MILLS & BOON

Vintage SUPER ROMANCE

Tell Me No Lies

KATHRYN SHAY

Kathryn Shay
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Аннотация

What her husband doesn't know could destroy them allDan Logan thinks he's got it all: a great job as a D.A., the ideal marriage and two wonderful children. Now he's been nominated Citizen of the Year. Seems his rigid pursuit of honesty and integrity has paid off.He has no idea that his picture-perfect life is about to be shattered.A man from Tessa Logan's sordid past has tracked her down and is intent on getting her back. If he can't have her, he won't hesitate to expose her past mistakes. One way or another, her secrets will be revealed.Even if Dan can live with the terrible truth, can he survive Tessa's deceit?

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“Hello, Trixie.”

Tessa slammed on the brakes. Her heart leaped in her chest as she saw the man’s face in the mirror. She gripped the steering wheel, scenarios of stalkers and what they did to their victims running through her head.

Then she realized the significance of what the man had said.

Trixie. He’d said Trixie. There was only one person in the world who’d ever called her that. It was his pet name for her. Too stunned to speak, she stared into the rearview mirror at Frankie Hamilton. At least, she thought it must be him. He bore little resemblance to the boy she’d known. The mixed-up boy for whom she’d almost thrown away her future.

Dear Reader,

Welcome to my twentieth Harlequin Superromance novel. I hope you enjoy my latest tale, and especially the characters I’ve created. The idea for this book came to me when I was contemplating the nature of marriage. With divorce rates high, and young people staying single longer, or forever, I wanted to write a story about the enduring nature of marriage, even if the couple runs into problems they think they can’t overcome.

A central question in plotting was, when two people love each other deeply and have built a life together, what could pull them apart? To me, most sins are forgivable. In any relationship, people let each other down. They also grow and change from

who they were when they took their vows, and this growth doesn't always occur at the same rate for both. Having been married for over three decades—I'll be celebrating the thirty-fifth anniversary with my own personal hero right when this book comes out—I know the ups and downs of relationships. I also know that trusting someone implicitly, even after a difficult time, is a true joy. It's worth working toward.

In Tell Me No Lies, Dan and Tessa Logan have an ideal marriage—on the surface. But the pasts of both threaten their happiness, and send each into a tailspin. They do love each other, though, and learn that loving means forgiving even the deepest breaches of trust. I enjoyed seeing Dan and Tessa learn this, and I hope you do, too.

I love to hear from readers. E-mail me at kshay@rochester.rr.com or write to me at P.O. Box 24288, Rochester, NY 14624. And please visit my Web site at www.kathrynshay.com, and the Harlequin Superromance author site at www.superauthors.com.

Happy reading,

Kathryn Shay

Tell Me No Lies
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For Zilla Soriano—
thanks for picking my first book out of the slush pile, loving the rest of them and helping to make each better. I miss you.

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CHAPTER ONE

AS TESSA LOGAN POURED the jasmine bath salts into her claw-footed tub, she thought about her husband. Tonight they'd celebrate their tenth wedding anniversary. Picturing the evening to come, she smiled, turned on the taps and breathed in the scented steam. Her daughters were staying with her sister for the next twenty-four hours, and Dan would be home from work any time now. She hummed as she stood, pinned up her hair and undressed.

The dinner was ready. She'd placed a prime-rib roast in the oven, set the potatoes in the microwave to bake later, stuck the green salad she'd put together in the refrigerator and uncorked the merlot. The next sixty minutes were just for her.

She crossed into the bedroom, newly done in shades of green with white accents. Dan had been surprised at the redecoration, so different from the rest of the traditional colonial furniture and earth tones in the rest of their rambling Victorian. She didn't know why she'd taken this tack with the bedroom, except that once in a while she felt stifled by the constraints of her life.

The phone rang as she removed a box from her dresser drawer.

"Hello." She expected it to be Dan, and hoped he wasn't calling to say he'd be late getting home from work.

"Hey, Tessa." Her sister.

"Hi, Janey. Everything okay?"

"Yep. Just checking to make sure you're wearing the gift I bought for you."

"I've got it in my hand. I'm running my bath now." She chuckled. "You know Dan will be scandalized."

"St. Daniel could use some loosening up."

Tessa hesitated. "Don't tease about him, Janey. Please."

"Sorry." She could visualize her sister's hazel eyes, just like her own, filled with sympathy. Though they were six years apart, they seemed closer in age because they looked so much alike. "You know I love Dan to pieces. It's just that he's so straitlaced."

"Straitlaced is fine by me."

"But I hate to see you both missing some spice in your life."

"I promise, tonight there'll be plenty of spice. Are Sara and Molly having fun?"

"Are you kidding? My boys are falling all over them. They always wanted a sister. The four of them are out in the pool as we speak." She chuckled. "Of course, Molly's giving her cousins a run for their money, as usual. She's already hidden Jason's baseball glove and checked Jim's e-mail."

Tessa worried about her older child. Molly never got into real trouble, but she did enough damage to keep them all hopping. She seemed to take delight in shaking things up. "Put her on. I'll talk to her."

"No way. Go take your bath. Use scented oil," Janey added before she hung up.

A few minutes later Tessa climbed into the deep tub and

sighed as she sank into the hot water. She lay back on the terry-cloth pillow, closed her eyes and listened to the Debussy CD she'd put on the stereo system in the bedroom. At one time she couldn't tell Debussy from Chopin. She hadn't known the difference between a van Gogh and a Picasso. When she'd become part of Dan's world, however, everything had changed.

Tessa pushed away her memories. She never let herself think about how she had lived before she met Dan because it was too painful. Tessa hadn't always been a good person. And her husband knew nothing about her past.

If Tessa had her way, he never would.

DAN LOGAN ENTERED the kitchen through the garage. He'd left work early, something he seldom did, but tonight was special, and he couldn't wait to get home. The girls were with Janey, and he and Tessa had the whole house to themselves. Stopping to put the red roses into a vase, he caught the scent of roasting meat and got a peek at the set table in the dining room. He smiled. The home Tessa had made for him was everything he wanted—well decorated, yet not ostentatious. A calm, peaceful haven after a day in the criminal world. Leaving her favorite flowers as a surprise for her when they came down to eat, he followed the sound of music up the back stairs.

He found his wife with her eyes closed, lounging in the tub. Glad to see she was pampering herself, he stood against the doorjamb of their bathroom and watched her. Her skin was flushed from the heat of the bath; her hair was piled on her head,

with a few curls escaping around her face. She didn't take time for herself enough. She worked too hard, raising the girls and covering for him at home when his job as Orchard Place district attorney demanded late hours. She also worked part-time at the library and volunteered in the community.

"Hi, sweetheart."

She opened her eyes. Shades of brown and green, they warmed when they focused on him. "Hi." She lifted a leg covered with bubbles and glided a sponge-like thing over her calf. "I'm being lazy. I didn't expect you home so soon."

His gaze focused on the sensual gesture. Combined with the scent rising from the water, Dan was mesmerized. "I…was anxious to see you."

She directed a flirty smile at him. "Want to join me?"

His first impulse was to say yes. But then it surfaced, that rigid control he kept over every facet in his life. By now, it had become second nature. Tessa, however, could sometimes tempt him out of the self-imposed boundaries. Once in a while, in bed, he let her do that.

Covering the space between them, he bent over and kissed her cheek. "No, thanks. You know that tub's too small for me. I'm going to shower, though."

Back in the bedroom, he put his pocket change and his watch in the top drawer of the dresser, hung up his suit, placed his shoes on the second shelf at the bottom of the closet and stuffed his dirty clothes in the wicker laundry hamper. He smiled again at

Tessa as he entered the bathroom and crossed to the shower in the corner.

She whistled at him. “Still looking good there, Dan.”

“Nice to hear at forty,” he said, stepping inside.

As he let the water sluice over him, he took pleasure in Tessa’s compliment. Concentrating on the night ahead, he smiled as he washed. When he came out of the glass enclosure, Tessa had left her bath. Drying himself, shaving, he heard the music in the bedroom change to some Michael Bolton. The melody was romantic and…sexy. He felt his body respond. Hmm. Their habit was to make love at night, but what the hell, today was their anniversary.

Apparently, Tessa had the same thoughts, because when he entered the bedroom with a towel wrapped around his waist, she was on the bed.

“Where did you get that?”

She fingered the black lace strap of the top. “Janey bought it for me.” Her hand slid to her thigh. “These, too,” she said of the shorts-like panties to match.

The man in him, the husband and lover, responded to her tease. But then the staid person he’d become took over.

Tessa noticed. “You’re frowning.” Her eyes widened. “I’m sorry if this is too…risqué. I just thought…it’s our anniversary.”

