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<strong style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">S</strong><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">eries: Isle of Hope</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">Genre:&nbsp;Christian, Romance</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">Publisher:&nbsp;Julie Lessman, LLC</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">Publication date:&nbsp;September 30, 2016</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">Number of pages:&nbsp;307</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">He sets hearts on fire.</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">She’s been burned by love.</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">Can hope survive the flames of the past?</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">School teacher by day, ghostwriter by night, sweet and shy Shannon O’Bryen doesn’t mind writing romance on the sly, but to live it? No, thank you, not since the man she loved turned out to be a player who broke both her heart and her spirit. Now focused more on her faith and her fiction, she vows the next time she falls in love, it will be safely—through the pages of a book.</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">Dr. Sam Cunningham is a charismatic player who breaks hearts as regularly as he washes his pearl-white&nbsp;Corvette. Abandoned as a young child, Sam was&nbsp;</span><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">an orphan shuffled through the foster-care system, bitterly driven to prove he is worthy of love—the kind that lasts forever. Once he learns Shannon is a romance writer, he enlists her help in winning back his ex-girlfriend. She teaches him about faith and the true definition of love, and he soon discovers he’s been seeking it in the wrong place all along—and with the wrong girl. But can he convince a woman who's been burned by love to open her eyes—and her heart—to a love everlasting?​​</span></div>

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<span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">Julie Lessman is an award-winning author whose tagline of “Passion With a Purpose” underscores her intense passion for both God and romance. A lover of all things Irish, she enjoys writing close-knit Irish family sagas that evolve into 3-D love stories: the hero, the heroine, and the God that brings them together.</span></div>

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Author of The Daughters of Boston, Winds of Change, and Heart of San Francisco series, Julie Lessman was named American Christian Fiction Writers 2009 Debut Author of the Year and has garnered 17 Romance Writers of America and other awards. Voted #1 Romance Author of the year in&nbsp;<em style="position: relative;">Family Fiction</em>&nbsp;magazine’s 2012 and 2011 Readers Choice Awards, Julie was also named on&nbsp;<em style="position: relative;">Booklist</em>’s 2010 Top 10 Inspirational Fiction and Borders Best Fiction list.</div>

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Julie’s most recent novel,&nbsp;<em style="position: relative;">Isle of Hope</em>&nbsp;was voted on&nbsp;<em style="position: relative;">Family Fiction&nbsp;</em>magazine’s&nbsp;Best of 2015, and&nbsp;<em style="position: relative;">Surprised by Love</em>&nbsp;appeared on&nbsp;<em style="position: relative;">Family Fiction</em>&nbsp;magazine’s list of Top Ten Novels of 2014. Her independent novel&nbsp;<em style="position: relative;">A Light in the Window</em>&nbsp;is an International Digital Awards winner, a 2013 Readers' Crown Award winner, and a 2013 Book Buyers Best Award winner. Julie has also written a self-help workbook for writers entitled&nbsp;<em style="position: relative;">Romance-ology 101: Writing Romantic Tension for the Sweet and Inspirational Markets</em>. You can contact Julie through her website and read excerpts from each of her books at&nbsp;<a data-cke-saved-href="http://www.julielessman.com/" href="http://www.julielessman.com/" style="color: #fa8f00; text-decoration: none;" target="\_blank">www.julielessman.com</a>.</div>

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Chapter 1</h2>

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<span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">&nbsp;</span><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">“Okay, smile pretty—hot guys at three o’clock.”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">Shannon O’Bryen smiled, more because of her friend Margo’s mumbled man alert than the need to charm any “hot guy.” She shook her head when Margo tugged the neckline of her sequin halter dress a bit lower before casually skimming a pinky along the rim of her Diet Dr. Pepper. When her friend chatted nonchalantly about a book she’d just discussed with Shannon, Cat, Amy, and Becky not five minutes ago, Shannon grinned outright. But when Margo’s finger slid from the rim into her soda, Shannon could do nothing but giggle. The sound set off a chain reaction of laughter around a table in the middle of a fancy fundraiser for Memorial Hospital at Mansion on Forsyth Park.