

Dean and Cassie

By Kate Simon

Dean Mitchell was working on a brake job for a Civic. Not his favorite car to work on but cars like this kept him in business. He'd rather work on a classic Buick but he had a payroll to meet. He finished up and went into the men's room to wash up. The harsh light showed the grey hair that was peppering his temples and beard. He supposed it was to be expected at forty five. Considering the life he led as teenager, the fact that he was still standing at this age was nothing short of miraculous.

He walked out to the front office to write up the Civic repair bill when he saw her. At first, he thought she was a young girl, she was so small. She was barely five foot two with huge doe eyes and soft brown hair. He looked closer and saw the business suit under her coat. He walked to the counter and realized how his eyes had deceived him. She was probably in her late twenties. Ron, one of his mechanics, was trying to simultaneously wait on her and hit on her. Dean couldn't fault Ron's taste but the girl looked very uncomfortable.

"Ron, have you finished up that Azerra?"

"Not yet."

"Why don't you go do that...now." Ron shot daggers at him as he went into the garage. "Sorry about him, miss. I usually keep him chained up in the back," he smiled. He was relieved when the young woman smiled back.

"Thank you. I'm not very good with that sort of thing."

"I assume you've come for a reason other than my mechanic's clever conversation."

"My car is making a squealing noise. I took it to the dealer but I think he's trying to take advantage of my complete lack of knowledge about cars. I thought you might give me a second opinion."

"Sure, let's go take a look." He walked out to the lot and stopped in his tracks. Parked in front of him was a cherry red BMW 840i convertible. "Whoa."

“Is there a problem?”

“No, I just don’t get cars like this in my shop.”

“What do you mean?”

“Cars like this are usually worked on by specialists. Why did you bring it to me?”

“I drive by here on my way to work and I’ve seen the classic cars. I figured you could handle this thing no problem.”

“This thing is a one hundred-thousand-dollar car.”

“What?” she gasped.

“You don’t know how much you paid for your car?”

“I didn’t pay for it. It was a signing bonus from my company. Honestly, it’s not really my kind of car but I thought it would be rude not to accept.”

“What kind of work do you do? I’m guessing you’re not with the NBA.” He liked when she giggled.

“No. I work for Toma Pharmaceuticals. I’m a medical researcher.”

“Wow. Okay, umm, your car, yeah, I can take a look. It might take a couple of hours.”

“That’s great. I’ll call a cab and you can call me when it’s ready.”

Dean didn’t know what possessed him but he had the sudden clarity if he didn’t, he’d regret it forever. “I could give you a ride.” He pointed to his 1956 Buick Century. The car was his baby. He’d lovingly restored it from a shell. Now it was red and white masterpiece. He’d won several shows.

“That’s your car?” she grinned. “I’d love a ride. Thank you.”

“Okay, let’s get you written up and I’ll get you to work.” They walked back into the office. He grabbed a work order and started to fill it out. “Name?”

“Cassie Coleman.”

“Phone number?”

She pulled a business card out of her purse and wrote a number on the back.
“That’s my cell.”

“Thanks,” he smiled, until he turned the card over. Dr. Cassandra Coleman, M.D.,
PhD. “You’re a doctor?”

She nodded. “I don’t see patients. I research new medications.”

“How old were you when you graduated? Twelve?”

Cassie laughed. “I get that a lot. I’m thirty-five.”

“I would have never guessed.” He opened the door to the garage and whistled.
“I’m dropping off a customer. Try not to burn the place down.”

Another of his mechanics glanced out at Cassie’s car and whistled. “I’m almost
done here, Dean. I can take care of the Beemer next.”

“Frank, don’t touch it, don’t even breathe on it. I’ll take care of it when I get back.”

“Damn,” Frank grumbled as he turned his attention back to the Ford’s carburetor.

Cassie smiled as they walked toward his car. “Before I get in your car, I should probably know your name.” She was surprised when she saw him slightly blush. He held out his hand.

“Sorry. Dean Mitchell. I own this place.”

“Business must be good. It always seems very busy when I drive by.”

“I have enough work to keep us going.” He reached for the passenger door and opened it for her.

She looked around the car for the seat belts and found none. “Are there no belts?”

“No, it wasn’t original equipment in the car. It’s legal without them.” He turned to her and smiled. “Don’t worry. This thing is a tank.” Cassie gave him the address and he started the car.

She didn’t know what was with her today. She barely talked to men let alone get in a car with a man she didn’t know. There was something about Dean. His smile made her heart skip. She didn’t feel nervous to be near him. He’d run to her defense when his employee got forward. Dean didn’t look like any of the men she knew. He was tall, well, everyone was tall next to her. He had a touch of grey in his beard and at his temples. He had a quirky, lopsided smile and the most beautiful blue eyes she’d ever seen. “This is a beautiful car.”

“Thank you.”

“Did you restore it yourself?”

“Yes, I did. It was a barn find. It had been rusting away for fifty years.”

“Wow, you’re really talented.” They stopped at a light and people were staring. One car honked and gave him a thumbs up. “It looks like everyone agrees with me.”

“It does get some attention.” He pulled into her building’s lot and parked. “I’ll call you as soon as I know what’s going on with your car.”

Cassie looked at Dean and decided to take a risk. “Do you have time for a coffee? There’s a very nice shop in the lobby. I’d like to say thank you for the ride.” He looked like

he was debating his answer. She hoped she hadn't crossed any lines. He finally smiled and nodded.

"I'd like that."

"Great," she said a little too enthusiastically. She grabbed her things and he followed her into the lobby. A security guard greeted her from the front desk.

"Good morning, Dr. Coleman."

"Good morning, George." He looked around her at Dean. "Mr. Mitchell and I are going to have a coffee."

"Yes, Ma'am."

Cassie headed toward the café past a collection of suits and lab coats when Dean touch her arm. "I'm not dressed this place."

She looked at his Harley t shirt and well fit, if a bit dusty, jeans. "You look just fine," she smiled. They walked into the café to a few stares but not for the reasons Dean might have thought. Cassie was never seen with anyone other than people on her team. "If you like strong coffee, they have a Jamaican blend that my assistant swears keeps her going all day."

"That sounds good," he smiled.

"Good morning, Dr. Coleman. Your usual?"

"Yes, thank you Dorothy."

"We have a some of those fresh vanilla scones you like."

"Oh, I shouldn't." She turned to Dean. "Split it with me. That way I won't feel so guilty."

"Well, we can't have that," he smiled. Dean ordered the Jamaican blend and she signed for the order. He carried the tray as she picked a table by the window. He took a sip of his coffee and made a face. "Wow, you weren't kidding. This is strong."

"If you don't like it, we could something else."

“No, this is fine, really.”

She cut the scone in half and pushed the plate toward him. “Please have some or I’ll eat it all.” He took a bite and smiled.

“This is good.” He took a sip of his coffee. “Are you going to get in trouble with your boss for being late?”

“No. I’m the team leader so that makes me the boss. Besides, I’m always the first in.” A few people walked by their table and nodded a greeting.

“Is it me, or are we the center of attention,” he asked.

“It’s not you, it’s me. I’m not known for being...sociable.”

“What do you mean?”

“I generally keep to myself. My father’s a shrink. He says I’m pathologically shy.”

“You don’t seem shy with me.”

She looked at him for a moment. “I’m not and I don’t know why.” The moment got uncomfortable. She didn’t want to say the wrong thing. “How long have you had your own shop?”

“Twenty years.”

“You prefer working on the classics, don’t you?”

“I do. Unfortunately, that’s not enough to keep the shop going, so I work on other cars.”

“I understand that. I want to work on orphan drugs but there is a limited market so I work on more mainstream drugs too.”

“What are orphan drugs?”

“Drugs that would treat an illness with a limited population. They cost millions to develop so the company would never make its money back.”

“So, the people with those diseases are out of luck?”

“Usually. Part of my contract is I work on both. Right now, I’m working on a promising new blood pressure medication. It’s showing to be very effective with very few side effects.”

“Something like that would make your company millions.”

“More like billions. High blood pressure is one of the most common and deadly of conditions.”

“That explains the fancy car.”

“They recruited me from another company. I have a bit of a reputation. I didn’t need the car. All I wanted is my orphan drug team and I got it.”

“Reputation?” he smiled.

She took a sip of coffee and tried to hide her blush. “I’m really good. I’ve developed some very profitable medications.” She saw he was staring. “What?”

“Why don’t you treat people?”

“That’s what my father asked. It’s the whole shy thing. I get really nervous around people I don’t know. I know it’s nothing I can change about myself. It’s who I am. When I discovered my talent for chemistry, I realized I could help more people developing medications than I ever could seeing patients.”

“That must have pleased your father.”

“Only when he saw my first paycheck.”

“Wow. I’m sorry but that’s cold.”

Cassie smiled. “That’s what I thought too.”

“Your card said you’re a PhD. Is that the chemistry?”

“One of them.”

“One of them?”

“I have one in computer software engineering.” Dean sat back against his chair and looked very uncomfortable. “What is it?”

“I’m a little out of my depth with you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I barely finished high school. I ran around for a for a while being crazy.” He leaned closer. “I did six months for stealing a car.”

“Huh. How old were you when you stole the car?”

“Nineteen.”

“How old are you now?”

“Forty-five.”

“Are you still stealing cars?” she smiled.

He managed to smile back. “No. That scared the wild out of me. That and my father smacking me upside the head for being an idiot. He helped me open my shop. I’ve been there ever since. I honestly don’t know why you’d want to be here with me. I’m nobody special. You, you’re going to change people’s lives.”

Something made her reach for his hand. “Dean, you drove me here in a work of art. A work of your creation. I’d say your pretty special.”

“Cassie, how do you know I’m not trouble?”

“Your eyes.”

“What?”

“It’s your eyes. They tell me everything I need to know.”

Dean got back to the shop about an hour later. He was greeted by goofy grins from Frank and Ron. "Where did she work? Canada?" Ron laughed.

"Shut up," he said trying not to smile. He drove Cassie's car around the block and immediately knew the problem. A drive belt needed to be replaced. He looked up the model specific part and it was about one hundred and fifty dollars. He had to run to the local parts store to get the right belt. He didn't stock BMW parts. Once he got back it took him about thirty minutes to finish the repair. He would have normally charged a thirty-minute labor fee, but not for Cassie.

She was something else. He had no business pursuing something with her. She was a doctor. He was a mechanic. He sat at his desk staring at her phone number. He'd just call and tell her the repair was done. He'd get one of the guys to follow him and he'd deliver her car. That would be that. That would be a big mistake. He hadn't been in a relationship for years. Even back then they were short lived things. One look at Cassie said she was different. Cassie was the answer to a question he wasn't sure he was ready to ask.

"Hi Cassie, it's Dean."

"Hi. How's my car?"

"It was a simple belt. It's a little more expensive because of the model of your car but it wasn't too bad."

"How much is not too bad?"

"One hundred and fifty."

"That bastard!"

"Excuse me?"

"The dealer said it was a serious repair. It would be a minimum of two thousand."

"I hate guys like that. They give us all a bad name."

"I can't thank you enough. I'll get a ride over after work. How late are you there?"

“I’ll stay until you get here.”

“I don’t want you to have to stay late on my account.”

“Don’t worry. I have plenty of paperwork to do.”

“I could be there about five-thirty.”

“That’s fine.”

“I’ll see you then.”

“Cassie…” he paused.

“Yes?”

“Would you like to have dinner?”

“What did you have in mind?”

“Do you like Chinese?”

“Ooo. The spicier the better.” She paused for a moment. “Do you like action movies?”

“Excuse me?”

“I like movies with minimal plots and lots of things blowing up. I have a big collection.”

“Of course, I like action movies. I’m a guy.”

“I noticed.”

Dean smiled at her muted giggle.

“Why don’t we get take out and then we can watch a movie at my place. That way we can kick off our shoes and relax.”

He understood. “And no crowds.”

“No crowds.”

“I’ll get the order delivered here and I can follow you.”

“That sounds perfect. I’ll see you then.”

“Bye.” Dean disconnected the call and smiled. This might be crazy but at the moment he didn’t care.