The stricken look on her face—he’d seen it before and it always troubled him—sent him to the bed where he sat down next to her. “Shh,” he said, kissing her tenderly. “It’s not too risqué

for your husband."

She didn't believe him.

"Tess, love, you know me. You know how conservative I am. I like it when you coax me out of that box."

"Do you?"

He touched the pearls around her neck. He'd given them to her on their wedding day, and he knew they'd become her most precious possession. "Of course." His grin was meant to soothe her. "You are so beautiful, and I love how this—" now he kissed the lacy edge of the top "—shows that off." He meant what he said, in his heart.

She relaxed. He ran his lips along the line of her collar bone and kissed his way over her body until all rational thought fled.

"WELL, I DON'T NEED to ask how your anniversary celebration was." Dan's brother Nick smirked at him with a cockiness left over from Nick's street days. "It's written all over your face."

Picking up his fork, Dan dug into his chicken Caesar salad. "Our anniversary was terrific. And it was nice to have time alone with Tessa. I'm crazy about my girls, but with Molly and Sara always there we don't have time to hold a decent conversation."

"Oh, yeah, I'll bet you talked all night long."

"None of your business, wise guy." Dan couldn't contain his smile. Last night had been full of fireworks. It stunned him that he could sometimes behave with such abandon.

"Yeah, yeah." Nick bit into his Reuben sandwich. "So what

did you want to talk to me about?"

Dan's gaze was direct. "Mom."

Nick's hand curled around the glass in front of him. "Off limits, Dan. You know that."

"Her sixtieth birthday's next month. We're having a party, and I know she'd love it if you were there. If you'd give a little…"

"She kicked me out of the house when I was seventeen. I've done her a huge favor by avoiding contact since I came back. You aren't going to change that."

"She didn't kick you out. You left after she said you had to abide by her rules. I remember, Nick, I was there."

"Same thing. Anyway, Mom had you, the perfect child, in her house. I'm the disappointment."

"You're not a disappointment to me." Dan hoped his tone was as sincere as he felt. "You turned your life around."

"Yeah, I did."

The look on Nick's face told Dan his brother would close down if he didn't change the subject. "How's the job going?" His younger brother had come back to Orchard Place two years ago and now ran the town's Center for At-Risk Teens.

"The center's doing great, though we always need money and volunteers. Your wife's a big hit with the kids. The book discussion group she started at the library is thriving. I can't believe how well she relates to the girls."

"She works too hard. I worry about her."

"Mmm."

Dan's head came up. "Mmm, what?"

"I don't know. I worry about her, too, I guess."

Sipping his iced tea, Dan frowned.

"She ever talk about her past?" Nick asked.

"Why?"

"No reason. Does she?"

Since Tessa was circumspect about her background, he'd never discussed this with Nick before. "She grew up in the Midwest with Janey and a grandmother. No parents in the picture. She came east when…" He thought a minute. "I guess when her grandmother died. Anyway, she was a waitress in Chico's Diner and living with Janey when I met her."

"She seems sad to me sometimes."

Dan studied his brother, hating the fact that Nick might know information about Tessa he didn't. "Do you think something's wrong with her?"

"Nah." Nick set his napkin down on the table. "You, on the other hand, I could write a book about."

"Don't start." Dan concentrated on his salad.

"You live in fear that it's genetic, Dan."

The it didn't have to be clarified.

"I'm nothing like Dad was."

"I had his unethical tendencies in me."

"How did we get on to this topic?"

"Probably because you brought up Claire." Nick refused to call their mother Mom. "It's obvious that she thinks I got my bad

seeds from him."

"That's crap."

"Then why have you spent your life in self-imposed perfection? I think you're trying to prove you're not like our embezzling bastard of a father."

"It's not necessary to get into this, Nick. I know I'm conservative because of our background. Tessa and I have discussed it. She accepts that about me. It works for us."

"Okay, fine."

"Let's talk about something else. How about your love life? Any women on the horizon?"

"Scores." Nick was always secretive about the women in his life, past and present.

"I'll bet that's true."

Nick had the Logan looks—dark hair and slate-blue eyes, classic bone structure. But whereas Nick held himself with easy grace and comfort, Dan was coiled up. Smiles came easily to Nick, while Dan was sober most of the time.

Well, he loved his brother and was grateful to have Nick back in his life. It was his father—the convicted felon—who Dan hated with a passion that wouldn't dissipate. Regardless of how much he talked to Tessa about it.

"MOM!" Nine-year-old Molly shouted the word from across the room, then hurtled herself at her mother as if Tessa had abandoned her for weeks, not left her one day with her favorite cousins. "I missed you." Molly's grin was infectious, and she

always made Tessa smile. Her carefree child loved life and showed it with exuberant charm.

"I missed you, too, Mol." Tessa hugged her and glanced over at Janey, who was rolling her eyes. "Well, I did."

"Did you and Dad have a good time on your anniversary?"

"Yeah, did you have a good time?" Janey teased.

Tessa drew back. "We did."

"What'd ya do, Mom?"

"Oh, grown-up stuff."

Very grown-up stuff. She shivered at the thought of how Dan had touched her last night. She loved it when he lost himself in their lovemaking. It didn't happen every time, but she treasured those rare occasions he couldn't even remember his name.

"Hi, Mom." Sara stood in the doorway. At almost eight, fourteen months younger than Molly, she eyed Tessa warily. She looked like her dad with dark hair and blue eyes, whereas Molly had inherited Tessa's hazel eyes and light brown hair. Molly's hair fell in curls down her back, but these days Tessa blew her hair straight.

"Hey, baby. Come give me a hug."

Sara approached her with dainty little steps. She hugged Tessa tentatively. Her younger daughter was quiet and self-contained. Again, like her dad.

"Go pack up your stuff, now. We have to do some grocery shopping before dinner."

"Can we get ice cream?" Molly asked. "The kind Aunt Janey

has, with pieces of candy bars in it?"

"I think so. Just as long as you don't overdo it."

When the girls were gone, Janey sat at her kitchen table and Tessa followed suit. "Sara's too serious," Janey said. "It would be healthy for her to overdo it once in a while."

"Maybe."

"You, too."

Tessa's sister had a strong protective streak, evident all through their youth, and when Tessa came to live with her in Orchard Place. Even now that they were adults with their own families, she played mother hen frequently.

"You know why I'm like this."

"The accident wasn't your fault." Janey hesitated before she continued. "That anniversary is coming up, too."

"Please, don't talk about it. I can't risk somebody finding out."

Janey's expression turned sad. "You should tell Dan."

"After his father's situation? Are you kidding? We'd never have gotten together if he'd known about me."

"Hey, he was the one who pursued you. Relentlessly, I might add."

That was true. Though she'd fallen hook, line and sinker for the young Orchard County assistant district attorney, it took him six months to wheedle a date out of her, a year until she slept with him. She wouldn't have married him but she'd gotten pregnant, which a few weeks later ended in miscarriage.

"It doesn't matter what happened in the past, Janey. With

Grandma dead, you're the only one who knows the truth. Not telling Dan is a done deal."

"I'm not the only one who knows the truth. That lunatic—"

Tessa felt her face pale. "Janey, no. Don't even say his name. Please. We made a pact."

"All right, all right. I won't even say his name. I hope he's burning in hell, anyway."

KANSAS FEDERAL Penitentiary had become Frankie Hamilton's own personal hell. He stared out his cell window at the barbed wire fences and dirty, white guard tower, his hate for the place burning inside him. He'd been down for fifteen years and only the black-market buck, which got him drunk, kept him from going postal all this time.

"Hey, Hamilton, you over there?"

Coughing from the freakin' dampness of the prison—he swore he'd had this cold for years— Frankie dragged himself to the front of the cell and plunked down on the end of his cot. The flimsy bed, a cheap steel desk and chair, a sink and a toilet furnished the concrete ten-by-ten room. It smelled like piss and cleanser. "Yeah, Shank, I'm here. Where you think I am, at a ball?"

"Just checking. I hate Sunday nights in this place."

"Why they any worse than the rest of the week?"

"My pa never came home on Sunday nights. Me and my ma—it was the only peace we had."

It had been rumored among the inmates that Sammy Shanker,

aka Shank, had blown off the back of his father's head one cold winter morning and splattered his old man's brains all over his own face. He'd been seventeen at the time.

"You get any more letters from your ma?"

"Not this week. Maybe tomorrow." Shank swore. "You heard from your girl?"

Frankie glanced to the desk and grinned. "Another letter yesterday."

"Read me some? 'Cause it's Sunday?"

"I dunno."

"Not the private parts."

Frankie rose from the cot, grabbed the sealed envelope off the desk and came back to the front of the cell. He put the letter to his nose; he knew it had a flowery scent but he couldn't smell it because he was constantly stuffed up. "Maybe a little bit." He tore open the envelope and smiled at the familiar handwriting.