</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">Peeking over her shoulder, Shannon expelled a sigh of relief, grateful the “hot guys” were only her brother Jack and his coworker, Sam Cunningham. Because although each of the girls around the table were looking for Mr. Right, Shannon was definitely not one of them--<em style="position: relative;">despite&nbsp;</em>the slinky blue dress and four-inch heels her twin sister Cat had coerced her to wear. Nope, she preferred her Prince Charming confined between the covers of a book, thank you very much, where he couldn’t stomp on her heart.</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">“Well, one viable ‘hot guy,’ anyway,” Shannon’s twin sister Cat said with a lazy smile. A breeze fluttered her long strawberry blonde hair, the salty scent of the marsh mingling with the hint of chlorine from the marble fountain in Savannah’s historical Forsythe Park. Cat swayed to the music of a five-piece orchestra while Spanish moss swayed in the canopy of oaks overhead, the mischief in her eyes sparkling as much as the water dancing into the fountain. “My brother Jack is taken, but his pediatrician friend--<em style="position: relative;">Dr.</em>&nbsp;Sam Cunningham—is still&nbsp;<em style="position: relative;">very</em>&nbsp;available.”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">“And very,&nbsp;<em style="position: relative;">very</em>&nbsp;attractive,” Amy whispered, swallowing hard while Margo just stared with saucer eyes, sucking Dr. Pepper off her finger.</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">Margo gulped and quickly averted her gaze. “Uh … I think you dropped a ‘very,’” she muttered, secretly tracking Jack and Sam as they wove their way through a glittering sea of people and tables in the candlelit promenade. “Far as I’m concerned, that guy just broke the hot scale, because he’s&nbsp;<em style="position: relative;">way</em>&nbsp;more than attractive.”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><em style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; position: relative; text-align: justify;">Too attractive.&nbsp;</em><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">Shannon watched as Sam flirted with every girl he could on the way to their table, Jack’s warning that Sam was a “player” resonating deep in Shannon’s soul. No matter the boyish twinkle in brown eyes that made every girl feel special or a crooked smile always tipped with tease, Shannon knew better. She had no doubt that beneath that magnetic façade was a man whose good looks and lust for women spelled doom for any girl sucked into his orbit—whirling them in a lovelorn spin that only made them dizzy.</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><em style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; position: relative; text-align: justify;">And so sick that avoidance was the only cure.</em><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">“Heeeeeey, ladies, I’m in dire need of a dance partner, so who’s willing to help me out?” Dr. Sam Cunningham ambled forward with hands in the pockets of his tux, his shirt and tie as disheveled as the dark curls that spilled over his forehead.&nbsp;<em style="position: relative;">Which</em>&nbsp;was a total rarity for the man who was usually a walking photo shoot for a Gucci cologne ad, always dressed to the nines like a GQ model with a wardrobe to match.</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">“You’re in dire need, all right,” Jack said with a slant of a smile, his eyes far more sober than Sam appeared to be, “of a lift home.” Looping an arm around Sam’s shoulder, he zeroed in on Shannon. “Shan, would you mind driving Sam home? I’m up soon on the podium for some announcements, so I can’t take him right now, and he’s pretty hammered. He’s feeling no pain, but I’ll tell you what—his bar tab will give him sticker shock on his next credit card statement.”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">Shannon blinked, stomach roiling over going anywhere with Sam Cunningham. “Uh … sure, Jack, but wouldn’t a cab be better?”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">“I don’t wanna go home,” Sam interrupted, a faint slur of his words a perfect complement to the glassy look in his eyes. “I wanna dance.” Pausing as if he just realized he hadn’t introduced himself, he dazzled the girls with his trademark smile, complete with a flash of dimples. “Please forgive me, ladies, but I’m Sam Cunningham, and I am hoping one of you might consider dancing with me.” In true Cunningham style—at least according to Jack, who claimed Sam had a genuine soft spot for wallflowers and underdogs—he turned his famous bedroom eyes on the least likely girl at the table, who seldom garnered the attention of men.</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">Becky Dempsey was a brilliant mathematician who, unfortunately, looked like one too. Unable to wear contacts, sweet Becky was relegated to thick tortoise-shell eyeglasses that magnified her eyes so much, her pupils were as big as eyeballs. At six foot, she wore her brown hair in a short permed bob that matched her mother’s and sported a host of allergies, not the least of which was to makeup and most food. As a result, she had a gangly frame, which did, fortunately, show off clothes to good advantage.