“Did you just make a date with that cute girl with the Beemer? Won’t her daddy object?”

He turned around to see Ron standing in the doorway. “She’s no girl and it’s her car. She’s a doctor. If you’re about to give me crap, let me remind you who signs your paychecks.”

Ron smiled and patted his shoulder. “I’m not going to give you crap. You’ve got a date with that gorgeous woman. You’re my new hero.”

Cassie hung up her cell phone and smiled. He'd asked her to dinner. Even more remarkable, she accepted. She hoped her house was picked up enough for company.

"Did I just hear you make a date?"

She turned to see her assistant, Kim, standing in the doorway. "Has Mark turned in his report?"

"Not yet. So, tell me, was it that scruffy guy from the café?"

"He is not scruffy."

"It is him," she grinned.

"How do you know about Dean? You weren't there."

"It's all anyone is talking about."

"You all need to get a life."

Kim put her hands on her hips and stared at her. She'd been the one person at the company Cassie felt comfortable with. "Did those words just come out of your mouth?" she asked. "I've been bugging you to come out with us for a year."

"I know. I'm sorry."

Kim walked closer and smiled. "So, tell me about him."

"I took my car to him this morning. I bought him a coffee to say thank you for giving me a ride to work."

"I hear you two were pretty cozy."

"You hear a lot." Cassie smiled. "We had a really nice conversation."

"And now he's asked you out to dinner." Kim patted her on the shoulder. "Good for you."

"Well, he did..."

"Don't tell me you said no!"

“I suggested get take out and we could watch a movie at my house.”

Kim’s hands returned to her hips. “Seriously?”

“He doesn’t like crowds either.”

“It’s a restaurant, not Yankee Stadium.”

“Kim, please.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Now, what was Mark’s excuse for not being ready?”

“He said he’s close.”

“I think it’s time I have a chat with him.” Cassie walked down the hall toward Mark Callen’s office. He was a good chemist but he’d had issues when she was brought in to lead the team. She’d given him some slack but enough was enough.

“Dr. Callen.”

“Dr. Coleman, what can I do for you?”

“You can have your report finished on the latest test results.”

“As I told your secretary, these things can’t be rushed.”

“Dr. Callen, you have had more than enough time to finish your work. The finished report will be on my desk Friday morning or I will have you assigned to a different project.” Cassie was startled when he leapt to his feet. “You can’t do that! This was my team. I built it. I should have been promoted but they gave you my team.”

“It is for that reason I have given you so much leeway, but that’s over. You will do the work or be reassigned.” She turned to leave then stopped. “Also, you know that I don’t have a secretary, I have an assistant. I recruited her from Caltech because she’s brilliant. She may be new but her PhD is just as valid as yours. Her name is Dr. Ashton and you will address her with the respect she deserves.” She walked down the hall to the sound of a door slamming.

Cassie sat in the passenger side of Kim's car. She'd given her a ride to Dean's garage on the promise of getting to meet him. It was probably a good idea that someone else meet Dean. Cassie thought she was sure about him but that could be hormones talking. He was a very handsome man. She couldn't remember the last time she'd been on a date and she'd never invited any of them to her home. She took a deep breath as they pulled into the parking lot. Here goes nothing. She got out of Kim's car and headed toward the office door. She looked at Kim as she reached for the doorknob. "Do not embarrass me."

"I promise," she grinned.

The door buzzer went off and they walked into office. "Hello?" Dean walked in from his office and smiled.

"Hi, Cassie."

"Hi." Her heart pounded. God, she felt like she was back in high school. She felt a nudge in her ribs. "Dean, this is Kim. She gave me a lift."

He extended his hand. "It's nice to meet you."

"You too," she smiled.

"Kim has to be going. She has lots to do. Her boss is a slave driver." She held the door open for her.

"Wow," she whispered. "I want a full report in the morning."

"Go on," Cassie said as she closed the door. "Sorry about that. She insisted on meeting you."

"Wanted to make sure I'm not a serial killer?"

"No, of course not."

"Really?" he laughed.

"Well, not really. It's just so unusual for me to date that she wanted to meet you." She flushed bright red. "That is what this is, right?"

Dean smiled and kissed her cheek. "Yeah, this is a date."

"Ah, let me pay you for the work on my car" He handed her the invoice and she reached for her charge card. "Wait. This is only for a part. I took up a good part of your day with this. You have to charge me for your time."

"It only took me a few minutes to change the belt." He took the card from her hand. "And for the record, I enjoyed my time with you today."

Cassie felt herself blush again. "So did I."

Dean followed Cassie to a nice neighborhood not far from his shop. It was a collection of small colonial homes. The garage door opened and Cassie pulled in. He parked behind her and walked into the garage.

"I don't always put it in the garage but now that I know what it's worth, I will."

"Good plan." He followed her into her kitchen and set the large brown bag on the kitchen table.

"Good Lord. How much food did you get?" she asked as she peered in the bag.

"I got a selection."

"I would say so. I'll get the plates." Cassie set out some plates as he set out the cartons. "Would you like an ice tea? I'm sorry, I don't have any wine or beer."

"Ice tea would be fine." Dean dished out some General Tso chicken and vegetable fried rice.

Cassie took a bite and smiled. "Oh, yum."

"I'm glad you like it."

"How was the rest of your day?"

"It was okay. We have a lot of cars backed up for work. I have to keep Ron and Frank on task."

“I understand that. I have to keep my team on point. It’s not always easy.”

He saw her strained look. “What happened?”

“A member of my team is dragging his heels. He was supposed to have his report ready two weeks ago. He claims it’s a problem with the modeling software.”

“It’s not?”

“No. I designed the software myself. Everyone else on the team uses it without a problem.”

“Does he not understand?”

“No. He’s doing it on purpose. He’s been on the team for three years. He thought he should have been promoted but Toma brought me in and gave me the team. I understand his resentment but I can’t let that stop our progress. I told him if he’s not done by Friday I’d have him assigned to a different team. He didn’t take the news well. He knows that Kim could replace him in a heartbeat.”

“That girl who dropped you off?”

“Yes. I recruited her from Caltech. She’s young but her doctoral thesis was brilliant.

“That young girl is a doctor?”

“She’s a PhD, not an MD. The whole thing was unnerving. I’m not good with those situations. I prefer working on my own.”

He saw how uncomfortable she seemed and he reached for her hand. “I’m sure you did what you had to.”

Cassie smiled and Dean knew everything in his life had changed in the course of one day.

Cassie opened the cabinet to her DVD collection. "Why don't you pick?"

"You weren't kidding. You have quite a collection." He looked through and pulled out a DVD. "What do you think?"

"Terminator 2. Good choice. The sequel was better than the original." She put the DVD in the machine and started the movie. Cassie kicked off her shoes and pulled her legs up on the couch. "Feel free to lose your shoes. You can't be comfortable in something so heavy." Dean kicked off his shoes and stretched out his legs. She caught herself leaning against him. He smiled and put his arm around her shoulder.

"Is this okay?" he asked.

"It is. I don't know why I feel so comfortable with you, but I do."

"Cassie, I don't do relationships, at least I haven't in a long while."

She pulled back. "Oh. It's okay. We're just hanging out and having some Chinese."

He put his arm back around her. "That's not what I meant. I meant the moment I saw you I knew you were different. I'm a little nervous about this. Hell, I'm a lot nervous about this, about us."

"You're nervous?" she gasped. "You look like the definition of cool."

"Thank you, I think."

"I meant it as a compliment. You seem so strong and self-possessed. Maybe that's why I feel so comfortable with you. You make me feel safe."

"That may be the nicest thing anyone has ever said to me." He leaned in and gave her a soft kiss.

She brushed her hand against his soft beard. "Dean," she whispered as she kissed him again. The kiss went from tentative to passionate in a heartbeat. He pulled back and chuckled.

"What?" she asked, terrified she'd been clumsy.

“This is not what I thought my day would be like when I got up this morning.”

“Neither did I.”

He brushed his hand against her cheek. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but let’s take our time.”

“I think that’s a good idea. I’m not good at these things. I don’t want to mess up.”

“Neither do I.” Dean gave her another kiss and they cuddled up on the couch and watched the new Terminator kick Schwarzenegger’s ass.

Dean walked into his office with a tall coffee and a lot of paperwork to do. He hated this part of the business. He'd much rather be working on cars, even a Civic, than doing paperwork. He needed to get this done so he would have enough time to prep his Buick for the car show this weekend. It was the biggest one in the state and he entered every year. He knew most of the entrants in his category and he thought he had a shot at winning. He smiled when he thought about the last few days. He and Cassie had fallen into an easy pattern of spending time with each other. They had fun watching movies and eating take out after work. He felt like a kid around her, mostly because they made out during the movies like a couple of teenagers. He pulled out the phone and pulled up the contact picture of Cassie. He'd taken it the other night and she looked completely adorable. He felt himself grinning like a fool. He touched the contact button.

"Hi. What a nice surprise."

"No, it's not," he laughed. "I call you every day."

"But not usually this early. What's up?"

"Are you free for lunch?"

"I could be."

"Good. What time?"

"How's one?"

"Fine. There's a nice deli not far from your work. I'll pick you up."

Cassie hung up the phone and smiled. She didn't think anything other than her work could ever dominate her thoughts. Then she met Dean. They'd spent a lot of time together in the last week. Sometimes they met for lunch. Most of the time they had takeout after work at her place. He was so handsome and strong. People would never guess he was also silly and funny. She felt her face heat when she thought of what a great kisser he is. They often missed large parts of whatever movie they were watching because they were busy making out on the couch.

"Ah...Cassie?"

She looked up and saw Kim in her doorway. "Yes?"

"I called your name three times?"

"You did?"

"Let me guess, Dean."

"What?"

"You're smiling at your phone. You must have been talking to him."

"Um," Cassie looked at Kim's grin and knew there was no point in denying it. "Yeah, I was. We were making lunch plans."

Kim's expression changed. "You may need to change your plans when you see what I have to show you."

"What's going on?"

She came around Cassie's desk and pulled up a file on her computer. She pointed to a few rows of numbers. Then she pulled up another file. Cassie reviewed another file and gasped. "What the hell? This isn't right."

"I know. This is different than what it was."

"Someone's altered the results. Get the backup."

"This is the backup."

“Shit! Damn him.”

“Callen?”

“He’s sabotaged the results thinking it will set us back months.”

“It will.”

“No, it won’t. I have a backup on my tablet I do every night. It’s air gapped. No one could access it.”

“You have a separate backup? Does the company know?”

“They approved it. It’s a defense against just this kind of thing.”

“So, you can fix the corrupted files?”

“Yes, but I’m not going to do it right away. Tell everyone that we are doing a computer update. Tell them to secure their work and that they are getting a jump on their weekend.”

“It’s only Thursday. Are you sure the company will approve that?”

“It will be fine. I need the time to prove Callen was the one who sabotaged the files. The moron forgot he was using software I wrote to corrupt the files. It won’t take me long. Send the team home and make sure everything, including the offices are secured. I will shut down the computer.” Kim left her office and she placed a call to Nicolas Toma, the CEO. He’d personally recruited her from Bradshaw Industries.

“Dr. Coleman, what can I do for you?”

“Mr. Toma, we have a problem.”

Twenty minutes later Kim returned to her office. “Everyone was more than happy to leave work. Callen had a smirk on his face.”

“I’ve spoken with Mr. Toma. He’s very upset about the incursion but I told him I will have the work restored by the end of the day. I have a meeting with him at six. Most people will be gone by then. We want to keep the circle small on this one.”

“Will you have what you need on Callen by then?”

“Yes. I’ll be able to trace where the corruption originated. Why don’t you pack up for your weekend?”

“Are you going to be okay here by yourself?”

“I’ll be fine but first things first. I’m going to have lunch with my boyfriend.”

“What?”

“We don’t want people to think there’s anything out of the ordinary.” Cassie locked down the computer system and grabbed her purse. Dean would be waiting.

Dean waited at the front door for Cassie. He didn't like going inside. As much as she said it was fine, he felt out of place among the lab coats. He smiled when she walked through the door and gave her a kiss on the cheek. "Hi. Are you hungry?"

