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## **Vintage** *Cherish*

# **The Man from Her Past**

**ANNA ADAMS**

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«HarperCollins»

## **Adams A.**

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It's taken five years for Cassie Warner to come to terms with the violent act that shattered her life and resulted in the end of her marriage to Van Haddon. Now, for the sake of her ailing father, she's returned to Honesty...bringing with her the secret that resulted from the fateful night. Cassie knows showing up with her daughter will make her the object of scandalized whispers, but she still hopes to avoid Van. Because even though their marriage has ended, it doesn't mean their feelings for each other have.

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## **The Man from Her Past**

### **Anna Adams**



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To Robert and Alice, and the love between you that still makes the lives around you richer.  
And to Uncle Cecil and Aunt Mary, Aunt Dorothy and Aunt Bertha. Your strength was mine.  
Your love kept me floating. Your kindness heals my heart. Thank you will never be enough, but if  
love counts—well, I sure do love you all, my “other parents.”

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## CHAPTER ONE

THUNDER CREPT across the sky, building strength to rattle Van Haddon's house. Rain and wind slapped at him so hard he hunched over as he climbed the wooden porch steps at the end of yet another business trip.

He used to love his job. For the past eleven months, he'd traveled at the drop of a hat, met with any financial client who seemed likely to sign on with him and all but begged for new business.

Getting into his house wasn't easy. He found the lock, despite the darkness of a storm-induced blackout, but another crack of thunder broke over his head. He jerked his hand, and the key came back out.

Faintly, he heard the telephone's insistent ring.

Van wiped rain off his face and tried again to get inside. Lightning flashed on the lock. He twisted the key and then kicked the front door open, shoving his carry-on out of the way as he grabbed the phone off a hall table. "Hello?"

"Van, Tom Drake here." The other man didn't have to add that he was the sheriff. Everyone who lived in the small town of Honesty, Virginia, knew who the sheriff was.

Van shouldered the door shut. "What's up, Tom?" He kept his tone carefully neutral. After two days of explaining a portfolio to a possible client who'd decided not to invest with him, he'd been grateful for the powerful December winds that had given the plane a boost all the way from San Diego. But as soon as he'd landed, all hell had broken loose. The storm had boiled over, and he couldn't forget last spring's disastrous lightning strike that had burned down his sister's fishing lodge.

"Something wrong with Beth or her family?"

"Beth and Eli are fine. In fact, I even think her new husband's home this week. I'm calling about Leo Warne."

Static broke up the words between syllables, but at Leo's name, Van let go of the strap on his laptop bag. It slid down his arm. He caught it and set the bag on the floor, shrugging out of his soaked coat at the same time.

"Leo?" He'd been Van's mentor, then his father-in-law and finally a walking wake-up call to his conscience.

"He's out here on the Mecklin Road Bridge. And I do mean out here. Half-dressed in a ratty shirt and boxers, cowering against the guardrail, scared out of his wits. He won't let us help him."

"Help him what?" Van loosened his tie and undid his top collar button. Five years ago, his ex-wife, Cassie, had left town, warning both her father and Van not to contact her again. Leo had soon suggested Van stay away from him, too.

They'd last seen each other a year ago in the canned vegetable aisle at Elljay's Market. One glance and they'd gone their separate ways.

Only family could be so cruel.

"I'm having no luck talking him into an ambulance," Tom said. "He's asking for his wife. He called me a liar when I said she was dead."

"I don't understand." Victoria had died while being treated for pneumonia when Cassie was fifteen.

"It's his mind, his memory. Something's wrong. He hasn't asked for Cassie, but he finally remembered you. I tried to make him see you'd want us to help him, but he won't move unless you come."

"Me?" Shock spotlighted the small things around him. Mail that had piled up. A picture of his nephew on a skateboard in midair. An unfolded, overdue bill for the credit card he used for travel expenses.

But he couldn't see Leo—always in charge, dressed to the extremes of elegance—scared and nearly naked on a bridge in a storm that could literally kill him.

At seventy-three, Leo had retired as president of Honesty Bank & Trust soon after Cassie had left. Ashamed of what had happened to her, he'd disappeared from the town's life.

Van couldn't explain anyone else's reasons, but he had let Leo go because he'd hated the other man's shame.

"Hell." He couldn't go on resenting Leo when he needed help. Van checked his pockets for his cell phone. "I'm on my way."

"Hurry. I'm afraid he'll jump."

Thunder jolted the house. A keening scream—unbearable and hardly recognizable as Leo's voice—seemed to form inside Van's head. "Take my cell number in case you need it." He gave it to Tom and then hung up.

Without a coat, without locking the door, with nothing except fear that Leo had gone insane, Van ran back into the storm.

He jumped into the car, switched on the engine and jammed the gas pedal. All the way down the driveway, the trees bent low, their branches open hands grasping at his roof. He skidded onto the main road.

How could he talk Leo off that bridge?

A truck crossed into his lane. Swearing, Van swerved around it.

Someone had to tell Cassie.

Someone.

Who was he kidding? He'd have to tell Cassie. Never mind that she'd long since stopped caring enough to even hate him.

The attack had done that to them. Attack. That was one way to put it—a way that let him face himself. He'd been away on business. She'd been home alone, and she'd left the bathroom window open, no more than half an inch, to air out the steam.

Half an inch.

He hit the steering wheel with his fist. Half an inch of air had changed Cassie forever, had forced a space like thousands of miles between them.

He'd tried to reach her, but she'd shut him out, lumping him with her father, who'd avoided her after that night. After she'd gone, Van had wanted to resent her, but he couldn't lie to himself. He'd owed her more than just love.

Blue lights slashed the sky. Van slowed as he neared the bridge. Clouds ambushed the moon and swallowed its reflection. Blinking red bulbs beneath the bridge flashed a warning to shipping on the river. Behind Van, an 18-wheeler drew close enough to illuminate the men milling in front of the emergency vehicles.

Van parked behind a fire-and-rescue truck. As he parted the crowd with his hands, rain poured down his face, and lightning made him flinch.

"Leo?" He searched for the other man, yelling his name. Why hadn't someone in this thicket of blue-and-yellow-coated rescue workers scooped Leo up and run him to the hospital?

At last Van saw Tom. Four paramedics flanked the sheriff, two on each side. They all turned. Trey Lockwood, a longtime family friend, lifted his hand toward Van. Behind Trey, about thirty feet onto the bridge, Van glimpsed Leo's grizzled, frightened face above bony knees tucked close against his chest.

Sick to his stomach, Van shoved past the other men, but Tom took his arm. "Every time we try to get near him he backs out of reach, or we'd have grabbed him. He could stand up and jump at any moment."

"I'll get him." If he had to dive into that dark water in Leo's wake, he wasn't about to tell Cassie he'd let her father die.

“He may not know you.” Tom had to yell over the weather and the noise of men and idling engines.

Van shook his head. “Does it matter? If we don’t get him off this bridge, he’ll die, anyway.”

“Somebody get this man a coat,” Tom said.

If he waited for a jacket, he might just end up wearing it to a funeral. “Leo.” Edging closer, he left the knot of rescuers behind. His hands shook. He tried to look as if he were offering help, but he’d just as happily jerk the other man to safety.

“Go away.” Leo turned his face toward the concrete guard rail.

“I can’t.” He’d been doing that for five years, and he was lucky Leo hadn’t died. “We’re still family. We were friends before Cassie and I even looked at each other.”

“She loved you from day one.”

She’d stopped easily enough. Van reached for the bridge railing, distracting Leo because it was easy to make the sick man follow his hand. Rain and wind gusted around them. Water rushed past the bridge supports below, but the voices behind them had quieted.

“Cassie’s my little girl. Victoria will take care of her.”

Van reached for the back of his collar as if something had slithered down his spine. It was one thing to hear Leo was sick, but another to see it.