"Dear Frankie, I miss you so much. I can't wait till you get out on parole in a few weeks. I'm sending another picture so you don't forget me."

"Can I see it?"

"Sure." Snaking his arm between the bars and out as far as he could, he let Shank get a peek at his girl.

"She don't look much different than the last picture."

Frankie snatched his hand back; his head started to hurt. "Course she does." He rubbed his thumb and finger over his eyes, then stared at the curly, light brown hair, the wide brown eyes,

the freckles on her nose.

“Frankie? Read some more?”

When the pain receded, he read parts of the three pages. The end of the letters always made him feel better. “I love you, Frankie, and can’t wait till you get out. Come back to me soon. Love, Trixie.”

Trixie, his girl. Frankie lay back on his bed, remembering her baby-soft skin and silky hair. He’d never forgive the damned prison system for splitting them up. She’d been sentenced to a different jail all those years ago and had gone back to the real world after eighteen months. Kissing the picture, he whispered, “It won’t be long now, Trixie.”

Frankie fell asleep with Trixie next to his heart.

CHAPTER TWO

THE SMELL OF FRESH FLOWERS filtered in through the open windows of Tessa's dark green SUV. The beginning of May in western New York was breathtaking. Tessa, who also liked the wintertime snow, couldn't understand why people would reside anywhere else. Living in a town with a population of twenty thousand, Tessa had to drive to most places, but although she hated being behind the wheel of a car, she was used to it. Today, she was heading toward the girls' school. Molly had a doctor's appointment and Tessa didn't have to work until the afternoon.

She passed Carlson's Drugs, reminding herself to drop by later with Dan's prescription. She frowned. His blood pressure was up again. She tried to banish the worry that continued to niggle at her. Nothing was going to happen to him. The condition would soon be under control.

The stoplight changed and, putting her foot on the gas, she started out into the intersection. A fleeting glimpse of red registered before she felt the impact. There was a loud crack, like a bat hitting a ball. The passenger side crumpled. The car spun out into the other lane of traffic.

She gripped the wheel. How should I turn it? What am I supposed to do? Her SUV slammed into a tree, then for a moment all was eerily still.

Finally she heard someone yell, "Call 911!"

A man yelled to her through her window. Tessa tried to look at him, to tell him she was okay, but when she moved, pain exploded in her forehead, radiating everywhere. She closed her eyes.

Sirens.

When she opened her eyes again, a red truck was in her line of vision.

"Ma'am? Are you all right?"

She tried to speak, but she couldn't.

"Get the ram over here, the door's stuck!"

The voices began to fade and the shouts came from farther away now. Dizziness engulfed her. She thought she might throw up.

Everything went black.

A loud pop startled her awake. The door to the SUV was ripped off.

"Ma'am. I'm Lieutenant Jacobs. I…holy hell, Tessa? I didn't recognize your car. It's me, Jake, from three doors down."

Only a squeak came out of her mouth when Tessa tried to answer.

Jake turned and said to somebody, "Get me a collar and the backboard." She felt a soothing hand on her head. "Don't worry, Tessa, we'll get you out of here."

Before she faded back into unconsciousness, she heard, "Call Dan Logan at the DA's office. Tell him to get to the hospital right away."

COLD FEAR LODGED in his throat as Dan rushed into emergency ten minutes after his assistant found him about to begin the trial.

Please, God, please, let her be all right.

He found Janey in the waiting room, huddled in a chair, her face ashen. As he got closer, he saw her hands twisting a handkerchief.

"Oh, no, Janey, what—?"

"She's all right. Brad saw her before her own doctor came in. He said she's got bruises and she's shaken, but it doesn't look like there's any serious damage." Janey drew in a breath. "Her doctor told Brad to tell us to wait out here and she'd find us after she examined Tessa." Thank God Janey's husband was a doctor.

His body went limp. Closing his eyes, he forced himself to calm down. Dan could do this now. He could do anything so long as she was all right. "What happened?"

Janey looked over his shoulder.

Dan tracked her gaze and saw a firefighter coming toward him.

"Hey, Dan," Jake, their neighbour, said. "I was the first responder. Tessa's rattled and bruised, but basically fine."

"You're sure?"

"Her doctor's examining her, but, yeah, I think she's okay. Except…"

"Except what?"

"She's really shaken. We had to pry her hands off the steering

wheel. They're black and blue from holding it so tight."

"Is that uncommon in a car accident?"

"It happens. But she also kept saying she was sorry."

"Poor Tessa." She hated to drive and this would make it worse. "Was she at fault?"

"Nope. A red Mustang T-boned her when he ran a light. Luckily on the passenger side, which was empty."

His stomach roiled. If one of the girls had been with her…

"The driver of the Mustang is okay, too. He admitted the accident was his fault."

"It's just like Tessa to believe she could have driven more defensively so this didn't have to happen," Janey said.

"She's a sweetheart." Jake smiled. "My kids love her. Anyway, count your blessings it wasn't any worse."

When Jake left, Dan turned to Janey. "I think it's more than what you said."

"What do you mean?"

"Tessa hates to drive. She didn't even have her license when I met her, which is odd for someone her age."

Her sister said nothing.

"Look, Janey, you know that accident when she was nineteen made her gun-shy. I had to coax her into learning to drive after we were married."

Janey sank into a chair. "That would make anybody gun-shy, wouldn't it?"

Dan dropped into an adjacent seat. "I guess." He watched

Janey fidget with her wedding ring, and his gut instinct—the one that made him a successful lawyer—kicked in. "Is there something I should know?"

"No, nothing."

He grasped Janey's hand. It was cold and clammy. "Honey, I'm crazy about your sister. If there's any way I can help her, please tell me."

"What do you want to know?"

"What was she like when she had the accident? I know so little about how you two grew up. I wish I had more information, but it upsets Tessa to talk about it."

"You know the important details."

Some of them, he thought. They never knew their father. Their mother drank and took off with some guy when they were little. Child protective let them live with their grandmother.

"Tessa said she worked in a diner after high school. I always wondered why she didn't go to college. She did great at Buffalo University when she got her librarian's degree."

"Sometimes people aren't ready for college right away."

"That's what she said." But he always thought she was hedging. Just like Janey was doing right now.

"You've been so good for her, Dan. That's all that counts."

"Dan, is that you?"

He glanced up to see that their doctor, Lisa Benton, had come out of E.R. "How is she, Lisa?"

"Physically, she's fine. Emotionally, she's shaken."

“Pretty common after an accident, right?” This from Janey.

“Yes, often it is.” Lisa looped her stethoscope around her neck and looked down at a chart. “But Tessa’s response is a bit exaggerated. She’s quiet and withdrawn. She’ll answer my questions, but there’s some kind of, I don’t know, fear in her behavior.”

“She hates driving,” Dan said.

“Maybe that’s all it is.”

“Should we do anything?” Janey asked.

“Not now. Take her home, keep her in bed the rest of the day, and call me tomorrow. If she’s still this upset, we’ll think about what to do.”

“All right.”

“I can stay with her,” Janey said after the doctor left.

Dan looked askance. “I’m not going back to work after this.”

“Okay. Could I have some time alone with her?”

An odd request. “Why?”

Janey’s lower lip trembled. “I was scared that something bad was going to happen to her, Dan.”

Janey loved Tessa unconditionally. And he knew being with Janey was good for his wife. Her mood was lighter after her visits with her sister or even after talking to Janey on the phone.

Dan touched her shoulder. “Tell you what. We’ll get her home and make sure she’s all right. The girls will need to see her, then I’ll take them to a McDonald’s restaurant and you can have an hour alone with her.”

"Thanks, Dan. For understanding our bond."

"Janey, I want what's best for Tessa. If being with you for a while will help, so be it." He put his arm around her. "Now let's go get our girl."

TESSA BURST INTO TEARS when Dan walked through the curtains of her cubicle in the E.R.

He strode to the bed. "Oh, sweetheart, I'm so sorry."

"It was my fault," she said, clinging to him, burying her face in his chest. This was what she needed now. His closeness. The feel and scent of him. "I should have been more careful. I should have waited at the light longer."

His hand in her hair was soothing. He kissed the top of her head. "Tess, the driver of the other car admitted guilt. He said he ran the signal light. He took legal responsibility. None of this was your fault."

"It's all my fault."

"No, no."

After a moment, his steady heartbeat quieted her and she drew back. She raised her hands to her cheeks and flinched. "My face hurts."

"It's banged up a little."

Her gaze flew to Janey.

"The bruises will go away," Janey said.

On the outside, maybe. Tessa fell back into the pillow. "Lisa said I can go home, right?"

"Uh-huh. As soon as you get dressed and I sign the papers."