</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">If they weren’t from her mother’s closet.</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">Sam awarded Becky a truly genuine smile. “How ’bout you, Miss …?”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">“<em style="position: relative;">Ohhhhhh</em>, no you don’t, Ham,” Jack said with a latch of Sam’s arm, employing the nickname Sam had earned in residency because of his outrageous flirting and show-off tendencies. “Sweet Becky here doesn’t need her feet mauled&nbsp;tonight, so let’s get you home.”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">Sam jerked free of Jack’s hold with amazing dexterity for someone swaying on his feet. “I told you, I don’ wanna go home, O’Bryen. I wanna dance.”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">“Yeah, well you can dance your way to Shan’s car, dude, because you’re in no shape to do anything but crash.”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">“I’ll drive him home,” Cat offered with a look way too eager, jumping up so fast, she jolted the table and everyone’s drinks along with it. She wriggled her brows at Sam while she reached for her purse. “I’ve been wanting to get to know you better anyway, Dr. Cunningham.”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">“Soun’s like a plan to me,” Sam said with a wayward grin. “Jack’s been&nbsp;<em style="position: relative;">waaaaay</em>&nbsp;too possessive of you girls, if you ask me.” He gave Cat a slow wink. “Forbidden fruit, I suppose.”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">“In your dreams, Dr. Love.” Jack flashed Cat a wry smile, resorting to his role of annoying big brother that Cat always accused him of. “Sorry, Catfish, but that would be the blind leading the blind, so I’ll stick with the sober and sensible twin.” He homed in on Shannon once again, the plea in his eyes weakening her defenses. “Shan, I really hate to ask, but I don’t trust Sam in a cab because he’ll just go to a club and drink some more.”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">“What are you, O’Bryen, my mother?” Sam scowled, and even that looked good on him.</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">Shannon chewed on her lip, not sure why Jack would put her in a situation like this with a Romeo he’d warned both Cat and her about.</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">“Come on, Cat, let’s dance …” Sam extended his hand to her sister, practically tripping on the leg of a chair when he rounded the table.</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">Ignoring Sam’s comment, Jack bent close to Shannon’s ear, kneading her shoulder in a coaxing manner. “Normally I wouldn’t let Sam within a mile of either you or Cat, sis, but he’s hurtin’ pretty badly because Jazz showed up with another guy.” Jack glanced toward the dance floor to where Jasmine Augustine—a nurse at Memorial who was both his and Sam’s ex-girlfriend—laughed and danced with some good-looking guy. “So I don’t trust him to go straight home.&nbsp;<em style="position: relative;">Nor</em>&nbsp;do I trust him with any female in this room but you, Shan.” His smile was laced with apology, reminding Shannon of another conversation in Jack’s office once, after she and Cat had met Sam for the first time.</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">“Sam and I are good friends, guys, but you two need to steer clear,” Jack’d told them after Sam had left, his voice lowering to a mere whisper. He’d zeroed in on Cat, then, with that warning squint in his eyes. “Especially you, Catfish, because he’s not like other players I know, only out for themselves. Deep down Sam’s a pretty decent guy who actually cares about people, so I don’t think he’s really looking to hurt anybody.” His mouth took a twist. “Unfortunately he does—a lot—because he’s got this innate kindness and sensitivity that disarms most women, setting them up for the fall when he moves on.” Jack had seared them both with a big-brother stare. “And trust me—he&nbsp;<em style="position: relative;">always</em>&nbsp;does.”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><em style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; position: relative; text-align: justify;">The fall.</em><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">&nbsp;Shannon swallowed hard.&nbsp;<em style="position: relative;">Yes, I remember it well …</em></span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">Jack’s heavy expulsion of air ruffled Shannon’s hair, bringing her back to the present where Sam was flirting with Cat. He shook his head. “I swear, the clown is so lousy with bone-deep charisma, Shan, he can charm the spots off a kid with measles, which makes him all the more dangerous.” He gave Shannon’s shoulder a quick squeeze, fixing her with a look of regret. “So I need someone mature and levelheaded, sis, with an immunity to players, and the only one I know is you.”