So he lied. Anything to get his friend off this bridge. “Let me take you to them.”

“I remember.” Leo’s hoarse voice suggested a sore throat and congestion. He pressed his fists into his eyes.

“Let me help.”

“I don’t want to remember.”

“Just remember me long enough to trust me.”

Leo lifted eyes that refused to focus. “You look funny. Not like you used to.”

Five years of loneliness changed any man. “I’m older.”

“Older?” His voice trailed off as if he didn’t understand the word. He leaned harder against the bridge. “Bring me Victoria.” Her name, something familiar, comforted him. “You can’t help.”

“I can’t get Victoria.”

“I’m not the one who’s crazy here.” Bracing his hand on the concrete, drawing himself up on one knee, Leo resurrected a semblance of his old dignity. “She’s not dead.”

He pointed at a paramedic on Tom’s left. “Like he said. Wouldn’t I know?” With a bone-shaking cough, he sank back to the pavement, his legs folding like matchsticks.

Van hurried at least five feet closer.

“Victoria...” Leo’s gasp was desperate. “She’d never leave.” He jabbed the air in front of Van, his bent finger shaking. “You find her. Now.”

“You’re freezing and sick, and this rain is making you worse.”

“Get away from me.” He waved a wasted arm.

“You taught me my job. You probably taught me how to be a man. You would have been my best friend all my life.” Only vaguely aware of the men behind them, he didn’t care what they thought. “You were like my father once. Let me walk you off this bridge.”

“I’m not sick.” The bones in his scrawny throat moved up and down. “You’ll drag me straight to the hospital, and people die there. I’ve seen it.” He frowned in confusion.

He had to mean Victoria, but maybe the memory was too painful to face. “Aren’t you hungry?” Van prayed Leo’s weight loss came from forgetting about mealtimes, rather than a serious illness. “Let’s get something to eat, a hot drink. We’ll talk all night, the way we used to.”

Leo shook his head. His mouth moved, but no sound came out.

Van took a chance and moved in, slipping a hand beneath the other man’s arm. God, his bones. “Come with me. We’ll find you a coat and some food.”

Awareness slowly lit Leo's dull expression. His chin dipped to his chest. "Don't tell Cassie. She doesn't speak to me." He lowered his voice. Van had to bend all the way down to hear. "Not in years."

Van patted his arm, the way he would a child's. "She doesn't talk to me, either, but I'll call her tonight. I'll make her listen."

"She hates me."

"You're wrong about that. She'll tell you." He couldn't meet Leo's eyes. Who knew how Cassie felt about either of them? "Come sit in my car."

"I don't have to sit in one of those trucks? I hate those lights. They get inside my head." He pressed his hands to his wet hair, trying to squeeze out the strobing flashes.

Van looked to the paramedics, who were inching closer, coiled to spring. No one offered advice. Could Leo be reacting to medication? Was that wishful thinking? If only he'd been around enough to know.

"The lights bother me, too, but my car's pretty dark. See if you feel better there."

Leo got halfway to his feet, but as Van was on the verge of shouting with relief, the older man collapsed against him. "Don't let me die in that hospital."

Van tried again to help him stand. "What happened to Victoria was a fluke. You know most people get help in a hospital. And you need help." He refused to let Leo brush his hands away.

"They'll kill me. I know."

"I'll go with you." Van made a production of wiping his nose. "I'm not feeling too great, either."

Leo squinted through the rain soaking his face. "Are you sick, too?"

"I think so." He'd rarely felt more torn up. He'd given Cassie the divorce she'd demanded and gone meekly away as she'd asked. He'd lost track of her father, and he couldn't find his old friend in this shell of a man. "How about if we both go with these guys?" He pointed at the EMTs. "They'll check us out on the way."

He coughed, feeling ludicrous, but Leo let him help him all the way up. "I'm freezing," Van said.

"I might be a little cold, too."

They shuffled, arms around each other, toward the ambulance. The paramedics closed in on Leo, seized his arms and began moving him at rapid speed. He searched over his shoulder for Van, desperation naked on his face.

Van wiped his eyes and then checked to make sure no one else had noticed. He and Leo had been close since he'd first marched into the bank to ask for an internship. He trotted to catch up. "Can I ride along?" he asked the nearest EMT, who turned out to be Trey.

"Sure, if it'll ease Mr. Warne's mind."

"You need to check him, too," Leo said.

The other guy looked at Van, who shook his head slightly.

The ambulance distracted Leo. He climbed onto it, slowly taking in the noise and machines. One of his rescuers eased him onto a stretcher. Immediately, the driver got in the front, and Trey and another EMT started treating Leo.

Van sat out of the way on the opposite side of the ambulance. Trey and his partner contacted the hospital, started an IV, and reported Leo's symptoms and vitals.

From between the two men, Leo's hand suddenly jutted out, splayed like a frightened child's. Van caught it and folded the gnarled, trembling fingers into his palm.

IN THE KIND HEART woman's shelter in Tecumseh, Washington, Cassie Warne was carrying a tray of cookies and milk to her office to share with her daughter when a man crashed through the locked double doors behind her in a hail of splinters and broken wood.

Cassie turned, transfixed by chunks of the door clattering at her feet. At first she thought the man was brandishing a baseball bat, but it was a metal battering ram.

He snarled a name Cassie couldn't hear. She didn't ask him to repeat it. Women and children going about the business of getting settled for the night, froze. The man searched them for the one he wanted, and Cassie's instinct took over.

She never let herself dwell on that night five years ago. It had happened, like her mother's death, and her broken arm on her eleventh birthday. It was only a fact, but it had changed her.

She needed no one and no one would ever hurt her or anyone who depended on her.

The tray slipped from her hands. The plate and glasses smashed. Vaguely aware of glass shards on the floor among the bits of broken wood, she felt time jerk to a start again.

Cassie threw herself at the man, praying her four-year-old daughter would stay in the office, out of sight.

Silently, she swung the edge of her foot into the man's belly. Though her own stomach heaved, she never looked away from his eyes. She'd seen rage like that—uninhibited, unstinting fury in a face looming over her one night when Van had been in D.C. or Milwaukee or Fresno. Somewhere other than their tiny apartment bedroom.

With a cartoon "oof," the man backed away, doubling over. His battering ram fell to the floor and scattered the wood and glass.

Please, she thought, let him stop now. Don't make me do anything else.

He straightened with a feral snarl.

Crying because she didn't want to do it, Cassie pointed her elbow into his throat. Her martial arts instructors had taught her to yell, supposedly to strike fear into an attacker and bolster her strength. She needed nothing but the will to hurt another human being. Still she felt sick as the man began to choke.

And damn him. He kept coming.

She was crying as the heel of her palm rammed his nose into his skull. Blood on her hands gagged her as he dropped, unconscious.

She hovered, ready, trembling from head to toe.

"Mommy?"

"Hope."

Cassie turned, gathering herself as if she'd also been broken into pieces. She rubbed her arm across her eyes and her mouth, trying to erase any trace of the violence that had adrenaline bubbling in her veins.

Gripping the office door, Hope pointed at Cassie's shirt. A scream poured out of her throat.

Cassie looked down. The blood snapped her straight back to reality.

"I'm okay." She tore the shirt off. "I'm all right, baby."

Hope rushed her. Cassie knelt and scooped her daughter into her arms. "The police," she said to the nearest woman. She threw her shirt far away. In her bra and jeans, she was wearing more than some of the clients who'd shown up at their doors.

She cuddled Hope, keeping her as safe as she could from scary things. "We're all okay, baby." To herself, she sounded calm while her heartbeat shook her whole body. In a few minutes, Hope's crying faded to a whimper.

"Wanna go home, Mommy. Bad, bad man." As she pointed at him with a four-year-old's contempt, sirens sounded.

