

Shining Star
By Kate Simon

Chapter One

Pebbles tore into her bare feet as horns blared. White lights flared through a red haze. There was no pain, only purpose. It was just a little further, a few more steps, just a few more. She stumbled and another horn screamed at her.

A few more steps, just a few more, down the hill, down the ramp. The pebbles were replaced by frigid asphalt. Lights grew brighter, voices came closer.

Just a few more steps.

An electric door sensed her presence and parted. She pressed herself against the wall, forcing herself to move down the ramp. More voices, more light. Loud colors suddenly appeared in front of her. Purples and pinks and reds, too much red. She squeezed her eyes against the onslaught and the pain returned, washing over her in a tidal wave that buckled her knees and sent her to the floor. The purple form shouted “Dr. Goren to receiving...STAT!”

A blessed blackness engulfed her.

It had already been a long night and it was only seven p.m. Two car accidents, a dog bite and a kid whose parents didn't think a bike helmet was all that important. Jeff had just finished explaining to them the particulars of organ donation.

Marsha shouted for him to come to receiving, no page, no calm voice. It was a straight from the diaphragm yell. He flew through the ER doors to find a body on the reception floor. He thought she was a young woman judging from her long black hair, but it was hard to tell. One eye was swollen completely shut, the other, nearly so. Her bare feet were badly scraped and bleeding. She wore faded jeans and an equally faded t-shirt from a high school he'd never heard of. Jeff called for a gurney and he and Marsha carefully lifted the battered woman off the floor.

"Domestic abuse?" asked Marsha.

"Probably."

"Should I call Henry? He's probably still in the building with that kid's parents."

"No reason to call in the police yet. Let's wait until I can see what we've got. She's not going anywhere."

Jeff wheeled the woman into an empty area as Marsha pulled the curtains. He gingerly began his examination. Marsha cut off the woman's t-shirt and attached the heart monitor. Clipping on the oxygen monitor to the woman's finger, she flipped the monitors on. Jeff breathed a sigh. It was the first good sign. Her heart and breath sounds were strong.

"Probably a concussion; could be a fracture. Order a CT scan."

Marsha picked up the extension and called for a technician.

Jeff rubbed his eyes in fatigue and disgust. "Have them scan her belly too. You know how these assholes love to hit below the belt. That rarely leaves external marks. Does she have any I.D.?" he asked.

Marsha rummaged through the woman's pockets. "What you see is what you get," she said as she started an IV and hung a bag of saline.

“Miss, Miss, can you hear me?” Jeff called. A deep moan rumbled in the woman’s chest. “What’s your name? Can you tell me your name?” He asked again and again until a slight whisper escaped the swollen lips. “Sara.”

The noise, the lights, talking, too much talking. They were pulling her back from the blackness, the comfort of oblivion. Questions, no questions. Sleep. Peace. Darkness.

The voice kept pulling her back asking her, what? Her name. He wanted to know her name. Why? What did it matter? Her name mattered to no one, not even to her. Why did it matter to him?

She relented. She told the voice her name. At least she thought she did. She must have because the voice stopped asking.

A softer voice whispered in her ear. “Don’t worry Sara; we’re going to take good care of you.” She felt a warm blanket cover her body, and then another. Warmer than she’d ever felt, as if they’d just come from a hot dryer. The soft voice spoke again. “There now sweetheart, doesn’t that feel better.” Tender hands tucked the edges of the blanket around her shoulders and under her chin. Like Mama did, just like Mama. A tear slid down Sara’s cheek.

“Thank you.”

Sara hoped she’d said that out loud.

Chapter Two

Jeff was sipping his third cup of rancid coffee when *that* voice pierced his brain.

“*Jeffrey!* I must speak with you.”

He looked up to see pure fury storming towards him. This particular tornado was wearing a moss green Chanel suit to perfectly accent the same dark auburn hair of her youth, maintained now with the assistance a her very discreet hairdresser. Her five foot and three inch frame belied a framework of steel. You wouldn't think that a woman so slight could storm, but storm she did, full tilt and directly toward him dragging a sandy haired girl with her.

“Good evening, mother.” He glared at his daughter and her sheepish smile. “What did she do now?”

“Your daughter is out of control, completely out of control,” She repeated herself as if any emphasis was needed. “She caught a toad in the garden and brought it into the house...IN THE HOUSE!”

“Yes mother. I understand. Emily caught a toad and brought it into the house.”

“She let it loose during my card party!”

“It escaped,” Emily added in her defense.

Jeff stifled a laugh. He could just see his mother's cronies hopping and screaming and the poor toad hopping and croaking. He would have given a month's pay to see it. He glanced over at his delinquent child and saw she'd caught his amusement and smiled.

“I do hope there were no injuries.”

“Oh no, Daddy,” Emily piped in. “I got the toad outside before he got smushed.”

Jeff exploded in laughter. His mother exploded in fury.

“You see, this is why she is unmanageable. You let her get away with anything. Next thing you know she'll be running wild in the woods. She certainly doesn't get this from our side. Margaret's people were...”

Jeff humor vanished in a vapor of fury even his mother feared.

“I’m sorry dear, it was all so unsettling. I am too old to be trailing after an eight year old. You will have to make other arrangements.”

“Mother, you know Mrs. Prince won’t be back for at least two weeks. What am I supposed to do in the mean time?”

“Hire someone,” his mother barked as she pushed her granddaughter into her father’s arms. They both watched as Millicent Prescott Goren exited the hospital as if she owned it, which in fact, she did.

“What am I going to do with you young lady?” Jeff asked his daughter with less than convincing ire.

“I’m sorry, Daddy. Really I am,” Emily smiled a smile that told him she was anything but sorry. “Nana is such a…”

Jeff wrapped his arms around his daughter and kissed her forehead, appreciating her ability to self-edit. “Yes she is, pumpkin, but when you are staying at her house you have to behave.”

“I don’t think that’s going to be an issue for a while.”

Jeff hugged his daughter tightly. She was wise beyond her eight years and there were times he was sorry for it. She was a brilliant girl, always at the top of her class. He liked to think she took after him that way. It helped to do so when he blamed himself for her height. He was six feet and Maggie had been nearly as tall. Jeff’s father had been six feet four inches tall. Emily never stood a chance. Five feet five inches on an eight-year-old constituted extraordinary. One of the reasons the Millicent felt unable to control her granddaughter was a Emily being a good two inches taller than her grandmother. Being so clever set her apart from the other children. His baby girl was a loner, and not by choice.

“Daddy,” Emily whined, “You’re smushing me.”

Jeff smiled and released his grasp. “Sorry, pumpkin.”

His current schedule left little time for play dates, ensuring Emily spent far too much time with adults. He wished she could have stayed an innocent child just a little while longer. Jeff reluctantly pushed his daughter out of his arms.

“Go to my office and settle in. It looks like you’ll be spending a few nights here until I straighten this out.”

“Sorry, Daddy,” Emily said with a smile.

He cuffed his daughter’s chin and smiled. He just couldn’t help himself. “No you’re not, but we’ll talk about that later. Now scoot. I have a patient to look in on.”

Jeff’s office would be a safe haven for Emily for a few nights at least. A doctor of his tenure wouldn’t normally have an office the size of a small apartment, with a private bath, foldout couch and cable TV. But he was Dr. Jeffrey *Prescott* Goren. When you worked in the small but prosperous town of Prescott, Pennsylvania, at Prescott Memorial Hospital, the name came with a few perks. Having your incorrigible daughter camp in your office was one of them.

Marsha pulled him aside before he could get to Sara’s cubicle. She clicked the mouse of her terminal and a CT scan appeared on the screen.

“Shit,” he whispered.

“That’s what I said,” she replied.

On the screen was evidence of a lifetime of pain. Breaks and calcifications dated back further than he could speculate. He put on his “*Everything’s going to be fine*” face and pulled back the curtain. Sara appeared to be staring at the ceiling, but it was hard to tell with the swelling.

“How are you feeling?” He flinched. *Jesus, Jeff, could you think of anything more trite? She’s just had the crap beat out of her, again. How do you think she feels, you moron?*

She turned her head toward him, but made no sound.

“Your tests came back. The good news is most of the damage is superficial.” He grimaced. If he could have kicked himself in the ass at that moment he would have. Terminal illness, horrible accidents, he could handle with ease. But this, as often as he saw it, he would never understand.

“You have a concussion but no internal injuries. The swelling will come down in a few days. I will order you something for the pain.”

He was about to exercise a Prescott perk. "I'm going to admit you for observation."

Her eyes widened as much as the swelling would allow.

Jeff set her metal chart down and took her hand in his. It felt as small and fragile as Emily's. "Who did this to you?"

She stared unmoving.

"Husband?"

