means work, Manny.” I knew what he was fishing for and resisted. “Stop feeding the kitties,” I reminded myself firmly.

“I could sure go for some of Bev's quesadillas right now. I am one hungry Mexican.” Manny laid the accent on thick. He only referred to his ethnicity when he talked about food. “I sure hope Gloria remembered to go shopping before she left for work. Otherwise, me and baby sister are eating Ramen again,” Manny sighed mournfully.

The baby sister line was over the top, but I found myself weakening. Manny was the man of the house, and that meant providing for Graciela, which he did with gusto, even if providing meant asking me to provide. I worked at Bev's Cafe several nights a week, and without fail I brought home dinner for Manny and Graciela at least once during the week.

“Fine. I will bring you and Gracie some quesadillas. But this is the last time, Manny. It cuts into my paycheck,” I scolded. Manny smiled brilliantly at me and clapped his hands like Oprah does when she's excited.

“I will see if my uncle has any more mesquite you can have,” Manny

promised, and I nodded and stuck out my hand to shake on it.

“Deal.”

Manny's Uncle Sal worked on a crew with the forest service. They frequently cleared scrub and brush and kept the mesquite from encroaching on government owned ranches. Last time Sal had come through for me, I had enough wood to last me two months of serious carving. I drooled at the thought.

“Of course, that means you will owe me, chica,” Manny suggested innocently. “Dinners for at least a month of Mondays, okay?”

I just laughed at his negotiating skills. He already owed me for two months of Mondays. But we both knew I would agree. I always did.

Chapter Two

Eggshell

OCTOBER 2010

Maybe it was the stories I was drawn to. Every day it was a new story. And quite frequently, the stories were about women in history, or told from the perspective of the women. Maybe it was just Mr. Wilson's obvious love of the subject he taught. Maybe it was simply his cool accent and his youth. The entire student body tried to mimic him. Girls crowded around him, and the boys watched him, fascinated, as if a rockstar had descended into our midsts. He was the talk of the school, an overnight sensation, instantly beloved because he was a novelty – and a very attractive novelty if you liked slightly unruly hair and grey eyes and British accents, which I told myself I did not. He was definitely not my type. Still, I found myself looking forward to my last class of the day with irritating impatience and was probably more adversarial than I would have otherwise been simply because I was puzzled by his allure.

Mr. Wilson had spent an entire month on the ancient Greeks. We had discussed epic battles, deep thinkers, architecture, and art, but today Wilson was detailing the different gods and what each represented. It was actually pretty fascinating, I had to admit, but incredibly irrelevant. I volunteered this observation, of course.

“This isn't exactly history,” I pointed out.

“The myths may not be historical fact, but the fact that the Greeks believed in them is,” Wilson responded patiently. “You must understand that Greek gods are an intrinsic part of Greek mythology. Our introduction to the ancient Greek gods can be traced all the way back to the writings of Homer in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Many scholars believe that the myths were actually influenced by the Mycenaean culture that existed in Greece between 1700 and 1100 BC. There is also evidence that the beginnings of Greek mythology can be traced back to the ancient Middle Eastern cultures of Mesopotamia and Anatolia because of the similarities between the mythology of these ancient Middle Eastern cultures and the ancient Greeks.”

We all just stared at him. What he'd said was about as clear as mud. He seemed to take note of our "huh?" expressions.

"The Greeks had a god to explain everything." Wilson wasn't about to be deterred, and he dug into his argument. "The sunrises, the sunsets, their tragedies and their triumphs were all connected to the existence of these gods. In many ways, their gods brought sense to a senseless world. A strangely-shaped rock could be said to be a god disguised as a stone, or an unusually large tree might be a god in disguise as well. And that tree would be worshipped for fear that the god would retaliate. There were gods everywhere, and everything could be used as evidence of their existence. Wars were started in the names of the gods, oracles were consulted and their advice heeded, however hurtful or strange or bizarre that advice might be. Even the storm winds were personified. They were thought to be harpies – winged women who snatched things up, just like the wind, never to be seen again. Storm winds and the weather that came with them were blamed on these winged creatures."

"I thought a harpy was just an old-fashioned word for witch," a pimply kid named Bart volunteered. I was thinking the same thing but was glad someone else decided to speak up.

"In early versions of Greek myth, harpies were described as lovely-haired creatures, as beautiful women with wings. That changed over time, and in Roman mythology they were described as hideous-faced beasts with talons and even beaks. Hideous, nasty, bird-women. That image has persisted over time. Dante described the seventh hell in his *Inferno* as a place where harpies lived in the woods and tormented those who were sent there." Wilson started reciting the poem, apparently from memory.

"Here the repellent harpies make their nests,
Who drove the Trojans from the Strophades
With dire announcements of the coming woe.
They have broad wings, a human neck and face,
Clawed feet and swollen, feathered bellies; they caw
Their lamentations in the eerie trees."

"You have that lovely poem memorized, I see," I said sarcastically, although I was mostly dumbfounded. Wilson burst out laughing, his serious

face transformed by the action. I even cracked a smile. At least the guy could laugh at himself. Wow! Talk about a NERD. Who quoted Dante at will? And with that stuffy British accent I was sure he was going to say, "It's elementary, Miss Echohawk," every time I asked him a question. He was still smiling when he continued.

"To answer your question, Miss Echohawk, what we believe affects our world in a very real way. What we believe affects our choices, our actions, and subsequently, our lives. The Greeks believed in their gods, and this belief affected everything else. History is written according to what men believe, whether or not it's true. As the writer of your own history, what you believe influences the paths you take. Do you believe in something that may be a myth? I'm not talking about religious beliefs, per se. I'm talking about things you've told yourself, or things you've been told for so long that you just assume that they are true."

Mr. Wilson turned and picked up a stack of papers. He started passing them out as he talked.

"I want you to think about this. What if what you believe about yourself or about your life is simply a myth that is holding you back?"

Mr. Wilson set a wrinkled sheet of paper on my desk and moved on without comment. It was my personal history. The history I'd thrown toward the garbage can the first day of school. It had been pressed and smoothed, but it bore the signs of having been discarded. It would never be the same. No amount of pressing and smoothing would ever disguise the fact that it had been rescued from the trash.

"Once upon a time . . . there was a little blackbird, pushed from the nest. Unwanted."

I added a word. *Discarded*. I read it to myself.

"Once upon a time . . . there was a little blackbird, pushed from the nest. Unwanted. Discarded."

Just like trash. And no amount of pretending I wasn't trash would make me something else. Girls like me deserve their reputations. I cultivated mine. I suppose I could blame my upbringing, but it wasn't in me to make excuses for myself. I like boys and boys like me. Or at least they like the way I look. I guess it would be a lie to say they like me, the me I keep to myself. They don't know that girl. But that's part of the allure. I cultivated my look, too. I had sexy hair, and I always wore my jeans too tight and my shirts snug and

my eye makeup thick. And when I was being held or kissed or touched, I felt powerful and I felt wanted. I knew what some people called me. I knew the whispers behind the hands. I knew what the boys said about me. They said I was a slut. Pretending I wasn't would be believing a lie. A myth, like the Greeks with their silly Gods.

Jimmy had called me Bluebird. It was his own little nickname. But I bore no resemblance to a bluebird . . . sweet, bright, happy. I was more like a modern day harpy. A bird-woman. A female monster equipped with crooked, sharp talons. Mess with me, and I would carry you off to the underworld and punish and torment you for infinity. Maybe it wasn't my fault I was the way I was. Cheryl took me in when I was about eleven, and she didn't have much use for a kid. Her lifestyle wasn't conducive to motherhood. She was unaffectionate and absent most of the time, but she was all right. When I was younger she made sure I ate and that I had a bed of my own.

We lived in a two bedroom apartment in a dumpy complex on the outskirts of Boulder City, twenty minutes from the bright lights of Las Vegas. Cheryl was a dealer at the Golden Goblet Hotel Casino in Vegas, and she spent her days sleeping and her nights surrounded by gamblers and cigarette smoke, which suited her just fine. She usually had a boyfriend. The older she got, the more seedy her choice in men became. The older I got, the more interested they became in me. It made for a tense relationship. I knew that as soon as I graduated I would be on my own because the money for my care had stopped at eighteen, and I had turned nineteen in August. It was just a matter of time.

When class was over, I wadded up my paper and threw it back in the trash where it belonged. Mr. Wilson saw me do it, but I didn't care. Both Manny and Graciela were sitting on my tailgate talking to group of Manny's girlfriends when I reached the parking lot. I just sighed. First Manny, now Graciela. I was becoming the chauffeur. They were all laughing and chattering, and my head immediately started to hurt. One of the girls called out to a handful of guys gathered around a vintage yellow Camero.

"Brandon! Who are you taking to Homecoming? I still need a date, ya know!"

The girls around her twittered, and Brandon looked over to see who was propositioning him. Brandon was the younger brother of a guy I hung out with every now and then. Where Mason was brawny and dark, Brandon was lean and blond, but both were too good-looking for modesty. Mason had

graduated three years before, and Brandon was a Senior, like I was. I was older than all the guys my age, and though I could acknowledge good looks, I grew bored with them very easily and didn't make it a secret. Which is probably why I would NOT be crowned Homecoming Queen, despite Manny's high hopes and machinations.

"Sorry, Sasha. I asked Brooke last week. We definitely need to hang out sometime, though." Brandon smiled, and I was reminded how appealing Mason was when he was being sweet. Maybe it was time to give Mason a call. It had been a while.

"That car is seriously hot, Brandon," Manny called out, his voice raised above those of his friends.

"Uh, thanks, man." Brandon grimaced, and his friends looked away awkwardly. I winced for Brandon's sake and for Manny's.

"Manny, Gracie, let's go." I yanked my truck door open, hoping the loafers on my tailgate would scatter when I started it up. I watched through the rearview mirror as all of Manny's friends gave him hugs and made him promise to text. Gracie seemed transfixed by Brandon and his friends, and when everyone dispersed she was still sitting on the tailgate staring. Manny tugged on her, pulling her out of her reverie, and the two of them hopped in beside me. Graciela had a dazed look on her face, but Manny was pouting.

"I don't think Brandon likes me," he mused, looking at me for feedback.

"Brandon is so hot," Graciela sighed.

I cursed derisively. Wonderful. Brandon was waaaay too old for Graciela, and I wasn't just talking age. Graciela was small and pretty, but she was immature, both physically and emotionally. And she was spacey in a very "look at all the pretty flowers" kind of way. It was a good thing she had Manny. Otherwise she might just wander around in a pleasant fog. Both Manny and Graciela were unfazed by my language, continuing on as if they hadn't even heard me.

"In fact," Manny huffed, "I don't think any of Brandon's friends like me, either. And I am so nice!" Manny seemed genuinely befuddled.

"Do you think Brandon likes me, Manny?" Gracie pondered dreamily.

Manny and I ignored her. I decided it might be time to give Manny a little advice.

"I think maybe the guys are confused about how to treat you, Manny. You're a guy but you hang out exclusively with girls, you wear fingernail

polish and eyeliner, and you carry a purse . . .”

“It's a slouchy bag!”

“Fine! How many guys carry slouchy bags in rainbow colors?”

“It's just a backpack with flare!”

“Okay. Fine. Forget the backpack. You openly remark on how hot this or that guy is . . . including freaking Wilson, yet in the very next breath you are flirting with the head cheerleader. Are you gay? Are you straight? What?”

Manny seemed stunned that I would just come out and ask, and he stared at me with his mouth agape.

“I'm Manny!” Manny shot back, folding his arms. “That's what I am. I'm Manny! I don't know why I can't compliment a cute guy and a cute girl! Everybody needs positive reinforcement, Blue. It wouldn't hurt you to give some every once in a while!”

I banged my head against the steering wheel, frustrated by my obvious inability to communicate, wondering if maybe he was the only one in high school who wasn't afraid to be himself. Maybe it was the rest of us who needed to figure ourselves out.

“You're right, Manny. And believe me, I wouldn't change a hair on your head. I was just trying to explain why some people might have trouble relating.”

“You mean why some people might have trouble accepting,” Manny sulked, looking out his window.

“Yeah. That too,” I sighed and started up my truck. Manny forgave me about ten seconds into the ride and chattered the rest of the way home. Manny couldn't stay angry unless, of course, someone messed with Graciela. Then all reason left him and his mother joked that he became a raging chihuahua. I'd only seen it happen a few times, but it was enough to make me never want a chihuahua. Apparently, since I'd only pointed out *his* flaws, I was immediately forgiven and back in his good graces with barely a snarl.

When I got home the heat inside the apartment felt like the bowels of hell. It didn't smell very good either. Stale cigarettes and spilled beer mixed with 90 degree October heat wasn't a pleasant combination. The door to Cheryl's room was shut. I wondered at her ability to sleep in the heat and sighed as I emptied the ashtrays and wiped up the beer spilled on the coffee table. Cheryl obviously had company. A pair of men's jeans lay in a crumpled pile and Cheryl's black bra and work shirt were tossed alongside them. Nice. The

sooner I got out of there, the better. I stripped my jeans off and pulled on a pair of cut-off sweats and a tank-top, pulling my hair up in a sloppy ponytail. Shoving my feet into flip-flops, I left the apartment ten minutes after I had arrived.

I rented a storage unit behind the complex for fifty bucks a month. It had lights and power, and it was my own little workshop. It had a couple of work tables fashioned from sawhorses and long sheets of plywood. I had a large dremel, various sizes of mallets and chisels, files and grinders, and an oscillating fan that moved the hot air and sawdust around in lazy circles. Projects in various stages, from a discard pile to completed pieces of twisting, gleaming art decorated the perimeter of the space. I had found a thick, gnarled branch of Mesquite on my travels the day before, and I was eager to see what it looked like under the layers of thorny bark that I had yet to strip off. Most people who worked with wood liked to use soft woods because they were easy to carve and whittle, easy to shape into their own creation. Nobody carved with mesquite or mountain mahogany or juniper. The wood was too hard. The ranchers out west considered mesquite a weed. You couldn't use a sharp knife to shape it, that was for sure. I had to use a big chisel and a mallet to strip off the bark. When the wood was laid bare, I would usually spend a great deal of time just looking at it before I did anything. I had learned that from Jimmy.

Jimmy Echohawk had been a quiet man, quiet to the point of not talking for days at a time. It was amazing that I had any language skills at all when I came to live with Cheryl. Thank you, PBS. When I was two years old, my mother – at least we assume it was her – left me in the front seat of his truck and drove away. I didn't remember my mother at all, beyond a vague memory of dark hair and a blue blanket. Jimmy was a Pawnee Indian and had very little that he called his own. He had an old pickup truck and a camp trailer that he pulled along behind it, and that's where we lived. We never stayed in one place for very long, and we never had company, except for each other. He said he had family on a reservation in Oklahoma, but I never met any of them. He taught me how to carve, and the skill had saved me, both financially, and emotionally, many times. I lost myself in it now, working until the early hours of morning when I knew Cheryl would be gone to work, along with her mystery man, and the apartment would be empty.

Chapter Three

Jerusalem

“When Julius Caesar crossed the Rubicon, he knew what it would mean.” Mr. Wilson was looking at us all somberly, as if Julius Caesar was his homey and he had just crossed the Rubics Cube yesterday. I sighed and tossed back my hair, slouching even further into my seat.

“It was considered treason to bring a standing army into Italy proper. The senators in Rome were intimidated by Caesar's power and his popularity. They wanted to control him, see, and it was fine if he was winning battles for Rome, conquering the Celtic and Germanic tribes, but they didn't want him to become too rich or too popular, and that was exactly what was happening. Add to that Julius Caesar's own political ambitions, and you have a recipe for disaster . . . or the very least, civil war.”

Mr. Wilson walked down the aisle, and I noticed in surprise that he seemed to have the attention of my classmates. They were watching him closely, waiting for what he would say next. He didn't use notes or read from a textbook or manual. He just talked, like he was relating the highlights of a killer movie.

“Caesar had some friends in high places. They snooped around, whispered in a few ears, and blatantly tried to influence the Senate. But the Senate wanted no part of it. They told Caesar to disband the army and resign his position, or risk becoming an 'enemy of the state.' We use the same term today in the US government. It basically means the government finds you guilty of crimes against your country. People who sell national secrets, spy for another country, that kind of thing, are deemed 'enemies of the state.' Very 007 without the glamour or the amazing stunts or the fit Bond girls.”

I found myself smiling as the rest of the class laughed, and I marveled that I'd forgotten for a moment that I didn't like Mr. Wilson.

“Plus, can you imagine what that label would do to someone? Some would argue that such a label is used as a political tool – a tool to repress or intimidate. You charge someone with being a traitor to their country, an 'enemy of the state' and their life is over. It's like accusing someone of being a

child molester. It wasn't any different in Ancient Rome. So we have Julius Caesar, ambitious, angry that he is being told he can't lead his army anymore, and basically being threatened with ugly labels and treason.

“Long story short, he brings his army to the banks of the Rubicon, which doesn't exist today, so no one really knows if it was just a little stream or a substantial river, and he stands there, thinking. He says to his men. 'We can still retreat. It's not too late, but once we pass this bridge, we will have to fight.'”

“You said he was rich, right? Why didn't he just take his money and go. Say to hell with the Senate, let them run the army, conquer people, whatever. They didn't appreciate him, fine. What was the point? What did he have to prove?” I found myself asking the question before I even realized I was saying the words out loud. I felt the heat of embarrassment travel up my cheeks. I never asked questions in class.

Mr. Wilson didn't act surprised that I was participating, and he immediately answered. “He was rich, he was powerful. He could have retired to Gaul, lived in the lap of luxury, and been fed grapes for the rest of his life.” Everyone laughed. I scowled. Mr. Wilson stopped in front of my desk and looked down at me quizzically.

“Why do you think he took his army into Rome, Blue?”

“Because he was a bloody peacock, and he wanted to be king,” I responded immediately, trying to mimic his accent. The class burst into laughter once more. “And because he didn't like being used or controlled,” I finished more quietly, without the accent.

“I think you're right on both accounts.” Mr. Wilson shifted away, drawing the rest of the class into the conversation. “It ends up that Julius Caesar grabbed a trumpet and ran to the bridge. He sounded the advance with a blast of the trumpet and cried out . . . and I am quoting, 'Let us go where the omens of the gods and the crimes of our enemies summon us! The dye is now cast.' What do you think that means? The dye is now cast.”

The classroom was silent. Of course there were kids who knew the answer, but, per usual, no one raised their hand.

“The deed is done, your goose is cooked, the milk is spilled, your bed is made,” I droned in a very bored voice.

“Yes,” Wilson ignored my tone. “It was in the hands of destiny. He had crossed the Rubicon and there was no turning back. We all know what

eventually happened to Julius Caesar, yes?” No, we didn't. I did, but I was through being the star student.

“Julius was murdered – a murder plotted with the help of his friend. Shakespeare wrote a wicked play called Julius Caesar, which you have all been assigned to read and which you will be tested on this Friday.” Moaning commenced, but Wilson just smiled. “I told you, literature tells the history so much better than the text books, and it's infinitely more enjoyable to learn it that way. Quit your whingeing. You'll thank me someday.” Whingeing? That was one I hadn't heard before.

“So Julius Caesar crosses the Rubicon, rushing to his destiny. And it was a destiny both glorious and tragic. He reached the very pinnacle of power, and in the end he discovered power is an illusion.

“So that brings us to round three, people. Feel free to add pages as you need. This is the assignment we started the first day of school. And it's just going to keep on growing. You've written some of your history, at least in broad terms. Now I want you to take one moment from your life. A moment where the dye was cast, where you crossed your metaphorical Rubicon and you couldn't go back. I want you to tell me how it formed you or changed you. Maybe it was something that was beyond your control, something that happened to you, or maybe it was an actual decision you made. For better or worse, how did it affect the direction of your story?”

One by one, Wilson started passing papers to my classmates, making a comment here or there. I sighed, remembering how I had thrown mine in the trash. Again. The classroom got quiet as people got to work. I tore a clean sheet of paper from a notebook and prepared to start over. Wilson was suddenly standing in front of my desk, which unfortunately had remained right on the front row since he had assigned us to the seats we had “chosen” on the first day of school.

He laid a sheet of paper on my desk. I looked down at it in surprise. My eyes shot up to his and then back down to my paper. It was the paper I had thrown away. Twice. He must have retrieved it after I left the room that day. It had been smoothed and pressed flat again, as if he had laid it between a couple of heavy books. My words stared back at me, almost mocking.

“There's no sense in running from the past. We can't throw it away or pretend it didn't happen, Miss Echohawk. But maybe we can learn something from it. You have an interesting story, and I'd like you to tell me more.” He

turned to walk away.

“Seems a little unfair to me,” I blurted out, and I immediately wished I had kept my big mouth shut when thirty pairs of eyes zeroed in on me.

Wilson raised his eyebrows, tilted his head inquisitively and folded his arms.

“What do you mean?” he asked quietly. I expected him to get red in the face or kick me out. That's usually what happened in my other classes when I couldn't keep my sassy comments to myself.

I shrugged and popped the gum I wasn't supposed to be chewing. “You ask us to bare all, write our little secrets down, our lowest moments, but I don't see you sharing anything personal with us. Maybe I don't want you to know my story.”

The class was quiet. Shockingly so. It seemed everyone was holding their breath, waiting to see if Blue Echohawk had finally gone too far. When Wilson didn't explode but merely eyed me owlshly for several long seconds, the tension eased somewhat.

“Okay. Fair enough,” Wilson acquiesced quietly. “But I *am* the teacher, which by definition means I instruct and you learn, so things are not going to necessarily be fair because we have different roles. And in the interest of time, I'm not going to spend the class period talking about myself.”

“How about twenty questions?” somebody spoke up from the back of the class.

“Or spin the bottle,” someone else shouted out, and a few people snickered.

“Tell you what. I will give you a brief timeline, just like you've done for me, and then I'll tell you my turning point moment. Deal? That way Miss Echohawk can be confident that everything is fair.” He winked at me, and I resisted the urge to stick out my tongue. Teachers were not supposed to be young and cute. Somehow that really irritated me. I just arched one eyebrow disdainfully and looked away.

“I was born in Manchester, England. I have two older sisters. One sister still lives in England, as does my mother. My oldest sister, Tiffa, lives in Las Vegas, which incidently is what brought me here. I am twenty-two years old. I finished what we call college when I was fifteen, which I suppose is about the equivalent of graduating from high school very early.”

“Wow! So you're really smart, huh?” This brilliant deduction was offered

by a girl with a Marilyn Monroe voice who used glittery pens and wrote each letter of her name in a different color, surrounded by hearts and stars. I had dubbed her Sparkles.

I snorted loudly. Wilson shot me a look, and I decided it was probably time to shut up.

“We moved to the states when I was sixteen so I could attend university early, which is simply not done in England. My mum is English, but my dad was an American. He was a doctor and took a position at the Huntsman Cancer institute in Utah. I graduated from university when I was nineteen, and that's when I had my turning point moment. My dad died. He had wanted me to be a doctor like he was – actually four generations of men in my family have been doctors. But I was rather a mess after he died and decided to go another direction. I spent two years in Africa in the Peace Corp teaching English. I discovered I really liked teaching.”

“You shoulda been a doctor,” Sparkles volunteered breathily. “They make more money. And you woulda looked super cute in scrubs.” She giggled into her hand.

“Thank you, Chrissy,” Wilson sighed and shook his head in exasperation. So that was her name. It wasn't much better than Sparkles.

“This is my first year teaching here in the states. And Bob's your uncle.” Wilson looked at his watch.” My life in two minutes. Now it's your turn. You have the remainder of the class.”

I looked down at my paper. Wilson's life was a neat little row of events and achievements. So he was smart. That was fairly obvious. And he was nice. And he was nice-looking. And he came from a nice family. All of it nice. So different from my own history. Did I have a defining moment? One moment where everything changed? I had actually had a few. But there was one moment when the world spun, and when it settled, I was a different girl.

I had been living with Cheryl for about three years, and in that time there had been no word from Jimmy. Nevada search and rescue had eventually suspended the search effort after they had been unable to find any trace of him. There was no outcry, no public awareness of his disappearance, no demands that the search continue. He was an unknown. Just one man who meant the world to one little girl.

During that three years, I had tried my hardest not to give up on him. Not in the first weeks when my social worker told me they had to put my dog,

Icas, down. Not when, week after week, there had been no sign of Jimmy. Not when Cheryl smoked incessantly in the apartment, and I had to go to school smelling bad, my hair and clothes reeking of cigarettes, friendless and clueless, awkward and strange, in my own eyes and the eyes of my classmates. I was not willing to admit that Jimmy was gone, and sheer stubborn will kept my eyes straight ahead and made me strong.

If not for the occasional teasing, I would have really liked school. I liked being around other kids, and school lunch seemed like a daily feast after years of eating from a camp stove. I liked having more books at my disposal. My teachers said I was smart, and I worked hard, trying to catch up, knowing how proud Jimmy would be when I showed him the books I could read and the stories I had written. I wrote down all the stories he had told me, all the things that were important to him, and, therefore, important to me. And I waited.

One day I arrived home to find my social worker waiting for me outside. She told me they had found my father. She and Cheryl both turned toward me when I approached the apartment. Cheryl was blowing huge smoke rings, and I remember marveling at her “talent” before I saw the expression on her face, the tight look around her eyes and the down-turned mouth of the social worker. And I knew. A hiker had been climbing around in a crevice, and had seen something below, wedged deep into the bottom of the crevice, and somewhat protected from the elements and the animals who would surely have scattered his remains. The rock climber thought it looked like human remains. He had called the authorities who sent in a team. Jimmy's remains were brought up a few days later. He had fallen from a significant height. Had the fall killed him, or had he been unable to climb up out of the crevice? His wallet was in the pocket of his pants, which was how they had known it was him. Mystery solved. Hope dashed.

After the social worker left, I went into my room and laid on my bed. I looked around the room that I always kept tidy and impersonal. I had never considered it my room. It was Cheryl's place, and I was staying with Cheryl. I still had the snake I'd been working on the day Jimmy disappeared. I had kept the pieces that he hadn't yet sold or completed and they were pushed in the corner, collecting dust. The tools were shoved under my bed. And that was all that remained of Jimmy Echohawk's life, and all that remained of my life . . . before. Dark descended on the apartment and still I lay, staring at the

ceiling and the brown water-mark that faintly resembled a lumbering elephant. I had named the water-mark Dolores and even talked to her periodically. As I stared, Dolores started to blur and grow, like one of those spongy things that expand when you put them in water. It took me a moment to realize that I was crying, that it was not Dolores who was floating away, it was me. Floating, floating, away.

Something slid down my cheek and splattered on my arm, and I shook myself, looking down in surprise where my arms framed the page Wilson had positioned in front of me. I ducked my head and grabbed my purse, surreptitiously blotting the moisture from my face. I grabbed my compact, checking my eye makeup for tell-tale streaks. What in the hell had gotten into me?! Crying in history class? I threw my purse down and gripped my pencil, determined to be done with the assignment.

“Once upon a time there was a little blackbird, pushed from the nest, unwanted. Discarded. Then a Hawk found her and swooped her up and carried her away, giving her a home in his nest, teaching her to fly. But one day the Hawk didn't come home, and the little bird was alone again, unwanted. She wanted to fly away.”

I stopped writing, remembering. I waited until Cheryl left for work and then I went into the bathroom and filled the tub. I stripped off my clothes and sunk beneath the surface refusing to think about Cheryl finding me, seeing me naked. My body had started to change and show signs of maturity, and the thought of anyone seeing my privates was almost enough to make me change my mind about what I was determined to do. I forced my mind up and beyond the dumpy bathroom with the peeling paint and the dirty linoleum. I willed myself to fly away like the hawk I had seen the day Jimmy disappeared. It had come into the camp and sat on a branch of the scrubby pine just above my head. I had held my breath, watching him as he watched me. I hadn't dared move. Jimmy had told me hawks were special messengers. I had wondered what message he was bringing me. Now I knew. He was telling me Jimmy was gone. My lungs screamed, demanding that I lift my face from the bath water, but I ignored the pain. I was going to float away like the star maiden in my favorite story. I was going to drift up into the sky world and dance with the other star maidens. Maybe I would see Jimmy

again.

Suddenly, I was being pulled from the water by my hair and flopped on the bathroom floor. My back was being slapped repeatedly. I coughed and sputtered, plummeting back to the earth.

“What the hell, kid!? You scared the shit outta me!! What are you tryin' to do? Did you fall asleep in there? Holy hell! I thought you were dead!” Cheryl's boyfriend Donnie was crouched beside me. Suddenly his eyes were everywhere, and he ceased his babbling. I drew my legs up, covering myself as I scooted to the narrow space between the toilet and the cheap vanity. He watched me go.

“You okay?” he eased closer.

“Get out, Donnie,” I ordered, but the coughing that wracked me weakened my demand.

“Just tryin' to help you, kid.” Donnie was peering at the length of my wet legs, which was all he could see at the moment. But he had seen it all when he pulled me from the bath water. I made myself as small as possible, my long black hair sticking to me in stringy clumps, providing little cover.

“Come on, little girl,” Donnie cajoled. “You think I'm interested in your skinny legs? Sheee-it! You look like a little drowned bird.” He stood up and grabbed a towel and handed it to me, walking out of the bathroom with a heavy sigh, an indication of how ridiculous he thought I was. I wrapped myself in the towel but stayed pressed into the corner. I was suddenly too tired to move. I was too tired to even be afraid of Donnie.

I thought I heard him talking to someone. Maybe he had called Cheryl. She wouldn't be pleased. They would have had to call her off the casino floor. I was forbidden to call her at work. I leaned my head against the cabinet and closed my eyes. I would just sleep here. I would wait for Donnie to leave, and then I would get back in the tub where it was warm and I could float away once more.

The bell rang. I threw my pencil down gratefully and grabbed my purse, abandoning the assignment as if it were burning me.

“Just leave your papers on your desks. I'll collect them!” Wilson called, avoiding having thirty pages shoved at him simultaneously.

He picked up the remaining papers quietly and halted when he came to the desk where I was sitting. I watched him read the line I added. He looked up at me, a question in his face.

“You haven't written very much.”

“There isn't much to tell.”

“Somehow I doubt that.” Wilson looked back down at the paper and studied what I'd written. “What you've written sounds almost like a....a legend or something. It makes me think of your name when I read it. Did you do that intentionally?”

“Echohawk was the name of the man who raised me. I'm not sure what my name is.”

I thought the bold statement would make him back off. Make him uncomfortable. I stared him down and waited for him to respond or dismiss me.

“My first name is Darcy.”

Laughter sputtered from my chest at the randomness of his response, and he smiled with me, the ice broken between us.

“I hate it. So everyone just calls me Wilson . . . except for my mother and my sisters. Sometimes I think not knowing what my name is would be a blessing.”

I relaxed a little, leaning back in my desk. “So why did she name you Darcy? Sounds pretty Malibu Barbie to me.” It was Wilson's turn to snort.

“My mother loves classic literature. She's extremely old-fashioned. Jane Austen's Mr. Darcy is her favorite.”

I knew very little about classic literature, so I just waited.

“Look, Miss Echohawk –”

“Ugh! Stop that!” I groaned. “My name is Blue. You sound like an old man with a little bow-tie when you talk like that! I am nineteen, maybe twenty. You aren't that much older than me so . . . just . . . stop!”

“What do you mean, *maybe* twenty?” Wilson raised a questioning eye brow.

“Well . . . I don't exactly know when I was born – so I suppose I could be twenty already.” Jimmy and I had celebrated my birthday every year on the anniversary of the day my mother abandoned me. He was pretty certain I was around two years old at the time. But he had no way of knowing how old I actually was. When I'd finally been enrolled in school they had put me in the grade below my estimated age because I had so much catching up to do.

“You . . . don't know what your name is . . . and you don't know when you were born?” Wilson's eyes were wide, almost disbelieving.

“Makes writing the personal history a little challenging, doesn't it?” I sneered, angry all over again.

Wilson seemed completely stunned, and I felt a surge of power that I had taken him off his high horse.

“Yes . . . I guess it does,” he whispered.

I pushed past him and headed for the door. When I was halfway down the hall, I tossed a look back over my shoulder. Wilson stood in the doorway to his classroom, his hands shoved into his pockets, watching me walk away.

Chapter Four

Stone

I didn't go to school until I was approximately ten years old. Jimmy Echohawk didn't stay in one place long enough for school to be an option. I had no birth certificate, no immunization record, no permanent address. And he was afraid, though I hadn't known that then.

He had done his best for me, in the only way he knew how. When I was still small, he fashioned several toys from the scraps of wood he had left over from his projects. Some of my very earliest memories were watching him work. It fascinated me, the way the wood would wrinkle and curl as he would chisel away. He always seemed to know what the end result would be, as if he could see what lay beneath the layers of bark, as if the wood was guiding him, guiding his hands in smooth strokes. And when he did stop, he would sit beside me, staring at the unfinished sculpture, gazing for long periods of time, as if the work were continuing in his head, in a place I was no longer privy to observe. He made a living selling his carvings and sculptures to tourist shops and even a few upscale galleries featuring local artists and southwestern art. He had cultivated a relationship with several shop owners throughout the West, and we would travel between shops, eking out a meager existence from the money he made. It wasn't much. But I was never hungry, I was never cold, and I don't remember ever being really unhappy.

I didn't know any different, so I wasn't especially lonely, and I had been brought up in silence, so I felt no need to fill it the few times I was left alone. There were times when Jimmy would leave for several hours, as if he needed respite from the restraints parenthood had placed upon him. But he always came back. Until the day he didn't.

We lived mostly in the warmer climates – Arizona, Nevada, Southern Utah and parts of California. It just made life easier. But that day was so hot. Jimmy had left early in the morning with a few words that he would be back later on. He had left on foot, leaving the truck to bake beside the trailer. We had a dog he called Icas, which is the Pawnee word for turtle. Icas was slow and blind and slept most of the time, so the name was fitting. Icas got to go with Jimmy that morning, which I was hurt and bothered by. Usually we

were both left behind, although Icas had seemed reluctant to go, and Jimmy had to whistle for him twice. I tried to stay busy, as busy as a ten or eleven-year-old girl can without video games or cable or a soul to talk to or play with. I had my own projects, and Jimmy was generous with his tools.

I spent the morning sanding a small branch I had fashioned into the curving, sinuous likeness of a snake. Jimmy had told me it was good enough that he thought he could sell it. That was a first for me, and I worked diligently in the shade of the ragged canopy that stretched ten feet from the camper door, providing blessed shade in the 110 degree heat. We were camped at the base of Mount Charleston, just to the west of Las Vegas. Jimmy had wanted more Mountain Mahogany, a scrubby evergreen tree that looked nothing like the rich dark wood most people associated with mahogany. Wood from the Mountain Mahogany was reddish-brown in color and hard, like most of the wood Jimmy worked with when he was sculpting.

The day dragged on. I was used to being alone, but I was afraid that day. Night came and Jimmy didn't return. I opened some re fried beans, heated them up on the little stove in the camper, and spread them on some tortillas we had made the day before. I made myself eat because it was something to do, but I found myself crying and swallowing my food in great gulps because my nose was clogged and I couldn't breath and chew at the same time.

There had been one other time when Jimmy stayed away all night. He had come home acting strange and stumbling around. He had fallen into his bed and had slept the day away. I had thought he was sick and had put a cold rag on his head, only to have him push me away, telling me he was fine, just drunk. I didn't know what drunk meant. I asked him when he finally woke up. He was embarrassed, and he apologized, telling me that alcohol made men mean and women cheap.

I thought about what he said for a long time.

"Can it make women mean too?" I asked Jimmy out of the blue.

"Huh?" he had grunted, not understanding.

"Alcohol. You said it makes men mean and women cheap. Can it make women mean too?" I didn't know what cheap meant, but I knew what it meant to be mean and wondered if alcohol had been part of my mom's problem.

"Sure. Mean and cheap both." Jimmy nodded.

I was comforted by that thought. I had assumed that my mom had left me

and Jimmy because I had done something wrong. Maybe I had cried too much or wanted things she couldn't give me. But maybe she drank alcohol and it made her mean. If alcohol made her mean, then maybe it wasn't me after all.

I fell asleep that night, but I slept fitfully listening even as I drifted off, trying not to cry, telling myself it was alcohol again, although I didn't believe it. I awoke the next morning, the heat seeping into the camp trailer pulling me from dreams where I wasn't alone. I shot up, shoving my feet into my flip-flops and stumbling out into the blinding sunshine. I ran around our camp site, looking for any indication that Jimmy had returned while I'd slept.

"Jimmy!" I shrieked. "Jimmy!" I knew he hadn't come back, but I comforted myself with calling for him and looking in outrageous places where he couldn't possibly be. A muffled whine had me running around the camper in jubilation, expecting to see Jimmy and Icas approaching from the direction they had headed the day before. Instead, I saw Icas, still several yards off, limping, his head hung low, his tongue practically dragging in the dirt. There was no sign of Jimmy. I ran to him and scooped him up in my arms, blubbering my gratitude that he was here. I wasn't a big girl, and I staggered a little beneath his weight, but I wasn't about to let him go. I laid him down awkwardly in the shade of the canopy and ran for his bowl, splashing lukewarm water into his dish and urging him to drink. He lifted his head and tried to drink from a prone position. He managed to splash a little water into his mouth but did not drink with the gusto one would expect from a dog so clearly in need of water. He tried to stand, but now that he was down he couldn't seem to find the strength to rise to his feet. I tried to support him as he attempted to drink again.

"Where's Jimmy, Icas?" I questioned as his body trembled and he slumped to the dirt. He looked at me mournfully and closed his bleary eyes. He whined pathetically and then was silent. Several times throughout the day, I thought Icas was dead. He was so still I had to get close and check to see if he was breathing. I couldn't rouse him to eat or drink.

I waited for two more days. The water in the camper tank was almost gone. I still had food. Jimmy and I were frugal, and there were weeks at a time between trips to the store. But we were frequently on the move, and we had been in this spot for a week before Jimmy had disappeared. What finally forced me into going for help was Icas. He ate a little bit and drank a little

more, but he was lethargic and whined softly when he was conscious, as if he knew something he was unable to communicate. On the morning of the third day, I picked up the dog and hoisted him into the truck. Then I climbed up behind the wheel, scooting the seat as far forward as it would go. I left Jimmy a note on the little table in the camper kitchen. If he came back, I didn't want him to think I'd run away and taken all his tools. I didn't dare leave them behind. If someone happened along our campsite, I knew the lock on the door wouldn't keep anyone out, and if the tools were taken, there would be no more carving. No more carving meant no more food.

There was a twenty dollar bill in the ashtray. It seemed like a lot of money to a kid. I knew how to drive the truck, but I struggled to see over the steering wheel. I grabbed the pillow from the bench that folded down into my narrow bed each night. Sitting on it gave me just enough height to see the road beyond the wheel. Once I was out of the quiet canyon we had been camped in, I narrowly missed colliding with several cars. My driving experience didn't extend to driving among other vehicles. I didn't know where I was going, but I figured if I stopped at any gas station and told them my dog was sick and my dad was missing, someone would help me.

I managed to keep the truck going in a straight line, but it wasn't long after I'd started seeing homes crop up in ever increasing patches that flashing blue and red lights pulled up behind me. I didn't know what to do. So I just kept driving. I tried pushing the gas pedal down harder, thinking maybe I could speed up and get away. That didn't work very well. Plus, the truck started to shake the way it always did when Jimmy tried to push it to go faster. I slowed down and thought maybe if I went really slow the police car would just pass me by. I slowed way down, and the police car came up beside me. The man behind the wheel looked angry and waved at me with his whole arm, as if telling me to scoot over. I scooted and came to a rumbling stop. Another car with flashing lights came speeding toward me from the other direction.

I screamed, now convinced that I had made a terrible mistake. Icas didn't even stir. I comforted him anyway. "It's okay, boy, it's okay. I'm just a kid. I don't think I will go to prison." I wasn't entirely sure of that, but I said it all the same. No reason to make Icas worry.

My door was wrenched open, and the cop who had been waving wildly for me to pull over was standing there, his legs and arms spread, making him seem very big and very scary.

“Hi there.” I smiled nervously. Sweetness usually worked on Jimmy.

“I need you to get out of the truck, Miss.” The officer had muscles popping out from his sleeves and a handsome face framed in sandy hair, neatly parted and brushed off his face.

“I'd rather not leave my dog, Mister,” I replied and didn't move a muscle. “He bites strangers. And you are a stranger. I wouldn't want you to get chewed up.” Icas looked like a bean bag with a dog head, lolling on the seat. Nobody was going to get chewed, unfortunately. I poked at him in frustration. “Icas?”

The policeman looked at Icas and then back at me. “I think I'll be okay. Please step out of the truck, Miss.”

“What are you going to do to me?” I asked, staring him down. “You haven't even asked me for my driver's license.” I knew that's what cops were supposed to do. Jimmy had been pulled over about a year ago because his truck had a broken headlight, and that police officer had asked him for his license first thing.

“How old are you, kid?” the officer sighed.

“Old enough to drive . . . most likely,” I said, trying to sound believable.

Another policeman joined the first just beyond the opened driver side door. He was tall and very thin, and his head was bald on top. The sun shone off it like glass, and I looked away wincing. I told myself that was why my eyes were wet and smarting.

“Plates and Vin say the vehicle belongs to a James Echohawk.”

At the mention of Jimmy's name, my heart lurched and the smarting in my eyes intensified. The moisture escaped and started sliding down my cheeks. I swiped at the water and tried to pretend it was the heat.

“Shoot! It sure is a hot day! Look at me, sweating all over the place.”

“What's your name, kid?” The skinny officer had a deep voice totally at odds with his appearance. He almost sounded like a frog.

“Blue,” I replied, my bluster fading fast.

“Blue?”

“Yes. Blue . . . Echohawk,” I mumbled. My lips trembled.

“All right, uh, Blue. Does your dad know you've got his truck?”

“I can't find him.”

The officers looked at each other and then back at me.

“What do you mean?”

“I can't find him,” I repeated angrily. “We were camping, and he said he would be back. Icas came home, but he didn't. He's been gone for a lot of days and Icas is acting all sick and the water is almost gone in the tank, and I'm scared he isn't coming back.”

“Icas is the dog, right?” The sandy-haired, muscley policeman pointed at Icas, who had yet to even open an eye.

“Yes,” I whispered, trying desperately not to cry. Saying the words out loud made them real and terrible. Jimmy was missing. He was gone. What in the world would happen to me? I was a kid. I couldn't help it if worry for myself was equally as terrifying as worry for Jimmy.

They coaxed me out of the truck, although at the last minute I remembered the duffel bag I had filled with tools. I ran back to the truck and dragged it out from behind the front seat. It was extremely heavy, and I ended up dragging it behind me. The muscle-bound police officer had lifted Icas from the passenger side, and was looking at him with a furrowed brow. He looked at me as if he wanted to speak, thought better of it, and laid the dog gently in the back of his cruiser.

“What in the world . . .” The skinny officer, whose name I learned was Izzard – like lizard without the L – tried to lift the duffel and didn't put enough heft into his effort. “What've you got in here?”

“Tools,” I clipped. “And I'm not leavin' 'em.”

“Okaaaaay,” he hedged, looking at the other officer.

“Come on Iz. Just put them back here with the killer dog.”

They both laughed, like it was a big funny game. I stopped and stared at them, glaring from one man to the other, thrusting my chin up and out, daring them to continue. Amazingly, their laughter died off, and Izzard lifted the tools in beside Icas.

I rode in the front of the car with Mr. Muscles, also known as Officer Bowles, and Officer Izzard followed behind us. Officer Bowles radioed a message to someone, telling them about the vehicle and saying some numbers I didn't understand. It was obviously a code for “what do I do with this crazy kid?”

I was able to show them where our camper was. It was just a straight shot back up into the hills. I hadn't turned right or left coming down from the canyon because I was afraid I wouldn't remember how to get back. But Jimmy had not miraculously returned in my absence. My note lay on the

table where I had left it.

They ended up calling in some guys they called search and rescue. That sounded good to me – searching and rescuing – and I felt hopeful for the first time in days. They asked me for a description of my dad. I told them he wasn't as tall as Izzard but was probably a little taller than Officer Bowles, just not as “thick.” Officer Izzard thought it was funny that I called Officer Bowles thick. Officer Bowles and I just ignored him. I told them he had black and grey hair that he always wore in two braids. When I reminded them that his name was Jimmy and asked them if they would please find him, I had to stop talking for fear that I would cry. Jimmy never cried, so I wouldn't either.

They did search. They searched for about a week. I stayed at a house where there were six other kids. The parents were nice, and I got to eat pizza for the first time. I went to church three Sundays in a row and sang songs about a guy named Jesus, which I rather enjoyed. I asked the lady who led us in singing if she knew any songs by Willie Nelson. She didn't. It was probably good that she didn't. Singing Willie songs might have made me miss Jimmy too much. The house where I stayed was a foster home, a house for kids who didn't have anywhere else to go. And that was me. I didn't have anywhere else to go. I'd been questioned by a social worker, trying to figure out who I was. I hadn't known Jimmy wasn't my father at that point. He had never explained it to me. Apparently, my identity was a mystery.

“Can you tell me anything about your mother?” The social worker had asked me. The question was gentle, but I wasn't fooled into thinking I didn't have to answer it.

“She's dead.” I knew that much.

“Do you remember her name?”

I had asked Jimmy once what my mother's name was. He had said he didn't know. He said I had called her Mama, like most two-year-olds do. It sounds unbelievable. But I was just a kid, accepting and unsuspecting. Jimmy had a little black and white TV with rabbit ears that I watched in the trailer. It picked up whatever the local PBS station was, and that was about it. That was my exposure to the outside world. *Sesame Street*, *Arthur*, and the *Antiques Roadshow*. I didn't understand the nature of relations between men and women. I knew nothing of babies. Babies were hatched, delivered by storks, purchased at the hospitals. I had no concept that my father not knowing my mother's name was beyond odd.

“I called her Mama.”

The lady's eyes squinted, and she got a meanish look on her face. “You know that's not what I meant. Surely your father knew her name and would have told you.”

“No. He didn't. He didn't know her very well. She just left me with him one day and split. Then she died.”

“So they were never married?”

“Nope.”

“Why do you call him Jimmy and not Dad?”

“I don't know. I guess he just wasn't that kinda dad. Sometimes I called him Dad. But mostly he was just Jimmy.”

“Do you know your aunt?”

“I have an aunt?”

“Cheryl Sheevers. It's her address listed on your father's information. She's your father's half-sister.”

“Cheryl?” Memories rose up. An apartment. We'd been there a couple of times. Never stayed long. I usually waited in the truck. The one time I'd seen Cheryl, I had been sick. Jimmy had been worried and brought me to her apartment. She got me some medicine . . . antibiotics, she had called them.

“I don't know her very well,” I offered.

The lady sighed and laid down her pen. She ran her fingers through her hair. She needed to stop doing that. Her hair was all fuzzy and starting to stand on end. I almost offered to braid it for her. I was a good braider. But I didn't think she would let me, so I was quiet.

“No birth certificate, no immunization record . . . no school records . . . what am I supposed to do with this? It's like freakin' baby Moses, I swear.” The lady was mumbling to herself, the way Jimmy did sometimes when he was making a list for the store.

I told the social worker that Jimmy had some family on a reservation in Oklahoma but that they didn't know me. It turned out I was right. Social services tracked them down. They didn't know anything about me and didn't want anything to do with me. That was okay with me. Oklahoma was very far away, and I needed to be close by when they found Jimmy. The cops interviewed Cheryl. She told me later that they “grilled her.” Cheryl lived in Boulder City, not far from where I was staying in the foster home. And amazingly enough, Cheryl said she would take me in.

Her name wasn't Echohawk. It was Sheevers, but I guess that didn't matter. She didn't really look like Jimmy, either. Her skin wasn't as brown and her hair was dyed in various shades of blonde. She wore so much makeup it was hard to tell what she really looked like beneath the layers. The first time I met her, I squinted at her, trying to see the “real her,” the way Jimmy had taught me to do with wood, picturing something beautiful beneath the crusty exterior. It was easier to do with the wood, I'm sorry to say. The officers let me keep Jimmy's tools, but they took Icas to an animal shelter. They said he would be able to see a doctor, but I was very afraid that Icas couldn't be fixed. He was broken for good. I felt broken too, but nobody could tell.

Chapter Five

International

“When the ancient Romans would conquer a new place or a new people, they would leave the language and the customs in tact – they would even let the conquered people rule themselves in most cases, appointing a governor to maintain a foothold in the region.” Wilson leaned against the whiteboard as he spoke, his posture relaxed, his hands clasped loosely.

“This was part of what made Rome so successful. They didn't try to make everyone Romans in the process of conquering them. When I went to Africa with the Peace Corp, a woman who worked with the Corp said something to me that I have often thought about since. She told me 'Africa is not going to adapt to you. You are going to have to adapt to Africa.' That is true of wherever you go, whether it's school or whether it's in the broader world.

“When I moved to the States at sixteen, I had my eyes opened to the differences in our language, and I had to adapt to America. I couldn't expect people to understand me or make allowances for the differences in our language and culture. Americans may speak English, but there are regional accents and phrases, different spellings, different terminology for almost everything. I remember the first time I asked someone on campus if they had a fag. It's a good thing I didn't get pounded. In Blighty, a fag is a cigarette, and I was going through a stage where I fancied smoking. I thought it made me look older and sophisticated, see.”

“What's Blighty?” someone asked amid the snickers that had erupted when Wilson said fag.

“Blighty is a nickname for Britain. We have nicknames and phrases that would make absolutely no sense at all to any of you. In fact you might need a translator for a while if you lived in London for any length of time, just like I did when I came here. Luckily, I had a couple mates that looked out for me at Uni. I've had years to become Americanized, but I find that old habits die hard, so I thought you might like to hear some British slang. That way if I slip and say something wonky, you'll have an idea of what I'm referring to.

“For instance, in Britain we call an attractive girl a *fit bird*. It works for blokes as well. You might say that's a *dishy bloke* or a *dishy bird*. We would

also say scrummy – which I suppose comes from the word scrumptious. Food is scrummy, naps are scrummy, books are scrummy. You get the idea. And if we like something we say we fancy it. If you fancy a *scrummy bird* you see at a do or a party, you might try to chat her up or flirt with her. If I were to call you a *twit* or a *tosser* I would be calling you an idiot or a jerk. If I were to say you looked *smart*, I would be referring to your clothing, not your intelligence. If you're *daft* or *nutters* or *barmy* it means you're crazy. And if someone is *brassed off* or *cheesed off* in England, it means they're fed up or angry. Not *pissed*, mind you, that means drunk. We don't say trash or garbage, we say *rubbish*. And, of course, we swear differently, although we have adopted many of the curse words your mother would object to.”

“You say bloody and bugger and blast, right?” someone volunteered from the back of the room.

“Among other things.” Wilson tried to keep a straight face as he continued.

“We don't 'call' our chums on the phone, we give them a *ring* or a *bell*. We also don't have hoods and trunks on our cars, we have *bonnets* and *boots*. We don't have bars, we have pubs. We don't have vacuumns, we have *hoovers*, and an umbrella is a *brolly*. Which, by the way, you must have in England. It's cold, and it's wet. After spending two years in Africa, the thought of going back to Manchester was not appealing. I discovered I loved the sun in large doses. So, although I will always consider myself an Englishman, I don't think I'll ever live in England again.”

“Tell us some more!” Chrissy giggled.

“Well, if something is *ace* or *brill* it means it is cool or awesome,” Wilson added. “If I were in London, I might greet you by saying 'All right?' And you would respond with 'All right?' It basically means 'What's up?' or 'Hello, how are you?' and it doesn't demand a response.”

Immediately, the whole class started asking each other 'All right?' with terrible British accents, and Mr. Wilson continued over the top of the chaos, raising his voice a little to rein the class back in.

“If something is *wonky* or *dodgy*, it means it's not right, or it feels suspicious. Your latest score on your test may strike me as a bit dodgy if you have failed all of your previous exams.

“In Yorkshire, if someone says you don't get *owt for nowt*, they would mean, you don't get anything for nothing . . . or you get what you pay for. If I tell you to *chivvy along*, it means I want you to hurry, and if I tell you to

clear off, it means I want you to get lost. If someone is *dim* they're stupid, if something is *dull* it's boring. A knife isn't dull, mind you. It's *blunt*, so get it right." Wilson smiled out at the rapt faces of thirty students, rapidly taking notes on British slang. It was as if the Beatles had invaded America once more. I knew I was going to be hearing "chivvy along", and "she's a fit bird", in the hallways for the rest of the year.

Wilson was just warming up. "If you *diddle* someone, it means you ripped them off. If something is a *doddle* it means it's a cinch, or it's really easy. If you *drop a clanger*, it means you've stuck your foot in your mouth. Like asking a woman if she's *up the duff*, which means pregnant, to find out she's just a bit fat."

The class was in hysterics by now, and it was all I could do not to laugh with them. It was like a different language. As different as Wilson was from all the boys I'd ever known. And it wasn't just the way he talked. It was him. His light and his intensity. And I hated him for it. I rolled my eyes and groaned and snarled whenever he asked me to participate. And he just kept his cool, which made me even more "brassed off."

My irritation only increased as Wilson proceeded to introduce a "special visitor," a blonde girl named Pamela who presented a power point on Roman architecture from her recent trip. Her last name was Sheffield, as in the Sheffield Estates – a popular hotel in Vegas that was designed to look like an English estate. Her family had apparently built the hotel that still bore her last name. Apparently they had hotels all over Europe. Pamela told us she had majored in International Hotel Management and traveled to all the different hotels owned by her family, one of which was near the Colosseum in Rome. She sounded exactly like Princess Diana when she talked, and she was elegant and glamorous and said words like "beastly" and "brilliant." Wilson introduced her as his "friend from childhood," but she looked at him like she was his girlfriend. It made more sense that he was in Boulder City if his girlfriend worked for the Sheffield Estates.

Pamela droned on about this or that stunning example of Roman ingenuity, and I despised her cool loveliness, her knowledge of the world, her obvious comfort with herself and her place in the universe, and I taunted her a little during her presentation. It was easy to see why Wilson would like her. She spoke his language, after all. It was one of youth and beauty, of success and entitlement.

In another time, she and Wilson would have been the conquering Romans, and I would have been a leader of one of the savage tribes that attacked Rome. What had Wilson called them? There were several. The Visigoths, the Goths, the Franks, and the Vandals. Or maybe I would be a Hun. Attila's girlfriend. I could wear a bone in my hair and ride an elephant.