"Put this on." Liza, one of Cassie's partners, dropped a faded Tecumseh PD T-shirt over Cassie's shoulder. Another woman must have worn it into the shelter. Cassie pulled it over her head, and Hope helped her yank it down.

"You hurt that bad man, Mommy."

"I know." She seriously wanted to bury her head. "It was scary."

"I'm glad you hurt him."

She didn't know what to say. Normally, it's not nice to hit people would do, but the man had come bent on hurting someone in the shelter. She couldn't let that happen.

Cassie cradled Hope's chin. Violence had changed Cassie's life forever, and she'd tried to make sure the past wasn't part of her present with Hope. "I don't like hurting anyone, baby, but that man wanted to be mean to someone here." Of their own volition, her thoughts returned to that other bad man, and she hated the fear that whispered through her in a warning.

Unconditional love looked out of Hope's blue eyes.

"I won't ever scare you if I can help it," Cassie said. Her daughter meant everything to her.

"You didn't look like my mommy."

Cassie hugged her tight. Someday she'd teach Hope the self-defense she'd made every shelter employee learn, but she didn't want her daughter to think of her as a woman who beat people up.

She went blank when she tried to think what else she should have done.

Two policemen, guns drawn, barged through the splintered doorway and stopped in front of the unconscious man.

Only then did Cassie realize one woman had picked up his battering ram and another stood over him with a raised chair.

More concerned about the guns, she turned Hope's face into her chest.

"Danger's over." Liza pointed at his revolver. "You can put that away. We don't like the children to see them."

The police both holstered their weapons. "What happened?" asked the one she'd spoken to.

"He busted in with this." She eased the battering ram out of the woman's hand. "And my friend stopped him from getting any further."

"Which friend?" the second cop asked.

Cassie stood, lifting Hope onto her hip. "He said someone's name, but I didn't catch it." She searched the suspicious glances of the women and children around them. "Anyone know him?"

"I do," the second cop said. "He's a fireman. I can't remember his name, but we worked together last year when the county put on that disaster training."

No one else claimed him.

The downed man began to stir and the first policeman cuffed him. He nodded at Cassie. "He wasn't looking for you?"

Shaking her head, she hugged Hope closer. "I work here."

"She's a partner," Liza said. "I'm Liza Crane. This is Cassie Warne. We have another partner, Kim Fontaine, but she works day hours."

So did Cassie, but Hope had been out of school for a teacher in-service day. For the first time in Hope's short preschool career, Cassie had forgotten to arrange for backup day care.

Between them, the police officers dragged the man to his feet. Catching sight of Cassie, he lunged.

"Bitch."

She backed up, turning Hope away from him.

"Bad man." Her daughter burrowed her face into Cassie's shirt.

WITH A TRACE of leftover nerves-on-alert, Cassie hurried Hope into their town house four hours later. She locked the door and shut out the world. Her haven of overstuffed chairs and verdant plants and overflowing bookshelves let her breathe again.

She sought the familiar. Prints from museums she'd visited when she could only stare at walls and pray not to scream. Framed pieces of Hope's artwork, going all the way from scrawls and handprints to the big faces with stringy hands and feet she favored lately.

"No bad men here." Hope slid from Cassie's arms and ran to her room, all order restored in her world.

Cassie breathed easier. The event had only scared Hope for a little while. It hadn't changed her life.

Setting the dead bolt on the front door, Cassie activated the alarm system. "Are you hungry?"

"Can we have eggs and cheese? All stirred up together?"

"Perfect." Comfort food.

Cassie went to the kitchen. Hope skipped in while she was pulling the mixing bowl out of a cabinet.

"Wait for me, Mommy. You know I'm 'posed to help."

"It wouldn't taste the same without you."

Cassie broke eggs into a bowl. Hope whisked them all over the kitchen counter and the sink, and Cassie mixed up chocolate milk. They toasted each other while a golden pat of butter sizzled in the iron skillet Cassie had taken from her childhood home.

"That man doesn't know where we live?"

Cassie shook her head. "And the police won't let him out, anyway."

Hope set her glass on the counter and then wrapped her arms around Cassie's thighs. Cassie leaned down and hugged her tight. And that seemed to be the end of it all.

"I'll get that peach stuff Mrs. Kleiber made me." Hope hurried to the fridge for a jar of preserves their neighbor made for her every year.

Cassie dropped bread into the toaster slots, grateful for Hope's resilience. "How hungry are we after such a long day?"

The phone cut into Hope's answer. As Cassie lifted the receiver, she saw that their machine had recorded eleven messages. Without bothering to look at the caller ID, she said hello.

"Cassie?"

That voice. Low, more uncertain than she'd ever heard it, but rich and familiar as his touch had once been. She shivered as memories of his hands on her body made her ache, arms and legs, heart and soul.

In a night of shocks, this one made her grab the edge of the counter.

"Van?" She'd read in romances that a man could make a woman light-headed enough to faint. But those women had been bound in Jane Austen finery. She was still sporting splinter-laden jeans and a Tecumseh PD T-shirt. "Van."

She'd loved him. She couldn't remember a time when she hadn't, but she'd had to leave him because he couldn't love her after she'd been raped.

## CHAPTER TWO

“MOMMY?”

She shook her head at Hope, urging the girl she loved more than her own life to keep quiet.

“What’s wrong?” Cassie couldn’t control the huskiness in her voice. Hope stared. Cassie cleared her throat. Van shouldn’t matter this much after five years. “How did you get my number?”

“From your father.”

Her heart tap-danced. Something must be horribly wrong. “Why are you calling?”

“It’s your dad,” he said. “The cops and paramedics found him on the Mecklin Road Bridge. He didn’t recognize them. He called for your mother.” He waited, as if to let it sink in.

It did with a thud. “He didn’t know she was dead?”

“Eventually he remembered.” Maybe Van kept stopping because he didn’t know what to say. She didn’t know what to say. Of all the scenarios she’d imagined drawing her home, this was the one she really hadn’t wanted to face. “I’m sorry,” Van said.

“How bad is he?” Her grandmother had died after battling Alzheimer’s disease. Her father had deeply feared a similar fate. “Is this a one-night problem, or could it be my grandmother’s illness?”

“I don’t know.” Van’s weariness scared her more than his words.

“Mommy?”

“Everything’s all right.” Straightening, she yanked the frying pan off the burner and spoke firmly, to comfort her child and to keep Van from guessing she was talking to a little one.

Hope, who’d been through too much, misunderstood and ran to her room. Cassie followed her into the hall. She couldn’t explain Van to Hope or her to him.

“I have to come home.” She’d been raised by a loving mother and a responsible father who’d taught her to think of others. Rarely had she been selfish in her life—not because she was noble, but because her parents had never accepted such behavior. But—home?

She’d dreaded this day for five years, had felt it threatening like a bag of bricks hanging over her head.

She pulled herself together. “I’m coming.”

“I can take care of him.” Van stopped again.

“How?” she asked. “You’re not his next of kin. You’re not even family anymore.”

His breathing deepened. How could she possibly hurt him after all this time?

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“No, you’re right. It was crazy to offer. Not long after you left, he also told me to stay away. But I thought maybe that was an excuse I was happy to take.”

“I don’t want to know—” It was too late to catch up on what had happened after she’d left. The time they’d shared had belonged to someone else. It didn’t feel like hers any longer. “I’ll be on my way as soon as I can get a flight.”

“Wait, Cassie. Let me pick you up at the airport.”

So she could explain Hope at baggage claim? Not a chance. “I’ll be fine.”

His silence ran thick, full of words unsaid. Their relationship had ended unnaturally when she’d walked away, but she hadn’t been willing to wait for the usual recriminations and anger. The rape had humiliated Van and her father. She’d hated them both until she realized she’d never love Hope while she nourished bitterness.