"I could eat."

"Bennie's makes great sandwiches," he said as he opened the passenger side door.

"Good. I may need to take some back to the office. I'll have to work late."

"Problem?"

"Yeah."

"What's going on?"

"I can't really talk about it. It's not my problem. It's something I need to fix."

He pulled into Bennie's parking lot and parked his truck on the end so his logo would face the street. He'd restored his '66 GMC truck and put his store logo, Mitchell Restorations and Repairs, on the doors. It was good advertising and he could deduct it from his corporate taxes. "Do you mind if we park here?"

"This is the best vantage point for your logo. People driving by can see your truck and what great work you do."

Dean grinned at how she picked up at exactly what he was doing.

"What?" she asked.

He put his arm around her shoulder. "It's fun dating the smartest girl in the class."

They found a booth in the back and placed their orders. Dean got a giant Reuben and Cassie got a Turkey club that barely fit in her mouth.

"It's delicious but I'll definitely be taking half of this back to my desk."

"I'm glad you like it. I wanted to ask you if you have plans this weekend."

“No, I don’t.”

“I’ve entered my Buick in the Hermitage Classic Car Show. I wanted to know if you’d like to go with me. It’s Saturday and Sunday.”

“I’d love to!” she grinned.

“Great. I think you’ll enjoy it.”

“I’m sure I will. Tell me about it.”

“I’m entered in the 50s category. That means it’s all original parts from the 50s. I’m taking tomorrow off so I can get her ready.”

“I’ll be off tomorrow. Can I help?”

“Sure? What about what’s going on at your work?”

“I’ll have that finished up tonight. I have a meeting with Mr. Toma at six. Tell me more about the show. Is it big?”

“Actually, it’s the biggest in the state, probably on the east coast. Hundreds of cars will be on display. There’s categories for each decade.”

“That sounds fun. Do people get dressed up, you know to match their decade?”

“Some do. I haven’t.”

“Oh, you should! That Buick is so you. You could wear jeans and a black t shirt. You must have a leather jacket and some boots.”

“I do,” he smiled. She really seemed to be getting into it.

“Slick back your hair and stick a cigarette behind your ear! You’d look perfect.”

“If I dress up, you’d have to.”

“Of course. This is going to be fun.”

Dean smiled and took a sip of his ice tea. “You think the Buick is me?”

“Definitely. It had some rough parts but it’s been completely restored. Now it big and powerful and beautiful.”

He leaned in. “You think I’m beautiful?” He grinned at her blush.

She slapped at his hand. “You know what I mean.”

“I do, and thank you.”

“If I were a car what would I be?”

“Huh. That’s a good question.” He pulled out his phone and paged through some pictures. He found what he was looking for and smiled. “This is you.” He turned the phone toward Cassie and she gasped.

“Oh, that’s beautiful.”

“It’s a ’56 Ford Thunderbird. It’s not as big as my Buick but it’s powerful. It also has a real surprise to it.” He switched pictures and showed her. “You can take the hard top off and make it a convertible.”

“Wow. That’s amazing.” She looked at him and smiled. “So that’s me?”

“I would say so. Small but powerful with a few surprises.”

Cassie reached for his hand. “What a wonderful thing to say.”

Cassie locked her office and walked down the hall to Callen's office. She used her keycard to open it and looked around. She checked his desk and the drawers. There were no personal pictures or belongings. Mark Callen knew that she was on to him and had cleared out.

She took the elevator up to the top floor and knocked on Mr. Toma's door. She hadn't been here since her final interview when he gave her the keys to that ridiculously expensive car.

"Come in."

She extended her hand. "Mr. Toma."

"Dr. Coleman." He pointed to the other man in the room. "You remember Pete Simmons, head of security."

"Yes, hello Pete." She'd gone over the details of her security backup when she first put it in place. Only he and Mr. Toma knew about it.

"Dr. Coleman."

"Okay," said Toma. "Let's get down to it. What have you got for me?"

"First, all the files have been restored. At most we lost maybe a few hours of work from this morning, but that's all."

"That's excellent news. Now tell me how it happened."

"Mark Callen."

"What? He's been with us for years."

"He resented my being given control of the team. He'd been dragging his heels for weeks on his portion of the project. I now understand why." She handed them a file. "He sabotaged the files to delay our project."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. He's been waiting until the project was at a point where he could copy the files with the maximum amount of information. That way he could sell it to a competitor."

“The bastard!” yelled Toma. “Get him in here.”

“He’s gone. He left when I sent the team home. He’s cleared out his office.”

“Do you think he copied the project files?” asked Pete.

“Oh, I know he did. That file proves it.”

“What? Pete, track him down. I want those files back.”

Cassie held up her hand. “That won’t be necessary.”

“Excuse me?”

“When I wrote the modeling software, I embedded a code.”

“A code I don’t know about?” Pete demanded.

Cassie took a deep breath. She didn’t like it when people raised their voices. “I wrote this software when I was doing my graduate work. There was a fellow student who was competing for the same grant. I knew he was trying to steal my work but I couldn’t prove it. I embedded a code in the software. Copying the files is possible, using them is not.”

“Explain,” said Toma.

“You can copy the files but if you do it without the codes I embedded, whatever computer you try to upload it to will become a useless brick. While the transfer is happening it also wipes out the media used to make the transfer.”

“What if he did it wirelessly?”

“Whatever cloud account he parked the files would be corrupted the minute he tries to transfer it to a secondary location.”

“We should still go after him,” said Pete.

“If you do that, you’ll never know what competitor put him up to it.” Cassie was not surprised at Toma’s smile.

“I still don’t like the idea that you have code in the system we can’t control,” said Pete.

Cassie should have been nervous around Pete Simmons. He was a large, bald man. He was ex-military and had a very commanding presence. She remembered what Dean had said. Cassie Coleman was small, but she came with a few surprises. “My software protected every byte of data of a project Toma Pharmaceuticals has been working on for three years. Losing the data could have cost Toma millions.”

“I want it on every project,” said Toma.

When she interviewed with Toma he’d seemed like a good guy. He had a reputation for being a sharp business man. He’d hired the best people in their fields and taken the company to a twenty billion-dollar, worldwide powerhouse. “Mr. Toma, I developed my modeling software long before I came to Toma. The work produced through the software is work product and company property. The software is not. If you’ll check my contract, you’ll see that any tools I brought with me when I came on board remain mine.” Cassie sat back against her chair. She wondered if they could see she was hold her hands in her lap so they wouldn’t notice them shaking. Toma did something she didn’t expect. He started chuckling.

“You are a constant surprise, Dr. Coleman. Will you consider selling the software to me?”

She looked back and forth between the two men and something came over her. Her hands stopped shaking. She knew what to do. “No. I won’t sell it. I will consider licensing it to you.”

“I’d want exclusive use of it for the length of the contract.”

“I would agree that you would have corporate rights. I would be able to use it for my own work.”

Toma nodded. “Let’s talk dollars.”

Cassie stood. “Let’s not right now. I don’t want to go back and forth with negotiations. You come up with a number and call me. Keep in mind that you hired me

because I'm a superior researcher. I know how much the company is worth and how many patents you're protecting."

Toma stood and extended his hand. "I knew I hired you for a reason."

"Now if you'll excuse me, I'll be taking an early weekend."

"One more question," said Toma. "What happened to the student you thought was trying to steal from you?"

"He had to drop out of the program."

Cassie closed the door behind her and waited until she got in the elevator before she collapsed against the wall. "What the hell just happened?"

Dean put the coffee on and waited for Cassie. She hadn't been to his house yet. It was easier to spend evenings at her home since he lived further outside town. He'd bought the two acres so he'd have the space for his cars. The first thing he did when he moved in was build a four-car garage almost as big as his house. He'd worked for decades to afford a place like this. His home was comfortable but his garage was his dream. He had room for his Buick, his truck and his Challenger Hellcat. He reserved the fourth space for new projects. He heard the car in the driveway and went out to meet her.

"Good morning," he said as he gave her a quick kiss.

"Good morning." Cassie smiled and looked around. "It's beautiful here." She spotted the garage on the side of the property. "Oh my. That's quite the set up."

"I like to have a safe space for my cars and big enough to work on any new projects."

"Sweet," she nodded. "I can't wait to see it."

"The coffee's ready. I was just about to make an omelet. Care to join me?"

"Sounds great."

Dean set plates on the kitchen island as Cassie poured the coffee. He smiled at how comfortable she seemed into his home. She caught him staring.

"What?"

"This." He gave her a quick kiss. "I'm glad you're here."

"So am I. It's a really comfortable place."

"Is that code for old?"

"No, it's you. Classic and unpretentious."

"Old," he smiled as he placed the omelet on her plate.

“Will you stop? I know I look like I’m a little kid but I’m only ten years younger than you.”

He leaned over and gave her another kiss. “You’re no kid. You’re a beautiful woman.” He loved her blush.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“How did you make out at work? Did you solve your problem?”

“It didn’t take too long. I had an interesting meeting with my boss, Mr. Toma and the head of security.”

“Can you tell me about it?”

“Some of it. When I was doing my graduate work, I wrote a special software program that prevented other people from copying my work.”

“Let me guess, that’s what solved the problem today.”

“Yes,” she smiled. “Mr. Toma wanted to buy it. I told him no.”

“Really?”

“I don’t know what possessed me. I’d normally be really nervous but something said I shouldn’t sell. I told him I’d license it to the company.”

“That way you maintain control over your product. Did he make you an offer?”

“I told him I know how much the company is worth and how many patents he’d be protecting. I said come up with a number and call me. Then I left. I can’t believe I did that.” She picked up her empty plate and took it to the dishwasher.

“What can’t you believe? It sounds like you did everything right. You kept control of the meeting.”

“That’s what I can’t believe. The security chief was there. He’s very intimidating, big and all sorts of gruff. Mr. Toma is my boss and the head of a Fortune 500 company. Normally, I’d be a quivering mess in that situation.” She looked at him and smiled. “I think it has something to do with you.”

“Me?”

“Ever since I’ve met you, I feel...different.”

Dean slipped arms around her waist. “How so?”

“I’ve never felt so comfortable in my own skin. When I’m with you, I feel like I’m enough, like there’s nothing wrong with me.”

“There isn’t,” he said as he pulled her close. “Not a damn thing.”

“I think you bring out the best in me.”

Dean didn’t know what to say, so he kissed her. Cassie wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him tight against her. He rubbed his hands up her body, enjoying her curves. He pulled back before he couldn’t stop himself. “There is something I needed to ask you?”

“Now?”

“It’s better now than later. I told you the show is two days.”

“Yes,” she smiled. She knew what he was going to say and she was going to make him spill it out.

“It’s a three-hour drive.”

“Yes, it is.”

“Is it okay that I booked only one room?”

Cassie pulled him into a kiss. When she pulled back, she smiled.

“I’m guessing that means yes.”

“It does. I have some luggage in my car. I thought it made more sense to start from here in the morning rather than driving back into town to pick me up. Is that okay?”

Dean gave her a deep kiss.

Cassie giggled. “I’m guessing that means yes.”

Dean keyed in the code to his garage and unlocked the front door. He was pleased at Cassie's gasp as she walked inside.

"Oh my. This is as spotless as my labs." She walked around, looking at all the tools hanging in their assigned spaces.

"Thanks. I like things in order. It makes it easier to work."

"I like all my equipment in the right places too."

Dean smiled as he resisted the temptation to say what he was thinking. "Let me show you what we'll be doing. Some people use electric tools to polish but I believe in elbow grease." He pulled some fresh cloths out of a drawer and grabbed some chrome polish. "I'll be polishing the body, but this is for the chrome. The judges really pay attention to the details. You can start on this side." He bent down next to her and opened the polish. He put a small amount of polish on one cloth and set it in her hand. "Let me show you." He covered her hand with his and put it up against the hub cap. He moved her hand over a small part of the chrome and applied the polish. He looked in her eyes and smiled. He'd never thought polishing his car could be a sensual experience. "Put it on like this," he said quietly. He reached for the other cloth and showed her how to polish it to a high gloss. "Now you try." Cassie copied his movements and polished another section.