In the end, the tribes had overrun Rome, pillaging it and burning it to the ground. That pleased me on some level. The underdogs rising up and conquering the conquerers. But if I was completely honest with myself, I didn't want to conquer Wilson. I just wanted his attention. And I got it in the most obnoxious ways. He usually was a fairly good sport about it, but the day Pamela came he held me after class.

"Miss Echohawk – hold up a minute."

I groaned, falling back away from the door where I was steps away from making my exit. I got a few smirks from some of the other kids as they vacated the room. They all knew I was in trouble.

"I thought we discussed the Miss Echohawk thing," I growled at him when the room had emptied around us.

Wilson started gathering up the papers littering the desks, pushing and straightening as he went. He didn't say anything to me but there was a deep furrow between his brows. He looked kind of pissed – the American definition.

"Am I missing something?" His voice was subdued, and when he finally looked up at me his eyes were troubled.

I tossed my hair and shifted my weight, popping one hip out the way we girls do when we're aggravated. "What do you mean?"

"Why are you so angry?"

His question surprised me, and I laughed a little. "This isn't angry," I smirked. "This is just me. Get used to it."

"I would really rather not," he replied mildly, but he didn't smile. And I felt a stab of something close to remorse. I tamped the feeling down immediately. I shifted my weight again and looked away, communicating that I was done with this conversation.

"Can I go now?" I asked sharply.

He ignored me. "You don't like me. And that's all right. I had teachers I didn't much care for in school. But you are constantly looking for a fight . . . and I'm not sure I understand why. You were rude to Miss Sheffield today,

and I was embarrassed for you and for her.”

“People like Miss Sheffield need to be given a hard time every once in a while. It's good for her. It'll toughen her up, help her grow hair on her chest, develop a little muscle,” I smirked.

“What do you mean, people like Miss Sheffield?”

“Come on, Wilson!” I moaned. “You know exactly what I mean. Haven't you ever noticed all the little groups, all the little cliques in your own classroom? Over here we have the athletes.” I walked to a grouping of desks on the back row. “Here we have the pom poms and the Prom Queens.” I pointed as I strolled. “The nerds usually congregate here. The bitchy girl – that'd be me – sits here. And the kids that don't have a clue who or what they are fill in all the spots in between. Maybe you don't recognize these little divisions because people like you and Miss Sheffield have your own status. People like you don't have a group because you float above the groups. You're from England. You should know all about class structure, right?”

“What in the world are you going on about?” Wilson cried out in frustration, and his obvious upset just spurred me on.

“Jimmy, the man who raised me, told me a story once,” I explained. “It goes right along with the whole tribal thing we've been talking about. Romans vs. Goths, vs. the Visigoths vs. everyone else. It's the reason people fight. It's an Indian legend his grandfather told him. He said Tabuts, the wise wolf, decided to carve many different people out of sticks. Different shapes, sizes, colors. He carved them all. Then the wise wolf put all the people he'd created into a big sack. He planned to scatter them all over the earth evenly, so every person he created would have a good place to live, plenty of space, plenty of food, and plenty of peace.

“But Tabuts had a younger brother named Shinangwav. Shinangwav, the coyote, was very mischievous and liked to cause trouble. When Tabuts, the wise wolf, wasn't looking, Shinangwav made a hole in the sack. So when the wise wolf tried to scatter them, instead of everyone getting their own little space, the people fell out in bunches.”

Wilson stood very still, his grey eyes trained on my face, and I realized I had his attention now, whether I wanted it or not.

“Jimmy said this explains why people fight. They don't have sufficient space, or maybe someone else fell on a better plot of ground, and we all want the land or possessions someone else got – simply by the luck of the draw. So

we fight. You and Pamela are the same kind of people. You're from the same bunch," I finished, defiant.

"What's that supposed to mean, Blue?" Wilson wasn't defiant. He looked upset, hurt even.

I shrugged tiredly, my anger fizzling like a leaky balloon. Wilson was a smart man. It wasn't exactly hard to decipher my meaning.

"But if we're all carved by the same wise wolf," Wilson persisted, using the story to make his point, "why does it matter where we were scattered?"

"Because so many people suffer while others seem to have it so easy. And it doesn't make much more sense to me than that Indian legend."

"So you're angry because of where you were scattered. And you're angry with me – and Pamela as well – because we grew up across the pond in a life of leisure and privilege."

The way he summed it up made me sound prejudiced. But I kind of was, so maybe that was fair. I shrugged and sighed, and Wilson clasped his hands in front of him, his eyes earnest.

"None of us can help where we were scattered, Blue. But none of us has to *remain* where we were scattered. Why don't you focus on where you're going and less on where you come from? Why don't you focus more on what makes you brilliant and less on what makes you angry? You are missing a key element to the story. Maybe the moral of the legend is that we are all carved, created, and formed by a master hand. Maybe we are all works of art."

I groaned. "Next you're going to tell me to just be myself and everyone will love me, right?"

"Love might be too strong a word," Wilson retorted, dead pan. I snickered.

"I'm serious!" I argued, smiling in spite of myself. "All that stuff people say about just being yourself is complete—"

"Rubbish?"

"Yeah. Being yourself only works if you don't suck. If you do suck, definitely don't be yourself."

It was Wilson's turn to groan, but I could tell he had forgiven me, and my heart softened the smallest degree.

"What was that 'Nobody' poem you quoted the other day? I think that is probably more accurate."

"Dickinson's poem?" Wilson looked absolutely tickled that I'd remembered. And then he recited it, his eyebrows raised as if he was certain I

couldn't be referring to Dickinson.

“I'm nobody! Who are you?
Are you nobody, too?
Then there's a pair of us
Don't tell—they'd banish us, you know.”

I nodded. “Yep. That's the one. I think old Dick and I would have been good friends, because I'm definitely a nobody too.”

“Old Dick is actually Emily Dickinson.” Wilson's lips twitched. I knew darn well who wrote the poem, but I found I liked making him laugh.

“The beauty of that poem is that everybody can relate, because we all feel like nobody. We all feel like we are on the outside, looking in. We all feel scattered. But I think it's that self-awareness that actually makes us somebody. And you are definitely somebody, Blue. You may not be a work of art, but you are definitely a piece of work.”

Chapter Six

Peacock

November blew in, and the sunlight changed and mellowed. The desert heat became muted and soft, and though Vegas and Boulder City had more palm trees than changing leaves, the fall was a beautiful respite. Mason started coming around more often, and as long as I was on the back of his bike, riding through the desert, being with him was something I enjoyed. It was when the ride was over, when our passion was spent, when we were breathing hard, lust sated, that I had nothing to say. I was always eager to leave or ready for him to go. I never pretended to love him or want anything from him, and he seemed satisfied with what I was willing to give.

I guess that's why it surprised me when his brother Brandon showed up out of the blue on a Thursday night. Manny and Graciela were at my apartment watching American Idol, Manny's favorite show. Manny was convinced he was a better singer than almost every one of the contestants, and would demonstrate his skill on commercial breaks, standing on the couch with his hand clenched around an invisible microphone. He wasn't bad, and what he lacked in talent he made up for in personality. Usually Graciela was his biggest fan, but she was been jittery and kept looking at her phone and pacing back and forth.

Graciela had been getting on my nerves lately. She had started straightening her curly black locks so they hung down her back and parting her hair on the side so her long bangs played peek-a-boo with her left eye. Just like mine. When the school year started the only makeup she had worn was lip gloss and masacara. But that had changed, too. Her eyeliner was thick and black, her lashes curled and coated, her eyeshadow smokey and dark. Her jeans were tight, her shirts fitted, and she'd even found a pair of sky high boots in a size 5. She weighed maybe 90 pounds and had no hips or breasts, and the clothing and makeup made her look like she was all dressed up for Halloween. It was not hard to figure out that she was trying emulate me, but she looked ridiculous, and for the first time I wondered if maybe I did too.

When the doorbell rang, Graciela sprang from the couch and ran for the bathroom, squealing like Justin Bieber was at the door.

“What in the world is up with her?” I growled, annoyed.

“It must be hormones,” Manny sighed, like he knew all about women's hormones.

“Oh, yeah? Is that why she's become mini me? Hormones?” I stomped to the door and jerked it open, thinking the neighbors had grown tired of hearing Manny sing at the top of his lungs and were coming to complain.

Brandon Bates and two of his buddies stood at my door, matching smirks on their faces.

“Hey, Blue,” Brandon grinned, his eyes on my tank top and the brief cotton shorts I had changed into after work. His friends seemed equally interested in my outfit.

I was taken aback, and for a second I didn't quite know what to say.

“Uh, hi, Brandon. What are you guys doing here?” My greeting wasn't exactly welcoming, but Brandon stepped through the small opening like I'd just invited him in. I yielded in surprise as he strode into the apartment like he owned the place, Cory and Matt at his heels. They all made themselves comfortable on the couch, eyes on the TV, as if they were going to stay for awhile.

Manny was all smiles and happy hellos, thrilled that Brandon Bates was here to watch his favorite show with him. Graciela slunk out of the bathroom, hugging the walls like a shy puppy and perching on the armrest closest to Brandon.

“Hi, Brandon,” she purred, her eyes glued to his face, her breathing shallow.

Gracie's skittish behavior suddenly made sense. She had known they were coming. What was she thinking? That we were all going to hang out? The way her eyes clung to Brandon made her feelings fairly obvious. But I knew for a fact Brandon wasn't interested in Gracie. Thank God. In fact, he'd been flirtatious and suggestive toward me on several occasions, and I wondered at what point Mason would see his brother as a possible threat.

“So, Blue,” Brandon suggested after a few minutes. “I was thinking you and I could take a drive or something. Cory and Matt will babysit if you want to take off.”

Manny huffed in indignation at the term babysitting, and Cory's eyebrows shot up like that wasn't what he had planned on at all.

“Brandon!” Matt warned.

“Brandon!” Graciela cried, as if Brandon had slapped her. Then she shot me a look of such venom that I fell back a few steps.

“Does Mason know you're here, Brandon?” I said flatly.

“Mason says you and he have an arrangement, not a relationship, so I doubt he'd care.” Brandon smiled at me like it was my lucky day. Gracie glowered at me like I had stolen her soulmate. Time to send everyone home.

“Really, Brandon?” I cooed. “I don't remember you being part of that arrangement, so I think I'll pass on that ride. And look at the time! Darn it, my aunt is gonna be home soon.” It was a lie, but Brandon wouldn't know that.

“You guys better head out.” I opened the door and looked at them, one eyebrow raised expectantly. Matt and Cory stood obediently, but Brandon looked a little peeved. He was slower to rise, and I thought for a minute I might have trouble on my hands.

“I'll walk you out, Brandon,” Graciela purred and rose to her feet beside him. Manny's brotherly instincts finally kicked in, and he stood abruptly and grabbed Graciela by the hand.

“Come on, Gracie. We need to go, too.” Gracie yanked her hand away, and Manny's eyes flashed. He spit something out in fiery Spanish and Gracie snarled back at him like a cornered cat, but she let him pull her from the apartment.

“I'll text you, okay, Brandon?” Gracie flung the words over her shoulder, and Brandon's friends snickered as Manny launched into another tirade that faded away with their footsteps. Brandon and his friends followed them out, and I breathed a small sigh of relief.

Brandon said something under his breath, and the snickers became snorts and sly suggestions. They jostled each other as they headed down the sidewalk leading away from my apartment.

“Hey, Brandon,” I called after them. “Stay away from Gracie, please.”

“Gracie isn't the one I'm interested in, Blue,” Brandon called back. “You let me know when you're ready to take that ride, all right?”

I shut the door in response.



“Joan of Arc was born in 1412 in a little village in eastern France. Her family was poor, and they lived in a region that had been ravaged by conflict. Three years after Joan's birth, England's King Henry the fifth invaded France and defeated the French at Agincourt, leaving the country very divided.” Wilson's hands were shoved into his pockets, his eyes serious as he gazed at his class.

“In surviving documents, Joan has been described as resembling a mere 'shepherd girl.' But to me she is one of the most fascinating people in history. At thirteen she began having visions of a religious or spiritual nature. She described them as admonitions to be good or pious, to go to church. Very simple, as far as visions go.” Wilson smiled, a quick flash of straight white teeth, a concession to the fact that visions weren't commonplace or simple at all. “It wasn't until she was closer to sixteen years old when the visions changed. She started getting specific instructions to 'go to France.' She obeyed.

“Joan of Arc was sixteen years when she petitioned Charles de Ponthieu, beliguered heir to the throne, and told him she had been sent by God to help him. Can you imagine a girl of our day going to the President of the United States and telling him she was sent by God to assist him? I submit that it wasn't any less dramatic for young Joan to petition a king. The fact that she was even granted entrance is remarkable. She was actually turned away twice before she was finally successful. But eventually Joan was able to convince Charles that she was sent by God by relaying a prayer that he had recently given asking God if he was the rightful heir to the throne and if he wasn't that he would suffer and not his people. She told him God had heard him, and he was indeed the rightful King.

“She sent a letter to the English, telling them that the King of Heaven and son of Mary, even Jesus Christ, supported the claim of Charles to the French throne and that they should go back to England. She was also given control over an army and allowed to lead them into battle. A seventeen-year-old peasant girl!” Wilson looked around the room at his audience, many of whom were seventeen years old themselves.

“Joan became an almost mythical leader among those who fought against English rule. People were in awe of her wisdom and knowledge and her spiritual maturity. She gave them something to believe in and something to fight for. Within a year, Joan of Arc had led the French army to victories at

Orleans, Patay, and Troyes. Many other towns were also liberated from English control, making possible the coronation of King Charles VII in July of 1429. However, a year later Joan was captured and sold to the English.

“The English and members of the French clergy decided to put her on trial for witchcraft. Whenever they wanted to put an end to a woman in those days, they would just accuse her of being a witch. You'll see this accusation leveled at strong women throughout history. Initially, the trial was held in public, but Joan's responses in her own defense were much sharper and more astute than her prosecutors could have ever imagined. She actually garnered support and sympathy among those listening. Her accusers couldn't have that, and her trial was made private.

“Of course, she was found guilty, and she was sentenced to burn at the stake. It is said that as she was tied to the stake she forgave her accusers and asked them to pray for her. Many Englishmen wept at her death, convinced that they had burned a saint. We have a great deal of documentation from the life of Joan of Arc. But I think one thing she said is particularly telling about her character and her convictions. She said 'life is all we have, and we live it as we believe in living it. But to sacrifice what you are and to live without belief, that is a fate more terrible than dying.'

“The last time we worked on our personal history we wrote about what false beliefs we may have – beliefs that might be myths. Today I want you to write about the other side of the coin. What beliefs keep you moving forward? What beliefs define you?”

“Once upon a time there was a little blackbird who was pushed out of the nest, unwanted. Discarded. Then a Hawk found her and swooped her up and carried her away, giving her a home in his nest, teaching her to fly. But one day the Hawk didn't come home, and the bird was alone again, unwanted. She wanted to fly away. But as she rose to the edge of the nest and looked out across the sky, she noticed how small her wings were, how weak. The sky was so big. Somewhere else was so far away. She felt trapped. She could fly away, but where would she go?”

I had stopped trying to throw my paper away. But I hated it more every time I saw it. *I'm nobody! Who are you?* And my mind traveled right back to that awful day. The day I had become nobody.

I had been weak, and I had been small. The memory rose up like a black cloud. I guess I had fallen asleep wedged between the sink and the toilet because the next thing I knew, Donnie was back. He had yanked at my legs, pulling me out from my hiding spot with little effort. I had shrieked and kicked and scrambled for the door. The floor was wet and I slipped, and Donnie slid, his arms pinwheeling as he tried to step back from me. I raced to my room with Donnie at my heels. Terror choked me, and I couldn't scream. I slammed the door and locked it and tried to shimmy under my bed, but it was too close to the ground and my head wouldn't fit. There was no place to hide. Donnie was shoving at the door. I scrambled to my drawers and yanked a big t-shirt over my head and grabbed the wooden snake that sat atop my dresser.

"I just want to make sure you're okay, Blue," Donnie lied. I had seen his face when he looked at me, and I knew he was lying. Then door crashed against the adjacent wall, and Donnie was framed in the doorway. The boom made me jump, and I dropped the snake.

"Are you crazy?" Donnie yelled. He held out his hands in front of him as if he had cornered a wild animal. He moved toward me slowly, his palms up.

"I talked to Cheryl. She said you had some bad news today. That's gotta be tough, kid. I'm gonna stay with you until she gets home, all right? Just go on and climb in bed. Your lips are all blue."

I leaned down and picked up my snake, holding onto the edge of my t-shirt so it didn't ride up and reveal the bareness beneath. The smooth heft of wood felt good in my hands. Donnie stopped moving.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Blue. I'm just here to make sure you're okay, okay?"

I turned and raced to my bed, diving in and pulling the covers up to my chin. I clutched the snake under the covers. I watched Donnie approach. He eased himself down on the edge of my bed. He leaned toward my nightstand and switched off the lamp. I screamed. The lamp immediately came back on.

"Stop that!" he barked.

"Leave the light on," I panted.

"Okay, okay," he rushed. "I'm just gonna sit here with you until you fall asleep."

I turned onto my side toward the wall, my back to Donnie, squeezing my eyes shut and wrapping myself around the long, twisting snake that was growing warm in my grip. Wood was like that, warm and smooth. Jimmy

said it was because wood was once a living thing. I felt a hand in my hair and stiffened, my eyes snapping open.

“When I was little, my mom used to rub my back sometimes to help me fall asleep.” Donnie's voice was soft. “I could rub your back, like this.” His moved his hand to my shoulder. He carefully moved it in little circles across my upper back. It felt nice. I said nothing, my attention focused on those circles and the hand that traveled back and forth.

I eventually fell asleep to the gentle ministrations against my back. Donnie had comforted me and soothed me with his touch. And I had so badly needed comfort. When Cheryl came home she awakened both of us. Donnie had fallen asleep in the chair by my bed. Cheryl kicked him out and took his place on the chair, lighting a cigarette in shaking hands.

“Donnie told me he thinks you tried to kill yourself tonight. Why would you do somethin' like that?”

I didn't answer. I hadn't wanted to die. Not exactly. I just wanted to see Jimmy again.

“I want to see my dad again.”

Cheryl eyed me, her mouth puckered around her cigarette. She seemed to be considering what I had said, weighing it out in her mind. She finally sighed and stubbed her cigarette out on the base of my lamp, scattering ashes over my nightstand.

“You know he ain't your dad, right? I mean. He was like a dad. But he wasn't your dad.”

I sat up in my bed and stared at her, hating her, loathing her, wondering why she would be saying such awful things to me, especially today, of all days.

“Don't look at me like that. I'm not tryin' to hurt you. You just gotta know what's what. Jimmy told me he ate at a truck stop in Reno, a place where he sold some of his carvings. He said you'd been asleep, just a little thing, barely more than a baby, all huddled in a corner booth, waiting for your mother who was playing the slots. He said he didn't know who you belonged to. You remember Jimmy. Wouldn't yell help if his clothes were on fire. He sat there with you, gave you some of his dinner. He said you didn't cry, and you didn't seem afraid of him. He sat with you for quite a while, even whittled a doll for you.” Cheryl lit another cigarette and inhaled deeply. She nodded toward my dresser. “It's that one. The one you have there.”

I began to shake my head, denying her story, denying her the ability to take him away from me in the way she seemed intent on doing. But she persisted, and I listened helplessly.

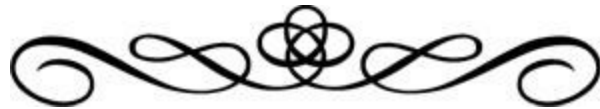
“He said you just watched him, and you gobbled up the french fries he offered. Your mother came back eventually. Jimmy said he was sure she'd be angry that he was sitting there with you. But he said she seemed nervous and kind of jittery and surprised more than anything.

“The next morning, he found you inside his truck. He said the handle on the passenger side was busted and he couldn't lock it, making it easy for her to get in. The windows had been rolled down a few inches, and you were laying there on the front seat. Luckily, it was fairly early in the morning when he found you. Jimmy said it was hot and your mother was a fool for leaving you inside the cab of a truck, even with the windows cracked. But maybe she was wasted or strung out. You had a backpack stuffed with a few clothes and the little doll he'd carved. Why she left you there, he didn't know. Maybe she thought he'd be nice to you. Maybe there was no one else and she was desperate. But she obviously followed him and at some point in the night left you there. He went back to the truck stop where he had first seen you and your mother. But she wasn't there, and he was afraid to ask questions, not wantin' to draw attention to himself.

“So the damn fool kept you. He shoulda gone to the police the first thing. After a few days, the cops showed up and asked the truck stop manager some questions. The manager was a friend of Jimmy's so Jimmy asked what the hub bub was about. Apparently the body of a woman had been found at a local hotel. They printed up some pictures from her driver's license and had left one there with the manager to put up at the truck-stop. One of those 'if-you-have-any-information-call-this-number flyers' the police sometimes put out. It was your mother. When Jimmy saw that, it scared him to death, and he moved on and took you with him. I don't know why he didn't just leave you there or go to the police. But he didn't. He didn't trust the police. Probably thought he'd be blamed for something he had nothin' to do with. He didn't even know your name. He said you just kept saying Blue, Blue, Blue. So that's what he called you. It kinda stuck, I guess.

“As far as I know, no one ever came looking for you. Your face wasn't on a milk carton, or nothin'. Three years ago when Jimmy turned up missing, I thought I was done for. I knew somebody was gonna figure out you weren't

his, and they'd throw me in jail for not tellin' on him. So I just told them you were his daughter, far as I knew. They didn't press too hard. Jimmy didn't have a record or nothin' – and you said he was your father. It's why I took you in. I felt like I had to keep my eye on you for his sake, and for my own. And you've been a good girl. I expect you to keep on bein' a good girl. No more shit like you pulled tonight. Last thing I need is a kid endin' up dead on my watch.”



Over the next few months, Donnie would come over when Cheryl was at work. He was always nice to me. He always offered comfort. A caress, a brief touch, crumbs for the hungry little bird. Cheryl dumped him eventually, maybe sensing that he liked me a little too much. And I was relieved, recognizing that his attentions weren't entirely appropriate. But I'd learned something from Donnie. I'd learned that there was comfort to be had for a pretty girl. Physical comfort, comfort that might be fleeting but that would fill me up temporarily and take away my loneliness.

Joan of Arc said sacrificing who you are and living without belief was a fate worse than death. I had lived on hope for three years. Hope that Jimmy would come back for me. That night, hope died, as did my sense of self. I didn't sacrifice who I was, not exactly. It was ripped from me. Jimmy's little blackbird died a slow and painful death. In her place I built a gaudy, colorful, blue bird. A loud, obnoxious peacock with bright feathers, who dressed to call attention to her beauty at every moment, and craved affection. But it was all just a bright disguise.

Chapter Seven

Royal

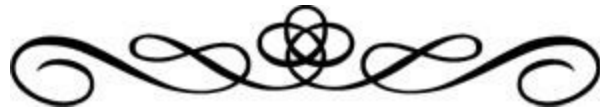
Gloria Olivares, Manny and Gracie's mom, was never home. It wasn't because she was a bad mother. It wasn't because she didn't love her kids. It was because providing for them meant working non-stop. The woman was bone thin and 5'0 if she stood on her tiptoes, and day in, day out, she put in 18-hour days. She was a maid at the same hotel where Cheryl was a dealer, but she also worked as a housekeeper for a wealthier family in Boulder City. I didn't know if she was legally in the U.S. or if she had more family still in Mexico. She had a brother, Sal, who had supplied me with wood a time or two, but Manny and Gracie never spoke of a father, and there certainly wasn't money coming in from another source.

Gloria took her responsibility for her kids very seriously. They were clean, they were fed, and they were warm, but her options were limited, and she had had to leave them alone a lot. It wasn't as big a deal now that they were teenagers, but Manny said he had been babysitting Gracie since he was five years old. Maybe that was the reason Manny considered himself mama to his younger sister, even though they were only two years apart. Maybe that was the reason Graciela's transformation had Manny as jittery as a crack addict in need of a fix.

Gracie's insolence and attitude had Manny pacing the floor and demanding she come out of her room when I brought dinner over on Christmas Eve. Bev had sent home a little of everything from the cafe, and normally Manny would have been in heaven. But Gracie claimed she wasn't hungry and declared she didn't want to “eat with a slut.” Graciela had been downright nasty to me since Brandon had shown up at my house over a month before. Unfortunately, the less interest Brandon showed, the more aggressive and determined Gracie became.

I shrugged my shoulders, wished Manny a happy holiday, and headed back to my own apartment. Graciela might not want to “eat with a slut,” but she'd been more than willing to bum a ride home with me after school every day just so she could see Brandon in the parking lot. And she still studiously copied the way I wore my hair and makeup and mimicked my style down to

the way I rolled my sleeves and buttoned my shirts. So she didn't want to eat with a skank, but she apparently wanted to look like one. I really missed the old spacey Gracie, and if she didn't knock it off soon, Manny was going to fall apart, and I was going to get pissed.



“Elizabeth the first was the daughter of a King. King Henry VIII, to be precise. Sounds ace doesn't it? Being a princess? Riches, power, adulation. Brilliant, eh? But remember the saying 'never judge a book by its cover?' I'm going to add to that. Never judge history by the so-called facts. Lift up that shiny cover, and get to the real story beneath. Elizabeth's mother was Anne Boleyn. Anyone know anything about her?” Wilson scanned the sea of rapt faces, but no hands shot up.

“Anne Boleyn's sister Mary was King Henry's mistress, one of them, at least. But Anne wanted more, and she believed she could get more. She plotted and schemed, and used her brain to catch Henry's eye and reel him in. For seven years, Henry tried to get a divorce from his Queen so he could marry Anne. How did she do it? How did she keep Henry not only interested but willing to move heaven and earth to have her? She was not considered beautiful. The standard of beauty for that time was blonde hair, blue eyes, fair skin – like her sister Mary. So how did she do it?” Wilson paused for effect. “She kept the man hungry!” The class burst out laughing, understanding what Wilson was referring to.

“Eventually, when Henry couldn't get the Church of England to dissolve his marriage to the Queen, he cut his ties with the church, and married Anne anyway. Shocking! The church held incredible power in those days, even over a king.”

“Ahhhh!” a few girls sighed.

“That's so romantic,” Chrissy mooned, batting her cow eyes at Wilson.

“Oh yes, highly romantic. A brilliant love story . . . until you find out that three years after Anne succeeded in marrying the King, she was charged with witchcraft, incest, blasphemy, and plotting against the crown. She was

beheaded.”

“They cut off her head?! That is so rude!” Chrissy was indignant and slightly outraged.

“She had failed to produce a male heir,” Wilson continued. “She'd had Elizabeth, but that didn't count. Some say Anne was seen as having too much power politically. We know she was no fool. She was discredited and taken out, and Henry let it happen.”

“He obviously wasn't hungry anymore,” I added caustically.

Wilson's ears turned pink, which pleased me deeply.

“Obviously,” he added dryly, his voice betraying none of his discomfort. “Which brings us back to our original thought. Things are rarely what they seem. What is the truth beneath the surface, beneath the apparent facts? Think now about your own life . . .”

I tuned Wilson out and laid my forehead down on my desk, letting my hair hide my face. I knew where this was going. Our personal histories. Why was he doing this? What was the point? I stayed that way, my head against my desk as Wilson finished his lecture and the sounds of papers being passed and pencils being sharpened replaced his buttery British accent.

“Blue?”

I didn't move.

“Are you ill?”

“No,” I grumbled, sitting up and shoving my hair from my face. I glowered up at him as I took the paper that he held out to me. He acted as if he wanted to speak, thought better of it, and retreated to his desk. I watched him go, wishing I dared tell him I wouldn't do the assignment. I couldn't do it. My sad little paragraph looked like chicken scratch on the wrinkled page. Chicken scratch. That's what I was. A chicken, pecking at nothing, squawking and ruffling my feathers to make myself appear strong, to keep people at a distance.

“Once upon a time there was a little blackbird, pushed from the nest, unwanted. Discarded. Then a Hawk found her and swooped her up and carried her away, giving her a home in his nest, teaching her to fly. But one day the Hawk didn't come home, and the little bird was alone again, unwanted. She wanted to fly away. But as she rose to the edge of the nest and looked out across the sky, she noticed how small her wings were, how weak.

She was trapped. She could fly away, but where would she go?"

I added the new lines to my story and stopped, tapping my pencil against the page, like tiny seeds for the chicken to peck. Maybe that was the truth beneath the surface. I was scared. I was terrified that my story would end tragically. Like poor Anne Boleyn. She plotted and planned and became Queen, only to be discarded. There was that word again. The life she had built was taken from her in one fell swoop, and the man who should have loved her abandoned her to fate.

I had never considered myself a chicken. In my dreams I was the swan, the bird that became beautiful and admired. The bird that proved everyone wrong. I asked Jimmy once why he was named after a bird. Jimmy was used to my questions. He told me I had been abnormally resilient and mostly unaffected by the absence of my mother. I hadn't cried or complained, and I was very talkative, almost to the point of driving a man who had lived with little company and even less conversation a little crazy. He never lost his temper with me, although sometimes he just refused to answer, and I ended up prattling to myself.

But this particular time he was in the mood for storytelling. He explained how hawks are symbolic of protection and strength, and that because of that he had always been proud of his name. He told me many of the Native American tribes had variations of some of the same stories about animals, but his favorite was an Arapaho story about a girl who climbed into the sky.

Her name was Sapana, a beautiful girl who loved the birds of the forest. One day, Sapana was out collecting firewood when she had saw a hawk laying at the base of a tree. A large porcupine quill stuck out of his breast. The girl soothed the bird and pulled the quill out, freeing the bird to fly away. Then the girl saw a large porcupine sitting by the trunk of a tall cottonwood tree. "It was you, you wicked thing! You hurt that poor bird." She wanted to catch the evil porcupine and take his quills so he wouldn't hurt another bird.

Sapana chased after him, but the porcupine was very quick and he climbed the tree. The girl climbed after him but could never seem to catch up to him. Higher and higher the porcupine climbed, and the tree just kept extending itself higher and higher into the sky. Suddenly, Sapana saw a flat, smooth surface over her head. It was shining, and as she reached out to touch it she realized it was the sky. Suddenly, she found herself standing in a circle of

teepees. The tree had disappeared and the porcupine had transformed himself into an ugly old man. Sapana was afraid and tried to escape, but she didn't know how to get home. The porcupine man said, "I have been watching you. You are very beautiful and you work very hard. We work very hard in the the Sky world. You will be my wife." Sapana did not want to be the wife of porcupine man, but she did not know what else to do. She was trapped.

Sapana missed the green and browns of the forest and longed to return to her family. Each day the old man brought her buffalo hides to scrape and stretch and sew into robes. When there were no hides to stretch, she would dig turnips. The porcupine man told her not to dig too deep, but one day the girl was daydreaming about her home in the forest and paid little attention to the depth she was digging. When she pulled the large turnip from the ground, she saw light shining up through the hole. When she looked into the hole, she could see patches of the green earth far below. Now she knew how to get home! She rolled the huge turnip back into the hole so the porcupine man would not see what she had discovered.

Each day Sapana would take the leftover sinews from the buffalo hides and tie them together. Eventually, she had a very long rope she could use to lower herself back to the earth. She tied the rope to a nearby tree and rolled the turnip from the ground. She lowered herself down through the clouds, and the patches of green grew closer and closer, but she was still high in the sky. Suddenly, Sapana felt a yanking on her rope and looked up to see the porcupine man peering down at her from the hole in the sky. "Climb back up or I will untie the rope from the tree and you will fall!" he roared. But Sapana would not climb back up. Suddenly, the rope loosened, and she was falling through the air. Then something flew up beneath her, and she settled onto the back of a large hawk. It was the hawk Sapana had helped in the forest the day she had chased the porcupine. He flew to the earth with her on his back. Sapana's family was so happy to see her. From then on, they left bits of buffalo meat for the hawk and other birds of prey as a symbol of their gratitude for Sapana's protection and return.

"You are like the hawk that saved Sapana!" I had squealed, delighted by the story. "I wish my name was Sapana! Then I would be Sapana Echohawk!"

Jimmy had smiled at me. But he seemed sad, and he muttered, "Sometimes I feel more like the porcupine man than the hawk."

I didn't understand what he meant and laughed uproariously at his joke. "Icas is the porcupine man!" I said, pointing at the lazy dog with the shaggy coat. Icas raised his head and looked at me, as if he knew what we were talking about. He ruffed and turned away, as if offended by the comparison. Jimmy and I had both laughed then, and the conversation was forgotten.

"Once upon a time there was a little blackbird who was pushed from the nest, unwanted. Discarded. Then a Hawk found her and swooped her up and carried her away, giving her a home in his nest, teaching her to fly. But one day the Hawk didn't come home, and the little bird was alone again, unwanted. She wanted to fly away. But as she rose to the edge of the nest and looked out across the sky, she noticed how small her wings were, how weak. She was trapped. She could fly away, but where would she go? She was afraid . . . because she knew she wasn't a hawk."



"Jimmy?"

The trailer was dark around me, and I listened to see if I could hear the sounds that Jimmy was still sleeping. Rain was pushing down on us from what felt like all sides, the little trailer rocking slightly from the water and wind.

"Jimmy?" I said it louder.

"Hmmm?" His reply was immediate this time, like he too lay listening in the dark.

"Did my mother look like me?"

Jimmy didn't answer right away, and I wondered if he was going to entertain this conversation in the middle of the night.

"She had dark hair like you," he responded quietly. "And she reminded me of someone I used to know."

He said no more, and I waited in the silence, hoping for crumbs.

"Is that all?" I said finally, impatiently.

"She didn't really look like you," he sighed. "She looked more like me."

“Huh?” I hadn't anticipated that response at all.

“She was Native, like me,” he grunted. “Her eyes and hair were black, and her skin was much browner than yours.”

“Was she Pawnee?”

“I don't know which tribe your mother belonged to.”

“But I'm still Pawnee?” I persisted. “Because you're Pawnee?”

Jimmy grunted. I hadn't recognized his discomfort for what it was. I hadn't realized what he wasn't telling me.

Jimmy sighed. “Go to sleep, Blue.”

Chapter Eight

Gun Metal

When I heard the first shot I thought of the fireworks that had cracked and sizzled throughout the neighborhood on New Years Eve. It startled me, but it didn't occur to me to be scared. The parking lot around my apartment complex had been lit up for the last two days with residents setting off bottle rockets and spinners and kids running around with sparklers, and I was almost used to the sound. I slammed my locker shut and headed toward my seventh hour class as another shot rang out.

And then kids were screaming and people were yelling that someone had a gun. I rounded the corner on the way to Mr. Wilson's room and saw Manny, his arm raised like the Statue of Liberty, a gun clutched torchlike in his hand. He was shooting at the ceiling and striding toward Wilson's door demanding to know where Brandon Bates was. Horror slammed into me like a runaway train. Brandon was in my seventh-hour, European History class in Mr. Wilson's room. I dropped my books and raced after Manny, screaming.

"Manny! Manny, stop!" I shrieked. Manny didn't even turn his head. He kept walking and shooting. Three shots and then four. He walked into Wilson's classroom and shut the door behind him. A shot rang out once more. I flew through the door seconds later, expecting the worst. Mr. Wilson stood in front of Manny, one hand stretched out toward him. Manny had the gun pointed at Wilson's forehead and was demanding to know where Brandon was. Kids were crying and huddling together underneath their desks. I saw no blood, no bodies, and no sign of Brandon Bates. My relief gave me courage. I was behind Manny, facing Wilson, and though Wilson's eyes never left Manny's face or the gun pointed at his forehead, his hand motioned me away. I moved toward Wilson, giving Manny a wide berth so I wouldn't spook him, speaking softly as I did.

"Manny. You don't want to hurt Wilson. You like him, remember? You said he's the best teacher you've ever had." Manny's eyes swung wildly to me and then zeroed in on Wilson once more. He was breathing hard and sweating profusely, and his hands were shaking violently. I was afraid he

would accidentally pull the trigger. At that distance he wouldn't miss Wilson.

"Stay away, Blue! He's protecting Brandon! Everybody get down!" Manny screeched, waving the gun in every direction. "I'll b-blow his head off, I promise," he stuttered, the words so at odds with his young voice that I almost laughed. But it wasn't funny. None of it was funny.

I kept walking, and Wilson shook his head furiously, willing me to stay put. But I kept moving. My legs felt like they weighed four hundred pounds, and I couldn't feel my hands. I was completely numb with fear. But I wasn't afraid of Manny. I was terribly afraid for him.

"Manny. Give me the gun, sweetie. None of us are protecting Brandon." I looked around at the cowering students, praying Brandon wasn't in the room. Several students lifted their heads, looking for Brandon too, but nobody spoke.

"He's not here, Manny," Wilson offered, his voice as calm as if he were just giving another lecture. "I'm not protecting him. I'm protecting you, do you understand that? Your sister needs you, and if you shoot Brandon or anyone else, you will go to jail for a very long time."

"But she's only fourteen! And he sent the pictures to everyone! She thought he liked her. He told her to send him some pictures and then he sent them to everyone! She tried to kill herself, and now I'm going to kill him!" Manny cried, bending down to look underneath the desks, certain we were hiding Brandon.

"And he's going to have to answer for that, Manny," I soothed, now within an arm's length of him. Wilson reached out and grabbed my arm, pulling me toward him. He tried to push me around his back but I shrugged out of his grasp, keeping myself between him and Manny. I knew Manny wouldn't shoot me. Manny had resumed pointing the gun toward Wilson, but I now stood in the way.

"There are picture of you too, Blue! Did you know that? Gabby showed me this morning. The whole fr-freaking sch-school has seen y-you!" Manny stuttered, his face a shattered mask.

I reassured myself that it couldn't be true, even as stunned humiliation clogged my throat and spread through my limbs like snake venom. I kept my arm outstretched, hoping Manny would relent and hand me the gun.

"If that's the case, then shouldn't Blue be the one with the gun?" Wilson countered mildly. Manny's eyes shot to Wilson, a shocked look on his face.

Then he looked at me, and I wiggled my fingers, indicating he should hand it over. He seemed to consider what Wilson said.

Then Manny laughed. It was just a slight hiccup, but the sound ricocheted around the room like another shot. I wanted to cover my head, but the hiccup became a chortle, and the chortle a full rolling laugh that turned into wracking sobs.

All at once, Manny seemed to lose his conviction, and his arm went slack, the gun hanging loosely from his fingers. He buried his chin in his chest and let the sobs overtake him. Wilson stepped around me and took Manny in his arms, pulling him close as my hands closed around the gun. Manny let me take it without protest, and I retreated gingerly, one step at a time, as I watched Manny sob into Wilson's chest. But once I had the weapon, I didn't know what to do with it. I didn't want to set it down, and I couldn't give it to Wilson. His arms were wrapped around an inconsolable Manny, more to keep him contained, I think, then to offer comfort, though Manny didn't need to know that.

"Do you know how to empty the magazine?" Wilson asked me softly.

I nodded. Jimmy had taught me. I swiftly removed the bullets as Wilson addressed the class, many of whom had started to rise from where they had huddled beneath their desks.

"Students – I need everyone to calmly exit the classroom. Walk, don't run. When you get out into the hallway, don't stop. Exit the school. I'm guessing help is already on its way. Everything is going to be all right. Blue, stay right here with me. You can't go out in the hallway with the gun, and I can't take it from you right now. We'll wait here until reinforcements arrive."

By reinforcements, I knew Wilson meant the police, but was trying not to alarm Manny who had clearly come undone, and was a quivering mess in his arms.

My classmates scrambled for the door, flinging it wide as they erupted into the hallway beyond. The corridor was silent and empty, as if classes were in session beyond the closed doors. But I knew there were teachers trying to keep their students safe, huddled in terror behind those doors, crying, praying, hoping that they wouldn't hear more gunshots, begging for rescue, calling 911. Maybe everyone had run for the exits when Manny began shooting at the lights. Maybe there was a SWAT team running up the stairs at that very moment. All I knew was that when the police arrived, my little

friend would be leaving in handcuffs, and he wouldn't be coming back to high school. Ever again.

“Set the gun and the bullets on my desk, Blue. You don't want to be holding them when the authorities arrive,” Wilson instructed, pulling my attention back to the now-empty classroom and the gun in my hand.

I did as Wilson asked, and as I moved back toward him his eyes met mine and I saw the terror of what had just transpired stamped all over his young face. It was as if, now that the danger had passed, he was replaying the entire event in his head, complete with bonus scenes and possible bloody outtakes. Even as I wondered why I wasn't shaking, my legs would not longer hold me, and I teetered, grabbing for a desk to lower myself into.

And then the room was swarming with police shouting instructions and asking questions. Wilson answered them all in rapid succession, pointing out the weapon and relaying what had transpired in his classroom. Wilson and I were pushed aside as Manny was surrounded, restrained, and led from the school. And then Wilson's arms were around me, holding me fiercely as I clung to him in return. The front of his shirt was damp with Manny's tears, and I could feel his heart pounding wildly against my cheek. The smell of spicy soap and peppermints that was uniquely Wilson was accompanied by the sharp scent of his fear, and for several minutes neither of us were capable of speech. When he finally spoke, his voice was hoarse with feeling.

“Are you daft?” he scolded, his lips against my hair, his words clipped and his accent pronounced. “You've got more bottle than any girl I've ever met. Why in God's name didn't you hide like every other student with half a brain!”

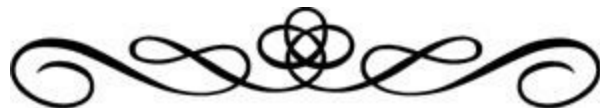
I clung to him, shaking. The adrenaline that had been keeping me upright had abandoned me. “He's my friend. And friends don't let friends . . . shoot . . . other friends,” I quipped, my voice quavering in spite of my bravado. Wilson laughed, the sound almost giddy and full of relief. I joined him, laughing because we had looked death in the face and lived to tell about it, laughing because I didn't want to cry.



Wilson and I answered questions together, and then we were questioned again separately, as was every student present in the classroom and in the hallways from the time Manny entered the school. I'm sure Manny was also questioned extensively, though rumors abounded that he was unresponsive and currently on suicide watch. I found out later that SWAT had been called and ambulances and emergency personnel were already gathering around the school by the time the seventh-hour European History class had erupted through the main doors of the high school.

Most of the student body had been swiftly evacuated by teachers and administrators as the drama unfolded in Mr. Wilson's classroom, and when his students had run from the building, carrying with them the news that Manny had been disarmed, the police just arriving on the scene promptly entered the building. From that first gunshot into a fluorescent light, to the moment Manny was taken into custody, only fifteen minutes had elapsed. It had felt like an eternity.

People said Wilson and I were heroes. There were local cameras everywhere as well as some national coverage of the school shooting that had ended without bloodshed. I was commended by Principal Beckstead personally, which was surreal for both of us, I'm sure. The few times I had been in his crosshairs in the past weren't because of heroic behavior, to say the least. Mr. Wilson and I were hounded for weeks by the media. But I didn't want to talk to anyone about Manny, and I refused all interviews. I just wanted my friend back, and all the police and the interviews just made me think of Jimmy and the last time I had lost someone I cared about. I even thought I saw Officer Bowles, the officer who had pulled me over in Jimmy's truck once upon a lifetime ago. He was talking with a group of parents when I walked out of the school that terrible day. I told myself it couldn't be him. And so what if it was? It wasn't like I had anything to say to him.



It was one month since Manny had lost his mind. One month since I'd had a break from the madness that had ensued. One month of intense

unhappiness, one month of despair for the Olivares family. They had released Manny, pending some sort of hearing, and Gloria had taken the kids and fled. I didn't know where they were, and I doubted I would see them again. One horrific month. And so I called Mason. It was a pattern with me. I didn't date. I didn't hang out. I had sex.

Mason was happy to oblige, as always. I liked the way Mason looked, and I liked the way he felt when I was beneath him. But I didn't especially like Mason. I didn't examine why I didn't like him, or even if that should be a consideration. And so when I found him waiting for me after school, pulled up on his Harley with his arms crossed so I could see the tattoos on his healthy biceps, I left my truck parked in the school parking lot and hopped on back of the bike. I slung my purse over my head and wrapped my arms around his waist as we roared away. Mason loved to ride, and the January afternoon was cold but pierced by a relentless desert sun. We road for over an hour, hitting Hoover dam and winding our way back as winter began to claim the light, pushing back the cowering sun, which retreated far too soon. I hadn't restrained my hair but let the wind whip it into a snarly black mass and slap against my face in a way that purged and punished, which was what I seemed intent upon.

Mason lived above his parents' garage in an apartment that was accessed by a narrow set of metal stairs that leveled off on a barely-there platform. We climbed into his apartment, cheeks windburned and red, blood pounding, invigorated by the cold ride. And I didn't wait for sweet talk or flirtatious foreplay; I never did. We tumbled onto his rumpled bed without a word, and I shut off my anxious heart and my nervous head as dusk descended into another night, another meaningless merging, another attempt to find myself as I gave myself away.

I awoke hours later to an empty bed. Music and voices bled through the paper thin walls that separated Mason's bedroom and bathroom from the rest of the space. I pulled on my clothes, wiggling into the jeans that I despised but continually donned day after day. I was starving and hoped Mason and whoever else was out there had ordered some pizza I could steal. My hair was an impossible tangle, my eyes a black-rimmed mess, and I spent twenty minutes in the bathroom making sure Mason's company couldn't make nasty insinuations about the evening's activities.

I finished in the bathroom and, out of habit, switched off the light as I

headed across the room. I picked my way carefully around the bed, stepping around the strewn clothing and shoes. The light switch for the bedroom was by the opposite door, but the bathroom was all the way across the room, making negotiating the messy space treacherous in my high-heeled boots. I made it to the door that separated me from something hot and cheesy and was feeling around for the knob when I heard the outside door open and Mason greet his brother with a “What's up, Bro?”

I hadn't seen or talked to Brandon Bates since before the shooting. And I didn't want to. He hadn't even been at the school that afternoon, yet I blamed him entirely for the events that had transpired. I huddled by the bedroom door, hungry and indecisive, listening as someone else offered a greeting as well.

“Hey, Brandon? Anybody try to take you out lately?” It was Colby, my least favorite of all of Mason's friends. He was ugly, mean, and stupid. A triple threat. And he sounded drunk, which didn't bode well for the evening. I avoided him whenever possible. It seemed tonight it would not be possible.

“Not yet, Colb, but the night is young,” Brandon joked, always the friendly charmer.

“Mason says you got some pictures of that little senorita on your phone,” Colby slurred. “They didn't confiscate 'em, did they?”

Even though Graciela had admittedly sent Brandon the naked pictures of herself, Colby was being charged with solicitation and distribution of those pictures, and the rumor was that his parents were fighting tooth and nail for his exoneration. But everyone knew what he had done.

“Shut up, Colby, you dumbass,” Mason barked, but his bark lacked a certain bite, and I sighed, seeing the writing on the wall. I would be walking back to my truck, still parked at the school. He and Colby had obviously settled in for the night. Lots of alcohol and endless episodes of *Ultimate Fighter*.

“What? I saw that picture you have of Blue! Now that girl has a body that don't quit, know what I'm sayin' – not like some little ninth grader!” Colby chortled.

My heart skidded to a screeching halt.

Mason cursed and threw something, his words lost in an obvious tussle as something crashed and obscenities flew with several hard objects.

“She's in the other room, Colby, you freakin' idiot!” Mason spat, and

Colby and Brandon started to laugh, obviously not worried whatsoever about the fact that I might hear them discussing my body or the fact that Mason had taken a picture of said body without my knowledge or consent.

“Man, I saw it, too!” Brandon howled. “The whole school saw it. In fact, I think that little Mexican chic saw it on my phone. Made it real easy to convince her that all the hottest girls send me pictures.”

“Shut up!” Mason hissed, his whisper as audible as Brandon and Colby's laughter. “What the hell were you two doin' lookin' at my phone?! Blue doesn't even know I took it!”

I stumbled back to the bathroom, unwilling to hear anymore. My stomach twisted, and the hunger that had growled at me moments before turned into a sour sledgehammer, and I wondered if I was going to be sick. Graciela had seen a picture of me naked on Brandon's phone. Manny had told me as much. But I had convinced myself it was just emotion, just a crazy rant, just him lashing out at me for standing between him and what he perceived as justice. I had said nothing to the police about what Manny had claimed. As far as I knew, nobody else had either.

I thought back to the evening when Graciela had been so angry with me. The night Manny and I had rolled our eyes and joked about hormonal girls and their crushes. And it suddenly all made sense. Graciela had looked up to me, had idolized me. And I had betrayed her. She thought I had sent that picture to Brandon, a boy I knew she liked. A boy everyone seemed to gravitate to, and who, for a moment, had let her bask in the light of his attentions. And so she had done it too.

My eyes were dry, but my chest heaved in an effort to hold back a sharp, dry cry that rattled around my heart and clogged my throat with guilt.

“I didn't know!” I begged my conscience for acquittal. Mason had snapped that picture of me without my knowledge, and his brother had gotten hold of it.

“I didn't know!” I said desperately, and this time my voice echoed in the filthy bathroom where I cowered. I looked around at the soiled clothes, the drooping shower curtain, the rancid toilet and the crud-lined sink. What was I doing here? What had I done? I chose to be here! And I had chosen to be in that situation with Mason. I hadn't known about the picture. But I wasn't innocent, either.

My actions had set off a chain of events. A mixed up girl, hungry for

affection, makes a terrible choice. Was I talking about Graciela or myself? I faced myself in the mirror and immediately looked away. My actions, as inadvertent as they may have been, had triggered Graciela's choice and, in turn, Manny's response. Manny, who had seemed to love the whole world and, even more impressive, to like himself. *I'm nobody. Who are you?*

"I'm Manny," he had said, as if that should have been enough. And why wasn't it? Because despite all the good intentioned urging to just be yourself, how was being yourself even possible if you didn't know who the hell YOU were? Manny seemed to have known, but he was as susceptible as we all are to the influences of a world where people act without thought, live without consciousness, and judge without understanding.

I grabbed my purse and headed back through the bedroom. Should I demand Mason's phone and delete the picture, threatening to go to the police? Should I throw things and cry and tell him he was a sick bastard and I never wanted to see him again? Would it do any good? The cat was already out of the bag, so to speak. The picture was in the wind. And maybe that was justice.

I strode through the living room and shrugged into my jacket. Colby belched out a happy hello and Brandon seemed uncomfortable. Mason was silent as I headed for the door. He had to have known what I had heard.

"Don't go, Blue," he said as I walked out. But he didn't come after me.

Chapter Nine

Midnight

My truck was alone in the sea of striped black top. The lights in the parking lot made little pools of orange on the ground, and I walked to my truck, grateful that the night was almost over. My feet hurt. The high-heeled boots that made my legs look so long pinched my toes and had me hobbling the last few steps. I dug my keys out of my purse and unlocked the door. It screeched loudly as I swung it open, making me jump a little, although I'd heard it squeak a thousand times before. I slid inside the cab, pulled the door shut, and shoved the keys into the ignition.

Click, click, click, click.

“Oh no! Not now, please not now!” I wailed. I tried again. Just the series of fast little clicks. The lights wouldn't even turn on. The battery was dead. I said a very unladylike word and beat on the steering wheel, making the horn bleep for mercy. I considered sleeping in the front seat. Home was miles away, and I was wearing impossibly high, ridiculous shoes. It would take me hours to walk home. Cheryl was at work, so she couldn't come get me. But if I stayed put I would be faced with the same dilemma in the morning, and I could be stuck walking home with raccoon makeup and bedhead in broad daylight.

Mason would come and get me. He would probably answer on the first ring. I shoved the thought from my head. I wasn't calling Mason Bates ever again. That left me with only one option. I climbed out of my truck and began walking, my anger fueling my steps. I cut across the parking lot and rounded the school in the direction of home – opposite the direction I had come. A car I hadn't noticed when I'd arrived was parked in the teacher's lot, closer to the school and the entrance doors. It was the silver Subaru I had seen Mr. Wilson driving around town. If it was his, and he was in the school, he would give me a ride – or even better, jump start my truck. I had cables. Maybe he had left his keys in it, and I could just quickly “borrow” his car, drive it over to my truck, give it a jump, and bring his car back without him ever knowing it.

I tested the driver's side door hopefully. No luck. I tested all the doors, just

to be sure. I could pound on the door to the school, the one closest to where he was parked. But his room was up the stairs and down the hall on the second floor. The likelihood of him hearing me knocking was pretty slim. But I knew a way into the school. My dremel had broken last summer and for about a month I hadn't had the money to replace it. But the wood-shop room in the school had a nice one that I'd made good use of many times. I'd taken a metal file to the lock on the shop exit door, filing it down just enough that any key would open the door. If no one had discovered it in the seven months since then, I would be able to get in. I might get in trouble, but I could just say the door was unlocked. I doubted Wilson would tattletale anyway.

My streak of bad luck took a small vacation because my car keys easily turned the lock on the shop room door. I was in. I crept through the familiar passageways. The smell of the school – disinfectant, school lunch, and cheap cologne – was oddly comforting. I wondered how I would approach Wilson without scaring the crap out of him. As I neared the stairs leading to the second floor I heard something that made me stop abruptly. I listened, and my heart thudded like a drum, making it hard to determine what the sound was. I held my breath and strained to hear. Violins? Weird. Hitchcock's *Psycho* flashed through my mind. “REE! REE! REE! REE!” I shivered. Violins were creepy.

The sound had me sneaking up the stairs, following the thready notes. When I reached the second floor, the hallway was dark and the light from Wilson's classroom beckoned me forward. It was the only light on in the whole school, creating a spotlight on the man within. Wilson was outlined by the frame of his door, a bright rectangle at the end of the shadowy corridor. I walked toward him, keeping close to the wall in case he looked up. But the light that illuminated him would also blind him. I doubted he would see me even if he looked directly at me.

He was wrapped around an instrument. I didn't know the name of it. It was a lot bigger than a violin – so big it sat on the floor and he was seated behind it. And the music he was making wasn't frightening. It was achingly lovely. It was piercing, yet sweet. Powerful, yet simple. His eyes were closed and his head was bent, as if he prayed as he played. His shirt sleeves were rolled up, and his body moved with his bow, like a weary swordsman. I thought of Manny then. How Manny had remarked on Wilson's forearms, and I watched the play of muscle under his smooth skin, pulling and pushing, coaxing the

mellow music from the moody strings.

I wanted to reveal my presence, to startle him. I wanted to laugh, to mock him, to say something cutting and sarcastic like I usually did. I wanted to hate him because he was beautiful in a way I would never be.

But I didn't move. And I didn't speak. I just listened. For how long, I don't know. And as I continued to listen, my heart began to ache with a feeling I had no name for. My heart felt swollen in my chest. I lifted my hand to my chest as if I could make it stop.