She took Dan's hand. It was big, and holding it always made her feel safe. But she had to be careful here. "I'm okay. Just shaken. When I think that Molly and Sara could have been with me. The other car hit the passenger side so hard."

Dan drew a handkerchief out of his pocket, and she wiped her eyes. "They weren't with you. They're safe with my mother. She picked them up after school and brought them to her condo."

"Do they know what happened?"

"Not yet. I wanted to wait to tell them until they could see you in person.

"I'll stay with you while he gets the girls," Janey said.

"Oh, okay."

Dan kissed her nose. "I'm so sorry you have to go through this, honey. I know driving is hard for you. This must be your worst nightmare."

"I'll be fine." She fisted her hands in the lapels of his suit coat. "I'm sorry I'm being such a baby."

"You're entitled." He stood. "Want me to help you get dressed?"

"I'll do it." Janey stepped closer to the bed. "Maybe you can take care of the hospital stuff."

Dan cocked his head and looked puzzled. "Sure." He squeezed Tessa's shoulder, and walked out of the cubicle.

When Dan was gone, Janey sat down on the side of the bed and enfolded Tessa in her arms. "Oh, God, Janey, what did I do?"

"You did nothing. Not this time or the last."

"Yes, yes I did."

She could still hear the screeching tires and breaking glass. The screams and the sirens.

"Don't associate the two accidents, honey. They're unrelated."

"I was driving this time."

"I know."

"I couldn't live with myself if I hurt someone again."

"The only person hurt today was you."

Releasing her sister, Tessa lay back. When she closed her eyes, she could feel the terror creep up on her. "I can't forget what happened fifteen years ago. This has brought it all back in Technicolor vividness."

Before Tessa could say anything, the curtain swung back. Dan stood in the entryway.

How much had he heard?

"DOES IT HURT, MOMMY?" Molly cuddled into Tessa on their bed, and Dan watched his wife wince. Sara stood across the room in the safe circle of his arm.

"Yes, sweetie, a little bit."

"Hey, kiddo," Dan said to Molly, "I think your snuggling could be a little less fervent today."

Molly glanced over at him. If it had been Sara, Dan wouldn't have said anything and let Tessa bear the brunt of her daughter's enthusiasm. Sara was sensitive and unsure of herself and even a gentle chiding would have made her feel bad.

But Molly was tough. Maybe too tough. "Okay, Daddy." She

drew back, and touched the purple bruises on Tessa's face. "It looks yucky."

"I know, Mol. But what's most important is that nobody was hurt."

Not today, anyway.

Dan had overheard his wife and Janey talking in the E.R. Once again, he squelched his anxiety that Tessa was keeping something from him. Something important. He'd have to deal with that sooner or later, and he would, but Tessa was at her worst right now and he wasn't going to force the issue.

Even if secrets were abhorrent to him. Even after he'd made Tessa promise she wouldn't lie to him, either outright or by omission, as his parents had. She was the one person he'd trusted in his life to be honest with him.

He made sure there was no concern in his voice when he said to the girls, "Are you two ready to eat yet?"

Molly catapulted off the bed. "McDonald's!" she shouted. "They got a mad-cool slide in the playground now."

Sara buried her face in his waist. "I don't want to leave Mom."

"How about if you visit alone with Mom for a few minutes, then you come with us."

"Okay." Letting go of him, Sara crept to the bed and perched on the side.

Molly skipped over to Dan. "Come on, Dad."

"We'll go keep Aunt Janey company. Sara, five minutes."

His little girl nodded. As he left the room hand in hand with

Molly, he saw Tessa wince again as Sara, albeit gently, went into her mother's open embrace.

Janey was fixing iced tea when they came down to the kitchen. "All ready to go?" she asked Dan.

The roses sat on the table, reminding him that it had been their anniversary only a few days ago. Everything had been fine then. Now, his wife was bruised as a boxer, and he'd discovered there was something more to that accident in her past that he didn't know about.

Molly snitched a cookie from the jar and said, "I'm goin' outside to wait for you and slowpoke."

"Go ahead, Mol."

When she left, Dan watched Janey fuss with a tray filled with tea and crackers, which was all Tessa wanted to eat. Though Janey wasn't any bigger or heavier than her sister, she always seemed sturdy and strong, whereas Tessa appeared fragile.

"Why are you staring at me like that?"

He folded his arms over his chest. "I overheard you two in the hospital when you thought you were alone."

If he wasn't sure before that something was going on, he was now. Janey went pale.

"Don't bother to deny it. I heard you talking about what happened fifteen years ago. I assume it was the accident that caused Tessa to hate to drive. The one you and I discussed."

"Dan, I—"

He held up his hand. "No, I'm not asking you to betray a

confidence. As soon as she's better, I'll get it all out in the open myself. Now, she's too raw."

"All right."

"I love your sister." He gave her a smile because she looked so sad. "Almost as much as you do."

Janey's return smile was weak.

"Now take the roses upstairs, too, so Tessa can enjoy them. And send my other daughter down."

As she walked by him holding the tray, Janey stopped and kissed his cheek.

He placed a hand on her shoulder. "Don't worry. I won't upset her now."

"Thanks, Dan."

When Sara joined him a few minutes later and they went out to find Molly, Dan put his cause for concern out of his mind. Since he'd become an expert at repressing negative thoughts, he was able, for the time being, to forget this one.

"SO, FRANKIE, your walkaway day's coming up next week."

Frankie was sitting at a table in the cafeteria with Shank, sipping hot tea that tasted awful. But he'd been to the infirmary again for this damned cold, and they told him warm liquids would help. The consistently loud din in this place hurt his ears and the bright lighting made him squint. "Yep, it is."

"How's it feel to be getting out?"

"Feels right, Shank."

"I'm gonna miss you."

“Me, too.” That was a lie. Frankie couldn’t wait to be done with this place. He couldn’t wait to see Trixie again.

“She coming to get you?”

Shank had some crazy obsession where Trixie was concerned. If they were on the outside, he’d beat the crap out of any guy for thinking about her that much. Frankie was a jealous man—and proud of it. Trixie was his, and if any other guy got near her, he’d bust the jerk’s face open.

“Is she coming for you, Frank?”

“Um, no. She can’t get off… She isn’t… I’m gonna surprise her.” His vision blurred some. He blinked hard to clear it. “She don’t know the exact date.”

But he did. He’d been counting the days. It was fifteen years ago today since the stupid accident and only a week more on his sentence. During the trial, the judge had had it in for Frankie and was jonesing to put him away. In the end, they separated Frankie from Trixie because everybody hated him. But she didn’t and that’s all that counted now. He’d see her soon.

In a line of prisoners, he left the cafeteria. A guard at the front took a group of them and veered off to the library. Since he was about to be paroled, they’d started letting him use the Internet. He got right online after the assistant read him the dumb-ass rules again; he clicked into his hometown Web site, Iverton, Ohio. The Iverton Banner was posted every day.

Same old, same old. New superintendent of schools. An issue up before the city council on paving the streets. Minor break-ins

and petty larceny on the police page.

He stopped short at the headline on section B. Fifteen Year Anniversary of Tragic Accident. Shit, small towns. They never forgot nothing. You couldn't make one single mistake without it following you for life. He was going back there to get Trixie, but he planned to leave that hick town in the dust. Morbid curiosity made him read the article.

Fifteen years ago today, Franklin R. Hamilton ran a red light and drove his car into the back end of a Chevy truck, killing Mrs. Serena Summers and her daughter, Joanna, age five. Shock filled our small community when it was discovered that both Hamilton and his companion, Tessa Lawrence, had been smoking marijuana and drinking alcohol. An undisclosed amount of cocaine was also found in the trunk of the car.

Frankie stopped reading. Tessa? Who was she? For a minute he didn't remember. Then he did—her sister called her that. Frankie had given her a nickname. To him, she was always Trixie. His Trixie.

Hamilton was sentenced to twenty years in a federal penitentiary for negligent homicide and possession of a controlled substance, and Lawrence received three years in a federal prison camp on the possession charge. Lawrence was released on probation after serving eighteen months. Hamilton is up for parole as this article is being written. He refused to talk to reporters at the prison. The husband and father of the slain family could not be reached for comment.

The reporter then went on to enumerate statistics about drunk drivers and increased penalties for DUI and drug possession, and ended with a comment about never being able to make up for such an atrocity.

Screw them, Frankie logged off the Web site. His life was gonna be just fine, as soon as he could get out of here and be with Trixie again.

Hmm. It was time for another letter from her.

CHAPTER THREE

DAN WANTED A CONVICTION on Eddie Cramden in the worst way. As the defendant sat in the witness chair, wearing a spiffy suit his rich father had most likely bought him and his hair slicked back in a ponytail, Dan had to curb the vehement urge to nail the guy. He forced himself to wait until his assistant district attorney brought in the new evidence that had come to light last night.