“Thank you for calling,” she said, “and for helping my father. I’ll take over as soon as I get there, and you can go back to your own life.”

“I’m trying to warn you he isn’t the same.” He didn’t seem to hear anything she said, as if he had an agenda and was checking off the items. “I don’t think he’s been eating, and I don’t know when he last took a shower.”

“That’s not my dad.” An image of him burned in her mind. “They’ll keep him in the hospital until I get there?”

“I doubt they’d let him out. When should I expect you?”

“As soon as I can make a reservation. Your number must be on my phone. I’ll call you back.”

“Let me give it to you to make sure.”

She wrote it down. “Thank you,” she said.

“Cassie?”

She bit her lip. Hard. Her arms and legs felt heavy, strange. As if she were channeling someone else’s feelings. If only Van would stop saying her name. “What?”

“Are you all right?”

He’d always cared. That had never been the problem, but his concern left her empty now. “Fine.”

A few seconds went by. She should hang up, cut off the thick voice that had haunted her dreams a lot longer than the monster’s who’d broken into their bathroom. The monster’s voice only terrified her.

Van’s made her lonely, reminded her how it felt to be intimate. Not sex, but trust and talk and safety.

“Should I get you a room at the hotel?” he asked.

She wasn’t about to put Hope on display for the kind, but too-quick-to-pity citizens of Honesty. “I’ll stay at Dad’s house.”

“Maybe you’d like to try Beth’s fishing lodge? She had some trouble last year, but the place is up and running again. She got married last summer and she and her husband renovated—”

Running on wasn’t like him. “I’ll stay at home.” She’d had to give up Beth’s unstinting friendship, and it was too late to start over or explain.

“Okay.” His tone tightened. “Don’t forget to let me know when you’ll be here.”

For the first time since high school, he didn’t say I love you as he hung up. Even the last time—months after she’d left, while Hope had kicked lazily in her belly and Van had begged for another chance, and she’d asked him to stop calling, he’d said it.

She clicked the off button, sliding her palms over her face as if to wipe away memories of Van that flew at her. Always laughing—as she ran her hands through his silky dark blond hair. As he took her mouth with his. Laughter dying as he moved his body above hers.

She flinched and grabbed the wall. “Hope?” After a deep breath, she hurried to her daughter’s room. “I have to tell you some things.”

“No, Mommy. I’m mad. You talked mean to me.”

“I’m sorry, honey.” She was so careful. She tried never to raise her voice, never to let Hope see a hint of brutality anywhere. Her stomach lurched as she remembered the softness of the intruder’s body this afternoon. The human body was so fragile.

And the psyche more so.

“Who was on the phone?” Hope asked, with eyes only for her doll.

“A man I used to know—a friend of my father’s.”

“Huh?” Hope’s eyes rounded and she dropped the doll on her pink-flowered comforter. “You have a daddy?”

Cassie tilted her head back. She’d never even mentioned him? “I have a father,” she said. “He’s sick and he needs me to look after him.”

“Like when I’m sick?” Hope grabbed her hand. “Ooh, will we make him glasses of ice water and toast?”

“We can make anything that will help him feel better. Let’s talk about it over our eggs. Help me warm them up?”

“VAN, TAKE THESE KEYS.” Frail in his hospital gown, Leo Warne covered them with his hand, like a spy passing off a top secret microfiche. “They’re not safe here. Someone will steal them and break into the house and clean me out.” Leo’s eyes darted toward the door and back.

Van suppressed a shudder. He’d loved the man like a father. How could he have abandoned him? “Don’t worry. Cassie’s going to stay at the house. Your stuff will be safe.”

“Stop looking at me like I’m a stranger. I’m not sick.” He nodded toward the ceiling as if someone were watching them from above. “I’m just a smart old man. Something no one in this town likes. I know how they treated Cassie. They made her leave, looking down on her after that man...” He swallowed, his Adam’s apple as big as an egg in his too-thin throat. “Like the rape was her fault. No one took care of her.” He skewered Van with blue eyes that were so much like Cassie’s. “Not even you.”

Van gripped the edge of Leo’s rolling tray. “The rape repulsed me. Cassie never did. I should have protected her, but I couldn’t even make her see I still loved her.”

“Because you didn’t. I know. I know it all. I walk around this town in the night. No one sees me. I’m invisible.”

Van stared, his own good sense returning. “You’re tired and sick and you need to be cared for.” Van dared to stroke Leo’s thin hair as he would have touched his own father—or his child, if he and Cassie had been so lucky. “You’ll get better and you’ll start remembering.”

“I remember everything. People laughed at her and they said she deserved it. They said she should have been more careful. She was asking for it.”

“Those are your own fears talking. It never happened.”

“It was worse. You don’t even know. She won’t come home now.”

“She’ll be here tomorrow. She’s planning to stay at your house.”

The house. With his heart breaking for his broken friend, he felt anxious. What would Cassie walk into in her childhood home? If Leo hadn’t washed himself in weeks, he certainly hadn’t cleaned the house.

Cassie had enough to face. No one had understood why she’d run away from Honesty. Her former neighbors would flood her with casseroles. They’d sympathize with her about Leo’s illness and they’d fish for answers about why she’d stayed away so long.

They’d tried often enough to extract the truth from Van, but no one seemed to realize she hadn’t been content to cut the town out of her life. She’d had no more room for her father or her ex-husband, either.

“Leo, I’m heading over to your house for a while. Just to make sure everything’s ready for Cassie.”

“I’ll give you a buck and a half to mow the lawn.” Leo dug for a nonexistent pocket. “It’s not worth that much, but I know you. You’ll just spend it on a Coca-Cola with Cassie, and you shouldn’t be paying for her treats.”

Van felt as if he’d run face first into a wall, but Leo didn’t seem to realize it was December. “Pay me later.” Van wondered which lawn guy had flirted with Cassie. Van hadn’t noticed her as more than a cute kid until after he’d been working in the bank for almost a year and she’d started college.

He pushed his fist against his chest. They’d been a family once, the three of them. He kissed his former father-in-law’s head and hurried out.

At the nurses’ station, he backed up and asked them to call if Leo’s condition changed. Despite all signs to the contrary, he hoped Leo might improve before Cassie arrived. Good food, warmth and attentive care had to give him a chance.

The Warnes lived across the lake from Beth’s fishing lodge. Van pulled up to Leo’s place to find Trey Lockwood, one of last night’s EMTs, banging away at the front porch with a hammer. Trey stopped and brushed back his ball cap with a weary sigh. He pulled a couple of nails from between his lips.

“I didn’t expect to find anyone else here,” Van said. “What’s wrong with the porch?”

Trey stepped on a board and it squeaked. “Ann and I didn’t realize we should have checked on him.”

“Has he been acting odd for long?”

“He definitely changed after Cassie...” He didn’t say the words and Van was just as glad. “We thought you probably knew, but you weren’t welcome here, either.”

“I’d have forced my way in.” He took in the paint peeling off the siding. Why hadn’t he driven past once in a while? The answer would keep him from facing himself in a mirror for a while. He’d been a coward. Pretending Leo and Cassie didn’t matter anymore had been easier than fighting them for a few pathetic minutes of their time.

“You look gutted,” Trey said. “People think everyone knows what goes on in small towns. But the doors shut here, just like anywhere else, and some things you can’t know.”

Trey was a smart guy. “The door didn’t shut on this.” Van pulled Leo’s keys out of his jacket pocket. “I’ll see how things look inside.”

“Yeah. Good luck. Let me know if I can help.”

“Thanks.” Van trod the rickety boards with care. He dreaded opening the door. “Cassie’s due back tomorrow.”

“You don’t want her to see what’s been going on with her dad.”

“I can’t protect her from what’s happened to her father, but I’d like to clean this place a little.”