She nodded slightly.

"I saw your tests Sara. This isn't the first time."

A tear slid down her swollen cheek. "No more," she whispered.

He gave her hand a slight squeeze as tightness gripped his heart. "I'm going to call someone who will take a report. In the meantime I'm going to get you into a room." He closed the curtain behind him and motioned to Marsha.

"Is 404 open?"

Marsha rolled her eyes. "Jeff, you can't."

"Actually, I can."

"You're mother will be furious."

"Is it open or not?"

Marsha clicked her mouse a few times and nodded.

"Get her in there."

Marsha smiled, "Yes, doctor."

Room 404 was a suite designed by his mother and her decorator for the exclusive use of the town elite. Any time they had a cosmetic procedure, minor test, or needed an excuse to have their children send flowers, they occupied Room 404. Unobtrusive medical equipment made it as close to a hotel suite as possible. Never averse to turning a profit, the hospital director, otherwise known as mother, charged through the nose for use of the suite. She would not be pleased her son was giving the room to an indigent woman. Tough

Chapter Three

Sara stared out the window at the riotous foliage. It was so pretty here this time of year. Beautiful people in their beautiful homes surrounded by perfectly manicured lawns. Not like back home. Beaten down workers in their rented shacks. Nobody cared about landscape back home.

Home.

She didn't have one anymore. There was no going back to the trailer. The policeman said they'd arrested Jimmy. That would be just the excuse the landlord needed to toss them out. It didn't matter. There wasn't anything to go back to.

Sara wasn't sure why last night had been different, but it was. She'd seen it in his eyes. For eight years she'd seen anger and loss and pain in his eyes. But last night, she'd seen evil. Jimmy said he was going to kill her and she believed him. Something inside her screamed awake.

He'd gotten in two or three hard blows to her face, knocking her to the ground. He straddled her, putting his hands around her neck. Before he could tighten his grip she drove her feet into his crotch with a force that shocked both of them. Jimmy fell to his side, screaming obscenities. Sara bolted out the door and ran.

And ran.

And ran.

Run or die. The hospital was miles down the highway from the trailer park. She vaguely remembered getting here. There were people here who said they cared what happened to her, but people always said things to be nice. It didn't necessarily give Sara cause to believe them.

The doctor seemed very nice. Her eyes had been so swollen she couldn't remember much of what he looked like. Just an impression was all she had, tall

enough to cast a shadow over her bed. And a voice, rich and deep, the kind of man a regular sort of woman would find attractive. But Sara wasn't a regular sort of woman. She saw the regular sort at the grocery and they looked at her with pity or derision in their eyes. She never could decide which was worse.

"Hello Sara."

She glanced at the door to see the voice she remembered attached to a handsome man in a white coat. His salt and pepper hair and blue eyes were worthy of any magazine cover. Yes, a regular sort of woman would want this sort of man.

"Hello," she replied.

"I'm Dr. Goren. I treated you last night."

"I remember. Thank you."

He smiled and her heart clutched. "Well, that's certainly a good sign, remembering me."

'*You'd be difficult to forget*', she thought, but dared not say.

"How are you feeling?"

"Ok, I guess." She flinched at the light he flashed in her still swollen eyes.

"How's your headache?"

"Not as sore as my feet."

"I'm not surprised. You must have run through some broken glass on the side of the road. You will have to stay off them for a few days so it looks like you'll be our guest for a bit longer."

She shook her head. "I can't..."

"Don't worry, Sara. When I said guest, I meant it. Just relax and get well. There's cable TV and the nurses will take good care of you. And I'll be into see you."

Sara's heart lurched at the thought.

"I'll have someone help you freshen up."

She looked at his kind face and couldn't help but smile.

"There, that's better," he said in a bit of a whisper "You have a nice smile."

Jeff tried to make notes in Sara's chart, but he couldn't get his bearings. He scribbled his orders on the pad and hit send. The information would go to the main chart at the nurses station. One of the nurses called for him but he slipped into the stairwell. Something about this patient, this woman, was getting to him. She was battered and bloodied but she still managed a smile, a smile that about broke his heart. He would have to keep his distance. She was a patient. There were rules about things like that.

Jeff had run into Henry Roberts this morning who told him, that Sara's husband, Jimmy Bridges, was arrested and safely tucked away in the county jail. Henry was always ready to boast of an arrest. There were so few in Prescott. It seemed Jimmy was not unfamiliar to their local sheriff. A drunk and part-time thief, he'd had enough run-ins with the law that an assault conviction would send him up for a while. The wheels of justice could grind slowly, especially when encouraged to do so. Jimmy Bridges would be arraigned but wouldn't see a trial until well after the holidays.

Enough time for Sara to get away.

Where the hell did that come from?

There are rules about things like this.

Chapter Four

Two whole days stuck in daddy's office. Well not, *whole* days. She went to school in the morning and Nana's secretary Mrs. Gonsalves picked her up after. Then she had to sit in daddy's office while he worked. Last night they'd had dinner in the cafeteria before they went home. Tonight she'd eaten in his office because he was busy in the ER.

Emily clicked off the TV and tossed it on the couch. Daddy's TV had the same boring stations as the rest of the hospital. Her homework was done and it was only six o'clock. Daddy said he wouldn't be finished work until at least eleven. So she was to stay put.

That fancy room Nana made had TV like they had at home.

She pressed the button for the fourth floor. One of the advantages of being Daddy's daughter was no one noticed her. No one at all.

She cracked the door to Room 404. Dang! There was someone in the bed. One of Nana's friends probably, who would rat her out to her grandmother. Double Dang! A head turned and a face appeared, a face Emily didn't recognize, even with the bruises.

"Hello," said the lady.

"Hi."

"Are you looking for someone?" she asked.

Emily coughed and looked at her feet. "I didn't know anyone was in here."

"Looking for a place to hide?"

"No." Emily nodded at the flat panel screen on the wall. "This room has better TV than my Dad's office." Emily added proudly, "My Dad's a doctor."

The lady smiled. "Well then I guess you should come in." The lady noticed Emily looking at her bruises and her smile faded.

"Oh, you don't look so bad. It's starting to turn yellow around your eyes so that means you're getting better."

A little smile returned. "It does?"

Emily closed the door behind her and sat in the chair next to the bed, tucking her legs underneath her. “Oh yeah. I read my Dad’s journals when he’s not home. I’ve seen much worse than what you look like.”

The lady laughed a little. “Well that’s good to know.”

“I’m sorry. That didn’t come out right. I’m always doing that. My Nana says I’m artless, whatever that means.”

“It means you’re a little girl and you tell the truth.”

Emily smiled and extended her hand. “My name is Emily.”

The lady extended hers as best she could with the tubes sticking in it. “My name is Sara.”

“You aren’t a friend of Nana’s, are you? I’d remember you. This room is usually saved for friends of Nana’s.”

Sara looked concerned. “My doctor put me here.”

Emily smiled broadly. “Tall and devastatingly handsome?”

Sara laughed, “I guess you could say that.”

“That’s my Dad. I’m Emily Goren.”

“It’s very nice to meet you Emily Goren.”

“It’s very nice to meet you too, Sara.”

Sara handed her the remote. “Maybe you could find something for both of us to watch.

Emily grabbed up the remote. “Cool.”

Jeff checked Sara’s chart. The damage from the beating was healing but her feet were still pretty torn up. No telling what she’s run through on the highway. He had her on a preventative course of antibiotics, long enough to keep her for a couple more days.

He pushed open the door and was surprised to hear laughing, familiar laughing. Emily was sitting in the chair next to Sara’s bed when he’d left her in his office not an hour ago. He was really going to have to have a talk with her about wandering the halls.

“Hello ladies.”

Both heads turned from the screen. Jeff’s step stumbled slightly. Sara smiled and for the first time he thought he saw what she must really look like. The bruises were fading, revealing pure alabaster skin. Her rich black hair had been washed and brushed out, falling in thick curls beyond her shoulders.

“Daddy,” exclaimed Emily. “Sara and I were watching a movie.”

“Your daughter has excellent taste,” said Sara.

Jeff looked at the screen and saw two live actors interacting with Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck. “Obviously,” he replied. “Very high brow, just like her father.” He snickered when Daffy’s bill fell off his face.

“Emily, I need to examine Sara. Please wait in the hall.”

Emily’s face fell. “Yes Daddy.”

“I’m sorry if my daughter intruded,” he said flipping on his penlight and looking in her eyes, a bit too long.

There are rules Jeffy boy.

“Not at all. I enjoyed her company. She’s a lovely girl.”

Jeff lifted her blanket and examined the soles of her feet. “Thank you. I don’t hear that a lot. Emily can be a bit of a handful.”

“She’s just lonely,” said Sara.