But with each note Wilson played, the feeling grew. It wasn't grief and it wasn't pain. It wasn't despair or even remorse. It felt more like . . . gratitude. It felt like love. I immediately rejected the words that had sprung to my mind. Gratitude for what?! For a life that had never been kind? For happiness I had rarely known? For pleasure that had been fleeting and left a desperate aftertaste of guilt and loathing?

I closed my eyes, trying to resist the sensation, but my heart was hungry for it, insatiable. The feeling spread down my arms and legs, warm and liquid, healing. And the guilt and the loathing slipped away, pushed out by the overwhelming gratitude that I was alive, that I could feel, that I could hear the music. I was filled with an indescribable sweetness unlike anything I had ever felt before.

I slid down against the wall until I was sitting on the cool linoleum floor. I leaned my heavy head against my knees, letting the strings Wilson played untie the knots in my soul and release me, even for a moment, from the burdens I dragged along like clanking cans and filthy chains.

What if there was a way to let them go forever? What if I could be different? What if life could be different? What if I could be somebody? I had little hope. But there was something in the music that whispered of possibility and breathed life into a very private dream. Wilson played on, unaware of the spark that had been lit inside of me.

The melody suddenly shifted, and the song Wilson played was one that stirred a memory. I didn't know the words. But it was something about grace. And then the words came to my mind, like they'd been whispered in my ear. *'Amazing grace how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me . . . '*

I didn't know what grace was, but maybe it sounded like the music. Maybe that was what I was feeling. How sweet the sound. And it was sweet, impossibly so. How sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. Was a

wretch the same thing as a bitch? Or a slut? My life was not a testament to being saved from anything. It was not a testament to love – not anybody's love.

My head firmly rejected the idea. Grace wouldn't save me. But in the tiny, neglected corner of my heart, freshly awakened by the music, I suddenly believed it might. I believed it could.

“God?” I whispered, saying the name I'd never spoken except in profanity, not even once. But I'd sung his name once, long ago. The name felt sweet on my tongue, and I tasted it again. “God?”

I waited. The music prodded me forward.

“God? I'm ugly inside. And it's not my fault. You know it's not. I'll take responsibility for some of it, but you've gotta own up to your part, too. Nobody saved me. Nobody gave a shit. Nobody came to my rescue.” I gulped, feeling the sorrow in my throat, making it hurt to swallow, but it was pain I'd been swallowing for a long time, and I forced it down. “So I'm asking you now. Can you take it away? Can you take away the ugliness?”

Something broke inside of me, and I groaned, unable to bite it back. Hot wet shame flooded out of me in waves of crushing grief. I tried to speak, but the torrent was almost too much. And so I gasped the final plea.

“God? If you love me . . . take it away. Please. I'm asking you to take it away. I don't want to feel this way anymore.” I wrapped my head in my arms, and let the torrent consume me. I had never let myself cry like this. I had feared that if I opened the floodgates I would drown. But as the waves crashed over me, I was not consumed, I was swept up, washed, my soul blanketed with blessed relief. Hope rose within me like a buoy. And with the hope, came peace. And the peace calmed the waters and quieted the storm, until I sat, spent, bled out, done.

Light bloomed overhead, illuminating the passageway where I huddled. I scrambled to my feet, grabbing my purse and turning my back to the man walking toward me.

“Blue?” Wilson's voice was hesitant, almost disbelieving. At least he didn't call me Miss Echohawk anymore.

“What are you doing here?”

I kept my back to him as I tried to remove the evidence that I had come undone. I scrubbed frantically at my face, hoping I didn't look as wrecked as I felt. I kept my face averted as he approached.

“The battery in my truck is dead. I'm parked out in the parking lot. I saw your car here and wondered if you would be able to help me,” I said softly, still not making eye-contact. I kept my eyes fixed on the floor.

“Are you all right?” he asked gently.

“Yes,” I said. And I was. Miraculously, I was.

A small white square of fabric appeared under my nose.

“A handkerchief! What are you, eighty-five?”

“Humph! I'm twenty-two, as you well know. I just happened to be raised by a very proper, slightly old-fashioned, Englishwoman who taught me to carry a handkerchief. I'll bet you're glad she did.”

I was. But I didn't admit it. The cloth felt satiny against my swollen eyes and tear-stung cheeks. It smelled heavenly . . . like pine and lavender and soap, and, suddenly, using his handkerchief felt incredibly intimate. I searched for something to say. “Is this the same woman who named you Darcy?”

Wilson's laugh was a brief bark. “The very same.”

“Can I keep this? I'll wash it and give it back. I'll even iron it, like your mom does.” The devil in me had to have her say.

“Ah, Blue. There you are. I thought for a moment you'd been body snatched by an actual human girl – one who doesn't take great pleasure in taunting her history teacher.” He smiled down at me, and I looked away self-consciously. “Let me get my things. I'm done here.”

“What? You're going to knock off this early? School only ended eight hours ago,” I teased, trying again for normalcy. He didn't respond, but was back moments later, his instrument in a case slung across his back. He flipped the light switch at the end of the hallway and we descended the stairs in silence.

“How did you get in?” he asked and then immediately shook his head and waved the question away. “Never mind. I really don't want to know. However, if on Monday I find that the walls have been spray painted, I'll know who to point the finger at.”

“Paint is not my medium,” I sniffed, offended.

“Oh really? What exactly is your medium?” He locked the door behind us as we stepped out into the night.

“Wood,” I clipped, wondering why I was telling him. Let him think I was a graffiti artist. Who the hell cared. “*You do*,” a little voice taunted mildly.

And I did.

“And what exactly do you do with wood?”

“I carve it.”

“People, bears, totem poles, what?”

“Totem poles?!” I was incredulous. “Is that supposed to be some kind of slam to my ethnicity?”

“Your ethnicity? I thought you told me you weren't Native American.”

“I don't know what the hell I am, but that still sounded like a slam, Sherlock!”

“Why don't you know what you are, Blue? Haven't you ever tried to find out? Maybe that would make you less hostile!” Wilson seemed frustrated. He stomped ahead of me, almost talking to himself. “Absolutely impossible! Having a conversation with you is like trying to converse with a snake! You are vulnerable and tearful one moment and hissing and striking the next. I frankly don't know how to reach you, or even if I want to! I only said totem poles because they are usually carved from wood, all right?” He turned and glared at me.

“Cranky when you stay up past your bedtime, aren't you?” I mumbled.

“See?” he griped, throwing his hands up. “There you go again.” He stopped at his car, his hands on his hips. “I know you are incredibly bright, because when you are not being a smartarse your comments in class are very insightful, and when you ARE being a smartarse you are witty and clever and you make me laugh even when I want to slap you. I know you are either an adrenaline junky or you have more courage than anyone I've ever met, and you know how to unload a weapon. I know you were raised by a man with the name Echohawk. I know you don't know when your real birthday is. I know you have no plans to go to university when you graduate. I know you enjoy being the class clown and making me the butt of your jokes.”

He counted on his fingers. “That's eight things. Oh, and you carve something out of wood. Most likely NOT totem poles, since that seemed to get a reaction out of you. So nine or maybe ten if we count being a smartarse.” He put his hands back on his hips. “I would really like to know more. I don't want to know about the little blackbird who was pushed from the nest. I would like to know something about Blue.” He poked me in the center of my chest, hard, as he said 'Blue.'

“It's a parable,” I whined, rubbing the spot he'd jabbed with his long finger.

“My father – Jimmy – used to say I was like a little blackbird, far from home.”

“Eleven things. See? Not so difficult.”

“You're kind of cute when your angry.” I meant to ruffle him, but it came out sounding flirtatious, like something Sparkles, aka Chrissy, would say. I felt stupid and darted a look at him. Luckily, he just rolled his eyes. Funny how you can tell someone is rolling his eyes, even when it's dark and you can barely see them.

Wilson dug into his pockets, feeling in every one. Then he tried his car doors. I could have told him they were all locked, but I wisely remained silent. I suppose that would be twelve things: I can be wise.

“Bollocks!” He pressed his face up against the car window, hands shielding his eyes on either side. “Blast!”

“You have a filthy mouth, Mr. Wilson,” I chided, trying not to laugh. “Isn't saying blast like saying the F word in England?”

“What? No! Bugger, blast and bloody are fairly tame . . . like damn.”

“And bollocks? That sounds downright profane.” It really didn't, but I found I was enjoying myself. “Soon you'll be saying fiddlesticks! I don't think Principal Beckstead would approve.”

“My keys are in the ignition,” Wilson groaned, ignoring me. He straightened and looked down at me soberly. “We're walking, Blue, unless you're willing to admit you have certain skills . . . breaking and entering, perhaps?”

“I don't need skills to break and enter. I just need tools – and I don't have any of them on me,” I retorted flatly. “We could shove your big violin through your car window, though.”

“Always a smartarse,” Wilson turned and began walking toward the road.

“I live about four miles away in that direction,” I offered, hobbling along after him.

“Oh, good. I live six. That means for at least two miles, I will not have to listen to you snipe at me,” Wilson grumbled.

I burst out laughing. He really was cranky.

Chapter Ten

Tobias

We walked along for several minutes with only the clickety clak of my high-heeled boots to break our silence.

"You'll never make it four miles in those shoes," Wilson remarked pessimistically.

"I will because I have to," I retorted calmly.

"A tough girl, eh?"

"Did you have any doubts?"

"None. Although the tears tonight had me wondering. What was that all about?"

"Redemption." The dark made the truth easy. Wilson stopped walking. I didn't.

"You'll never make it six miles with that violin on your back," I parroted, smoothly changing the subject.

"I will because I have to," he mocked. "And it's a cello, you ninny." His long strides had him walking beside me again in seconds.

"Don't say ninny. You sound bloody ridiculous."

"All right then. Don't say bloody. Americans sound foolish when they say bloody. The accent is all wrong."

Silence.

"What do you mean by redemption?"

I sighed. I knew he would come back to that. Four miles was far too long to evade him, so I thought for a moment, wondering how I could put it into words without telling him what I needed redemption for.

"Have you ever prayed?" I ventured.

"Sure." Wilson nodded like it was no big deal. He probably prayed morning and night.

"Well. I never have. Not until tonight."

"And?" Wilson prodded.

"And it felt . . . good."

I felt Wilson's eyes on me in the dark. We walked in syncopation for

several breaths.

“Usually redemption implies rescue – being saved. What were you being saved from?” he inquired, his voice carefully neutral.

“Ugliness.”

Wilson's hand shot out, pulling me to a stop. He searched my face, as if trying to glean the meaning behind my words. “You are many things, Blue Echohawk, I can even name twelve.” He smiled a little. “But ugly isn't one of them.”

His words made me feel funny inside. I was surprised by them. I had assumed he had never noticed me on a physical level. I didn't know if I wanted him to. I just shook my head and shrugged him off and began walking again, answering him as I did.

“I've had a lot of ugly in my life, Wilson. Lately the ugly has gotten to be more than I can take.”

We resumed our steady march through the sleeping street. Boulder City was incredibly quiet. If Vegas was the city that never slept, then Boulder made up for it. It slept like a drunkard on a feather bed. We hadn't even been barked at.

“All right. So that's two more. We're at fourteen. You've had an ugly life, but you're not ugly. And you enjoy praying in darkened hallways in the middle of the night.”

“Yep. I'm fascinating. And that's fifteen.”

“I would think that after the shooting, the school would be the last place you would go for prayer . . . or redemption.”

“I didn't really choose the venue, Wilson. I was stranded. But if God is real, then he's just as real in the school as he is in the church. And if he's not . . . well, then maybe my tears were for Manny, and all the rest of the lost misfits who walk those halls alone and could use a little rescue.”

“From childhood's hour I have not been as others were; I have not seen as others saw; I could not bring my passions from a common spring,” Wilson murmured.

I looked at him expectantly.

“‘Alone’ by Edgar Allan Poe. Misfit. Loner. Poet.”

I should have known. I wished I knew the lines he quoted, that I could continue the poem where he left off. But I didn't and I couldn't, so silence reigned once more.

“So tell me why you don't know when you were born,” Wilson said, abandoning Poe.

“Do you enjoy picking scabs?” I shot back.

“What? Why?”

“Because you keep picking mine, and it kind of hurts,” I whined, hoping my pathetic pleas of “ouch” would end the questioning.

“Oh, well, then. Yes. I suppose I love picking scabs. Out with it. We've got at least three miles to go.”

I sighed heavily, letting him know I didn't think it was any of his business. But I proceeded to tell him anyway. “My mother abandoned me when I was two-ish. We don't know exactly how old I was. She just left me in Jimmy Echohawk's truck and took off. He didn't know her, and I wasn't old enough to tell him anything. He didn't know what to do with me, but he was afraid that somehow he would be implicated in some kind of crime or that someone would think he had taken me. So he split. He took me with him. He wasn't exactly conventional. He roamed around, made carvings for a living, sold them to different tourist shops and a few galleries. And that's how we lived for the next eight years. He died when I was ten or eleven. Again, I don't have any idea how old I really am, and I ended up with Cheryl, who is Jimmy's half-sister.

“Nobody knew who I was or where I came from, and I thought Jimmy was my dad. Cheryl didn't tell me that he wasn't for another three years. There was no record of me, so with the help of the courts, they got me a birth certificate, a social security number, and I am officially Blue Echohawk, born on August 2, which is the day Jimmy found me and the day we marked my birthday. Social services thought I was about ten, which was more or less what Jimmy and I thought. So they estimated I was born in 1991. So there you go. Nutshell. I am nineteen . . . maybe even twenty by now, who knows. A little old for a senior in high school, but hey! Maybe that's why I'm so intelligent and mature,” I smirked.

“Quite,” Wilson said softly. He seemed to be processing my improbable tale, turning it over in his head, dissecting it. “My birthday is August 11, which makes me three years older than you, almost to the day.” He glanced over at me. “I guess it is a little silly for me to call you Miss Echohawk.”

“I don't mind all that much, Darcy,” I smiled innocently, sweetly even. He snorted at my jab. The truth was, I didn't mind. When he said 'Miss

Echohawk' in that snooty way of his, it made me feel like I had been given an upgrade or a makeover. Miss Echohawk sounded like someone I would like to become. Someone sophisticated and classy, someone I could aspire to. Someone very different than me.

My phone vibrated against my hip, and I coaxed it out of my tight pocket. It was Mason. I considered not answering it but thought about the miles Wilson and I still had to walk.

"Mason?"

"Blue. Baby . . . where are you?" Oh, man. He sounded so drunk. "I came looking for you. Are you mad at me? We're at your truck but you're not here. You're not here, right?" He suddenly seemed doubtful, as if I was going to spring out from somewhere.

"My battery is dead. I'm walking home, Mason, along Adams. Who's with you?" Hopefully someone less plastered.

"She's with Adam," I heard Mason say to someone, and the phone was dropped. Someone cursed and the phone was jostled back and forth.

"Who's Adam, Blue? Is that why you left so early, you skank!" Colby's voice blared at me. He laughed, a high-pitched cackle, and I held the phone away from my ear. I was pretty sure Wilson could hear the conversation, Colby's voice was so loud.

"I'm on Adams . . . the street, Colby," I said as clearly as I could.

The connection was lost. Awesome.

"Well. We may be rescued," I said dourly. "But we may not. And it might be better if we're not."

"So I gathered." Wilson shook his head. "This day has been one for the record books."

It wasn't long before lights pinned us in their glare, and we turned to face the oncoming vehicle. I tugged at Wilson's arm. I didn't want to him to be run over by the rescue squad.

It was Mason's truck, and he was driving. Colby hung out the passenger window like a big dog, his tongue flapping and everything.

"Hey, Adam! Did you get a piece of ass too?" Colby chortled, and I felt disgust curl in my belly. Disgust for myself, and disgust for the boy who thought he could talk about me like I was trash.

"Are these your mates?" Wilson said stiffly, hoisting his cello further up on his back.

I nodded once, briefly, too humiliated to look at him.

"Get in, Blue," Mason yelled across Colby. Colby opened the door and beckoned to me. I remained on the sidewalk.

"Those boys are completely sloshed," Wilson said wearily. "I don't recognize either of them. They aren't in any of my classes."

"They've graduated. Mason is the same age as you are. Colby's a year younger." Both had been out of high school for years. Sadly, neither of them had moved beyond the football field where they had both excelled.

"You need to let me drive, Mason. Okay?" I knew if I got aggressive, he would drive away, which was preferable to driving with him at this point, but they really shouldn't have been driving at all.

"Sure, baby. You can sit on my lap. I'll let you steer. I know you like driving a stick!" Mason yelled, all the time glaring at Wilson like he wanted to beat him up.

I started walking. They could crash and burn. Mason yelled for me to stop and spilled out of the truck, staggering after me. The truck stalled. Apparently, Mason hadn't taken it out of gear before he decided to chase me down.

Wilson was on Mason in a flash, and with one swift pop, Mason's head rolled onto his shoulders and he sank into a heap, Wilson struggling to support his weight.

"Holy shit!" Colby was half-way out of the truck, one leg in, one leg on the ground. "What did you do to him, Adam?"

"My bloody name is not Adam!" Wilson growled. "Now come help me get your stupid mate into the . . . blasted . . . pickup, or whatever you call it." Wilson had apparently had enough. I had no idea what he had done to subdue Mason. But I was grateful.

I ran to his side, helping him half-drag, half-carry Mason to where Colby was frozen in an inebriated stupor. I put down the tailgate, and we managed to roll Mason into the bed of the truck. Unfortunately, even with Mason unconscious in the back, I had to sit squished between Colby and Wilson, who surprisingly knew how to drive a stick shift. Colby ran his arm along the back of my seat, resting his hand on my shoulder possessively. I elbowed him in the side and moved as close to Wilson as I possibly could, straddling the gear shift. Wilson's right arm pressed up against me and he grimaced every time he shifted gears, as if he hated touching me. Tough. I wasn't sitting by

Colby.

We drove back to the school, and Colby sat in sulky silence while we got my truck running. Until he decided to be sick, that is, and puked all over the passenger side of Mason's truck. Wilson just gritted his teeth and climbed back into the cab, rolling his window down with angry jerks.

"I'll follow you to Mason's house," he bit out, as if the whole mess was my fault. I led the way in my truck, keeping Wilson in my rear-view mirror. When we reached Mason's, we hoisted him out of the truck and in through the basement door of his parents' house. There was no way we were getting him up the stairs to his apartment above the garage. He weighed close to 200 pounds, and it was all dead weight. We slung him onto the couch, and his arms flopped theatrically.

"Is he going to be all right?" I watched for his chest to rise.

Wilson slapped Mason's cheeks briskly.

"Mason? Mason? Come on, chap. Your girl is worried that I've killed you." Mason moaned and shoved at Wilson's hands.

"See? He's brilliant. No harm done." Wilson marched out of the house. Colby slumped down into the recliner and closed his eyes. The fun was all over. I pulled the basement door shut behind me and ran after Wilson. He lifted his cello out of the back of Mason's truck.

"His keys are on the dash, but I've locked the doors. It will serve him right if he doesn't have another set. I'm hoping it will slow him down if he and his chum decide to rescue anyone else tonight, or, even better, come looking for you." He glowered at me briefly and transferred his cello into my truck. He climbed in the passenger side, and I slid behind the wheel, angry because he was angry. I peeled out of Mason's driveway, my temper flaring with the squeal of my wheels.

"It's not my fault you locked YOUR keys in YOUR car. That had nothing to do with me."

"Please, just take me home. I smell like beer and pizza vomit. #16 – Blue has horrible taste in mates."

"Are all Brits this miserable around midnight, or is it just you? And what did you do back there anyway? You are a school teacher and you play the cello! You are the biggest nerd I know. You are not supposed to know Kung Fu."

Wilson scowled at me, apparently not appreciating the nerd comment.

“I honestly don't know what I did. It was pure luck. I just popped him in the jaw. He went down.” We were both silent, contemplating the odds. “It felt bloody amazing.”

Startled by his admission, my head snapped around and my eyes found his. I don't know who started laughing first. Maybe it was me, maybe it was him, but within seconds we were wheezing and howling with laughter. I could barely drive, I was laughing so hard. And it felt bloody amazing.

I ended up taking Wilson to his house to retrieve his keys and then running him back to the school to get his car. He lived in a big old monstrosity that he was remodeling. Most of the newer homes in the Vegas area were stucco, and you would be hard pressed to find a handful of homes that were bricked. But in Boulder City there was less rhyme and reason, more old than new, and less community planning.

Some older structures still dominated Buchanan Street, where Wilson's house was located. Wilson's home had been listed with the historical society until lack of funds made it impossible to maintain. Wilson told me it was a heap when he had purchased it a year before. I informed him it still was, smiling to take the sting out of my words. But I could see the appeal.

It was an enormous red brick, done up in a style that seemed more suited to a college campus back East than a neighborhood in a small desert town. Wilson said everything in England was old, and not just seventy years old, like this house, but hundreds and hundreds of years old. He didn't want to live in a home where there wasn't any history, and his home had as much history as you were going to find in a Western town. I should have known.

As we walked up the front steps, I noticed he had placed a small plaque by the door, the kind with gold lettering that usually states the home's address. It said Pemberley. That was all.

“You named your house Pemberley?” The name was familiar, but I couldn't quite place it.

“It's a bit of a joke,” he sighed. “My sisters thought it would be funny. They had it made and Tiffa surprised me on my birthday. I keep telling myself I'll take it down, but . . .” His voice faded away and I let it go. I would have to google Pemberley when I had a chance, just to let myself in on the joke.

A great deal of work had been done on the interior. The front doors opened up into a foyer dominated by a wide set of stairs that curved up to the second

floor. It was beautiful, but I think it was the dark, heavy wood that won me over. The floors matched the enormous mahogany banister that swept gracefully up to the second level, where it became a thick railing that made a wide circle beneath the vaulted ceiling.

There were two apartments completely finished, one on the second floor and one on the main level. Another was still under construction, due to be finished shortly, according to Wilson. The ground floor apartment was occupied by an old lady whom Wilson seemed rather fond of. I didn't meet her. It was past midnight, after all. Wilson lived in the other. I was curious to see what his digs looked like but hung back, wondering if he would want me to stay out. He was my teacher, and almost everything that had happened that night could cost him his job, or at least get him in trouble, though he had been an innocent victim to circumstance.

He seemed relieved that I didn't come inside but left the door open. I could see that the dark wood floors extended into his apartment, which he called his "flat." The walls were painted a pale green. Two framed prints of African women carrying bowls on their heads hung in the long hallway leading into the rest of the space. Nice. I didn't know what I'd expected. Maybe shelves and shelves of books and a high backed velvet chair where Wilson could smoke a pipe, wearing a red smoking jacket while reading big dusty books.

Wilson exchanged his cello for a second set of keys and a clean shirt and jeans. He hadn't been splattered by vomit, but he insisted he reeked of it. I had never seen him in anything but slacks and dress-shirts. The T-shirt was a snug soft blue, and his jeans were worn, though they looked expensive. He hadn't bought them at Hot Topic. Why is it that you can see money even when it comes wrapped in a T-shirt and jeans?

"Nice pants," I commented as he approached me at the door.

"H-huh?" Wilson stammered. And then he smiled. "Oh, uh. Thanks. You mean my trousers."

"Trousers?"

"Yes. Pants are underwear, see. I thought . . . um. Never mind."

"Underwear? You call underwear pants?"

"Let's go, shall we?" He grimaced, ignoring the question and pulling the door closed behind him. He looked so different, and I tried not stare. He was . . . hot. Ugh! I rolled my eyes at myself and stomped back out to my truck, feeling suddenly morose. I spent the ride back to Wilson's car in quiet

contemplation which Wilson did not intrude upon until we reached the school.

Before he climbed out, Wilson gazed at me seriously, grey eyes tired in the paltry dome light triggered by his open door. Then he extended his hand and clasped mine, giving it a brief shake.

“Here's to redemption. See you on Monday, Blue.” And he climbed out of my truck and loped to his Subaru. He unlocked it easily and gave a little wave.

“Here's to redemption,” I repeated to myself, hopeful that such a thing existed.

Chapter Eleven

Tiffany

Beverly's Cafe was located on Arizona Street in the center of Boulder City, a refurbished restaurant in the old part of town, established in the 1930's when Hoover Dam was being built. Boulder City was a master-planned, company town, completely built by the US government to house dam workers after the Great Depression. It still had most of the original structures, along with a neat hotel, not far from Bev's, that had been built in those early days. Boulder City was a strange mix of big city cast-offs and Old West traditions that make most people scratch their heads. It isn't very far from Las Vegas – but gambling is illegal. It holds the appeal of a small-town community that Vegas can't boast.

I had known Beverly, the owner of the cafe, since my days with Jimmy. She had a small gift shop in the cafe that was filled with southwestern art, paintings, pottery, cactuses, and various antiques. She had taken Jimmy's work on commission, and Jimmy had always seemed to like her. Jimmy had kept my existence pretty low-key, but Beverly had been kind to him and kind to me. He had trusted her, and it was one of the places where we let down our guard a little. I had eaten in the big red leather booths many times.

A few years back, when I was old enough to drive and get around on my own, I approached Beverly for a job. She was a woman on the heavy side of pleasantly plump, with red hair and a welcoming way. Her laugh was as big as her bosom, which was pretty impressive, and she was as popular with her customers as her milkshakes and double cheeseburgers with jalepenos were. She hadn't recognized me until I'd told her my name. Then her jaw had dropped and she had come out from behind the cash register and hugged me tightly. It had been the most genuine expression of concern anyone had shown me since . . . since, well . . . ever.

“What ever happened to you two, Blue? Jimmy left me with five carvings, and I sold them all, but he never came back. I had people wanting his work, asking for it. At first I was puzzled, wondering if I'd done something. But I had money for him. Surely he would have come back for his money. And

then I got worried. It's been at least five years, hasn't it?"

"Six," I corrected her.

Beverly hired me that very day, and I had worked for her ever since. She had never said anything about my appearance or my taste in men. If she thought my makeup was a little thick or my uniform a little tight, she also never said. I worked hard, and I was dependable, and she let me be. She even gave me the money from the sale of Jimmy's sculptures six years before.

"That's after I took twenty percent, plus six years worth of interest," she had said matter-of-factly. "And if you've got any more of his carvings, I'll take 'em."

It was five hundred dollars. I had used it to buy tools and secure the storage unit behind the apartment. And I had started carving in earnest. No more dabbling as I had done since Jimmy died. I attacked the art with a ferocity I didn't know I was capable of. Some of my carvings were hideous. Some weren't. And I got better. I parted with a couple of Jimmy's carvings, and finished the ones that he hadn't had the chance to complete. I then sold them all with his name – my name too, Echohawk - and when it was all said and done, I had made another \$500. With that, and a year's worth of savings, I bought my little pick-up truck. It was very beat up, and it had 100,000 miles on it. But it ran and it gave me the wheels I needed to expand my wood gathering capabilities.

I had practiced on every log, branch, and tree I could get my hands on, but it wasn't like there were vast forests surrounding me. I lived in a desert. Fortunately, Boulder City sat higher up at the base of hills with mesquite growing in enough abundance that I could forage and pretty much take what I wanted. I became pretty good with a chain saw. Nobody cared about the scrubby mesquite anyway. And I have to admit, cutting it down was therapeutic in a very gut-level way. Within a year of getting a job at the cafe, I had sold a few of my pieces and had ten or so pieces lining the shelves of Beverly's little shop at all times. Three years later, I had a nest egg of several thousand dollars.

I was working the Thursday dinner shift one evening when Mr. Wilson came into the cafe with a pretty woman in a big fur coat. Her hair was a mass of blonde curls pinned up on her head, and she wore little diamonds at her ears as well as black stilletos and fishnet stockings. She was either coming from somewhere uber fancy or was one of those women who had never

outgrown dress-up. The fur coat was so out of place in the cafe's southwest décor that I found myself trying not to laugh as I approached their table to take their order. She shrugged out of her coat and smiled up at me brightly when I asked them if I could bring them something to drink.

“I am so thirsty! I'll have a whole pitcher full of water, luv, and a massive order of nachos if you have them just for starters!” she chirped in accented supplication. She was British too. I looked from Wilson to the woman and back again.

“Hello, Blue,” Wilson smiled up at me politely. “Blue is one of my students, Tiffa,” he offered, introducing me to the woman across from him.

Tiffa's eyebrows shot up in disbelief as she gave me a quick once over. I had the feeling she didn't think I looked like a student. Her hand shot out, and I took it hesitantly.

“Are you the one who took the gun from that poor boy? Wilson's told me all about you! What a beautiful name! I'm Tiffa Snook, and I'm Darcy's, er, Mr. Wilson's, sister. You'll have to tell me what to order! I could eat a unicorn and pick my teeth with his horn! I'm absolutely famished.” Tiffa rattled all of this off in about two seconds flat, and I found myself liking her, in spite of her fur coat. If she hadn't mentioned the family connection, I would have thought Darcy liked older women.

“Tiffa is always famished,” Wilson added dryly, and Tiffa snorted and threw her napkin at him. But she laughed and shrugged, conceding the point.

“It's true. I am going to have to run for hours to work off those nachos, but I don't care. So tell me, Blue, what shall we order?”

I suggested several things, wondering all the while what Tiffa Snook exercised in if she wore fishnets and a fur coat to eat at the cafe. I could just see her clomping on the treadmill in heels and a baby seal-lined sweat suit. She was as thin as a rail and quite tall, and she exuded energy. She probably needed to eat like a horse – or a unicorn – just to fuel her energy level.

I found myself watching Wilson and his sister throughout their meal, and it wasn't just because I was their waitress. They seemed to enjoy each other's company, and their laughter filled their corner frequently. Tiffa was the one who seemed to do the majority of the talking, her gestures and hands movements accenting everything she said, but Wilson had her giggling uncontrollably more than once. When they finally signaled that they wanted their check, Tiffa reached out and took my hand as if we were old friends. It

was all I could do not to yank it back.

“Blue! You have to settle this for us! Darcy here says you know something about carving. There are some fabulous carvings in the shop there, that I saw on the way in. You wouldn't know anything about them, would you?”

I was stricken with sudden self-consciousness, and for a minute I didn't know how to respond.

“Uh, what would you like to know?” I answered cautiously.

“Darcy says it's your last name carved into the base of each one. I told him they couldn't possibly be yours. No offense, luv, but they are seasoned, if that makes any sense.”

“They're mine,” I blurted out. “If that's all you need, here's your check. You can pay at the register. Thank you for coming in.” I rushed away, breathless, and barged into the kitchen like someone was after me. I found myself actually looking for some place to hide, as if Wilson and his sister would actually chase me and tackle me to the ground. After a minute of cowering, I marshalled enough courage to peek through the swinging doors separating the kitchen from the dining room.

They were browsing the gift shop, pausing beside several of my pieces. Tiffa ran her fingers along one of them, commenting to Wilson, though I couldn't hear what she said. I was struck with self-consciousness all over again, horror and elation warring in my chest. I turned away, not wanting to see more. It was close to closing time, and the cafe was almost empty, so I managed to hide out in the kitchen, doing my closing duties, waiting for them to leave.

About half an hour later, Jocelyn, the night manager, came bursting through the double doors into the kitchen, her face wreathed with smiles.

“Oh my gosh! Oh my gosh, Blue! That lady in that sweet fur coat? She just bought all your carvings. Every one of them! She put them on her credit card and said she would send a truck to pick them up in the morning. You just made like \$1000 bucks! There were ten of them! She had me walk behind her with a calculator, and we added them all up, plus she added a \$200 tip for you because she said they were 'pathetically underpriced!’” She waggled her fingers, indicating quotations.

“She bought all of them?” I squeaked.

“All except one, and that was because the guy she was with insisted that he wanted it!”

“Which one?”

“All of them!”

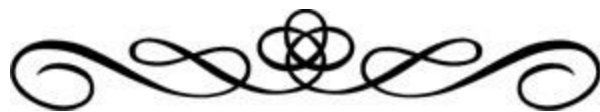
“No, I mean, which one did the guy want?”

“The one closest to the exit. Come here! I'll show you where it was. He took it with him.”

She squealed like a little girl and turned, racing from the kitchen as I scampered behind her. I was kind of surprised by her obvious excitement for me.

“There! It was right there!” Jocelyn pointed at a large empty space on a shoulder-high shelf. “It had a funny title . . . The Arch? Yeah! I think it was that one.”

Wilson had taken ‘The Arc.’ I felt a thrill that he had recognized it for what it was. I had found a piece of mesquite that hid a curve in its line. Slowly, I had cut away the wood, forming the suggestion of a woman on her knees, back curved like a cat, deeply bowed in worship or subservience. Her body formed an arc, her arms stretching beyond a head which nearly kissed the ground into hands that curled into fists clenched in supplication. As with all my pieces, it was completely abstract, the suggestion of the woman merely that, a hint, a possibility. Some might simply see the highly-glossed wood, shaped into long lines and provocative hollows. But as I had carved, all I could see was Joan. All I could hear were her words. “To live without belief is a fate worse than death.” My Joan of Arc. And that was the one Wilson had purchased.



About a week later I walked into Wilson's classroom and stopped so suddenly the people walking behind me collided like human dominos, creating a little traffic jam in the doorway. I was jostled and complained about as my disgruntled classmates made their way around my inert form. My sculpture was sitting on a table in the center of the room. Wilson stood by his desk, talking with a student. I stared, willing him to look up, to explain what his game was. But he didn't.

I made my way slowly to my desk, front and center, putting me directly in front of the sculpture I had created with my own hands. I didn't have to look at the long lines or gleaming wood to know where I had patched a worm hole or cut more deeply than I had planned. I could close my eyes and remember how it had felt to form the suggestion of womanly curves bowed like Atlas with France on her back.

"Blue?" Wilson called from where he still stood by his desk. I turned my head slowly and looked at him. I didn't think the expression on my face was especially friendly. He didn't react to my glare but calmly asked me to "come here, please."

I approached carefully and stopped in front of his desk, my arms folded.

"I want you to tell the class about your sculpture."

"Why?"

"Because it's brilliant."

"So?" I ignored the pleasure that flooded my chest at his pronouncement.

"You named it 'The Arc.' Why?"

"I was hungry . . . thinking about McDonalds, you know?"

"Hmm. I see. As in the golden arches." A small smile twitched at the corners of Wilson's mouth. "You haven't written more than a paragraph in your personal history. Maybe there are other ways to share who you are. I thought maybe this piece was about Joan of Arc, which would make it especially relevant. Consider it extra credit . . . which frankly, you need."

I considered retorting with the famous line, 'Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn.' But that wasn't true. I did. In a very small corner of my heart, the thought of talking about my sculpture filled me with elation. But the rest of my heart was terrified.

"What do you want me to say?" I whispered, the panic oozing out and ruining my tough girl posture.

Wilson's eyes softened, and he leaned toward me across the desk. "How about I just ask you some questions and you answer them. I'll interview you. Then you won't have to think of things to say."

"You won't ask me anything personal . . . about my name or my dad . . . or anything like that, will you?"

"No, Blue. I won't. The questions will be about the sculpture. About your uncanny gift. Because, Blue, your work is brilliant. Tiffa and I were blown away. She can't stop talking about you. In fact," Wilson reached into his shirt

pocket and pulled out a card. "Tiffa asked that I give you this."

It was a shiny black card with gold lettering. **Tiffany W. Snook – The Sheffield** was all it said. A phone number and an email account graced the right hand corner. I ran my fingers over the engraved letters and then peered up at him suspiciously.

"The Sheffield is the big hotel on the south end of the strip that looks like an English Estate, right? The one where your girlfriend works?"

"Tiffa is a curator for both the art museum and the gallery. She bought nine of your pieces Friday night. Did you know that? She would have purchased ten, but I begged her to let me have just one."

"I knew she bought them. I didn't know why, though. I'm still not sure I do."

"She wants to place a couple of your pieces in the gallery and see how they do. The Sheffield will take a cut if they sell. But she'll give you what's left, minus what she already paid."

"But she bought them. She can do what she wants with them."

Wilson shook his head. "Call her, Blue. If you don't, she'll hunt you down. She's very persistent. Now, the class is waiting."

The kids behind me weren't waiting. They were noisily enjoying the fact that class hadn't started, but I didn't argue with him. I returned to my seat, wondering how long it would be until Wilson embarrassed me. It wasn't long.

"Many of you are most likely wondering about this stunning sculpture." I wished he would lay off the over-the-top descriptions and cringed a little. He turned toward a boy who sat to my right named Owen Morgan.

"Owen, can you read the word carved down here by the base of the sculpture?"

Owen stood and crouched down so he could see the word Wilson was pointing to.

"Echohawk," Owen read. "Echohawk?" he repeated with a surprised inflection. Owen whipped his head toward me, his eyebrows raised doubtfully. I really, really didn't like Wilson very much at that moment.

"Yes. Echohawk. This piece is called 'The Arc,' and it was carved by Blue Echohawk. Blue has agreed to answer some questions about her work. I thought you all might find it interesting."

I stood and moved next to Wilson but kept my eyes trained on the sculpture so that I didn't have to make eye contact with anyone in the room.

The class had fallen into stunned silence. Wilson started by asking some basic questions about tools and different kinds of wood. I answered easily, without embellishment and found myself relaxing with each question.

“Why do you carve?”

“My . . . father . . . taught me. I grew up watching him work with wood. He made beautiful things. Carving makes me feel close to him.” I paused, gathering my thoughts. “My father said carving requires looking beyond what is obvious to what is possible.”

Wilson nodded as if he understood, but Chrissy piped up from the front row.

“What do you mean?” she questioned, her face screwed up as she turned her head this way and that, as if trying to figure out what she was looking at.

“Well . . . take this sculpture for example,” I explained. “It was just a huge hunk of mesquite. When I started, it wasn't beautiful at all. In fact, it was ugly and heavy and a pain in the ass to get in my truck.”

Everyone laughed, and I winced and muttered an apology for my language.

“So tell us about this particular sculpture.” Wilson ignored the laughter and continued, refocusing the class. “You called it 'The Arc' – which I found fascinating.”

“I find that if something is really on my mind . . . it tends to come out through my hands. For whatever reason, I couldn't get the story about Joan of Arc out of my head. She appealed to me,” I confessed, slanting a look at Wilson, hoping he didn't think I was trying to butter him up. “She inspired me. Maybe it was how young she was. Or how brave. Maybe it was because she was tough in a time when women weren't especially valued for their strength. But she wasn't just tough . . . she was . . . good,” I finished timidly. I was afraid everyone would laugh again, knowing that “good” was not something that had ever been applied to me.

The class had grown quiet. The boys who usually slapped my rear and made lewd suggestions were staring at me with confused expressions. Danny Apo, a hot Polynesian kid I'd made out with a time or two, was leaning forward in his chair, his black brows lowered over equally black eyes. He kept looking from me to the sculpture and then back again. The quiet was unnerving, and I looked at Wilson, hoping he would fill it with another question.

“You said carving is seeing what's possible. How did you know where to

even start?" He fingered the graceful sway of the wood, running a long finger over Joan's bowed head.

"There was a section of trunk that had a slight curve. Some of the wood had rotted, and when I cut it all away I could see an interesting angle that mimicked that curve. I continued to cut away, creating the arch. To me it looked like a woman's spine . . . like a woman praying." My eyes shot to Wilson's, wondering if my words brought to mind the night he had discovered me in the darkened hallway. His eyes met mine briefly and then refocused on the sculpture.

"One thing I noticed, when I saw all your work together, was that each piece was very unique – as if the inspiration behind each one was different."

I nodded. "They all tell a different story."

"Ahhh. Hear that class?" Wilson grinned widely. "And I didn't even tell Blue to say it. Everyone has a story. Every *thing* has a story. Told you so."

The class snickered and rolled their eyes, but they were intent on the discussion, and their attention remained with me. A strange feeling came over me as I looked out over the faces of people I had known for many years. People I had known but never known. People I had often ignored and who had ignored me. And I was struck by the thought that they were seeing me for the first time.

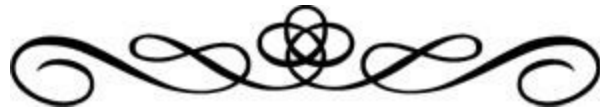
"It's all about perspective," I said hesitantly, giving voice to my sudden revelation. "I don't know what all of you see when you look at this," I nodded toward my carving. "I can't control what you see or how you interpret what you see any more than I can control what you think of me."

"That's the beauty of art," Wilson suggested quietly. "Everyone has their own interpretation."

I nodded, looking out over the sea of faces. "For me, this sculpture tells the story of Joan of Arc. And in telling her story . . . I guess I tell my own, to some degree."

"Thank you, Blue," Wilson murmured, and I crept to my seat, relieved it was over, the heat of so much attention heavy on my skin.

The room was hushed for a heartbeat more, and then my classmates started to clap. The clapping was modest and didn't shake the room in thunderous applause, but for me, it was a moment I won't forget as long as I live.



It turned out that Pemberley was the name of Mr. Darcy's house in Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*. That was the inside joke. Tiffa had named Wilson's house Pemberley to poke him about his name. It made me like her even more. And my regard for her had nothing to do with the fact that she seemed to love my carvings, though that certainly didn't hurt.

I called the number on the card Wilson gave me and enjoyed ten minutes of effusive praise in very proper English. Tiffa was convinced she could sell everything she had bought up at the cafe and at significantly higher prices. She made me promise to keep carving and promised to have a contract sent over for me to sign. The Sheffield would take a healthy cut of everything sold in their gallery, which would include Tiffa's percentage, but I would get the rest. And if the pieces sold at the prices Tiffa was sure they would sell for, my portion would still be substantially more than I made from them now. And the exposure would be priceless. I had to keep pinching myself through the conversation, but when it was over, I was convinced that, in the struggle to become a different Blue, my fortunes were changing too.

That Friday night, instead of carving, I watched every version of *Pride and Prejudice* I could get my hands on. When Cheryl dragged herself home from work eight hours later, I was still sitting on the couch staring at the television as the credits rolled by. The English accent had made it very easy to substitute Wilson into every depiction of Mr. Darcy. He even had the mournful eyes of the actor who played opposite Keira Knightley. I found myself seeing him in every scene, angry with him, crying for him, half in love with him when it was all said and done.

"What are you watching?" Cheryl grumbled, watching Colin Firth stride across the menu screen over and over again, waiting for me to push play.

"*Pride and Prejudice*," I clipped, resenting Cheryl's intrusion on my post-Darcy glow.

"For school?"

"No. Just because."

"You feelin' okay?" Cheryl squinted at me. I guess I couldn't blame her. My preferences usually swung toward *The Transporter* and old *Die Hard*

movies.

“I was in the mood for something different,” I said non-committally.

“Yeah, I guess so.” Cheryl looked doubtfully at the screen. “I never cared for that hoity-toity stuff. Maybe it was because in those days I woulda been the one scrubbin' the pots in the kitchen. Hell, girl. You and I woulda been the girls the Duke chased around the kitchen!” Cheryl chuckled to herself. “Definitely not Duchess material, that's for sure.” Cheryl looked at me. “Course we're Native, which means we wouldn't have been anywhere near England, would we? They might not have even let us scrub the pots.”

I pointed the remote at the screen and Mr. Darcy disappeared. I pulled my pillow over my face and waited until Cheryl went into her bedroom. She had ruined eight perfect hours of pretending in ten seconds. And even worse, she had to remind me that “I wasn't Duchess material.”

I stomped to my room, mentally defending myself. It was perfectly acceptable to have a crush on a fictional character. Most women did! Cheryl, for all her insistence on giving me a reality check, had a thing for vampires, for hell sake!

But that wasn't the problem, and deep down I was too honest to deny it. It was perfectly fine to have a crush on the fictional Mr. Darcy, but it wasn't acceptable to have a thing for the real one. And I had a thing for my young history teacher. No doubt about it.

Chapter Twelve

Feather

The test was positive. I took several more over the next few days, until I could no longer convince myself that all the results were wrong. I was pregnant. At least eight weeks along, by my calculation. I had slept with Mason the night Wilson and I had been stranded at the school, and I'd avoided him since. He had called and texted, but other than a few angry messages on my voicemail, making insinuations about "Adam," he had stayed away. He probably felt guilty about the picture, but I had really hoped he would move on because I had.

I had moved on, but life had sent me hurtling back. And I was devastated. I missed a week of school, called in sick to work, and slept constantly, unable to face the truth. The nausea that had forced me to face the possibility that I might be in trouble in the first place descended on me with a vengeance, making it easier to wallow and hide. Cheryl was mostly oblivious, but after a week of my not leaving the house, I knew I would have to "recover" or risk having to explain to Cheryl what was wrong with me. I wasn't ready for that conversation yet, so I pulled myself together and went back to school and resumed my normal shifts at the cafe. But the knowledge was like a painful sliver trying to work its way out, constantly there, just under the surface, impossible to escape, impossible to eradicate, and before long, impossible to ignore.



We had been talking about the Spanish inquisition for a week, and the correlation between the inquisition and witch hunts had been Wilson's monologue to start the day.

"We think of witchcraft as a mostly medieval phenomenon, but roughly 100,000 people were tried for witchcraft between the fifteenth and eighteenth

centuries. Of those tried, approximately 60,000 were executed. Burned at the stake, more often than not. 75% of those executed were women. Why the disproportionate numbers? Well, woman are more susceptible to the influence of the devil, see.” Wilson's eyebrows quirked as the girls in the class immediately took issue with his statement.

“What?” he threw his hands up in mock protest. “It all started with Adam and Eve, didn't it? At least that was the logic of the church throughout the medieval period and forward. Many of the women who were accused were poor and elderly. Women also worked in the areas of midwifery and healing. They were the ones who cooked and cared for others, so the idea of them cooking up a potion or poison or casting a spell was an easier label to lay on a woman than a man. Men settled things with their fists, but women were less physical and more verbal, perhaps more prone to giving a tongue lashing that might be construed as a witch's curse. I find it interesting that in history all one had to do to discredit a woman was label her a witch. How do we discredit a strong woman today?”

The class stared back at Wilson, not understanding. And then it clicked.

“You label her a bitch,” I offered boldly.

The class gasped, as was customary when someone let a bad word fly. Wilson didn't flinch though. He just looked at me thoughtfully.

“Yes. It's often the very same thing. Let's compare. Throughout history, women have been defined by beauty. Their worth has been tied to their faces, has it not? So as a woman ages and her beauty fades, what happens to her worth?”

The class was following now.

“Her worth would diminish, but what about her freedom? In some ways, a woman who is no longer beautiful, no longer competing for the hand of the richest or most eligible man might have less to lose. A fifty-year-old crone in the 1500's might not be as afraid to speak her mind as a fifteen-year-old girl who feels the pressure to marry and marry well. In that way, the less attractive woman might be more free, more independent, than the beautiful girl.

“Nowadays, women are still judged according to their physical attributes, moreso than men. But times have changed, and women don't necessarily need men to provide for them. Women today have less to lose by speaking their minds, and calling someone a witch is fairly ineffective. So we use the same

tactics that were used long ago, just different words. I find it interesting, though, that the label used to discredit a strong, independent woman has only changed my a mere letter.”

The class laughed, and Wilson smiled with us before he moved on.

“Which brings us to our end-of-year project. What label do you wear? Why do you wear it? Many of you are seniors and will be moving out into the larger world. You don't have to continue wearing the label you've worn. Will you choose to drag it along with you and don it in your new circles, or will you choose to shed it and make a new name for yourself?” Wilson looked at the attentive faces surrounding him.

“Sadly, in school, and often in life, we are defined by our worst moments. Think about Manny.” The room was silent with contemplation, and Wilson paused, as if the memory was difficult for him as well.

“But for most of us, who we are is made up of the little choices, the little acts, the little moments that comprise of our lives, day after day. And if you look at it that way, labels are pretty inaccurate. We would all have to wear a thousand labels with a thousand different descriptions to honestly depict ourselves.” Wilson strode to his desk. “Here. Take one and pass them back. Go on.” Wilson handed a stack of heavy white pages to the first person in each row. Each page had about twenty labels on it. I took a page and handed the rest to the kid behind me.

“If I told you to peel each label off and stick it to yourself and then walk around the room and let different people write something about you – just one word, like witch, for instance – on the label, what do you think they would write? Should we try that?”

I felt dread pool in my belly like hot wax. There was a general unease in the classroom, and people started to grumble and murmur under their breaths.

“Don't like that idea, eh? Lucky for you, I don't like it either. For starters, people would either be too nice or too brutal – and we'd get very little honesty. Secondly, although it DOES matter what others think of you . . . yes, I said it, it does matter.” Wilson paused to make sure we were listening. “We all like to throw out those cuddly cliches that it doesn't, but in a business sense, in a relationship sense, in a real-world sense, it DOES matter.” He emphasized “does” and eyed us all again.

“So although it matters, it doesn't matter as much as what we think of ourselves because, as we discussed earlier on in the year, our beliefs affect

our lives in very real ways. They affect our story. So. I want YOU to label yourself. Twenty labels. Be as honest as you can. Each label should be one word – two max. Make it short. Labels are just that . . . short and unforgiving, aren't they?"

Wilson opened a huge box of black Sharpies and proceeded to hand one to every student in the class. Permanent marker. Nice. I watched as everyone got busy around me. Chrissy had eschewed the Sharpie for her gel pens and was busy writing words like "awesome" and "cute" on her labels. I felt like writing KICK ME on one of my labels and sticking it to her ass. Then I would write SCREW YOU on the rest of them and smack them one by one on Wilson's forehead. He was so aggravating! How could someone I liked so much make me so angry?

The image of Wilson with labels on his forehead made me smile for a second. But only for a second. This assignment was seriously messed up and seriously degrading. I looked down at the little white boxes in front of me, just waiting for me to tell it like it is. What would I put? Pregnant? Knocked-up? That would qualify. Two words, right? Or how about Skank? Maybe . . . LOSER? How about Screwed? Done? Finished? Game over? The word that popped into my head next had me shuddering. Mother. Oh, hell no.

"I can't do this!" I said loudly, emphatically.

Everyone looked at me, Sharpies paused, mouths open. And I hadn't really been talking about the assignment at all. But I found I couldn't do it either. I wouldn't do it.

"Blue?" Wilson questioned softly.

"I won't do this."

"Why not?" His voice was still just as soft, just as gentle. I wished he would yell back.

"Because it's wrong . . . and it's . . . stupid!"

"Why?"

"Because it's incredibly personal! That's why!" I threw my hands in the air and shoved the labels onto the floor. "I could lie and write down a bunch of words that mean nothing, words I don't believe, but then what would be the point? So I'm not going to do it."

Wilson leaned back against the chalk board and stared at me, his hands clasped loosely.

"So what you're telling me is you refuse to label yourself. Right?"

I stared back at him stonily.

“You refuse to label yourself?” he asked again. “Because it that's the case, then you've just passed this little test with flying colors.” A protest started up around me, kids feeling like they had been given the short end of the stick because they had done what they had been asked to do. Wilson just ignored them and continued on. “I want you to throw the labels away. Peel them off, rip them up, scribble them out, throw them in the rubbish bin.”

I felt the heat of confrontation leave my face and my heart resume a more normal pace. Wilson looked away from me, but I knew he was still talking to me, especially to me.

“We've written our histories throughout the year. But now I want you to think about your future. If you predict your future based on your past, what does your future look like? And if you don't like the direction you're headed, which label do you need to shed? Which one of those words that you've written to describe yourself should be abandoned? All of them? What label do you want for yourself? How would you label yourself if the labels weren't based on what you *thought* of yourself but what you *wanted* for yourself?” Wilson picked up a stack of folders. One by one, he began passing them out.

“I've combined every page of your history into this folder. Everything you've written from the very first day. This is the last page of your personal history. Now. Write your future. Write what you want. Shed the labels.”

Once upon a time there was a little blackbird who was pushed from the nest, unwanted. Discarded. Then a Hawk found her and swooped her up and carried her away, giving her a home in his nest, teaching her to fly. But one day the Hawk didn't come home, and the bird was alone again, unwanted. She wanted to fly away. But as she rose to the edge of the nest and looked out across the sky, she noticed how small her wings were, how weak. The sky was so big. Somewhere else was so far away. She felt trapped. She could fly away, but where would she go?

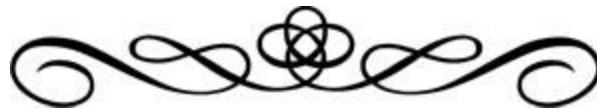
She was afraid . . . because she knew she wasn't a hawk. And she wasn't a swan, a beautiful bird. She wasn't an eagle, worthy of awe. She was just a little blackbird.

She cowered in the nest hiding her head beneath her wings, wishing for rescue. But none came. The little blackbird knew she might be weak, and she might be small, but she had no choice. She had to try. She would fly away and

never look back. With a deep breath, she spread her wings and pushed herself off into the wide blue sky. For a minute she flew, steady and soaring, but then she looked down. The ground below rose rapidly to meet her as she panicked and cartwheeled toward the earth.

I pictured the bird teetering at the edge of the nest, trying to fly, and then falling and hitting the concrete below. Once I had seen an egg that had fallen from a nest in a huge pine tree near our apartment complex. A baby bird, partially formed, had lain in the cracked shell.

I threw my pencil down and stood up from my desk, breathing hard, feeling like I was going to crack too and severed pieces of Blue were going to rain down upon the room in a gruesome display. I grabbed my bag and ran for the door, needing to get out. I heard Wilson calling after me, telling me to wait. But I ran for the exits and didn't look back. I couldn't fly away. That was the kicker. The little bird in the story was no longer me. My story was now about someone else entirely.



I had been to Planned Parenthood before. I had gotten birth control there, though the latest round had obviously failed me. I googled all the possible reasons birth control could fail. Maybe it was the antibiotics I had been on after Christmas, or the fact that I had inexplicably had an extra pill and no extra days, meaning I'd missed one somewhere. Whatever the reason, the test was still positive, and I still hadn't had a period.

I'd called days before and made an appointment for after school – though running out of class had given me ample time to get there with time left over. The lady at the reception desk was matter-of-fact if not friendly. I filled out a medical form, answered a few questions, and then sat on a metal chair with a black cushion and turned the pages in a magazine filled with “the world's most beautiful women.” I wondered if any of them had ever gone to a Planned Parenthood. Their faces stared up at me from the glossy pages, resplendant in their colorful plumage. I felt small, cold, and ugly, like a bird

with wet feathers. Enough with the birds! I pushed the thought away and turned the page.