"How's that?"

He smiled and kissed the tip of her nose. "Perfect."

Dean realized they'd be working for five hours without a break. He took a look at the chrome Cassie had worked on.

"What do you think?"

"I couldn't have done better myself. There isn't a bit of leftover polish showing anywhere."

"Thank you," she smiled. "I like to be thorough."

He pulled her closed and gave her a quick kiss. "Betty looks great."

“Betty?”

“That’s what I call her. Thought it fit her. It’s a good 50’s name.”

“I like it.”

“How about we get something to eat?”

Cassie glanced at her watch. “It’s past three. Wow. The time flies when you’re having fun.”

“Only you would think hands covered in chrome paste was fun.” Dean put his arm around her as they walked into the house. “I’d feel better if you’d park your car in the open bay. The garage is alarmed.” Cassie grabbed her keys he followed her back out. She pulled her car into the empty bay. She opened the trunk and pulled out a small suitcase. He loved how shy she looked when she saw his smile. He took the suitcase from her hands and gave her a kiss. “There is no rush for anything, sweetheart. I’m glad you trust me enough to take this step but I don’t want you to feel any pressure.”

“I imagine you think I’m being ridiculous.”

“Not at all. I think this isn’t the normal situation for either of us.”

Cassie looked surprised. “Are you nervous too?”

Dean set her case down and put his arms around her waist. “Of course I am. You’re not like any other woman. I’m nothing like you and I’m worried I’ll mess this up.”

She held tight and rested her head on his chest. “I’m worried I’ll mess up too.”

“How about this? How about we go have something to eat and relax.

They sat at the kitchen table finishing their hamburgers and Fritos when Cassie's phone rang. "I'm sorry I have to take this. It's my boss." She clicked on the call. "Hello, Mr. Toma."

"Dr. Coleman, I've just had an interesting call from Richard Banfield at Stoker Pharmaceuticals accusing me of industrial espionage. He accused me of setting him up."

"What?" Cassie couldn't believe it when she heard Toma chuckle.

"Yeah. Apparently Banfield met Callen off site and used his own laptop to upload the file."

"Uh oh."

"Yup. It's now a very expensive brick, just like you said. Fortunately for him, he wasn't linked into Stoker's mainframe at the time. That tells me who was paying Callen. I had HR send Callen a registered letter telling him he's terminated for cause."

"Wow."

"Definitely. Dr. Coleman you were right. If we'd lost the files to Stoker it would have cost us years of work and millions of dollars. Your software will prevent this kind of industrial espionage. I'm prepared to make you an offer for a ten year lease, to include you training IT and security on how it works."

Cassie looked at Dean. She wondered if he could see her hand was shaking. "I'm listening."

"Ten million."

She covered her mouth to prevent Toma from hearing her gasp. She took a deep breath and smiled. "I accept, tentatively. We can meet on Monday to hammer out any details."

"I'm in the office now if you..."

"No sir, this can wait until Monday. I have very important plans this weekend."

"Very well. Nine a.m., my office?"

“I’ll see you then.” She disconnected the call and set down the phone. She reached for her ice tea but her hand was shaking. Dean grabbed it and put it in her hand.

“Sweetheart, what is it? You look like you’re going to faint.”

“I very well might. That was my boss. He made me an offer for my software, a ten year lease.”

“I thought that’s what you wanted.”

“It is. I just never expected...”

“What?”

“He offered me ten million dollars.”

“Holy shit!”

“My thoughts exactly.”

“And you’re making him wait until Monday?”

“If I talk to him now, I may miss something in the contract. I’m too nervous. I need to be calm.”

“So, you told him you had very important plans? Will he buy that?”

Cassie put her hand to his cheek. “I do have very important plans.”

Dean served Cassie an ice tea in the den. He had a big screen TV and collection of DVDs, not as big as Cassie's collection, but pretty big. "Can I get you anything else?"

"No, I'm good. Why don't you sit down here?" He sat down next to her on the couch. "Good, now tell me what's wrong."

"What?" He put his arm around her shoulder. "Nothing's wrong."

"Bull. I've gotten to know you well enough to know your bothered by something. You were fine in the garage and now...is it Toma's offer?"

"I'm happy you're being recognized for your work."

"I'm sure you are but you're still bothered by it. Is it the money?"

"I'm never going to get anything past the smartest girl in the class, am I?"

"Not a chance. Now, please, tell me."

"It just that the money reminds me how different we are. We live in very different worlds." Cassie looked so sad, he regretted it the second he said it.

"Are you...do you want me to go?"

"No, sweetheart. I love being with you. I guess that much money freaks me out."

"You don't think it freaks me out too? I never dreamed I'd make as much money as I do. I love the work. Frankly, I love that companies are willing to pay for what I can do. I have no idea what I'll do with all that money, but I'm sure as hell not going to turn it down. I may be a shy, nervous wreck, but I'm not stupid."

He chuckled and pulled her close. "Of course, you're not."

"Are you going to let money get in the way of what I think could be a very good thing?"

Dean brushed his hand across her cheek, looking into her deep brown eyes. Cassie and Dean didn't make sense in any way. But he knew he was in too deep already. There had never been anyone who'd meant as much to him as Cassie, and there never

would be. He leaned in and gave her a kiss. "I can't promise that I'm never going to feel awkward about our differences."

"I feel awkward too."

"You do? About what?"

"About being around your friends, car people. I really don't know anything about cars. That's the reason I came to you in the first place. I'm afraid I'll embarrass you with your friends."

Dean smiled and pulled her close. "You won't embarrass me. I'll be very proud to be with you."

"You say that now..."

He stopped her with another kiss. "Cassie, we're going to have a lot of things to figure out but I think we're worth the effort." He was rewarded with a broad smile.

"So do I."

Cassie curled up against Dean as they watched classic car shows instead of their usual action movies. It had been her choice, wanting to get in a little research before tomorrow. Dean answered her questions while she admired the beautiful cars. She looked up at his beautiful eyes and he gave her a lopsided smile. She knew her moment was now or she might lose her nerve. The episode ended and Dean reached for the remote.

"One more?" he asked.

Cassie smiled and pulled the remote from his hand. "Not right now." She rubbed her hand and pulled him into a deep kiss. She felt, more than heard, his growl. She fell back on the couch, bringing him with her. His hands travelled down her body, caressing her curves. When they finally came up for air, he started nipping at her neck while his hand slid under her t-shirt. She moaned as his hand traveled up and ran his finger under the edge of her bra.

"Dean," she whispered.

“Yes?” He looked at her with a passion she’d never seen in anyone.

“Let’s go upstairs.”

“You read my mind,” he smiled. He took her by the hand and led her upstairs to his bedroom. He’d left her bag next to his bed.

“Give me just a minute.” She grabbed the bag and closed the master bath door behind her. She unzipped the bag and pulled out a deep red satin camisole and short set. She changed quickly for fear she’d lose her nerve. She hadn’t been in a relationship in years and she was afraid of disappointing Dean. He was so powerfully male, she imagined there were any number of women who’d wish they were her at this moment. She looked in the mirror and tried fluffing out her hair. “Here goes,” she said to herself. She took a breath and opened the door. Dean had pulled back the covers on his bed and had removed his boots. He turned and saw her.

“Wow,” he whispered.

Encouraged by his reaction, she walked toward him. She slipped her hands under his t-shirt and pushed it up until he pulled it over his head. “Oh my,” she smiled as she ran her fingertips over his well-defined chest. She ran her hands down to his abs and was rewarded with a gasp. She undid his belt and stood back. She nearly laughed when he couldn’t get out of his jeans fast enough. She sat on the bed and pushed herself back toward the pillows. If Dean had been any other man she would have been terrified by the look on his face. He looked like he wanted to devour her. She reached her arms toward him and he covered her with his body. Heat flared and she was lost in his kiss.

“My God,” he whispered. “You’re so beautiful.” He put his hand to her cheek and for a moment Cassie thought she saw tears in his eyes. He placed kisses on her neck, shoulder and chest. “I wanted you the moment I saw you.”

“I wanted you too.” She ran her hands down his back to his boxers. “I think it’s time you lose these.” His chuckle broke the tension. He kicked off his boxers and then slipped the small strap down off her shoulder.

“This feels nice. Did you get this special for me?”

“I did a little shopping last night.”

“Very effective. I approve.”

“I’m glad.”

Dean started nipping at her skin through the satin. He looked up at her and smiled. “It’s time they go.” He slipped his hands under the camisole and pushed it over her head. He kissed his way down her body, licking and tasting. He pushed her shorts down and threw them next to his boxers. He explored her legs, touching and tasting and driving her mad.

“Dean, please,” she gasped.

“Please what?”

“I need you.”

“Not yet.”

“What? No, now. I need you.”

“Patience,” he chuckled.

“I’ll get you back for this,” she groaned.

“I’m counting on it.” He explored her heat with fingers and lips and tongue until she quaked and screamed for him. He pulled himself to her and kissed her. “Now,” he whispered. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he thrust inside her with one stroke. She held on tight as the passion overwhelmed them both.

Dean listened to Cassie's breathing as she was curled up on his chest. He'd been surprised when she said she wanted to spend the night. She was still nervous and shy about some things but somehow, gratefully, not about him. He wrapped his arm a bit tighter around her shoulder and kissed the top of her head.

"Mmmm," she murmured.

"Didn't mean to wake you. I'm sorry."

Cassie looked up at him and smiled. "I'm not." She gave him a kiss that quickly heated. She nipped at his neck and shoulder. She raised herself over him and traced his pecs with her tongue. She started down to his abs.

"What are you doing?" he gasped.

She looked at him with an evil grin he quite liked. "Payback."

He closed his eyes and thought if he died tonight, he'd die happy.

Dean had set the alarm for an early wake up. If they were going to have any breakfast it would have to be now. There would be no food or drink in the car. He finished his shower and pulled his towel around his waist. He tapped Cassie on the foot. "Come on sleepyhead."

She rolled over and smiled. She looked him up and down, licking her lips. "Mmm. Good morning." She got out of bed, still naked, and rubbed her hands on his waist.

He gave her a deep kiss then pulled away. "You're killing me here, woman. You're the one who said you wanted to get dressed up for this thing. If we're going to be on time, we have to leave in one hour, that includes breakfast. She took his hands and ran them down her hips to hold her bare ass.

"Okay, then. I'll get my shower," she said with a fake pout.

"You have an evil streak." She smiled over her shoulder as she walked to the bathroom. "I like it!"

Dean looked in the mirror and pulled down his black t-shirt. He pulled on his black leather jacket and tucked a borrowed cigarette behind his ear. He hoped he didn't look ridiculous. He looked over toward the bathroom as the door opened. He stopped thinking about himself and all he could see was Cassie. She was wearing tight black jeans, a black off the shoulder top and red spike high heels. Topping off the look was a black scarf wrapped around her head and neck. She wore bright red lipstick and cat's eye sunglasses. Cassie turned around, showing off how the tight jeans curved perfectly over her ass. He seemed to have lost the ability to speak.

"What do you think? Dean? Is it okay? I did some research."

He walked toward her and rubbed his hand down her shoulder. "You look perfect."

She grinned. "So do you. Very bad boy."

"Is that a good thing?"

"Very good."

He smiled and gave her a quick kiss on the nose. "Let's get some breakfast."

They checked into their hotel, then drove over to the fairgrounds. Dean checked in at the registration booth and got his assigned spot. He looked back at Cassie and grabbed the form to register for the best dressed competition. He thought he was no prize winner but Cassie looked like a movie star straight out of a film noir. He moved his car to the assigned spot and opened the hood so people could see the engine. The drive hadn't done any damage to all their work from yesterday.

"Let's take a look around."

"Is it okay to leave the car like this?"

"Sure. Come on. I'll introduce you to a few people."

"Okay," she said unconvincingly as she grabbed his hand.

"Don't worry, babe. I'm right here."

They'd walked for a while when they were spotted John Ramos. "Dean?"

"Hey, John."

"Who's this?"