Jeff tucked the blankets back under her feet. “Why do you say that?”

Sara tugged her blankets tight around her. “She spent an hour talking to someone like me. She must be lonely.”

He looked into her eyes. Pale aqua drowning in a sea of bruises and pain. He forced himself to speak. “You’re doing well. Your feet are still pretty torn up. You have another three days of the antibiotics. I want you to try and walk a bit, but not on your own. I’ll have the nurses help you.”

“Yes, doctor,” she said obediently, and it grated at him. Sara rarely spoke and then she couldn’t look him in the eyes. He felt guilty of some unspoken crime.

“I’ll have a talk with my daughter not to pester you.”

Sara’s head snapped up. “Oh no, don’t. I wouldn’t want her in trouble.”

Jeff saw some of the fear creep back in her eyes he'd seen in the ER. *Christ, she's even afraid for Emily*

"Ok," he nodded toward the muted TV. "The movie's still playing. Should I send my wandering daughter back in for the finale?"

Sara relaxed back against the pillows. "Oh yes, do. She'd hate to miss the ending."

Jeff smiled and walked into the hallway. Emily was leaning against the wall, no doubt awaiting the chewing out she so richly deserved.

"We'll talk about your roaming the halls later. For now, Sara wants to watch the rest of the movie with you."

Emily's face lit up in a way he hadn't seen in far too long. "Remember Emily, visiting hours are over at eight."

"We're Prescott's and we make the rules."

Jeff leaned over and took her by her defiant chin. "First of all, you're a Goren and you'll do as I say."

Emily dropped her eyes. "Yes, Daddy."

"Second of all, don't talk like that. You sound like your grandmother."

Emily shuddered. She leaned up and gave him a quick kiss and dashed to the door, then stopped short. "Who hit her, Daddy?"

God, he wished she wasn't so quick. No point in lying to her. "Her husband."

"Did Henry arrest him?"

"Yes, Emily, he did."

"Good. I don't want anyone hurting Sara. I like her." Jeff watched as she closed the door behind her and listened for a moment to the muffled conversation.

There are rules Jeffy boy.

Chapter Five

Emily pushed through the door carrying two large drink cups. This time she didn't come without a gift. Nana always said you have to bring a gift when you visit someone in the hospital. She wasn't quite sure why, but Nana was very specific. Nana had a big shop in the lobby for anyone who forgot their presents. It was nearly Halloween so there was lots of pumpkins and orange teddy bears, but they didn't seem right. She met her dad in the cafeteria for dinner and he suggested the milkshakes. Daddy was so smart.

"Hi, Sara. My dad said you could have one too," she said as she pushed one of the cups toward Sara.

"One what?"

"A milkshake. I got you chocolate even though Daddy said you might want vanilla."

"Who doesn't like chocolate?"

"That's what I said," Emily exclaimed as she pushed a straw through the lid.

"Does your mother work here too?" asked Sara.

Emily put her milkshake down. "My Mom died." She looked up at Sara for the look that grownups always gave her when she told them.

Sara considered her for a moment. "That stinks."

Emily nodded her head. "Yeah, it does."

Sara took a sip of her milkshake. "It was very nice of you to get this for me."

"They give me whatever I want at the cafeteria."

"They must like you."

Emily scrunched her face. "They're scared of my Nana."

"Your Nana?"

"She's the boss here. My Grandpa used to be, but he died. Now Nana's in charge."

"You don't like her?"

Emily looked down in guilt. “Not exactly. She used to be different. She and Grandpa would come to visit us in Chicago. That’s where we used to live. Emily’s face suddenly turned to a broad smile. Grandpa was real nice and was fun and really, really tall, even taller than my Daddy. Nana would bring presents and…”

“And?”

“She just seems different. She used to smile.” Then Grandpa died right before my Mom did. An an, aneur…”

“Aneurysm?”

“Yeah. How did you know?”

Sara shrugged. “I read a lot.”

“Oh.” She paused to sip her milkshake. “Well, Grandpa died and then everything was different. Now she doesn’t smile. Not even when I let a toad loose in her house and Daddy laughed his butt off.”

“Maybe she’s sad.”

“Like you?”

“Sort of.”

Emily’s face darkened. “Grandpa didn’t hit her!”

Sara reached for her hand. “No, people get sad for other reasons. Maybe she misses your Grandpa.”

“You think?”

“Like you miss your Mom.”

“But Grandpa was old. My Mom was real young, like my Dad.”

“That doesn’t mean she didn’t love him a lot.”

“Like Daddy loved Mom.”

“Exactly.”

“Huh. But my Dad laughs and he’s real nice.”

“Yes he is, but he has you.”

Emily contemplated the bottom of her shake. “She doesn’t have anybody.”

“Except the two of you.”

Emily liked Sara. She didn’t talk to her the way the other grownups did. She didn’t say cute things or look at her like she was pathetic because her Mom was

dead. She just talked to her, like she really liked her. Not because her Nana signed her paycheck.

“Sara, why did your husband hit you?”

Sara set her drink down and pulled her blanket tight. “I’m not really sure. He drinks a lot. And he lost his last job. He got mad a lot.”

Emily took Sara’s hand in hers. “But Henry arrested him. My Daddy told me. He’s in jail so he can’t hurt you again.” She thought she saw tears in Sara’s eyes. “It’s going to be ok now.”

Sara wrapped her arms around her and gave her a tight hug. Sara’s arms felt real good. She even kissed her forehead like Daddy did. That felt really good too.

Sara watched Emily flip through stations with one hand and suck down her milkshake with the other. She was tempted to stroke the girl’s silky brown hair. Emily was a dear child, bringing a woman she barely knew a chocolate milkshake. They watched cartoons together. She didn’t want Sara to be afraid of Jimmy anymore. For those few moments she’d held Emily in her arms, she knew she’d never felt such goodness.

Chapter Six

Finding a temporary housekeeper was impossible. Between his hours and Emily's reputation for mischief, no one from the agency was willing to take the post, not even for a few weeks. At least Emily hadn't argued about staying with him at the hospital. The past few evenings Emily spent most of her time in Sara's room. Last night she'd come home with her hair done in something called a French braid.

"Dr. Goren?" His secretary's voice came through the intercom.

"Yes Fran?"

"Mrs. Price is on the phone."

Jeff grabbed at the receiver. "Mrs. Price, thank God! When are you coming back?"

Ten minutes later Jeff hung up the phone convinced his day couldn't get worse. He was wrong.

"*Jeffrey!*"

"Come in mother," he said despite the fact that she was already standing over his desk, breathing fire.

"What is *that* woman doing in 404?"

"What woman, mother?" Sometimes he just couldn't resist goading her.

"That trailer trash."

Jeff drew himself up to his full six feet. "That's a despicable term and you know it. Mrs. Bridges is recovering from a brutal beating."

"And she has no insurance! Not that any insurance would cover the five thousand a day we charge for that suite. There are patients who really need that room.

"It's a luxury for your spoiled friends who want to be catered to even in the hospital."

"Jeffrey, I am still director of this hospital..."

“I agreed to come back to Prescott so Emily could have some semblance of a family life after Maggie died. I’m grateful for the accommodations you’ve made for me here at the hospital.”

Millicent tried to interrupt and was stopped cold.

“But as you constantly remind me I am Dr. Jeffrey *Prescott* Goren, and for once I’m taking advantage of it and I’m using your goddamn suite for someone who really needs it. So get over it, Mother.”

She stood opened mouthed, remarkably at a loss for words. No one ever spoke to Millicent Prescott Goren like that.

Pity.

Jeffrey grabbed his lab coat off the door and turned to face her. “She’s a good woman, Mother, and she’s had a rough go of it. Is it really so hard for you to understand? Dad would have.”

If he’d struck her she would have looked less shocked. Her cheeks flamed. He knew he’d gone too far, but damn her, she pushed him. How she and Dad could have made a go of it for forty years was beyond him.

John Goren had come to town with a larger than life personality to match his size. The former football star soon won over the petite daughter of John Prescott, owner of Prescott Seed, largest seed company in the nation, and primary benefactor of Prescott Memorial Hospital. Prescott approved of the up and coming doctor as an appropriate match for his only child. They were married in a still talked about ceremony six months later. John charmed the public at every perfectly appointed hospital fundraiser his wife arranged. Contributions rose along with wing after wing until Prescott Memorial was known as the finest hospital in suburban Philadelphia. They were a perfect team and from everything Jeff saw, they were completely happy.

He knew after little more than a year the pain of Dad’s death was still fresh. He understood all too well how she felt and he cursed the fates for it. In her mourning she’d lost a kindness she used to have in abundance. She also lost her buffer. When she and Jeff would butt heads, Dad would say, “She doesn’t mean any harm Jeffy boy. She’s a good woman at heart.”