“She shouldn’t have left.” Even after five years, Van turned to defend Cassie, but Trey tested the next step, looking regretful. He’d been Cassie’s friend, too. He yanked and the plank gave way with a scream. “None of us asked her to go. None of us wanted her to.”

“It was my fault,” Van said, surprising himself. “Not hers.” A floorboard groaned as he eased across it. A strong wind could send the porch across the lake to Beth’s yard. “It’s too late to talk about the past,” he said.

“You gotta talk to someone.” Trey held a nail against the board and hammered. “Sometime.” He added another nail. “Or it’ll drive you crazy.”

“Yeah?” Van turned the key in the lock, but it took determination, as if Leo hadn’t locked it in five years. He looked over his shoulder at the lake. Leo rented a boathouse down there, hidden by the pines. Three years ago, Van had discovered it open, and he’d locked it to keep it safe from vandals. He’d left a note, telling Leo to get in touch with him for the lock’s combination, but Leo had never called about it.

Trey was watching. “I’ll finish out here. I know a guy who can repaint fast. Cassie’ll feel at home.”

Van nodded. “Thanks for the help and the therapy.”

The EMT grinned. “Free of charge, buddy.”

He went back to work, and Van turned the doorknob and shoved it open. The hinges screamed for oil. A stench of decay and dirt almost knocked him back down the steps.

“God.” He stared at newspapers and canned goods stacked in ranks like soldiers waiting to march down the hall. On each tread of the staircase along the right wall, three packages of paper towels stood side by side.

He pushed the door wide and went searching for the source of the smell. It was easy to trace it to the dining room.

Food. Old, old food, and food as new as last night’s dinner.

He slammed his hand over his mouth like any heroine in one of the old movies his sister loved to watch. Apparently, Leo had thought getting the food to the dining room was enough. There were china plates on the table, but at some point he’d switched to paper and plastic utensils.

And then he'd stopped washing dishes. He'd neatly aligned the plates and the cups and glassware and, eventually, he'd done the same with the throwaway stuff, unless he hadn't finished his meal. Those plates perched on any surface—and the floor.

Compulsive neatness and haphazard filth. How had it made sense?

The kitchen was even crazier. Completely spotless, except there wasn't a dish to be found, beyond the paper and plastic in the cabinets where the real stuff used to be stored.

"Dear God, Leo."

In the back of his mind, Van had blamed Leo for Cassie's leaving. If her beloved father hadn't been ashamed, maybe Cassie would have given Van another chance, but Leo's humiliation had blinded her. She'd taken Van's revulsion at his inability to help her, for shame like her father's.

He choked in a breath and grabbed a garbage bag from beneath the sink. He set to work, realizing he'd misread Leo. They'd tried to live with their guilt in different ways.

He'd been unable to touch his wife, and Leo had stopped living in a world that made sense.

"HOW MUCH LONGER, Mommy?" From her car seat in the back of their rental, Hope flipped her cloth doll, Penny, in circles until the arms coiled like springs. "Where is my grampa, anyway?"

"In a hospital, honey." Squinting into the fading evening sun, Cassie passed another highway sign that assured her she was on her way to Honesty, Virginia. She didn't need the sign. She knew each bump and dip of the road like the corners of her childhood bedroom.

"Will he like me?"

"You're funny. How could anyone not love you?" It was what Cassie feared. It was the reason she'd told no one back home that she'd had Hope. The reason she'd never returned.

"He didn't come see me. We never visited him in his neighbor good."

They'd recently started looking for a new house in a "neighborhood with a great school." Hope couldn't get the hang of the word.

"He's an older man."

"Mrs. Bonney is a older lady." She usually babysat when Cassie had to work late. She made cookies and crocheted afghans and loved Hope almost as much as Cassie did. "She wants to see me all the time."

"But she lives right next door."

"She goes away. She goes to see her little girls."

Mrs. Bonney called her granddaughters her little girls.

Cassie searched for answers. She'd told her father to stay away. She couldn't explain why. "Mrs. Bonney isn't sick."

"Is my grampa a nice man?"

A simple yes stuck in her throat. He'd blamed her for the rape. And he hadn't loved her since.

Van, too. Van, who'd been so much her other half that excising him had left gaps in her soul. Maybe he was worse than her father, because he'd vowed to be her husband. Better or worse had broken him.

"I'm talking to you, Mommy."

"I told you all this last night, sweetie, but you might not get to see him, since he's in the hospital."

"I thought we were gonna get him out of there."

"It's not a bad place." Another hint she should look at her current work situation. So many of the women at the shelter went to the hospital, and their husbands were kept from seeing them. From phone calls Hope had overheard, and frankness about work that Cassie and her partners should have forgone, she might have gotten the wrong idea.

"I don't want to go."

“You don’t have to.” Cassie’s stomach dropped. Who’d look after Hope while she was with her father? How many people in Honesty would have to see Hope? “We’re not staying here long,” Cassie said.

“But how long?”

“A few days.”

She could hear her old friends.

When did she have that kid?

Why didn’t she tell Van?

Whose kid is that?

Van would wonder why she’d hidden Hope’s existence.

“You don’t have to explain.” Her counselor in Tecumseh had repeated that over and over in the months after Hope was born. “She’s your responsibility. You have to make a good life for her and you. And frankly, to hell with anyone else.”

Cassie’s father, practically a Biblical patriarch in her mind when she was growing up, hadn’t wanted her after she was tainted. He certainly wouldn’t want Hope. When Cassie had needed him most, he’d blamed her for the worst thing that had ever happened to her.

She’d find help for him. She closed her burning eyes tight for a second. She’d provide medical care if he needed it. She owed him nothing more.

“Where’s my gramma, Mommy?”

That question hadn’t come up last night. “I’m sorry, but you don’t have one,” Cassie said, fighting, as always, the soft memory of her mother’s hands on her face, her whispered reassurance that the dark was safe. “My mom died when I was a teenager.”

Hope, who’d been traveling since early morning and missed her nap, looked as if she might cry. “You won’t ever die, will you, Mommy?”

“Not for a long time, Hope.” According to the policeman who’d taken her statement at the shelter, she had every chance of dying pretty soon if she wasn’t more careful about taking on thugs. She’d tried to explain about the advantage of surprise. He hadn’t been impressed, and he was right. He just hadn’t come up with an alternative response, other than everyone hiding—and who could do that all the time?

“Good.” Hope smiled through a soft veil of tears in her eyes. Blessed with a sensitive heart, she’d always cried easily. “But you don’t have a mommy.”

“I’m used to that.” Who ever got used to that?

“It’s a good thing you have me.”

Cassie laughed. “Having you is the best. I love you this much.” She took her hands off the wheel long enough to spread them as far as she could. “And then some.”

“Good.” Hope tucked her baby onto her shoulder. “I’m not sleepy, Mommy.”

“I see that.”

“But I could use some mac and cheese.”

“Just let me know when. We’ll be home before you know it.” Home. She’d said it without thinking, after five years of dreading the sight of Honesty.

“We can make eggs for my grampa.”

The hospital concept proved tricky for her to grasp. Cassie glanced in the rearview, at Hope’s drooping eyelids.

With any luck, she could keep this trip an adventure for her daughter and then escape. No one who’d known Cassie before would see Hope, or ask questions.

HOPE WAS ASLEEP when Cassie parked in front of her father’s home. With her palms sweating on the steering wheel, she stared at the house, low, squat and dingy in moonlight instead

of the rich blue of her memory. The ivy her father had tended so lovingly had taken over the porch and the roof, trying to pull the house down.

A woman could almost wish it had.

She glanced at Hope, hating to wake her until she saw what awaited them inside. Van had said her father would still be in the hospital, but when had Leo Wainwright Warne ever paid attention to anyone or anything other than his own sense of right and wrong?

Wallowing in a hospital bed would strike him as the height of wrong.