"John, this is my girlfriend, Cassie. Cassie, this is John Ramos. He has a shop in Boyertown. We run into each other at shows."

John looked at him and smiled. He turned to Cassie and extended his hand. "It's very nice to meet you. How did you wind up with this guy?"

"He saved me from an unscrupulous car dealer."

Dean shrugged. "All she needed was a belt but the guy wanted to charge her two grand."

"Damn."

"Did you enter your T-bird?"

"Yeah. Did you bring the Buick?"

"Yeah. Hoping to place this year."

"Would you like to see my car, Cassie?" said John with too broad a grin.

She squeezed Dean's hand tight. "Sure."

Dean leaned toward John. "Get your own girl. This one's mine."

"Lucky bastard." They walked toward a bright red car and Cassie gasped. "Isn't this the '56 Thunderbird?"

"I thought you didn't know anything about cars. That's exactly what it is."

"It's the one Dean said reminded him of me."

"I had no idea you were so romantic," John laughed.

"No, it is. He said it's small but it's powerful and has some surprises. The hard top comes off, right?"

“Right.”

Cassie walked around the car and Dean knew the look. She'd been bitten by the car bug. Unfortunately, John had seen it too.

“I'm looking to sell it.”

“For heaven's sake, why? She's beautiful.”

“It's a little small for me. I had fun restoring it but I need room for my next project.” John stood closer. “Would you like to go for a ride?”

“Can we, Dean?”

Dean moved next to Cassie. “Maybe after today's judging.” He pulled John aside while Cassie continued to examine the car. “Dude, you need to dial it down. Cassie doesn't like men hovering, and neither do I.” He was surprised at John's smile.

“Well I'll be damned. It finally happened.”

“What?”

“You're in love,” he said quietly. “Sure as hell took you long enough to find her.” He glanced back at Cassie. “From the look of her, she was worth waiting for.”

He stared at his friend for a minute, opened mouthed, until he realized John was right. He was in love with her. “Yeah, she was.”

Cassie came over to them with the look of a kid at Christmas. “Dean, it's just as beautiful as you said. Maybe he'd trade for my car.”

“No!” said Dean. “Your car is worth twice the Thunderbird.”

“Really? She's so much prettier.”

“What kind of car do you have?” asked John, smelling the deal of a lifetime.

“A BMW 840i convertible.”

He thought John might hyperventilate. “Deal!”

“No!” Dean repeated.

“Cassie, honey, are you really interested in buying the car?”

“Definitely.”

“Okay, after today’s judging John can take us both for a test drive. Then I’ll be able to tell what it’s worth.”

“Sounds good,” said Cassie.

John got a glint in his eye that said he was about to poke the bear. “Do you always defer to him like that?”

Dean was about to deck him when she smiled. “About cars? Of course. That is his area of expertise. If there was a medical question, he’d defer to me, wouldn’t you?”

“Of course, babe.” He looked at John and grinned. “She’s a doctor.”

“No shit?”

“No shit,” she replied. “By the way. You smoke way too much and go have your knee looked at. It’s probably osteoarthritis. It might be time for a replacement. The rehab’s a bitch but it’s worth it in the long run.”

“How...?”

“You don’t smell like smoke but your skin between the first and second fingers are badly stained. I could tell about your knee by the way you walk.”

“Damn,” said John.

“We’ll see you after the judging,” said Dean as he took Cassie’s hand. She waited until they were far enough away from the still frozen John before she started laughing.

“I hope you don’t mind me having some fun at your friend’s expense.”

“No, he had it coming. Could you really tell all those things about him?”

“Yeah. He’s a pretty easy read.”

“What about me? Am I an easy read?”

She turned to him and smiled. "Well, I have done a much more thorough examination of you. My scientific method calls for it."

He put his arms around her waist. "I am a fan of your scientific method. A really big fan. So, what did you discover?"

"Okay, you are physically fit. Really fit," she grinned. "Well above average for a man in your age group."

"Is that right?" he smiled.

"Absolutely. You eat right, you don't appear to drink, at least not to excess, and you don't smoke, despite the well place prop behind your ear."

"How do you know all that?"

"Your fridge is full of healthy food. There is also a lack of any beer or hard liquor in your house. There are no ashtrays in your house and no stains on your fingers."

"Wow, you're good. I try to take care of myself. I don't drink anymore. I did enough of that when I was young and it got me into a lot of trouble. I've never smoked."

She gave him a quick kiss. "Of course, I'm not done with my research."

Dean and Cassie stood by his car as the judges did their inspection. He knew he'd done his best with his car. It was just a matter of what competition he was a up against. He recognized some of the judges from past shows. He was ready to have a word with the one judge who seemed to be looking Cassie up and down. Then he realized the judge was looking at him too. He must be the judge for the costumes. He saw Cassie smiling at the judge and realized she was posing and the judge was eating it up. They made their notes and moved on to the next car.

"That was fun. When will the announce the winners?"

"They'll do best in category today. They'll do best dressed too. I entered us."

"You did? That's great." She gave him a big hug. "I was wondering why that guy was looking at us like that."

"Are you having a good time?" he asked.

"I really am. I can see why you love it. These cars are all so beautiful. They should be preserved."

"I'm glad you're enjoying yourself." They heard a noise and saw a crowd gathering up the row. Dean saw John running toward them. "What's going on?"

John looked at Cassie. "Are you really a doctor?"

"Yes."

"Then come on. A little girl is in trouble."

They ran after John as he made his way through the crowd. "I've got a doctor." The crowd parted and they saw a little girl laying on the ground. She was unconscious and her lips were blue. Kneeling next to her was weeping woman who was presumably her mother.

"Let me through," shouted Cassie.

"That little girl is no doctor," said someone in the crowd.

Cassie looked at the crying woman. "I am a doctor. Does your daughter have allergies?"

"No."

She did a quick exam and opened the girl's mouth. She took a whiff of the girl's breath. "Was she eating?"

"Yes, she had ice cream on a stick."

Cassie started breathing for the girl. A first aid team broke through the crowd. "Do you have an EpiPen?"

"Yes."

"Give it to me."

"Who are you?" asked the medic.

Cassie pushed him out of the way and rummaged through the kit. She pulled out the EpiPen, turned and jammed it into the girl's thigh. A few moments later the girl started breathing and her eyes fluttered open.

"Mom?"

The crowd broke into a cheer and applause. Cassie looked at the mother. "Did the ice cream have nuts on it?"

"Yes, but she doesn't have an allergy to nuts."

"She does now. It can come on suddenly." Cassie took the girl's pulse. "Can you tell me your name, sweetie?"

"Emily."

"How are you feeling?"

"Scared."

“You’ll be okay now.” She turned to the EMT’s “Get the ambulance over here and transport her.” Cassie stood and brushed off her jeans. The mother pulled her into a tight hug.

“Thank you, Thank you. I don’t know what I would have done.”

“You’re welcome.”

“I don’t even know your name.”

“It’s Cassie.”

Dean walked Cassie back to his car after the police took her information. He gathered her in his arms and gave her a kiss. “You’re amazing.”

Dean opened the door to their hotel room and tossed down their things. He smiled as Cassie carried in their awards.

“This is so exciting!” she smiled.

“I can’t believe you saved a little girl and you’re excited about a couple trophies.”

Cassie slipped her arms around his waist. “Of course, I’m happy about the little girl.”

“I was amazed at how you handled that. I saw a different side of you.”

“It’s the training. Even though I don’t treat patients now, I did my rotations including emergency. You train to act. You don’t have time to think about your nerves.”

He gave her a quick kiss. “You were brilliant.”

“Thank you. Now, do I get to be excited about your awards?”

Dean picked up the small cup and handed it to her. “This one is yours. They certainly didn’t give best costume to me.”

“You want me to keep it?” she smiled. “I’ve never won a trophy before.” She set it on the dresser. “I’m so happy for you winning your category.”

He couldn’t hide his grin. “I’ve placed before with other cars but I’ve never won. I thought Betty might be the one.”

“She certainly is. The hard work that went in to the restoration must have been enormous. I’m really proud of you.”

“Thank you, sweetheart.” He gave her a quick kiss. “How about we order room service instead of going out?”

“I think that’s a wonderful idea. I want to get out of these heels.” She kicked them off and dropped four inches in height. Dean smiled and picked up one of the shoes.

“They do look really good.”

“Maybe later I’ll put them back on,” she smiled. “If you’re a good boy.”

“What if I’m bad?” he grinned.

“Then I’ll definitely put them back on.”

He pulled her close and rubbed his hands down her back, cupping her ass. “I really like this side of you.”

She giggled and grabbed his ass. “I like this side of you too.”

He gave her a playful slap and grabbed the menu off the dresser. “What are in the mood for?”

She sat down on the bed and pushed herself against the pillows. “Other than you? How about a big mushroom cheeseburger and a plate of fries?”

“Mmm. Sounds good.” Dean placed the order as Cassie switched on the TV.

“Hey, look. The car show is on the news.” She turned up the sound. “Oh.”

“What?” He looked at the screen and saw a phone video of Cassie leaning over the little girl.

“A remarkable video today from the Hermitage Classic Car Show. Eight-year-old Emily Harkness went into anaphylactic shock from a peanut allergy. Fortunately for the little girl, Dr. Cassandra Coleman was nearby.” The announcer paused as the video showed Cassie grabbing the EpiPen and reviving the girl. *“The girl was transported to Memorial Hospital where she was treated and released. Dr. Coleman’s car later went on to win the Classic 50’s category.”*

“Oh no.” Cassie looked stricken. “Dean, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to steal your thunder.”

He sat down next to her on the bed. “It’s okay, sweetheart.”

“No, it’s not. You’re upset. I can tell.”

Dean wasn’t sure he liked being read so easily. “Okay, so it’s a little annoying they got it wrong. But it’s my name on the trophy so it’s okay. Really. I’m sorry we didn’t get a chance to take that ride with John. I’ll text him. We can do it after the finals.”

“Thank you,” she said quietly.

Now he felt like crap. She saved a girl’s life and she was embarrassed that she was getting more attention than he was. “Come here.” He put his arms around her and gave her a kiss. “You are an amazing woman. You have every right to be proud of what you did today. Saving a little girl’s life is a very big deal. I hope I’m a big enough man to see that too.”

Cassie stood at the foot of the stage and held on to Dean's hand. They were about to announce the Best in Show. He pretended he wasn't nervous but she could tell he was. He wanted this and she wanted it for him.

"This year's winner of the Hermitage Classic...the 1956 Buick Century, owner Dean Mitchell."

Dean seemed frozen. She pulled on his hand. "Dean, you won!" He finally smiled and walked up to the stage. He accepted his award and smiled at the crowd. Then he looked at her and winked. It was a simple thing but she knew then and there her heart was lost to Dean Mitchell. And she couldn't be happier.

They walked through the crowd and Dean accepted congratulations from other competitors. A few people asked for his card and talked to him about restoration projects. John made his way through the crowd toward them. "Congratulations, buddy."

"Thanks."

"Are you ready to take a drive in the T-Bird?"

"Sure. Meet us at my car." John took off and Dean looked at her. "The T-Bird is probably worth fifty thousand. Do you really want me to make an offer?"

"Yes, I can manage that."

"Okay then, let's go look at a car."

Cassie looked into the car and smiled. "I saw it was automatic. I can't wait to drive it." John handed her the keys and moved toward the passenger side. Dean put his hand on his shoulder.

"Back seat."

"You'd have been disappointed in me if I hadn't tried," John smiled.

Cassie turned the motor over and smiled. "Oh, she sounds good." She smiled as she drove the car out of the show and down the road. This car felt much more like her

than her fancy Beemer. She glanced over at Dean who was smiling. John tried to run down a list of the car's features but she stopped him.

"John, that's lost on me. Dean will tell me if the car is right for me."

"You would trust his opinion on an investment like this?"

She glanced over her shoulder and smiled. "Well, he did just win Best in Show." She pulled into a lot and parked. "Okay, babe. Your turn." She got out of the car and she switched seats with Dean. He pulled out a little faster than she did and merged into traffic. He drove down the road until they pulled back into the fairground. He got out of the car and popped the hood. Dean and John pointed and talked about various car parts. They might have well been speaking Greek. Actually, she'd have better understood Greek.