He knew she was a good woman; it was just getting harder and harder to see.

Jeff glanced at Sara's chart as he heard giggling from the other side of the door. He had to discharge her. Her feet were healed. There was no reason to keep her any longer, not even to spite his mother. He would tell her she could leave in the morning.

"Hello Daddy." Emily was kneeling on the bed, brushing out Sara's thick curls.

"I'm just getting my hair done," Sara smiled. She did that when Emily was around and it warmed him. So few people ever made a connection with Em, except of course for Maggie.

"I can see that. But you'll have to let me do my job now." A quick exam confirmed what he already knew. Sara could go.

"Your feet have healed up nicely and you're showing no signs of infection." Sara's face fell. She knew what was coming. He was just doing his job, why did he feel so bloody awful?

"I'm going to discharge you tomorrow."

"Nooooo..." Emily moaned.

Jeff forgotten she was still in the room. Sara intervened. "It's alright Emily. It means your dad did a good job with me. I'm better now."

"Is there someone you can call?" Jeff asked.

"I'll be fine," she smiled.

It was a smile Jeff had seen before, the smile of resignation. Jesus, she had nowhere to go. There had to be an agency, a shelter. He'd make some calls.

Emily broke his train of thought. "But who am I going to sit with?"

"I've made arrangements," he said not knowing what arrangements those were short of locking her in his office.

"I suppose that means Mrs. Price is coming back?"

Jeff looked at his daughter, ashamed to be caught in a lie. "Well, no. Mrs. Price called today. Her father is going to need long term care, so she's staying in Memphis."

Emily's face brightened. "Sara can take care of me!"

"What?" they both replied.

Emily turned to Sara and gave a rapid fire breakdown of their lives. "Mrs. Price was our housekeeper. She's a nice lady and all, but her dad got sick, but you know that. Anyway, she would clean up and cook for us and she'd take care of me when I got home from school."

"When you got home?" Sara asked.

"Yeah, she lived with us. She had a nice bedroom and her own bathroom in the back of the house. It could be your bedroom, Sara!" Emily turned *the look* on Jeff he could rarely resist. "Please Daddy! It would be great."

"Emily, Mrs. Price had a tough job and Sara's been through a lot. You're a handful young lady, in case I haven't told you that."

"Not today," she replied.

"Watch the mouth."

"Sorry, Daddy," Emily sighed. "Oh please, it makes perfect sense."

"There's the doctor-patient relationship. You know about that. It wouldn't be right to have her working for me."

"Technically Daddy, once you discharge her, she's not your patient anymore, is she?" Emily smiled that smile she had when she knew she'd one-upped him.

Jeff grimaced. Sometimes he wished Em wasn't so damn smart. "Technically, no, she won't be my patient. Sara may not want the job. Did you think of that?"

Emily turned to Sara, crestfallen. It hadn't occurred to her that her new friend wouldn't want what she did. "Sara?" she asked quietly.

Sara glanced down at her blanket, pulling it tight around her. "I can cook," she whispered.

"What?" asked Emily.

"I can cook. Nothing fancy, but I can cook."

Jeff was astonished. Sara was speaking up, albeit quietly. She wanted the job. Emily wanted her in their home. It solved all their problems, and gave Jeff a whole new set of them. He should say no.

“I guess I’ll pick you up tomorrow morning.”

Emily squealed and threw her arms around Sara’s neck.

“Emily, why don’t you get some lunch at the cafeteria and I’ll meet you there. No wandering.

“I think I’ll stop at Nana’s office and see if she wants some lunch too.”

Jeff stared, open mouthed, as she dashed off in the admin wing. He turned his attention back to Sara. “Well, I guess I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She looked up and captured his gaze. “I guess so.” She smiled and he knew his gaze wasn’t the only thing she could capture. He went back to his office and punched in a familiar number. “Henry, I need a favor.”

He was being ridiculous. It was just lunch with his daughter...and his mother. Meals with mother were command performances, not spur of the moment "let's grab a burger" meals.

He spotted mother in her reserved booth, chatting, or at least trying to, with Emily. His daughter tended to break land speed records for dialog. Mother seemed to be smiling, although it could be a trick of the light from the floor to ceiling windows. Emily spotted him first. She squealed in a voice every diner could hear.

"Hi, Daddy!"

"Inside voice, please." He kissed her forehead "Hi, pumpkin. Hello mother." He kissed her cheek.

"Hello, dear."

Hello dear? Okay, if this was the Twilight Zone where the hell was Rod Serling? He slid in next to his daughter. In front of her was her favorite meal, mushroom cheeseburger, fries and a chocolate shake. An anomalous bowl of fresh melon sat next to the fries. He glanced at his mother's meal. Instead of the usual arugula salad and raspberry tea was the same cheeseburger meal and the same bowl of fruit. "Mother?" he asked checking to see if in fact this was his mother. If not he was checking her office for pods. Millicent smiled, really smiled. This was no trick of the light.

"Emily insisted. She said the staff makes the best burgers in town."

"Uh huh," she muttered through a mouthful of ketchup dripping fries.

Millicent took a tentative bite. Emily laughed as juice sprayed from her Nana's mouth. Jeff couldn't help but smile. She took her linen napkin, dabbed lightly and chewed thoroughly before responding.

"It appears Emily is correct. This is quite good."

"Try your shake, Nana."

Millicent took a sip and smiled. "Ummm. I haven't had one of those in years."

"How come?" Emily asked as she reached for her shake.

"I didn't want to get fat."

Em tilted her head as if it was the strangest notion she'd ever heard. "You're not fat. You're really pretty." She reached for a fry. "You should have all the milkshakes you want."

Millicent positively beamed. "So tell me, Emily. How is school?"

"It's ok"

"Are you keeping your grades up?"

"They're ok."

Jeff chimed in. "All A's." He tugged at his daughter's long braid. "Smart as a whip."

"Really?" Millicent smiled, again. At him. "You're just like your father."

"Daddy says you're smart too. Went some place called...Vassel?"

"Vassar. It was an all-girls school back then."

"Did you want to be a doctor?" Everyone Emily knew was in medicine.

"No, I studied English literature and Secondary Education. I thought I might be a teacher."

Jeff stopped chewing. Millicent Prescott a teacher? Why did he not know this?

Emily continued. "Like in college?"

"No, high school."

"Teach what?"

"The classics, '*Pride and Prejudice*', '*Great Expectations*', '*David Copperfield*'."

"Isn't he a magician?"

Millicent laughed. He was going to have to check her blood work, do a tox screen. "No dear, it's the story of the life of a young boy in seventeenth century London. His mother marries a man who treats him cruelly and when she dies he send him to work in his factory. He eventually escapes the factory and the story follows him as he goes through his life and the people he meets and the love he finds."

"Wow."

"I'll get you a copy if you like."

Emily smiled then shoved a fry in her mouth. "That would be cool. So how come you didn't become a teacher?"

"I'd already had an offer from Oak Dale High School. But I met your grandfather the summer I graduated. He swept me off my feet," she said wistfully.

Emily's glance darted between them.

"It means they got serious really fast," Jeff said.

"We were engaged by fall and married before Christmas."

"Cool," Em murmured as she sipped on what was left of her shake.

Millicent glanced out the window, her eyes wet with unshed tears.

"Do you miss him a lot, Nana?"

"Every day, dear. Every day."

"Like Daddy misses Mom?"

Millicent faced her with a sad smile. "Exactly like that."

Before he'd realized he'd done it he'd reach for his mother's hand, patting it softly. His pager brought reality crashing back, specifically back to the ER. "I'm sorry ladies, I have to run."

"I'll have them box the rest of your meal."

"Thank you, Mother." He smiled at her in a way he hadn't felt in years. "We'll have to do this again," he said and surprisingly, he meant it.

"That would be lovely, dear."

"Em, go back to my office and stay there."

"She can stay in my office," Millicent offered. "I have a few books she can look at. Much better than all that reality show nonsense."

Jeff hustled down to the ER thoroughly confused.

Chapter Seven

“Are you nuts?” George was never one to mince words.

“Wouldn’t that be your call?” replied Jeff.

George Lynch had been Jeff’s best friend since the sixth grade when he’d come to George’s defense in a school yard brawl. Ever since they’d had each other’s back. Through high school angst, college crisis, medical school, George’s divorce. Jeff didn’t know what he would have done without him when Maggie died. George flew to Chicago when it happened. He put his life on hold for more than a month while Jeff drank himself stupid. Determining that he’d indulged in enough self-pity, George smacked him upside his head, threw away the scotch and told him to get a grip. Pretty unorthodox therapy for a shrink.