I wondered if my mother had come to a place like this when she was pregnant with me. The thought brought me up short. I was born in the early nineties. Very little had changed in the last twenty years, right? It would have been almost as easy for her to get an abortion as it would be for me. So why hadn't she? From the very little I knew about her, my birth was not convenient for her. I was definitely not wanted. Maybe she just didn't know about me until it was too late. Or maybe she had hoped to use me to get her boyfriend to take her back, to love her, to take care of her. Who knew? I sure as hell didn't.

"Blue?" My name was called, a big question on the end, as was always the case when anyone read my name. People were always sure they were being messed with. I grabbed my purse and walked to the door where the nurse stood, waiting for me to join her. Without even waiting for the door to swing shut behind us, she informed me that they would need a urine sample and handed me a cup.

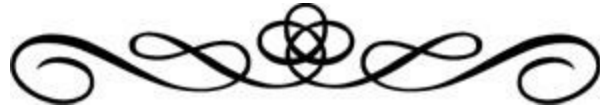
"When you're done, write your name on the label, attach it to your sample, and give it to me directly. We will test for pregnancy and STDs. You will have your pregnancy result today, but the STD results will take longer." She walked me to the restroom and waited until I walked inside and closed the door. I looked down at the label I was supposed to attach to the cup. There was a place for my name and a section for the time, temp, and date of the sample, which I assumed would be completed after I turned it over for inspection. Wilson's lecture on labels filled my head.

" . . . And if you don't like the direction you're headed, what label do you need to shed? Which one of those words that you've written to describe yourself should be abandoned?"

I was going to place my name on a cup of urine. They were going to tell me I was pregnant. Then they were going to counsel me on aborting the pregnancy because that was why I was here. Soon, I would be able to metaphorically peel off the "pregnant" label, scribble it out, throw it away and be done. It would no longer be true. And I would be able to change the direction I was heading. Label abandoned. Just like my mother had abandoned me.

I rolled my eyes at the comparison my overly emotional brain had

immediately jumped to make. It wasn't the same thing at all. Abandoning a child, abandoning a pregnancy. I told myself the two weren't even comparable. I hurried and got the sample, scribbled my name on the label, and slapped it on the warm cup that made me very aware that I probably needed to drink more water, and very embarrassed that the nurse would be thinking the same thing.



“Congratulations.”

The test hadn't taken very long. I wondered if they used the same strip test I had used ten times at home.

“Congratulations?”

“Yes. You're pregnant. Congratulations,” the nurse said, deadpan.

I didn't know what to say. Congratulations seemed completely the wrong word, considering I had been counseled about abortion services over the phone when I had made my appointment. But I didn't sense mockery. This was obviously just the response that was standard, or safe . . . I supposed.

“I see you have talked to..” She looked down at her clipboard, “Uh, Sheila . . . about your options?”

Sheila was the girl on the phone when I had called for an appointment. She was nice. I had been grateful to have someone to talk to. I wished Sheila were the one with me now. This nurse was so . . . dry with her canned congratulations. I needed to think.

“Is Sheila here?”

“Uhhhh . . . no,” the nurse said, clearly befuddled by my question. Then she sighed. “You will need to schedule another appointment for your procedure if that is what you decide to do.”

“Can I just have my pee please?” I interrupted, suddenly desperate, wanting to leave.

“Wh-what?”

“I just need, I mean, I don't want my pee sitting in there with my name on it. Can I have it please?”

The nurse stared at me like I was crazy. Then she tried to reassure me. “Everything is completely confidential. You understand that, right?”

“I want to go now. Will you please give me my pee?”

The nurse stood and opened the door, her eyes darting back and forth like she was looking for something to taser me with.

“And there is no such thing as completely confidential!” I pushed out of the little room, purse in hand, on a mission to find my labeled sample. I suddenly felt as if my life had narrowed to that label, to my name on a white sticker, pressed to a pee sample. I was crossing the Rubicon. This was it. And that label was all I could think about.

The nurse seemed shaken but didn't argue with me. She handed me my sample, and her hands trembled. I took it and ran, like a thief at a convenience store, hoping nobody could identify me, knowing the likelihood of getting away free was slim to none, knowing my problem had just gotten ten times worse. Yet, like the thief, I felt amped on adrenaline, buzzed at the decision I'd made. Euphoric with the power I had to flush my life right down the tubes . . . or protect a life, whichever way you looked at it. Speaking of flushing, I still gripped the urine sample close to my chest. I set it on the dashboard in my truck and stared at my name under the dim dome light.

Blue Echohawk. Date: March 29, 2012. Time: 5:30 pm. Beyond the interior of my truck, it was dark already. In Vegas in the winter, the sun set around five o'clock. It was fully dark now. I looked at my name again. I thought of Cheryl's words to me that awful day when drowning had seemed to be a more palatable alternative than living without Jimmy.

“He didn't even know your name. He said you just kept saying Blue, Blue, Blue. So that's what he called you. It kinda stuck, I guess.”

Blue Echohawk was not my name. Not really. Maybe I had been named Brittney or Jessica or Heather. Maybe Ashley or Kate or Chrissy, God forbid. *'I'm nobody. Who are you?'* The poem taunted me. It suddenly bothered me that I could have a child, and that child would not know *her* mother's name either. The cycle would continue. I pulled the sticky label from the sample and stuck it on my shirt, needing to declare who I was, if just for my own piece of mind. Then I threw the cup out the window and begged Karma to forgive me, knowing it was gross and that I would be stepping in dog poop or vomit soon because the universe would demand retribution in kind.

Chapter Thirteen

Pale

I found myself in front of Wilson's house. There was construction debris piled to the side, and it looked as if the roof was being redone. Light shone from all the windows and the wide front stairs were lit in the soft glow from the light shaped like an antique brass lantern that was hung by the door. I climbed out, not knowing what in the hell I was doing but desperate for companionship. For safety. I didn't know where else to go for either. Mason would have to be told, but I wouldn't be telling him tonight.

There was a little intercom by the door and the sign that said Pemberley. The intercom was new. I pressed it once, wondering if an alarm sounded inside the house. I pressed it once more, and Wilson's voice came through the speaker, sounding ridiculously like a stuffy English butler. It was such a perfect complement to the house that if I had been in any other state of mind I would have laughed hysterically.

"It's Blue Echohawk. Can I talk to you . . . for a minute . . . please? I don't need to come in. I'll just wait out here . . . on the steps."

"Blue? Are you all right? What happened at school?" The concern was evident even through the intercom, and I bit my lip to hold back a sob. I shook myself briskly. I didn't sob.

"I'm fine. I just need . . . to talk to someone."

"I'll be right down."

I sank to the step, waiting, wondering what in the world I was going to say. I wouldn't tell him I was pregnant, I was sure of that. So why was I here? The sob rose up again, and I moaned, wishing I knew how to let it out without coming completely undone like I had in the dark hallway of the school, listening to Wilson play, two months before.

The door opened behind me, and Wilson plopped down beside me on the step. He was in jeans and a T-shirt again, and I fervently wished he weren't. His feet were bare and I looked away, suddenly overwhelmed by despair. I needed a grown-up – an authority figure – to reassure me, to tell me it was all going to be okay. Wilson in jeans and bare feet just looked like another kid

without any answers. Like Mason or Colby, like a boy who wouldn't have a clue what to do if he were in my shoes. I wondered if his feet were freezing and decided I needed to get to the point.

"Remember when you told us about Julius Caesar crossing the Rubicon?" I blurted out.

Wilson reached over and touched my jaw, turning my face toward him.

"You look knackered."

I wrenched my chin free and pushed his hand away. I rested my head on my knees.

"Blue?"

"No, I'm not knackered, or knickered or whatever the hell that means."

"Knackered means exhausted, knickered means something else entirely, but I'm grateful you are neither," Wilson said dryly. I made a note to find out what knickered meant.

"So . . . Julius Caesar, eh? You needed to talk to me about Julius Caesar?"

"You said he knew when he crossed that river that he wouldn't be able to go back, right?" I prodded.

"Yes?"

"Well what if you crossed the Rubicon . . . and you didn't know it was the Rubicon. What then?"

"I assume we are speaking hypothetically."

"Yes! I messed up! I can't fix it, I can't go back, and I have no idea what the crap I'm going to do." The sob broke from me once more, and I covered my face, regaining control of myself almost immediately.

"Ah, Blue. It can't be that bad, can it?"

I didn't answer, because that would require telling him how truly bad it was.

"Nobody died." *Not yet.* I pushed the guilt away. "No laws were broken, I'm not suddenly growing a mustache, I don't have terminal cancer, and I haven't gone deaf or blind, so yeah, I guess things could be worse."

Wilson reached over and gently swept a strand of hair from my eyes. "Are you going to tell me what the problem is?"

I swallowed, fighting for composure. "I have tried to change, Wilson. Remember when we talked about redemption? That night my car wouldn't start, that night we were rescued by Larry and Curly?"

Wilson grinned and nodded, tucking my hair behind my ear. I tried not to

shudder as his fingers touched my skin. He was trying to comfort me, and I welcomed it, wishing I could lay my head against his shoulder while I unburdened myself. He pulled his hand back, waiting for me to continue.

“That night . . . something happened to me. Something I've never felt before. I was heartbroken and sick inside. And I prayed. I cried out for love, not even knowing that love was what I asked for. I needed to feel loved, and it was just . . . just poured down on me. No strings, no ultimatums, no promises required. Just freely given. All I had to do was ask. And I was . . . changed by it. In that moment, I felt . . . healed.” I looked at him, willing him to understand. He seemed engrossed by what I was saying, and I felt encouraged to continue.

“Don't get me wrong. I wasn't perfected by it. My trials weren't even taken away. My weaknesses weren't suddenly made into strengths, my struggles weren't any different. My sorrow didn't miraculously become joy . . . but I felt healed all the same.” The words poured out of me, words that described a feeling I had pondered over and over since that night. “It was as if the cracks were filled, and the stones around my heart were broken up and swept away. And I felt . . . whole.”

Wilson stared at me, his mouth hanging open slightly. He shook his head as if to clear it and rubbed the back of his neck like he didn't know what to say. I wondered if I had made any sense at all, or if he would start insisting I was knackered all over again.

“That is possibly the most beautiful thing I've ever heard.”

It was my turn to stare at him. His eyes held mine until I turned away, embarrassed by the praise I saw there. I felt his eyes on my face, clearly pondering what I'd said. After a minute he spoke again.

“So you have this incredible experience. You call it redemption. You've obviously thought about it a great deal . . . and now you're convinced that you've messed up so badly that, what? You can't be redeemed again?”

I hadn't thought about it that way. “It's not that . . . not really. I guess I just believed that I had moved beyond my old self. And now . . . I find that I can't escape the mistakes I've made.”

“So redemption didn't save you from consequence?”

“No. It didn't,” I whispered. And that was it. Redemption *hadn't* saved me from consequence. And I felt betrayed. I felt like the love that had been poured over me had been withdrawn before I'd had a chance to prove I was

worthy of it.

“So what now?”

“That's why I'm here, Wilson. I don't know what now.”

“And I can't advise you since you won't tell me what the problem is,” Wilson plied gently.

When I didn't respond he sighed, and we sat, looking out over the street at nothing, our thoughts filled with things we could say, but saying nothing at all.

“Sometimes there is no rescue,” I concluded, facing what was before me. I still didn't know what I was going to do. But I would manage. Somehow.

Wilson propped his chin in his hands and eyed me thoughtfully. “When my dad died, I was lost. There was so much that I regretted about our relationship, and it was too late to fix it. I joined the Peace Corp – mostly because my dad told me I wouldn't last a day – and spent two years in Africa working my arse off, living in pretty primitive conditions. Many days I wanted to be rescued from Africa. I wanted to go home and live at my mum's and be taken care of. But in the end, Africa saved me. I learned a lot about myself. I grew up – found out what I wanted to do with my life. Sometimes the things we want to be rescued from can save us.”

“Maybe.”

“Are you going to be all right, Blue?”

I looked at him and tried to smile. He was so serious. I wondered if he had been less so when his dad was alive. Somehow I doubted it. He was what Beverly called a mensch. An old soul.

“Thank you for talking to me. Cheryl's not great with heavy conversation.”

“Did you try Mason or Colby? They seem well-suited to solving the world's problems.”

I giggled, the laughter easing the tightness in my chest.

“I've made her laugh! Brilliant! I am good.”

“Yeah, Wilson, you're good. A little too good for the likes of Blue Echohawk. But we both knew that.”

Wilson agreed, acting as if my comment was in jest. Then he stood, pulling me to my feet after him. He walked me to my truck, tucked me inside, and pinched my cheek like I was five and he was one hundred and five.

“Six weeks, Echohawk, and the world is yours.”

I just shrugged and waved, the weight of that world heavy on my shoulders

and farther from my grasp than ever before.



Graduation was held on a late May morning out on the football field. It meant plenty of seats on the hard bleachers for family and friends and relatively bearable temperatures. I say relative because it was 90 degrees at ten am. I was extremely nauseous and the heat didn't help. I considered ditching, but wanted my moment. I wanted to wear my cap and gown, receive my diploma, and silently give the bird to all the haters that rolled their eyes when I walked by or thought I would drop out before the end of sophomore year. But I had made it. Just barely, but I had. Unfortunately, I ended up racing for the bathroom minutes before we were supposed to line up to make our entrance. I threw up what little was in my stomach and tried to breathe through the aftershocks, my stomach heaving and rolling like an angry sea.

I gathered myself together, rinsed my mouth, and dug in my purse for the crackers I had started to carry everywhere I went. I was almost four months along. Wasn't the morning sickness supposed to ease up by now? I ate a cracker, gulped a little water from the faucet – trying not to wonder how much chlorine it contained – and fixed my makeup where my eyeliner had smeared and left black smudges under my eyes. Then I slicked on some lip gloss, re-attached my sneer, and walked back to the cafeteria where all the graduates were gathered, only to find that they had left to make their entrance without me. I sank down at a lunch table and began to ponder why my life sucked so much. There was a lump in my throat that pounded with the ache in my heart. I couldn't go out there now. I had missed it.

“Blue?”

I jumped, taken completely by surprise, and lifted my head from where I had cradled it in my hands.

Mr. Wilson stood about ten feet away, his hand poised on the light switch by the door closest to where I sat. He wore his customary pin-striped shirt and slacks but had left the tie at home. Most of the teachers played a role at graduation, whether it was collecting caps and gowns, mingling with parents

and students, or checking for stragglers. It seemed Wilson was in charge of the latter. I straightened and glared at him, upset that he had found me vulnerable once again.

“Are you . . . all right? You missed the entrance. Everybody is on the field.”

“Yeah. I kinda got that.” The lump in my throat doubled in size, and I looked away from Wilson dismissively. I stood and pulled off my cap and tossed it on the table. I started to yank my robe off over my head, revealing the pink shorts and white t-shirt I wore underneath. We were supposed to wear dresses beneath our robes, but who was going to see?

“Wait!” Wilson called out, and he started moving toward me, his hand outstretched. “It isn't too late. You can still make it.”

I had stood up too quickly, and the room swam around me. Ohh, please, no! I bore down on the nausea and willed it away, only to realize I wasn't going to make it to the bathroom this time. Throwing my robe aside, I raced toward the door, flying past Wilson, barely making it to the trash can before I threw up the crackers and water I'd just consumed. I felt hands in my hair, pulling it back from my face and wanted to push Wilson away . . . oh, please, no . . . but I was too busy shuddering and heaving to follow through. I eventually gained dominion over my stomach and wished desperately for something to wipe my mouth on. Almost immediately, a neatly folded square of cloth appeared in my line of sight. I took it from Wilson's hand gratefully. It was the second time I'd used one of his handkerchiefs. I hadn't given the last one back. I had washed it and pressed it, but I knew it smelled like cigarette smoke and I was too embarrassed to return it. I straightened, and Wilson's hand released my hair as he stepped back from me.

He turned and left quickly, only to return less than a minute later with a little paper cup of icy water. “Compliments of the teacher's lounge.”

I sipped the water, grateful – but again – refusing to acknowledge it.

“If you think you can, I think you should put on your cap and gown and head out to the field. You haven't missed anything important.”

“Ha! I'm not walking out there by myself.”

“I'll walk with you. Easy peasy. Once you're seated, the embarrassment will be over, and in the end you will be glad you didn't miss your own graduation.”

I looked over at my cap and gown wistfully. Wilson must have seen my

hesitation and pressed me further. "Come on. You like making entrances, remember?"

I smiled a little, but the smile fell as I considered the likelihood that I wouldn't make it through the ceremony without needing to make another run for the commode.

"I can't do it."

"Sure you can," Wilson picked up my cap and gown and held them out to me, an encouraging look on his face. He reminded me of a dog begging for a walk around the block, his big, heavily-lashed eyes pleading, his mouth turned up the slightest bit in supplication.

"I can't do it," I repeated more forcefully.

"You need to," Wilson said just as forcefully. "I get that you're feeling dicky –"

"I'm not dicky, whatever that means! I'm pregnant!" I whispered, interrupting him. Wilson's face went slack, as if I'd just told him I was having an affair with Prince William. The lump was back, and I felt a stinging in my eyes that caused me to blink rapidly and grit my teeth.

"I see," Wilson said softly, and his hands fell to his sides, my cap and gown still held in his hand. A strange expression stole across his features, as if he was putting everything together, and his jaw clenched as his gaze stayed locked on my face. I wanted to look away, but pride kept my stare steady and belligerent.

I took the cap and gown from him and turned away, feeling suddenly very shy in my short Daisy Dukes and my flimsy t-shirt, as if my skimpy choice of clothing underscored my humiliating confession. I suddenly despised myself and wanted nothing more than to get away from Darcy Wilson – the one teacher, the one person, who seemed to give a damn about me. He had become a friend, and I realized in that moment that I had probably disappointed him. I started to walk away. His voice was insistent behind me.

"I didn't go to my father's funeral."

I turned, confused. "Wh-what?"

"I didn't go to my father's funeral." He walked toward me until he stood directly in front of me.

"Why?"

Wilson shrugged and shook his head. "I thought I was responsible for his death. The night he died we had a huge fight and I stormed out. I didn't want

to go to medical school; he thought I was being a fool. It was the only time I had ever fought like that with my father. Later that night, he had a massive heart attack in his car in the hospital parking lot. He had been paged but never made it through the hospital doors. They might have saved him if he had.

“Naturally, I blamed myself for the heart attack. I was devastated and guilty . . . so I didn't go.” Wilson stopped talking and looked down at his hands as if they held answers that he had yet to find. “My mother begged and pleaded. She told me I would regret not going for the rest of my life.” He looked up at me. “She was right.”

I looked down at my own hands, knowing exactly what he was trying to say.

“Some moments you don't get back, Blue. You don't want to spend a lifetime wondering about those moments you didn't seize, about the things you should have done but were too scared to do.”

“It's just a stupid ceremony,” I protested.

“No. It's more than that, because it means something to you. It's something you've earned and no one can take it away from you. This journey hasn't been an easy one for you, and you deserve this moment, maybe more than any student out there.” Wilson pointed toward the football field that lay beyond the walls of the cafeteria.

“Nobody will miss me. I don't have anyone out there waiting to see me walk across the stage.”

“I'll be there, and I'll clap and holler and yell your name.”

“If you do, I'll kick your ass!” I snapped, horrified.

Wilson busted out laughing. “There's the girl I know.” He pointed to my cap and gown. “Let's go.”

I ended up attending my graduation ceremony after all. Turns out, I hadn't missed much. I walked out onto the field, Wilson by my side. I held myself stiffly and didn't hurry, and I made my way to my empty seat without flinching, although heads were swiveling right and left. Wilson sat with the row of teachers and true to his word, whistled and yelled when my name was called. I have to admit I kind of liked it, and my classmates and the other teachers laughed, most likely thinking Wilson was clapping because he was glad to get rid of me. I tried not to smile but, in spite of my best efforts, at the last minute a huge grin split my face.

Chapter Fourteen

Indigo

I spent as little time in the apartment as possible. It reeked of cigarettes, and although I tried to keep my door shut off from the rest of the apartment and the windows to my room open at all times, May in Las Vegas is hot, and my room was unbearable. My little storage unit at the back of the complex was just as hot, but I had fresh air and my projects to distract me. I was lost in my latest creation – filing and sanding and grinding away – when a car rolled up beyond the sliding metal door. I turned to see Wilson step from his grey Subaru and slam the door behind him. I walked out into the bright sunlight, shading my eyes as he approached.

“Your aunt said I would find you out here,” he offered by way of greeting.

“She answered the door? Wow. Wonders never cease.” She’d been asleep on the couch when I’d slipped out. I tried not to pull at my red tank top and my shredded jeans shorts. My belly had just started to round, but it wasn’t noticeable in my clothing. I looked down at my flip flops and curled my painted toes. I had showered and shaved my legs, but my hair had still been wet when I had come outside, and I had pulled it up in a high ponytail to keep the wet strands off my neck. I hadn’t even looked in the mirror. I didn’t know what bothered me more: Wilson seeing me like this or the fact that I *cared* that Wilson was seeing me like this. He had stopped walking and was staring at me. I cringed and then immediately got defensive.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

Wilson stood with his hands shoved in his pockets, his eyebrows lowered quizzically over his somber gaze.

“You look different.”

“Well, yeah!” I scoffed self-consciously. “I look like crap. No makeup, my hair’s not done, and I’m wearing these scruddy clothes.”

“Scruddy?” Wilson’s eyebrows shot up.

“Yeah, you know. Cruddy and scummy make scruddy.”

“I see,” Wilson nodded sagely. “Like scrummy, only . . . scruddy.” He tipped his head slightly. “It suits you.”

“Scruddy suits me?” I tried not to be hurt. “Why thank you, Mr. Darcy!” I said in my southern belle accent and fluttered my eyelashes. “You are as romantic as your namesake.”

“Natural suits you. You wear too much makeup,” Wilson shrugged and turned away.

“A girl can never wear too much blue eye shadow,” I quipped, trying to pretend that I didn't care what he said or what he thought. I ran my hand over my hair, feeling the rumpled strands and the off-centered ponytail.

“Tell me what you're doing.” Wilson moved to stand next to me. He reached a long finger out and followed a groove that widened into a hollow space.

“I'm never sure what I'm doing,” I answered honestly.

“Then how will you know when you've done it?” Wilson smiled.

“That's always the question. When to stop. I usually start to get a feel for the shape as I work. It rarely comes to me before. The inspiration comes through action.” I bit at my lip in concentration. “Does that make sense?”

Wilson nodded. “If I squint it almost looks like a cello that has been melted down and pulled . . . like taffy.”

I didn't tell him that I kept seeing a cello too. It seemed too personal, as if it would again introduce the feelings that had risen within me when I had first heard him play that night in the high school, the night I'd vowed to change.

“What's that?” Wilson indicated a small hole whorled into the now smooth surface of the wood.

“A worm hole.”

“Will you sand it away?”

I shook my head. “Probably not. I'll just fill it with a little putty. The problem with fixing one problem is that sometimes you uncover two.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well this is a relatively small worm hole, right?”

He nodded.

“If I start cutting it away, the hole may widen and veer off into a new direction, creating a much bigger problem or, at the very least, a much bigger hole. There is no such thing as perfect, and honestly, if the wood were perfect it wouldn't be as beautiful. I seem to recall someone telling me that 'perfect was boring' anyway.”

“You were listening!” Wilson smiled again.

"I usually am," I replied without thinking and then worried that I might have given something away.

"How are you this morning?" Wilson's eyes were grave as he switched subjects.

I stopped filing and flexed my muscles. "Tough as nails," I said dryly, not wanting to talk about what I knew he was referring to. I had spent about an hour feeling absolutely hideous, bent over the toilet in the apartment. But I had managed to keep down about ten crackers and the fresh air outside was doing me good. I wondered again how long I was going to be able to stay in the smokey apartment. It wasn't good for me, and it definitely wasn't good for the baby inside me. My stomach knotted up instantly, and I wondered briefly if part of my on-going, never-ending nausea was just plain old fear.

"Does your aunt know about the pregnancy?" Okay, now Wilson was being blunt.

"Nope," I responded shortly.

"Have you been to see a doctor?"

"Not yet." I didn't make eye contact. I didn't think my trip to Planned Parenthood counted. His silence felt like condemnation. I stepped back from my sculpture and sighed loudly. "I have an appointment with someone at Health and Human services. I should be able to get some kind of medical assistance, and they will tell me where I can go to see a doctor, okay?"

"Good," Wilson replied shortly, nodding his head. "You know you're going to have to stop smoking too, right?"

"I don't smoke!" It was as if Wilson had heard my thoughts moments before.

Wilson lifted an eyebrow in disbelief, and smirked at me, waiting for me to come clean.

"I don't smoke, Wilson! I just live with someone who smokes like a chimney. So I smell like an ashtray all the time. I can't help it if I reek, but thank you for noticing."

Wilson had lost his doubtful smirk, and he sighed gustily. "I'm sorry, Blue. I'm incredibly good at dropping clunkers. I don't have a big mouth, but somehow I manage to stick my foot in it quite frequently."

I shrugged, letting it go. He watched me work for a while, but he seemed preoccupied, and I wondered why he lingered.

"Well that settles it . . ." he mumbled to himself. Then said to me, "Have

you ever thought about getting a place of your own?”

“Only every second of every day,” I replied wryly, not looking up from the line that was emerging, changing my cello into a full symphony. The curve suggested sound and movement and a continuity that I couldn't put into words but that somehow was conveyed in the line of the wood. It happened like that – beauty would emerge almost by accident and I had to let it take me where it wanted me to go. So often, I felt like my hands and heart knew something I did not, and I surrendered the art to them.

“Can you take a break? I want to show you something that might interest you.”

I worried my lip, wondering if I would lose the thread of inspiration if I walked away. It was almost done; I could go. I nodded to Wilson.

“Let me run inside and change.”

“You look fine. Let's go. It won't take long.”

I tugged at my ponytail, pulling the elastic free. I ran my fingers through my hair and decided it didn't matter. In moments, my tools were put away and the unit locked up tight. I ran inside and grabbed my purse, yanking a brush through my hair while I pulled on a T-shirt that was a little less bare.

“A guy with a funny accent came looking for you,” Cheryl mumbled from the couch. “He sounded like the professor from *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. But he was much younger – and cute too. Moving up in the world, huh?” Cheryl had a thing for Spike on the show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. She owned every season and watched it obsessively whenever she was between boyfriends. It made her believe that her perfect guy was still out there – immortal, blood sucking, and strangely attractive. Comparing Wilson to any member of the cast was high praise. I left without commenting.

Wilson opened the passenger door for me me, and I managed not to say something sarcastic or tell him that he did remind me a little of a young Giles. We pulled up outside his house, and I remarked on the improved look of the exterior.

“Initially, I focused all my attention on the interior, but once the three apartments were completed, I turned my attention to the outside. In the last month she's had a new roof put on, new fascia, new windows. We reformed the steps and laid them and the sidewalk in stone. The landscapers came in and really cleaned up the yard too. The old girl has had a complete makeover, really.”

He bounded up the steps and unlocked the door. I followed more sedately. How would it be to have the money to instigate a makeover like he'd given "the old girl?" Sure it was still work. It was probably still a headache to deal with contractors and construction. I couldn't imagine having the vision to put it all together. But how would it be to be able to do whatever you wanted . . . within reason? I wondered randomly if I was Wilson's new project. Maybe he would make me over.

"This is what I wanted to show you." He led me to a door off of the foyer that I hadn't even noticed the last time I had been inside. It was partially hidden behind the sweep of the stairs.

"You see how we've divided the house into two flats upstairs, yet there's only one down? It's because when the house was built, the staircase was slightly offset to the right. That made all the rooms on this side of the house smaller. My rooms sit over the garage somewhat, so I still have plenty of space. But down here things are pretty cramped. I thought maybe at some point I would live down here and let my flat, but I can't stand up straight in the shower – you'll see why – and honestly, I like my flat upstairs. I also thought we could let it to a handyman of sorts. But that has turned out to be me, which makes it easier for me to justify staying in my flat because I'm saving money on not hiring someone else."

As he talked we walked inside the small apartment. The space had the same wood floors as the foyer, and the walls had been freshly painted. A little entryway opened up into a small sitting room, which Wilson called a "lounge," bordered by a galley kitchen complete with a stainless steel sink, a black fridge and stove, and a narrow slash of black countertop. It was all new and shiny and smelled like wood and paint and starting over. A bedroom and bathroom, every bit as new and every bit as small, completed the tiny apartment. I stepped into the shower and saw what Wilson had meant.

"The duct work runs through here. It was our only option. The ceiling is less than six feet right here above the shower, which won't be a problem for you unless you like to shower in those ridiculously high boots you like to wear."

"I can't afford this place, Wilson. It's small, but it's really nice. I work at the cafe, I'm pregnant, and there's no space to carve, which means my financial situation probably isn't going to improve if I live here."

"You can afford it, trust me. And the best part? Come on. I'll show you."

He was through the bathroom door and back in the kitchen in about ten steps.

“This door here? It isn't a pantry. It leads to the basement. I thought if this was the handyman's flat, he would need easy access, so we didn't cover the original door when we drew the floorplan. I do my laundry down there. The furnace and water heater are down there, along with all the fuse boxes, etc. There's an outside entrance too, so I can access it without traipsing through your flat. And it's huge. There's plenty of space for you to set up shop. You might get a bit cold in the winter, but we could get you a little space heater. And in the summer it will be the coolest place in the house.”

I followed him down the stairs, trying not to get excited, telling myself it was a bad idea. The basement was nothing much to see. It was concrete walls and floor, easily 2,500 square feet of mostly empty space. There were some odds and ends and an old washer and dryer pushed up against the farthest wall, but that was all. The fact that the home had a basement was notable. Basements in Las Vegas were about as scarce as brick houses. It had overhead lights though, and electricity for my power tools. It would be more than sufficient for what I needed.

“There's some old furniture that was in the house when I bought the place.” Wilson jerked tarps off of various items in the farthest corner. “You're welcome to whatever you think you can use, and that washer and dryer are all hooked up. You could come down here and do your laundry, too.”

“How much, Wilson?” I demanded, interrupting his list of amenities. “How much a month?”

He considered, tilting his head to the side as if he had to put a lot of thought into it.

“It's small, and I can't rent it to a full-grown man. He'd feel like Gulliver living with the Lilliputians. I had actually decided to just leave it empty and let my mum use it when she visited. But she's too much of a snob, so that probably won't work.”

“How much, Wilson?”

“Four hundred a month would be too much probably.” He eyed me. “But I'll throw in your utilities to make it more fair.”

Four hundred was ridiculously cheap, and he knew it. The rent on Cheryl's apartment was \$900 a month and it was a smelly dive, and that only included water and sewer. Gas and power were separate. I knew because there were times when I'd had to pay the power bill out of my paycheck from the cafe.

“Why are you doing this for me?” I demanded, shoving my hands into the pockets of my raggedy shorts.

Wilson sighed. “I'm really not doing anything, Blue. The \$400 is more than sufficient, really. It will be nice for Mrs. Darwin to have another female in the building, too. My new tenant is a bloke. This way if she needs help with anything . . . female . . . then you will be here. It's perfect, really.” He was grasping at straws.

“Anything female? Like what?”

“Well, I don't know. Just bits and bobs . . . uh, female stuff that I wouldn't be able to assist her with.”

“I see,” I said, trying not to laugh. Euphoria was bubbling in my chest, and I wanted to do a celebratory dance around the basement. I was going to do it. I was going to move into that perfect little apartment all by myself. No smoke, no Cheryl, no beer bottles and sweaty men to trip over and avoid. I was moving out.

Chapter Fifteen

Bright

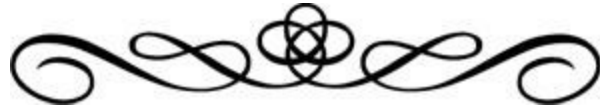
I found a table and two chairs, a loveseat with a matching recliner, and a bed frame that we brought up from the basement. Wilson insisted on having the sofa and recliner steam cleaned. He made up some excuse about Mrs. Darwin having already scheduled someone to come for some of her things, but Mrs. Darwin looked completely clueless when I mentioned it to her the day the steam cleaner arrived. Wilson also miraculously produced a brand new, double-sized mattress and box springs that he said had also been in the basement, though I hadn't seen them.

I presented him with a check for six hundred dollars the next day and told him I was on to him and to knock off the extras because I couldn't afford them, and I wasn't taking freebies. I loaded up my tools, discontinued my lease of the storage space, and gathered up my few belongings from Cheryl's. It was probably the easiest moving day in the history of moving days. Cheryl was a little surprised but not especially emotional. She seemed a little worried that she might not be able to pay all the bills that month but was considering possible roommates by the time I left. I wondered if I would see her again. I wrote down my new address and told her she had my number if she needed to reach me. She nodded, replying, "You too." And that was all.

There was a huge dumpster at the edge of the complex, not far from where my truck was parked. I looked down at the garbage sacks filled with my clothes, and then back at the dumpster. Soon I wouldn't fit into most of my things, and they all stunk like Cheryl's apartment. I didn't want to bring them into my new place. I wanted to fling them high and wide, letting them land in a smelly heap on top of all the other trash. Tiffa had called me a few days before and told me she'd sold three more of my pieces. Together the pieces had gone for a thousand bucks. I could afford new clothes if I was thrifty. Tiffa said she would bring the check by Wilson's place when I was settled. She seemed to have all the details on my big move, which both surprised and pleased me. I liked that I warranted mention in Wilson's conversations.

I dug my boots and my shoes out of the bags, as well as a few other things

I didn't want to part with, and piled them on the passenger seat. I couldn't replace everything. Then with great relish, I threw every last piece of clothing I owned away.



The very best thing about my apartment was the vent in the ceiling. If I stood beneath it, I could hear Wilson playing his cello. I don't know why the sound traveled the way it did, but once I discovered it, I placed the sagging recliner beneath the vent in the center of my tiny living room, and I would sit there in the dark each night, rocking and listening as Wilson's music whispered through the metal slats above me and wrapped me in sweetness. He would have laughed to see me there, my face upturned, a smile on my lips, as he made the strings sing without words. He played one particular melody every night, and I would wait for it, sighing with satisfaction when the familiar tune found its way to me. I didn't know the name. I had never heard it before, but every time he played it I felt like I had finally come home.

The weeks following my move were the happiest I had ever spent. I hit the thrift shops and the garage sales to furnish my new home and fill my new closet, and my wardrobe underwent a drastic transformation. Gone were the skin tights jeans and low cut tops. Gone were the short shorts and boob tubes. I found I liked color – lots of it – and dresses were cooler in Nevada than even shorts, so the majority of my purchases were sundresses in happy shades and cool fabrics, with the added bonus that there was room for my expanding midsection.

My home became my haven, a heaven, and I pinched myself everytime I returned. Even the fear of what the future would bring did not dim my pleasure in my new place. If I saw something at a garage sale that I could afford and it made me happy, I bought it. The result was a bright yellow vase with a chip in it, and an apple green throw on my couch, surrounded by red and yellow throw cushions Mrs Darwin didn't want anymore. Mismatched dishes in bright colors and throw rugs to match filled the cupboards and covered the floors.

I sanded down the table and chairs from the basement and painted them barn red. Then I placed three glass canisters with wooden stoppers in the center and filled one with red cinnamon bears, one with skittles, and one with chocolate kisses. And no one ate them but me. I found a cuckoo clock with a bluebird that chirped on the hour and bronze Julius Caesar bookends for five dollars at a garage sale. The bookends made me laugh and think of Wilson, so I bought them. I built myself a book shelf – working with wood has its more practical advantages – painted it apple green to match my throw, and filled it with every book I owned and every book Jimmy had ever owned. My two Caesars guarded them seriously, keeping them aligned like obedient soldiers. My wooden snake and a carving Jimmy and I had done together sat atop it, along with the housewarming gift Wilson had surprised me with.

I had come home after my first big day of shopping to find a little package outside my door. It had a note attached and BLUE written across the envelope in bold letters. I unlocked the door and dumped my bags in the entryway, unable to contain my curiosity.

I opened the package first – I couldn't help myself. The card could wait. Inside was a little porcelain blackbird with bright blue eyes. It was dainty and well-formed, with fine detailing and sooty feathers. Standing in the palm of my hand, it was maybe four inches tall from head to foot. I placed it carefully on my countertop and tore open the card bearing my name.

Blue,

You never finished your story. The blackbird needed a safe place to land. I hope she's found it. Congratulations on your new nest.

Wilson

My personal history, the one I had tried and failed miserably to write, was included with the note. I read it once more, noting the way I'd left it, with the blackbird hurtling toward the earth, unable to right herself.

Once upon a time there was a little blackbird who was pushed from the nest, unwanted. Discarded. Then a Hawk found her and swooped her up and carried her away, giving her a home in his nest, teaching her to fly. But one day the Hawk didn't come home, and the bird was alone again, unwanted.

She wanted to fly away. But as she rose to the edge of the nest and looked out across the sky, she noticed how small her wings were, how weak. The sky was so big. Somewhere else was so far away. She felt trapped. She could fly away, but where would she go?

She was afraid because she knew she wasn't a hawk. And she wasn't a swan, a beautiful bird. She wasn't an eagle, worthy of awe. She was just a little blackbird.

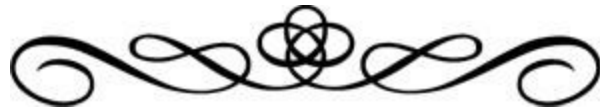
She cowered in the nest hiding her head beneath her wings, wishing for rescue. But none came. The little blackbird knew she might be weak, and she might be small, but she had no choice. She had to try. She would fly away and never look back. With a deep breath, she spread her wings and pushed herself off into the wide blue sky. For a minute she flew, steady and soaring, but then she looked down. The ground below rose rapidly to meet her as she panicked and cartwheeled toward the earth.

I dug into my purse and found a pen. Sitting down at the table, I added a few more lines.

At the last minute, the bird looked upward, fixing her sights on the horizon. As she raised her head and straightened her wings, she began to fly instead of fall, the wind beneath her lifting her back into the sky.

It was silly and cheesy. But I felt better for having written it. It wasn't an ending, exactly, but maybe it was a new beginning. Then I folded up Wilson's letter and my story and tucked them into a copy of Dante's *Inferno* that I knew I would never read but that would forever make me think of harpies and history, heartache and holding on.

In the weeks that followed, I was suspended in a happy timelessness. My baby's birth was still far enough in the future that I could push thoughts of motherhood away, even as I began regular visits to the doctor, having made no real decision beyond acceptance. I had accepted that I would not be ending my pregnancy. I would be giving birth. I owned that responsibility. I claimed it. I was living on my own, working in the cafe, and selling my carvings. And I was happy. Beyond that, I just didn't know.



When Tiffa sold four more of my sculptures, I stopped placing them at the cafe, simply because I couldn't meet the demands of both and Tiffa could sell them for so much more. I apologized to Beverly, explaining my dilemma.

"That is wonderful, Blue!" she said firmly, resting her hand on my arm. "You have nothing to be sorry for! Don't apologize for success! Are you crazy? I might have to smack you up side the head, girl!" She squeezed me tightly and then pulled me into her office, shutting the door behind us.

"I found a roll of film when I was cleaning out some old filing cabinets the other day. I had it developed. I have something for you." She pulled an 8 x 10 frame from a plastic Walmart sack and handed it to me. "I thought you would like this."

I stared down at a picture of Jimmy and me, our eyes squinting against the sun, the cafe in the backdrop, Icas at our feet. I drank it in, speechless.

"I had just purchased a new camera and was taking shots of all my regulars that day. There were pictures of Dooby and Wayne having their morning coffee, same as they've done for the past thirty years. Barb and Shelly were waitressing for me back then, too. I have a cute one of them in their aprons keeping Joey company in the kitchen. Barb's gotten fat. So have I, for that matter." Bev patted her stomach ruefully. "I forgot that she used to have a pretty cute little figure. I haven't shown her the pictures. Thought it might depress her. I don't know why this roll didn't get developed, but you know me, always moving a mile a minute."

Beverly tapped the glass, pointing at an unsmiling Jimmy. "He turned up that day, out of the blue, which was the way it always was with Jimmy. I got lucky, I guess. I ordered him to pose for a picture. You were so cute, smiling and thrilled to get your picture taken. I remember thinking what an old codger Jimmy was. He wasn't thrilled about the picture at all, even though he didn't say much. He just made me promise that I wouldn't display it in the cafe. At least he put his arm around you. It's easy to see that you belonged together – just two funny peas in a pod, you and your daddy, huh?" Her words were like a slap, especially because they were so heartfelt.

"You think so?" I whispered around the memories that clogged my throat.

“You think we belonged together, Bev?”

“No question about it, honey,” Bev declared, nodding her head as she spoke. I managed to smile, hugging the picture to my chest. I'd never shared the fact that Jimmy wasn't my father with Beverly. In fact, the only person who knew, besides Cheryl, was Wilson. The realization struck me. I'd told Wilson things I had never told another soul.

Bev cleared her throat and straightened her blouse. I could tell she wanted to say something more, and I waited, almost certain that she had noticed the changes in my figure.

“You're changing, Blue.” Her words echoed my thoughts almost verbatim, and I held the picture tighter, mentally shielding myself from the discomfort of the topic.

“You've softened up some, and it looks good on you. And I'm not talking about the weight you've put on.” She eyed me pointedly, pausing for effect, letting me know she was on to me. “I'm talking about your language and your appearance and your taste in men. I'm talking about that cute Sean Connery you're friendly with. I hope you keep him around. And I hope to hell you've told him about the baby, 'cause I'm guessing it ain't his.”

“It's not. We're not. I mean . . . we're not in a relationship like that,” I stammered. “But yes, he knows. He's been a good friend.” But Bev was more right than I wanted to admit. Something was happening to me, and it had everything to do with Darcy Wilson.

“That's good then.” Bev nodded to herself and straightened some papers on her desk. “I'm your friend too, Blue. I've been where you are, you know. I was even younger than you are now. I made it through. You will too.”

“Thank you. Bev. For the picture, and . . . everything else.” I turned to go, but she stopped me with a question.

“Are you keeping the baby, Blue?”

“Did you keep yours?” I asked, not willing to answer her.

“Yes . . . I did. I married the baby's father, had my son, and got divorced a year later. I raised my boy on my own, and it was hard. I'm not gonna lie.”

“Did you ever regret it?”

“Regret keeping my son? No. But getting pregnant? Getting married? Sure. But there's no way to avoid regret. Don't let anybody tell you different. Regret is just life's aftertaste. No matter what you choose, you're gonna wonder if you shoulda done things different. I didn't necessarily choose

wrong. I just chose. And I lived with my choice, aftertaste and all. I like to think I gave my boy the best life I could, even if I wasn't perfect." Bev shrugged and met my eyes steadily.

"Knowing you, I'm sure that's true, Bev," I said sincerely.

"I hope so, Blue."

Chapter Sixteen

Old Glory

“But the fourth of July is an American holiday.” I wrinkled my nose at Wilson. “What in the world are a bunch of Brits doing celebrating Independence Day?”

“Who do you think celebrates more when the child moves out, the parents or the kid? England was glad to see you all go, trust me. We threw a party when America declared their independence. Bravo! Now go, and don't let the door hit you in the arse!” Wilson growled.

“I'm not buying it. Does the Revolutionary war ring any bells, Mr. Professor?”

“All right then. Actually, Mum is in town, along with Alice and Peter and my three nephews. It's too blasted hot to barbeque, but Tiffa's flat has an amazing view of the strip – so the fireworks are brilliant – and best of all, there's a pool on the roof.”

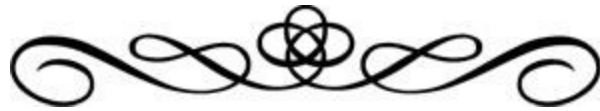
It had averaged 118 degrees all week. Hot didn't even begin to describe it. The thought of a pool was almost too wonderful to contemplate. Then I thought of how I would look in a bathing suit and felt my enthusiasm wane.

“So why are you asking me? Where's Pamela?” I was proud of how innocent and conversational I sounded.

“I'm asking you because you informed me that you are out of wood, you are bored, you are hot, and you are cranky.” That much was certainly true. Wilson had come down to the basement to do some laundry and found me staring at my empty work bench mournfully, trying not to melt into a hot mess all over the concrete floor. I had neglected my wood gathering expeditions lately. The heat combined with pregnancy made me an absolute wuss. Now I was paying for it. A whole day off and nothing to sculpt.

“And Pamela's in Europe,” Wilson added, moving a load of his clothes to the dryer. Of course she was. People like Pamela hobnobbed all over Europe with their hobnobby friends. But if Pamela was gone . . .

“Okay,” I agreed. “Bring on the barbeque!”



Wilson's mother looked nothing like him. She was blonde, slim, and looked very much like an English aristocrat. She would look very at home in a wide brimmed hat watching a polo match and saying 'Good form!' I could see a resemblance to Tiffa in her willowy figure and wide blue eyes, and Alice looked exactly like her, only less serene. The lack of serenity might have been the result of the three little red-haired boys bouncing around her, over her, under her. Alice looked frazzled and irritated where her mother seemed cool as a cucumber. I wondered if Wilson favored his dad. If not for Tiffa's curly hair, I might think he was the product of a torrid affair. The thought made me snicker. Joanna Wilson did not do torrid affairs, I would almost bet my life on it. But she was crazy about Wilson, no doubt about it. She held his hand in hers while they talked, hung on every word he said, and patted his cheek countless times.

I hung back, awkward in the close family setting, and spent most of my time in the pool playing with the kids, throwing weighted rings to the bottom over and over again so they could retrieve them like tireless puppies. Tiffa joined me after a while, and the kids piled on her eagerly, little wet bodies scrambling to hold on as she giggled and dunked herself – and them – several times. I was surprised by her physical play and the obvious affection she had for her nephews. I wondered suddenly why she didn't have any kids of her own. She seemed much more suited to motherhood than poor Alice, who sipped an alcoholic beverage in a nearby pool chair and squealed every time one of the boys splashed too much. What had the woman been thinking having three children one after the other? Maybe, like me, she hadn't been thinking at all.

Tiffa had met and married Jack, a native Las Vegas boy, when he was completing his residency at the Cancer Institute her father had left England to work for. Tiffa could have stayed in England when her parents and Wilson moved to the States. Alice was married by that time and had remained in England. But instead, Tiffa had taken a job at a small art gallery on the upper east side of Salt Lake City, anxious to stay close to her family and gain new experience. She and Jack had been engaged and were married in a matter of

six months. And six years later, they were still obviously giddy about each other. They had moved to Vegas when Jack had taken a permanent position with the oncology unit at Desert Springs Hospital, and Tiffa had been hired as a curator for The Sheffield.

My eyes swung to Jack, tan and handsome in a pale blue polo and khaki cargo shorts, manning the barbeque like a true-blue American man. Alice's husband Peter wasn't contributing much to the preparation, but he hung close to Jack, listening to him talk and laughing at something Jack said. The two men seemed nothing alike, but I had liked them both immediately.

Peter was the nephew of an Earl – I was stunned to discover there were still Earls and such in England – and, according to Tiffa, richer than the Queen. I didn't know what Earls did, but apparently when your wealth rivals that of royalty, there is a lot to manage, which Peter was reportedly good at. Maybe that was what had attracted Alice, although he had other qualities that endeared him to me. He was homely while Alice gleamed, quiet while Alice scolded, and gentle while Alice seemed harsh. His smile was shy and his manner unassuming. And his hair was as red as that of his offspring. I sincerely hoped they were all wearing sunblock. I was naturally brown, and even I had slathered on the 50.

I climbed out of the pool and walked quickly to where I had removed my sundress. I had made Wilson stop at a Target on the way, and I had grabbed a boring blue one piece that drew as little attention as possible. I hadn't wanted to wear the black string bikini that had survived the dumpster heap six weeks ago. Somehow, pregnancy and string bikinis didn't appeal to me. Some women worked it, I supposed. To me it just looked tacky, like those horrible facebook pictures where expectant women bared all and their husbands kissed their bellies awkwardly. I was five months along, and my stomach was a neat little mound, but compared to what it had been, it felt gigantic. I wondered if it would be sleek and concave ever again.

Wilson and his mother were still deep in conversation, sitting on deck chairs under blue striped umbrellas as they had been every since we'd arrived. Wilson had introduced me to his mother as a “friend and a tenant” and had not embellished further. Joanna Wilson seemed to accept my status, though she had raised her eyebrows slightly and asked about Pamela when she thought I wasn't listening. Apparently, Joanna was good friends with Pamela's parents.

I tried to keep my back to them as I exited the pool, but when Joanna stopped talking midsentence, I knew I hadn't hid my stomach well enough. I pulled my sundress over my head and tried to pretend I hadn't noticed the telling pause. She resumed her conversation a half-beat later, as if she'd never stopped, but when I stole a peek at Wilson he was looking at me with an indecipherable expression on his face. He hadn't misunderstood her reaction either.

"Tiffa? These steaks are done, baby. Let's eat," Jack called out to his wife, who was cackling like a witch, the littlest red-head on her back, the other two in full squirt gun assault.

"We're dining inside, aren't we?" Alice spoke up from under her umbrella. "I can't endure this heat for another instant."

"We can do both," Tiffa called, climbing out of the pool without relinquishing the little monkey on her back. "I had catering brought in, and everything is sorted in the flat. Jack will bring the steaks down. Anyone who wants to can come back up here and eat or stay inside where it's cool."

Jack and Tiffa had also invited a handful of close friends to the get-together, which was a relief to me. The larger group made it easier to be inconspicuous. Most everyone made their way down the circular stairs that connected the roof to Jack and Tiffa's apartment. All of the penthouse flats, as Tiffa referred to them, had private stairs leading to the rooftop pool and gardens. I tried not to think about how much a place like that cost and marveled again at the differences between Wilson and me. He had received a trust when he turned twenty-one, which had enabled him to purchase the old mansion in Boulder City. I had no idea how much the trust was. I honestly didn't want to know, but from the off-hand way Tiffa talked, it was millions. Which might explain the little gasp from Joanna Wilson when she had seen my belly. Millions of dollars? Millions of reasons why she would want Wilson to steer clear of someone like me. I understood, I really did, but it didn't ease the embarrassment I felt for the rest of the afternoon.

The summer sun set late and brought a welcome respite from the desert sun. When the sun went down in Vegas, the heat wasn't just bearable, it was beautiful. I even liked the way it smelled, like the sun had stripped away all the grime and the desert oasis had been washed in fire. Indescribable, until you breathed it in. I didn't think any place in the world smelled like Vegas.

The party moved back up to the roof with the setting of the sun, and I

basked in the dark heat, an icy sweet tea in my hand, eyes on the sky, waiting for the fireworks to start. Wilson had been at my side off and on through the evening, and neither of us commented on the awkward moment earlier by the pool. Joanne Wilson was gracious and polite to me whenever circumstances demanded, but I had caught her looking at me several times throughout the evening.

As the hour for the fireworks neared, I trudged back down the stairs for yet another trip to the bathroom – curse my pregnant bladder! – when I overheard Wilson and his mother talking in Tiffa's kitchen. The stairs from the pool ended in a tiled area – a large jacuzzi and a sauna sat just to the left, a laundry room and a large bathroom with an enormous shower to the right. Straight ahead, through a large stone archway lay the kitchen, and though I couldn't see Wilson or his mother, it was impossible not to hear them, especially when I played such a prominent role in the conversation. I stood motionless at the foot of the stairs, listening as Wilson denied any special feeling for me. His mother seemed aghast that he would bring me to an outing where so many would assume I was his girlfriend.

“Darcy. You can't be dating a girl who is expecting, darling.”

“I'm not dating her, Mum. Blue is my friend, and she lives in my building – that's all. I'm just looking out for her a bit. I invited her on a whim.”

“And what's with that name? Blue? It sounds like something Gwyneth Paltrow would pick out.”

“Mum,” Wilson sighed. “I could say the same about Darcy.”

“Darcy is a classical name,” Joanna Wilson sniffed but dropped the subject and resumed her original argument. “It's just a shame that pregnancy comes so easily to those who don't want it and then not at all for those who are desperate to be mothers.”

“I don't hear Tiffa complaining,” Wilson replied, sighing.

“You don't, do you? Is that why she's always got Henry in her arms even though he's three years old and more than capable of walking? Is that why I caught her watching Blue like her heart was broken?”

“That's not Blue's fault.”

“What is she going to do with her baby?” Joanna queried. “Where is the father?”

“I'm sure she plans to keep it. The father doesn't seem to be in the picture, not that it's any of my business, or any of your business, Mum.”

“It's just unseemly, Darcy. You'd think she would be a little embarrassed to accompany you here in her condition.” I felt her disapproval skewer me from my head to my red toenails. I wondered why she was taking my presence so personally. I hadn't known Tiffa wanted children or was unable to have them. I wondered now if it really *was* hard for her to have me around. The thought made my chest ache. I liked and admired Tiffa Snook. She was one of the nicest and most genuine people I had ever met. I wondered if it was an act, or if she felt the same way her mother did.

I slipped into the bathroom to avoid hearing more, knowing it would only make me feel worse. I had enough money to catch a cab, and although it was probably cowardly, I wasn't going back up on that roof or anywhere near Joanna Wilson, or any of the Wilson's for that matter.

I hadn't asked to come. I hadn't hung on Wilson or pretended a relationship or a status that didn't exist. I hadn't acted “unseemly,” whatever that meant. I used the bathroom and washed my hands, squaring my shoulders as I opened the door. Joanna Wilson stepped through the archway as I exited, and a flash of chagrin crossed her face before she continued up the stairs to the roof.

I stood in the foyer, frozen with indecision. I was tempted to leave and just shoot Wilson a text and tell him I was tired and didn't want to stay any longer. But my phone was in my purse, and my purse was still on the roof sitting next to the deck chair I had been parked in most of the evening.

“Blue!” Tiffa was descending the stairs with a sleeping Henry in her arms. “Have we worn you out, duck? You aren't the only one.” Henry was still in his swim trunks, and his head was a tousled mop of red, resting on her shoulder. She stroked it absentmindedly.

“I thought I would put Henry to bed. I think he's done for the night. Gavin and Aiden are still awake, although Aiden's starting to whinge and rub his eyes. I don't think it will be long before he's unconscious, too.”

“I'm a little tired, I guess,” I took the excuse she offered. “I thought I'd get my purse and maybe catch a cab so Wilson doesn't have to leave yet.”

“Darcy won't want that. Plus, I think he's keen to get home. He was looking for you.” Tiffa moved through the archway toward a section of the apartment I hadn't yet seen. She called over her shoulder. “Come with me while I lay Henry down. I didn't get to visit with you today. Your pieces are selling so well we need to start strategizing about establishing a bigger presence – more pieces, larger pieces.” Tiffa talked as she walked, and I

followed her obediently, postponing my departure.