Cramden was on trial for a VOP, violation of probation, and Dan was losing his case. The witness who was to testify that Cramden had completed a drug transaction had recanted, so Cramden was off the hook not only for that crime, but for the VOP, which had been hinging on the drug deal. For his entire career in the D.A.'s office, Dan had fought to get drug dealers and users off the street and away from innocents, like his family.

The judge sat behind her oak bench, her face inscrutable, and nodded to him. "Mr. Logan, would you like to cross-examine the witness?"

In his peripheral vision, Dan saw Karen Jackson, his assistant D.A., enter the courtroom carrying a folder and, better yet, smiling.

"Yes, Your Honor, I would. Might I have a minute to confer with my colleague?"

"Do you want a recess?"

“I don’t think so. I need to confirm the relevance of a question I have for Mr. Cramden.”

In her no-nonsense way, Karen handed him the folder. “Got it. K-Mart store, last year. The amount was low, so he pleaded guilty to a noncriminal offense of disorderly conduct when he appeared before a judge at the arraignment. Though at that time he was indeed on probation, he was never prosecuted, therefore no one got him on the VOP. His daddy managed to make the charge go away.”

“Hooray.” Dan strode to the witness stand and stood in front of Cramden. The guy was at ease because he’d been informed before the proceedings got under way that Dan had no case. Which had been true up until a few minutes ago. “Mr. Cramden, were you ever arrested for shoplifting?”

“Objection!” Allison Markham, the defense attorney, was on her feet. A partner in a prestigious firm, she was one of the best criminal lawyers in town. “Mr. Cramden is not on trial for shoplifting.”

“Mr. Logan, are you going somewhere with this?” Judge Wicker asked.

“Yes, Your Honor.”

Sweat began to bead on Cramden’s face, and he frowned over at his father, who was paying Allison’s enormous fees. “I didn’t get a conviction for shoplifting.”

Dan held up the file. “I have here a document that shows you were involved in an incident at a K-Mart store.”

Cramden's smiled disappeared. "That was nothing. I didn't get charged with a crime."

"Approach, Your Honor." In her blue power suit, Allison was already marching to the bench. "What's going on, Dan?"

"Your client was picked up at a local discount store for shoplifting. He stole a ten-dollar fishing pole."

"Was he arrested?" the judge asked.

"No, he got off with noncriminal disorderly conduct." He nodded back to the rows of spectator seats where the indulgent father sat. "A deal was made."

Judge Wicker's eyes narrowed on Dan. "You know, Mr. Logan, any case involving prosecution for ten dollars is liable to be thrown out of court."

"Maybe not. Given the security tape and the testimony of the supervisor we just obtained, which wasn't used before, a judge might reconsider opening the case. If he does, even prosecution for the incident constitutes a violation of probation."

Though a judge might not consider opening the case, the defense couldn't afford to take the chance that Cramden would go back to jail for ten years.

Allison's face flamed. "I know nothing about this! The D.A. withheld evidence."

"That came to us only minutes ago."

"This is a witch hunt."

Judge Wicker bristled. "Violation of probation, no matter how minute, is something my court takes seriously, Ms. Markham.

I'm adjourning for today in hopes you and Mr. Logan can come to some agreement so we don't have to go through a full-fledged trial."

Stifling a grin, Dan knew he had the guy.

Allison came to the same conclusion. By four, they had a plea bargain and Cramden was headed back to prison for three years. Happy, Dan sauntered to his office. He was meeting Tessa at the library at five and they were going to the lake for dinner. Nick was taking the girls to SeaBreeze, a local amusement park.

Dan dropped down behind his desk. Tessa. Now that he had a minute to think, he played back what had happened in the week since her car accident. Most of the bruises on her face had faded, but the ones on her legs and butt were still nasty. Poor baby. Her mood had improved, too, and she was no longer blaming herself for the crash. He'd waited until last night to bring up the question he'd had about her past….

"Tess, honey, sit with me a minute."

She'd been standing at the kitchen counter, and he had taken a chair at the table. "I should finish up the salad."

"In a minute. The kids are watching a video. I'd like to talk to you about something."

She had sat down. "What's going on?"

"When you were in the emergency room, I overheard you and Janey talking about the car accident you had when you were nineteen. You said something about still feeling guilty."

Her hands had clenched the skirt she wore. "Did I? I don't

remember."

"Tess, love, you can tell me anything. We all make mistakes."

There had been a wounded look in her eyes. "I didn't have a happy childhood, and I had a worse adolescence." She had drawn in a breath. "One of the reasons I didn't want a relationship with you all those years ago was because you were always prying into my past. I hate it when you do this."

The accusation had stung. Sure, Tessa had been more than wary of his attention when she worked at Chico's Diner and waited on him. She refused—innumerable times—to date him. He didn't remember one of the reasons being his interest in her past, though.

"No, I haven't forgotten what happened eleven years ago. Or the fact that you only agreed to marry me because you were pregnant."

Her face had shadowed at the reminder of the baby she'd lost.

"Dan, why are we going over all this? You know I love you, the kids and our life together. What possible reason could there be for you to delve into something so painful for me?"

"The car accident made you sad."

"Right now, you're making me sad."

So he'd dropped it….

Tonight he hoped to make up to her for being so pushy. He should have let it go, he guessed. Sometimes, his overprotectiveness caused him to be too aggressive. Maybe he'd leave work early and pick up some flowers for her.

He was stuffing things into his briefcase when the administrative assistant, Wanda Anderson, strode into the office. “Dan, Mayor Nash is here to see you.”

“Why?”

Wanda shrugged. “He’s with two city councilmen. They said they want to talk to you right away.”

This was unusual. He circled his desk and went to the door to greet them, hoping this wasn’t bad news, hoping he got out of this meeting in time to meet his wife.

“THAT’S A WISE CHOICE, Chelsea. It’s one of my favorites in the series.”

Book in hand, the pretty blonde with world-weary blue eyes looked over at Tessa. “I already read Go Ask Alice and Jay’s Journal.”

Tessa nodded to the book. “Annie’s Baby is as well written as those.” She held the girl’s gaze. “Want to talk about anything, sweetie?”

Chelsea Chamberlain shrugged with typical teenage nonchalance. “Talk about what?”

Tessa had been working with this particular group of girls from Nick’s center every Thursday since September, and had gotten close to them. In the last few weeks, she’d begun to suspect Chelsea was pregnant. Tessa wondered how much to say. Kids hated to be pushed. She hated to be pushed. Something Dan did routinely, as he’d shown last night.

Before Tessa could respond, another teen, Jill, came up to

them. Dark-eyed and intense, she said, “Hunk alert.”

Tessa laughed. She’d gotten used to the girls drooling over her brother-in-law. Nick was the center’s school liaison and focused on keeping troubled kids in classes, steering them away from drugs and into healthier endeavors, helping them keep their grades up. Dan, who’d had contact with Nick over the years, had been shocked to find out that he’d earned a degree in counseling in Rockford. “Is Nick here already?”

“Yeah.” Jill sighed. “He wants to see you when you’re done steering us to lesson-laden literature.”

“Great alliteration.” She cocked her head. “Do you mind so much? I thought reading about teenagers your age might help you figure things out.”

“You’re such an easy mark, Mrs. L. We’re cool. We like it better than those classics you had us reading when we first came here. Except maybe that doll’s house play, where the chick finally blows off her deadbeat husband.”

Tessa left them and found Nick staring at a glass-enclosed case full of books. From a distance, she could admire the long lines of his build, his dark hair and his almost navy eyes. In some ways he looked like his brother, and in some ways they could be complete strangers.

“Hey, how’s my favorite brother-in-law?”

Nick winked at her. “I’ll bet you say that to Brad, too.”

“That’s right. I’m an equal opportunity sister-in-law.”

“How are you feeling today?”

Nodding to the stacks where the girls had been drooling over him, she said, “I’m well enough to do this. I’m coming back to work here tomorrow.”

“Bruises look better.”

Self-consciously, she touched her face. “Finally!”

“How are my girls doing?”

“They’re on to me.” She told him about Jill’s remark.

Nick laughed. “You’re pretty transparent. I think that’s why they like you. What you see is what you get.”

She had to clear her throat. “I like them, too.”

“I’m ready to take them back, then go pick up my nieces at their friend’s house.”

“Thanks for watching them tonight.”

“Dan said he wanted an evening alone with you.” He squeezed her shoulder. “I think you scared him half to death with that accident. Me, too.”

“Still, you have better things to do than babysit.”

“I have nothing better to do than spend time with my two nieces.” He glanced at his watch. “You can return the favor, though.”

“Anything.”

“The guys at the center are jealous of this little Thursday excursion the girls get to take. They want equal time. Could you manage that somehow in your schedule? They could come to the library when you’re working your part-time shifts.”