“Yes it is my call and you’re officially nuts,” replied George. He ran his hands through his hair in desperation. “What the hell were you thinking, hiring a patient, and a complete stranger at that?”

“I had Henry run a check on her. Her husband is bad news but she’s never had so much as a parking ticket.”

“That’s another thing. What about the husband?”

“Jail. Sara pressed charges.”

George flopped in the chair next to Jeff’s desk. “She’s a battered woman. I’ve treated enough to know she’s very fragile right now. How do you think she’s going to hold up under the stress of caring for you and Emily?”

Jeff stopped pretending to make notes on a patient’s chart and looked up.

“What about her family?”

Jeff sighed. “Mother died when Sara was a kid. Father drank himself to death five years ago.”

“Henry was thorough,” replied George.

“He always is.” Jeff didn’t tell him how thorough. He was taking enough heat as it was.

“Jeff, I know she’s in a tough spot, but there are shelters, agencies. There are procedures for cases like hers.”

“Emily’s crazy about her.”

“Is she the only one?”

Jeff tossed his pen on the desk. “George, give me a break. I haven’t laid a finger on her that wasn’t in the line of duty.”

“How long will that last when she’s under your roof? She’s very pretty, or she will be when the bruises heal. You’ve been alone for nearly a year.”

Jeff’s heartbeat tripled.

George rested his hand on Jeff’s arm. “I was the psychiatrist called in on her case, you know that. You called me. You’ve seen my report, trauma due to long-term abuse. Do you want this damaged woman taking care of your child?”

Jeff grabbed George’s comforting hand in a death grip. “You could tell me if you thought she was dangerous.”

“You know I can’t break privilege, but no, in my opinion, she’s not a threat. However, this woman is carrying a ton of baggage.” He stood and headed toward the door. “First day of med school Jeff, you can’t save everyone.”

“I’m not trying to save her.”

“Aren’t you?”

Chapter Eight

Daylight streamed through the tiny window, creating a striped pattern across the bed. A scruffy, slight man with thinning dull brown hair pulled at his oversized orange jumpsuit. Jimmy Bridges didn't mind being a resident in the Prescott city jail. Three hots and a cot wasn't such a bad deal. The bed was more comfortable than the one in the trailer, those times he'd used it. Most nights he passed out in front of the TV in his beat up recliner. He fell back on his cot, bouncing off the springs. Swinging his legs up on the mattress, he stared at the ceiling. He couldn't figure how she could leave him in here an entire week. She had to drop the charges. She was too stupid to earn a living. He'd been taking care of the useless bitch since high school. When he got out he'd take care of her all right...once and for all. Nobody messed with Jimmy Bridges.

"So whatch'a in for?" asked a skinny kid with bad skin.

Jimmy looked up at his cellmate. Standing in front of him was a tall red haired string bean in desperate need of mouthwash. These were the first words he'd spoken since he'd been brought in at two a.m. last night, drunk and out cold.

"Christ, kid, is that the best you can do? You sound like an old movie?"

The kid puffed his chest out. "Hey, I'm no kid. I'm twenty two."

"Oh yeah, your real manly, manly enough to be your cellmate's girlfriend."

The kid's face blanched. "Relax, I'm into broads."

The kid relaxed slightly. "So, whatch'a do? I'm in on a drunk driving beef."

Jimmy snorted. "No shit. I was here when they brought you in. I'm surprised you're still alive. Figured you'd choke on your own puke before morning."

"So...?" asked the kid

"So what?" replied Jimmy without moving.

"Whatch'a do?"

Jesus, this kid was pushing it. "Shut the fuck up," he growled.

"You don't scare me, tough guy," boasted the kid "I can handle myself."

Jimmy leapt up and threw the kid against the block wall in one move. Holding the kid by the neck he applied just enough pressure to silence him. "I told you to shut...the fuck...up!" he hissed. Jimmy pressed harder, cutting off the kid's air. His eyes rolled back in his head as he slumped to the floor.

"Hey, what's going on in here?" shouted the guard.

"Kid's passed out. Guess he's not over his bender." Jimmy flopped down on his cot.

"Pick him up," ordered the guard.

"You do it, asshole. That's what you're getting paid for," Jimmy spit back.

Jimmy lay back down and waited. "*Come on, tubby*".

He heard the door open and glanced out the corner of his eyes. "*Shit, tubby brought back up.*" Standing by the door was the second guard, blocking the opening. Tubby caught him looking.

"What did you think, Bridges? I'm stupid enough to turn my back on a weasel like you?"

Jimmy just smiled and turned his gaze back to the ceiling. A smile crossed his face. "*Don't worry Sara, your time will come.*"

Sara stood by the window, looking out at the park, her heart pounding. Her entire life was going to change today. No more Jimmy, no more fear. A real job, a future. Just a few days ago such a thing was unimaginable. Sara had expected life to continue, just as it always had, until it didn't anymore. Like Mama.

That night Jimmy was so drunk and so angry. Just like Papa. Sara rubbed her eyes. Faint images blurred together, pushing their way into Sara's thoughts. Mama crying, the old quilt, the feel of a glass doorknob, darkness. She pushed the blackness away and focused on a fire red Japanese maple tree just outside her window.

No more.

The policeman said Jimmy was locked up and couldn't make bail. She signed the papers that would keep him there. He never had a dime and his worthless friends certainly wouldn't come to his rescue.

No more.

She knew she was intended for more than this. She was certain of it.

When Dr. Goren told her what he would pay her and she tried not to look stunned. She'd never had a real job. With free room and board she'd be able to save her money for the future. He'd even given her an advance so she could get some necessities. All she had what she was wearing, her faded jeans, a pair of padded hospital slippers and a sweatshirt from the hospital gift shop.

She smiled. This may not be what the universe had ultimately intended for her, but it was a start.

Sara looked around her room as Emily gave her an enthusiastic tour. "And this is your bathroom. What do you think, Sara? Do you like it?"

She smiled. Emily was desperate for her approval. "It's very nice, Emily. I like it very much."

Emily beamed. "See Daddy, I told you she'd like it."

Sara turned to see his frame filling the doorway. He pointed to the end table next to the bed.

"That's a mini-fridge. Mrs. Price used to keep her beverages there."

"Wine Coolers," offered Emily.

Her father raised his eyebrows "What? How do you know that?"

"Don't worry, Daddy. She never drank them during the day." Emily turned to Sara. "I couldn't sleep one night and knocked on her door. That's when I saw her. Mrs. Price said she liked to have a 'cold one' after work, but she didn't like the taste of beer."

"Jesus," he muttered.

Sara turned towards him. "I don't drink, Dr. Goren."

He gave her a slight smile and nodded. Her heart skipped several beats. She was going to have to avoid that smile. No sense in tormenting herself. A man

like Jeff Goren would never be interested in her. Besides, she'd just got shed of one man, last thing she needed was another.

"Emily, why don't you get Sara's things out of the car?"

"Okay, Daddy," she replied as she dashed past both of them.

"Sara, sit down for a moment," Jeff motioned toward the bed.

"Is there a problem?"

He noticed the quake in her voice. "No problem. I just want to discuss something with you. Do you remember Dr. Lynch?"

Sara nodded.

"I'd like you to continue seeing him."

Sara shot to her feet. Standing toe to toe, she barely reached his shoulders. "You think I'm crazy?"

He pushed gently on her shoulders and she gave way, falling back down on the bed. "No Sara, I don't think you're crazy. If you'd broken your leg or your arm, I'd send you to an orthopedist. I'd get you therapy for your injuries."

"But I'm better, you said so."

He stroked her shoulder. "Your physical injuries are healing. But you and I both know there's a lot more going on than cut feet and black eyes. Dr. Lynch is going to help you with your other injuries."

Sara cast her eyes down. "What other injuries?" she murmured.

Jeff tucked his finger under her chin and tilted her head to meet his gaze. "It wasn't the first time you'd been hurt. It's been going on for a very long time."

A single tear ran down her cheek. Jeff's heart clenched. He brushed his thumb over her cheek "You need to heal. George will help you."

"Those kind of doctors are expensive," whispered Sara.

"Medical care is free for family."

"I'm not family." She glanced down to the floor. Damn it, she did that a lot.

Jeff smiled and raised her chin to meet his gaze. "Extended family. Don't worry, Sara. It's going to be ok." Jeff put his arm around her small shoulders. He

shouldn't, but he couldn't resist. She needed his strength, almost as much as he needed to comfort her. "Everything will be fine, I promise."

Emily bounded back in the room dragging Walmart bags. She stopped dead. "What's wrong? You're not leaving, are you Sara?"

Sara looked up and smiled. "No Em, I'm fine. I was just a bit overwhelmed by all this. It's a big change for me you know."