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">Shannon sighed.&nbsp;<em style="position: relative;">Ah yes, my immunity to players. I’ve definitely been inoculated by the best.</em>&nbsp;“All right, Jack.” She tossed her purse strap over her shoulder and rose with another heavy exhale of air. Pushing her chair in, she gave him a twist of a smile. “But you owe me, big brother.”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">“And then some,” Jack said with a kiss to her head. He tucked a finger to her chin. “And don’t let him bamboozle you. The man has a masters in roguery, so it might be good to lend him an ear, but nothing else.” He tugged on her hair. “His address is 665 Parkway, Apt. B, and he keeps a key under one of the potted palms by his front door.”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">Her smile slid off-center. “The operative word being ‘potted,’ she said with more sarcasm than normal.</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">He grinned. “I have his car keys, so Lacey and I will drive his Corvette home later, okay? Just get him inside and make sure he stays.”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">Shannon’s mouth went flat. “You want me to tuck him in too?”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">Jack chuckled. “Might be a nice touch, but not necessary.” He leveled a finger at her with a mock glare. “I don’t want you within twenty feet of his bedroom, young lady, you got that?” He winked. “I’m trusting you, Shan.”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">“Glad one of us does,” she mumbled, shoulders slumping when she saw Sam dipping Cat in a dance move next to the table, almost dropping her.</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">“Okay, come on, Twinkletoes.” Jack pulled Sam away from Cat to hook an arm over his shoulder, carefully guiding him down the wide, tree-lined walkway dotted with tables. He tossed Cat a warning glare over his shoulder. “And if I ever see you dancing with this joker again, Catfish, I’m going to toss you into the river, you got it? He’s off-limits to you and Shan because he’s dangerous to women’s health.”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">“Yeah?” Sam mumbled, stumbling along beside Jack, “then how come it’s&nbsp;<em style="position: relative;">my</em>&nbsp;health that took the hit this time?”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">“Have fun, you lucky duck,” Margo called as Shannon led Jack and Sam to where she had parked her car. “Sure wish it were me.”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">“Me too,” Shannon muttered, wondering if she could talk Jack into putting Sam in the trunk.</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">“Jack, I’m fine, I swear.” Sam’s argument sounded convincing enough except for a near miss with a chair, and Shannon couldn’t help the ghost of a smile when her brother gave him a Gibbs smack to the back of the head. She could have kissed Jack after he dumped Sam into the back seat of the car instead of the front.&nbsp;<em style="position: relative;">Especially</em>&nbsp;after a slight detour where Dr. Love puked on the parking lot, necessitating quick cleanup with wet wipes from the glove compartment.</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">Facedown on the upholstery, Sam ground out a low groan that coaxed another smile to Shannon’s lips. “I think I’m gonna die …” he muttered. His voice was no more than a rasp as he lay prostrate across the back seat of her mother’s 1999 Chevy Impala, his bristled jaw flat against her beige upholstery.</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">“No you won’t, Ham,” Jack said with a degree of sympathy. “You just need to get past this obsession with Jasmine and move on with your life, man. There are other fish in the sea.”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">A hiccough interrupted Sam’s moan. “I don’ want fish. I want her. She’s one in a million.”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">“Yeah, and so’s the headache you’re gonna have come morning, bro, if you don’t get some decent sleep.” He shoved the rest of Sam’s legs into the car and slammed the door, opening the passenger side to offer Shannon a penitent smile. “I can’t thank you enough, Shan. Jazz dumped him for some new intern, and it’s been a rough week for him, you know?”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">“I’m sorry to hear that,” she whispered, her heart aching for him despite his inebriated state. “Is there anything else I can do to help cheer him up?”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">“Yeah, you can pray for him, and maybe even share some of that wisdom you’re so famous for. Never seen Ham this down before, and it has me a little worried, you know?”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">“Sure, Jack.” She peeked into the back seat where snores could be heard while drool puddled on the upholstery. “I feel bad for the poor guy.”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">Jack grinned. “I knew you would because you have an oversized heart of gold, kiddo, but not too much, okay? Ham has been known to take advantage of the kindness of strangers.”