Tiffa laid the little boy down, and he sprawled across the bed, dead to the world. He was completely limp as Tiffa removed his swim trunks. When she sat him up to put on his pajama top he bobbed and swayed, drunk with sleep. We both laughed, and Tiffa guided him back against the pillows, kissed him, and pulled a light blanket over his small form.

“Good night, sweet boy,” she whispered as she looked down at him.

I felt like an intruder, a peeping Tom, watching her as she gazed at him.

“Tiffa?”

“Hmm?”

“I'm pregnant. Did you know that?”

“Yes, Blue. I know,” she said gently.

“Did Wilson tell you?”

“He told me when you moved into the little downstairs flat.” The light in the room was dim, and we both spoke in hushed tones in order to not disturb Henry, but neither of us moved, a silent acknowledgement that the conversation had taken an intimate turn.

“I overheard your mother and Wilson talking,” I said softly.

Tiffa tipped her head curiously, waiting.

“Your mother was upset.”

“Oh, no,” Tiffa moaned quietly, her shoulders slumping. “What did she say?”

“She told Wilson he shouldn't have brought me here. That it was hard for you.” I wanted to apologize, but my lingering anger at Joanna Wilson kept me silent. I hadn't tried to hurt anyone.

“Oh, Mum. She can be such a nitwit . . . and an old-fashioned one at that. I see now why Wilson was keen to leave. She probably gutted the poor boy.” Tiffa reached out and clasped my hand.

“I'm sorry, Blue. Although I desperately wish I had a baby bump just like yours, you are welcome in my home, with my brother, any time.”

“Have you been trying to get pregnant?” I asked, hoping I wasn't getting too personal.

“Jack and I have never used birth control, and we enjoy each other immensely, if you know what I mean. I thought I would have several little Jackie's biting at our ankles by now.” Tiffa paused and looked at Henry again. “A few years ago, Jack and I saw a specialist. He said our chances are

slim to none . . . and they favor none. But I'm an optimist, and I keep telling myself it could still happen. I'm only thirty-two. My mum had a difficult time getting pregnant, and she still managed it a couple of times.”

“Have you ever thought of adoption?” The words tumbled out of my mouth, and my heart began to race. I knew what I was going to say next, and it terrified me even as I felt the surety of my sudden inspiration settle upon me.

Tiffa must have sensed my heightened emotion because she turned toward me, a quizzical look in her blue eyes.

“Yes,” she answered slowly, drawing out the word as her eyes searched my face. All the nights, laying awake, considering options, battling insecurities, weighing choices, seemed to coalesce in this one moment. I stared back, anxious to communicate. Needing her to understand.

“My mother abandoned me when I was two years old.” The words tumbled out with the force of Niagara, and the little boy in the bed tossed, though I hadn't raised my voice. “I want my child to have a different life than I had. I want her . . . or him, to be anticipated, celebrated . . . ch-cherished,” I stuttered, stopping to press my hands to my galloping heart. I was going to say it. I was going to make Tiffa Snook an offer that shook me to my core. She had pressed her hands to her own heart, and her eyes were as wide as twin moons.

“I would like you and Jack to adopt my baby.”

Chapter Seventeen

Dodger

Wilson was quiet as we drove back to Boulder City, and I was too preoccupied to confess that I had overheard his conversation with his mother. I was too dizzy with hope to care that he'd dismissed me as a whim, nothing more. I had arrived at Tiffa's that Fourth of July expecting nothing but fireworks, hotdogs, and a long swim. I had left with a possible family for my unborn child. And though my head swam and my thoughts raced frantically, I felt a rightness that resonated within me through that first long night and into the days that followed.

Tiffa and I agreed that we should both sleep on the decision and say nothing to anyone until after she had spoken to Jack and consulted a lawyer. Neither of us had any idea what legal steps needed to be taken, but Tiffa thought she could get some answers from Jack's brother, who was an attorney. Her hands shook as she embraced me and her eyes were wide with wonder, most likely at the turn her life had suddenly taken. The hope in her eyes must have mirrored my own, and though she begged me to think seriously about my choice over the coming days, I knew I wouldn't change my mind.

Tiffa, Jack, and I met with Jack's brother, who took us through the process. It wasn't terribly complicated: Jack and Tiffa would pay my medical costs, which I would need to reimburse if I changed my mind within a certain window of time. And, of course, the father would have to be notified, and he would have to sign away his rights. The thought made my stomach cramp with dread. It wasn't that I thought Mason would want to be a daddy and raise the child. But he was territorial, and I could see him making trouble just for the sake of troublemaking.

And then Tiffa told her family. Tiffa's mother, Alice, Peter, and the kids were flying back to Manchester in the morning, so Tiffa invited Wilson to dinner so she could break the news while they were all still together. She invited me as well, but I refused, grateful that my scheduled shift at the cafe gave me an excuse to stay away. Awkward didn't begin to describe the

situation. And I really didn't want to talk adoption over tea and crumpets with Joanna Wilson. I wondered if the awkwardness would extend to my relationship with Wilson, and I spent a tense evening at work, dropping dishes and providing lousy service. It was nine o'clock when I finally clocked out and walked home, tired and strung out from juggling orders and nervous energy. Wilson was sitting on the front steps of Pemberley when I trudged up the sidewalk.

I sat down beside him and tried to rest my tired head on my knees, which I had done a thousand times before, but my burgeoning stomach made it impossible. In the last week it had grown so much it was constantly surprising me and getting in the way, and disguising it had gotten increasingly difficult. So I just sat with my hands in my lap and stared out into the darkened street, reminded of the time, several months ago, when I had been so lost and had shown up at Wilson's announced, looking for direction. We had sat just this way, our eyes facing outward, our legs almost touching, quiet and contemplative.

"Tiffa and Jack might be the happiest people on the planet right now," Wilson murmured, looking down at me briefly. "My mother is not far behind, though. She was singing a stirring rendition of "God Save the King" when I left."

"God Save the King?" I sputtered, surprised.

"It's the only song she knows all the words to . . . and she apparently felt like singing."

I giggled and we lapsed back into silence.

"Are you sure about all of this, Blue?"

"No," I laughed ruefully. "I've decided being sure is a luxury I won't ever be able to afford. But I'm as sure as a twenty-year-old waitress could ever be. And the fact that Tiffa and Jack are so happy makes me almost positive."

"Lots of women, younger than you, and with a lot less talent, raise children alone every day."

"And some of them probably do a damn good job, too," I admitted, trying not to let his comments bother me." Some of them don't. "My eyes met Wilson's defiantly, and I waited, wondering if he would press me further. He searched my expression and then looked away. I wanted him to understand, and I desperately needed his validation, so I turned to the one thing I knew he would grasp.

“There was a poem you quoted to me once, by Edgar Allan Poe. Do you remember?” I'd memorized it after that night. Maybe it was to feel closer to him, to know something he knew, to share something he loved, but the words had spoken to me on a very primal level, haunted me even. It was my life, boiled down to a few rhyming lines.

Wilson began to quote the beginning lines, a question in his expression. As he did, I spoke the words with him, reciting them. His eyebrows rose at each word, and I could tell I had surprised him by my mastery.

“From childhood's hour I have not been
As others were; I have not seen
As others saw; I could not bring
My passions from a common spring.
From the same source I have not taken
My sorrow; I could not awaken
My heart to joy at the same tone.”

Wilson stopped, staring down at me in the dusky light that spilled around our concrete perch.

“It's the next part I can't ever get out of my head,” I ventured, holding his gaze. “Do you know what comes next?”

Wilson nodded, but he didn't quote the lines. He just waited for me to continue. So I spoke them, delivering each line the way I interpreted it.

“And all I loved, I loved alone.
Then – in my childhood, in the dawn
of a most stormy life – was drawn
from every depth of good and ill,
the mystery which binds me still.”

There was more, but it was this line that resonated, and I gathered my thoughts, wanting to be understood.

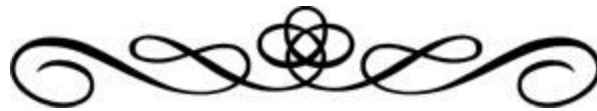
“The mystery of my life binds me still, Wilson. You told me once we can't help where we are scattered. We are born in whatever circumstances we are born into, and none of us has any control over it. But I can make sure this baby isn't scattered like I was. I have nothing to give but myself, and if

something were to happen to me, my baby would have no one left. I can't guarantee this child a happy life, but I can make sure she doesn't love alone. I want to layer her in love. Mother and father and grandparents and aunts and uncles and cousins. I want her to have family surrounding her so there is no mystery and no fear of being alone or abandoned . . . or scattered."

Wilson nodded again, but his face was troubled and his grey eyes morose. He leaned in and kissed my forehead, and I smelled peppermints and aftershave and had to steel myself against the desire to breathe deeply, to pull his scent around me like a warm blanket. I sensed his unrest, as if he disagreed with everything I had said but didn't want to hurt my feelings. I wondered if it was the fact that he would be an uncle to my child, to Tiffa's child. He would be one of the layers of love I was so painstakingly constructing.

"So what's next, Blue? Where do we go from here?" I didn't know what he referred to exactly, so I took him literally.

"Tomorrow I have to tell Mason."



"Well look who's here. Couldn't stay away, could ya?" Mason crooned, looking down at me from his open door. He was silhouetted in the light from his little apartment over the garage. I had called him, telling him I was outside and needed to talk to him. He snapped his phone shut and began walking down the stairs, his swagger pronounced. He obviously thought I wanted to do something more than talk. I held my purse in front of me, not wanting him to get an eyefull until I was ready. I heard a door slam. Wilson rounded the corner. So much for him staying in the car.

"Where the hell have you been, Blue?" Mason reached the bottom of the stairs at the same time Wilson reached my side. Mason's eyes strayed to Wilson and a dark look passed over his features. "Thought you'd trade me in for this uppity pansy?"

"I'm pregnant, Mason. It's yours," I shot out, not wanting to make small talk. I needed this over and done as soon as possible. I moved my purse to the

side so he could get a good look at my stomach.

Mason's eyes shot to my belly and back to my face. I wasn't obviously pregnant if I wore the right clothing. I'd made sure to wear a fitted T-shirt with slim white capris so there was no doubt.

"Oh, that's rich!" Mason howled, running his hands through his hair, and I immediately felt bad for him. I didn't blame him for being outraged. It was a major sucker punch, and I knew exactly how he felt; I'd felt the same way several months ago. He pointed at me, his finger only inches from my face.

"You show up here after almost six months, and lay this on me? No way. Uh uh! I'm not buying it."

"Not buying what, Mason?" I challenged. I tempered my sympathy with the need to accomplish what I'd come for.

"How do I know the kid is even mine, Blue? I sure as hell wasn't your first, and I definitely wasn't your last. If I recall, Adam here was in the picture around that time, too." Mason eyed Wilson sourly. Wilson just shook his head and crossed his arms. The Adam thing just wouldn't go away. It did no good to try to deny or explain anything.

I shrugged, not arguing. It was better if Mason doubted me. He would make less of a fuss. I handed him the summons Jack's brother had prepared.

"I didn't come here to make trouble, Mason. I didn't come here to fight. I want to give the baby up for adoption. This explains termination of rights. You need to show up at court on this date, sign on the dotted line, and you're done. You never have to see me or my big belly again."

Mason glanced at the paperwork and for a minute I thought he would rip it in two.

"I gotta work. I can't make it." He scowled, tossing the paper aside. It fluttered to the ground, and we all stared at it, waiting for someone to make a move. After a second, I stooped to pick it up.

"I understand," I said, sweetness dripping from my voice. "You're definitely gonna want to hold onto that job. Because if this adoption doesn't work out, I'm going to file a paternity suit and sue for child support." I kept my face blank and my eyes innocently wide.

Mason swore, and Wilson bit back a grin. He gave me a thumbs up under his folded arms. His grin faded when Mason proceeded to call me an F-ing whore.

"Watch yourself, chap," he bit out, and Mason eyed him warily, most

likely recalling the kung fu from their last meeting.

“You aren't getting a damn dime from me, Blue.”

“Show up on Thursday, and I never will,” I pressed the paper against his chest, holding it there until he reached up and grabbed it, wrinkling it in his fist. “See you, Thursday.”

I turned and walked away, not glancing back to see if Mason watched or Wilson followed. I slid into the passenger seat of Wilson's Subaru and fumbled for my seatbelt, needing to feel secure, needing to reassure myself that I was safe. Safe from Mason's anger? From his palpable sense of betrayal? Maybe. I just knew I felt scared and inexplicably sad. Wilson climbed in beside me and started the car. My hands shook so badly that the clasp slipped and ricocheted back against the window, smacking the glass with a sickening crack. Wilson leaned over and pulled the seat belt across me and clicked it without comment, but I felt his eyes on my face as he pulled away from the curb.

“You're shaking. Are you all right?”

I nodded, trying to swallow the shame that filled my mouth and made speaking difficult.

I could feel Wilson's eyes on me, studying my profile, trying to peel back my mask. I wished he would just let it go.

“Do you love him?” The sympathetic query was so unexpected that I laughed, a harsh bark that held little resemblance to mirth.

“No!” That was easy. “I'm embarrassed and I'm ashamed. Love has nothing to do with it. It never did.”

“Does it make it easier . . . not loving him?”

I pondered that for a moment and then nodded. “Yeah. It does. I'm just glad he didn't offer to make an honest woman of me.”

Wilson smiled wryly. “Yes . . . there is that.” He turned up the radio and The Killers streamed out into the Vegas night, “Miss Atomic Bomb” making the dashboard vibrate. I thought the conversation was over when Wilson reached up and punched the knob, silencing the music.

“What if he had?”

“Had what? Asked me to marry him? Get real, Wilson.”

“Would you want to keep your baby then?”

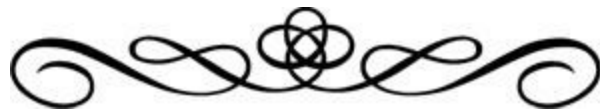
“And we could be a happy little family?” I squeaked, incredulous. “It's bad enough that this baby has our combined DNA. It doesn't deserve to be raised

by us, too.

“Ahh, Blue. You wouldn't be a bad mother.”

“I wonder if that's what someone told my mother when she found out she was pregnant with me.”

Wilson swung his head around, surprise evident on his handsome face. I shrugged, pretending nonchalance. I didn't know if I would be a bad mother. I didn't know if I would be a good mother. But I knew I wouldn't be as good a mother as Tiffa Snook, not yet anyway. And that was the bottom line.



Thursday came. I had slept poorly all week, worried that Mason would show up with his parents in tow and that they would sue for custody of my unborn child. If that happened, I would be keeping my baby. Giving her up to Tiffa and Jack was one thing. Giving her to Mason and his parents was another. But Mason was unaccompanied in the courtroom when I arrived Thursday morning. He was an adult and didn't need permission for what he was about to do. I wondered if he had even told his parents. He wore a tie and a shell-shocked expression, and I felt bad all over again.

When the judge questioned him, making sure he understood his rights as well as the rights he was terminating, he nodded and then looked at me. I didn't sense anger anymore. He just seemed stunned. With a notary looking on, he signed the documents, and Tiffa and Jack hugged each other tightly as if they too had been terrified of a derailment. I felt faint with relief and struggled to hold back a sudden flood of emotion. As soon as the proceedings were over, I found Mason. I owed him that much.

“Thank you, Mason,” I said quietly, extending my hand.

Mason slowly took my outstretched hand in his. “Why didn't you tell me sooner, Blue? I know we were never serious, but I . . . I wanted to be.”

It was my turn for shock. “You did?” I never thought Mason liked anything about me but the sex. It occurred to me then that my low opinion of myself may have blinded me to his true feelings.

“I know I can be an asshole. I drink too much, I say things I shouldn't, and

I get mad too easy. But you could have told me.”

“I should have,” I acquiesced. We stood awkwardly, looking everywhere but at each other.

“It's better this way, Mason,” I suggested softly. He looked at me then and nodded.

“Yeah. I know. But maybe someday you'll give me another chance.”

No. I wouldn't. Mason was part of a past I didn't want to repeat. But I nodded noncommittally, grateful that there was peace between us.

“Take care of yourself, Blue.”

“You too, Mason.” I turned and made my way to the door. Mason called out behind me, and his voice seemed awfully loud in the almost empty courtroom.

“I never pictured you with a guy like Adam.”

I turned and shrugged. “Neither did I, Mason. Maybe that's part of my problem.”

Chapter Eighteen

Noon

“Why is your recliner in the middle of the floor?”

“I like to sit under the vent.”

“Are you cold? Don't be shy about turning up the thermostat. This little space isn't exactly expensive to heat.”

“Wilson. It's August in Nevada. I'm not cold.”

“So . . . why is the recliner in the middle of the floor?” Wilson insisted.

“I like hearing you play at night,” I admitted easily, much to my surprise. I hadn't planned to tell him. “The sound travels through the vent.

“You like to hear me play?” Wilson sounded shocked.

“Sure,” I said easily, shrugging as if it was no big deal. “It's nice.” Nice was an understatement. “I just keep wishing you would play something by Willie,” I teased.

Wilson looked crestfallen. “Willie?”

“Yes, Willie,” I insisted, trying not to giggle. “Willie Nelson is one of the greatest songwriters of all time.”

“Huh,” Wilson said, scratching his head. “I guess I'm not that familiar with his . . . work.”

He looked so flummoxed that I couldn't help myself and burst out laughing. “Willie Nelson is a country singer – an old-timer. Jimmy loved him. Actually, Jimmy kind of looked like him, just with darker skin and less scruff. Jimmy had the braids and the bandana, though, and he had every album Willie had ever put out. We listened to those songs over and over.” I didn't really feel like laughing anymore and abruptly changed the subject.

“There's one song you play that I especially like,” I ventured.

“Really? Hum a bit.”

“I can't hum, sing, dance, or recite poetry, Wilson.”

“Just a bit, so I know which tune you like.”

I cleared my throat, scrunched my eyes closed, and tried to think of the tune. It was there in my head, like a cool stream of water. Beautiful. I attempted a couple of notes, and gaining confidence, hummed a few more,

still with my eyes closed. I felt quite pleased with myself and opened one eye to see how my humming had been received.

Wilson's face was bright red, and he was shaking with laughter. "I don't have a clue what song you're humming, luv. Maybe you should hum a few more bars until I have it."

"You . . . jerk!" I fumed, slapping at him as he laughed harder. "I told you I couldn't sing! Stop it!"

"No . . . really, it was brilliant!" he wheezed, warding me off. I gave up with a huff and started dragging my recliner from the middle of the floor, indicating I wouldn't be listening anymore, now that he'd gone and embarrassed me.

"Come on, I'm sorry. Here. I'll hum now so you can poke fun at me." He pulled the chair back directly under the vent. "Sit right here and put your feet up." He pushed me down gently into the chair, and lifted my feet so they were propped on the recliner's footrest. "Even better, I'll run up and get my cello, and I'll bring it down and I'll play for you."

"Not interested," I lied. The thought of him playing his cello for me made me feel slightly breathless and lightheaded. Thankfully, he just laughed and jogged out of my apartment. I could hear him flying up the stairs and his door bang above me. In minutes he was back, carrying the huge cello case. He snagged one of my armless kitchen chairs, sat down in front of me, and pulled out his shiny black cello. He proceeded to tune and tighten his strings as I watched, trying to hide my anticipation.

"Perfect." Apparently satisfied, he began to run his bow over the strings, finding a melody. His eyes met mine. "When you hear it, tell me."

"Why don't you just play . . . the way you do when you're alone. I'll just listen." I gave up any pretense of not being interested.

"You want me to practice?" He stopped playing abruptly.

"Yeah. Just do what you do every night."

"I practice for at least an hour most nights." It was spoken like a challenge, and I responded immediately.

"I know." And I did, very well. "But tell me the names as you go, so that when I hear you practice from now on, I will know what you're playing. It will be educational," I added, knowing it would make him laugh. It did. "I'm all about education, ya know."

"Yes, quite. The girl who couldn't wait to come to my class each day, so

eager to listen and to learn.”

If he only knew. But he just grinned at me and lifted his hands to play once more. He needed a haircut again. A chestnut curl slid into his eyes, and he impatiently pushed it back. He tipped his head to the side as if the cello he held was a lover, whispering a secret. His wand slid across the strings, and he launched into a melody. The sound was so sweet and sensuous – the low, trembling tones blending into one another – that I almost sighed out loud. The music filled the room and pushed against my heart, demanding entrance.

“Do you know this?” he asked as he played.

“Mary Had a Little Lamb?”

“Ever the cheeky one, aren't you?” he sighed, but a smile hovered around his lips and his eyelids drooped closed as he continued to play. I watched him, the length of his lashes against his cheek, the lean jaw emphasized by the slight shadow of a day's beard. His face was serene, lost in the music that he was creating. And I marveled that he had become my friend. I wondered if there were other men like him. Men who loved history and carried handkerchiefs and opened doors for girls . . . even girls like me. I didn't know anyone like him. I wondered again about Pamela and whether he was in love with her.

“This is Brahms.” His eyes blinked open, refocusing on my face. I nodded, and he sank back into reverie. One song bled into another, and I let my own eyes close as I listened. I felt heavy with peace and well-being, and I curled more deeply into the chair.

And then I felt a thump. Oomph! I looked down in wonder, puzzled at the nudging against my abdomen. The sensation came again and I gasped,

“Wilson! Wilson come here! The baby . . . is . . . dancing!”

Wilson was at my side, kneeling almost before the words had left my mouth. He reached for me, and I pressed his hand to my belly, guiding it toward the movement. I had felt the baby move many times, but not like this.

“There! There! Feel that?” Wilson's eyes were as wide as saucers. We both held our breath and waited. A nudge and then a kick.

“Ouch!” I laughed, “You had to have felt that!” Wilson moved his other hand to cup my stomach more firmly, and he settled his cheek against me, listening. For several seconds his head was cradled against me, dark curls bent over me, and I resisted the urge to run my hand through his hair. The baby was still, yet Wilson seemed reluctant to pull away.

“It was the music,” I whispered, hoping to keep him close, just for a minute more. “You were playing the song we like.”

Wilson looked up at me, and our faces were so close it would have been so easy to lean into him. So easy . . . and completely impossible. He looked surprised by my nearness and immediately pulled away.

“That was the song?” A smile lit his face.

“Yes. What was it?” I asked

“Bob Dylan.”

“What?!” I wailed. “I thought it was going to be Beethoven or something. Now I know I'm white trash.”

Wilson bopped me on the head with his bow. “It's called 'Make You Feel my Love.' It's one of my favorite songs. I embellish it a bit, but it's all Dylan, definitely not Mozart. The lyrics are brilliant. Listen.” Wilson sang softly as he played. His voice was as rich as the moaning cello .

“Of course,” I said sourly.

“What?” Wilson stopped, startled.

“You can sing. You have a beautiful voice. I can't even pretend that you suck. Why can't you suck at something? It's so unfair.”

“You clearly haven't seen me try to carve something intricate and beautiful out of a tree stump,” Wilson said dryly, and started playing again. I resumed listening, but the music made my fingers itch to carve.

“If you would practice in the basement every night, I could listen to you while I carve. Then, I would make sculptures that looked like your music sounds. We could make millions together. You would be my muse, Wilson. Can men be muses?”

Wilson smiled, but his eyes again wore that unfocused look, as if his power to see was absorbed by his need to hear. I closed my eyes too, letting myself drift away in a sea of sound. I awoke hours later to silence. My apple green throw was tucked around me, and Wilson and his magic cello were gone.



Since moving to Pemberley, I'd gotten into the habit of walking to work. It

saved me money on gas and provided a little exercise, though as I neared the end of my eighth month, the heat, even in mid October, was almost enough to make me drive. But I never drove on Mondays. That was the night Wilson walked down and ate at the cafe. When my shift ended, I always joined him, and we would walk home together.

Once, just in passing, I'd told him how I used to bring Manny and Gracie dinner on Monday nights so Mondays were always a little melancholy for me. After that, Wilson started showing up at the cafe on Monday nights. I tried not to read anything into his actions. He was nice to me, kind and considerate, and I told myself that was just who he was. I never questioned the time he spent with me, never commented on it, never drew attention to it. I worried that if I did he might stop.

My shift usually ended at seven, and Wilson walked in that Monday at seven on the dot. He still wore slacks and a light blue dress shirt, rolled at the elbows. It was his standard school attire. Bev winked at him and gave me the go ahead to clock out. I joined him for a sandwich and a glass of lemonade, sighing as I wiggled my toes and rolled my stiff shoulders.

Bev made sure she served Wilson his standard tomato-and-grilled-cheese-with-french-fries personally, though Bev always called them chips, as if to make Wilson feel right at home. He thanked her and said everything looked absolutely "scrummy." She giggled just like Chrissy used to do in history class. It was all I could do not to laugh right out loud.

"I think Bev has a crush on you, Wilson. I know you're probably used to that by now. Don't you have a fan club at school? The 'I Heart Wilson' club, or something?"

"Ha, ha, Blue. I have never been all that popular with the girls."

"Wilson. Don't be an idiot. You were all Manny could talk about the whole first month of school."

"Manny is not a girl," Wilson remarked mildly.

I snickered. "True. But I think I was the only one who wasn't following you around with my tongue hanging out. It was disgusting. Now even Bev has joined the club. I saw a bumper sticker on her car that said British Butts Drive Me Nuts."

Wilson choked on a mouthful of food, laughing, and grabbed at his lemonade to wash it down. I loved making him laugh, even if it was hazardous to his health.

Wilson recovered and shook his head, denying my claim that he was popular with the ladies. “I was always the orchestra nerd – whatever you Americans call them..band geeks? I got along better with my teachers than my classmates. I was the skinny kid with glasses and big feet who knew all the answers *in* class and who volunteered to clean the whiteboards *after* class.”

“Kids actually do that?” I interrupted incredulously.

Wilson just rolled his eyes at me and continued. “I was not a chick magnet at all, especially with girls like you . . . so the fact that you weren't all that impressed with me last year, well, that much hasn't changed. And that was always fine with me. Girls were never high on my list of priorities. Don't misunderstand, I *noticed* girls like you, but I didn't especially *like* girls like you. And girls like you never noticed guys like me.”

“What? Mean skanks, you mean?” I said this mildly, pretending I was kidding. I wasn't. His words stung, but “girls like me” knew how to roll with the punches.

“No, Blue.” He shook his head in exasperation. “That's not what I meant. Beautiful girls, hard girls, girls who grew up way too fast and who would chew up chaps like me up and spit them back out.”

“Yeah. Like I said. Mean skanks.” I pushed my plate away and slurped my drink loudly, indicating it was all gone. I stood up, communicating the end of our conversation and the end to our “cozy meal.” Wilson just stared up at me, and I could tell I'd made him angry. Too bad. I smiled at him slowly, sarcastically, showing lots of teeth. What had been a lighthearted conversation had suddenly take on a different tone. He ran his hands through his hair and pushed his plate away as well. He tossed a couple bills on the table and stood. He walked toward the register, away from me, dismissing me. He paid for both of our meals and left the cafe. I waved at Beverly, who blew me a little kiss.

“See ya in the morning, Blue. Tell Wilson I said cheerio.”

Wilson was waiting for me outside, his hands shoved in his pockets and his face raised toward the sunset. One of my favorite things about the desert were the sunsets. The sky above the low-lying western hills cast pink and purple ripples up into the descending night sky. Maybe it was because there was nothing to obscure the view – Las Vegas sat down in the valley, and Boulder City sat higher, to the southeast, around the bend of the eastern hills – but the

sunsets never failed to move me and remind me of times with Jimmy when I wasn't so hard, when I hadn't had to grow up so fast. Wilson didn't speak as I approached, and we began to walk in silence. My increasing size forced me to waddle, but Wilson adjusted his stride as we made our way toward home.

“Why do you do that?” Wilson bit out eventually. I knew he'd been working up a good mad.

“Do what?”

“Assume the worst. Put words in my mouth, call yourself names, all of it. Why?”

I thought for a minute, wondering how I could possibly make someone like Wilson understand how I felt to be a “girl like me.”

“The first time I had sex I was fourteen, Wilson. I didn't necessarily want it, but there you go. He was an older boy, and I liked his attention. He was nineteen, and I was easy pickings.” I shrugged. “I've had sex many times since then. Some people might say that makes me a slut, and the fact that I make no apologies for it might qualify me as a bitch. Calling myself a mean skank is mild, if you look at it that way. I'm not proud of it – and I'm trying to change it – but it's the truth, and I'm not really interested in making excuses for myself.”

Wilson had stopped walking and was staring at me. “Fourteen?! That's not sex. It's statutory rape, Blue.”

“Yeah, Wilson. In many ways, it was.”

“Bugger!” Wilson whispered, incredulous. “I don't bloody believe this!” Then he yelled, “Bugger!” again, this time so loudly that some people crossing the street stopped and stared. A woman was driving by in her car with her window down as he yelled, and she frowned at us. The poor woman thought Wilson was yelling at her.

“Let me guess, nothing happened to him? Right?” Wilson turned on me as if it were me he was angry with. I knew it wasn't. In fact, Wilson's anger was incredibly validating. I found that telling him did not upset me and, for the first time, remembering didn't make my insides quake.

“What do you mean? Of course not. I told Cheryl, she made sure I was on the pill, and I . . . got over it.”

“Aaargh!” Wilson yelled again, kicking at a rock and sending it flying. He mumbled and swore and seemed incapable of rational speech, so I walked along beside him, waiting him out. After a couple of blocks, he reached out

and took my hand in his. I had never held a boy's hand while walking beside him. Wilson's hand was much bigger than mine, and it engulfed mine, making me feel delicate and cherished. It was incredibly . . . sexy. If I hadn't been hugely pregnant, if I hadn't just confessed my ugly past, I might have made a move on Wilson right then. I might have taken his wonderful face in my hands and kissed him until we were both wrapped around each other in the middle of the sidewalk.

I laughed silently at myself and pushed the thought away. I was pretty sure Wilson would run screaming for the hills if I ever made a move on him. That wasn't the nature of our relationship. It definitely wasn't the nature of his feelings for me. Plus, with my belly sticking out the way it did, getting close might be impossible. We walked until the sunset faded and dusk dimmed our view. The streetlights began to flicker on as we neared Pemberley.

"Make a wish!" I cried, pulling on Wilson's hand. "Quick! Before all the lights come on!" In the Vegas area, the night sky always had an orange cast. Neon and night life combined to make star-gazing almost impossible. So I had created my own variation of wishing on stars. I wished on streetlights instead.

I squeezed my eyes shut and clung to Wilson's hand, encouraging him to do the same. I mentally ran through a litany of wishes, some of them the same wishes I always made – riches, fame, never having to shave my legs again – but there were new ones, too. I snapped my eyes open to see if I'd gotten them in before the last streetlight flickered on. The last one buzzed and glimmered as I watched.

"Boo-yah!" I hip bumped Wilson. "Those wishes are definitely coming true."

"I can't keep up, Blue." Wilson said softly. "I'm always reeling with you. Just when I think I know all there is to know, you reveal something that absolutely guts me. I don't know how you've survived, Echohawk. I really don't. The fact that you're still making jokes and wishing on streetlights is a bit of a miracle." Wilson reached out as if to touch my face, but let his hand fall at the last second. "Remember that time in class when I asked you why you were so angry?"

I remembered. I'd been such a brat. I nodded.

"I thought I had you all figured out, thought you needed to be brought down a peg. And then I found out why you were having such a struggle with

writing your personal history. I felt like a complete tosser.”

I laughed and did a fist pump with my free hand. “That was the goal, Wilson. Make the teacher feel sorry for you. It really helps the grade.”

Wilson just gazed down at me, and I could tell he wasn't buying it. He started climbing the steps to the house, letting go of my hand as he felt for his keys.

“For the record, Blue, I don't think you're a mean skank,” Wilson said soberly, and I almost laughed at the way those words sounded coming out of his mouth. “I'll admit, when you walked into my class that first day, I thought that's exactly what you were. But you surprised me. There's a whole lot more to you than meets the eye.”

“There's a whole lot more to most people than meets the eye, Wilson. Unfortunately, a lot of times it isn't good stuff. It's scary stuff, painful stuff. By now, you know so much scary, painful stuff about me, it's a wonder you're still around. You had me pegged pretty well right from the start, I'd say. You're wrong about one thing, though. Girls like me notice guys like you. We just don't think we deserve them.”

Wilson immediately dropped his keys. I groaned inwardly and wished I had kept my big mouth shut. He leaned down and retrieved the keys and after several attempts, he unlocked the entry door and pushed it open. He waited until I entered and then followed me in, shutting the door behind us. Always the gentleman, he stopped outside my apartment. He seemed to be searching for the right words, and for once I didn't tease him or try to be funny. I just waited, feeling a little despondent that he knew my darkest secrets and seemed to be struggling with them.

He found his voice at last, and he trained his melancholy eyes on a spot beyond me, as if he was reluctant to meet my gaze.

“I keep wishing you had had a better life . . . a different life. But a different life would have made you a different Blue.” He looked at me then. “And that would be the biggest tragedy of all.” With a little quirk of a smile he raised my hand to his lips – Mr. Darcy to the very end – and then he turned and walked up the stairs.

That night I sat in the dark, waiting for Wilson to play. But there were no strings to tie me up in silken knots. I wondered if Pamela, the pretty blonde with pearly skin and perfect teeth, was with him. Maybe that's why there was no music. I supposed I should be grateful that there weren't moans and

professions of love coming through the duct work. I winced at the thought and the baby kicked, causing me to catch my breath and lift my shirt so I could watch my stomach. It was so alien . . . and so cool. My stomach rolled, lifting and lowering like an ocean wave.

“No tunes yet, sugar. Wilson's holding out on us. I would sing, but I promise that's worse than no music. My stomach rolled again, and I eased myself into a different position, trying to get comfortable, trying to appreciate the discomfort. It wouldn't be long. Moments like these were trickling away. I felt them sliding away into yesterdays, and the yesterdays were stacking up. Eventually, this moment would join the others. The final tomorrow would come, and my baby would be born. And I would just be Blue again.

I was tired, and my eyes grew heavy. Somewhere between wakefulness and sleep, a memory shimmered to the surface, and I watched it like a dream, playing out like an old rerun on the T.V.

“Jimmy, how about we find a new mom?” I had pulled myself up into a tree with low hanging branches and climbed out until I lay on the branch above Jimmy. His hands slid along the gnarled hunk of juniper he was striping of bark.

“Why?” Jimmy answered after several seconds.

“Don't you wish we had a mommy?” I asked, enjoying the scenery from above. It gave me an interesting view of Jimmy's greying head. I dropped a pine cone on him, and it bounced off his head harmlessly. He didn't even swat at it.

“I had a mommy,” he grunted.

“But I don't! And I want one!” Two more pine cones hit their target.

“Put an apron on Icas.” Jimmy picked up his hat and put it on, his answer to the barrage of pine cones.

“Icas smells and has slobbery kisses. Mommies don't have dog breath.” I looped my knee over the branch and swung from one arm and one leg. Reaching down, I swooped Jimmy's hat from his head. “Maybe Bev could be our new mom. She likes you and she likes me, and she makes really good cheese sandwiches.” I put Jimmy's hat on my own head and dropped to the ground, not really minding the pins and needles sensation in my feet when I hit the dirt.

“I guess I like things the way they are, Blue.”

“Yeah. I guess.” I picked up a smaller piece of juniper, a mallet, and a chisel and started stripping the bark, mimicking the steady movements of my father.

“Maybe we could just adopt a baby,” I suggested.

Jimmy's chisel bit deeply into the wood and he cursed under his breath . . . something about hell freezing over.

“I would be a good mommy, I think,” I said seriously, ticking off my accomplishments. “I would share my bed with her. I could teach her to crawl. I obviously know how to walk, so that wouldn't be a problem. You would have to change the diapers, though. Or maybe we could teach her to poo outside, like Icas.”

“Hmmm,” Jimmy sighed, tuning me out.

“I could be the mommy, you could be the grandpa. Would you like being a grandpa, Jimmy?”

Jimmy stopped chiseling, his hands falling to his sides. He looked at me soberly, and I wondered at the deep lines around his mouth that I hadn't really noticed before. Jimmy already sort of looked like a grandpa.

Strains of music found their way through the vent and I shook myself drowsily, the memory/dream still hanging in the air like a hint of perfume. I had grandparents somewhere. My mother must have had *some* family. And if not, what about my father's family? Had they even known about me? Had they looked for me?

I lay in the dark, listening as Wilson played the songs that I now had names for. I could identify many of them within the first few notes. Yet I could walk by my own grandfather – even my own father! – tomorrow and not recognize him. My baby shifted within me again. Someday my baby would want to know, no matter how deeply he or she was swathed in love and family. Someday he or she would need to know. And that meant I had to find out.

Chapter Nineteen

Slate

The precinct smelled like you would expect a precinct to smell. It smelled official. Coffee, cologne, a hint of bleach, and electronics . . . you know the smell. I didn't smell donuts, though. I guess the cops and donuts thing is just a bad stereotype. More labels.

I approached the front desk, manned by a enormous woman with a severe bun and a hint of a mustache. Her looks did not encourage secret spilling.

"Can I help you?" Her voice was a complete contrast to her appearance. It was sugary and kind, and reminded me of Betty White. I felt better almost immediately.

"I don't know if you can help me, but maybe you can direct me. I wondered if there is a policeman here with the last name of Bowles? I think he will remember me if he is. It involves a missing persons case he was in involved with about ten years ago."

"We do have a Detective Bowles. Would you like me to see if he is on the premises?"

Bowles wasn't a terribly uncommon name, and I knew there was a chance it wasn't the same guy, but I nodded anyway. It was a start.

"Could I have your name please?"

"Blue Echohawk." That would make it simple. If Detective Bowles didn't recognize my name, he wasn't the same officer I had known.

The woman who swallowed Betty White spoke sweetly into her headset, obviously trying to locate Detective Bowles. I looked away, taking in my surroundings. This building was much older than the police station they'd taken me to in 2001. That station had been in Las Vegas somewhere, and it had been brand new. It had smelled like paint and sawdust, which at the time had been very comforting. For me, the smell of sawdust was probably the equivalent of homemade chocolate chip cookies hot out of the oven.

"Blue Echohawk?" I turned as a muscular, middle-aged man approached. He was instantly familiar, and I resisted the urge to turn and run as my heart began to pound. Would I get in trouble for not coming forward with this

information sooner? Would Cheryl? A smile broke out across his face as surprise had him chuckling and reaching a hand out in greeting.

"I'll be damned. When all that stuff went down at the high school last January, I wanted to get in touch and say hello and let you know how proud I was of you, but thought maybe you would be overwhelmed with all the hype and media attention at the time."

"I thought I saw you that day. That's why I'm here. I figured you had to be working here in Boulder City now and – I know this is a little strange – I think you might be able to help me. I'm not in trouble!" I hurried to add, and he smiled again. He seemed genuinely pleased to see me.

"I knew there couldn't be two Blue Echohawks in the world, but I admit, I still pictured you at ten years old." He eyed my protruding stomach in surprise. "And you're going to be a mother soon, looks like!" My hand fluttered to my belly awkwardly. I nodded and reached for the hand he held toward me, shaking it firmly before I let it drop.

"Candy?" Detective Bowles directed his question to the helpful lady at the front desk. "Is room D available?"

Candy?? Oh, that poor woman. She needed a strong name to go with that strong upper lip.

Candy smiled and nodded, all the while speaking into her headset.

"Right this way." Detective Bowles began walking. "Can I just call you Blue?"

"Sure. What do I call you?"

"Detective . . . or Andy's fine, too."

He led me into a little room and pulled out a chair. I wondered if they used these rooms to question murderers and gang members. Strangely, I had felt a lot more nervous at Planned Parenthood.

"So talk to me. What brings you to me after all this time?" Detective Bowles crossed his bulging biceps over his chest and leaned back in his chair.

"My father's body was found three years after he disappeared. I don't know if you knew that. I was told by my social worker, and I don't know what happened on your end of things . . . what exactly the police did, if anything. I'm guessing it was documented and the case was closed at some point?" I didn't know if I was using the correct terminology. Like most people, I had watched a few cop shows. I felt a little silly trying to sound like I had any clue what I was talking about.

"I did know, actually. I'm sorry for your loss." Detective Bowles tipped his head, knowing there was more to come.

"My . . . aunt . . ." My voice trailed off. She wasn't my aunt, but for the sake of the story I needed to keep it simple but honest. I adjusted slightly. "Uh . . . the woman who took me in told me something at that time that I don't think the police ever knew. I didn't know . . . you see." I wasn't making any sense.

Detective Bowles just waited.

"I don't want to get her in trouble. She should have spoken up . . . but she had her reasons, I guess."

"Do you want a lawyer?" Detective Bowles asked softly. I looked at him in confusion.

"No . . . I don't think so. I didn't commit a crime. I was a kid. It never even occurred to me that I could go to the police with what she told me. And I'm hoping that this won't be about Cheryl Sheevers or anybody else. This is about me. I'm trying to find out who my mother was."

"If I remember right, nobody seemed to know who your mother was, correct?"

I nodded. "But after Jimmy Echohawk's body was found, Cheryl told me that he wasn't my father."

Detective Bowles was sitting up a little straighter. I definitely had his attention. "How did she know that?"

"She told me that Jimmy stopped for the night at a truckstop in Reno. He sat down in a big booth in the restaurant to have a bite to eat, and about twenty minutes into his meal a little girl sat up across from him. She had apparently been asleep on the far side of this big round booth, and he hadn't even seen her there. He offered the little girl his french fries. She didn't cry, but she was hungry and ate everything he gave her. He ended up sitting there with her, hoping someone would claim her." I looked up at Detective Bowles whose eyes had grown wide, jumping to the obvious conclusion.

"You would have to know Jimmy. He definitely walked to a different drum. He didn't live like other people lived, and he definitely didn't respond they way someone else would have responded. He was kind, but he was also reserved . . . and very . . . quiet and..and unassuming. I can just picture him, looking around, trying to figure out what in the world to do with this child, but not saying a word. I swear, he wouldn't have spoken up in an emergency

room if he had a hatchet in his head.”

Andy Moody nodded, listening, urging me on.

I paused, the memory poised at the edges of my mind . . . but hazy. I didn't really know if it was an actual memory, or if I had just pictured it so many times that it felt that way. “Anyway, eventually a woman came for the little girl. Jimmy thought maybe the little girl was lost and had climbed into the booth on her own. But from the way the woman acted, she had laid the little girl down in the booth on purpose, and let her sleep while she went off and played the slots.”

Detective Bowles shook his head in disbelief. “And this little girl was you.”

“Yes,” I said frankly. I proceeded to tell him what Cheryl had told me, about Jimmy's belief that my mother had followed him back to his trailer and about the faulty passenger side door. I told him how I'd been found the next morning, how Jimmy had recognized me, and how he hadn't known what to do. “A few days later, the cops showed up at the truckstop, showing a flyer with the woman's face on it, asking about a child. The owner of the truckstop, who had purchased some carvings from Jimmy and was fairly friendly with him, told him the woman had turned up dead at local hotel. The cops had come around because the woman was wearing a T-shirt with the truckstop logo on it. At that point, Jimmy moved on and took me with him.”

By this point, Detective Bowles was scribbling wildly, his eyes darting up from his paper to my face as I spoke.

“Bottom line, my mother abandoned me at a truckstop in Reno. She turned up dead in a motel in the area a few days later. With that information, I wondered if you could find out who she was.”

Detective Bowles stared at me, his jaw working, blinking rapidly. He didn't have a great poker face. “Do you know approximately when this would have been?”

“August. I always thought my birthday was August 2. But how would Jimmy have known when my birthday was? I think he just marked my birthday by the day my mother abandoned me. I can't be sure of that, but it's my best guess. Cheryl said she thought I was about two when this all went down. It would have to have been 1992 or 1993. Does that help?”

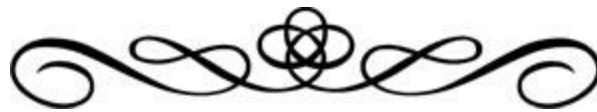
“Yeah. It does. August of '92 or '93. Hotel room. Missing child. T-shirt with a truckstop logo. What else can you give me? Anything at all?”

“She was young . . . maybe younger than I am now.” The thought had struck me often in the last few months. “She was Native American, like Jimmy. I think that might be one of the reasons she left me with him.” Maybe I was kidding myself. But it was something to hold onto.

“I’m gonna make some calls. This case was obviously never solved because they never found you, did they? Reno P.D. will have to hit the archives, do a little digging, might take a few days, but we’ll find out who your mother was, Blue.”

“And find out who I am.”

Detective Bowles stared at me and then slowly shook his head, as if the realization was staggering. “Yeah. You poor girl. And we’ll find out who you are, too.”



“I’m going to Reno.”

“Reno?”

“Reno, Nevada.” Wilson *was* British. Maybe he didn’t know where Reno was. “It’s in Nevada, but it’s way up North. It’s about an eight hour drive. I could fly, but I’m too far along for that to be safe. I don’t even know if they’d let me on a plane.”

“Why Reno?”

“I went to the police department on Monday.”

Wilson’s eyes widened and he was very still.

“I told them everything I knew . . . about myself, about my mother . . . about Jimmy.” I felt oddly like crying. I hadn’t felt that way when I spoke with Detective Bowles on Monday. But he had called me back this morning. And he had been excited. And I had a feeling that the life I was trying to build for myself was going to unravel yet again.

“The Detective who I spoke with . . . he says there was a woman who was found dead in a hotel room in Reno in 1993. This woman apparently had a child. The child was never found. The details match up with what Cheryl told me. They want me to come to Reno, give a DNA sample, and see if I’m the

missing child.”

“They will be able to tell you that?” Wilson sounded as stunned as I felt.

“Not right away. Apparently, when they realized there was a child unaccounted for, they took a DNA sample from the woman and it's in some national database.”

“How soon will they know?”

“Months. It isn't like TV, I guess. Detective Bowles said he's had to wait a year for DNA results before, but he thinks this will be a priority, so it shouldn't be that long.”

Wilson huffed out. “Well, the sooner you get up there and give them a sample, the sooner you'll know, yeah?”

“Yeah.” I felt queasy.

“I'll come with you.”

“You will?” I was surprised and oddly touched.

“You can't go alone. Not when you're this close.”

“I've got two weeks.”

Wilson waved that away and whipped his cell phone out, making arrangements for a substitute for Thursday and Friday as well as reservations at a Reno hotel, all in a matter of minutes.

“Did you tell Tiffa?” He paused, phone in hand, glancing up at me. “She's going to want to know.”

I called Tiffa, and, as it turned out, Tiffa didn't just want to know, she wanted to come. She actually didn't want me to go at all, but Wilson just shook his head and took the phone from me.

“She has to go, Tiff. She has to.” So Tiffa decided the next best thing was to just come along. Jack was going to be in Reno for a medical convention on Saturday and Sunday anyway, and she had debated joining him. She would just leave a couple of days early so she could be with me. Baby Mama status was getting a wee bit old, I told myself grumpily. I had been so independent for so long, it felt strange needing to clear my comings and goings with anyone. Secretly, though, I was thrilled that she cared so much.

“Road trip!” she squealed, coming through my door two hours later, suitcase in hand, sunglasses on, wearing one of those big hats you wear on the beach. She looked ready for a day on a yacht. I giggled and allowed her to pull me in for a big squeeze, a smooch to my belly, and a kiss to my cheek. I'd always thought the English were supposed to be less effusive, less

demonstrative, than Americans. It definitely wasn't true where Tiffa was concerned.

"We're taking the Mercedes! I'm not squeezing these long legs in the back of the Subaru, Darcy!"

"Fine. But I'm driving, and you are still sitting in the back," Wilson said agreeably.

"Please do! I'm just going to sit back and relax, maybe read, maybe kip a bit."

She didn't read a word. Or sit back. And she definitely didn't kip . . . which I learned meant to sleep. She talked and laughed and teased. And I learned a few things about Wilson.

"Did Darcy ever tell you how he wanted to trace the steps of St. Patrick?"

"Tiffa..please, can you just fall asleep already?" Wilson groaned, sounding a lot like one of his students.

"Alice had just turned eighteen – done with school, wanting an exciting holiday. I wasn't even living at home then. I was twenty-two and working at a little art gallery in London, but every year we had a family holiday. We would go somewhere for a couple of weeks, usually somewhere sunny and warm where Dad could unwind a little. Alice and I wanted to go to the south of France, and Dad was on board. However, little Darcy had gotten a wee bee in his bonnet. He wanted to go to Ireland – cold, wet, and WINDY just like Manchester was that time of year. Why? Because the precocious lad had just read a book about Saint Patrick. Mum, of course, thought that was wonderful, and we all ended up traipsing all over a bloody hill in sloshy boots, reading pamphlets."

I giggled and tossed a look at poor Wilson. "St. Patrick was fascinating." He shrugged, grinning.

"Oh, Cor! Here we go!" Tiffa groaned theatrically.

"He was kidnapped from his home at fourteen, chained, marched onto a boat, and kept as a slave in Ireland until he was twenty years old. Then he managed to walk across Ireland, get on a boat, with nothing more than the clothes on his back, and make it back to England, a miracle in itself. His family was overjoyed at his return. Patrick's family was wealthy and educated, and Patrick would have had a comfortable life. But he couldn't get Ireland out of his head. He dreamed about it. In his dreams, he claimed God told him to go back to Ireland to serve the people there. He went back . . . and

ended up serving the people in Ireland for the rest of his life!” Wilson shook his head in wonder, as if the story still moved him.

I thought St. Patrick was just an Irish leprechaun. I'd never even thought about him as an actual person. Or an actual saint. It was just a holiday.

“So, how old were you when you discovered St. Patrick?” I teased.

“Twelve! He was bloody twelve!” Tiffa bellowed from the backseat, making everyone laugh. “When Darcy was born, he was wearing a tiny little bow tie and braces.”

“Braces?” I giggled.

“Suspenders,” Wilson supplied dryly.

“He has always been an absolute geek,” Tiffa chortled. “That, my dear Blue, is why he's brilliant. And wonderful.”

“Don't try to be nice to me now, Tiff,” Wilson smiled, catching her gaze in his rear view mirror.

“All right. I won't. Did you know he was going to be a doctor, Blue?”

“Tiffa!” Wilson moaned.

“Yes . . . actually. I did know that.” I patted Wilson's shoulder.

“He wasn't cut out for it. He would have been completely miserable. Dad saw how brilliant Darcy was and just assumed that meant he should be a 'man of medicine' like he was, and his father before him, and his father before him. But Darcy was brilliant in all the ways that had nothing to do with science, right luv?”

Wilson just sighed and shook his head.

“Darcy always had his nose in a book. He used enormous words and used them correctly . . . at least I think he did. He loved history, literature, poetry.”

“Have you heard him quote Dante?” I interrupted.

Wilson's eyes shot to mine.

“What was that lovely poem you shared with us . . . about harpies?” I questioned.

Wilson chuckled at the memory and quoted the lines obediently.

Tiffa moaned, “That's awful!”

“I thought so, too,” I laughed. “I couldn't forget it, though. I ended up carving 'Bird Woman' as a result.”

“That's what inspired 'Bird Woman?’” Wilson asked, astonishment coloring his voice.

“Your history lessons seemed to find their way into my carvings more

often than not.”

“How many? How many carvings were inspired by my history class?”

“Counting 'The Arc?’” I counted them in my head. “Ten. Tiffa bought a couple of them the first time she came to the cafe.”

Tiffa and Wilson seemed stunned, and the car was quiet for the first time since we'd set out. I fidgeted uncomfortably, not sure what the silence meant.

“Blue!” I should have known Tiffa would find her tongue first. “Blue, I have to see all of them. We should do something big, a big display with all of the pieces together. It would be brilliant!”

My cheeks flushed and I looked down at my hands, not wanting to get excited over something that hadn't even happened. “Some of them I sold at the cafe, but you are welcome to see the rest.”

“Darcy can die a happy man now,” Tiffa added after a moment. “His teaching has inspired art.” She leaned up and hoisted herself over the seat and kissed Wilson's cheek with a loud smack of her lips.

“Actually. For once, Tiffa is absolutely right. That might be the best compliment anyone has ever paid me.” Wilson smiled at me. Warmth pooled inside me, and the baby kicked in response.

“I saw that! The baby kicked!” Tiffa was still hanging over the front seat and she laid her hands against my belly, a look of intense rapture on her face. The baby rolled and nudged a few more times, inducing squeals of delight from Tiffa.

For the rest of the ride we talked, listened to music – I introduced them to Willie Nelson – and took turns driving and dozing off. But I couldn't get the image of a young Darcy Wilson out of my head, plodding over Irish hills in search of a saint who had lived many hundreds of years before. It was easy to see how a boy like that could go to Africa for two years or shun a medical profession for something simpler and less glamorous. It was harder to see how a boy like that, so inspired by a saint, could be attracted to a sinner like me.

Chapter Twenty

Blizzard

The process was incredibly easy. I met with a Detective Moody, who had been the responding officer on the case more than eighteen years before. He was bald, whether by choice or necessity, I wasn't sure. He was in his early forties, but tired looking, like he had a long life so far. He looked fit and slim in khakis, a dress shirt, and a shoulder holster that he seemed as comfortable with as everything else he wore.

"I can't give you details of the case. Not yet. You understand that if you aren't this woman's child, you have no right to the information. Not to her name, to her child's name, to the details of her death, nothing . . . do you understand?" Detective Moody was apologetic but firm. "But if you are who we think you are, when we get that DNA confirmation back, we'll give you everything we have. I have to say, I hope to hell that you are that little girl. It's bothered me for a lotta years, I can tell you that. It would be a happy ending to a very sad case." Detective Moody smiled at me, his brown eyes sober and sincere.

I was sent to the lab, and I was given a big Q-tip and told to rub it against the inside of my cheek. And that was it. Eight hours in the car for a buccal swab. Detective Moody told me he would put a rush on it, and he hoped to have it back in three or four months.

"It all depends on whose goose is being cooked in these things. There are priority cases, though. And this rates pretty high up there. It'd be pretty exciting for us to see resolution on this. And we want that for you too."

Resolution. Redemption. My life had began to circle around these reoccurring themes. Now we could add Reno. That was a new one. Another 'R' to add to the list.

We stayed the night in Reno, Tiffa and I in one room, Wilson in another. Tiffa had put her arms around me as we left the police station and had kept me close through dinner, occasionally rubbing my back or patting my hand, as if for once she had no words. None of us did. The whole thing was stranger than fiction, and the ramifications affected not only me, but my

unborn child and the woman who wanted to be her mother. It wasn't until we lay in the darkened room, the long day put to bed, the sounds of the Reno night shut out by heavy curtains and thick carpeting, that I faced the fears that had clawed for recognition since talking to Detective Bowles on Monday.