Cassie climbed out of the car, eased the door shut and started up the cracked driveway. Then she stopped, eyeing the house and a dark band of cloth blocking off the porch. Someone had pinned a Wet Paint sign to it. She leaned down to touch a step. Tacky. And that wasn't all.

The ivy, cracks in the dirty cement, black tire streaks and bird droppings dotting the graying pavement. Her father hadn't been out here with his pressure washer in a long time.

Five years couldn't change anything this much—not unless time and neglect had lived hand in hand. Van had tried to warn her about her father. Like Hope, she just hadn't got it.

She went around to the kitchen door. Half expecting to find it unlocked, she nonetheless lifted her key.

Only to have the door open in her face and Van come out.

Without thinking, she turned toward the car. He took her arm as if to stop her from running. She looked down at his broad hand, his splayed, capable fingers.

Her body seemed to grow heavier, but she wasn't confused about her real feelings. She looked up at him and prayed Hope wouldn't wake, the way children did when a car stopped too long.

"I thought I'd be out of here before you arrived." Stress tensed his face. His dark green eyes watched her as if she were a stranger.

"You dreaded seeing me, too." She pulled away from him. How could he bother her so much after five years? After the revulsion he hadn't been able to hide before she'd left?

She started over.

"I came straight from the airport," she said. "What are you doing here?" She forbade herself another glance toward Hope. Sometime he'd have to know but, please God, not now. Not yet.

"The house was a—we have to talk, Cass."

"Don't call me that." Her old nickname tugged her toward him as if he were her true north. Everyone had used it, but from Van it meant familiarity and whispers in the cocoon of their bed. Secrets only they knew.

He nodded, his eyes so intense she wanted to scream. He shut the door behind him. "Parts of the house were in bad shape. Are in bad shape."

"What are you talking about?" She reached past him. Just then, the back door of her rental car opened, and a small voice shouted, "Mommy?"

She turned. "Hope." Cassie ran across the grass and snatched her daughter into her arms, holding on so tight Hope tried to wriggle free.

"You're squishing me."

"Sorry." Tears choked her, but she never cried. "Sorry, baby." She turned, her daughter in her arms.

Van had followed, shock draining his face of color. She wished the sunset would just finish up and fade and make them all invisible.

Cassie shook her head, begging him not to say anything that might hurt Hope. Naturally, he wondered if she belonged to him. Despite five years and the certainty he hadn't wanted her or their marriage, she feared his unspoken question.

At last, he dragged his gaze away from Hope, moving his head as if his muscles were locked. Pain pulsed from his body.

Cassie relented. She'd assumed a lot of bad things about Van's inability to be human, but he obviously had feelings.

"No," she said. "Not yours."

He grimaced, looking confused. Then he put his hand over his mouth. She was close enough to see sweat bead on his upper lip.

As it had the last time he'd tried to make love to her.

She'd been right to leave Honesty. She was the only one who could love the whimsical, curious girl who danced through her life in joy.

Only Cassie could love the daughter born of her rape.

## CHAPTER THREE

“MOMMY, WHOZZAT MAN?”

Van’s eyes darkened. His mouth froze in a sharp, thin line. He clenched his fists at his side.

Cassie pressed her face to her daughter’s head and breathed in Hope’s warm, still-babyish scent. Cassie swore silently. He could still make her tremble, but she and Hope were a family.

“Van, this is Hope, the love of my life.” Be careful, she warned him in her head. Don’t say anything to hurt my daughter. “Baby, this is Mr. Van. He’s a—” She stopped. If explaining Hope’s long-lost Grampa had been hard... “a friend of my father’s.”

“Hello, Mr. Van.” Hope stuck out her tiny hand. As always, Cassie marveled at her long slender fingers. She’d know her daughter decades from now, if only by her hands. God had been kind. They were Victoria Warne’s hands, too. “Mr. Van?” her little girl said.

He literally shook himself, staring at her.

“Is he okay?” Hope stage-whispered.

He forced a false smile, but Cassie was grateful. Finally, he dwarfed her hand in his and shook it.

Giggling, Hope dropped her head against Cassie’s chest and didn’t see Van press his palm to his jeans.

Watching him, Cassie felt more than the cold of the Virginia winter. Not even the coat she’d draped over the backseat would have warmed her. Why had she expected anything more compassionate from him?

“Sorry.” He shook his head. His disgust this time was clearly for himself, but it came too late.

Cassie swept past him. “I’m taking her inside for dinner and bed.”

“There’s no food,” he said, “and a couple of the rooms...”

She waited. He didn’t go on. She didn’t look back. “What about the rooms?”

“Your dad.” He came after them. The kitchen steps dipped beneath his weight. “He had some collections.”

“What are you trying to say?”

“Paper towels,” he said. “And those dishwashing sponges. Hundreds of them.”

“What?” She stared at him underneath the porch light.

“In the guest rooms. I’ve cleaned your room and his and your old playroom, and I cleaned off and remade the daybed in there. But the others—I called the women’s shelter in town to see if they could use anything.”

He actually blushed, but for no valid reason. Obviously, his mind had gone to the women’s shelter because of what had happened to her. They’d be well sponged and paper-towel clean, because she’d forgotten she’d left her bathroom window open one night five years ago.

“Get over it, Van. I have.”

“Have you?”

His simple question rattled all her doubts. “I had to.” She glanced down at Hope’s head.

He wiped his mouth again. “I don’t know how to talk to you.”

“Fortunately,” she said, trying to be kind because she didn’t want grudges between them, “we don’t need to talk. Don’t get me wrong. I’m grateful for everything you’ve done. We’ll both have beds to sleep in, and I can go by the grocery store.”

“Let me.”

“We’re not your problem. Good night.”

“Come on, Cass.” She’d known Van nearly all her life, but never had she heard the kind of anger he was fighting to quell—all the more frightening because he was normally so controlled. “Give me a chance,” he said. “What did you expect me to do when I found out?”

She looked down. Hope's eyes had drifted shut. "I expected the reaction you had. That's why I left town and never meant to come back."

"Not because you didn't love me anymore?"

She stopped, feeling naked, sensing the eyes of everyone who'd ever known her in this town. "You stopped loving me," she said, praying Hope was really asleep and not just pretending.

"I always told you I was the problem." He edged closer to her shoulder as if emotion brought him there. His nearness and her unaccountable urge to remember what it was like to be in his arms made her want to scream.

"I know. It's not you. It's me." Hearing Cassie's frustration, Hope tried to lift her head, but she was too tired. "Go home, Van. I'm busy."

"Let me help you carry your things in. The house will be a shock."

"I don't need your help." She opened the door. Something smelled awful, and the kitchen looked darker than she remembered.

Van stepped inside.

"Bad man," Hope muttered.

"Not overly bad." No doubt Hope would have to see him again. Cassie walked around him and tried to shut the door, but he wouldn't let her.

"I feel as if I'm barging in, but the house is going to come as a shock." The past, moments in time that should have ended, reopened the gulf between them.

"I'm fine."

Her little girl looked up. "Mommy, what are you talking about?"

"Old stuff," Cassie said. "And what you and I should have for dinner. Can you stay awake long enough to eat something?"

"I'm pretty hungry."

"Me, too."

Hope wrinkled her nose. "Something smells funny." She covered her face with both hands. "Are you sure this is your daddy's house?"

"The smell is bleach." Cassie sniffed harder. "And garbage?"

Van nodded ever so slightly.

She stared at the faded paint and worn appliances. How had this looked before Van started cleaning? "Can I see Dad tonight? Does the hospital have late visiting hours?"

"What about—" He looked at Hope.

Cassie had known people would treat her and Hope like freaks, but she hadn't expected Van to be the first. "I'll manage. Thanks for your help." She went to the door, forcing him to follow, and then ushered him through. "And for looking after Dad."