Emily approached her slowly, dropping the bags in the doorway. "But you like it here, don't you?"

Sara's heart nearly broke at the quake in Emily's voice. She extended her arms and enfolded her. She slid her onto her lap, not an easy task given her size. "I like it very much Em. But you know I've had a rough time. Sometimes remembering makes me sad."

Emily looked at Sara and love shown bright, in both their eyes. "You won't be sad for long. You'll like it here. I know Daddy says I'm a handful, but I'll be good, I promise."

Sara kissed her forehead. "Be yourself, Emily. Yourself is just fine with me. Now why don't you help me unpack my things?"

Emily gave Sara a broad smile as leapt off her lap and dumped the contents of the large plastic bags on the bed. Sara blushed as the new bras and panties tumbled out along side the jeans and t-shirts. She saw a lovely shade of pink rise on Dr. Goren's cheeks and she couldn't help but smile.

He coughed as he turned towards the door. "I have to get back to the hospital. Emily, you have my numbers if you have an emergency." He smiled and wagged a finger at his daughter. "Remember, having chocolate cake for lunch *does not* constitute an emergency."

"Yes, Daddy."

"Emily will show you the rest of the house. After that I want you to rest."

"I feel fine." Sara protested.

"Doctor's orders. There's enough here for lunch. We'll order out for dinner. I should be back by then." He leaned down to kiss his daughter and retreated from the room.

Sara watched Emily open bureau drawers as she listened to the sound of the front door being locked. She glanced in the wide mirror over the bureau. Dark circles rimmed her eyes. Her hair hung lifeless about her shoulders. She was grateful Emily had talked her in to buying a bit of makeup. She had a few hours to wash away a lifetime.

Emily had taken Sara on a tour of the house. It was a fine home, much finer than any Sara had ever been in, but not so grand as she'd expected for a family as wealthy as the Prescotts. The nurses told her about Dr. Goren's family and how they owned most of the town. The house was a respectable colonial, set in a fairly new development with other respectable colonials. There were four bedrooms upstairs, one used as a guest room, with a sturdy but unremarkable queen size bed and serviceable furniture and linens. It appeared not to have been used in some time.

One room was as an office lined with shelves of books that looked expensive, with heavy dark bindings like she'd seen in the library, in the section she never went in. The center of the desk was strewn with papers. Poking out from the debris was a flat screen monitor. In the far corner was a small, well used couch. The end tables were filled with more debris, several coffee mugs and a small portable TV.

"Daddy doesn't like anyone in his office except Mrs. Prince would sneak in once in awhile to clear out the coffee mugs. Otherwise Daddy would yell that someone had taken them all."

Emily's room was a sweet little girl's room, and though Emily was nearly as tall as Sara, she was after all, a little girl. The room was filled with a canopy bed with white lace covers and pale pink wallpaper with delicate flowers. Sara had never seen so many dolls, not even in a toy store. Emily had her own television too. Respectable colonial homes were very nice places indeed.

The master suite was enormous, half the size of the trailer. On the far wall was a king size bed covered with linens of bold, dark stripes. The wallpaper was a thin pinstripe, reminding Sara of a man's fancy suit. The master bath had the

biggest tub she'd ever seen, but the tub, like the bed would have to be large to accommodate his frame. There were metal heads circling the rim of the tub. It must be a Jacuzzi. She'd seen them on TV.

It a man's room, right down to the dirty underwear on the bathroom floor. Sara smiled. Rich or poor, men were all the same. She bent down to pick up the laundry.

"Oh no Sara, Daddy said no work for you today." Emily grabbed up the laundry and threw it in the nearby hamper.

After the tour Emily had helped Sara find her way around the kitchen. She made them both ham and cheese sandwiches. Emily protested when Sara made her drink her milk. She grumbled a bit less when Sara finished a big glass herself.

Emily was tucked in her room playing video games on her own television. She'd bargained to behave and stay in her room if Sara would take a nap. "Daddy said you have to rest, Sara."

She smiled at the dear face. "Ok, Em. I'll take a nap. But wake me up in an hour." She walked about the house, ensuring all the doors were locked before she went to her room and closed her eyes.

Her room. Her bed.

She would do a good job. She would keep a good house and take good care of Emily and Dr. Goren wouldn't regret taking pity on someone like her.

Sara brushed Emily's long silky hair. It felt cool in her hands, like soft silk. She parted the hair and began to braid the long strands. She looked into the mirror, but it wasn't the square mirror over her bureau. It was the antique oval from her childhood, cracked in the corner and never quite clean. Emily's face did not look back, it was her own as a little girl. Mama was sitting behind her on the bed braiding her hair, just as she had every morning before school.

"Mama?" she whispered.

"Yes, Sara?"

“Where have you been?”

“What a silly thing to ask. I’m right here. Where else would I be?” Mama smiled. She had such a pretty smile.

A tear slid down Mama’s cheek.

“What’s wrong Mama?”

“Hush now Sara.”

A bruise appeared on her mother’s cheek.

“Mama!” she screamed.

“Hush now Sara. You must be very quiet. Papa’s resting.”

Mama’s eyes began to swell, turning purple then black. Blood flowed from her nose and mouth. Mama’s mouth opened in a silent scream.

Sara gave the scream voice.

“Sara, Sara, wake up.”

She felt a small hand shaking her shoulder. She opened her eyes and saw a terrified Emily standing next to her bed. “You were having a nightmare,” she whispered.

Sara sat up and tried to straighten her clothing. “I’m sorry I scared you.”

Emily’s face grew stern. “I wasn’t scared. I was getting a drink in the kitchen when I heard you. I thought you might be scared.”

Sara folded the girl into her arms and kissed her silky hair. “I was a bit. Thank you, Em,” she whispered.

“Daddy says if you talk about your nightmares they go away.”

Sara hugged her tight. “I don’t remember.” She lied. She looked around for a clock. “What time is it?”

“About four, I think.”

“What?” Sara bolted off the bed. “Your father will be home soon.” She found the towels in the bathroom. “Darn it! I didn’t get any shampoo.”

Emily was gone and back in a flash with shampoo, conditioner and a robe tucked over her arms. “You didn’t get one when we were shopping.” Emily fingered the white chenille “I’m so big this will probably fit you. Nana gave it to me last year

for Christmas. She said she had to buy it in the ladies department because I'm so...gangly."

Sara set down her towels and the bottles. Taking the robe from the girl's arm, she tilted her face up and placed a kiss on Emily's nose. "You're perfect," she whispered.

Emily's smile brightened Sara's heart like nothing ever had. She could mean something to this girl. She could do some good. She could help.

Sara smiled and swatted playfully at Emily's bottom. "Now go make sure things are picked up and you might want to find me a blow dryer."

"I can help you with your hair like I did in the hospital."

"That would be nice."

Chapter Nine

It had been another long day. He was tired and sore and ready for a hot meal, which he'd have to order, since he'd given Sara explicit directions to rest. He almost wished he'd been more an employer and less a doctor. At least then he wouldn't have to wait for the delivery boy from the Asian Garden to get lost, again.

He threw his keys on the sideboard and flipped through the mail. From the back of the house he heard a sound he'd not heard in his home in a long time, laughter. He wasn't surprised to find the source of the merriment in Sara's room. Emily was brushing out Sara's thick black hair. Her eyes weren't as dark as they had been and he thought he saw traces of blusher and mascara. A pale blue knit top fit snugly against her slight frame. Dark blue jeans hugged her bottom. Jeff's jeans got noticeably tighter.

"Hello you two."

"Hi Daddy," Emily squealed as she bounded towards him for a kiss. "I was helping Sara with her hair."

"I can see that. Did you rest, Sara?"

"Yes, I did." Sara and Emily exchanged a conspiratorial glance he decided not to challenge. He rubbed his hands together. "I'm starved. How 'bout Chinese?"

"I want pot stickers," Emily chimed.

"Pot stickers for the beautician, and you Sara?"

Sara glanced down. "I'll have whatever you're having."

"I have a menu."

"That's ok. Anything will be fine."

Jeff sighed. "Sara, you can make your own choices here. You don't have to do what every else does."

Sara whispered, "I wouldn't know what to order."

"What?"

"I've never had Chinese food."

“You’ve never had Chinese?” asked Emily. “How come?”

“There aren’t any Chinese restaurants where I came from. I’ve only lived here for about six months. My husband didn’t like to go out a lot.”

Jeff felt like he’d stepped in a big pile, again. He was always doing that with her.

“Do you like chicken?” he asked.

“Yes.”

He could barely hear her. “Do you like spice? Not a lot, but some.”

She nodded.

“General Tso.”

“Who?”

“General Tso Chicken. Trust me, you’ll love it.”