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">A grin tugged at Shannon’s lips as she glanced over her shoulder. “Doesn’t look like he could take advantage of much of anything right now.” She wrinkled her nose. “Except Mom’s car seat.”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">“Yeah, well that’s when he’s at his most dangerous, I’m afraid, catching women off-guard with his little-boy charm. So unconscious or not, keep your distance, okay?”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">She started the car with its customary sputter and growl, shifting into gear as she slid Jack a wry smile. “Distance would be a cab, Jack, but I’ll keep that in mind.”</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">“Good girl.” With two firm taps of her roof, Jack closed the door, hands in his pockets as he watched her drive away.</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><span style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;">A snort sounded from the back seat, and Shannon had no choice but to smile. A cab, definitely.</span><br style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; text-align: justify;" /><em style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; position: relative; text-align: justify;">In another state.</em></div>

<div style="text-align: left;">

<em style="background-color: white; color: #6d6d6d; font-family: Arial, Helvetica, sans-serif; font-size: 14px; position: relative; text-align: justify;"><br /></em></div>

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Chapter 2</h2>

<div style="font-style: italic; text-align: left;">

<em style="position: relative; text-align: justify;">Stupid fly.&nbsp;</em><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">Sam Cunningham swatted at the insect, its stupid buzzing getting on his last nerve. It landed again, and he literally growled, flailing his arm to shoo it away. “Beat it, before I nail your butt to the wall.”</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">“Now&nbsp;<em style="position: relative;">that</em>&nbsp;I’d like to see.”</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">Sam jolted up with a groan, drool smeared on the side of his mouth as he squinted into the eyes of an angel.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">Okay, he couldn’t be dead because his head was pounding too hard, and dead people didn’t feel pain, right? Not unless … He shot straight up, head in a vice as he groaned in misery, kneading his temples. His stomach burned like the devil and his throat was so parched, it felt like it was on fire.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">Uh-oh …&nbsp;<em style="position: relative;">fire!</em></span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">Yep, he was dead.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">And now, he was going to pay for his sins.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">“You’re not going to throw up again, are you?” A quiet voice asked, soft with sympathy.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">He glanced up at the angel through slits in his eyes, his voice barely a croak. “I might. Where am I?” he rasped.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">“The back seat of my mother’s car, and I’m Jack’s sister Shannon in case you don’t remember.” She gently tugged on his arm, obviously hoping to remove him from the vehicle. “Which would be a miracle, given the brain cells you destroyed&nbsp;tonight.”</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">He grunted, gingerly attempting to unfold himself from the car while bowling balls ricocheted in his head. “I don’ believe in miracles.”</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">“You should—it’s a miracle you’re even alive after the alcohol you consumed.”</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">“Wish I wasn’t,” he muttered, hand to his eyes as he teetered on the sidewalk, limbs as limp as the crumpled tie dangling around his neck. He sniffed. “What’s that awful smell?”</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">“Vomit. You puked on your tie and shirt,” she said, the empathy in her tone now laced with a hint of a smile.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">He groaned. “<em style="position: relative;">Noooo!</em>&nbsp;This is my best tie—a Ralph Lauren black.” One eye opened a sliver. “Not in your car, I hope?”</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">“Nope, that’s miracle number three—you puked in the parking lot, so Jack and I cleaned you up with the wet wipes we keep in the glove compartment.”</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">“For sloppy drunks you cart home?” He managed to pry his eyes open all the way, noticing for the first time just how pretty she was.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">“Nope, you’re my first.” She hooked an arm to his waist. “Ready?”</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">“Always,” he said with a smile that was worth the pain, “when there’s a pretty woman by my side.”