On the porch, Van turned, opening his mouth, but Cassie had stopped worrying about manners. She shut the door.

And locked it. Tight as a drum.

THE MOON HUNG above thick trees. Van stared at it as he measured each step to his car.

His hand shook so much he could barely hit the button for entry. He stared at the house and wished he'd opened all the blinds. Whatever Cassie was doing, she wasn't letting in light or prying eyes.

Whatever she was doing...Finding something to feed her daughter. He got in the car and grabbed the steering wheel to keep from crashing his fists through his windshield.

His wife had given birth to that rapist's child.

His wife loved that animal's child. Love for Hope was a coat she wore—a second skin—a part of her he'd seen the moment the girl had called her name.

Damn her. Damn her to hell along with that bastard who'd stolen everything from him.

No.

That made it sound as if the rape had been her fault. He'd never thought that, never blamed her, never wanted her anywhere but at his side.

But it didn't feel as if five years had passed. He was still living that last night they'd tried to make love. His head swimming with images of that guy forcing her, he'd had to get away or punch the damn wall.

She hadn't understood. It was almost as if she'd preferred thinking he couldn't stand being near her.

And tonight, she'd sprung Hope on him like another test. He'd failed again, but how could she expect the people who'd loved her to accept a constant, living reminder of the worst moments in their lives?

So, he hadn't thrown a party. He hadn't said anything to hurt Hope or Cassie, either. Why couldn't Cassie give him a break?

He looked up at the closed windows and the door whose locks still clanked and clicked in his ears. Five years, and it was as if she'd left last night and come home this morning.

All the feelings were so familiar. Fear, anger, dread.

And somewhere down deep, the love he hadn't been able to abandon or smother. No other woman had ever made him forget Cassie.

He'd been stranded in a time capsule since the evening she'd left him outside her lawyer's office. Him still swearing he'd make her love him again. Her looking sad. Out of his reach.

And early on, whenever he'd suggested he come to Washington to see her, she'd refused. Finally, she'd said her life would be easier and she'd forget the past better if she never again saw anyone connected with it.

Especially him.

He took a last look at the windows, like eyes closed against the world. Cassie had made enough rules for him and her father. Surely Leo was a living illustration that Cassie's way led to disaster.

Van made his own rules in every other part of his life. If Cassie wanted to throw away love, she'd have to say so, flat out.

He turned the key in the ignition and then pulled his cell from his pocket. Cassie took three rings to answer.

"Hello?"

If she'd sounded certain, instead of wary, maybe he'd have backed off. If she hadn't sounded afraid...

"Don't start dinner. I'll bring something back."

"I don't want you to come back."

"I don't blame you. I didn't treat Hope right and I'm sorry."

"She deserves better, and so do I."

Before, he'd have handled her with kid gloves. She'd been hurt, inside and out, and he couldn't hurt her more.

"Cassie." If he gave in, he'd lose any chance of finding out if they could still love each other. "I don't want to hurt that kid, but she reminds me of—" He couldn't say her father. If he did, he'd never look the child in the eye again. "She reminds me of what happened. Give me a chance to live with it."

"Are you crazy? I'm not coming back here. You and I have been divorced for almost five years. We're over."

"Your father is extremely ill. You won't throw him into some nursing facility and run away."

"I will," she said through what sounded like gritted teeth.

"I know you."

"You're living in a crazy dream. You need treatment as much as my father."

"You might be right, but I've never said goodbye to you. I don't want to give up."

“On what? On nothing. It’s been nothing since the night I left here.”

“Do you think I’m proud of feeling this way? I’m a man. I don’t want to run after a woman who couldn’t be more clear about not wanting to be with me. But I think you were lying five years ago about not wanting us in your life, because you were afraid for your child. I have to know if we can still care for each other.” He tapped his fist against the steering wheel. “Don’t make me talk about feelings, Cassie. And don’t make me beg.”

Her silence stretched so long he pulled the phone away from his ear to see if the signal had faded or she’d hung up.

“Mommy,” said a small voice on Cassie’s side of the connection, “I’m really hungry.”

“So I’ll be back,” Van said. “With dinner for both of you.”

“For all of us?” Cassie asked.

He stiffened. “Are you inviting me or preparing yourself?”

She took a deep breath, but he was holding his. “Maybe a little of both.”

“That’s a start,” he said. “I’ll be back.” He hung up before she could change her mind.

She might be right. What kind of man held on to a woman who’d turned her back on him in the most final of divorce decrees five years ago?

But she’d kept information to herself then. She’d been pregnant. With a rapist’s child, but she’d been his wife and she’d been carrying a child. He’d loved her. He’d had a right to know—or to tell her he couldn’t face it.

He wasn’t sure he could face it now.

He pulled away from the curb, not letting thoughts of Hope reignite his old anger. She was a child, not someone to blame.

And he was through giving up on everything that had mattered because Cassie didn’t believe in him. It was his turn to take charge.

For the first time in a long time, he felt a little hope.

He drove to the town’s new overpriced luxury market, parking next door at the Honesty Sentinel because everyone who wanted to see and be seen had already taken all the open spots at Posh Victuals.

The second he hit the aromatic air inside, his stomach muttered with guttural hunger. He flattened his hand against his belly, but in the Babel of dinnertime shopping, no one else noticed.

He waited in line at the Poshly Prepared Pasta counter. A high school girl, wearing a checkered napkin folded artfully into a cap, finally got through the three customers before him.

“What may I feed you, sir?”

As if she were wearing a toga and offering grapes. “What do you have that will make a four-year-old girl happy?”

“Huh?” She glanced around the counters as if seeking help. No one materialized.

“I have a friend who’s just arrived in town with her four-year-old daughter, and they haven’t eaten. I’d like to take them some dinner.”

Lowering her voice, she leaned toward him. “I’m supposed to talk you into buying the more expensive stuff, but take the spaghetti. Kids always like spaghetti. I have a little brother, and he can’t get enough of the stuff we make here.”

“Perfect. Pack it up.”

“Just for the girl? Would you like a whole dinner? Or a child’s spaghetti?”

“Dinner for three.”

“Okeydoke.”

“Do you have a meatless sauce?”

She nodded.

“I’d better take two orders of that.” Cassie hadn’t eaten meat for years before she’d left, and she might have persuaded her daughter to eat the same crazy way.

With deft hands, the girl packed a meal in takeout cartons. Pasta, a container of sauce, a larger one without meat, and garlic bread, so rich with spicy scents his stomach grumbled again. Louder.

The girl must have heard. Her mouth twitched, but she was too polite to mention it.

She added vegetable antipasto, a tossed salad and two containers of tiramisu. He stopped her in time to ask for crème brûlée for Cassie.

“Just warm everything up. If you boil the pasta for two minutes, it’ll be better than new.” She leaned in again. “I add olive oil to the water. Amazing.”

“Thanks.” He found her badge beneath a wavy ponytail. “Rita.”

“My pleasure. Here’s hoping your friends enjoy.”

His friend had probably changed her mind about letting him in—and changed the locks.

Back at Leo’s house, he parked in the driveway behind Cassie’s rental and carried their dinner to the front door, tapping the newly painted porch with his fingertips to make sure it was dry. He rang the bell and then waved the bags in front of the door to spread the delicious aromas. That market might have a froufrou name, but their cooking smelled great.

Nothing happened on the other side of the Warne door. He backed up and looked around one of the porch stanchions, but the blinds remained shut tight. If the lights were on, not one sliver of illumination leaked through.

He rang the bell again. Would she really change her mind? Could she lock him out of her life again?

The door opened, and Cassie stared at him, accusation and embarrassment on her face.

“How long did it take you to decide?” he asked, fighting a smile.

She stared at his mouth, and resentment firmed her beautiful lips. “I’m letting you in, but it doesn’t mean anything.” It should have sounded churlish, but her sad eyes made him feel responsible.