Forty minutes later, a land speed record by delivery boy standards, the three of them were feasting on General Tso Chicken, pot stickers, beef and mixed vegetables and a large order of vegetable lo mien.

“How come you never had Chinese food?” asked Emily.

“I come from a small town in West Virginia called Catfish Creek.”

Emily giggled at the name.

“I thought it was a funny name too. It’s mostly farms and there’s a Dairy Queen, but not much more, not even catfish.”

“What about Italian food?”

Jeff reached for his daughter’s hand and pressed it. “Now, Emily that’s enough. Let Sara finish her food.”

Sara looked at him and smiled. “I don’t mind. I haven’t had much Italian food.”

Emily turned to her father. “We’ll have to go to *Mario’s*. They have great garlic knots.”

“Sounds delicious,” said Sara with a smile.

Jeff looked over the large kitchen table at the cartons and smiling faces. Emily laughed as she tried to show Sara how to use chopsticks. This time, Sara laughed too. It was a sound he wanted to hear more.

“How do people use these things?”

“I never could master them either and the little minx delights in pointing that out.”

Emily smiled as she gracefully dipped her dumpling in sauce and took a bite. Jeff handed Sara a fork. “Here. Don’t let the munchkin intimidate you.”

Sara smiled as she took the fork from his hands, her fingertips grazing his. He slipped a plump piece of chicken in his mouth as he watched Sara enjoy her first Chinese meal. He could get used to this.

There are rules Jeffy boy.

Chapter Ten

He should have been home hours ago to tuck Emily in bed. When he called to say he'd be late, Emily had already done her homework and was surfing the net with Sara. It was past eleven and they were both most likely fast asleep. He set his keys down and flipped through the mail.

"Dr. Goren?" He heard Sara whisper from the kitchen.

"Yes, Sara. It's just me." He walked into the kitchen and froze. Before him stood a sleepy-eyed beauty. Her ebony hair was loose about her shoulders. Moonlight from the bay window shown across her nearly pristine skin. He could almost forget the way she looked that first night.

Almost.

Sara tugged at the robe and glanced down. "I'm sorry. Emily gave it to me. I forgot to buy one and she said I could use it."

It took a minute for Jeff to realize what she was talking about. He was glad she didn't know what he was really thinking. He coughed as he walked toward the refrigerator. "Don't give it a thought, Sara. Em has several robes." Clutched against her chest was a volume from the rarely used bookcase in the den. He moved closer, *Great Expectations*.

"Would you like some dinner?"

He looked at her and sighed, a savior in a chenille robe. "God, yes! I'm starving. There was a pile-up on the turnpike and we were stacked up all night. I haven't had anything but coffee since lunch."

Sara smiled and pushed him toward the kitchen table. "Sit. There's plenty of stew left." Thanks to the local market's online delivery service the house was stocked with enough fresh meat and veg that even Rachael Ray would be proud. Sara quickly threw a large container in the microwave. Pulling what look liked fresh biscuits from the bread box, she covered them in a damp paper towel. As soon as the first container was finished she popped the rolls in after them. In less than five minutes his first home cooked meal in months was piping hot in front of him. Sara poured him a large glass of milk.

"Milk?" he asked.

“What is it with this family and milk? Emily makes the same face.” She smiled and shook her head. “It’s nearly midnight. You’ve had enough caffeine for one day. Just drink it.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he smiled and tossed a large chunk of beef in his mouth. “Mmmmm, delicious.”

Sara glanced down at the floor. “Call me when you’re finished and I’ll get the dishes.”

He reached for her hand. He wanted to touch her. At least he was honest enough with himself to admit it. But more than that, he wanted her to look up. Look at him, look at the world. “Keep me company.”

“Ok,” she whispered and she slid in the chair next to him.

Jeff smiled and tore into the hot biscuit. “Oh Sara, this is great.” He popped a wedge of potato in his mouth.

“I warned you I don’t know anything fancy.”

Jeff shook his head. “No, this is terrific. Emily and I have been eating take-out or at my mother’s for months, neither of which is good for the digestion.”

Sara smiled. “Emily did seem to enjoy it.”

He glanced up from his plate. “You got my Emily to eat carrots, potatoes...celery? Are you sure? Emily Goren, tall girl, looks like me, poor kid, actually ate her vegetables?” He smiled as he reached for his milk. “We’re off to a very good start.”

Chapter Eleven

“Good morning, dear.” Millicent Goren stood in his office doorway. Today’s uniform was a chocolate brown Armani suit, complimented by a gold necklace and matching earrings. The jewelry was just the right size on her slight frame, but not so small as you couldn’t tell they could be traded for a good used sedan, newer model.

“Good morning, mother. What can I do for you?” Jeff said glancing back down at the chart he was trying to update.

“Why do you assume I want something? Can’t I just stop by to say hello to my only child?” Even she didn’t look like she believed what she said. “I thought you might buy me breakfast.”

“You don’t eat breakfast.”

“Oh, now you’re just being difficult.”

Jeff sighed and closed the chart. He stood and closed the distance between he and his mother, at least the distance in the room. “I’m sorry,” he said as he kissed her cheek. “I’d love to grab coffee with you but I’m due in the ER.”

She brushed his arm and glanced up into his eyes. Jeff was taken aback. He saw Mom, not Mother. Mom from when it was ‘Mom and Dad’, one phrase, one unit. “I’m free for lunch,” he offered.

Mom smiled. “That would be lovely, dear.”

“I’ll stop by your office around noon.” He kissed her again, this time meaning it. He watched her perfectly tailored suit disappear down the hall. “Odd,” he muttered. He returned to his desk and tapped his tablet. He was determined to finish documenting Mr. Mendez broken ankle before Marsha started paging him to the ER.

“Hey, how about coffee? I’m buying.” George was standing in Jeff’s amazingly busy office door.

He tossed his pen down and slammed the metal folder shut. “Ok, what the hell is going on? First my mother, then you.”

George's face softened. "What?" Jeff shouted.

It hit him like a thunderbolt. He flipped the pages of his desk calendar. October 18. He raked his hands through his hair. "Oh my God, I forgot." He collapsed back against his chair and stared plaintively at his friend. "How could I have forgotten?" Jeff whispered.

George took the chair opposite. "Things get crazy around here."

"Bull."

"Don't beat yourself up."

"There's no excuse. How could I have forgotten the first anniversary? I forgot and everyone else remembered? There must be something wrong with me. I should be locked in a room drinking." George looked at him askance. "Or in a church or...Emily! Christ, George. She's going to think I'm a heartless bastard."

"Jeff, you think about Maggie every day, don't you?"

"Every time I look at Em."

"Are you still drinking, like in Chicago?"

Jeff looked at him with disgust. "Of course not. You know that."

"Yeah, I know that, buddy," he said softly. "I also know you don't need to mark the anniversary of your wife's death to still mourn her."

Another wave of pain hit him. "Christ, George...October 18th."

"Yeah."

He looked at the family portrait on the credenza. The last Christmas, the last normal holiday. Mom gave Maggie pearls she knew she would never wear. Dad gave Emily a copy of Grey's Anatomy, which Jeff instantly confiscated, deeming it to graphic for a seven-year-old

"Why didn't she say something? She has no problem making me feel guilty about everything else in my life."

"I don't know, Jeff."

"Dad died and I came back here to help out. I didn't get back until..." Jeff remembered the call from his mother, the calm, detached voice he barely recognized. He'd flown back to help with the details, details that had taken weeks.

He'd no sooner flown back to Chicago than Maggie had been killed by a drunk driver. Then it was Millicent's turn to help.

He looked to his friend. "George, I need...hell, I don't know what I need."

George came around the desk and sat on the edge. "Call Barnett, have him cover for you. Then take the day off. Go be with your family." He put a hand on Jeff's shoulder. "Doctor's orders."

Jeff nodded.

He moved down the hallway, not sure what he was doing or what he could say. He walked through his mother's office door. "Mom?"

"Yes, dear?" she said with what he saw was false bravado. Cracks in the hard shell of Millicent Prescott.

Jeff realized he was crying for the first time since Maggie's funeral. "I'm sorry, Mom. Can you forgive me? His mother got up from her desk and took him in her arms. Sobs escaped him. "I'm so sorry. How could I have...?"

"Hush, dear," she whispered as she stroked his back. "It's ok. I understand."

He looked into her eyes and realized, more than anyone in the world, she did understand.

Jeff sat in his car staring at his own front door. Maggie had never lived here. Once he'd decided to move back to Prescott everything had been done via phone and email. Millicent had taken care of the realtor, pronouncing the home fit for her grandchild. It was too big he thought, too many rooms, too much to take care of. Millicent had insisted her granddaughter needed to keep things as normal as possible. He'd resisted the urge to point out that Emily had only lived in apartments, usually located within walking distance of whatever hospital at which he and Maggie were working. Jeff hadn't had the energy to argue. He hadn't had the energy for much of anything.