</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">She paused, face in a pinch as she stared up with mouth agape. “Seriously? You’re going to hit on me when you can barely walk and smell like puke?”</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">He gave a faint shrug, smile sheepish. “Nothing ventured, nothing gained.”</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">“I guarantee you, Dr. Cunningham,” she said in a stern tone tempered with tease, “the only thing you’re going to gain with comments like that is a whop alongside the head.”</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">“Ouch.” He grinned while she attempted to steer him toward his luxury villa with a strength and determination that belied her small size, her manner utterly patient when he stumbled several times. His hands shook as he fumbled to fish his keys from his pocket, striving for a smile that came out as a grimace. “I can take it from here,” he said, then froze, his keys promptly plummeting onto his brick front porch. Panic set in when he broke out in a cold sweat, mouth salivating like he was going to throw up …</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><em style="position: relative; text-align: justify;">Noooooooooooo!</em><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">Body heaving, he spun around to a potted palm just in time, retching into the planter for several agonizing seconds. He stood there, breathing hard while he remained bent over the poor plant, pretty sure he’d just puked up his intestines.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">“Let’s get you inside,” a soft voice said, the gentle touch of a palm rubbing his back.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">A groan scraped past his dry lips, and he white-knuckled the edge of the planter, not sure if the heat in his cheeks meant he was embarrassed or going to toss his cookies again. “Please go—I can take it from here.”</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">The caress of a hand to his back continued despite his objection. “I’m sure you can, Sam, but it remains to be seen if you’ll be sleeping out here next to a potted palm or inside in a clean, cozy bed. So, if it’s all the same to you, Doc, I have strict orders to get you down for the night before I leave, so I’m here till I get the dirty deed done.”</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">He rose slowly, wiping his mouth with his coat sleeve and feeling so much better after unloading his stomach, he actually managed a chuckle. “Ah yes, the ‘sober and sensible twin.’”</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">“That’s right, Dr. Love,” she said, employing Jack’s nickname while she turned the key in his door, “which means the party’s over and you’re done for the night.”</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">“Wait …!” He spun around, heart in his throat. “Where’s my car?”</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">“Jack will deliver it in the morning, Doc, so move it inside, please.” She nudged him into his spacious marble foyer that never failed to elicit a feeling of pride, always reminding Sam that he’d finally arrived. A far cry from a flea-bitten room over a bar on the wrong side of the tracks, Sam’s villa—along with his “preowned” pearl white Corvette—were his pride and joy. Absolute proof he was worth something, despite desertion by a two-bit mother and the rantings of a foster father who claimed he’d only amount to a pile of dung.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">He fumbled to turn on the light, then reveled in the gasp that popped from Shannon’s lips, her voice tinged with an awe he never tired of hearing. “Wow, this is some place, Doc,” she whispered, peering up at the vaulted foyer with its sleek chrome and teak stairway that zigzagged against a wall of glass. Cream walls resplendent with equally pale modern works of art were beautifully complemented by a central circular mirror and white calla lilies in a tall pottery vase. Sam would have preened with pride if he wasn’t covered in puke, because each and every piece was deliberately designed to evoke the clean and simple beauty he so craved in his own life.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">“It’s breathtaking,” she whispered, leaving his side to wander the entryway with a look of awe as if she were Alice perusing Wonderland for the very first time. “Utterly clean and pure. Not at all what I expected of a notorious bachelor.” She turned, the look of astonishment on her face making him grin and wince at the same time. “You didn’t do this yourself, did you? I mean a designer put it together for you, right?”</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">“Nope, all mine,” he said, chest swelling with pride even as his stomach rebelled with a twinge of nausea. He fought it off, suddenly aware he smelled like a pub on payday.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">Her jaw actually dropped. “I don’t believe it.”