“Whatever makes you feel all right, Cassie. Where’s—” he cursed himself for the three seconds it took to say her name “—Hope?”

“That’s why I don’t want you around. I don’t doubt you mean well and, obviously, I’m some sort of penance to you.” She lowered her voice. “But every time you look at my little girl, you’ll see that man.” She said it without a shudder, as if that didn’t happen to her. “Or you’ll wonder why I kept her.” She took both bags.

He caught the door in one hand, half expecting her to close it, and then he took back the heavier bag. “I’d never hurt you—or Hope.”

This time her daughter’s name stopped her for a second. “Not on purpose.” She nudged him with the other bag. Cassie, who’d never had a violent bone in her body, actually tried to push him outside. “But you can’t help—and your feelings hurt me more than anything he ever did.”

It was a kick in the gut. He swallowed—twice—before he was able to speak. “Don’t ever say that again.” The connection between his mouth and brain seemed to break. Finally, he managed to pry his tongue off the roof of his mouth. “Don’t compare me to him.”

He turned for the door, but she caught him.

“I’m sorry,” she said, and he believed her because her eyes shone with unshed tears and her mouth trembled. “It just came out. I didn’t mean—”

“Let it go. There are some things you and I can’t talk about.” Nor could he explain he’d been walking through life blind, not living since she’d left him. “I was surprised about Hope. A man doesn’t expect his former—” He glanced toward the kitchen. “I never thought about you having a baby and me not knowing, but none of this is her fault. I want her to feel comfortable around me, and you’d better want that, too, because someone has to look after her while you visit your father.”

Maybe Hope could hang out with one of the nurses for the few minutes it would take for him to—“I’m the closest thing to family he’s had for the past few days. You need me to remind him who you are.”

VAN'S SPEECH, half apology and a whole lot of assumption, hung in the air.

Cassie stared, her mouth half-open until she noticed she was catching flies and closed it. "Remind him?" The bag slipped in her arms. She managed to catch it. "You honestly think he won't know me?"

Van eyed her right back as if he was worried she might also be losing her memory. "I told you that, Cassie."

"I didn't understand." She turned with the bag, not certain where to go next. "How am I going to make sure no one tells him about—I don't care if he hates me, but I don't want him to hurt her." Van's reaction to Hope had proved she was right to shield her daughter from everyone in Honesty. "Plus, I don't want him to get worse. Making him angry could easily make him sicker."

"What are you talking about? You think he hates you?"

She lifted her head, an animal scenting a challenge. "I liked you better when you couldn't hide anything you felt." Including the fact that he'd blamed her, too. "He thought what happened was my fault."

"He was scared. Still is, but he doesn't hate you."

Trust Van to protect her father. She went toe to toe with the only man she'd ever loved more than her dad. "I could never blame Hope for something like that. That's how I know his love wasn't enough, and he does blame me."

Deep down, she realized she was still accusing Van, too. She couldn't help it. His rejection—turning from her in their bed, stepping away from her as they'd gazed together out of their kitchen window—those moments lived under her skin, thorns too sharp to bear.

They'd argued until he had no more words, and hers only made him angry.

"Your father isn't well."

"He was fine five years ago." A new rush of resentment shocked her. She had to get a grip. "I'm sorry." She rubbed her forehead. "Seeing you and being here brings it all back."

"I didn't like your answers to our problems then. I still don't." Answers. Nice, antiseptic way to describe ripping out her own heart and throwing it onto a barbed-wire fence.

"You don't get a choice," she said, not to be unkind but to make him see it was too late to change things.

Faltering, Van turned to a safer subject. "Leo's worse when he's tired, and what about Hope? I'll be glad to look after her, but she'll have to go with us when I introduce you to him."

"I can explain if he doesn't know me." She hated the thought of accepting his help. As if coming back had turned her into the naive young woman who'd married her personal Prince Charming, the habit of leaning on Van tempted her. "And Hope doesn't know you. I'm not comfortable leaving her with anyone."

"Like it or not, I'm not just anyone."

"Close enough."

He looked her straight in the eye and pretended not to have heard. "I could ask my sister to come to the hospital."

"Beth." Her heart ached. She'd lost more than her father and Van. "I've missed her."

"You could have stayed in touch."

"How would I have asked her not to tell you about Hope?"

"You couldn't." He lifted the other bag of food. "Dinner's getting cold."

Hope appeared in the kitchen doorway. "Mommy, I'm starving. I need foods."

"Coming, sweetie." Cassie led the way. "I'll call the hospital and see if my father's still awake."

In the kitchen, Hope climbed back into a chair. The water Cassie had set to boil in a saucepan on the stove was still, the gas beneath it turned off.

Hope looked up as Cassie put two and two together. "I did it."

The stove was like theirs at home, far from here. Her little girl wanted to be a big girl as quick as she could and never thought about saucepan handles. “I’ve asked you not to mess with stoves when I’m not in the room.”

“I’m okay. It’s like ours. I knew how.”

“Hope, I’ve asked you...”

“I’m sorry, Mommy.”

“Do you like to help cook, Hope?” Van started removing paper cartons from his sack. The poisonous resentment in his voice had faded.

He was so very friendly.

“We were gonna have those instant grits.” She pointed at the counter.

He made a face at the box. “I’ve saved you from an ugly fate.”

“Mommy likes ’em.” She slid out of her chair and went to his elbow.

“You’re not such a big fan?”

He still hadn’t looked into her innocent face.

“I don’t mind ’em.” Lying, Hope smiled at Cassie, offering her loyalty.

“Maybe you’ll like this stuff instead.” Setting the last carton on the table, he looked at Hope and a smile spread across his face. A real smile. Wide, warm. Real.

Hope laughed out loud. “I was kinda scared to come here, but you’re nice, Mr. Van. I like your face.”

He laughed, too. Slowly, his hand curved around the back of Hope’s head.

For a split second, before he pulled back and whisked the bag off the table.

## CHAPTER FOUR

VAN FOLDED the Posh bag as deliberately as any bit of paper anywhere had ever been folded, and then he stared at the recycling bin, stunned by Cassie's look of relief.

She must love her daughter more than he'd imagined if she thought he could forget the past so easily.

"Mr. Van, are you saving that bag?"

He pushed it into the bin and got himself under control. Ridiculous that a little girl could do this to him. But it was what she stood for—those hellish images he had never escaped.

"No." He choked as his throat tightened. "I'm not saving it."

He turned. Cassie was waiting, still watchful.

"What did you bring?" Cassie asked with a hand toward the cartons.

"Antipasto, spaghetti, tiramisu for Hope and me and crème brûlée for you."

"I smell the spaghettis." Hope's nose quivered like a kitten's. "And look at the salad, Mommy." She prodded the one see-through package. "Can I have your cootons?"

"Croutons." Her voice was absent. "Spaghettis are Hope's favorites."

There was more in her tone. An extra warning. She looked at her daughter with her heart literally in her eyes and more love than Van suspected she'd ever felt for him. Hope owned that much of her. Cassie would fight with her last breath to keep her little girl safe.

Even from him. As if he'd hurt a baby.

She took down plates and salad dishes from the cabinet. Then she helped Hope open the plastic container. "What else did you want to talk about?" Her briskness suggested he make it fast and beat it.

"I didn't come back just to talk about your father."

She found serving utensils and scooped salad onto Hope's dish without looking up. "He's all that's left. Face it, Van."

"No." With Hope hanging on every nuance, he couldn't elaborate.

Cassie just looked at him. Then she popped the tops off the other cartons and started to add food to her daughter's plate.

"Wait." Van reached for her hand, but she backed up. Message taken. "I need to warm up the pasta."

Cassie shrugged. "Okay. I'd better call the hospital, but you can start now with your salad, baby."

"Goodie."

"Will you talk to Mr. Van while I'm gone?"

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