"Okay, what are you asking?" asked Dean.

"Fifty-six five."

"Come on, John, It's me, not some newbie."

"It only has forty thousand miles on an original engine."

"Forty-six thousand and you trailer it."

John sighed. "Fine. Do you want it at your shop?"

Cassie finally joined in. "Could I store it at your place until I get rid of the Beemer. I don't want to park it on the street."

"Sure thing, sweetheart."

"So, do we have a deal?" asked John.

She extended her hand. "We have a deal." She tried to maintain a calm manner, but failed. She squealed and ran her hands over the hood. "John, you take good care of my new baby."

"Sure thing."

"We'll call you to set up the delivery," said Dean. "Are you ready to go, babe?"

“Take my picture with her first?”

“Sure thing.” Dean pulled out his phone as she posed against her new car.

Dean pulled into his spot at the shop and tried to wipe the smile off his face. He knew he was going to get some serious busting from the guys but he didn't need to give them extra ammunition by grinning like a kid. It had been the best weekend he could remember. He'd been entering shows for years but this had been his first Best in Show. As much as he wanted the win, it couldn't compare to spending time with Cassie. She was an amazing woman and he knew he was in love with her. He thought she might feel the same way too, but there was no hurry. They had time to figure things out.

He opened his shop and started the coffee. He'd need some extra fuel to get started. Cassie had left for work very early. She had to get ready for her meeting with her boss. She barely spoke about the possibility of being a multi-millionaire by the end of the day. It seemed all she wanted to talk about was her new Thunderbird and when they could arrange to bring the car to his house. His garage had the proper security. He'd recommended Cassie contact his security guy to wire her house and garage. She'd asked him to contact her for her. As comfortable as she was with him, she still was nervous around strangers.

He took a sip of the coffee and added a bit of sugar. He sat down at his desk and reviewed the weekend's work. As much as he gave Ron and Frank a hard time, they were good men who did good work. He forced himself to concentrate on the full schedule of work for the next few days and wondered when he could get away to see Cassie again. He was still grinning like a kid again when Frank walked in looking for a coffee.

"How was your weekend?" he grinned.

"It was fine. How were things here?"

"Oh, shut up. How's the doctor?"

"She's just fine," he smiled. "Why don't you get started on the Ford's brakes?" Dean stood and followed Frank into the shop.

"So, how was the show?"

Dean stopped and smiled. "I won."

Cassie pulled into the Toma parking lot to her assigned spot. She never had a problem finding a spot, because she was always early. She'd left Dean's early this morning. She hated leaving his arms but today she needed to get her attention back on work. Her meeting with Toma was in two hours and she wanted to go over some details so she'd be ready. She turned off her car and smiled. It had been the best weekend she'd ever had. Nothing felt better than being with Dean. She grabbed her briefcase and stepped out of her car. Suddenly pain exploded as her head slammed against the car. As she slid to the ground, all she saw before she passed out was a pair of black sneakers.

She woke up to a crashing pain in her head. Her eyes fluttered opened and she realized she was in the passenger side of her car. "What?" she whispered. The door opened and she fell on to the ground. A hand pulled her hair and dragged her away from the car. She clawed at the hands and a foot kicked her in the head. She looked up and saw through the fog. Callen.

"No," she gasped.

"Shut up, bitch! You did this to yourself. You've ruined me!" He dragged her through a short patch of grass into the woods.

"You won't get away with this. They'll find me."

"I'll make sure they never do." He let her go near a tall tree and she scrambled to her feet. "You set me up. Banfield thinks I purposely sabotaged them. I'll never be able to get another job and it's all your fault."

"You did this to yourself, Mark." Callen face turned red then he punched her in the face. Cassie fell to the ground and he set on her, kicking and punching her. "Please, no more," she gasped and she tried to curl up and protect herself. She glanced up and Callen stared at her with pure hatred. "That's all I wanted. I wanted to hear you beg. Are you begging Cassie?"

"Yes, please Mark. Don't hurt me anymore." She saw a strange smile cross his lips.

"I'll stop," he said as he pulled a gun from his jacket.

“Oh God, Mark, please no!” she cried. He kept smiling as he pulled the trigger.

Dean was working on a particularly annoying Volvo. It kept registering a check engine light but he couldn't figure out the problem. He was half under the hood when Frank hit him on the back. He smacked his head on the top of hood and came out swearing.

"Damn it, Frank. What the hell?!"

He grabbed his arm and pulled him toward the waiting room. "You need to see this." Frank dragged him into the waiting room where they had a small TV for customers. On the screen was an anchor talking over a picture of Cassie.

"Dr. Cassandra Coleman, the hero doctor, who saved the life of a little girl this weekend at the Hermitage Classic Car Show, has been reported missing by her employer, Toma Pharmaceuticals. Her car was found burning on River road, off Highway 611. We will continue with updates as they happen."

"Cassie!" he screamed. Dean ran to his truck and peeled out of the lot. He barreled down the highway until he found the River Road off ramp. He stopped at a police barricade. In the distance he could see Cassie's burned out car. He jumped out of his truck and tried to push forward. A firm hand pushed on his chest.

"Hold on, buddy."

"That's my girlfriend's car."

The cop looked him up and down. "Yeah, right. Back up behind the line."

He knew arguing with the cop was useless. He looked beyond the cop and saw a cluster of unmarked cars. Standing by one of them was a girl in a lab coat. "Kim! Kim! It's Dean! Kim!" Kim turned around and ran toward him.

"Oh, Dean," she cried as she threw her arms around him. She looked at the cop. "Let him through. He's Cassie's boyfriend."

He ignored the cop's stunned face as he ran toward the burned-out hulk. Another cop grabbed him by the arm.

"Hold it right there."

“Please tell me she’s not in there! Cassie!” he screamed.

A woman with short black hair and black glasses took his arm. “We did not find evidence of a body.” He felt his knees nearly buckle. “I’m Detective Sue Perkins. We need to talk.” He looked at the woman as she showed him her badge. “Please come with me.” He followed her to a car where another detective was standing. “Please, have a seat.”

“No,” he said. “What are you doing to find her?”

“Everything we can.” She pointed to the man who was staring at him. “This is my partner, Detective Tim Travis. Your name?”

“Dean Mitchell.”

“You’re in a relationship with Dr. Coleman?” asked Travis.

“Yes.”

“Really?” he said with too much doubt.

“Yes, really!” Dean said a little too forcefully.

Perkins grabbed her partner’s arm and set him back. “How did you meet Dr. Coleman?”

“What has that to do with anything? We need to find her!”

“Please, Mr. Mitchell. We need to ask these questions.”

Dean rubbed his hand over his face and tried to calm down. “Yeah, yeah, okay. Cassie came in to my shop to get her car fixed. We started see each other after that.”

“A doctor and a garage mechanic?” Travis smirked.

“Yeah.” It took everything he had not to deck the guy. “We went to the Hermitage Car Show this weekend. I restore cars. That’s when she helped the little girl. She left my place early this morning, about six a.m. She had a meeting with her boss at nine and she wanted to prepare for it.”

“Do you know if she had any problems at work?”

“There was something going on but she couldn’t tell me about it. You should talk to Kim. She might know.”

“We’re going to need to verify your whereabouts.”

“My employees are at my shop. I was there when they got in at seven.”

Travis walked closer. “Did you two have an argument?”

“No! What is wrong with you?” Dean lost his temper and pushed the guy against the car.

“Stop it!” Kim shouted as she ran toward them. “Leave him alone. He couldn’t have anything to do with it. I’ve never seen Cassie happier since she met Dean.” She pushed against Travis. “You need to be looking for Mark Callen. He tried to steal our project and he got fired for it. Cassie was the one who proved he was the one who did it.”

Perkins looked at Travis. “Go back to their office and get information on Callen.” Travis looked at Dean. “Go now,” said Perkins. Travis got in the car and took off. “My partner can be a…”

“A dick?”

“Yeah, pretty much. Now, Mr. Mitchell, did Cassie feel threatened by this employee?”

“She didn’t tell me. I didn’t even know his name until now. She said she had a problem at work that was resolved by a software she’d designed. Toma offered to lease it from her for a lot of money.”

“How much?”

“Ten million.”

Perkins whistled. “That’s a lot of money. It’s also a lot of motive.”

“But it’s not. Only Toma, Cassie and I know about it.” He saw the look on Perkins’s face. “Even if I wanted her money, she doesn’t have it yet. That’s what the meeting was about.”

“Alright, Mr. Mitchell, you’ll need to come with me while I verify your story.”

“Hell no.”

“Excuse me?”

“Check everything you want, my cars, my house, my shop, but you’ll be wasting your time. We need to look for Cassie.”

“We are investigating. We’ll track down Callen...”

“No. Look around you.” He pointed to the trees. “Do you know where you are?”

“River road.”

“It’s an access road used by hunters and fishermen. Beyond the trees is the river. He may have dumped her back there.”

“We have no evidence of that. This is a likely a car dump after the kidnaping.”

“That means there had to be another car waiting.”

“There was,” said Perkins. “We found the tire tracks. Our CSU is trying to identify them.”

“Show me,” said Dean.

“What?”

“It’s my business. I can tell you what tires they are.”

Perkins nodded and led him beyond Cassie’s burned out car. He couldn’t stop himself from looking inside. “She’s not in there.”

Dean nodded and looked at the tire tracks just beyond her car. “These are Nokian 235/55/17’s. They’re for a larger sedan. It’s not a car you’d bring here if you were hunting or fishing. He planned this.” He started to move toward the tree line when Perkins grabbed his arm.

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to look for her. Either arrest me or shoot me. It’s the only way you’ll stop me.” She let him go and he ran toward the woods.

Cold and pain. It was everything. It was the only thing. Water rushed over her body. Cassie was pushed up against a fallen tree. She tried to keep her head above the rushing water. Pain was searing through her body. Her strength was failing. Her right side was immobile. She had to get out of the water. She clawed at the mud, trying to pull herself to shore. Her brain was starting to shut down. She needed to focus. Not the pain. Focus. Dean. Dean would be looking for her. She pulled at the mud, inching her way. Dean. His smile. His eyes. She pulled herself further up the bank. Dean, he would find her. She used everything she had left to pull herself out of the water and on to the bank. She looked up at the sky through swollen eyes. Dean would save her. She listened to the rushing water as she closed her eyes.

Dean's heart was pounding as he ran toward the woods. He was vaguely aware of the sound of the police running behind him. He had to think like Callen. It had been so early in the morning he wouldn't have worried about being spotted. He would have taken her straight back into the woods. He looked for a path, broken branches, anything. He spotted a shoe. It was Cassie's. He was right. She was here, somewhere. "Cassie! Cassie can you hear me?" He ran through the woods looking side to side as he moved. "Cassie!" He broke through the tree line and looked up and down the bank. He thought he saw something down the bank. He started running. "Cassie!" He fell to his knees. If he didn't know what she'd been wearing that morning, he wouldn't have recognized her. The bastard had beaten her before he dumped her in the river. "Cassie, baby, talk to me." She turned her head and he thought he saw a smile.

"I knew you'd come," she whispered.

He turned toward Perkins and the officers running up behind her. "She's alive! Get help!" He covered her as best he could. "Help's coming, Cassie. Hang on, baby. I'm here. I'm here. Please don't leave me." He saw there was more blood than should be from a beating. He pulled aside her coat and looked up at Perkins standing over them. "She's been shot."

Dean was furious they wouldn't let him ride with Cassie in the ambulance but he followed as fast as he could in his truck. He pulled into a spot at the ER and ran into the waiting room. He looked for Detective Perkins and saw her talking to the doctors. "Where is she?"

"She's being examined. Do you know her family? They need to be contacted."

"No, I don't. Kim might know. I want to see Cassie."

She put her hand on his arm. "I know you do, but the doctor's need to do their job." Her partner, Travis, joined them and looked at Dean. "We need to talk." Perkins found a conference room and they all took a seat. Travis looked at him. "Toma's not talking."