"Tiffa?" I spoke up softly.

"Hmm?" Her voice was drowsy, as if I had caught her just before she dropped off into sleep.

"What if she was a monster . . . a terrible person?"

"What?" Tiffa was slightly more awake now, as if sensing my turmoil.

"Can that be passed on? Does it hide in our genes?"

"Luv. You'll have to forgive me. I don't have a clue what you're talking about." Tiffa sat up and reached for the lamp.

"No! Please leave it off. It's easier to talk in the dark," I pleaded needing the buffer of a shadowy room between us.

Tiffa dropped her hand but stayed upright. I could feel that she was looking at me, letting her eyes adjust in the dark. I stayed turned on my side, looking at the wall, the weight of my stomach supported by the thick mattress.

"You are going to adopt this baby. You say you don't care if it's a girl or a boy. You don't care if the baby is brown-skinned or light. And I believe you. But what if the baby is . . . the offspring of a weak, selfish, evil person?"

"You are none of those things."

I thought for a moment. "Not all the time. But sometimes I'm weak. Sometimes I'm selfish. I don't think I'm evil . . . but I'm not necessarily good, either."

"You are much stronger than I am. You are incredibly selfless. And I don't think evil resides with strong and selfless," Tiffa said softly. "I don't think it works that way."

"But my mother . . . what she did was evil."

"Leaving you with a stranger?"

"Yes. And her blood runs in this baby's veins. Are you willing to take that chance?"

"Absolutely. But I don't think it's much of a risk, luv. Jack has diabetes. Did you know that? It's pretty manageable. I never considered not having a child just because the child might suffer with the same illness. I had the most ghastly buck teeth growing up. Thankfully, braces made me a ravishing

beauty.” There was laughter in Tiffa's voice. “But what if there were no such thing, and my child was doomed with horse teeth?”

“None of those things compare,” I protested, needing her to understand. Tiffa plopped down on the bed behind me and began to smooth my hair. She would be a fabulous mother. It was all I could do not to curl into her and let her soothe me. But of course I didn't. I lay stiffly, trying not to be so susceptible to a gentle hand. She stroked my hair as she spoke.

“We don't know what kind of life your mother had. We don't know what her reasons were. But look at you. You're brilliant! And that's enough for me, Blue. What if my mother had chosen not to adopt Darcy? She never met his birth mother or father. She knew nothing about them but their names. But she loved Darcy, maybe best of all, and he was a complete unknown. His father could have been a serial killer, for all we knew.”

“Wilson was adopted?” I was so stunned, the words came out like a shriek. Tiffa's soothing ministrations faltered along with my heart. She lay down on the bed beside me, curling up against my back, and resumed stroking my hair.

“Yes! Didn't he tell you? Mum and Daddy tried to have another child for years. They adopted Darcy when he was only days old. It was arranged through our church.”

“No . . . he didn't tell me.” My voice cracked, and I cleared my throat to disguise my dismay.

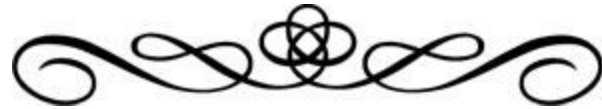
“He looked up his parents when he turned eighteen. His mother was young, like you are, when she got pregnant. She is married now with several children. She was happy to see him, happy that he had turned out well. His father was a copper in Belfast. He and Wilson hit it off. I think they still talk every now and again. Jenny Woodrow and Bert Wheatley, I think their names were. I can't remember Jenny's maiden name.”

I lay in the dark, my thoughts whirling like pinwheels in a storm. And a hurricane was brewing. I felt betrayed. Wilson was adopted. Adopted! And he hadn't said anything at all. No words of wisdom or encouragement when Tiffa and I had broken the news to the family. No “adoption is a wonderful thing, look at me” commentary. He had stayed silent; there had been no revelations.

Tiffa was apparently unaware of the gathering storm. She hadn't said anything for several minutes, and before long I heard her breathing change,

and knew she had fallen to sleep, lying beside me. My hips ached. My lower back had been killing me all day, my ankles were swollen and I was too uncomfortable, too pregnant, and far too angry to sleep.

Redemption, resolution, revelations. The 'R' words just kept stacking up. Reno was just full of secrets. I was ready to go home.



Jack flew into Reno Friday morning for the medical conference and Tiffa stayed with him, sending me and Wilson on our way in her Mercedes. They would fly home on Sunday evening, which meant I was trapped in tornado alley with Wilson for eight long hours. Accusations were buzzing in my head like angry bees, threatening to break loose and swarm Wilson with a stinging barrage. I sat in angry silence, giving curt responses to every question, not looking at him, not laughing with him. He seemed flummoxed, but tried harder and harder the meaner I got, until I finally pushed him too far and he pulled off the seemingly endless highway into a rest area. Shoving the car into park, he turned toward me and threw his hands in the air.

“What is wrong with you, Blue? Did I do something? Are you in pain? For God's sake! What is the matter?”

“You were adopted!” I shouted and promptly burst into the kind of tears that squirt out of your eyes like a hose and make your nose run. I grabbed for the jockey box, but Wilson was there with his damn hanky, blotting my cheeks and shushing me like a doddering old man.

“Tiffa has such a bloody big mouth.”

“She had no idea you hadn't told me! Why wouldn't you tell me, Wilson?”

“Would it have helped you?” Wilson wiped my eyes, his gaze penetrating, his brow wrinkled in consternation.

I angrily pushed his hands away, shoving the door open and hoisting my awkward body from the confines of the car, furious in a way I had never been before.

My back was on fire, and my neck was sore and my heart hurt like it had been dragged behind the car. I waddled toward the restrooms, needing space

and, frankly, needing to pee. I was nine months pregnant, after all.

I used the toilet and washed my hands, trying to stem the angry tears that wouldn't quit. I held a cold, wet paper towel to my cheeks and wiped the mascara away. I looked miserable. Even my nose was puffy. I looked down at my ankles and tried not to wail. I used to be hot . . . and I used to be thin. And I used to trust Wilson. The tears flowed again, and I held the towel to my eyes, willing them away.

"Are you all right, dear?" A little voice spoke just to my right. An old woman who barely reached my shoulder stood looking at me with a frown etched on her thin lips. Wrinkles rimmed her mouth like legs on a centipede. Her grey hair was in neat little curls all over her head, and she wore a scarf over them, presumably to protect her hair-do from the wind that had kicked up outside. I'd brought the storm with me, apparently.

"Your husband sent me in to check on you. He's worried about you."

I didn't correct her. I was so obviously in need of a husband, since I was so obviously about to have a child, and I really didn't want to explain who Wilson was. I followed her out and saw Wilson conversing with an equally small old man. When they saw me, the old man patted Wilson's shoulder and nodded knowingly. Then he offered his arm to the old woman, and they teetered toward their car, holding each other against the wind that had started to rage.

"I'm sorry, Blue." Wilson had to raise his voice to be heard, and his dark curls whipped around his head.

"Why didn't you tell me? I don't get it! I lay in bed all night thinking about it. And I can't think of one plausible explanation." My hair streamed into my mouth and flew around me like Medusa's snakes, but I was not getting back into the car . . . not until I had an answer.

"I didn't want to influence your decision," Wilson shouted, "I had a great life. Wonderful parents. And my parents never hid the truth from me. I grew up knowing that they had adopted me. But I can't tell you it didn't bother me because it did! I often wondered about the woman who didn't want me and about the man who hadn't wanted either of us."

I felt his words like a kick to the stomach, and I wrapped my arms around my abdomen, holding the life inside me, shielding it from him. He winced but kept talking, yelling into the wind.

"I didn't want my feelings to sway you, can you understand that?"

“You think I don't want this baby? You think I'm giving it away because I don't want it?”

Wilson's eyes searched mine, and a myriad of emotions crossed his face as he struggled for words that weren't easy to say.

“When you told me that you had decided not to keep your baby, I thought you were making a mistake. Yet how could I say a bloody thing? My sister is over the moon with joy. And you seemed at peace with your choice.”

The wind moaned and the sky darkened. Wilson reached for me, but I stepped away, letting the wind howl and pull at me. It seemed fitting.

“My mother didn't give me up for adoption, Wilson. But she should have. She should have!”

Wilson braced his legs against the wind and shoved his hands into his pockets.

“She didn't love me enough to give me up. I am not going to ruin this baby's life just because I need someone to love.”

Thunder rolled and a flash of lightning had Wilson reaching for me again. This time I wasn't quick enough, and he wrapped an arm around me, pulling me toward the car. The rain hit as we slammed our doors, and we were cocooned in grey, the rain so heavy that the world was liquid beyond the windows.

The Mercedes purred to life, and heat billowed at our feet and warmed the seats beneath us. But Wilson didn't resume our journey. There was still too much to say.

“I didn't mean to hide it,” he appealed, his grey eyes entreating me. I looked away, not wanting to listen. But he was insistent, and he turned my chin toward him, demanding that I hear. “I didn't speak up when I should have. It never seemed appropriate or timely. And then it was too late. And honestly, the fact that I was adopted, it's irrelevant, Blue.”

“Irrelevant? How can you say that?” I cried, yanking my chin from his grasp. As if Wilson's opinions had ever been irrelevant to me. He had become the most relevant thing in my life. Redemption, resolution, revelation, and now relevance. I fisted my hands in my hair. “I've been blindly trying to figure things out. I am days away from giving birth, and you don't think your own adoption is relevant? Your perspective might have changed everything.”

“Exactly. But instead, you've come to your own conclusions, you've made your own decisions, and that is how it should be.”

“But you said I was making a mistake,” I whispered, trying not to cry again. I looked for the anger I had felt, but it had blown away somewhere between the restroom and the car, and I couldn't call it back.

Wilson reached over and clasped my hands in his, turning toward me as much as the wheel would allow.

“Blue, this whole experience has been a revelation to me.”

I tried not to recite all the R words in my head as he continued.

“I, like every human being, needed to know who I was. My parents understood that, and, unlike what you've dealt with, there were no secrets in my life. I knew everything . . . except the why. I never understood *why* my biological mother made the choice she did. I always thought if someone really loved me, they would never give me away. Watching you go through all of this, I think I finally understand that that isn't necessarily true.”

My eyes were glued on our clasped hands, our fingers laying side by side. I couldn't look at him. Not when the words he spoke were so intensely personal that the glare from the truth hurt my eyes. Wilson continued, his voice choked with emotion.

“Loving someone means putting their needs above your own. No matter what. Somehow, you figured that out. I'll be damned if I know how, but you did. So, no. I don't think you're making a mistake, Blue. I think you're bloody amazing. And when I get home, Jenny Woodrow is going to get a call. She deserves a little thank you – finally – for loving me and letting me go.”

We sat quietly for several breaths, letting the emotion ebb, our hands intertwined, heat circling the interior of the car and fogging the windows.

“What did the old man say?” I questioned softly.

“He told me not to worry. He said, 'Women cry. If she's crying over you, she still loves you,’” Wilson tried to mimic the shaky voice of the old man. He looked at me and grinned playfully. “He said I should only worry when you stop.”

I couldn't smile back and swiftly looked away. I was the one who should worry. Not because I had stopped crying, but because I'd started in the first place. The old man had it all figured out.



We tried to wait out the rain, but it never let up. We got back on the road only to fight rain and snow for the next three hours. Snow in Boulder City was almost unheard of, but we were a long way north of the Las Vegas area, and snow in Reno was commonplace. However, October snow was not. My anxiety grew as the journey lengthened. I didn't want to whine or worry Wilson, but my back and lower belly had been cramping steadily since we had stopped at the rest area. Maybe it was the stress of the trip, or all the R words raining down without relief, or maybe it was simply time. Two weeks early wasn't really considered early. It was considered full term. And I had a sneaking suspicion I was in labor.

"I'm going to pull off wherever I can find a hotel. We're still three hours out, maybe more at this speed, and I've had enough," Wilson sighed, squinting to make out road signs.

"We have to keep going," I insisted, gripping the armrest as a wave of pressure moved through my lower body.

"Why?" Wilson didn't look at me, he was so intent on the road ahead.

"Because I really don't want to have a baby in a Super 8 Motel."

"Bugger!" Wilson's head swiveled toward me, his eyes wide with horror.

"I'm not in any pain. Not really. It's just uncomfortable. And it's been going on for about three hours. Just keep going and we'll be fine."

The next three hours were the longest three hours of my life – Wilson's too, I'm guessing. He was white around the lips, and his face was haggard by the time we saw the Vegas lights smeared like an oil spill beyond the windshield, a muted rainbow in a sea of black. I had timed my contractions, and they had grown steady and increasingly painful at about five minutes apart. I had no idea what that meant, or how far I had to go. But we were both too tired to go home and wait for it to get worse. Getting to the hospital was a feat in itself. Some of the roads were knee deep in water, and the rain wasn't letting up.

We pulled into the parking garage, and Wilson was out and at my door before I could get my seat belt off. Together we made our way to Labor and Delivery, breathing a small sigh of relief that we had made it. Visions of highways births had been our constant companion for three long hours. I'm sure it was a relief for Wilson to turn me over to the perky blonde nurse who oozed competency. She got me settled in a room, set out a gown, and told me she'd be back momentarily.

Wilson turned and walked toward the door. Panic bubbled up in my chest

as I watched him leave. My fear made me bold.

“Will you stay with me?” The words came out in a jumble and my face felt hot with shame that I had even uttered them. But I had, and I didn't want to take them back. He was frozen in place, his hand still resting on the door handle.

“Please.” I didn't know if he heard the final plea, and I had to close my eyes so I didn't see his response. I was afraid to see him shrink, to see his eyes shift away, to hear him make excuses.

The bed shifted, and I opened my eyes to see him sitting beside me. His eyebrows were drawn together and his grey-eyed gaze was filled with apprehension. But he didn't fidget or shrink, and his eyes held mine.

“Are you sure?”

“I can't do this alone, Wilson. I wouldn't ask . . . but . . . I don't . . . have anyone else.” I bit down on my lip, stifling the urge to shamelessly beg. His face softened, and the worry in his eyes faded.

“Then I'll stay.” He slid his hand into mine and held it tightly. His hand was large and cool, his fingertips calloused. My relief was so intense that I couldn't immediately respond for fear I would lose my composure. I wrapped both of my hands around his and held on gratefully. After several deep breaths, I whispered my thanks as another wave of pressure and pain built within me.

Chapter Twenty-One

Deep

My assigned nurse was in and out. Wilson always made sure to sit at the head of the bed, trying desperately to respect my modesty as much as possible. He kept his eyes on my face as she checked and pronounced me at five centimeters, then six and then six and a half. And then the progress stalled.

“You wanna get up and walk a little? Sometimes it helps things along,” the nurse suggested after an hour of watching the clock and counting contractions with no improvement. I didn't want to walk. I wanted to sleep. I wanted to cancel the whole event.

“Come on, Blue. I'll help you. Lean on me.” Wilson helped me sit and with the nurse's help I pulled another hospital gown around my back like a robe, tying the strings in front so I wouldn't moon the folks as I strolled. And we walked, up and down the hallways, my slippered feet trudging along beside Wilson's longer stride. When the pain was too great to move and my legs shook with the strain of keeping upright, Wilson locked his arms around me and pulled my forehead into his chest, talking quietly as if standing in his embrace was the most natural thing in the world. And it was. My hands clutched his upper arms as I trembled and groaned, and I whispered my gratitude to him again and again. When the pain would ease and I would regain my breath we would retrace our halting steps once more, and when I was desperate for distraction from the relentless waves, I poked at Wilson.

“Tell me a story, Wilson. It can even be a long, boring, dusty English tome.”

“Wow! Tome. Learn a new word, Echohawk?” Wilson wrapped his arms around me as I sagged against him.

“I think you taught me that one, Mr. Dictionary.” I tried not to whimper as the pain swept through me.

“How about *Lord of the Flies*?”

“How about you just kill me now?” I ground out, my teeth gritted against the onslaught, appreciative of Wilson's diversionary tactics if not his choice

in stories.

Wilson's laughter made his chest rumble against my cheek. "Hmm. Too realistic and depressing, right? Let's see . . . dusty tomes . . . how about *Ivanhoe*?"

"Ivan's Ho'? Sounds like Russian porn," I quipped tiredly. Wilson laughed again, a sputtering groan. He was practically carrying me at this point and looked almost as exhausted as I felt.

"How about I tell you one," I offered as the pain eased, and I stepped back from the circle of his arms. "It's my favorite story. I used to beg Jimmy to tell it to me."

"All right. Let's make our way back to your room and see if all this walking has done any good."

"This is the story of Waupee –"

"Whoopee?"

"Very funny, Wilson. Fine. I won't use his Indian name. This is the story of White Hawk, the great hunter, and the Star Maiden. One day, White Hawk was out in the woods hunting and he found a strange circle in a clearing. He hid at the edge of the clearing and watched, wondering what made the strange markings.

"Ahhh. Now I will discover the origin of the crop circles," Wilson interrupted once more.

"Hey! I'm the one who makes the jokes. Be quiet. I have to tell you this story before I can't talk anymore." I gave him a long look, and he made the motion of zipping his lips. "After a while, White Hawk saw a large woven basket descending from the sky. Twelve beautiful girls climbed out and began dancing in the clearing. As White Hawk watched them, he noticed that all the girls were lovely, but the most beautiful was the youngest, and White Hawk immediately fell in love with her. He ran out, trying to catch her, but the girls screamed and climbed back into the basket, which rose high into the sky until it disappeared in the stars. This happened three more times. White Hawk couldn't eat or sleep. All he could do was think of the star maiden who he had fallen in love with.

"Finally he hatched a plan. He transformed himself into a mouse –" I reached up and placed my hand over Wilson's mouth when he began to speak. "He had powers, okay?" Wilson nodded, but his eyes gleamed with mirth. We had made it back to my hospital room, and Wilson helped me ease

down to a sitting position on the edge of the bed. I stayed sitting, holding onto him as I felt my insides start the slow clenching that would build until I was holding back tears. I tried to talk through it, clinging to Wilson's arms as the pressure became almost unbearable.

"He . . . waited," I panted, speaking in little gasps, "until the star sisters descended from the sky again. He knew . . . they wouldn't be afraid of a small mouse."

"Of course not. Women love mice," Wilson amended agreeably, and I laughed and moaned and tried to continue. Wilson smoothed my hair back from my face, following it down my back in steady strokes as I pressed my face into him, trying to escape the pain that was only mine to bear. But he didn't interrupt again as I told the story in fits and gasps.

"When the sisters climbed from the basket and began dancing White Hawk . . . crept closer and closer to the youngest, until he was right . . . next to her. Then he transformed . . . back into a man and swept her up in his arms." The pain began to ease in increments, and I took several long breaths, unclenching my hands from around Wilson's arms. The man was going to have some serious bruises when all this was over.

"The other sisters screamed and jumped into the basket, which ascended into the sky, leaving the youngest behind. The star maiden cried, but White Hawk wiped her tears away and told her he would love her and take care of her. He told her life on earth was wonderful, and she would be happy with him."

I stopped talking as a nurse hustled into the room, pushing the curtain aside with a swoop of her hand.

"Okay, sweetie. Let's see where you're at." I looked up at Wilson as I was eased down onto the bed. He sat down on the stool by the bed and leaned into me, ignoring the nurse and the discomfort of the intimacy I had forced upon him. His face was only inches from mine as he again took my hand and met my gaze.

"You're moving along. You're at a loose seven. Let's see if we can't get that anesthesiologist up here to get you some relief —"

The lights flickered, and suddenly there was a cessation of sound and the darkness was complete. The nurse swore under her breath.

The lights came back on with a whirl, and the three of us breathed out in unison.

“The hospital has generators. Don't you worry.” The nurse tried for lightness, but her eyes shifted to the door, and I could tell she was wondering what else the night would bring. “That must be some storm.” She swished back out the door with promises to be right back.

I thought of Tiffa at an airport in Reno and immediately pushed the thought away. She would come, she would make it. There would be someone to hold my baby. Someone had to hold her. I wouldn't be able to. The thought brought ice to my veins and dread pooling in my chest. Tiffa and Jack needed to be there, ready with open arms to swoop up my child and take her immediately away.

Pain drove the thought from my head, the more immediate misery taking my attention from thoughts of Tiffa and my child. Twenty minutes passed, then twenty more. The nurse did not return nor did the anesthesiologist. Then the pain reached a crescendo. Giant cascading waves threatened to tear me in half. I writhed in agony and clutched at Wilson, desperate for reprieve.

“Tell me what I can do, Blue. Tell me what to do,” Wilson insisted quietly. I had settled into silence, my energy and focus drawn into the narrowest pinprick of light, caught in the seemingly never-ending cycle of pain and pardon, unable to find words. I just shook my head and clung to his hand. He swore violently and rose from my bedside with a jerk, his stool clattering across the floor. He eased my fingers from his hand, and I whimpered my dismay as he turned toward the door. He crossed the room in long strides, and yanked the door open. Then I heard him, his voice raised, demanding assistance in very, very impolite terms. I was so proud and ridiculously touched that I almost laughed, but the laugh caught in my throat, and I screamed instead. My body shook and the pressure in my legs was overpowering. The need to push was so intense that I acted without thought. I screamed again, and my door slammed open and Wilson, his hair a wild, curling mess, along with a horrified nurse came flying into the room.

“Doctor's on his way! Doctor's on his way!” the nurse babbled, her eyes growing wide as she positioned herself between my drawn up legs. “Don't push!”

Wilson was instantly at my side, and I turned my face to him once more, unable to stop the ripples of pressure that sought to expel my child. The door slammed again as the nurse left the room and bellowed down the hallway for reinforcements. All at once I was surrounded – another nurse, a doctor,

someone else was hovering by the incubator on wheels.

“Blue?” The doctor's voice seemed far away, and I struggled to focus on his face. Brown eyes met mine as I bore down helplessly. “It's time to push, Blue. It won't be long 'til your baby is here.”

My baby? Tiffa's baby. I shook my head. Tiffa wasn't here yet. I bore down once more, pushing through the pain. Then again. And again. And again. I don't know how long I pushed and pleaded with God for it to be over. I lost count in the haze of pain and exhaustion.

“Just a little more, Blue,” the doctor urged. But I was too tired. I didn't think I could do it. It hurt too much. I wanted to float away.

“I can't,” I croaked. I couldn't. I wouldn't.

“You're the bravest person I know, Blue,” Wilson whispered into my hair. His hands cradling my face. “Did I ever tell you how beautiful I think you are? You're almost there. I will help you. Hold on to me. It's going to be all right.”

“Wilson?”

“Yes?”

“If I see her . . . I don't know if I will be able to let her go. I'm afraid if I hold my baby, I won't be able to let her go.” The tears ran down my cheeks, and I didn't have the strength to hold them back.

Wilson wrapped his arms around me as the agony inside me rose up and howled.

“Come on, Blue!” The doctor was insistent. “Here we go! One more.”

And somehow I did. Somehow I did. A last desperate effort, the final thrust, and a moment of relief as the baby was pulled free. Wilson's arms fell away, and he rose to his feet as the room erupted in excited exclamation. A girl. She was here, arms flailing, black hair wet and slicked to her tiny head, eyes wide. She howled in outrage, a war cry worthy of the battle that had been waged and won. And I reached for her.

In that moment she was mine. The nurse laid her on my chest, and my hands were there to hold her. The world around me fell away. Time ceased, and I drank her in. I felt simultaneously dizzy with power and impossibly weak as I stared at my tiny daughter. She blinked up at me, her eyes blurry and swollen, her mouth moving, making mournful sounds that ripped at my heart. Terror rose inside of me, blinding me, and for a heartbeat I considered fleeing the room, running wildly down long corridors and out into the storm.

with my child in my arms to escape the promise I had made. I loved her. Insanely and completely. I loved her. I swung my head around, wild with turmoil, sick with dread, searching for Wilson. He stood only a few feet away, his hands shoved into his pockets, his face haggard, and his hair falling across his forehead. His eyes met mine, and I saw that he was crying. And then the nurse whisked her away – just like that – and the moment was gone. Time resumed its normal speed, competently unhindered by my devastation. I fell back against the pillows, stunned, and let the world rush on without me.

It was mere minutes before the room emptied and I lay alone, the refuse of childbirth efficiently bundled and trundled away. Wilson had stepped out into the hall to call Tiffa, the nurses had taken the baby to places unknown for measuring and bathing, the doctor had neatly finished his work, removed his gloves, and congratulated me on a job well done. And now I lay, spent and rejected, like yesterday's news. And it was done.



I was moved to a recovery room, helped into the shower, and unceremoniously tucked back into my bed. Nobody asked me if I would like to see my baby. Wilson had hovered for a time, but when it was evident that I was in good hands, he decided to run home and grab a shower and some clean clothes as well. The rain had finally stopped. The flash flood warning had been lifted, but the lowest level of the hospital had had to be evacuated because of flooding – which had caused chaos throughout the rest of the hospital. My nurses had apologized profusely that I had been neglected during my labor. Staff had already been skeletal due to the difficulties of getting to the hospital in the storm, and the flooding had almost done them in.

Jack and Tiffa were unable to get home. The storm that had caused flooding in Las Vegas caused a blizzard in Reno as the massive storm stretched from one end of the state to the other. The airport in Reno had been shut down by the blizzard, and flights weren't scheduled to resume until morning. I managed to eat and was dozing off when Wilson returned. The lights were off in my room, but it wasn't truly dark. My room had a “lovely

view” of the parking lot and the orange-yellow streetlights below cast a burnished glow into my darkened room. Wilson tried to sit unobtrusively in the corner chair, but the chair squeaked loudly, and he cursed quietly.

“You didn't have to come back.” My voice sounded scratchy and wrong to my own ears, hoarse, like I'd been screaming for hours.

Wilson sank down into the noisy rocker, resting his elbows on his knees and propping his chin in his hands. I had seen him do this before, and it brought a sudden rush of tenderness so intense that I gasped.

“Are you hurting?” he asked softly, misinterpreting the sound.

“No,” I whispered. It was a lie, but at the moment the truth was too complicated.

“Did I wake you?”

“No,” I repeated. Silence magnified the sounds in the room and in the corridors beyond. Squeaking wheels chirped down the hallway, the squelching sound of sneakers on the linoleum floor. A nurse entered the room across the hall with a cheerful “How we doin'?” And I found myself listening for sounds I couldn't hear. Straining to hear a baby's cry. My mind traveled down the hall and into the nursery where a child lay unclaimed.

“Did you hold her?” I asked suddenly. Wilson straightened in his chair, and his eyes searched my face for clues in the murky light of the room.

“No,” it was his turn to reply. Again, silence.

“She's all alone, Wilson.”

He didn't argue that Tiffa was on her way or that my baby was being taken care of and was most likely sleeping. Instead, he stood up and approached the bed. I was curled up on my side, facing him, and he squatted down so his eyes were level with mine. We studied each other silently. And then he brought his hand up and laid it gently against my cheek. Such a simple gesture. But it was my undoing. I closed my eyes and cried, blocking out his stormy grey eyes, the understanding there, the compassion. Eventually, I felt him lay down beside me on the narrow bed and wrap his arms around me, pulling me up against him. Occasionally, he would stroke my hair or shush softly, but he made no comment as my heavy grief saturated the pillow beneath my head.

A nurse entered the room once and turned around and went right back out. Wilson made no attempt to move or retreat to the chair in the corner.

“You never told me the ending of the story,” he murmured much later.

“Hmm?”

“The hunter and the star girl? Did they live happily ever after?”

“Oh,” I remembered drowsily. “No . . . not exactly. She stayed with him, and they had a child. They were happy, but the girl started to miss the stars.” I paused, fighting the lethargy that was stealing over me. I continued, my voice fading with every word. “She wanted to see her family. So she wove a large basket and collected gifts for her family, things from the earth that you couldn't find in the sky. She placed the basket in the magical circle, put the gifts and her son inside, and climbed into the basket herself. Then she sang a song that caused the basket to rise into the sky. White Hawk heard the song and ran to the clearing, but he was too late. His wife and child were gone.” I felt myself drifting into sleep, exhaustion muddling my thoughts, making speech difficult. I wasn't sure if I dreamed it, or if Wilson actually spoke.

“That story sucks,” Wilson whispered sleepily in my ear. I smiled but was too far gone to respond.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Grey

Tiffa and Jack got to the hospital about five o'clock the next day. Wilson had moved to the chair sometime while I slept and had received the call letting us know they had arrived. He went out to meet them when my nurse came in to chart my condition and take my blood pressure. I was eager to leave the hospital and was dressed and waiting to be discharged when I heard a light knocking. Tiffa stuck her head around the heavy hospital door and called to me.

“Can we come in, Blue?”

I answered yes, and she and Jack walked into the room hand in hand. Tiffa had pulled her hair off her face into a curly up-do, but somehow she still managed to look chic and put together. Jack looked worn out. They had waited at the airport most of the night and all morning, waiting for flights to resume. But they were smiling broadly, and Tiffa was practically vibrating. Without warning, she pulled me into her arms and promptly burst into tears. Jack wrapped his arms around the two of us and commenced sniffing as well. I felt emotion swell in my chest and rise in my throat until swallowing was impossible. I held myself as still as I possibly could, as if movement would dislodge my control. I recited the alphabet backwards in my head, “Z, Y, X, W, V, U, T . . .” focusing my eyes beyond Tiffa and Jack. Wilson stood by the door. My eyes locked on his and immediately shifted away. “J, H, I, G, F, E . . .” I recited silently. But my efforts at distraction did not prevent me from hearing Tiffa's heartfelt thanks.

“She's beautiful, Blue. She's absolutely beautiful. I can see you in her . . . and that makes me so happy.” Tiffa whispered between sobs. “Thank you, Blue.”

I had to pull away. For my own survival, I had to pull away. They let me go, but Tiffa clasped my hands in hers. She seemed unconcerned with the fact that tears still streamed down her cheeks. I marveled at her ability to cry without shame or embarrassment.

“We're going to name her Melody. It was Jack's mother's name, and I've

always loved it.” Tiffa's eyes shifted to Jack, who urged her on with a tip of his head. “But we would like her middle name to be Blue if that is all right with you.”

Melody Blue. It was a beautiful name. I nodded, just the slightest movement, but I didn't trust myself to speak. Then I nodded again, a little harder and smiled the best I could. I was pulled back into Tiffa's arms and held fiercely as she whispered a promise in my ear.

“You have given me something I would never have asked of you, and I promise I will be the best mum I can be. I won't be perfect. But I will love her with all my heart, and I will be perfect in that. When she's old enough, I will tell her all about you. I will tell her how brave you were and how much you loved her.”

A moan tore from my throat, and I shuddered helplessly, no longer able to hold back the billowing sorrow that flooded my mouth, streamed from my eyes, and robbed me of speech. Jack's arms were back around us, and we stood that way for a very long time, propping each other up, as gratitude and sorrow met and merged and silent bonds were forged. I found myself offering up a prayer for the very first time. A prayer to the Great Spirit that Jimmy had believed in. A prayer to the God that had created life and let it grow in me. A prayer for the child who would never call me Mother, and for the woman whom she would. And I prayed He would take away my pain, and if He couldn't do that, then would He, please, take away my love? Because the pain and the love were so intertwined that I couldn't seem to have one without the other. Maybe if I didn't love, I wouldn't hurt so much. I felt Wilson's arms enclose me and bear my weight as Tiffa and Jack eventually released me and stepped back.

When I was discharged from the hospital, Wilson took me home, helped me into bed, and stayed with me through the night once more. Never once did he complain or offer empty words or platitudes. He was just there when I needed him most. And I leaned on him, probably more than I should have. I didn't let myself think about it or question it. I allowed myself to be taken care of and forbade myself introspection.

In the days that followed, Wilson gave me more and more space, and we fell back into a pattern that resembled the days and weeks leading up to Melody's birth. I went back to work at the cafe almost immediately and started carving again. In other ways, moving on was much more difficult.

Immediately after Melody's birth, I bound my breasts the way the nurses showed me, but they ached and leaked, and I would wake up soaked, my sheets wet with milk, my nightgown sticking to me. Washing myself was almost painful, my body felt like a stranger, and I couldn't bear to look in the mirror and see the swollen breasts that were meant to nourish, the stomach that grew flatter every day, and the arms that longed to hold what was no longer mine. Every once in a while I would forget and reach down to caress my belly, only to remember that the swelling that remained was not a child, but an empty womb. I was young and active, though, and my body recovered quickly. Soon the only reminder that she had been part of me would be the faint stretch marks that marred my skin. These marks became beautiful to me. Precious.

Correspondingly, I found myself unwilling to sand away the imperfections on a piece of juniper I had been shaping and molding. The scars on the wood were like the marks on my skin, and I found myself continually tracing them, as if removing them would signify a willingness to forget. I ended up enlarging them, so the lines and divets became mawing canyons and shadowy recesses and the gracefully stretching branches became twisted and tortured, like the clenched fists of empty hands.

Wilson came to visit me in the basement one evening while I worked on the sculpture, sinking down on an overturned pail, observing without comment.

“What are you going to call this?” he asked after a long silence.

I shrugged. I hadn't gotten that far. I looked up at him for the first time. “What do you think I should call it?”

He gazed back at me then, and the sadness in his rain-grey eyes had me turning from him immediately, shrinking from the compassion I saw there.

“Loss,” he whispered. I pretended not to hear. He stayed for another hour, watching me work. I didn't even hear him leave.



Life returned to normal in painful increments, as normal as it ever had

been. I worked, carved, ate, and slept. Tiffa called frequently to check on me and offered details about the baby only if I asked her first. She was careful and precise, but mercifully subdued in her descriptions. Each time I was able to hear a little more, although the first time I heard Melody's new-born wail through the receiver I had to end the call immediately. I spent the rest of the night in my room, convinced that my heart was officially broken and no amount of time and no amount of tears would ever ease the ache.

But time and tears proved to be better tonics than I would have thought. I had spent my whole life denying grief, holding it back like it was something to avoid at all cost. Jimmy had been so contained, and I had adopted his stoicism. Maybe it was the hormones, or a purely biological response, maybe it was the fact that I had pled with a God I knew very little about to take away the pain, but in the days that followed Melody's birth I discovered I had been given the ability to weep. And in weeping there was power. The power to heal, the power to release pain and let go, the power to endure love and to shoulder loss. And as the weeks became months, I cried less and smiled more. And peace became a more frequent companion.

But as peace and acceptance became my friend, Wilson began pulling away. At first I was almost grateful, simply because I was terrible company. But as I started to heal, I started to miss my friend, and he was mostly absent. I wondered if he felt his job was done. Maybe Melody had been delivered, and so had he.

Just before Christmas, I wrote a couple of days off work and went on a major wood hunting expedition. I headed into Arizona, hit the corner of Southern Utah, and circled back to Vegas with a truck full of juniper, mountain mahogany and more mesquite than I could carve in a month of Sundays. The heavy rains and floods from months before had moved downed timber from higher ground, filling the washes and valleys and making it fairly easy to find what I was looking for. Unfortunately, I had to leave some of the heaviest pieces behind because, though I had perfected using levers, pulleys, and ramps, some of the pieces demanded more than one woman and her tools could accomplish. When I planned the trip, I had hoped I might be able to convince Wilson to come with me. With the Christmas holiday he would have some time off. But he was so obviously trying to steer clear of me that I didn't bother.

When I rolled in on Monday night, filthy and tired, sporting slivers,

bruises, torn clothing and a throbbing toe, courtesy of a log that got away, I was not in the mood for any interactions with Pamela and Wilson. Unfortunately, they pulled up at the house while I was attempting to unload my truck by the basement entrance. Pamela was wearing a little white skirt with tennis shoes and a fitted sports tank, her hair pulled back into a perky ponytail. She shivered as Wilson jumped up into the back of my truck and began to help me unload. She danced in place for about two minutes, hopping from one foot to the other.

“Darcy, I'm freezing. Let's go inside, shall we?” she complained, and then smiled at Wilson when he paused to look at her.

“Go on ahead, Pam. It is too cold out here. I'll just help Blue get this in the basement.”

Pamela scowled slightly, her eyes lingering on me doubtfully. She didn't want to leave Wilson, I could tell. Women have a sense about these things. There was something going on between Wilson and me. And she knew it. I just shrugged. Not my problem.

“Really, Pammy. Head on up to my flat. I'll just be a minute. There's no reason for you to stand in the cold,” Wilson insisted.

It wasn't really very cold, although December in the desert can be surprisingly nippy. But I guess if I was wearing a tiny tennis outfit instead of jeans, work gloves, and a flannel shirt I might be cold, too. I didn't know what Pamela was worried about. My hair was a ratty nest. In fact, I was pretty sure I was sporting a few twigs. My nose was red, my cheek scratched, and I wouldn't be turning any heads, including Wilson's. Pamela must have arrived at the same conclusion, because she gave me a long look and flounced away, calling that she would just turn on the “telly” for a bit.

“Pammy?” I mocked, rolling a four foot section of a tree I'd razed down my makeshift ramp.

“When we were little, everyone called her Pammy. It slips out every now and again.”

I snorted, not having anything to say but feeling disdainful anyway.

“Why did you leave without telling anyone where you were going, Blue?” Wilson called over his shoulder as he descended the ramp, juggling an armful of juniper. He proceeded down the stairs to the basement, and I decided that meant he didn't need an answer or he didn't think he was going to get one. He loped back up seconds later and resumed talking as if he hadn't left.

“I didn't even know you were gone until yesterday morning. Then I started to worry.”

“I didn't leave without telling anyone. I just didn't tell you,” I replied shortly. “This is the last piece, but it's heavier than hell. Get on the other end, will ya?” I directed him, changing the subject. I didn't want to justify my absence. He had been the one ignoring me, not the other way around.

Wilson grabbed the end of two heavy, tangled branches I was struggling to hoist. Two separate branches had grown out of two different trees that had been growing side by side, and the branches had overlapped, wrapping around the other, the smaller branches tangling and intertwining. The branch from one tree had been damaged and was split at its base. Had it not been wrapped around the branch from the other tree it would have come down on its own. I had to climb both trees to cut each branch loose, sawing off the branch that wasn't split, and severing the few jagged connections of the one that was. It had cost me a hole in my jeans and a long scratch on my right cheek, but it would be worth it in the end.

The imagery of the fused branches was compelling and suggestive of something innate to every human heart – the need to touch, the need to connect – and I knew exactly what it would look like when I finished. When I'd first seen it, I had ached for something I had denied myself since I walked out of Mason's garage apartment a year ago. But it wasn't the physical release I yearned for. Not entirely. It was the closeness, the connection. But the thought of going back to a time when I'd slaked a physical need at the expense of an emotional one didn't appeal any longer. And so I was left with the ache and no idea how to soothe it.

Wilson and I teetered down the stairs, facing each other through scrubby branches and prickly bark. I led the way, placing my end gently on the floor by the workbench, and he followed suit, standing back and wiping his hands on his white tennis shorts. He had sap on his light blue shirt and grubby marks on his shorts where he had wiped his hands. I wondered if Pammy would want him to change. The thought made me inexplicably mournful, and I snatched up a chisel and mallet. I wanted to start removing bark and twigs and leaves immediately. Maybe I could work the ache away, focus the need and desire clawing at me into something productive, something beautiful, something that wouldn't leave me empty in the end.

“Can I leave my truck where it's at?” I asked Wilson, attacking the bark,

my eyes on the branches.

“Are the keys in it?”

I patted my pockets and groaned. “Yeah. They are. Never mind. I’ll go move it and lock it up.”

“I’ll do it. I’ve seen that look before. Blue is in the zone,” Wilson commented wryly, and he turned and left without another word.

I worked frantically for several hours, stripping and snipping, sanding and shaving, until my embracing branches lay bare and naked on the concrete. My hands were raw and my back screamed when I stepped back to take a breather. I had pulled off my flannel shirt sometime in the course of the night, growing too warm from my labor and the small space heater that Wilson insisted I use, blasting in the corner. I’d twisted my hair into a sloppy braid to keep it out of my face and safe from the sander. It had grown so long that the braid kept falling over my left shoulder like a heavy vine. I was considering lopping it off when I heard a key scrape in the lock and the basement door swing open with a rush of cold air. Wilson shut the door behind him, shivering a little from the wintry blast. He wore a T-shirt and those low-slung jeans, the ones I had tried not to notice the first time he’d worn them. My keys were in his hand, and an irritated expression made a crease between his grey eyes.

“It’s midnight, Blue. You’ve been down here working non-stop for five hours.”

“So?”

“So . . . it’s midnight!”

“All right, Grandma.”

The scowl between Wilson’s brows deepened. He closed the distance between us, his eyes taking in my unkempt appearance.

“You were gone for three days, and I’m guessing you hardly slept the whole time you were gone, yet here you are, working like you’re under a deadline or something. Your jeans are torn, you were limping earlier, and your cheek is scratched,” Wilson argued. He ran a finger down the angry welt on my cheekbone. I reached up to push his hand away, but he captured my hand and turned it over, running his fingers over my palm, straightening my fingers, noting the callouses and the scrapes I had acquired in the last few days. Goose bumps rose on my arms and tickled my neck. I shivered and pulled my hand away. I crouched beside my project and resumed sanding.

“So why didn't you tell me?”

“Hmm?” I didn't stop working.

“You said you didn't leave without telling anyone where you were going. You just didn't tell me. Why?”

“You've been avoiding me for a while, Wilson, which gave me the impression that you wouldn't be bothered by my absence.” My words were blunt, and I boldly held his gaze.

Wilson nodded, pulling his lower lip into his mouth, chewing on my accusation. But he didn't deny that he had purposely stayed away.

“I thought maybe you and I needed some distance. It's been only two months since Melody was born. Our . . . relationship . . . has been forged on some pretty intense experiences.” Wilson formed his words carefully, pausing between thoughts. I didn't like that he was so deliberate. It felt patronizing. But he continued in the same tone, speaking precisely and slowly.

“I thought maybe you needed some time and some . . . space. Without drama, without . . . me . . . or anybody else. Just space.” Wilson looked at me intently, his grey gaze sober and steady.

I laid down my tools and stood, putting space – the thing Wilson was so convinced I needed – between us. I shivered, freezing now that I had slowed my pace. The cold of the concrete floor had seeped up through the soles of my feet, and my torn jeans and thin tank top were suddenly insufficient to ward off the chill. I turned my back to Wilson and reached my hands toward the heater, trying to pull the warmth into my stiff fingers and arms.

“Do you remember that story Jimmy told me? The one about Tabuts the wise wolf and his brother Shinangwav, the coyote?” I tossed him a questioning look over my shoulder.

“The one about the people carved from sticks? The one you told me to school me on the unfair socio-economic structure throughout the world?” Wilson's mouth twisted wryly, and he walked toward me, grabbing my flannel shirt off the floor where I'd discarded it. He placed it around my shoulders, and then folded his arms around me, resting his chin on my head. His heat felt so good, so right, that I closed my eyes against it, against him and the ease which he held me, as if I were his sister or a favorite cousin. I didn't feel at all sisterly toward Wilson. And as good as his arms felt wrapped around me, there was pain in the pleasure.

“When I was a child, that story never made any sense to me. Why would people want to be alone?” The wistful tone of my voice was revealing, and Wilson's arms tightened around me. I kept my eyes closed, a sudden weariness crawling into my muscles and limbs with the heat that surrounded me.

“I thought Shinangwav was the smarter brother. He knew people would want to be in bunches. I pestered Jimmy constantly for a mother or a sister or a handful of friends. A wise wolf should know that people would rather be together.”

Wilson turned me in his arms and smoothed the tendrils of hair from my cheeks. I wanted to keep my eyes closed, fearing that if I opened them when we stood this close they would give me away. But the proximity made keeping them closed seem expectant, as if I were waiting for him to kiss my lips, so I opened them and raised them wearily to his.

“Sometimes I feel like I was one of those who was left in the sack while everyone else was falling out in groups,” I whispered.

Wilson's eyes were so grey in the paltry light of the dim corner that they looked like slate in a deluge. His face was a study in concentration and empathy, as if every word I said was of supreme importance. It was that expression, that intensity, that had worn me down, and won me over, history lesson after history lesson, day after day, and he didn't even know I was his.

“I would say that's a pretty understandable reaction after carrying a child for nine months . . . and having to part with her.” Wilson's voice was gentle, and he kissed my forehead chastely, obnoxiously. But I didn't want his sympathy. And I definitely didn't want space. I wanted him. I didn't want him to kiss my forehead. I wanted to kiss his mouth. I wanted to kiss him with my hands fisted in his hair and my body wrapped around him. I wanted to confess my feelings and demonstrate my devotion. And if I didn't leave right that second, I might do something that would push him away forever. I pulled away almost frantically, afraid of myself, afraid for myself. Wilson let me go immediately.

“Some people are destined to be alone. Jimmy seemed to be one of those people. Maybe I am too, whether I like it or not.”

Wilson did not respond as I turned and walked to my work bench. I snagged my keys and headed for the stairs leading to my apartment. Neither of us offered words of farewell, and the distance between us was

reestablished as if I had never stood in his arms.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Alice

I had refused Thanksgiving and Christmas and all the trappings that went with the holidays, but when Tiffa called and begged me to come to her annual New Year's party and told me her mother would be watching Alice's boys and Melody somewhere else, I relented. I told myself it had nothing to do with the fact that she had arranged for Wilson to be my date because Pamela was in England for the New Year.

I imagined a classy party with a live orchestra and cocktail dress and heels. But Tiffa surprised me by saying, "Wear something comfortable! And colorful! We have a contest who can wear the most color, and we Wilsons like our New Year's parties raucous. Don't wear anything that will show your knickers if you bend over in case we end up playing the brown bag game. Alice complains about it every year, but it wouldn't be New Year's without it."

I thought I was colorful enough in hot pink skinny jeans and a spangled bright blue blousy top. I even had purple feathered earrings in my ears and attached in my hair and glittery eye shadow and red lips, but Tiffa had me easily beat with tie-dyed leggings, a blinding neon-striped shirt, high-heeled orange platforms, and a rainbow clown wig. Wilson even got into the spirit of things with a shirt that wasn't blue, grey, or black. It was a long sleeved v-neck in a soft pale green. Not very loud, but at least he tried. He wore black jeans and black boots, and looked very un-professorish.

It wasn't a huge party – maybe thirty people – but everyone seemed to know each other well. There were ten or twelve other couples, in addition to Tiffa and Jack, Alice and Peter, and Wilson and me. Most of the others were Tiffa's British associates from The Sheffield. I would have expected all of them to drink their champagne with their pinkies raised, considering how proper they sounded in conversation. But they were all quite boisterous and easy-going, especially after a few drinks.

The night started with a game called Ha Ha Ha – that's what Tiffa called it. Every party-goer had been given a bracelet, which was made of a roll of

stickers in all different colors. The goal was to make people laugh using a big fake “ha ha ha.” If you were successful in making a person laugh, that person had to reward you with a kiss and a sticker. If a girl made another girl laugh, she could give her a sloppy smooch, or choose a boy for that girl to kiss, or vice versa. The Ha Ha Ha champion was determined at the end of the night by the number of stickers accumulated, as well as how many you still had on your bracelet roll. I was relieved to see that the kisses were all friendly pecks on the lips and cheeks with lots of “Happy New Years!” thrown in. No one seemed to take advantage and lay a wet one on an unwilling recipient. Most people were intent on collecting stickers. The game continued throughout the night, even when other games were being played, and I became a bit of a target because the Ha Ha Ha's directed at me weren't terribly funny, and I had yet to lose a sticker . . . or give a kiss. Tiffa and Wilson kept going back and forth at each other, trying to get the other to break – occasionally cracking into guffaws that were promptly rewarded with a chaste kiss to the forehead, followed by a sticker. Tiffa quickly looked like she had the pox, her face was so dotted in stickers. Alice's Ha Ha Ha was so grating that people laughed as they cringed, which got her several kisses and stickers as well.

I don't know what I expected from a New Year's party with a bunch of Brits, but it wasn't Ha Ha Ha, and it definitely wasn't the brown bag game. The brown bag game consisted of standing on one leg like a crane, leaning over, and without touching the floor or the bag, lifting the bag off the floor using only your mouth. Each round, an inch or two would be cut off of the brown bag until there was only a thin lip of bag left. Alice ended up getting a bloody nose when she face planted into the floor. Tiffa was like a long giselle, easily bending herself in half and swooping the bag off the floor like it was a dance move she had mastered years before. Jack was out after the first round. Alice's husband Peter farted every time he made an attempt at the bag, his embarrassed “Pardon me's” almost funnier than the constant toots. Wilson attacked the brown bag game with a single-minded concentration that his sisters claimed was how he played every game, but he was out of his league after two or three rounds.

Apparently, the brown bag game was a Wilson family tradition and not an English tradition at all. The late Dr. Wilson had been the one to introduce his children to the game, and they had played it for as long as any of them could remember. It had been just over two months since I had a baby, and I could

easily have begged off, claiming that I was not up for such a physical game. But I didn't want to pique the other guests curiosity or invite questions, so I joined in and found my distaste for alcohol was a real advantage, as my balance was still intact when everyone else was teetering. The final round was down to me and Tiffa, and Tiffa was talking trash, sounding like Scary Spice, as she glided in for the win.

“Ha ha ha!” she said to me, nose to nose, her eyes crossed comically, as I conceded the victory. This Tiffa was such a contradiction to Tiffa-the-Art-Connoisseur that I giggled and pushed her away.

“You laughed! You laughed at my ha ha ha!” Tiffa squealed and pranced around waving her hands in the air. “Give me a sticker, Blue Echohawk! You have succumbed to my wit! Now I must assign someone to kiss you and kiss you good! Wilson! Pucker up, luv!”

No one really paid much attention to the frozen look on Wilson's face. We were there together, after all, a couple, so to speak. Tiffa's guests were more entertained by her gloating than by the fact that Wilson had stood and was approaching me with the intention of delivering a kiss.

Alice, however, was watching with glee as Wilson leaned in and pressed his lips to mine in a kiss that was mostly air and mostly over before I'd even had a chance to prepare.

“Oh, Cor! That was pathetic, Darcy! What are we, five?” Alice groaned loudly. “This whole party is pathetic! I haven't seen a real kiss all night! All these pruny pecks and stickers and the bloody brown bag game. Cor!” Alice harrumphed loudly. She sat up and pointed to a nice looking guy most of the women had swarmed to when the Ha Ha Ha game started.

“Justin! You're not married, and you're absolutely scrummy. Go give Blue a real kiss, will you please?” Alice was a tiny bit drunk, I suspected. The man named Justin looked at me with interest.

“Now, Peter and I could show you how it's done, couldn't we Peter?” Alice elbowed her husband who had fallen asleep after failing at the brown bag game. He responded with a quiet little snore. Alice shoved him in outrage. “Cor! Puffing and snoring! What romance! Help me, Justin!”

“Help us all, Justin!” Tiffa added emphatically, nudging Justin forward. Everyone burst out laughing, everyone but Wilson, who stood stiffly at my side, his eyes trained on the hunky Justin who had decided to give Alice what she wanted and was heading toward me.

Wilson turned on me suddenly, and his hands cupped my face, his fingertips sliding into my hair. With his eyes on mine, he ducked his head and brushed his lips against my mouth, once and then again, as if afraid that Alice would start “Cor-ing” if he pulled back. His lips were firm and smooth, and his breath tickled my lips. My heart pounded in my throat and my mind screamed at me, demanding I catalog every detail of the event I had dreamed about but never dared hope for. Wilson was kissing me!!

And then I couldn't think at all. His lips were more insistent, his hands pulling me forward and into him as his mouth moved against mine, and then into mine, opening my lips gently, his tongue seeking entrance. And I let him in. And then his arms were wrapped around me, and the kiss became something else. It wasn't a game, it wasn't a show, it was ours, and the room around us did not exist.

We parted on a shared sigh. The room erupted in whoops and clapping as Alice jumped up and down and giggled like a little girl about to sit on Santa's lap.

“That was lovely! Darcy! If you weren't my wee little brother I'd stand on line! Peter! Wake up, man!” Alice turned on her tired spouse who had missed the entire spectacle.

Tiffa was staring at us with a small smile on her lips, as if she'd known it all along. Wilson's hand slid down my arm and captured my fingers in a clasp. His ears were red, but he didn't speak. He held my hand for the rest of the evening, and I swore my heart had swollen in size. I was breathless and thrilled and anxious to be alone, anxious to explore this new development.

As midnight neared, Tiffa turned on the television and passed around noisemakers and confetti. Apparently, another British tradition was watching Big Ben strike twelve, which Tiffa had tiVo-ed when it had actually occurred in London so that everyone would feel like they were right at home . . . in England. I didn't mind giving up Times Square for Big Ben. Or giving up American boys for a nerdy English school teacher. At the moment, I was completely enamored with all things British.

We counted down and then watched as the big clock welcomed the New Year into our corner of the world. Shouts of “Happy New Year!” and hugs and cheers and noisy revelry broke out around the room. Tiffa and Jack had tears on their cheeks as they kissed and held each other, obviously moved by the year they had had and the years that were to come. And I had helped give

them that. I turned to Wilson with a smile, but he looked away, watching the room erupt without joining the celebration.

"Let's go," he said suddenly, "Are you ready? I want to go. We'll sneak out. I'll call Tiffa in the morning and thank her for the party."

"Oh. Okay," I nodded as he hustled me toward the door. He grabbed our coats and was trying to slip out when Tiffa rushed over to us, calling out for us to wait. Wilson winced, and I wondered why he was in such a hurry to leave all of a sudden.

"Darcy, wait! Don't whisk Blue away yet! The fireworks are unbelievable from up here. You missed them on the Fourth of July too! And we haven't crowned the Ha Ha Ha champion!" She descended on us, wrapping her arms around our shoulders.

"I think Justin has that all locked up, Tif." Wilson's voice sounded strange, and a look passed between brother and sister that made my chest feel tight and my face burn hot.

"I see," Tiffa said softly. I wished I did. She leaned over and kissed my cheeks and squeezed my hand. "Thank you for coming, Blue. Jack and I consider you part of our family and always will. When you're ready, you should come see Melody. It would be good for all of us, I think." Her eyes shot to Wilson and back to me. "Happy New Year, luvs."

We descended to the parking garage in silence, the elevator surprisingly full, considering the fact that it was barely midnight and most parties were in full swing. I pressed back into Wilson as floor after floor added a few more occupants all going down. Wilson kept his hand in mine and watched as the numbers ticked lower and lower. My mood descended just as rapidly as I wondered if the trip home would be filled with apologies for a kiss that had lit me up like the Fourth of July . . . or New Year's Eve, to be more exact. Tiffa was right. The fireworks from her balcony would have been unbelievable. I wished we would have stayed to see them, to share another kiss as crashing colors filled the air before reality swept the magic away.