</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">He forced a flirtatious smile, barely minding the throb in his head. “Every shade of paint, every stick of furniture, every piece of art,” he said with a wobbly hand to his heart, “straight out of my depraved brain, I promise.” He suddenly steadied himself with a hand to the wall, a flashback from his childhood making him dizzier than the booze in his body.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><em style="position: relative; text-align: justify;">“I’ll come back soon, I promise,”</em><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">&nbsp;his mother always said, night after night, the stench of alcohol on her breath making him nauseous. Only she never did, leaving a skin-and-bones five-year-old to fend for himself in a rat-infested room over a dive of a bar. And when her lush of a boyfriend gave her a choice between Sam and him? Sam’s teeth ground hard as he swayed on his feet. No contest. Because his so-called mother was weak—seeking her self-worth in a loser who had absolutely no worth at all—while giving her son promises that were worth even less.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">“<em style="position: relative;">No,</em>” Sam stressed with a hint of a slur, focusing glassy eyes on a woman who for some strange reason, he wanted to know the truth. “I give you my<em style="position: relative;">&nbsp;word</em>,” he emphasized with surprising clarity, “because you see, Miss O’Bryen, promises are nothing more than a puff of air. But my word is my unbreakable bond, as honest and pure as I can ever hope to be.” The dizziness passed, and he stood up straight and tall, both his smile and the “player” in play once again. “Because despite my notoriously black reputation, I am inexplicably drawn to things that are simple and pure, honest and clean, and completely unblemished by my own sordid life.”</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">Her gaze met his and held. “It’s beautiful,” she said softly, head tipped as if she couldn’t quite figure him out.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">“Thank you.” He leaned on the knob of the open door, making every effort not to waver on his feet. “Unlike its owner at the moment, I’m afraid. It seems I’m in dire need of a shower.”</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">She simply stared, her calm look of compassion so disarming that the smile slowly dissolved on his face. All at once, he felt his shoulders relax, the need to impress suddenly as absent as his sobriety. “Thank you, Shannon,” he said quietly, somewhat baffled by the calming effect that she had, “for putting up with metonight&nbsp;and getting me home.” He took a stab at a smile that came out more as a flinch. “I’ll have the inside of your car fumigated and detailed, so just send me the bill.”</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">For some reason the kindness in her eyes put a hitch in his throat he could only blame on the booze. She slipped her purse off her shoulder, dangling it from one hand while she reverently glided the other across his polished teak half-moon table. “That won’t be necessary,” she said with a smile, “but I suspect a pot of coffee will be. Direct me to the kitchen?”</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">He studied her through blurry eyes, wondering if the aura of innocence he detected was real or just the effect of the alcohol on his brain. “You don’t have to do that, Shannon. The vomit was already above and beyond the call of duty, so I’ll give Jack a good report.”</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">She huffed out a sigh bigger than her. “Sorry, Doc. Jack asked me to make sure you go to bed and don’t go out again. Blame it on the curse of being the sensible and sober twin who follows orders, but if it’s all the same to you, I’d like to follow through with coffee and even lend an ear if you like.”</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">He stared for several dizzy seconds, then shut the door, figuring a cup of coffee was preferable to a vertigo spin in bed. “Sure. Kitchen’s down the hall, and it won’t take me three minutes to shower.” He eyed the lofty staircase with a dull gaze. “Now the stairs? Might be more like twenty.”</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">She paused halfway to the kitchen. “Need help?”</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">“Nope.” He made his way to the staircase, trying hard not to weave. “The hangover will be wicked enough without Jack’s fist if I get one of his sisters into my bedroom.”</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">“O-Okay.” She spun on her heel and all but sprinted down the hall.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">But not before he saw the delicate rise of color in her face that lured a smile to his lips. He shook his head as he methodically scaled one step at a time, fisting the steel banister to hold himself up. He sure didn’t blame Jack for banning him from his sisters, especially Shannon. There was something so sweet and wholesome about her that it almost made him want to protect her himself.