She hesitated only a split second, but Nick must have caught

it. Sometimes, he was too good at reading people.

"You don't like working with the boys, do you?"

"I prefer to be with the girls." The boys reminded her too much of someone else, long ago.

"Forget it then. I can do something else with them that they'll like as much."

"No, no, I want to help out. You never ask me anything."

"Tessa, really, it's okay."

Dan came bursting through the front door of the library, precluding any further discussion. His face was lit with excitement. Anticipation. She knew him so well, had studied his moods, so she could prepare for them.

He placed a hand on her shoulder. "Hello, sweetheart."

"Hi."

"You look like you could scale Mt. Everest," Nick said. "Did something happen?"

"Yeah. I'm glad you're both here." He grinned at his brother. "And that I have Tessa alone tonight. We've got something to celebrate."

"What?" Tessa asked, already smiling.

"I'm being named Citizen of the Year."

"Oh, Dan, that's terrific." The award had been instituted two years ago, and Tessa was hoping it would fall his way.

"Yeah, terrific." Nick tried to sound enthusiastic, but Dan's need for respectability always grated on him.

"Come on, Nick. It's my thing, even if it isn't yours. There's a

banquet honoring me next month. I want everybody there."

Tessa had caught his excitement. "The girls, Janey and her family…"

"And our mother, right?" Nick asked.

"Of course." Dan said.

"I'll let you know." Nick clapped Dan on the shoulder. "Congrats, Dan. I'm happy for you." He started to walk away. "I have to find the kids."

"Nicky?" Tessa called out.

"Yes?"

"Will you come to the award dinner?"

"Sure."

After he left, Dan said, "He won't. Not if Mom's there."

"Oh, dear."

"Don't." In a rare display of public affection, he picked her up and twirled her around. "No negative thoughts. Nothing's going to spoil this for me. Nothing."

JACKHAMMERS WERE GOING OFF in his head. He sneezed into his handkerchief, then blew his nose. Frankie was ready to smash somebody's face in as he rode the Iverton bus to the outskirts of town. Trixie wasn't here. How could she not be here?

He'd scoured the place for her. First, he'd gone to her grandmother's house. The shingles were new and the porch refurbished, and somebody else owned the place. Grandma Addie was gone. No loss there. She'd hated him….

Get out of here, you're not welcome.

Trixie says I am.

You're not right in the head. Leave her alone.

And when they'd gotten in trouble she'd screamed at him again. You crazy bastard. You corrupted her. She was a good girl until you came along.

He'd told the old biddy to go to hell. Trixie was his, and he could do anything he wanted with her. Hadn't she told him that, in the letters stuffed in his duffel bag?

The ugly industrial scenery of downtown Iverton rolled by. He'd checked out the diner where she had worked all those years ago. They had new owners, too, who didn't remember any Trixie Lawrence.

Now, he was headed to the south side of town. That bitch Janey, who was always trying to interfere, always trying to protect Trixie from him, for God's sake, had ditched this place, too. But her old boyfriend, Teaker, still lived here. He might know something about Trixie.

Frankie got off at Farrell Street and walked up the hill; the bartender at Crane's Beer Hall had told him where Teaker lived. Man, what a dump, Frankie thought as he found the shack. An old man tottered out.

"I'm lookin' for Teaker. The guy at Crane's says he lived here."

The man came closer. "I'm Teaker. Who are…holy shit, Frankie, is that you?"

Frankie knew his mouth dropped. "What happened to you?"

“Fifteen years, Frank. You look older, too.”

Can’t be as bad as you. He ran his fingers through his gray hair, noticed the veins in his other hand were more pronounced. “I guess.”

“I had some bad times. Not as bad as you, though. I never went down. How’d ya hold up in there?”

“Letters. From Trixie.”

“I thought she was in the can, too.”

“Got out after a while. She wrote me every day from here. That’s why I’m back.”

“Trixie? She ain’t living in Iverton no more.”

“I don’t get it.” Frankie cocked his head and thought hard. The pain, which had started to recede, instantly came back. “Got any beer?”

“Yeah, sure. Come onto the porch.”

Frankie sat on a rickety chair under an overhang. Once he chugged some ale, he could think more clearly. “You ever hear from Janey?”

“Shit, no. She married some doctor and went to live in New York.”

His heart began to beat fast. “New York’s a big place. The city?”

Teaker lit a cigar and sat back. “Nah. On a lake, I think.”

“There’s a shitload of lakes in New York.”

“I dunno which one.”

“Who might?”

His old drinking buddy raised his bushy gray eyebrows. “I think there was somethin’ in the paper a while back about her doctor husband getting a grant to find a cure for some disease.”

“Yeah? Who’d know about that?”

“Maybe Mrs. Fox.”

Frankie recognized the name of the librarian he and his buddies used to terrorize. “Hell, she ain’t dead yet?”

“She’s too mean to die, Frankie.”

“You remember Janey’s new name?”

“Nope. But the article could tell you.”

Frankie finished his beer and crumpled the can in his fist. Promising to bring up a six-pack later that night and reminisce about old times, he left.

No way was he going to come back, though. He wouldn’t waste his time with that loser when he could be looking for Trixie. Frankie still couldn’t figure out all those letters coming from Iverton, if she hadn’t been here.

He found old lady Fox at the library. She was ancient now and just as nasty. Everybody in this hick town treated him like dirt. Everybody was always after him. The bitch turned him over to her younger staff member, who found the article on the computer for him.

He read it anxiously.

Janey Lawrence…Christopher.

Married the up-and-coming doctor, had two boys.

Bingo! In Orchard Place, New York.

Almost as an afterthought, he googled the husband. The guy had a freakin' Web site for his practice and the grant thing Teaker told him about. It also had a section on family. He clicked that link. There was Janey. Older, heavier, but Janey all the same. She had Trixie's looks, but Trixie was prettier. He waded through photos of the kids, the colleagues. The last picture was a family shot of all the Christophers. And arm in arm with Janey was her sister. Tessa. God he hated when people called her that. He stared at the different hair and clothes, but she had the same eyes, mouth and features of his beloved Trixie. He'd recognize that face anywhere. Glancing around, he printed off the picture.

Frankie smiled all the way to the bus station. If Janey was in Orchard Place, chances were her sister would be there. Those two were like Siamese twins. And Janey had hated Frankie with a passion. She'd tried every way she could to break them up but never could.

At the bus station, he bought his ticket. The attendant told him it was a ten-hour ride from Iverton to Orchard Place, stopping several times. But Frankie didn't care. He was gonna see Trixie. He might have to bitch-slap her around some for not staying put, but after that there'd be pure bliss.

Finally, him and Trixie were going to be together again.

CHAPTER FOUR

TESSA ARRANGED FOOD at the picnic table on the patio of her sister's home, where the family had gathered for their Memorial Day picnic. The sun was shining and the sky was cloudless; a warm breeze wafted over her, carrying the sweet sound of chirping birds, making this a halcyon afternoon.

"I like seeing that."

Tessa looked up at Janey's husband, Brad, who'd come over from the grill. "What do you like seeing?"

"You smiling." He slid his arm around her. "We were worried after the accident. Your sister freaked."

"I'm sorry she spends her time fretting over me. She always has, Brad. I can't seem to break her of the habit."

Brad shook his head—he was mostly bald now and had shaved off what was left of his hair. Still, he was fit and youthful-looking for forty-five. "You two had a hard life. You, especially."

"I guess." She held Brad's gaze a moment. He knew about her past, of course, because he was married to her sister; after Tessa had been released from prison, she had lived with Janey.

Just the thought of her time in jail made her shiver. Dawson Federal Prison Camp was a minimum security facility, without bars, but the prisoners were locked down at night, performed long tedious work details and had no say over their time. Worse, Tessa had always had a sense of foreboding, as if something bad

was going to happen to her. A few times, awful things had…even now, she sometimes woke up in a cold sweat from a bad dream.

Hugging her tighter, Brad whispered, “Don’t think about it, kid.”

“I try not to.”

“Hey, buddy, what are you doing with my wife?”

Tessa and Brad both smiled as Dan approached. He’d just gotten out of the pool, and his muscles were outlined by his T-shirt. Damp from the water, his navy shirt heightened the color of his eyes.

“Just catching up.” Brad took a carrot stick from the plate on the table. “I haven’t seen her much.”

Dan shrugged. “You’ve been out of town a lot.”

“Yeah, this grant thing’s great, but it’s hell on my life. We had to hire a new internist to take on some of my patients. Janey’s been terrific but I know it’s hard on her.”

“That’s what you get for being such a world-renowned researcher.”