"What?"

"He won't give out any information. Says it proprietary." He looked at Dean. "Let's talk about this morning. When did Cassie leave your place?"

Dean pounded his fist on the table. "Damn it! We've been through this. I've had nothing to do with what happened to Cassie!"

"Mr. Mitchell, please, calm down. We have to ask these questions."

He leaned back against his chair and tried to calm himself. "Okay, look, I get it. I don't look like someone who has any business with someone like Cassie. I've seen all the crime shows. I'm your first person of interest." He reached into his pocket and pulled out his ring of keys. "Here are the keys to my truck and my cars. My shop and my house are there too. You don't need a warrant. Look where ever you want. This is a hospital. I'm sure you can get a DNA swab here. I'll do what ever you want so you can eliminate me if you tell me one thing."

"What's that?"

"What kind of car does Callen drive. Surely you've gotten that information."

"He drives a two year old Hyundai Azerra," said Travis.

“That’s a large sedan. Those Nokian tires would be a perfect fit.” He slid his keys across the table at Perkins. “Have at it. In the mean time, I’ll be the waiting room.” He got up from the table.

“We’re not done here,” said Travis.

“Yes, we are,” said Perkins. She looked at her partner. “He didn’t have anything to do with this.” She looked back at Dean. “We will still confirm your story. In the meantime, stay put.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Cassie tried to open her eyes. She was cold. So cold. She could feel herself shivering. She heard the noise, machines beeping, people talking about her. “Dean,” she whispered. A woman leaned over her.

“Dr. Coleman? I’m Dr. Wilson. You have severe hypothermia. We’ll treat that as soon as we get you into surgery. There’s a bullet lodged in your chest.”

Cassie heard the monitors beep louder. “Dean,” she whispered. “Please.” She heard someone yell to find whoever Dean was and get him back here. It could have been seconds or minutes later, she couldn’t tell. He was there. “Dean,” she whispered.

“I’m here, baby. I’m here.”

“Dean, so cold.”

“I know baby.” He turned to a nurse. “She needs a blanket.”

“We’re going into surgery.”

“She needs a blanket now.” He waited until the nurse gave him another blanket and he tucked it around her. “Is that better?”

“Better.”

Dean put his hands on her cheeks and gave her a kiss. “They need to take you to surgery now, but I’m not going anywhere. I’ll be the first thing you see when you wake up.” He leaned in and whispered in her ear. She thought she heard, “I love you.”

Pain. In her chest, legs, head. Everywhere. She tried to move but that made it worse and she groaned.

“Cassie, baby, I’m here.”

She tried to open her eyes, but only one seemed to be working. “Dean.”

“You’re going to be fine, baby.”

“Cold, so cold.”

“I’ll get you some more blankets.” He leaned over and kissed her. “I’ll be right back.”

Dean ran down the hall to the nurse's station. "Cassie's awake. She needs pain med and more blankets."

A nurse looked up at him. "I'll be right in."

"Where are the blankets?"

"I'll be right in."

He tried to calm himself. He didn't want to get thrown out. "Ma'am. My girlfriend was shot and thrown in a freezing river, left to die. That she's made it this far is a freaking miracle. Please, let me get her some blankets." She nodded and walked to a cabinet. She pulled out three blankets and set them in his hands.

"These just came up from the laundry. They're still warm."

"Thank you." He went back to Cassie's room and started to cover her with the blankets. "How's that, better?"

"Good," she whispered. She looked over at him through swollen eyes. A tear ran down her cheek. "Stay."

"I'm not going anywhere, baby. I promise."

A couple in their sixties entered the room. The man was well dressed with greying brown hair was holding the arm of a woman Dean who was an older image of Cassie. "Who are you?" demanded the man.

"I'm Dean Mitchell. Cassie's my girlfriend."

"Ridiculous," said the man. "We're her parents we would know if she was seeing someone," He looked Dean up and down. "And it certainly wouldn't be someone like you."

"You're the shrink," he said. "The one who called her pathologically shy."

The woman put her hand on the man's arm. "I'm Diana and this is my husband, Matthew. How is she?"

"She just came out of surgery. I'm trying to keep her warm. She keeps saying she's cold."

“That’s the medication,” said her father.

“That’s the fact that she was thrown into a freezing river after she was beaten and shot.” He should have stopped when he heard her mother gasp but he couldn’t. “She dragged herself out of the river by pulling with her one working arm. Do you have any idea how remarkable your daughter is? She is brave and strong and loving. Just because she doesn’t like to be around a lot of people she doesn’t know doesn’t mean there is a damn thing wrong with her.” Dean felt Cassie reach for his hand. “Cassie, sweetheart?”

She managed a small smile. “I love you too.”

He squeezed her hand. “I love you, Cassie.” He gave her a gentle kiss. “Your parents are here.”

“Mom? Dad?”

“We’re here, Cassie,” said Diana as she kissed her daughter’s forehead.

Dean felt her squeeze his hand tight. “Are you hurting?”

“Hurts,” she whispered.

“I’ll find the nurse,” said Dean.

“Don’t leave me,” she whispered.

He kissed her forehead. “Never. I’m going to find help but I’ll be right back.”

Cassie tried to focus. Her parents were in her room. Dean. Dean was with her. He was looking after her. He would protect her.

“Cassandra, what happened?” asked her father. She couldn’t. Not now. She just wanted to be left alone. Alone with Dean.” More people came into the room. Too many.

“Dean,” she whispered.

“I’m here, baby. The doctor is here.”

“Dr. Coleman, I’m Dr. Thomas.” He looked around the room. “Who’s family?”

“We are her parents,” said her father.

Dean stood. “I’ll be just outside.”

She held tight to his hand. “No, don’t leave me.”

“Okay, then.” The doctor proceeded. “You were very fortunate. The bullet lodged in your chest wall, very near your aorta. The hypothermia you suffered was actually a good thing.”

“How was that a good thing?” asked Diana.

“It slowed the flow of blood and prevented her from bleeding out. That and your daughter’s determination. I understand she dragged herself out of the river. Dr. Coleman, you’re going to have a tough recovery but it looks like you have a lot of support. I’m going to order your pain med.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

The doctor left and a woman with dark hair and glasses knocked on the door. “Dr. Coleman, I’m Detective Perkins. I need to speak with you.”

“She can’t speak with you now,” said her father.

“Dad, please.”

“I need for your daughter to tell me what happened.”

Her father drilled Dean with a look. “Have you checked him out?”

“Oh, do shut up, Matthew!” shouted Diana. “It’s obvious they love each other.”

“In my practice I have seen...”

“Let her talk,” she said.

Perkins stepped closed. “Dr. Coleman, who did this to you?”

Cassie held on tight to Dean’s hand. She had to get through this. “Mark Callen. He came up from behind me in the parking lot. When I woke up, we were at the woods. He dragged me in. He got fired and blamed me. He beat me. I begged him to stop. He said that’s what he wanted. He wanted to hear me beg. That’s when he shot me.” She heard her mother gasp as Dean’s grip on her hand tightened. “I woke up in the river. I was pushed up against a tree. I knew I had to get out of the water before I passed out.” She held up her hand, wrapped in Dean’s. Her knuckles and fingers were torn up. “I pulled myself up the bank.” She looked at Dean and smiled. “He found me. I knew he would.” She closed her eyes.

“Tell me you found Callen,” said Dean.

“Not yet,” said Perkins.

Cassie gasped and pulled his hand close as she started to cry.

“Don’t worry, sweetheart. I’m not going to leave your side. I swear.”

A nurse came in with a syringe. “I have Dr. Coleman’s medication. You’ll all need to leave now.”

“No, not Dean,” said Cassie.

“Okay, sweetie, but as soon as I give you this you’re going to be down for the count.”

Dean leaned close. “Don’t worry, sweetheart. I’m not going anywhere.”

Dean took a quick shower in Cassie's hospital room. He'd had Frank bring him a change of clothes. Ron and Frank were running the shop until Cassie was well enough. He combed back his damp hair and walked back into Cassie's room, only to run into her parents.

"What are you doing here?" said her father.

"Lower your voice. Cassie's resting. I promised her I would stay. I never break a promise."

"We're here now."

"Matthew, please be quiet," said Diana. "How is she doing?"

"They're keeping her pretty sedated to keep her comfortable. Between the surgery and the broken ribs, she's in a lot of pain."

Diana touched her husband's arm. "Why don't you find her doctor. He could give you an update on her condition." He nodded and left the room. She looked at Dean and nodded. "Mr. Mitchell, I want you to understand. My husband may be a pretentious pain in the ass, but he's a good man at heart. He loves his daughter and always wants the best for her."

"And that's not me."

Diana smiled. "I never said he was always right."

Dean relaxed a bit. "Thanks."

"Mom?"

She walked over to Cassie's bed and kissed her forehead. "Hello, sweetheart. How are you feeling?"

"It hurts."

"I know, baby."

"I'll go see if it's time for your medication," said Dean.

“Where’s Dad?”

“He’s looking for your doctor.” Diana sat down next to Cassie’s bed. “It seems like Dean’s been here the whole time.”

Cassie managed a smile. “He promised.”

“He seems very devoted to you.”

“He’s a good man, Mom.”

Dean came back into her room. “The nurse will be right in.”

“I can see that,” Diana smiled.

Matthew came back in the room with Cassie’s doctor in tow. “Dr. Coleman, how are you feeling?”

“Okay I guess.”

Dr. Thomas took a pen light and looked in her eyes. He pulled up her information on a tablet and nodded. “Your vitals are strong. I think I can release you tomorrow but I don’t want you to be alone.”

“She won’t be,” said Dean and her parents. An uncomfortable silence was broken by Cassie.

“I’ll go with Dean. He has lots of security. I’ll be safe there.”

Dean took her hand. “What’s wrong?”

Tears filled her eyes. “They haven’t caught him yet.”

He felt like a total idiot. That’s why she was still so scared. “It will be okay. I promise.”

“Have you heard anything from that detective?” asked Matthew.

“Nothing yet.”

“I’ll make a call.”

Dean thought for a moment about stopping him but didn't. The man seemed to have a lot of pull with the powers that be. The guy may be a bit of a prick, but Cassie was his daughter. "Thank you, Dr. Coleman." Matthew walked out into the hall and Diana nodded at Dean and smiled. She knew what he was doing. Thirty minutes later Matthew returned with Detective Perkins. Dean had to give it to the guy. When he spoke, people listened.

"Dr. Coleman, how are you feeling?" asked Perkins.

"Better, thank you. Do you have any news?"

"We picked up Dr. Callen an hour ago. He was trying to board a flight to Mexico."

Cassie gasped and Dean held tight to her hand. "It's okay, sweetheart. They got him. You're safe now."

"He's claiming he had nothing to do with it but he'll be hard pressed to refute the video."

"What video?" asked Dean.

"Security cameras in the parking lot," smiled Cassie.

"Toma Pharmaceuticals is a multi-billion-dollar company. They have the tightest security I've ever seen, including high definition cameras in the parking areas. The video shows Dr. Coleman pulling in about seven a.m. Dr. Callen had used a lot card he'd stolen from another employee to open the gate. He hid himself behind some trees waiting for Dr. Coleman. How would he know you'd be alone in the lot?"

"Apart from the security guard at the front desk, I'm usually the first person in."

"Why didn't the guard see what was happening?" asked Diana.

"Because at that hour there is only one guard monitoring dozens of screens. Since Callen used a valid pass to open the lot it didn't set off any alarms." Perkins took a step forward. "I do want to caution you. This is his first offense. Once he's arraigned, he may be given bail."

"What?" gasped Cassie.

“He tried to kill her!” said Dean.

“He hasn’t been convicted.”

“Yet,” said Matthew.

Dean looked at Cassie’s father. “Can you make a call?”

Matthew looked at him and nodded.

Dean had moved some of Cassie's things to his place. She'd been out for a few weeks and she was well enough to work from home. She'd been okay being left alone at his place because he had the same security installed in his house that he had on his garage. All Cassie had to do was plug in the code on the keypad and only Dean could enter.