Vegas was a party town, and the crowds were heavy, making navigating away from Tiffa's building slow as the strip was lined with people swarming from one hotel to the next, soaking up the bright lights, endless food, and glitz of a city that catered to celebrations in the extreme. Luckily, The Sheffield was on the south end of the Vegas strip, making it easier to side step the thickest intersections as we climbed up and onto the beltway that

would swing us east toward Boulder City. Wilson had been quiet as he maneuvered his way through the crush of traffic and people, but as the city and her lights fell away behind us, the silence was more than I could stand so I decided to make light of the whole thing.

“You kiss like an old woman, Wilson.”

The car veered wildly, rocking us slightly as Wilson swore and righted the vehicle, his head swiveling between me and the road.

“Bugger!” Wilson sputtered, and then laughed and groaned, running a hand down his face in obvious agitation. “Well, you don’t.”

My heart fluttered and my stomach dropped at his words. “So what’s the problem?”

“That’s the problem.”

“So if you kissed me and it felt like kissing one of The Golden Girls, all would be right in the world? Because that’s what it felt like for me, and I feel fine, while you obviously do not.”

“The Golden Girls?” Wilson obviously didn’t watch American re-runs.

“Well . . . maybe not one of them. Maybe . . . Prince Charles,” I teased.

“But not Camilla? Please tell me it wasn’t like kissing Camilla,” he insisted.

I snickered. Poor Camilla. “Was kissing me like kissing Victoria Beckham?” I poked at him. “Tiffa told me you had a major crush on her when you were seven.”

“Oh, yes. Since I know exactly how it feels to kiss Victoria Beckham.”

“Did you *think* about Victoria Beckham when you kissed me? That’s almost as good.”

“No, Blue. I didn’t. Unfortunately, I was very aware of whom I was kissing and why I shouldn’t be kissing her.”

My attempts to avoid serious examination of “the kiss” had obviously failed. Wilson kept his eyes forward all the way home, and I stifled the urge to ask him to explain himself, to justify his blunt rejection. If he was struggling with his feelings for me, he would have to figure them out. I refused to feed his regret – or even argue with it. I sat in stony silence for the remainder of the ride. He pulled up in front of the house and put the car into park, turning the key and turning to me at the same time.

“I’ve crossed so many lines with you so many times. I was your teacher, for God’s sake! My sister adopted your child! It’s all so convoluted and

complicated, and I don't want to make things messier than they already are. The friendship we have, the incredibly intimate moments we've shared, the fact that you are my tenant . . . I can rationalize all of that away. I can justify all of it . . . as long as there is no romance. Tonight, when I kissed you, I crossed the line from friend, teacher, adviser, bloody father figure," he spat this last line out, clearly disgusted, "to something else entirely, and I owe you an apology. I don't know what I was thinking, letting Alice manipulate me that way."

"Father figure?! Holy Crap!" Now I was horrified. "That's how you see our relationship? Yuck, Wilson!" I slammed out of the car and stomped up the steps, not waiting for Wilson. I really didn't want to kill him, but at that moment, strangling him would not have been a stretch. I heard him behind me, and I swung on him as we climbed the front stairs.

"For the record, Wilson. You *were* my teacher. Once! You've become my friend. I am not a child, and I am not your student. I am a grown woman, not even three years younger than you are. You not only kiss like a stuffy old woman, you're acting like one! Kissing you was no big deal! It was not inappropriate, it was a silly party game. Get over yourself!"

I prided myself on my honesty and here I was, lying through my teeth. The truth is, the kiss *was* a big deal. It was a huge deal. And Wilson definitely didn't kiss like an old woman. But he wasn't getting that truth. Not now. Not after he had ruined everything.

Wilson's eyes were on my mouth, and I could tell he was fighting an inner battle whether to establish his kissing prowess or let me calm his guilty conscience. He really couldn't have it both ways. Either the kiss was a very big deal and we were in an entirely different relationship than he was ready to admit, or the kiss was just a game among friends and he could go on pretending that everything was tidy and uncomplicated and he was just the good guy who looked out for Blue Echohawk.

He approached me, moving deliberately. He stopped just below me so I was only one step above him. Our eyes were now level, as were our mouths.

"It was no big deal?" he said softly.

"Just a silly game," I answered, just as quietly.

"So why do I want to do it again?"

My heart was pounding so hard that it echoed in my head.

"Maybe you just need to prove to me that you aren't an old woman?"

“Ah . . . that's probably it. I just need to show you that I am indeed a man, capable of delivering a kiss that won't make you think of crochet needles and baggy stockings.”

“And talcum powder and dentures.”

Wilson's mouth was a breath away. “That must be it.”

My eyes fluttered closed as he nipped at my bottom lip and then my top. Then he parted my lips with a nudge of his tongue, tasting me softly. His tongue found mine, and we stood, with only our mouths touching, only our mouths moving. For several minutes we remained this way, our bodies inches apart, our hands at our sides, completely focused on the meeting of our lips. The kissing was slow, sweet, languorous, like a cat stretching in the sun.

And then it was over. I held myself still – waiting, hoping – for his mouth to find mine again. But it didn't. My eyes slid open heavily, unwilling to face the end of a truly staggering kiss. Wilson was watching me, a small smile on his lips.

“Take that, Camilla,” he whispered. Without another word, he sidestepped me, walked up the stairs and unlocked the door. He held it open, waiting for me to turn and join him. My limbs felt sluggish and I couldn't keep my eyelids open. The roof of my mouth was so sensitive it was as if I'd eaten peanut butter while in a coma.

Wilson walked me to my door and whispered, “Goodnight Blue.”

I didn't respond. I just watched him walk up the stairs to his apartment, wondering how he had managed to get the last word after all.



Wilson resumed avoiding me for the next month. Maybe he was busy, maybe the new semester had him working late. Several nights I heard his footsteps in the apartment above me after nine o'clock. A teacher's life was a thankless one, I supposed. But I suspected it had more to do with the kiss on New Year's and staying away from me than an increased work load. And, of course, there was Pamela.

Pamela was back from England, worming her way back into Wilson's life,

gobbling up his spare time. They went to the movies, out to dinner, and even played tennis over the weekend. I had never even held a tennis racket. Guess we wouldn't be playing doubles. Plus, I didn't exactly have a partner. I couldn't imagine Bev being very good at tennis, and other than Wilson and Tiffa, she was my best friend. And that was just plain sad.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Iridescent

And then the lab called.

I had worked seven straight eight-hour shifts at the cafe, and when I wasn't at the cafe, I was in the basement, wallowing in all the space I'd been given. Wilson stayed away. The only connection I felt with him was at night, when I sat beneath the vent, listening to him play his cello. I had tried to wean myself from even that, simply because the music chafed at my longing and made me feel raw and rejected. But night after night, I found myself with my face upturned, torturing myself with sound, cursing Wilson and his space.

It wasn't that I had forgotten about the pending results of the DNA testing. I hadn't. But I hadn't awaited them eagerly. So when the call came, I was unprepared.

"Blue Echohawk?"

"Yes. This is Blue."

"This is Heidi Morgan from the Forensics Lab in Reno. We have the results."

My heart actually hurt it was pounding so hard.

"Okay." My lips felt numb, and the simple word was all I could form.

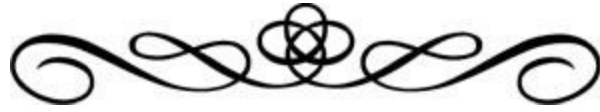
"We have a match, Blue. We'd like you to come back to Reno."

"Okay," I repeated. They had a match. They knew who I was. "I . . . I need a second to think. I will have to get off work and get a plane ticket . . . and I . . . I need to think," I stuttered out, sounding ridiculous even to my own ears.

"Absolutely," Heidi Morgan replied warmly. "Give us a call when you've made your arrangements. I have been in contact with Detective Moody and Sergeant Martinez. Everyone is pretty excited, Blue. This kind of thing doesn't happen very often."

I promised I would be in touch and disconnected the call, collapsing onto my old recliner where it rested beneath the vent, awaiting another late night symphony. I tried to calm my racing heart and breathe through the nerves that had me biting my nails and tapping my feet against the floor. I needed to tell someone. I needed to tell Wilson. But he wasn't home, and I was mad at him.

Without pausing to talk myself out of it, I grabbed the keys and headed out the door. I would go see Tiffa.



Tiffa's building had a doorman, and I supposed that was good because he warned Tiffa I was on my way up, giving her time to compose herself in the face of my surprising visit. But she answered the door immediately and pulled me into the house with a fierce hug and a wide smile.

“Blue! You twit! Why didn't you tell me you were coming? I would have ordered lunch and champagne to celebrate! And I would have had a chance to change my blouse! Melody spit up all over it. She spits up on everything, so be warned. At the very least I could have changed her nappies so she could make a good first impression! As it is, you are going to have to put up with us as we are – smelly and hungry!” Tiffa's laughter floated around me like a balmy breeze, and I relaxed immediately, letting her pull me toward the bedroom.

Melody's nursery looked like a garden with butterflies and birds fluttering on the walls and perched on the branches of blossomed trees. A chipmunk poked his head from a hole in the trunk, and a family of rabbits hopped along the wall above the plush pale green carpeting. The ceiling was a blue sky, peppered with fat white clouds and a flock of tiny geese flying in V formation. A wise old owl looked down from a branch that stretched above the crib, which was draped in seafoam green canopy, sprinkled in little pink flowers, like a little hill in springtime. There were stuffed animals straight out of the movie *Bambi* lining the edges of the room, and a giant white rocker brimming with flower-shaped pillows took up another corner.

It was absolutely enchanting. Every little girl should have a room like that. But it was the baby in the crib that held my attention. She gurgled and kicked her chubby legs. The black hair that she had at birth had morphed into a lighter brown, and she had easily doubled in size. I had only seen her for a few seconds, but those seconds were burned in my brain. This baby looked very different from the image in my head. But her eyes were blue. She

smiled and wiggled, arms and legs churning, and I found myself smiling back, blinking through eyes that had suddenly filled with tears. The regret that I had feared, that I had dreaded, that had kept me away, didn't crash down on me like I thought it would. The tears in my eyes felt more like relief than sorrow, and I clung to Tiffa's hand, grateful for her in a way I would never be able to put into words.

"She is . . . so . . . so.." I stammered

"Perfect," Tiffa finished, her own eyes shining with tears as she put her arms around me and squeezed me fiercely. "Perfect. Dirty nappies and all. Let me change her bum so you can hold her."

In three months, Tiffa had become a pro, changing the diaper with deft hands and whisking it all away while she cooed and talked to Melody, whose eyes stayed trained on her face. Tiffa let me powder Melody's wrinkly pink tush, and we both sneezed loudly when I got a little carried away.

Tiffa laughed. "You do it just like Jack. He says you can never have too much baby powder. When Daddy's on duty, Melody gives off a little fragrant poof every time she kicks."

Tiffa scooped Melody up and set her in my arms.

"Here. You rock the wee one while I get her bottle." Tiffa patted my cheek, dropped a kiss on Melody's flyaway hair, and was out of the room before I could protest. I sat stiffly on the edge of the rocker. Not counting the few seconds after Melody's birth, I had never held a baby. I tried not to hold her too loosely or too tight, but her face wrinkled in dissatisfaction and her lower lip jutted out, as if she were preparing to howl.

"Okay, okay. You don't like that position. We can adjust!" I rushed to oblige, holding her so her head bobbed above my shoulder, one of my hands on her bottom, one hand pressed against her back. She promptly latched onto my cheek and started sucking frantically. I yelped, pulling away, and she reattached herself to my nose.

"Tiffa! Help! She's got my nose!" I laughed, trying to disengage from the little blood sucker. She immediately started to wail, and I turned her around so she was facing outward, her head against my chest. I bounced her a little and walked around the room, talking to her the way Tiffa had.

"Oh look, Melody. There are some baby bunnies! Little grey bunnies the color of Uncle Wilson's eyes." I stopped myself abruptly. Where had that come from? I moved onto other exciting features of the room. "Oh, boy!" I

continued in my syrupy sweet tone. “There's a little chipmunk. He's looking for Melody. He sees you, Melody!”

Melody stopped crying, so I kept going, walking around the room, bouncing her in my arms. “That little chipmunk better watch out! Mr. Owl is watching him, and owls love to gobble up chipmunks!” I bit my lip. Maybe that was scary. I tried again.

“Owls are the only bird that can see the color blue. Did you know that Melody?”

“Really?” Tiffa walked into the bedroom, shaking a bottle briskly in her right hand. “Is that true?”

“Yes. I mean, I think it is. Jimmy, my father, loved birds, and he knew all sorts of random interesting things. I've probably forgotten most of what he told me, but that was a joke between us. I assumed, naively, that because owls were the only birds who could see the color blue that I must be invisible to all other birds.”

Tiffa smiled, “Because you were BLUE.”

“Yeah. I thought it was awesome.”

“Invisibility would come in handy, wouldn't it?” Tiffa handed me the bottle, but I begged off.

“You do it, please! She's hungry, and I don't want to make her cry again. She tried to get milk from my nose.”

Tiffa giggled, took Melody from my arms, and settled into the rocker. Melody began to suckle in earnest. Tiffa and I watched her, our eyes glued to her happy face, her cheeks moving in and out in ecstasy, so content and easy to please.

“Speaking of invisibility,” Tiffa said quietly, not raising her eyes from Melody's face, “I'm a little surprised to see you. Happy – but surprised. What's going on, Blue?”

“The lab called today. They said they have a match. They know who I am, Tiffa. They know who my mother is. They asked me to come to Reno.”

“Ohhhh, Blue,” Tiffa drew the words out in one long sigh. Her gaze was full of compassion and a lump rose in my throat. I swallowed hard and tried to laugh.

“I hope I didn't scare you, showing up here, wild-eyed and panic-stricken. I just needed to tell someone. And I thought of Melody, and how I need these answers for her sake, even if sometimes I would rather never know.”

"I'm so glad you did. It was time. And you weren't wild-eyed and panic-stricken. You are always as cool as a cucumber, Blue Echohawk. I read people pretty well, but you are always so self-contained, so private. What's that saying? Still waters run deep? In that way, you and Darcy are so much alike." When I didn't comment, Tiffa just shook her head in exasperation, as if my silence proved her point.

"He came by yesterday, you know," Tiffa said casually. "I think he's smitten."

My heart dropped to my toes. My face must have registered my distress because Tiffa stopped rocking abruptly.

"What? Blue, what did I say?"

"Nothing," I lied, shaking my head. "I figured as much."

Tiffa cocked her head to the side, confused. "Figured what?"

"That he was smitten," I responded flatly. I felt sick.

"He's smitten with Melody!" Tiffa cried, and shook her head, disbelieving. "You should have seen your face. Who did you think I was talking about? Pamela?"

I looked down at my feet, unwilling to answer.

"Blue. What in the world is going on with you two? I thought after New Year's that you would both finally admit you have feelings for each other. It's so obvious! I asked Wilson about you yesterday and he acted so aloof. I didn't know what to make of it."

"Yeah. Wilson must be a rare breed of bird. Definitely not an owl because I've become completely invisible."

"Oh, luv," Tiffa sighed. "My brother is my mother's son. Maybe not biologically, but in every other way. His sense of propriety is positively archaic. I've been surprised he's allowed himself to get as close to you as he has. And that kiss? Alice and I were crowing about it for days."

I kept my face averted, uncomfortable with the turn in the conversation, but Tiffa kept rocking and talking. "What my brother needs is a push. It sure worked when we dangled you in front of Justin. Maybe it's time for you to spread your wings and force him to make a choice," she mused, patting Melody's back. The bottle was long gone and Melody was too, snoring softly with milk dribbling from the corner of her bow shaped mouth.

"I have been working on something, but I haven't wanted to tell you until it was a sure thing. I had an artist scheduled to be part of a exhibit at the

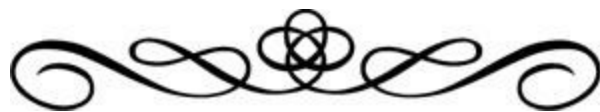
Sheffield next Saturday night. He decided he wanted to renegotiate his contract, and ended up renegotiating himself right out the door. It just so happens that I think your work will gel nicely with the entire exhibit. In fact, I think your work will stand out. I've been holding back 'Bird Woman' and a few other pieces, simply because they demand a certain kind of audience. I think we will be able to sell 'Bird Woman' for \$5,000 at the exhibit, where it might sit for months in the gallery."

I gulped and swore under my breath. Tiffa just winked at me. "That's a bargain, luv. Someday your work will sell for far more, I guarantee it. 'Bird Woman,' 'Rubicon,' 'Witch,' and the one you named 'Armor' are the only pieces I have left. All of those will be stunning, but I need more. What do you have completed?"

I had carved one called 'The Saint.' It was St. Patrick immortalized in wood, though the stooped man with a shepherd's staff walking in the curling flames that appeared to dance around him could easily be mistaken for something entirely different. The one Wilson had named 'Loss' was in the basement too, covered by a sheet beside my workbench so I wouldn't have to see it. It might be my best work yet, but it hurt to look at it. And there were several others, including the intertwined branches that I had frenetically lost myself in a month ago.

"I can come up with ten."

"Then it's set. Get me the pieces, and I will make it happen. And Blue? Don't tell Darcy. It will be our little surprise."



I finished my shift at the cafe late Thursday night and headed for home, my mind on Saturday's exhibit, on the carvings I had assembled, and on the call to Reno I hadn't yet made. They must think I was nuts. Detective Moody had left two messages on my voicemail and I'd received another from Heidi Morgan at the lab. I told myself after the showcase I would call them.

A big part of my indecision was Wilson. I had shared this journey with him, and in the last month I had hardly seen him. He'd become my best

friend, and I missed him desperately, and was angry with him for pulling away. I'd decided "space" was just another one of those, "it's not you, it's me" slogans people use when they want to end a relationship. But friendships weren't supposed to end. I wished we'd never shared that damned kiss. Wilson hadn't been the same since.

I was standing in front of my apartment door, perusing my mail, when I heard Wilson's door open and shut above me. I tensed, listening to his footsteps near the top of the stairs, and then grimaced as I heard Pamela's voice asking him about the exhibit at The Sheffield on Saturday.

"I saw the tickets. Were you going to surprise me? Is it my Valentine's Day surprise?" Pamela teased, and her flirtatious tone made me want to run up the stairs and hurl her over the banister. She must not have sensed my murderous intent, because she kept right on talking.

"We can have dinner with my parents before. They'll be staying at the hotel through next week." I had forgotten about Pamela's connection to the hotel. Tiffa said the Sheffield family wasn't the sole owner of the hotel any longer, but money talked, and the hotel still bore the Sheffield name.

Pamela and Wilson reached the bottom of the stairs and I slunk back, hoping they wouldn't see me. I should have gone into my apartment and closed the door. Now it was too late to do so without alerting them of my presence. So I stood, frozen, watching Pamela loop her arms around Wilson's neck and stand up on her toes to place a quick kiss on his lips. I looked away. I should have watched, should have made myself acknowledge that she was the girl in his life. And I was the neighbor. The project. The whim? I had no idea what I was to Wilson anymore.

"See you Saturday?" Pamela asked.

I didn't hear Wilson's answer, I was too busy unlocking my door. I decided I didn't care if they knew I was there. I shut the door behind me. When I heard a soft knock several minutes later, I considered ignoring it. It could only be Wilson, and he would only make me feel worse. But I was just a girl. And the guy I liked stood on the other side of the door. So I opened it.

"Hi," I said cheerfully, as if I was completely unaffected by what I had just seen. Wilson didn't look like a man who had just enjoyed a goodnight kiss. He looked a little upset. And a little stressed. I tried not to read anything into it.

"Hi," he replied softly. "Can I talk to you for a minute?"

“Sure. Mi casa es su casa . . . literally.” I turned and walked into my home, feeling him at my back. “Did Camilla just leave?” I asked pointedly. When Wilson didn't answer I looked up at him in question.

“Camilla?” he smirked, folding his arms. “You asked me if Camilla just left.”

“Is that what I said?” I frowned.

“Yes. You called Pamela Camilla.”

“Hmmm. Freudian slip,” I mumbled, a little embarrassed. It wasn't my fault. I had been thinking of kisses, and lately kisses made me think of Camilla . . . and The Golden Girls.

The carving I had been working on the last time we talked sat on my kitchen table, and Wilson halted beside it abruptly. He studied it intently, turning it this way and that, but I was distracted, knowing that any mention of Camilla had to remind him of what had transpired between us more than a month ago.

“Tell me what you see when you look at this sculpture,” Wilson asked after a while, his eyes roving down the sensual lines of the stained mahogany. His hand traced the contours reverently.

I had whittled away the heaviness from the branches, creating hollows and sinews and shaping the suggestion of lovers wrapped around each other while still maintaining the natural innocence and simplicity of the merging branches. The branches were mountain mahogany, the wood a natural reddish brown. I had rubbed several applications of black stain into one branch, and it gleamed like a black jungle cat, the golden red tones melding with the dark stain so the black looked like it was silhouetted in sunlight. I applied no stain to the other branch but had simply buffed and glossed the golden red wood until it glowed like amber. The effect was that the two limbs in the sculpture appeared to be different wood, branches from two different kinds of trees. The result was a statement all its own.

I looked away. I felt hot and angry, and my chest was tight with a feeling Wilson always seemed to stir in me.

“I'd rather not.”

“Why?” Wilson sounded genuinely confused by my refusal, since I was usually eager to discuss my carvings with him.

“Why do you want my explanation? What do *you* see when you look at it?” I said crossly. Wilson withdrew his hand from the sculpture and grabbed

my braid where it hung over my shoulder. He tugged it gently, wrapping it around his hand as he did.

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing's wrong. I'm preoccupied,” I protested. “And my art is not about what I see. It's about what I feel. And right now I don't really want to discuss what I feel.” I tried to pull my hair free from his hand, but he wound it tighter, pulling me toward him.

“I see limbs and love and lust,” Wilson stated flatly. I stopped resisting, and my eyes rose to his. Wilson's gaze was wide and frank, but his jaw was clenched as if he knew he was crossing that invisible line he had drawn for himself.

“I'm not surprised you see those things,” I said softly.

“Why?” His eyes were intense, and I was suddenly furious. I was in love with Wilson, no doubt about it, but I would not be toyed with, and I sure as hell wasn't going to play kissy face ten minutes after Pamela left.

“You've just spent the evening with Pamela,” I reminded him sweetly. “She is a beautiful woman.”

Wilson's eyes flashed, and he dropped my braid, turning back toward the sculpture. I could tell he was mentally counting to ten. If I made him angry, it was his own fault. What did he think I was going to do? Wrap myself around him after he had ignored me off and on for months? I wasn't that girl. But maybe he thought I was. I took several deep breaths and ignored the tension that simmered between us. It was thick enough to slice and serve with a big dollop of denial. He took several steps, his hands fisted in his hair, putting some distance between us.

I stood my ground, waiting for him to make the next move. I had no idea what he was doing here. And he didn't seem to know either. When he looked at me again, his mouth was set in a grim line, and his eyes held a note of pleading, as if he needed to convince me of something.

“You said your art is about what you feel, not what you see. I told you what I see. Now you tell me what you feel,” he demanded.

“What are we talking about, Wilson?” I shot back. I walked toward him, hands shoved in my pockets. “Are we talking about the sculpture?” He watched me as I approached, but I didn't stop until our toes were almost touching.

“If we're talking about the sculpture, fine. I see desire and belonging and

love without space.” I said the words like I was a guide at an art museum, putting emphasis on the word space. “What do I feel? Well, that's easy. I've been at work all day. I'm tired, Wilson. And I'm hungry. And I don't like Pamela. There. That's what I feel. How about you?”

Wilson looked at me like he wanted to shake me until my teeth rattled. Then he just shook his head and walked to the door. “I'm sorry I asked, Blue,” he sighed. He sounded weary and resigned, like one of those TV dads just trying to tolerate his teen-aged daughter. “Goodnight, Blue.”

I was too confused and befuddled to even respond. He walked out of my apartment without another word.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Electric

I spent a ridiculously long time curling my hair. When I finished, it hung in shiny dark waves down my back. I took great care applying dramatic makeup, more than I'd worn in months. I thought it suitable for an artist at her first exhibit. I had splurged on a cocktail dress that would highlight my eyes, and the electric blue was exactly the same shade. It hadn't been very expensive, but I was crossing my fingers that it didn't look cheap. It had small cap sleeves and a high neckline, but it draped lower in the back, almost to my waist. It skimmed my curves without being too tight or suggestive, and it ended just above the knee. I found a pair of high-heeled sandals to match. I thought I looked pretty good and squealed a little when I was ready. I looked grown up and alluring but sophisticated too, like Tiffa. I waited just inside my door, listening for Wilson to leave his apartment. If he and Pamela were meeting her parents for dinner, he would be leaving soon. I didn't have to wait long. Wilson strolled out of his flat and started down the stairs at exactly 6:30.

I calmly locked my door and walked toward the front door, just like I planned, reaching the base of the staircase before Wilson did. He was scrolling through his phone, but when he heard the click of my heels, he glanced up and his eyes widened. I tried not to smile. I had desperately wanted that reaction. He could think about me the whole time he was out with Pamela. I hoped he had a rotten time. His eyes traveled up and down the length of me and seemed to get stuck on my legs. It was all I could do to not giggle. I cleared my throat instead. His eyes snapped up to mine and he glowered at me. Wait. That wasn't what I wanted. Blushing, stammering, compliments – all of that was good. Glowering looks were not part of the plan.

“Where are you off to?” His voice sounded funny. Almost angry.

“Out,” I said lightly.

“I see.” Wilson's expression was indecipherable. “That frock's a bit short.”

“Really?” I laughed, incredulous. I looked down at the hem that really

wasn't very short. "And why exactly do you care how short my skirt is?"

"I don't," Wilson replied brusquely. He definitely did. Maybe he was jealous. That was a good thing. A very good thing. I shrugged and walked past him toward the door. My hair brushed against the bare skin of my back. Wilson cursed.

"Bugger! So it all starts again, does it?" Wilson bit out behind me. I froze. Pain lanced through me, and I spun on him. His face was like granite, his eyes icy, his jaw clenched. His arms were crossed and his stance was wide, almost as if he were bracing himself for my comeback.

"What do you mean, Wilson? What am I starting again?" I kept my voice low and contained, but inside I was quaking.

"You know exactly what I mean, Blue." Wilson's voice was harsh and his words clipped.

"Oh, I see," I whispered. And I did. It was written all over his face. Revulsion. He didn't see a glamorous woman on her way to a classy exhibit. He saw a tawdry teenager with a sordid past all dressed up for a night on the corner.

"I'm reverting to my slutty ways. That must be it." I raised one thin eyebrow disdainfully and held it there, waiting for him to correct me. He just glared back and was silent.

I pivoted in disgust and yanked the front door open.

"Blue!"

I didn't turn, but I paused, waiting for an apology.

"I'm not going to watch you destroy yourself. If this is the road you want to go down, I won't come after you." Wilson's voice was hard, almost unrecognizable.

I shook my head, unable to speak. Where had this come from? What had I done to make him go all parental and self-righteous on me? I wanted to scream at him, scratch his eyes out, and tell him what a jerk he was being. But I didn't want to be that girl anymore. In spite of what he thought, I wasn't that girl anymore. So I turned and leveled a look at him.

"I guess the dye is cast . . . huh?"

I turned and walked out of the building, my spine stiff, but my chin quivering. If he watched me leave, I didn't know. I looked neither to the right nor left, but drove away looking straight forward. I did not cry. I did not curse. I just drove, stone-faced, to the hotel.

Tiffa had told me to go to valet parking and I did, refusing to be embarrassed by my dumpy old truck. I stepped out of it like I was royalty and dropped my keys in the valet's hand with a comment to make sure he didn't "scratch my baby." The man was good at his job, and he didn't even bat an eye. I was grateful for his ability to hide his real feelings and vowed that tonight I would hide mine just as well. It was a talent I had let get rusty.

I swept through the door and asked the first official looking person I saw where I could find the art exhibit. He directed me to the elevators and instructed me to get off on the gallery floor, marked with a G next to the button. Panic bubbled up in my chest, and for a moment I considered leaving. Just kicking off my heels and heading for the door. I gritted my teeth and stepped onto the elevator, along with several other people in formal attire. I stared at myself in the mirror, trying not to see what Wilson had seen. My pleasure in my appearance had been crushed into tiny, vicious shards. My reflection stared back at me defiantly. My eyes looked too big in my face, and the pink in my cheeks had been leached out with the joy I no longer felt. What had I been thinking?

Tiffa descended on me as soon as I stepped out of the elevator. The room beyond was soft with strategic lighting and carefully placed art. A huge painting of a weeping face took center stage. The tears were so lifelike they shimmered wetly in the lights.

"Blue! You look wonderful! Smashing! Where is Darcy?" Tiffa looked beyond me to the elevator doors that were firmly shut. "He is going to die when he sees your pieces on display! I can't wait!" She squealed girlishly, and I felt a wash of intense affection sweep over me. But like the tide, the wave of love was yanked back into the sea of my disappointment as my thoughts were focused once again on Wilson.

"I didn't tell him."

"Yes, luv, I know. I invited him!" Tiffa whispered theatrically. "I told him he had to come tonight. I said there was a brilliant new artist whose work he had to see. I sent him tickets and everything. Did he bodge it up then?"

You could say that. I felt pretty bodged up. "I don't know what Wilson's plans are." My voice sounded flat and cold, and Tiffa's eyebrows shot up. It wasn't quite true, but I didn't elucidate.

"Hmm." Her eyes scoured my face. She pursed her red lips in contemplation. "He bodged it good," was all she said. Then she looped her

arm through mine and pulled me forward. "Come see how we've arranged your pieces. They are breathtaking, Blue. I've already had a slew of people ask after them. You are already a hit." I let myself be pulled along and vowed to forget Wilson and the way he had looked at me. I was "a hit." Tiffa said so, and I was going to do my best to enjoy the moment, surreal as it all was.

'Bird Woman' filled an entire corner. She was elevated on a black platform. The lighting overhead turned the wood into liquid gold. For a moment, I saw the sculpture as others would, and my breath caught in my throat. There was only the hint of a woman in the dramatic sweep of wood and the suggestion of outstretched wings. It was the reason I hated to title my sculptures; the title limited it. I didn't want to do that. I wanted people to interpret what they saw without influence from me.

A few people stood around it, studying it, turning their heads this way and that. My heart pounded so loudly I thought it would shake the room and its precious contents. Tiffa glided toward the man who seemed most enamored by the woman encased in wood. She reached out a graceful hand and touched the man's sleeve.

"Mr. Wayne, this is the artist." She slid her other hand down into my own. Mr. Wayne turned toward us. His silver hair was slicked back from his face. It was an interesting face, more suited to a mobster than an art connoisseur. He was powerfully built, and his black tuxedo fit him well. He seemed surprised by the introduction, and his mouth curved as his gaze met mine.

"I want her," he said bluntly, his voice as accented as Tiffa's. He must work at The Sheffield, too. I felt heat flood my face, and Tiffa laughed, that tinkling waterfall sound that said, "You are so wonderful – I adore you!"

"And you may have her. The sculpture, that is," Tiffa responded with a mischievous twinkle. "This is Blue Echohawk." She said my name as if I were someone very important. I tried not to giggle. I settled on stone face. It was my go-to face when I had no clue of how to respond.

"Your work is beautiful. But more importantly, it's fascinating. I find myself getting lost in it. That's when I know I want something." Mr. Wayne raised the glass of clear liquid he was drinking and sipped it thoughtfully. "I almost didn't come tonight. But Tiffa can be quite insistent."

"Mr. Wayne is an owner of The Sheffield, Blue," Tiffa said simply. I tried not to quake. Tiffa turned back to Mr. Wayne. I wondered briefly if his first name was Bruce. He looked like he could have a Batmobile stashed on the

roof.

Tiffa continued, “The Echohawk pieces are going to be worth a fortune someday. The Sheffield scored a major coupe in the art world tonight.” Tiffa oozed confidence. I felt like putting my hand over her mouth.

“I agree.” Mr. Wayne cocked his head to the side. “Well done, Tiffa.” He extended a hand to me. “Would you show me your other pieces?”

Tiffa didn't even hesitate. “What a brilliant idea. I will be around, Blue.” And she was off, moving on to another couple without a second look. Mr. Wayne smelled expensive. He threaded my hand through his arm, the way Wilson did sometimes, and we moved to my next sculpture. Maybe it was a British thing, the courtly manners. Or maybe it was something that rich, educated, men did. I had had so little experience with any of the above. I moved beside him and tried to think of something clever to say. My mind ran in dizzying circles as I groped desperately for something – anything – to converse about. I suddenly realized Mr. Wayne wasn't waiting for witty remarks but was engrossed in the sculpture before him.

“I think I've changed my mind. I want this one instead.” I noticed the sculpture in front of me for the first time. 'Loss' bowed before me in anguished repose. I wanted to turn away. I had been relieved when Tiffa had sent the truck to pick it up. I didn't respond, but looked beyond it, hoping Mr. Wayne would move on.

“It's almost painful to look at,” he murmured. I felt him looking at me, and I brought my eyes to his. “Ah, there's a story here, I can tell.” He smiled. I smiled too, but it felt forced. I knew I should tell him about the piece, sell it, sell myself. But I couldn't. I had no idea how. An awkward silence followed. He eventually spoke, saving us both.

“Someone told me once that to create true art you must be willing to bleed and let others watch.” I felt a little exposed and suddenly wanted to melt into the shadows of the room where I could observe without being observed.

“There is suffering in every line. It's simply . . . wonderful.” His voice was gentle, and I berated myself silently. Here I was on the arm of someone who could be enormously helpful to me in my career, and I wanted to escape.

“Then it's yours,” I answered suddenly. “It is my gift to you, to thank you for this opportunity.”

“Oh no.” He shook his leonine head emphatically. “No. I will buy this sculpture. Thank you, but a tremendous price was paid in the creation of this

piece, and it should not be given away for free.” His voice was both tender and kind.

My heart thudded painfully and emotion rose in my chest. “Thank you,” was all I could manage. And we moved on.

The night continued, a blur of expensive clothing and heady praise. I lost my pain in the pleasure of attention and moved from one effusive patron to the next, Tiffa always nearby. Toward the end of the evening, Tiffa stopped and waved to someone across the room.

“He came, luv. Are you still miffed at him? Should I keep him away so you can make him suffer?” My head shot up, finding the “him” she referred to standing in front of the weeping visage that welcomed new arrivals to the gallery. Wilson looked pressed and proper in his black tux. Tall, handsome, his hair slicked back, barely a wave in sight. I wished I could run my fingers through it and tousle it into floppy curls. I turned away immediately. He had seen Tiffa wave and had been in the act of raising his hand in response when he saw me at her side. His hand froze mid-wave.

“And he brought that naff cow with him,” Tiffa moaned. “What is with my little brother? His taste in women is ghastly. Well, now we know what he did with the other ticket. He's positively dead from the neck up.” She muttered the last part under her breath. I wasn't sure what she referred to. Pamela wasn't exactly a cow. Or a dog. Or anything remotely unattractive, as much as I wished she were.

“I'm leaving now, Tiffa. Have I schmoozed and schlepped enough?” I said brightly, already pulling away.

“No! Blue! What in the world is going on with you and my silly brother? This is your big night!”

“And it's been amazing. But I don't want to talk to Wilson right now. We had a pretty tense moment right before I came tonight. I am not ready to be anywhere near him.”

“Miss Echohawk!” Mr. Wayne approached from my right, a small Asian man walking beside him. “Miss Echohawk,” Mr. Wayne extended his hand in introduction, “this is Mr. Yin Chen.” The little man bowed slightly. “He is intrigued by your work. He begged for an introduction.”

Next to me, Tiffa was practically vibrating. This must be someone important. What was his name? I suddenly felt like the top of my head was going to pop off and float away like a helium balloon. Should I bow too?

Tiffa did. So I copied her.

“Nice to meet you,” I murmured, clueless.

“Mr. Chen is especially interested in the one you've titled 'Cello,’” Mr. Wayne smiled down at Mr. Chen indulgently.

Mr. Chen! That was it. Not too hard to remember. From the corner of my eye, I saw Wilson approaching with Pamela on his arm. I stepped on Tiffa's foot, probably more viciously than was warranted. Tiffa gasped slightly and moved to engage Mr. Chang(?) in conversation. I turned to Mr. Wayne, and he dipped his head discreetly and murmured softly in my ear, pulling me aside, which was fine with me as it moved me away from Wilson.

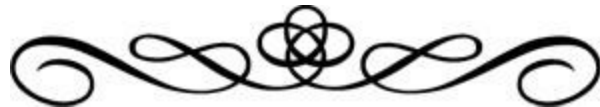
“Mr. Chen (Chen!) is a Bei Jing mogul – one of the whales we like to take very good care of whenever he's in town. He fancies himself quite the art oficianado. If he likes your work and thinks you are the next big thing, he will move heaven and earth to buy up as many pieces as he can.”

“Will he buy them all?” I asked, trying not to squeak like a child.

“Unfortunately for Mr. Chen, they have all sold.” Mr. Wayne smiled down at me.

“All of them!” I whispered, stunned.

“Yes. All of them.”



Wilson's tuxedo jacket was flung over the railing and his tie was loose, hanging in a tired curl. His top few buttons were undone, and he was slumped on the stairs, elbows on his knees, hands clasped in front of him. I watched him through the glass of the front door for a moment, wondering what he could say that would make me forgive him. He had revealed too much, and I couldn't get his words out of my head. They blinked in neon, buzzing continuously in my brain.

I had been congratulated, praised, even adored that night. But it was Wilson's words that filled my head. The Bei Jing Mogul whose name I couldn't seem to remember had commissioned five separate pieces and had presented me with a check for \$5,000. I would receive another check for the

same amount when the carvings were completed, and The Sheffied was letting me take the full commission. The night had been a success that I could build a future on. A success I hadn't even dared dream of. But my heart ached in my chest, and I had felt sick to my stomach all night because of Wilson.

He stood as I unlocked the front door. I dropped the keys into my purse and headed for my apartment, not acknowledging him. I had driven around town for hours after leaving the exhibit. For the first time since moving in, I hadn't wanted to go home to Pemberley.

“Blue.”

I had to dig the keys back out again at my door. Smooth. My hands shook, and I sneered down at them. I would not shake! I would not show him weakness.

“Blue.” It was just a whisper, and I flinched against the quivering in my limbs, the shattering of my heart. And then he was next to me, his head bent over mine. I kept my head bowed, staring at the lock on my door.

“I was worried about you.”

“Why?” I responded quietly. The key slid into the lock, and I turned the knob gratefully. “Didn't Tiffa tell you? I was the high-priced call girl for the event. They hired me to keep Mr. Ying Yang happy.” I batted my eyelashes at him, not really looking at him as I shoved the door open and walked into the narrow entryway of my apartment.

Wilson jerked like I'd shot him. And then he was crowding me up against the wall, slamming the door behind us so hard the picture of me and Jimmy teetered and fell, crashing to the floor. Wilson's hands bracketed my head, and he leaned into me, his lips trembling.

“Stop. Stop that. It isn't funny, Blue. It's sick. It makes me want to hunt down Mr. Bloody Chen, whatever the hell his name is —”

“Isn't that what you thought when I left tonight?” I interrupted. “That I was on the prowl?”

“Why didn't you tell me?” he choked out in disbelief. “I was so bloody proud. It was brilliant. All of it. And you didn't tell me. You let me go on like a complete asshole.”

“I *let* you? I got all dressed up and you . . . you insulted me and implied I looked like a . . . wh-whore.” I pushed against him, shoved him angrily, needing to breathe, not wanting to break down in front of him. But he didn't back off, instead his hands dropped to frame my face, forcing my gaze to his.

I looked away immediately, defiantly.

"I was afraid." I watched his mouth and tried to focus on what he'd said to me earlier. I reminded myself of his revulsion, his disdain. But his lips were so close. He was so close. His breath smelled sweet, and I felt a shuddering deep in my belly.

"I was afraid, Blue," he repeated, insistent. "You've been through so much. And I am half mad over you. I don't think you are ready for the way I feel."

My heart thudded to a standstill, and my breath hitched. And then . . . his lips brushed mine. Slowly, tenderly. Barely there. He spoke again, his words tickling my mouth. I gripped the back of his shirt, twisting the fabric, desperately trying not to lose my mind.

"I've tried to give it time. I've tried to give you time. And then I saw you tonight. You were all dressed up, ready for a night out, impossibly beautiful, confident, strong. And I thought I had lost you once and for all."

I could feel his heart pounding in his chest, and mine raced to join the cadence. And then his mouth closed over mine again. Not hesitant, not whispering. And I too felt lost. Completely. It was a kiss too long denied. Asking, opening, claiming. And the room spun as I clung to him. My hands moved over the length of his back, pulling him into me, needing more.

His wrapped his arms around me and lifted me up and into him, opening his mouth on mine, demanding entrance. He tasted like black licorice and snowflakes. Simultaneously forbidden and familiar. Hot and cold. Sinful and safe.

His mouth left mine to rain kisses on my eyelids, my cheeks, my throat, and his hands gripped my hips desperately, crushing the fabric in his hands as if he resented the barrier. I felt like I was riding a wave, mounting a crest, and I couldn't get close enough to him. Then he lifted me, wrapping my legs around his waist, as he claimed my mouth again, swallowing my name as he spoke against my lips.

"Blue, I need you so much. I want you so much."

And his face rose in my mind . . . the way he had looked as he told me he wouldn't follow me down "that road." I broke away, panting, my legs still locked around him, his arms braced around my body.

"Do you want me, Wilson? Do you want me? Or do you love me?" The words rushed out of me, and Wilson's eyes were heavy with passion, his lips a breath away, seeking me again, as if he hadn't registered the question. I

pulled back further, denying myself, denying him. His brow furrowed and he nipped at my lips, pulling my head toward him, demanding more. I resisted, even as my body trembled with need. I unlocked my legs from his waist, letting my feet find the floor. I smoothed my skirt down, grateful that my legs held me. If I didn't stop now, I wouldn't have the strength to say no. And tonight I had to say no.

Wilson looked dazed, as if all reason had left him.

“Blue?”

“I saw it when you looked at me tonight. You were disgusted. You looked at me like I was . . . cheap.” I took a deep breath. “But I'm not that girl anymore. And so you need to go. Please.” My voice wasn't strong, but it was firm. Wilson seemed stunned. He ran his hand along the back of his neck, confusion and remorse warring in his eyes.

I moved beyond him and opened the door. I waited next to it, my heart in my throat.

“Please, Wilson,” I entreated. He moved as if he didn't know what else to do, stepping slowly into the foyer beyond my door like a man who has just suffered a terrible shock. I closed the door behind him and waited, my ear pressed against it, until I heard his footsteps move away. They tread heavily upon the stairs. I locked the door and knelt, retrieving the picture that had fallen to the floor. Jimmy's face stared back at me, but it was my own that drew me in. A little girl with long braids, longer than Jimmy's but plaited just like his were. I was missing my two front teeth, and I smiled gleefully, mugging for the camera in all my toothless glory. Jimmy didn't smile, but his arm was wrapped around me, and I clung to it as naturally as he held me to him. As if I were precious. As if I were loved.

There was a crack in the glass. I hung the picture back up anyway, straightening it carefully. The crack separated the top half of our bodies from the lower half. Luckily, the picture wasn't damaged. We were still whole beneath the jagged scar. I stopped, considering. I was scarred, but I was not broken. Beneath my wounds I was still whole. Beneath my insecurities, beneath my pain, beneath my struggle, beneath it all, I was still whole.

I dimmed the lights and slipped out of my dress in quiet contemplation. And then, above my head, music began. I walked to the living room and lifted my face to the vent, listening. Wilson tuned and tightened the strings, plucking and playing as he went. And as I listened, I was filled with wonder.

Willie Nelson. Wilson was playing Willie Nelson. “You Were Always on my Mind” had never sounded so sweet. It was as if it had been written for the cello, though I doubted most people would even recognize Willie Nelson in Wilson's arrangement. He played it several times before he left it, as if needing to make sure that I heard. And then it was quiet above me.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Light

I awoke to pounding on my door the next morning. I had tossed and turned all night, restless with lust and love, weary with doubt, wondering if I should have taken what Wilson was clearly offering.

“Blue! Blue! Open up! I need to talk to you!”

“Holy crap!” I moaned, sliding out of bed and pulling on a bra, a pair of jeans, and a T-shirt as Wilson continued to pound.

I opened the door, letting him in, but I immediately retreated to the bathroom. He followed me, and I quickly shut the door in his face. I used the toilet, brushed my teeth and hair, and scrubbed my face free of all the makeup I'd gone to bed in. Wilson was still waiting outside the bathroom door when I opened it. He took in my freshly scrubbed face, his eyes lingering on my mouth. Without a word, he slid his arms around me and buried his face in my hair. I gasped, caught completely off-guard. He just held me tighter.

“I think it's time to end this,” he whispered against my hair.

I tried to pull away from him, rejecting him before he rejected me. It was easier that way. But he tightened his arms and soothed me with shhing sounds.

“Shh, Blue. Just listen.”

I held myself very stiff, trying not to be distracted by his scent, by the way his arms felt around me, by his lips in my hair, by my desire to keep him there.

“End what?” I finally responded.

“This not knowing business.”

“What don't you know, Wilson?”

“I know a lot more than I used to, Blue. What number are we on now? I've lost count. What were some of them? I know you're brilliant. You're beautiful. You're incredibly brave. You have a wicked sense of humor. You carve unbelievable works of art . . . not totem poles.” I relaxed against him, smiling into his chest. “You have lousy taste in mates . . . although since I

count myself among them, I might have to amend that one.”

“Tiffa says you have terrible taste in women, so maybe we're even,” I interrupted.

“I don't have terrible taste in women. I'm mad about you, aren't I?”

“Are you?”

“Yes, Blue. I am. I am completely gone on you.”

The feeling that surged in me was tempered by confusion and doubt.

“What about Pamela?”

“She kisses like an old woman,” he said softly.

I laughed, my heart immediately lighter.

“I told her last night that I was in love with you. Funny thing is, I think she already knew.”

I curled my hands into his shirt and took a deep breath, waiting for the axe to fall, because I could feel he had a lot more to say. He paused, maybe wondering if I would declare my feelings, too. When I remained silent, he sighed and spoke again.

“But this is where the not knowing part comes in. I have no real idea how you feel about me. One minute, I'm sure you feel the same. The next you're telling me it's just a silly game. One minute, I'm telling you I'm lost without you. The next you're telling me to sod off.”

“So that's what you don't know? You don't know how I feel about you?” I almost laughed, it was so obvious. “I'm not the one who's been dating someone else, Wilson. I'm not the one convinced it's inappropriate to be with me. I'm not the one who has been fighting this every step of the way.”

“That's still not an answer, Blue. How do you feel about me?” His voice was insistent, and his hands were on my shoulders now, pushing me away so that he could see my face. I couldn't answer. Not because I didn't know but because I did.

“Can I show you something?” I said suddenly. Wilson dropped his hands in frustration and turned away, running a hand through his hair.

“Please. It might help me to explain. I'm not as good with words as you are, Wilson.”

I leaned forward and grabbed his hand, pulling him behind me as I walked through the house. He followed, but I could see that I'd hurt him by not answering his question. I tugged him through the door in my kitchen that led to the basement, and I clattered down the stairs, not releasing his hand until

we reached my workbench.

I pointed at my latest work-in-progress. “This was that huge lump of wood you helped me drag in a while ago. You asked me if I was going to make a life size replica of Tyrannosaurus Rex, remember?”

“This is it?” Wilson stared in disbelief at the carving that was still big, as far as carvings went – but when we'd lugged it in, it had been too big to get it on the work bench, and we'd had to use a dolly to even get it into the house. It had to have weighed 250 pounds. Since that day, I had carved away enough mass to actually hoist it onto the table myself. I pointed at the large sections of wood that I had cut away, creating a climbing, circular structure, almost like a circular staircase built for fairies in a wooded glen. It was going to be my first carving for Mr. Chen. “Do you see how the carving is created by removing wood? How I almost remove more than I keep.”

Wilson nodded, watching my fingertips skim along the valleys and shadows I'd created.

“It's not just about what's there but what isn't there. Do you understand?” I stumbled a little bit on my words, knowing what I was trying to say and not knowing if I was actually saying it.

“I think so. The space creates the silhouette, the dimension, the form . . . right?”

I smiled up at him, thrilled that he understood. He smiled back, so sweetly, so fondly, that for a minute I couldn't find my breath, and I scrambled to regain my train of thought.

“That's exactly right.” I nodded, my eyes re-focusing on the sculpture in front of me. “Jimmy taught me that when you carve, it's the negative space that creates line, perspective, and beauty. Negative space is where the wood is carved away, creating openings that in turn create shape.” I paused and took a deep breath, knowing this was something I had to say. If I loved Wilson – and I knew that I did – I would have to make him understand something about me that wasn't easy to grasp. It would make loving me hard. I had to warn him. I turned to face him and met his gaze, beseeching him without artifice or apology.

“Sometimes I feel like I have a huge, gaping hole from my chin to my waist, a wide open negative space that life has just carved away. But it's not beautiful, Wilson. Sometimes it feels empty and dark . . . and . . . and no amount of sanding or polish will make it into something it isn't. I'm afraid if I

let you love me, your love will be swallowed up in that hole, and in turn YOU will be swallowed up by it.”

Wilson touched my cheek, intent on what I was saying, his brows lowered in concentration over a compassionate grey gaze.

“But that's not really up to you, Blue,” he said gently. “You can't control who loves you . . . you can't *let* someone love you anymore than you can *make* someone love you.” He cradled my face between his palms. I reached up and held onto his wrists, caught between the need to hang onto him and to push him away, if only to save myself from what he made me feel.

“So you're afraid to let me love you because you fear you have a hole that can't be filled . . . not by any amount of love. But my question to you is, once again, do you love me?”

I braced myself and nodded, closing my eyes against his gaze, unable to say what I needed to say with his eyes, so full of hope, trained on my face.

“I've never felt about anybody the way I feel about you,” I confessed in a rush. “I can't imagine that what I'm feeling isn't love. But 'I love you' doesn't feel adequate to express it.” I plunged headlong into babbling. “I desperately want you to love me. I *need* you to love me – but I don't want to need it, and I'm afraid that I need it too much.”

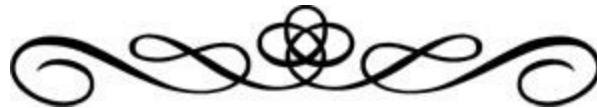
Wilson's lips danced across mine, and he reassured me between kisses, professing his own need. His hands smoothed my hair, his lips traced my eyelids and the corners of my lips as he continued to whisper all the reasons, one after the other, why he loved me. When his words became poetry, *How Do I Love Thee? Let me Count the Ways*, I sighed and he captured the sound with a kiss. When tears swam in my eyes and trickled down my face, he followed them with his mouth and trapped them between our lips. When I whispered his name, he tasted its flavor and lapped it up until I was dizzy with his attentions and wrapped around him like a frightened child.

But I wasn't afraid. I was gloriously ebullient, weightless, and free. Light. And though we spent the day in my apartment in blissful bouts of kissing and touching, interspersed with hushed conversation and drowsy silence, entwined like sleepy snakes, by some unspoken understanding, we didn't make love. And it was all new to me, novel and decadent, kissing for the sake of kissing, not as a means to an end, but as an experience in itself.

I had never held someone or been held without sex being the intended outcome. I had never run my hands across a man's back or linked my hands

through his as he kissed my mouth without my mind being consumed with what came next. With Wilson, it wasn't about what came next but what was happening now. Touching wasn't orchestrated or choreographed to fulfill the requirements of foreplay. It was an event all its own. And it was erotically chaste, tender, and telling.

It was the ultimate makeout session, the kind I imagined took place in homes of teenagers all across America. Where every touch was stolen, every kiss a conquest, every moment a race against curfew. It was the kind of kissing that felt forbidden because Mom and Dad were sitting upstairs and discovery was imminent, where clothing stayed put and passions raged and kissing took on an intensity all its own, simply because going further was not an option. By the time the late afternoon sun filled my sitting room, my lips felt bruised and beautiful, and my face was slightly raw from nuzzling and nudging, from burrowing my face into Wilson's neck and from being burrowed into in return. I was spent without compromise, sated without sacrifice, completely and totally head-over-heels in love. And it was delicious.



The shadows of a perfect Sunday evening filled my apartment before either of us made any attempt to speak of the future. We had raided my cupboards for sustenance and discovered what I already knew . . . there was little sustenance to be had in my kitchen. We ended up ordering Chinese and waited anxiously for its arrival, distracting our famished selves with cinnamon bears and confession.

“I was the one who took the caps off of all your dry erase markers.”

“Really? Were you the one who replaced them all the next day, too?”

“Yeah. I felt bad. I don't know what got into me. I kept trying to get your attention in the nastiest ways, like one of those weird little boys on the playground who throws rocks at the girls he likes.”

“So I can assume it was you who put a dirty picture on my overhead projector so that when I turned it on all the students got the full monty?”

“Guilty.”

“And the lock that suddenly appeared on my cello case?”

“Yep. That was me too. It was just a little one. And I put the key in your coat pocket.”

“Yes . . . that was a little strange. Too bad it took me two days of trying to saw off the blasted thing before I found it.”

“I wanted your attention, I guess.”

Wilson snorted and shook his head. “Are you kidding? You walked into my class in the tightest trousers I've ever seen, high-heeled biker boots, and wild, snogging hair. You had my attention right from the get go.”

I blushed, half-pleased, half-mortified. “Snogging hair?”

Wilson smirked like a man who knows he's pleased his woman. “Snogging is what we spent all day doing, luv. It means kissing . . . a lot. After that first week or so of school, I was convinced I'd chosen the wrong profession. I was utterly depressed, and it was all your fault. I was quite sure I would have to ask you to transfer out of my class because I knew I was in trouble. In fact, as long as we're confessing things . . . I went and asked the counselor to pull your records for me. It was after the day I talked to you after class, after the whole 'I don't know who I am bit.'”

“It wasn't a bit.” I said, stung.

“Yeah, luv. I know,” he said softly and dropped a long kiss on my frowning mouth. And then we became entangled in each other, forgetting the discussion altogether until the doorbell chimed and we jerked apart, laughing a little as we did.

“Food's here!” We both raced for the door.

It wasn't until we had dug into the cashew chicken and the sweet and sour pork that I circled back to his confession.