“Says the hotshot D.A.” Brad glanced over at his wife, who was sprawled in a lounge chair getting some sun. “I wanted to ask you two to watch out for her and the kids. I’ve got that trip to London coming up, and I’ll be gone awhile.”

“Of course.” Dan’s expression grew serious. “Any time.”

“I’m sorry I can’t get back for the Citizen of the Year dinner. Janey will stay for it, though, and come to London afterward when Oxford officially awards me the grant.”

Dan clapped Brad on the back. “It won’t be the same without you.”

After exchanging more small talk, Brad went to check the meat on the grill, and Tessa and Dan stood watching the kids playing in the pool. Dan’s mother, Claire, who’d been taking pictures of them, got up from the poolside bench. At sixty, she was an attractive woman with gray-bobbed hair, youthful skin and a generous smile, though today it seemed forced. “Can I help?” she asked Tessa.

“No, we’re waiting on the grill. Want some lemonade?”

“Yes, dear.”

While she poured her mother-in-law a glassful, Dan put his arm around Claire’s shoulder and kissed her. “You okay?”

She looked up at him. “He’s not coming, I guess.”

“Nick had a lot going on at the center, Mom. Don’t take it personally.”

“It is personal. He’ll never forgive me for how I treated him after your father…left. It happened so long ago, and he’s done so much with his life. I wish he could forgive and forget.”

Tessa handed her the drink. “He’ll come around.”

“We Logans can’t seem to put the past behind us.”

Dan’s brow furrowed. “Did something happen?”

His mother sipped the lemonade, then ran her finger around the rim of the glass. “I received a letter from your father’s attorney. Daniel’s earning money again and wanted to know if we needed anything.”

Dan's stance shifted. "Several years too late," he said, his tone clipped. "We worked like dogs to survive after he used up all our money and stole more."

Sometimes when Dan talked about his father, it chilled Tessa. He seemed to turn into a different man, one she didn't really know.

"Be that as it may, I don't want anything from him, but I'd like to stop taking your money, Dan."

"Why?" Tessa asked. "We're not hurting."

"You two could vacation more. Have a new car every few years."

Dan smiled at Tessa. "We've got all we need, don't we, sweetheart?"

"You bet. And we use the money I earn at the library for anything extra we want."

Dan refused to let her put her paycheck toward necessities. Instead she bought frills for the girls, Dan and sometimes herself, and used what was left for vacations, like a weekend away with her husband now and then. One of those was coming up. They were taking a few extra days when Dan had to go to Rockford to give a presentation to the city council on some innovative crime prevention work he'd done with underprivileged kids.

"Steaks are ready," Brad called.

"Come on, Mom, I'll help you find a rare one." Dan grasped her arm and glanced over at Tessa. He mouthed "thank you."

She nodded. She didn't care about the money they gave Claire.

No one wanted for anything in her household, and his mother couldn't make ends meet on the hospital aide job she'd taken once she'd retired from full-time work. Though her condo was paid for, she needed other income.

Molly yelled from the pool, "Mom, look!"

Glancing over, Tessa saw her little daredevil do a backflip off the diving board.

Tessa's chest tightened. "Be careful, honey." Too protective, she knew. She had to lighten up.

Janey stood and yelled something to Molly about being careful. She wore a white swimsuit, high-cut at the legs. Tessa was in a navy Speedo swimsuit, with a wraparound skirt tied at her waist…

Buy this bathing suit, Trix. It's sexy as hell.

I don't want to. It's too revealing.

I want you revealed, doll.

No, Frankie.

He'd grabbed her arms.

You're hurting me. What's wrong with you?

Don't say that. Nothing's wrong with me. Why do people keep sayin' that to me?

Although the day was warm, Tessa shivered.

"Honey," Dan called from the grill. "Come on, steaks are ready."

"Be right there. I need to get more drinks." She fled into the kitchen. Her life was wonderful, and she was going to enjoy it.

She put on a big fat smile as she took the lemonade concentrate out of Janey's freezer and brought them to the sink.

ALLISON MARKHAM was a striking woman. Her auburn hair, caught up in a twist, accented the flawless perfection of her face. She was dressed in her customary tailored suit. At one time, Dan had loved the cool sophistication Allison seemed to have been born with. He chuckled to himself at how he ever thought this woman could make him happy.

"I won't plea down on this case, Dan. Your offer is insulting."

He shook his head. "It's the only one you're going to get. Your client is a criminal, Allison, no matter how white his collar is. He cheated senior citizens out of their pensions."

Her expression softened, and she hitched a hip on his desk. He got a hint of the French perfume she always wore. "That's why you're being such a hard-ass about this. Because it kicks in to what your father did."

"No, because Sam Albert belongs behind bars. You should be working to keep scum like him out of business, not set him free so he can trick more people on a fixed income."

Anger sparked in her gray eyes. He should have known better. Allison gave as good as she got, both in her professional and personal life. "Doesn't it get tiring, keeping that halo in place?"

Looking down at his desk, Dan counted to ten. You'd think after all this time, Allison would let up on him. But, no, she was still steamed that he'd broken it off with her for Tessa. And her attitude had seemed to worsen in recent months. Probably

because Allison's marriage had ended not too long ago. Rumors had spread that it was an acrimonious split. He guessed that would make anybody sour. And maybe it made sense to take out her issues on Dan—in truth, they could have been married and she'd never have gone through the divorce.

Regardless, he wasn't going to back down on this case. He looked her square in the eye. "This meeting is over. I refuse to discuss my personal life with you or anyone else. The offer on Albert stands. Take it or leave it."

"I'll let you know."

"It's only on the table for today."

Damn it, he hadn't planned to say that. But Allison could push his buttons.

"You've got to be kidding."

"Sorry, I'm not."

She pushed off from the desk and glowered at him. "Someday, something's going to bring you down, Dan. You're going to find out you're no better than everyone else."

"I don't think I'm better than anyone else. Far from it."

"Get real. I hope you and your perfect wife are ready for the fall when it happens."

Man, that divorce really had soured her. For a minute, he was frozen with fear. He'd never be able to handle it if something caused him and Tessa to split. Hell, why was he worrying? Things had never been better between them. Nothing was going to change that.

THE FREAKIN' TOWN could have come off a postcard. From the bus, Frankie watched the quiet streets pass by—quaint houses alongside the downtown businesses. It reminded him of a picture book he'd had when he was little. He was sick a lot as a kid and had to stay in bed. Once, a priest from the church near his house had brought him a book. It was about God and how He helped a little town. Frankie loved that story. When he was alone at night and scared, he still talked to God.

He got off at the Orchard Place Station, wondering what the hell must have happened to make Trixie leave Iverton. He felt for the letter in his pocket. The last time she wrote to him, she asked him to come to Orchard Place and rescue her. He smiled as he navigated the steps. That was what Frankie was going to do here—save Trixie.

Though it was four in the afternoon, he put on his sunglasses and the fishing hat that he had bought at one of the places the bus had stopped on the trip east. No need to make his presence known yet; just his luck he'd bump into Janey. He looked the same as he had when he'd last seen her, screaming at him after the trial.

I hate you, you bastard.

Shut up, bitch.

Maybe on this visit he could get back at her for saying those things to him, and for poisoning Trixie's mind against him. She must have brought Trixie here. His beloved wouldn't have come of her own free will. It made him sick inside not knowing where

she was and what she was doing. He had to find out what Trixie had gotten herself into in this Hicksville.

He went inside the station proper and up to the counter. He hated places like this. They suffocated him. That's why, all his life, Frankie had had to own a car, so he could avoid depressing places like this. He'd had beauties when he was on the outside, which always made him feel like somebody. First thing he was going to do when he found Trixie was get some new wheels.

"Can I help you?" the man behind the plastic asked. He was a weasel of a guy with a bad comb-over.

"Yeah, I need a room to stay for a few days. Where's the nearest hotel?" He didn't have a lot of money, but he expected Trixie could get what they'd need to keep them going for a while.

"There's a couple of bed and breakfasts on the outskirts of town." The guy shrugged. "Nice if you like company. They serve communal meals."

That was the last thing Frankie wanted. "Nah, somethin' with more privacy."

"There's a hotel in the center of town. It's not the newest, but it's clean and private. Name's Heritage House."

"Thanks." Frankie started to walk away.

"What's your business here?" the guy called after him.

"None of yours."

He wouldn't give himself away—he wanted to surprise Trixie. He could picture her running to him like in those old TV commercials and throwing herself into his arms. And later, the

sex would be hot and rough like she liked it.

As he left the bus station, a man in tattered clothes came up to him. “Any spare change, buddy?”

Frankie looked down at the guy. Homeless probably. Because Frankie remembered what it was like to be hungry and have nowhere he belonged, he dug in his pocket. Handing the guy a bill, he said, “Don’t spend it on booze.”

“Sure thing. Thanks, mister.”