She'd understood when he needed to go back to the garage. The work was backing up and Frank and Ron could only handle so much. He made sure to call her frequently. She was doing her physical therapy at home but he could tell something was wrong. She was pulling into herself. She didn't even like walking on his property, let alone to go for a drive. As much as he hated doing what he was about to do, he didn't see any alternative.

"Coleman."

"Dr. Coleman, it's Dean."

"Is something wrong with my daughter?"

"No, physically, she's fine. But she won't leave the house."

"She knows Callen couldn't make bail? It could take months before he goes to trial."

"Yes, of course. At first, her feeling safe was a good thing. Now, I think the longer she stays put, the harder it will be for her to get back to her normal life. I need your advice. How do I get her to go back to work?"

"You must really love her to call me for advice."

"I do."

"She told me she's working from home. I would start by getting her to go back to her lab. Point out all the security."

"But that's where it happened."

"If she doesn't face it now, it will only get worse. She can't let it take over her life."

“But how do I convince her to go back?”

“You know her well enough to know she needs help. You’ll figure it out.”

“Okay, I’ll try.”

“Keep me informed.”

“I will, sir.”

“Call me Matthew. Look, Dean, I know I’ve been rough on you but you’ve proven you put my daughter’s welfare first. That counts with me.

“Thanks, Matthew.”

Dean came home with a large order of Chinese food. Cassie had been working on the final documentation for the blood pressure medication. She could do this from home but Dean had a plan. It was kind of mean but short of dragging her out of the house it was the only way he could think to make this work.

“Cassie, I’m home.”

She came around the corner into the kitchen. “Did you remember the egg rolls?”

“Of course. This time leave one for me.”

“Hey, you snooze you lose!” she smiled.

He set everything out on the dining table while Cassie set out the plates. They enjoyed a pleasant meal while he told her about the goings on at the shop. His win at the Hermitage had brought him a couple of interesting restoration projects. Cassie told him about what she’d be working on and he understood about half of what she described. “I want to talk to you about something.”

“I promise, I’ll leave you an egg roll.”

“Not that, and thank you. I want to talk about our living arrangement.” He saw the look of panic on her face. “I’m not talking about you moving back to your place.”

“Oh,” she said quietly.

“I’m very happy to have you living here, with me. I’d like to know if you’d like to make it a permanent situation?”

“What?”

“I’d like to know if you want to move in with me? We could turn a spare bedroom into a home office. I called the cable company about high speed cable installed so you’d have a faster connection.”

“Well, it seems like you have this all figured out.” She got up from the table and sat in his lap. “I’d hate to disturb your plans.” She gave him a quick kiss.

“Is that a yes?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Now that’s settled, how are you feeling?”

“I’m good. I’m doing my PT. I’m progressing.”

Dean rubbed his hands up her back. “Physically, yes. I wondering how much longer you’re going to hide out here.” She gasped and tried to get up from his lap but he held her tight.

“Dean, how could you?”

“Cassie, sweetheart, you know I love you, don’t you?”

“I thought so.”

“Then let me clarify things for you. I love you, Cassandra Coleman. I love you more than I’ve loved anyone, ever. I will love you even if you steal the last egg roll. I will love you even if you keep stealing the covers. I will love you, forever. Are we clear?”

Cassie nodded.

“I’d like to hear you say it.”

“Yes, we’re clear. You love me.”

“Forever.”

“Forever,” she smiled.

“Now it’s your turn. I’d like you to clarify your position.”

She rolled her eyes and pushed at his shoulder. “Dean, be serious.”

“I’m quite serious. You’ve agreed to move in with me. I want to know your intentions.”

“What?” she laughed. “Are they honorable?”

“Cassandra.”

Using her full name stopped her cold. “Okay. I will clarify my position. I love you, Dean Mitchell. I’ve never been in love before so I’m not sure how I know that this is the real thing but I am. You bring out the best in me. I know I will love you forever, even if you do hog the covers.”

He smiled and gave her a kiss. “Good to know. Okay, that’s settled. I love you; you love me. No doubts.”

“No doubts.”

“Then when I tell you it’s time for you to go back to your lab you know I’m not trying to get rid of you.”

Cassie managed to pull out of his lap. “Mr. Toma said it’s okay for me to work from home.”

“You know there’s only so much you can do from here. You need to be in your lab.”

“Do you know how much paperwork is involved in applying for FDA approval?”

“A great deal, I’m sure, but I’m also sure there are other people on the team who could be working on it.”

She turned away from him, boxing up the leftovers. “You don’t know.”

“I know the most important thing to you when we met was that you were going to work on your orphan drug projects. You can’t do that from here. Are you giving up on the people who need you? No one else in the world can do what you can do. No one has your brilliance for this work. You can’t let Callen steal this from you.” Cassie tried to pull away and he stopped her. He could see she’d gone pale at the mention of Callen’s name. “Cassie, sweetheart, you know Callen is in jail.”

She looked away. “He could get out.”

“No, he can’t. His bail was one million. He can’t raise it.”

“What if he does?” she asked. He could see she was shaking. He pulled her tight against him. Cassie knew anyone who had know Callen, including Toma, had washed their hands of him. She knew he couldn’t make bail but logic was lost when it came to Callen.

“Your father is a pain in the ass.”

She pulled back and looked at him. “What?”

“He’s a full-on, pompous pain in the ass. But apparently, he knows everyone who’s anyone in this town. When he calls, people answer, including the district attorney. Your father made sure that the DA will contact us the moment Callen’s status changes. In the meantime, he’s sitting in jail, waiting for his trial.” He could see she wasn’t convinced. Your case is very high profile. It made national news. You are the beautiful, heroine doctor who saved the little girl. Everyone fell in love with you. When you were attacked, the whole country was outraged. Kim told me they have a whole storage room filled with letters and gifts that have been sent to you.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No, I’m not. Hundreds of people have sent you letters and emails.”

“They could send them to me here.”

“No. Cassie, you know what you need to do. You need to go back to your lab, to your life. It’s time.”

Cassie darted out of the kitchen and Dean was tempted to go after her, but he didn't. She needed to do this on her own.

Cassie went up to their bedroom and closed the door. Their bedroom. How long had she been thinking of it like that? Days. Weeks. She grabbed a tissue and wiped her eyes. She looked out the large backyard. Trees blocked the view of the garage. Dean had changed his entire life to accommodate her. He spent his free time with her, watching movies and teaching her about cars instead of working on his own projects.

She'd just agreed to move in with Dean. This was her home now. She'd spent her whole life feeling out of place. Even with her parents being academics, she never felt completely comfortable with them. She preferred being alone. Then she met Dean. Something in his eyes told her he could be trusted with her heart.

Dean was right. If she was going to continue her work she had to go back to her lab. She didn't have to go back. She'd finalized the software deal with Toma and she was financially secure. There was the prospect of the trial looming. She'd have to relive what Mark had done to her. But she'd have Dean at her side. Everything he'd done was for her. He'd moved her into his home so she could feel safe while she recovered. She felt more comfortable here than anywhere else. But maybe comfortable wasn't always a good thing. She dried her eyes and walked back downstairs. Dean had finished the dinner dishes and was setting the coffeemaker for tomorrow morning. "Hi."

"Hi. Are we good?" he asked.

Cassie walked toward him and slipped her arms around his waist. "Yeah, we're good. Can I ask you a favor?"

"Of course."

"When I go back on Monday, will you drive me?"

Dean gave her a broad smile. "Sure."

Dean headed toward Cassie's office and hoped she'd be okay with the news he brought. It had taken her a few days to get comfortable at the lab but she'd been working for a few weeks. She'd even gotten more comfortable with going out on the weekend, especially when she was driving her Thunderbird. She'd made a lot of progress in the past few weeks. He hoped this wouldn't set her back.

The security guards all recognized him now and signed him into the building without question. He hung the visitor's badge around his neck and took the elevator to her office. He was surprised when the door opened on her floor and she was waiting for them.

"The guard called me. What's going on?"

"Let's go to your office."

"Oh God," she whispered.

He took her hand in his. "It's okay." She closed the door to her office and they sat on her couch. "The DA wants to offer Callen a plea deal but he wants your input."

"What? A plea? He tried to kill me."

"Nothing is done yet. The DA wants to offer a plea of twenty five to life with a minimum of twenty years served. That would make Callen seventy before he'd be eligible for parole. It also means no trial. You wouldn't have to testify."

Cassie sat back against the couch. "What do you think I should do?"

"Sweetheart, I can't tell you what to do. You need to do what's right for you."

"What happens if we go to trial?"

"If convicted he could get life."

"If convicted."

"Yes."

"A deal would be guaranteed."

"It would."

“This wouldn’t be looming over us anymore.”

“It wouldn’t. Sweetheart, I will back whatever you want to do.”

She gave him a small smile. “I know you will. I think we should take the deal.”

“Are you sure? You don’t have to make a decision right now.”

“No, I’m sure. We should call the DA.”

Dean smiled and gave her a hug. “Okay. That’s what we’ll do.” He was relieved Cassie said yes to the deal. Maybe now they could start to put this behind them and he could finally relax. He’d spent the last three months as on edge as Cassie, but he’d tried to hold it together for her. There was nothing more important to him.

Cassie pulled back and looked at him. “Did the DA call you?”

“No, he called your father. He’s the big wig, not me,” he smiled.

“And my father called you.”

“Yes.”

“Have you been talking to my father about me?”

“Yeah, I have. Don’t be mad. I wanted to know what to do, how to help you. He’s not just your father, he’s a psychiatrist.”

“As cold as my father has been to you, you still called him?”

Dean leaned his head against her forehead. “You’re more important.”

“That’s not the only reason the DA called him, is it? He called my father as next of kin.”

“Yes.”

“What would you think about changing that?”

“What?”

“Dean, we’ve made a life together. I can’t imagine the rest of my life without you. Despite everything we’ve been through the last few months, I knew I had you by my side. What do you think about making our situation permanent?”

Dean smiled. “What exactly do you mean?”

“You’re going to make me say it, aren’t you?”

“I think it would be helpful to clarify your position,” he grinned.

Cassie smiled and shook her head. “Fine, Dean Mitchell, you are the most amazing man I’ve ever met. You are kind and loving and strong. You see me for who I really am and you love me for it. I love you with all my heart. Will you marry me?”

“Well, that is certainly clear,” he grinned.

“Dean! Stop teasing me.”

Dean took her hands and held them to his chest. “Cassandra Coleman, the day you drove into my shop was the luckiest day of my life. From the first day you saw me for who I really am and you love me for it. I love you. I can’t imagine the rest of my life without you. I would love to marry you.” He pulled Cassie into a deep kiss. They were interrupted when Kim walked in on them.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, I didn’t…”

“It’s okay,” Cassie smiled through her blush.

“Mr. Toma wanted an update…”

Dean didn’t let her finish. “Tell Mr. Toma he’ll have to wait. Dr. Coleman has an appointment at a jewelry store.”

“Excuse me?” said Cassie and Kim.

“She needs to pick out her engagement ring.”

Cassie gasped and Kim squealed with excitement. “Oh my God! This is great! Kim gave her a tight hug. “I’m so happy for you. When should I tell Mr. Toma you’ll be back.”

“Tomorrow,” said Dean.

Dean held her hand as they walked out to the parking lot. “We can come back for your car.”

“You’re serious? We’re going ring shopping?”

“My girl will have a proper ring.”

“Well, technically, I asked you so shouldn’t I be buying you a ring?”

“You can if you want,” he smiled. He stopped and looked at Cassie’s Thunderbird, parked in her assigned space. The same spot where she’d been attacked.

“You weren’t the only one talking to my dad. He said I needed to take back what was mine. My work, my life...”

“Your parking space.”

“Even that. I’m ready to move forward. I just so glad I’m doing it with you.”

“So am I, sweetheart. So am I.” Dean pulled her into his arms for a kiss. He pulled back and looked at his bare ring finger. “I’m thinking maybe a big skull with ruby eyes.”

“Is this how it’s going to be for the rest of our lives?” she laughed.

“Absolutely.”

Cassie smiled. “Thank God.”