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">He paused at the top of the stairs to catch his breath, the thought of Jack’s sister in his “lair” quirking his lips. Obviously Jack was concerned about Sam’s welfare enough to put his sister in harm’s way, which only deepened Sam’s gratitude to the man who was quickly becoming a close friend. His mouth crooked. Even&nbsp;<em style="position: relative;">if</em>&nbsp;he was annoyingly bent on saving Sam’s soul.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">Plodding into his massive bedroom, he peeled off his clothes, leaving a trail on his way to the master bath before turning the shower all the way to scalding. Feeling woozy, he braced his hands on the vanity, mind as foggy as the steam billowing behind him like thunderclouds portending a doozy of a storm. He peered into the mirror, muscled arms taut with his weight while red eyes and a sagging face shadowed with scruff confirmed the storm was already here.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">And it was a stinkin’ category five.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">He dropped his head, the pain in his chest suddenly making the throb in his brain look like lollipops on immunization day.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">Because he’d lost Jazz again. A second time.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">And losing always left a bitter taste in his mouth.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">&nbsp;<em style="position: relative;">You’re nothing but a loser, kid, just like your old lady.</em></span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><em style="position: relative; text-align: justify;">&nbsp;</em><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">Kind of like spewing in a parking lot, only this time the nausea was in his heart. Peering up, he saw a ripped body honed at the gym and chiseled features Jazz once likened to a Greek god. Determination steeled his bones. Because inside he knew his feelings for Jasmine and hers for him went far deeper than a pretty face. “You’ll be back, Jazz,” he whispered, “because I’m the one you come to when you’re hurting, and the one who makes you laugh when others make you cry.”</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><em style="position: relative; text-align: justify;">Like Jack when he dumped you for Lacey.</em><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">An odd mix of resentment and regard churned in his gut along with the booze, reminding him that it had been Jack who had stolen Jazz away the first time, after Sam cheated on her. But then it was Jack who had sent her running right back after he’d upped and married Lacey. Jasmine had been devastated, but Sam had been ready, wooing her back with love and understanding and an iron-clad resolve to never stray again.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">Until she dumped him for an intern.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">Sam’s eyes shuttered closed. Just like his so-called fiancée dumped him in college. Right after she had an affair with his professor, destroying Sam’s confidence along with the man’s marriage.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">Mind and body wobbling, he quickly opened his eyes, desperate to purge the memory from his brain along with the alcohol from his system.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">Stepping into the shower, he welcomed the hot water that battered him raw. Well, he’d lost Jazz twice, but he’d also won her twice, and if it took every trick in the book, he’d do it again. His jaw automatically hardened, resolve to win her back pummeling through his veins as hard as the steaming water pummeled his body. But right now he needed to numb the ache in his heart, so he’d start with a cup of coffee with a pretty woman who just might help fill the hole in his chest.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">At least for a while.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">He lathered with soap, aching with the need to feel worthy and clean. He suddenly thought of Shannon and instantly relaxed, the idea of coffee with her suddenly the only thing he wanted to do. He could use an honest sounding board after all the angst Jasmine had put him through. And he’d begin&nbsp;tonight&nbsp;by picking Shannon’s brain as to how he might win her back. Because Shannon&nbsp;<em style="position: relative;">did</em>&nbsp;mention lending an ear.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">Stepping out of the shower, he expelled a burdensome sigh. And maybe, if she realized just how badly he was hurting, she’d lend him even more. Like a few innocent kisses—and only kisses—from a woman who could help ease some of his pain. Sagging over the sink, he ground his thumb against the throb in his temple, desperate to free himself of the awful loneliness that always haunted his brain. His eyelids weighted closed. Because he had to.</span><br style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;" /><span style="font-style: normal; text-align: justify;">Jack’s sister or no.</span></div>

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