The thought of some booze right now sounded good to Frankie. He glanced up and down the street. Then he saw a bar two doors over with a dark interior and a neon sign announcing Zip’s Café. In the window was a beer sign.

Dodging oncoming cars, Frankie crossed the street. Before he went looking for Trixie, he could use a belt or two to calm his nerves. Just the thought of seeing her made him jittery. And sometimes, his mind got cloudy and he didn’t remember things right. Especially when his cold was acting up. But alcohol always let him see things clearer.

Inside it was cool and a chill ran through Frankie. He sneezed several times. Setting his duffel bag on a stool, he drew out the black sweater Trixie had sent him for his birthday one year and shrugged into it.

He took a seat at the bar.

“What can I get you?” the bartender asked.

“Whiskey. A double.”

The man filled a glass and slid it to him. He knocked the liquor

back in one swallow and ordered a second. Warmer and happier, he studied the bar. Not many patrons, as it was almost the dinner hour. Most of the working stiffs in this town were probably hurrying home for boring dinners with their over-weight wives and whiny kids. At one time, Frankie had thought he wanted all that. But years of shuffling from foster home to foster home had cured him of the dream. Family members did despicable things to each other.

The man on the stool next to him stood, threw some money on the bar and called goodbye to the bartender. He'd left behind a newspaper. The Orchard Place Globe was a hefty size for a small town. He skimmed the front page's national news, read about the most recent hurricane in Florida and another attack in Iraq. What a crummy world. Nowhere was safe anymore. Chaplain Cook told them once that a lot of guys got out of prison and went right back in because they couldn't deal with the real world. Not him, though. When he had Trixie again, he'd be fine.

He flipped through to the local news. Maybe there'd be something in there about Janey's husband, the famous doctor.

Frankie read the front page. The feature article was on a guy… holy hell. The world spun out of focus for a minute, and drums began to beat in his head. He clutched the paper so hard his fists hurt. He heard himself moan, as if from a distance.

"You all right, buddy?" the bartender asked. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

It was Trixie. His Trixie. Only she wasn't alone. She was

with two little girls. Behind them, a man stood—tall, imposing, confident. His hand rested possessively on Trixie's shoulder. Frankie had to gulp in air. His gaze dropped to the caption.

"Orchard Place's D.A. honored as 2006 Citizen of the Year. Shown here with wife, Tessa, and two daughters, Molly and Sara. Dinner to be held…"

The print blurred and pain shot to his temples. Tessa? There was that name again. This was his Trixie. She was married? There had to be some mistake. He pulled the picture he'd downloaded from Brad Christopher's Web site out of his wallet.

The two photos matched.

"I don't understand," he murmured.

"What?" the bartender asked.

He shoved his picture out of sight and held up the newspaper. "Who are these people?"

"The Logan family. Pillars of the community. The guy's the town's D.A. and even my ex likes the wife, and she hates most people."

"Her name's Trixie, right?"

"No, Tessa, like it says there. Tessa Logan."

Tessa Logan. This was the love of his life, whose letters had kept him going all these years. How could she be married to somebody else? What the hell was going on here?

He stumbled out of the bar. There had to be a mistake.

"ALL RIGHT, who'd like to start?" Tessa smiled at the four who were part of the Sassy Girls Book Club. She'd let them pick

the name of their group but had taken it upon herself to choose the books. The one for today was from the adolescent literature genre she'd been steering them to since Nick had asked her to be library liaison and, she suspected, a positive role model for these girls. That made her shake her head, but she did want to help, so she forged ahead, squelching her insecurity.

She made eye contact with each teen: Beth, Chelsea, Dawn and Jill. When no one answered her question, she asked, "Did you read the book?"

One by one, they nodded.

At last, Beth spoke up. "I thought it was sad. That girl had everything going for her and still she committed suicide."

Tessa knew a bit about their lives from offhanded statements they'd made. Beth came from a large family on welfare.

Out of the corner of her eye, Tessa saw someone enter the library. She and the girls were sitting in a glassed-in meeting room in the front of the building. Tessa hoped Annie, the night librarian, would take care of the late-afternoon patrons.

She brought her attention back to the teens. "Does everybody think Mina had everything?"

"I don't." This from Dawn, whose parents had gone through a difficult divorce, which led to her rebellious behavior at school. "She had material things—clothes, a car, a big house—but she was lonely."

"I wouldn't change places with her." Jill's husky voice belied her delicate appearance. She was adopted and wanted to search

for her birth parents, but her adoptive parents objected. She acted out at school.

Tessa glanced to her left. She'd been waiting for Chelsea's opinion of the main character because Tessa had chosen the book partly because of her. She sensed the girl was not only pregnant but desperate. "Chels, what do you think?"

"I think her boyfriend was a bastard. And her father wasn't much better." With a disgusted look on her face, she added, "All men are pigs, as far as I'm concerned."

From there the girls talked about fathers—what made a good one, a bad one, was a bad one better than none at all? They all spoke in general terms.

Then Chelsea turned to her. The teen's blue eyes were intense. "What about your father, Mrs. L? What was he like? Cool? He had to be because you're so together."

For a moment, Tessa panicked. She never talked about her family, or lack of it. "I, um…" Four faces focused on her. It was then she realized this was some kind of test of trust.

Damned if she was going to fail. "I never knew my father. He took off when I was born."

The girls were shocked.

Chelsea frowned. "I wouldn't have guessed."

Because I've spent my whole life covering things like that up. The burden of keeping that secret was heavy, and Tessa felt like a phony.

"I guess you can come from a dysfunctional family and still

be a happy adult," she told them.

"Was yours?" Dawn asked. "Dysfunctional?"

"Yes." She kept her voice calm. "Maybe you'd like to share some of your background with me?"

The girls relayed much of what Tessa already knew about them. Poverty, depression, frustration and loneliness combined to send them into a downward spiral.

Chelsea, however, refused to share. "Can we talk about the book?"

By the time the girls left, Tessa felt like she had accomplished something important. The bond they'd been forming all year had strengthened, and they seemed to take comfort in it. Hard as it was, she was right to share her story.

Could she have some impact on the boys? She hadn't followed up on Nick's request a few weeks ago. How long was she going to let Frankie affect her life? She'd call Nick tomorrow to talk about a group for the guys.

After locking up the meeting room, Tessa headed down the long corridor to the office. The library had been built in the early 1900s, and, though she loved its quaint atmosphere, the corridors tended to get dark as the day wore on. She thought she saw something in the shadows. "Who's there?" she asked, her heart pounding.

No answer.

Of course there was no answer. She was letting talk of her past spook her. Swallowing hard, she found her office and opened the

door. She stopped when she heard another noise. Then she saw a man, his back to her, striding down the hall and out the front door. There was something familiar about his walk.

CHAPTER FIVE

DAN WAS DETERMINED to keep his temper as he drove to Molly's school. Tessa was chaperoning a field trip to the zoo with Sara's class, and the elementary school principal had called him about yet another incident concerning his older daughter. Molly was always stirring things up at school—causing some kind of ruckus on the playground, planning pranks, daring the other kids to stretch the rules. The incidents were invariably harmless, but she was making a name for herself with the faculty.

This time, though, her actions were more serious. She'd cheated on a test. In fourth grade! Dan was shocked when the principal, Katie Gardner, someone he and Nick had gone to school with, called to tell him what had happened. He was more than a little disappointed in Molly. But as he pulled up to the building and headed inside, he curbed his reaction. He knew he tended to overreact to anything resembling public embarrassment, and Molly would need a sane parent now. The secretary showed him to the appropriate office.

Katie, a pretty blonde, sat behind her desk with Molly across from her. His little girl swung her sneakered feet back and forth, staring down at her hands in her lap.

Katie looked over at him. "Hi, Dan."

Molly didn't acknowledge his arrival. He greeted Katie then crossed to his daughter. Kneeling in front of her, he said, "Mol,

what happened?”

She kept staring at her lap and so he tilted her chin. Her eyes were red-rimmed and her usually smiling face distraught. She bit her lip, the vulnerable gesture making her father’s heart ache. “I…I…”

She threw herself at him and sobbed into his chest. He held on to her solid little body and let her cry. Lord knew this wasn’t the worst thing that could happen, but he was glad she was showing repentance. Or maybe it was fear. They’d had stern talks with both girls about fairness, integrity and doing your own work. When the outburst subsided, still holding on to her, he sank into a chair.

Katie gave him a sympathetic smile.

He smoothed down his daughter’s hair. “We need to talk about this, kiddo.”

She shook her head.

“Yes, we do.” After one more hug, he set her in her own chair. “Mrs. Gardner says you cheated on a test.”

Molly wouldn’t look at him.

“Why, Molly? You’re a good student. You know your math. Why would you cheat?”

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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