“So you pulled my records . . . and what did you find?”

Wilson swallowed and took a big slug of milk. “I didn't know what I was dealing with then. You were a hard case, Echohawk. Did you know there's a police record in your file?”

I froze, my spoon paused between mouth and bowl. “What?”

“When your father's body was found they re-opened your case – or what little anyone knew. There were some efforts to find out who your mother was, for obvious reasons. Your father was officially dead, and someone thought it important to make another attempt to locate your mother. There

wasn't much in the file. I'm not sure why the school even had a copy except that you are a legal ward of the state, at least you were until you turned eighteen. There was an officer's name on the file. I made note of it, I don't know why. Maybe it was the odd name, Izzard. Does that ring any bells?"

I nodded, resuming my meal. "He was one of the officers who initially found me, so to speak, after my dad went missing." We ate in silence. "They called me. The lab, in Reno? They called. The results are back."

Wilson stared at me, his fork paused on the way to his mouth, prompting me to continue.

"They want me to come back. They said they have a match. They will show me everything. I've known for two weeks now. Part of me wants to get in the car right now and head to Reno. Part of me can't wait. But the other part, the part that belongs to Jimmy? That part doesn't want to know. He was all I had, and I don't want to let him go. I don't want to know something that will change the way I feel about him, that will change our history."

I thought about how that small act of kindness to a hungry little girl had brought destiny to Jimmy Echohawk's doorstep and how he had paid for his compassion in a way only Karma can craft. One small act and he opened himself up to a mother's desperation and found himself in a position where he became responsible for a child who was even more alone in the world than he was.

"And I worry that what I find out will be ugly and . . . scary. I'm really tired of ugly, as you are well aware. It's going to hurt. It's going to rip me open. And I'm tired of that, too. What kind of woman does what she did? What kind of mother? A big part of me doesn't want to know who she is or anything about her."

We sat silently, my words surrounding us like graffiti on the walls, unavoidable and glaring, destroying the peace that had been between us. Wilson put down his fork and rested his chin on his steepled fist.

"Don't you think it's time to put an end to this?" Same words as before, entirely different context.

"An end to what?" I said my line.

"To this not knowing business," he repeated quietly, holding my gaze.

I knew what he meant and didn't need to hear him say it.

"We'll take a couple of days off. I have some personal days left, and Beverly will understand."

“And what do we do?”

“We find your mother. And we find Blue.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Ice

We flew this time. No long, eight-hour road trip each way. I was no longer pregnant and under doctor's orders not to fly. Wilson said driving took too long, and there was no reason to torture ourselves. I think he was more anxious to get there than I was. I fluctuated between anxiousness and nausea.

We had contacted both the lab and Detective Moody and told them we were coming. Detective Moody had offered to meet us at the airport, which surprised me. I didn't think that was standard procedure and said as much. He was quiet for a moment and then replied, his voice laced with emotion, "In my line of work, there aren't very many happy endings. So many people suffer, so many people are lost . . . and we never find them. For me, this is a pretty big deal. The whole department is pretty pumped. The Chief said it's a great human interest story, and we have a liason at the *Reno Review* that is itching for an interview. We will let you decide if that's something you are interested in. I did call Detective Bowles out of professional courtesy, and let him know that we got a match. He was pretty excited, too."

I said nothing, not wanting to deflate his genuine enthusiasm, but I knew I wouldn't be talking to any reporters. Like a child with a long-awaited gift, I wasn't ready to unwrap my story and immediately pass it along like it had little worth. There was a time to share and a time to savor. I needed to hold my story, examine it, understand it. Then maybe someday, when it wasn't so fresh and raw, when some of the shine and newness had worn off, when I understood not just what but why . . . maybe then I'd be willing to share. But not now.

Las Vegas had already embraced spring, but Reno was cold. Wilson and I huddled in our coats, unprepared for the blast of winter air that met us as we walked to our rental car. We had refused the police escort, deciding we would need our own wheels though we didn't expect to be in Reno long. The answers were there waiting for us. There would be no searching. My life, my history, would be laid out before me like a movie script . . . complete with crime scenes and character descriptions. And like a movie script, none of it

seemed real. At least, not until we pulled into the police station. Suddenly action was required. The cameras were rolling, and I didn't know my lines. I was overcome with stage fright, of the strangers in the audience, of the scenes I hadn't studied and couldn't possibly prepare for. And above all, I didn't want Wilson to see me in the spotlight once more, the light unflattering, the story line tragic, violent, and depressing.

"Are you ready, Blue?"

No. No! "Yes," I whispered, lying, but seeing no way around it. But I couldn't make myself move. Wilson stepped out of the car and came around to my door. He swung it open and offered his hand. When I didn't take it, he leaned in and looked at me intently.

"Blue?"

"I don't want you to come inside. You know too much, Wilson!"

He pressed a kiss to my forehead. "Yes. I know hundreds of things. I think we've discussed this . . . quite recently, actually."

"What if they tell us something that changes the way you feel about me?"

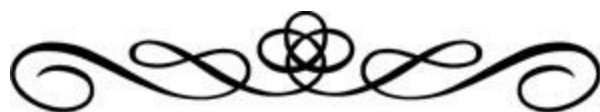
"What could they possibly say that would change the way I feel about you? You were two years old when your mother left you. Do you think they are going to tell us you were a tiny drug dealer? The world's youngest ever? An assassin maybe? Or . . . oh no! A boy. Maybe you are actually a boy. That would be difficult to adjust to, I confess."

Laughter bubbled out of me like a yellow balloon, and I clung to that glimmer of brightness Wilson always seemed to inspire in me. I buried my face in the crook between his neck and shoulder, breathing in the smell that was Wilson. Comfort, challenge, and hope all rolled into one clean scent.

"Blue. Whatever we learn will only make me love you more. You're right. I know too much. And because I do, there isn't anything anyone can say that will make me doubt you or the way I feel about you."

"Okay," I whispered, and I kissed his neck just above the collar of his coat. He shivered and wrapped his arms around me.

"Okay," he repeated, a smile in his voice. "Let's go."



I met Sergeant Martinez, who had been the lead Detective on the case eighteen years ago along with several others who faded into background almost as quickly as they were introduced. Heidi Morgan from the state crime lab was also present, and she, Sergeant Martinez, and Detective Moody proceeded to take us into a room where a large file sat waiting in the center of the table. We took a seat around the file, and Heidi Morgan added a file of her own. Without fanfare, the meeting began.

Heidi went through an explanation of DNA and DNA markers. She showed me a chart comparing my DNA to the DNA of the woman who was my mother. Some of the brief overview was the same information that had been shared with me when they had pulled my DNA months before, only this time they had the results to talk me through.

Heidi looked at me and smiled. "We are certain that you are indeed the biological daughter of a woman named Winona Hidalgo."

"That was her name?" I repeated it, just to test its impact. "Winona Hidalgo." I thought maybe it would strike a chord of remembrance, that I would feel something when I heard it. But it was foreign to me, as unremarkable as the name Heidi Morgan or Andy Martinez. It was as if I had never heard it before.

It was Sergeant Martinez's turn to take center stage. He flipped the big file open, and Wilson reached for my hand under the table. I clung to it, breathless.

"Winona Hidalgo was found murdered at the Stowaway Motel on August 5, 1993. At the time of her death she was nineteen years old. In fact, she had just turned nineteen on August the second, three days before.

"She was murdered?" I gasped. I don't know what I'd expected, but it hadn't been murder.

"We found paraphernalia at the scene, and blood work came back that supported drugs in her system, but her purse and her car were missing, and there were contusions to the back of her head. Apparently, Miss Hidalgo had won about five grand from the slots at a local truckstop a couple of days before, and at the time of her death, she had a nice little wad of cash on her. The money ended up getting her killed. From the tox screen, it looks like she was pretty strung out and going for round two. The dealer decided she was easy pickings and took her purse and pounded her head into the nightstand. There wasn't much evidence of a struggle, and we had no witnesses. But we

were able to get a visual off a security camera on her car leaving the scene, with a decent look at the driver. The case was pretty cut and dried. Until we found out from extended family that there was a missing child. That's where the case hit a standstill. You had literally vanished into thin air.

"This is a picture of her, taken from her drivers license records, which puts her at about sixteen in this photo." Detective Martinez slid an 8X10 photo of a smiling girl across the table, and when I let my eyes settle on her face, I saw myself there. Wilson sucked in his breath beside me, and his hand tightened around mine.

"She looks like you, Blue," he whispered. "The eyes are different, and you have a lighter complexion . . . but the smile and the hair . . . that's you."

"Yeah. We noticed it right off too, and as a result we were pretty confident when we met with you in October that we had found Winona's baby girl. Of course, we couldn't say anything at the time." Detective Moody smiled broadly, and I tried to smile back.

Winona Hidalgo's driver's license description said her hair was black and her eyes brown. Her ethnicity was listed as Native American. She was five feet four inches tall and one hundred eighteen pounds. I was taller than she had been but just as slim. I couldn't take my eyes off her. She didn't look evil. She just looked young.

"Initially, we had the notification of death made by local law enforcement, but when the search for the child, uh..when the search for you stalled, Detective Moody and I went and visited with the family personally."

"I have family?" The churning in my stomach resumed with a vengeance as I felt what little identity I had was being wrenched from my grasping hands.

"You have a grandmother, Stella Hidalgo, who is Winona's mother. You and your mother lived with her until Winona took off with you when you were just shy of two years old. Stella Hidalgo lives in Utah on the Paiute Indian Reservation. We have contacted her, and she is eager to see you."

"Does my grandmother know who my father is?"

"Yes. Your biological father is a man by the name of Ethan Jacobsen." Another picture was taken from the file and handed to me. A boy with spiky blonde hair and bright blue eyes stared out, unsmiling. His shoulders were wide and square under a red jersey with a white number 13 displayed proudly on his chest. It looked like a yearbook shot, the kind they take of each

football player, where all the guys tried to looker bigger and badder than they really were.

“I've seen that expression before,” Wilson murmured, and when my eyes met his there was tenderness in his gaze. “I saw it the first day I met you. I interpreted it as the 'sod off' look.”

The room grew quiet as everyone seemed to sense I needed a minute to emotionally catch up. Eventually, Detective Martinez resumed speaking.

“According to Ethan Jacobsen, and according to Stella Hidalgo, Ethan wanted nothing to do with Winona when she told him of her pregnancy. His family is on record claiming they begged her to give the baby up for adoption. They did give Winona some money when you were about eighteen months old, which Stella Hidalgo confirmed, but Winona left the area shortly after and none of them ever saw her or you again.

“Ethan Jacobsen is married with kids now, but he did give us a DNA sample back when Winona was found dead and you were declared missing. His DNA was also uploaded into NCIS, and we had it compared to yours as well.”

Heidi Morgan interjected, “Ethan Jacobsen's DNA was also confirmed as being a match with yours, which was why it took us a little longer than I promised to get the results back.”

Detective Moody spoke up again, and his eyes were sober, his smile gone. “As a courtesy, Blue, Mr. Jacobsen has also been contacted, and he has been informed that you were located. He was pretty shaken up, understandably. He did give us his contact information and current address but said any further contact will be up to you.”

I nodded, my head reeling. I knew the names of both of my parents. I knew what they looked like. I had a grandmother. She wanted to see me. There was just one more thing.

“What's my name?”

Detective Martinez swallowed, and Detective Moody's eyes filled up with tears. They both seemed as overwhelmed in the moment as I was.

“The name on your birth certificate is Savana Hidalgo,” Detective Martinez said hoarsely.

“Savana,” Wilson and I breathed together, and it was my turn to be overcome with emotion.

“Savana? Only Jimmy would truly appreciate the irony.” The words

trembled on my lips.

Wilson tipped his head in question. I explained, the words catching in my throat as the tears spilled onto my cheeks. “When I was younger, I would pretend my name was Sapana – so close to the name Savana. Sapana is a girl in a Native American story that climbs to the sky and is rescued by a hawk. I always said Jimmy, because of his name, was the hawk and I was Sapana. He always claimed he was more like the porcupine man. I never understood what he meant. I thought he was just being funny. Looking back, he probably felt guilt for not going to the police. I think it must have weighed on him. But I'm not sorry.” I looked from one person to the other, my eyes resting on Wilson at the end. “He was a good father. He didn't hurt my mother or kidnap me –”

“Were you worried he had?” Wilson interrupted gently.

“Sometimes. But then I would remember Jimmy and how he was. It's like you said, Wilson. I knew too much to doubt him. I won't be sorry he chose to keep me with him. Ever. I know it might be hard to understand, but that's the way I feel.”

I was not the only one who needed a minute to compose myself, and we took a brief break to wipe our eyes before Detective Martinez continued.

“You were born on October 28, 1990.”

“Only two days before Melody's birthday,” I remarked, touched once more.

“October 28 was also the day you submitted a DNA sample to find out who you were,” Heidi Morgan offered. “Interesting how things come full circle.”

“I'm twenty-one,” I marveled, and, like most young people, I was pleased that I was older than I had thought.

“But your drivers license still says twenty, so we won't be pub-hopping or hitting the casinos tonight,” Wilson teased, making everyone chuckle and relieving some of the emotional pressure that had built in the room.

“You are welcome to look at everything in the file. There are crime scene pictures, though, and things you might prefer not to see. The pictures are in the envelopes. Everything we know is in the file. We'll leave you alone for a while if you'd like. Contact information for your grandmother is there, as well as for your father. Your grandmother is still living on the reservation, but your father is in Cedar City, Utah, which isn't all that far from there.”

Wilson and I spent another hour pouring over the contents of the file,

trying to get a more complete picture of the girl who had been my mother. There wasn't much to learn. The only thing that struck me was that when my mother's car had been recovered there was a blue blanket in the back seat. It was described as having big blue elephants on a paler blue background, and it was clearly designed for a young child. A picture of it had been tagged as evidence from a possible secondary crime scene.

"Blue." The word sprang out of me as a sliver of recognition wormed its way to the surface.

"I called that blanket 'blue.'"

"What?" Wilson looked at the picture I was staring at.

"That was my blanket."

"You called it Blue?"

"Yes. How is it that I remember that blanket but I don't remember her, Wilson?" My voice was steady, but my heart felt swollen and battered, and I didn't know how much more I could take. I pushed the file away and stood, pacing around the room until Wilson stood too and pulled me into his arms. His hands stroked my hair as he talked.

"It's not that hard to understand, luv. I had a stuffed dog that my mother eventually had to pry from my hands because it was so filthy and worn out. He had been washed a hundred times, in spite of the severe warning label on his arse that promised he would disintegrate. Chester is literally in every picture of me as a child. I was extremely attached, to put it mildly. Maybe it was like that for you with your blanket."

"Jimmy said I kept saying blue . . ." The puzzle piece clicked into place, and I halted midsentence.

"Jimmy said I kept saying 'blue,'" I repeated. "So that's what he called me."

"That's how you got your name?" Wilson was incredulous, understanding dawning across his handsome face.

"Yes . . . and all the time, I must have just wanted my blanket. You would think she would have left it with me, wrapped it around me when she left me on that front seat. That she would have known how scared I would be, how much I would need that damn blanket." I pushed away, fighting out of Wilson's arms, desperate to breathe. But my chest was so tight I couldn't inhale. I felt myself cracking, the fissures spreading at lightning speed across the thin ice that I had been walking on my whole life. And then I was submerged in grief, consumed by it. I fought for breath, fought to rise to the

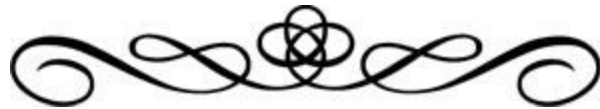
surface. But there was lead in my feet, and I was sinking fast.

"You've had enough for today, Blue." Wilson gathered me against him and pulled the door open, signaling to someone beyond the door.

"She's had all she can take," I heard him say, and someone else was suddenly there beside me. My vision blurred and darkness closed in. I felt myself being lowered to a chair, and my head was forced between my legs.

"Breathe, Blue. Come on, Baby. Deep breaths," Wilson crooned in my ear. My head cleared slightly, and the ice in my veins began to thaw the slightest degree. One breath, then several more. When my vision cleared I had only one request.

"I want to go home, Wilson. I don't want to know any more."



We left the police station with a copy of the file. Wilson insisted I take it, as well as the contact information for people who shared my blood but had never shared my life. I wanted to throw the file out the window as we drove and let the pages spill out across the road and into the Reno night, a hundred pages of a tragic life tossed into the wind so they could be forgotten and never gathered again.

We ate a drive-thru, too weary and subdued to leave the car or even converse. But home was eight hours away and our flight wasn't until 8 the next morning, so we found a hotel and paid for one room for one night. Wilson didn't ask me if I wanted my own. I didn't. But there were two double beds in the room, and as soon as we checked in, I brushed my teeth, pulled off my jeans, and crawled into one, promptly falling asleep.

I dreamed of strings of paper-doll cutouts with my mother's face and blankets in every color but blue. I dreamed I was still in high school, walking through endless hallways, looking for Wilson but instead finding dozens of children who didn't know their names. I came awake with tears on my cheeks and terror writhing in my belly, convinced that Wilson had left Reno while I slept. But he was still there in the bed next to mine, his long arms wrapped around the spare pillow, his tousled hair a dark contrast against the white

sheets. Moonlight spilled onto him, and I watched him sleep for a long time, memorizing the line of his jaw, the sweep of long lashes against his lean cheeks, watching his lips as he sighed in his sleep.

Then, without giving myself time to consider my actions, I crept into his bed and curled myself around him, resting my head against his back, wrapping my arms around his chest. I wanted to seal him to me, to fuse him to my skin, to reassure myself that he was actually mine. I pressed my lips against his back and slid my hands up under his T-shirt, pressing my hands against his flat abdomen, stroking upward to his chest. I felt him come awake, and he turned toward me, his face falling into the shadows as he held himself above me. Moonlight limned him in white, and when I reached up and touched his face, he was perfectly still, letting me trace his features with my fingertips, letting me rise up and rain kisses across his jaw, across his closed lids, and finally against his lips. Then, without a word, he pressed me down against the pillows and captured my hands in his. My breath caught in anticipation as he pulled me firmly against his chest, trapping my hands between us.

But he didn't kiss my mouth or run his hands along my skin. He didn't whisper words of love or desire. Instead, he tucked my head beneath his chin and wrapped me in his arms so securely I could hardly move, and he didn't let me go. I lay in stunned surprise, waiting for him to loosen his grip, waiting for his hands to touch, for his body to move against mine. But his arms stayed locked around me, his breathing remained steady, and his body remained still. And there, in the circle of his arms, held so fiercely that there was no room to doubt him or fear his loss, I slept.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Bitter

When I awoke the next morning, Wilson was already up, showered and clean-shaven, but his eyes were tired, and I wondered if holding me all night had taken a toll. And I was a little embarrassed that I had been rebuffed, as tender as his refusal had been. He didn't act awkward or uncomfortable, so I pushed away my hurt feelings and rushed through a shower and a quick breakfast so we could make our flight home. I was preoccupied and quiet, Wilson was introspective and morose, and by the time we dragged ourselves through the doors of Pemberley, we were both in need of our separate corners, the weight of the last twenty-four hours hovering like a black cloud. Wilson carried my duffle bag to my apartment and paused before heading to his own.

"Blue. I know you're exhausted. I'm absolutely knackered, and I'm not the one who's had their world turned upside down over and over again over the last few months. But you need to see this through to the end," he entreated.

"I know, Wilson."

"Would you like me to call her? It might make it easier to take the next step."

"Is that weak?" I asked, really wanting to let him but not wanting to do the easy thing if it meant I was a wimp.

"It's delegation, luv. It's ensuring it gets done without tying yourself up in knots."

"Then, yes. Please. And I'll be ready whenever she is."



It turned out Stella Aguilar was tougher than I because she was ready immediately. So Wilson and I headed for St. George, Utah, the very next morning in Wilson's Subaru. We had both had a solid twelve hours of sleep in

our own beds . . . separately, which concerned me a little, mostly because I didn't know what to make of it. Wilson was a completely different kind of guy than I was used to. He was a gentleman in a world of Masons and Colbys. And I was very afraid that the fact that I wasn't much of a lady was going to be a problem.

"Tell me what it's like," I pleaded, my thoughts narrowed on the task that lay ahead .

"What what's like?" Wilson replied, his eyes on the road.

"Meeting your birth parents for the first time. What did you say? Tiffa said you did it on your own. You are obviously braver than I am. I don't think I could do this alone."

"The circumstances are completely different, Blue. Don't ever believe you aren't brave. You are the toughest bird I know, and that, luv, is a compliment. I was eighteen when I met my birth parents. My mum had maintained contact with them throughout the years so that someday I could. She thought there might come a time when it might be important to me. My dad was against it. He thought it was unnecessary, and he was certain it would be distracting. I was one semester away from graduating, and I had been burying myself in school, which was very like me, I have to confess. I'd managed to fit four years of school into two-and-a-half, keeping to a schedule my father and I had mapped out. My father was an incredibly driven man, and I thought being a man meant being just like him. But it was semester break, and I was restless and irritable, and frankly, I was a powder keg, waiting to explode. So I flew to England and stayed with Alice. And I looked up the folks," Wilson finished glibly, as if it had been no big deal. "My mum and I thought we could keep it a secret from Dad. Bad idea. But that's another story."

"What was it like?" I prodded.

"It was bloody awful," he answered promptly. "And enlightening and . . . very confusing."

I had no idea what to say to that, so I just waited, watching his thoughts play across his face. He brooded for a moment, lost in remembering.

"When I met my birth father my first impression was that he was a bit of a bum," he mused. "After a few hours talking to him, walking around, seeing his neighborhood, meeting his mates, I began to see him a little differently. We went to a pub where he liked to have a bitter after shift, a place called Wally's, where everyone seemed to know him and like him. Bert's a copper."

“A copper?”

“A policeman. Which seemed so at odds with his personality. He is incredibly jovial and free-spirited. I always thought coppers were the strong, silent type.”

“Maybe more like your dad?”

“Yes! Like John Wilson. Driven, hard, serious. And Bert Wheatley was anything but serious or driven. He said he was a copper because he loved his neighborhood. He liked being with people, and when he was a boy he'd always wanted to drive a car with lights and a siren.” Wilson laughed and shook his head. “That's what he said! I remember thinking what a nutter he was.” Wilson looked over at me as if I was going to scold him for his opinion. I just stayed quiet.

“But I noticed other things. Bert seemed very content. And he was very fun to be with.” Wilson laughed again, but his laughter was pained. “In those ways, he was very different from my dad, too. John Wilson was never satisfied – rarely happy – and he wasn't exactly a pleasure to be around most of the time.” Wilson shook his head and abruptly changed the subject.

“My birth mother's name is Jenny. She never married Bert, obviously. She married a plumber named Gunnar Woodrow. Gunnar the plumber.” Wilson said it like Gunna the Plumma, and I tried not to snicker. I'd gotten to the point where I didn't even notice his accent . . . most of the time.

“She and Gunnar have five kids, and their house is like a zoo. I stayed for an hour or two, until Gunnar got home from work, and then Jenny and I slipped out and had tea around the corner where we could talk without the monkeys interrupting.”

“Did you like her?”

“Very much. She's lovely. Loves books and history, loves to quote poetry.”

“Sounds like you.”

Wilson nodded. “We have a great deal in common, which thrilled me, I must say. We talked about everything. She asked me all the things mothers are interested in: what my hopes and dreams were and whether I had a girlfriend. I told her I didn't have time for girls. I told her that history and books were the only loves in my life so far. We talked about school, and she asked me what my plans were for my future. I rambled off my ten year plan, involving grad school, medical school, and working with my father. She seemed a little surprised by my career goals and said, 'But what about the

loves in your life?"

"She was worried about your love life? You were only eighteen," I protested, ridiculously grateful he didn't have a past like mine.

"No. She wasn't worried about my love life. She was worried about the 'loves in my life,'" Wilson repeated. "History and books."

"Oh!" I responded, understanding.

"Meeting my parents had me questioning myself for the first time ever. I suddenly wondered if I really wanted to be a doctor. I found myself thinking about what would make me happy. I thought about lights and sirens." Wilson's lips quirked, a hint of a smile. "I thought about how I wanted to share everything I learned with anyone who would listen. In fact, I drove my parents and my sisters crazy, constantly reciting this or that historical fact."

"St. Patrick?"

"St. Patrick, Alexander the Great, Leonidas, King Arthur, Napoleon Bonaparte, and so many others."

"So being a doctor lost some of its luster."

"It had *never* held any luster, and once I realized that, I told my dad I wasn't going to medical school. I had kept my mouth shut until graduation, quietly making different plans while my dad continued to map out my future. I told him I wanted to teach, hopefully at a university someday. I told him I wanted to write and lecture and eventually get my doctorate in history. He found out that I had contacted my birth parents and blamed my change of heart on my trip. He was furious with me and my mother. We fought, we yelled, I left the house, my father was called to the hospital, and I never saw him alive again. You've heard that part of the story." Wilson sighed heavily and pulled his hand through his hair.

"Is that what you meant when you said meeting your birth parents was dreadful . . . because it set so many other things in motion?"

"No. Although, I guess it could be construed that way. It was dreadful because I was so unbelievably confused and lost. Two feelings I'd never felt before, ever. I know, I lived a sheltered life, didn't I?" Wilson shrugged. "I met two people who were very different from the people who raised me. Not better, not worse. Just different. And that's not a slight against my mum and dad. They were good parents, and they loved me. But my world was rocked. On the one hand, I was very confused about why Jenny and Bert couldn't have made it work for my sake. Had I meant so little to them that they passed

me along to a rich doctor and his wife and went their merry way, washing their hands of me?”

I winced, knowing intellectually that this wasn't about me. But there was guilt all the same. I wondered if Melody would ask me the same question someday. Wilson continued.

“On the other hand, I suddenly came to realize that I didn't want the things I always thought I wanted. I wanted to pursue things that made me happy, and I wanted a certain amount of freedom that I had never experienced. And I knew that meant taking a very different road from the one I'd been on.”

“I can understand that,” I whispered.

“Yes. I know.” Wilson's eyes met mine, and there was a heat there that had my heart doing a slow slide inside my chest. How was it that he could look at me that way yet manage to hold me all night long without a single kiss?

“The last week in England, I left Manchester and took a coach to London. Alice is a lot less protective of me than the rest of my family. She kind of shrugged and said, 'Have fun, don't get killed, and make sure you're back here in a week to catch your flight home.' I met up with some mates from school, and I spent the week completely sloshed doing things I'm rather embarrassed to talk about.”

“Like what?” I said, half-aghast half-thrilled that Wilson might not be squeaky clean after all.

“I was absolutely desperate for companionship. I lost my virginity, and I don't remember most of it. And it didn't stop there. Night after night, club after club, girl after girl, and I just felt worse and worse as the week went on. I kept trying to restore my equilibrium by doing things that just made me dizzy. Does that make sense?”

I nodded, knowing exactly what he meant. I understood dizzy.

“One of my mates ended up driving me back to Manchester. He made sure I got on that aeroplane and back to the States in one piece. And over the next six months, I managed to stop the spinning in my head and find my balance again for the most part. But in many ways being with you through your journey has been a journey for me, too. I understand myself and my parents – both sets – so much better now.”

We drove without talking for a long time. Then I asked him the question that had been bothering me since waking up alone the morning before.

“Wilson? What happened in Reno? I mean . . . I thought you would want . .

. I mean, are you not attracted to me?" I felt like I was asking the star quarterback to the prom, and my knees shook. Wilson laughed right out loud. And I cringed, trying not to slump down in my seat and cover my face to hide my rejection. Wilson must have seen the humiliation on my expression, and with a screech of brakes and some illegal lane changes he was swerving over to the side of the road, hazards on and everything. He turned to me, shaking his head as if he couldn't believe I didn't get it.

"Blue. If this was simply about attraction, you and I would never have left Reno. We would still be in that crappy hotel room, starkers, ordering room service . . . or, more likely, pizza from down the road. But for me, with you, sex is not the goal. Do you understand that?"

I shook my head. No. I totally did not understand that.

"When you climbed into my bed in Reno, all I could think of was how I felt in London in that awful week when I'd had more sex than any teenaged boy could dream of. And how gutted I felt at the end of it. I didn't want our first time to be like that for you. You were emotionally rocked in Reno, just like I was in London, and you needed me. But you didn't need me that way. Someday . . . hopefully bloody soon – because I will combust if I ever have to spend a night like that again – you will want me because you love me, not because you're lost, not because you're desperate, not because you're afraid. And that's the goal."

"But, Wilson. I do love you," I insisted.

"And I love you . . . most ardently," he responded, twisting my hair in his hands and pulling me toward him.

"Pride and Prejudice?"

"How did you know?" he smiled.

"I have a thing for Mr. Darcy."

In response, Darcy himself captured my mouth with his, and showed me just how ardently he cared.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

True

If it hadn't been for a diesel truck blasting us with his horn and shaking the Suburu as it flew by, we might have been very, very late for our appointment with my grandmother. As it was, we found Stella Hidalgo's home on the outskirts of the Shivwits Indian Reservation after a little backtracking, and a consult with Wilson's trusty Garmin, which didn't seem to work especially well when it came to Indian reservations, or Utah for that matter. I had only been to the St. George area once before on a school trip, but I remembered the red rocks and the jutting plateaus outlined against blue sky and desert sand. It was as harsh and inhospitable as it was beautiful, and I wondered briefly how my ancestors had survived in the area for hundreds and hundreds of years before modern conveniences. Water was scarce, food must have been even scarcer, and growing anything would have been close to impossible.

We rolled up to Stella Hidalgo's home, noting the boxlike Rambler with white siding and red shutters in need of a paint job. It was neat and clean but unadorned, and the yard was kept simple with desert rocks and Joshua trees. We stepped out of the car into a silence so heavy I could hear my heart beating like an ancient drum. Stella Hidalgo opened the door before we reached the front steps.

She was a slight woman of medium height. She was probably close to sixty, though she had an ageless beauty that made estimation difficult. Her skin was unlined, and her hair had streaks of silver amid the black. She wore it simply, parted on one side and bobbed at her shoulder. She wore a loose white dress shirt and white slacks, her skin a golden brown contrast against the pale outfit. She had white sandals on her feet and turquoise stones at her ears and around her wrists and throat. She had the look of a woman who knows how to present herself to the world and is confident with what she sees in the mirror. She invited us in, and the only indication that she was just as nervous as I was the tremor in her hand as she beckoned us forward.

"The police told me very little about your life." Stella Hidalgo's voice was

soft and cultured when she spoke. “In fact, when Detective Martinez called me last week and told me they had a DNA match, he was careful to explain that because you are a legal adult with a right to privacy they could encourage you but ultimately it would be your choice whether or not to make contact with me. He didn't even tell me your name. I don't know what to call you.”

“You can call me Blue.” I extended my hand and she clasped it in hers. I wouldn't ever be Savana Hidalgo or Savana Jacobsen . . . or anything else. I was Blue Echohawk, and that wouldn't change.

“It suits you.” She smiled tremulously. “Please call me Stella.” Her eyes shifted to Wilson, waiting for an introduction.

“Hullo. I'm Darcy Wilson, but everyone calls me Wilson. I'm in love with Blue.” Wilson also extended his hand, and Winona dimpled, completely taken in from the word “hullo.”

“How nice!” she giggled, and I loved Wilson more in that moment than I had ever loved a single soul. Thanks to Wilson's charm, Stella's hands seemed steadier as she showed us into her little home and invited us to sit on a couch covered with a multi-colored blanket across from a pair of deep brown chairs. Several framed awards were hung along the walls, along with a picture that I could have sworn was Jimmy Carter with a woman who was most likely my grandmother thirty years ago. I don't know what I expected when Sergeant Martinez told me Stella Hidalgo lived on a reservation, but this wasn't it. A few pictures were placed on the mantle, and a large Indian-style rug covered the wooden floor. I knew nothing about the Paiute Indians – their customs, their history, their lifestyle. It would be something I hoped this woman could teach me about myself. Someday.

Stella's eyes kept drifting to my face, like she couldn't believe I was there. I let her look her fill and drank her in as well. The moment was beyond surreal, and I have wondered since how we must have appeared, staring at each other in silence, the clock on the mantel marking time as we tried to absorb more than eighteen years into the present.

We made small talk for several minutes, discussing our trip to Reno and our drive to St. George, but soon the talk turned to my mother. I had the distinct feeling that my grandmother needed me to understand her daughter. Maybe because she was still struggling to understand her as well.

“Winnie was full of personality, and she loved being the center of attention, which she usually managed to be both here at home and at school.

My parents doted on her, and she always had lots of friends. She loved cheerleading and was very popular, especially with the boys. I was always just the opposite. I was so shy around boys . . . never could figure out what to say.” Stella paused, and I wished she hadn't told me my mother was popular with the boys. It made me worry once again that we were alike, and I didn't want to be anything like her. My feelings of despair deepened as Stella touched on her daughter's unexpected pregnancy.

“Being pregnant was hard for her, as it would be for any sixteen-year-old girl. When Ethan didn't want to have anything to do with her or the baby, she was despondant . . . wouldn't come out of her room, cried a lot. Her pregnancy was miserable, and after you were born, she was inconsolable. The doctor said it was postpartem depression. As time passed, she was less depressed, but she became so angry, and I took care of you most of the time. You were a sweet baby, such a calm little thing. You hardly ever fussed. You made it easier for Winnie to ignore you, I think. For me, it was that much easier to love you. As long as you had your blanket, you were content.”

“Was it blue? With elephants on it?”

“Yes! It . . . it was!” Stella stuttered in surprise. “Do you remember?” My grandmother's lips trembled, and she pressed her knuckles to them to suppress the emotion that was evident in every line of her face.

I nodded, suddenly unable to speak.

“Winnie hated it.” Stella's voice wobbled, and she cleared her throat. “She said blue was for boys. But I chose it because you had such blue eyes. Your eyes were so striking. In every other way, you looked Native, except maybe not so dark. Your eyes were what finally convinced Ethan's family that you were his. His family gave Winona some money when you were almost two years old. She took the money they'd given her, stole all the money in my savings account as well as my car, and hit the road. Unfortunately, she didn't leave you behind. I have always regretted not contacting the police and having them throw her in jail. It might have saved her life, and I would never have lost you.

“But she needed to grow up, and I thought getting out of town would be good for her. So I didn't report it. I just . . . let her go. In fact, if she would have just asked me for the money and the car, I most likely would have given them to her. She ended up staying with a friend in Salt Lake City, and she found a job. The friend's mother ran a daycare, and you were being looked

after by people I knew and trusted. I kept tabs on her through her friend and thought things were going fairly well. She was there for about six months until she wore out her welcome. She ended up stealing a fairly large amount of money from the friend's mother. And they did report her. After that, I heard from her every once in a while, enough that I knew she was okay."

The conversation trailed off, and I studied my grandmother's face as she studied mine. It was Wilson who finally spoke up.

"The police report says they had a tip from someone in Oklahoma who swore that a girl matching your daughter's description was caught shoplifting several items from a convenience store. The shop owner ended up not pressing charges because he felt bad for the girl. She was stealing diapers and milk. He ended up giving her the milk, some groceries, and a case of diapers, along with some money. When the store owner saw her picture on the news, he remembered your daughter and her little girl and called the police."

"Oklahoma?" Stella Aguilar seemed stunned, and she shook her head, muttering under her breath. "No . . . that isn't possible."

"The police say nothing ever came of it. It only muddled the waters without giving them anything more to go on," I interjected. "I just noticed it because my father – the man who raised me – had family on a reservation in Oklahoma. I wondered what in the world she would be doing there."

"What was your father's name?" Stella Hidalgo's voice was faint and there was an odd stillness about her, as if she were waiting for an answer she already knew.

"James Echohawk . . . I called him Jimmy."

Stella slumped back in her seat, shock and dismay written in bold across her face. She stood up abruptly and raced from the room, leaving us without a word.

"Something's wrong. Do you think she knows Jimmy?" I whispered.

"She sure acted like she recognized his name," Wilson replied, his tone just as hushed. We were interrupted by crashing and muttering, and we rose to our feet, all at once anxious to leave.

"Maybe we should go," Wilson said loudly. "Ms. Hidalgo? We didn't come here to upset you."

Stella rushed back into the room holding a box.

"I'm sorry, but I need you to wait . . . please. Just wait . . . for a minute." We sat back down reluctantly, watching Stella as she pulled the lid from the

box and lifted out a photo album. Frantically, she flipped through the pages and then stopped short.

“Some of the pictures are missing. Someone has taken some of the pictures!” Stella tore through the pages, her eyes flying from one photo to the next. “Here. This isn't a very good shot . . . but it's him.” She tugged the picture from beneath the plastic covering. It had obviously been there a long time, and it had adhered to the plastic sheet. She tugged and the picture began to tear. She gave up and brought the book to me, walking across the small space on her knees as if she were six instead of sixty.

“Do you recognize the man in this picture?” she demanded, tapping the page.

I looked down at a picture that had a faintly yellow cast. The clothing and the cars in the background dated it sometime in the '70s. A man and a woman were in the shot, and for a moment my eyes were delayed by young Stella Hidalgo, slim and smiling in a deep red dress, her hair hanging over one shoulder. She looked so much like me that my head swam. Wilson stiffened beside me, clearly noting the resemblance as well. Then my gaze moved to the man standing next to her, and time ceased its steady ticking.

Jimmy looked up at me from a decade long past. His hair was a deep black and hung around his shoulders from a center part. He wore jeans and a brown patterned shirt with the large pointed collars that were popular in that day. He looked so young and handsome, and though his eyes were on the person taking the picture, his hand was wrapped around Stella's, and she clung to his arm with her free hand.

“Is that the Jimmy Echohawk who raised you?” Stella demanded again.

My eyes shot to hers, unable to comprehend the meaning of what I was seeing. I nodded dumbly.

“Blue?” Wilson questioned, completely confused.

“What are you trying to tell me? What is this?” I gasped, finding my voice and shoving the book toward Stella, who still knelt in front of me.

“Jimmy Echohawk was Winona's father!” Stella cried out, “He wasn't just a..a . . . random stranger!” Stella opened the book once more. Her shock was as clearly as pronounced as my own.

“Bloody 'ell!” Wilson swore next to me, his curse ringing out in the little sitting room that had turned into a house of mirrors.

“Ms. Hidalgo, you need to start talking,” Wilson insisted, his voice firm

and his hand tight on mine. “I don't know what kind of game you think this is —”

“I'm not playing games, young man!” Stella cried. “I don't *know* what this means. All I know is that I met Jimmy Echohawk when I was twenty-one years old. It was 1975. I had just graduated from college, and I accompanied my father to several Indian reservations throughout Oklahoma.” Stella shook her head as she spoke, as if she couldn't believe what she was saying.

“My father was a member of a tribal council that was trying to get federal status restored to the Paiute people. The Paiute tribes had had their Federal status terminated in the 1950s. Which meant maintaining our lands and our water rights – what little we had – was almost impossible. The Southern Paiutes had dwindled to near extinction. We went to several different reservations in addition to the remaining bands of Paiutes trying to build support among other tribes for our cause.”

My head was swimming, and the plight of the Paiute people was, sadly, way down on my list of things-I-need-to-know-at-this-very-minute.

“Ms. Hidalgo, you're going to need to move this story along a little,” Wilson prompted.

Stella nodded, obviously at a loss as to where to start or what was even relevant.

“It was love at first sight. I was reserved, and so was he. Yet, we were instantly comfortable with each other. We weren't in Oklahoma long, and my father did not like Jimmy. He was worried that I would be distracted from the future I had planned.” She shrugged her shoulders. “He was right to be worried. I had dreamed of being the the next Sarah Winnemucca, and all at once the only thing I could think about was becoming Mrs. Jimmy Echohawk.”

Hearing Jimmy's name on Stella's lips in that context was another jolt. I didn't even ask who Sarah Winnemucca was. Another day, another story.

“We wrote letters back and forth for almost a year. By then I was working for Larry Shivwa, who later worked in the Carter Administration in Indian Relations,” Stella rushed on. “Jimmy wanted to be closer to me. He came out West . . . just to be near me. He was an extremely talented woodcarver. He had received some national recognition for his work, and had started selling his carvings. He had been saving to open a shop . . .” Her voice dwindled off, and she seemed reluctant to continue. But the time for silence was past,

and I pushed her forward.

“Stella? I need you to tell me what happened,” I demanded, forcing her to look at me. Her eyes were filled with regret and her shoulders narrowed with defeat.

“Jimmy took his savings and bought a pickup truck and a camp trailer. And he came here. He knew my father wouldn't support a marriage at that point. My career was really taking off. And I had a responsibility to my community. I was the first in my family to graduate from college, and one of the first Paiute girls ever. I had been groomed for bigger things. So . . . we saw each other behind my parents' backs. I was angry with them. I was an adult, and Jimmy was a good Native man. I didn't understand why I couldn't have both. But I proved them right in the end. And, truthfully, I blamed them because it was easier than blaming myself. I used my parents as an excuse. The truth was, I was ambitious, and I feared losing my ambition. I feared becoming like my mother, stuck on a reservation, poor, unnoticed, unremarkable.”

“What happened?” Wilson urged her on.

“Jimmy Carter was elected President in 1976, and I was invited to go back and work in Washington, DC in the office of Indian affairs as an assistant to Secretary Shivwa. My father was sure I would be instrumental in getting the Paiute Tribal status reinstated. So I went. Jimmy never told me not to go. He told me he loved me . . . but he never begged me to stay.

“I found out about six weeks later that I was pregnant. I stayed in Washington DC until my boss, who was good friends with my parents, called them and ratted me out. By that time, I was seven months pregnant, and I wasn't able to hide my figure in high-waisted dresses and shawls. I was too far along to fly home, so I stayed on, even though I was embarrassed and my parents were ashamed. When Winnie was born, I left Washington DC and came home. But Jimmy was long gone. And I was too proud to find him.”

“Jimmy never knew?” I whispered, devastated for the man who raised me.

“I never told him.”

“But then . . . how did . . . how did he find me?” I had no other conclusion to draw. Somehow Jimmy had found me . . . and he had taken me from my mother.

“I don't know,” Stella whispered. “It doesn't make any sense.”

“Winona never knew her father?” Wilson asked gently. He was the only

one who seemed capable of stringing two thoughts together.

“We allowed her to think my parents were her parents. I called them Mom and Dad and that's what she called them, and we all lived together when I wasn't traveling. My mother raised her while I continued to work as a liaison for Indian Affairs. And in 1980 President Carter signed legislation that restored federal recognition to the Paiute tribes and called for a Paiute Reservation. I like to think I had something to do with it. It made the mess I'd made of my personal life a little easier to bear.”

“But what about Jimmy?” I whispered, stunned that he might have never even known he had a child. The Jimmy I knew had lived so simply and had had so little. I felt anger rise in my chest at this woman who had never even told him about his daughter.

“I didn't know how to find him, Blue. I should have tried harder, I know. But it was a different time. In the 1970s, you didn't just make a quick phone call to an Indian reservation. In fact, you can hardly do that now! I managed some contact with Jimmy's mother, but she died a few years after Winona was born. Jimmy's brother said he didn't know where he was. I was pretty conflicted. I loved Jimmy, but I had traded him for my dreams . . . and I lost him. I thought someday we would find each other again, and maybe I would be able to explain.”

“Maybe Winona did find him,” Wilson pondered out loud. “She was seen in Oklahoma. Why else would she have gone to Oklahoma?”

“But . . . I don't think Jimmy ever went back. She wouldn't have found him there,” Stella protested, clearly befuddled by it all.

“But she wouldn't have known that, would she? Is there any way she might have discovered who her father was?”

“My dad passed away when Winnie was fifteen, and my mother died the very next year. Their deaths were very hard on Winnie. I decided it was time to tell her that I was her mother. I thought it would make her feel less alone, not morose. I don't seem to have very good instincts with such things because she didn't deal with it well. She wanted to know everything about her father . . . about why he didn't stick around. I had to explain that it was my fault. But I could tell she didn't believe me. I showed her some pictures of him. I wonder if she was the one who took these.” Stella fingered the empty squares as she continued with her story.

“She started acting out in school. She had some run-ins with the police

over drugs. It wasn't long after that she got pregnant. All talk of her father ceased. And I thought she had let it go, that she'd moved on to other concerns. We never spoke of her father again."

Stella Hidalgo began putting the photo album back in the box when she hesitated and felt around the box, pulling various items from inside.

"The letters are gone," she announced and looked up at me. "The letters are gone! I kept all of Jimmy's letters. They were here. I haven't opened this box since I showed Winona those pictures more than twenty years ago."

"The letters would have given her some valuable information, including a return address," Wilson proposed. Stella nodded, and she was silent while she digested the possibility that Winona had gone looking for her father.

"The last time I talked to Winnie, she kept ranting about men who never take responsibility . . . about the injustices of life." Stella's voice was thoughtful, and her expression suggested she was examining the memory. "I just thought she was talking about Ethan. She said she was going to confront him and make him answer for what he'd done. I thought she was talking about Ethan," Stella insisted again, almost pleading. "I was afraid. She was so angry, talking about getting even. I even called Ethan and warned him. I didn't like Ethan Jacobsen, or his parents, for that matter, but I didn't want him hurt, for Winnie's sake as much as for his own."

"She didn't find Jimmy in Oklahoma, but maybe Jimmy's brother told her about Cheryl," I said, chewing on possibilities. Stella frowned at me, clearly puzzled.

"Cheryl? Cheryl was quite a bit younger than Jimmy. She was only about twelve when Jimmy and I met, and she didn't live on the reservation. Her mother was a white girl who had an affair with Jimmy's father. I only knew about her because Jimmy had a lot of hard feelings toward his father, and the affair was a big part of it."

It was hard for me to imagine Cheryl at twelve. She was in her late forties now and didn't wear her age well.

"Cheryl lives in Nevada. She raised me when Jimmy died," I supplied, hoping Jimmy's death wouldn't come as a shock, but my grandmother nodded as if she knew.

"Jimmy's brother sent me a letter when they found Jimmy's remains. He never mentioned anything about you," Stella said tearfully.

"Why would he? I never met any of them. They knew nothing about me," I

explained.

We sat in silence, each of us mentally unwinding the tangle of secrets and supposition that had led us to this point in the story.

“Jimmy said he found me in a restaurant booth. I'd been asleep. He waited with me until my mother returned. He told Cheryl that that my mother acted strange, but he thought it was because *he* was a stranger, sitting with her child. Maybe it was because she recognized him, and he had taken her by surprise.”

“We know Jimmy didn't hurt your mother, Blue. The police found the man who did,” Wilson offered emphatically, as if he knew where my thoughts had wandered.

“Jimmy would never have hurt a soul,” Stella agreed. “But I don't understand how you ended up with him.”

“He said I was asleep on the front seat of his truck the next morning.”

“Then that's what happened,” Stella said firmly. “Jimmy Echohawk wasn't a liar. Winona must have followed him and left you with him. Maybe she planned to come back. Maybe she wanted to force him to acknowledge her. Maybe she was high on drugs, or desperate . . .” Stella offered up excuse after excuse before her voice faded off. Whatever her reasons, Winona had done what she'd done, and no one would ever really know why.

“Jimmy was my grandfather,” I marveled, suddenly arriving at the conclusion that had been obvious since my grandmother had shown me his picture. “My name really is Echohawk.” And all at once, I didn't feel like crying anymore. I felt like laughing. I felt like throwing my hands up and dancing, praising and praying. I wished I could talk to Jimmy. To tell him that I loved him. To tell him how sorry I was for sometimes doubting him. Wilson and Stella were watching me, and Wilson's jaw was tight and his eyes were bright with emotion. I leaned in and kissed his lips, right in front of my grandmother. She would have to get used to it. Then I looked at her and spoke directly to her.

“When Cheryl told me Jimmy wasn't my father, it was the worst day of my life. I had lost him, not only physically, but in every other way. I had no idea who I was. I convinced myself I didn't know who *he* was either.” I paused to corral the emotion that wanted to spill over. “But he was mine all along. And I was his.”

Stella had begun to cry. When I finished talking she covered her face with

her hands, and a moan of such torment broke free that I knelt in front of her and did something I would never have been able to do before Wilson. He had mourned with me, held me, propped me up, pushed me forward, and asked for nothing in return. And because he had done that for me, I was able to put my arms around her. I hugged her tightly, and I didn't let go. I felt her sag against me, and then she was clinging to me desperately, sobbing, grieving for a man she had mistreated, for a daughter she had failed, and for a granddaughter she had lost. So many secrets, so many poor choices, so much pain.

Chapter Thirty

Sky

In the end, I went to see Ethan Jacobsen, too. I was tired of secrets, tired of skeletons, tired of the not knowing. I was shaking out the cobwebs and tearing down the heavy drapes, letting the light shine in on a life that had been nothing but dark corners. It wasn't a long meeting nor a particularly pleasant one. Ethan Jacobsen was just a regular guy with a plump wife, a couple of cute blonde kids – Saylor and Sadie – and a spotty dog. My father looked nothing like his high school picture. His youthful scowl and his spiky blond hair had been replaced by a benign smile and a balding head. He had grown soft and middle aged. The only thing that time hadn't altered were his arresting blue eyes. He stared at me with those blue eyes, and I'm certain he noted I had them too. I'm sure he noted my black hair and olive skin and the resemblance I held to a girl he had once certainly cared for, at least for a while.

But he didn't deny me. He told me I was his father and that he would like to get to know me. He asked me about my life, my dreams, and my future with Wilson. I answered vaguely. He hadn't earned the right to confidences. But maybe someday. I promised I would be in touch. I wanted to get to know my sisters. Cedar City was only about three hours from Boulder City, and I was willing to drive. Family had taken on a whole new importance to me because I had a daughter who would someday want all the answers. And I would be able to give them to her. Every last detail.

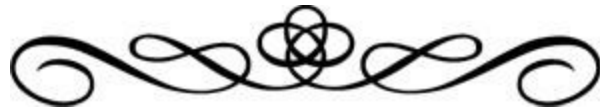


I asked my grandmother once if it was worth it . . . the work she'd traded my grandfather for. I didn't want to hurt her, but I needed to understand. She rattled off a bunch of facts and interesting details.

“Well, in 1984, the Paiutes received 4,470 acres of land scattered

throughout southwestern Utah and a \$2.5 million fund from which we can draw interest for economic development and tribal services. Our health care is so much better, as well as our education opportunities. We have been able to build new houses, open and operate a couple of factories. But we have to continue to fight for water rights, to keep our land, to keep our people thriving. There is always work to be done.” She smiled brightly, but her hands shook, and she had trouble meeting my eyes. After a while she spoke again.

“The truth is, on a personal level, it wasn't really worth it, Blue. When it's all said and done there are so many worthy causes, so much work to be done, so much good to do, but if we sacrifice everything for a cause, we tend to become a spokesperson instead of a lover, an organizer instead of a wife, a mouthpiece instead of a mother. I gave everything else away in the name of a greater good, but look how many people I hurt. Look at the ripple effects of thinking my life's work was more important than the people in my life.”



“I've been thinking about that story, the one you told me when Melody was born,” Wilson hummed, his brow furrowed, his lips pursed. He had been practicing his cello in my tiny sitting room, the way he did every night, unless I was carving, in which case we filled the basement with sweet strings and sanding. The days of listening under the vent were long gone.

“The one you said sucked?” I murmured, wishing he would play another song. I was half-asleep in my recliner, the deep tones making me mellow and drowsy. It was like an elixir, and I was addicted to both the man and his music.

“Yes. That's the one. It was horrible. And to think you eschewed *Ivanhoe*. What was the hunter's name again?”

“Waupee. White Hawk.”

“That's right. White Hawk loved a star girl, they were happy together, but she decided to take their child and float up into the sky, leaving him behind.”

“So why have you been thinking about it?” I yawned, concluding that he wasn't going to play anything else until he had worked through whatever was bothering him.

“I just realized that it's Jimmy's story.” Wilson plucked his strings absentmindedly, his luminous eyes unfocused, distracted by his thoughts. “Stella floated away and took his child. Even the name is similar.”

I hadn't thought of that. But Wilson was right. It was very like Jimmy's story. Except Jimmy didn't get a happy ending.

“But the star maiden came back to White Hawk, Wilson. I didn't ever finish the story. Her son missed his father, so the star maiden came back for him—”

“Did you know that Stella means star?” Wilson interrupted, as if he'd just stumbled over the realization.

“It does?”

“Yes. So we have a Hawk and a Star. And a Sapanana.” Wilson counted each name on his fingers. “It's his story,” he marveled.

I shook my head, disagreeing. “Jimmy didn't ever get his family back. The star maiden's father turned his daughter and Waupee and their son into hawks so they could fly between heaven and earth and be together. But none of us ever got to be together.”

“But you came back to Jimmy, Blue. You and he were together.”

“I guess I did,” I agreed. “But Sapanana isn't in that story, luv.” I smiled at him tenderly, using his own term of endearment. “She has a story all her own.”

Wilson laid down his cello and stood, leaning over the recliner until he hovered only inches above me, grey eyes on blue, his mouth on mine. He spoke against my lips.

“Of course she does . . . Savana Blue. And it's a story just waiting to be told.”

“A little blackbird, pushed from the nest?” I whispered, wrapping my arms around his neck.

“Or placed there. It's all in the way you tell the story.”



“Once upon a time there was a little bird who was placed in a nest. Wanted. Cherished. Unafraid, because she knew she was a hawk, a beautiful bird, worthy of awe, deserving of love . . .”

The End

Acknowledgments

Having grown up in Utah, I love to explore the history of the people of my home state. Shivwits Paiute Reservation is indeed located in the St. George area of Southern Utah. Larry Shivwa and Stella Hidalgo are fictional characters, as are all the characters in my story, but the plight of Paiute people is factual and historical.

The story of Waupee and the Star Maiden is an Arapaho story. The tale of Tabuts the Wise Wolf and the sticks is a story of the Paiute people. Like many of the Native legends and stories, these stories have great lessons and significance for all people.

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About the Author



Amy Harmon knew at an early age that writing was something she wanted to do—and she divided her time between writing songs and stories as she grew. Having grown up in the middle of wheat fields without a television, with only her books and her siblings to entertain her, she developed a strong sense of what made a good story. Amy Harmon has been a motivational speaker, a grade school teacher, a junior high teacher, a home school mom, and a member of the Grammy Award winning Saints Unified Voices Choir, directed by Gladys Knight. She released a Christian Blues CD in 2007 called "What I Know"—also available on Amazon and wherever digital music is sold. Her first two books, "Running Barefoot" and "Slow Dance in Purgatory" are rich with humor, heart, and fast paced story telling.

For more information about Amy and her books, visit:

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