How could have time gotten away from him? They'd moved in right before Christmas. He'd had to find help to keep his home and his daughter in line. There was no issue with the former, the latter, however, became problematic. Emily was

in an explorer phase. That was the euphemism George called it. Jeff called it the 'which grownup can I make crazy' phase. The answer was, usually, him. A procession of practical jokes, inappropriate pets and incessant questioning that would have made Clarence Darrow proud, had run off four housekeepers in five months. Then he'd found the no-nonsense Mrs. Price. She kept a sparkling house, and was able to largely ignore the frogs, bugs and field mice playmates, having raised four boys.

In between the revolving door housekeepers and more intentional groundings than an NFL game, he and Emily had managed to put together some kind of life. He went to work and Emily went to school and life went on, without Maggie.

Emily wouldn't be home for at least another couple of hours and he still didn't have a clue what he would say. He saw curtain move and caught a glimpse of Sara peaking out. He checked the rearview to see deceptively clear eyes. Grabbing his medical bag he locked to car and headed toward the house. She was waiting in the foyer. No pretending she wasn't watching, not Sara.

"I was beginning to worry," she said.

"About what?" he said, reaching for the mail on the side table.

"You were sitting in your car for a nearly an hour."

Jeff's head snapped up. An hour? He'd been sure it'd been only a few minutes, fifteen at most. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to worry you."

He slipped off his windbreaker and Sara took it as she reached for his bag. She set them inside the coat closet and turned back to him as if he'd forgotten to give her something.

"Have you eaten?"

"Lunch?" he laughed.

"I didn't even get breakfast." He followed her toward the kitchen

"If you hadn't run out of here so fast you would have." Sara whirled around so fast he had to grab her by the arms not to bowl her over. She looked stricken. "I'm sorry, Dr. Goren," she said quickly. "That was disrespectful." She glanced down and Jeff noticed her tightly clenched hands. "I shouldn't talk like that."

He rubbed his hands lightly up her arms. "Sara, you were stating fact, not being disrespectful." She glanced up. "I've gotten so used to living on bad coffee and vending machine food that I'm not used to having the option of a healthy meal."

She smiled. "Well then let me make you some lunch," she said heading back toward the kitchen.

"I'm not really very hungry,"

She turned again, this time hands on hips as if to say, "*Didn't we just have this conversation?*" She opened the fridge and peeked in. "It's kind of chilly today, a good day for a grilled cheese sandwich and tomato soup."

"That sounds perfect." He sighed as he sat at the kitchen table and began thumbing through the day's mail, forcing normal into a very abnormal day.

Sitting before him on were a perfectly grilled cheese sandwich, a steaming bowl of tomato soup, a plate of saltines.

"Saltines? he asked

"For the soup. You can't have tomato soup without crackers," she replied as she set a glass milk in front of him.

"Again with the milk? Do you secretly work for the dairy industry?"

"Drink it, it's good for you," she smiled. "Just stating fact."

Jeff smiled as he bit into his All-American lunch.

"Why are you home so early?" Sara asked.

The vague feeling of peace that'd come with his hot lunch instantly fled. "I need to talk to Emily."

Sara paled. "Is everything all right?"

"Yes...no." He took another sip of milk and absently thought it beat diet soda. "Today is October 18th. It's the one year anniversary of my wife's death."

"Oh," she said quietly. "That explains it."

"Explains what?"

"Emily's usually more chatty in the morning. I thought she might just be tired. You know how she likes to stay up late reading."

He didn't know. There was so much he didn't know. "I forgot! I forgot the anniversary I didn't say anything to her before she left for school and she must think I'm a heartless bastard."

She covered his hand with hers. "Of course she doesn't. She loves you."

He could hear Sara moving about the kitchen from his spot on the family room couch. He hadn't realized what a comforting sound that was until now. He looked out into the backyard where he spent almost no time. It was a beautiful showpiece, carefully maintained by his mother's people. He really ought to figure out which tree was which. After all, he was a Prescott. The family fortune was built on flowers and trees of every variety. There was so much he didn't know.

"Hi Daddy." She'd come in without a sound. His Em, quiet. Yup, heartless bastard. His kid was hurting and he should have known.

"Hi, pumpkin."

She came towards him and slid into his lap. He did his best to hold her close. She may have been over five tall but she was still his little girl. He kissed her forehead, still searching for words.

"Daddy, what's a rough patch?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Uncle George said that's what you had after mom got killed."

Jeff cringed at the memories. Shouting, crying, drinking. He thanked God every day he'd had George to see him through.

"You know that stretch of road right before you hit Mario's?"

"The one with all the potholes?"

"Yeah"

Emily gave a small laugh. "You always swear when you hit them."

"I do not," he claimed.

She drilled him with a gaze.

"Okay, yes I do. That section of road between Main Street and Charles Avenue sucks. It bounces the car up and down and everyone in it. It makes it tough

to control the car. It's really unpleasant and wrecks my suspension. That's a rough patch." He sighed, remembering all those nights after Maggie when he didn't know how he was going to survive without her. "I think what Uncle George meant was after Mom died I was I felt like I couldn't control things. I was all over the place. Most of all, I was really angry."

"At the man who killed Mom?"

"Yeah, baby I was mad at him. He did a really stupid thing by drinking and driving and it cost Mom and him their lives." He looked into his daughter's eyes. There was one thing he could never do with Emily, he could never lie. "Em, I was mad at Mom, too."

"You were?"

Jeff thought he saw her lip quiver. "Yeah, baby, I was. I was mad that she left me, left both of us. I loved her so much and then she was gone and I..."

"I was mad at her too," Emily said as she began to cry. Her words spilled out. "Why did she have to work so late? If she hadn't been working late she'd have been home when that man was driving and nobody would be dead."

She looked at Jeff as she'd just been caught in the worst thing she'd ever done. He hugged her tight and whispered, "I felt the same way, baby. I thought the same thing and it made me really mad and I had a really hard time handling it"

"That's why Uncle George came to stay with us?"

"Yeah, he wanted to make sure we'd be okay."

"He tucked me in and read to me every night. He promised everything would get better."

"Do you think things are better?" he asked, dreading her answer.

"Yeah. You aren't mad all the time or drinking like you did in Chicago."

Jeff cringed. He'd been a real jerk. "How are you feeling?"

"Okay, I guess. I miss her a lot." She looked at him and said in a whisper "But sometimes I'm still really mad."

"Me too, baby. And that's okay. We're supposed to be sad that she's gone. And it's normal to be mad."

"Do you think Mom can see us?"

Damn if Emily hadn't blindsided him. Religion had never been a big factor in his life. He'd gone to CCD and attended Mass with his parents, but like most Catholics he knew, he was well and truly lapsed. Emily had never been sent to CCD, a large point contention with his mother. Now what? The only thing he possible with Emily, an honest answer.

"Yes Em, I do think she can see us. I think she's in heaven with God. I think she watches over us."

Emily seemed to consider this. "Do you think she's mad at us?"

"For what, baby?"

"For being mad at her?"

He kissed her forehead. "Oh, no, sweetheart. Mom understands."

'Mom understands', present tense. And now he understood. He truly believed that Maggie was watching over them and she would always be with them in the best possible way, through their daughter. He felt tears fall as a lightness filled him, something vaguely resembling peace.

"Emily, what do you think about us going to Mass tomorrow?"

"So we can talk to Mom?"

"Yeah, and maybe to God, so long as we're there."

"We should ask Nana to come too so she can talk to Grandpa."

"That's a very good idea, pumpkin."

Jeff held his daughter tight and started humming an old lullaby. This time he didn't notice Sara watching.

Chapter Twelve

Breakfast was no longer the hurried affair it had been in the Goren household. In fact, food was actually involved, not processed, prepackage food stuffs, real food. He smelled sausages and fresh coffee before he made it to the kitchen. He heard his daughter chatting away. Sara stood at the stove rolling sausages across the griddle.

“Hi Daddy,” Emily called.

He bent low to kiss his daughter’s forehead. “Good morning, love.” He stepped back and gave her a closer examination. Her hair had been arranged in that French braid thing she and Sara did to each other. Her clothes appeared to match as did her shoes. As he joined Emily, Sara placed a full plate in front of him.

“Where’s yours?” he asked.

Sara wiped at the stove with a rag. “I’ll get something once I finish here.”

“Sara, get a plate and join us. This isn’t Victorian London and there isn’t a servant’s hall.” She put two sausages and a small mound of scrambled eggs on a plate. She’d no sooner taken her place across from Emily than the girl bounded to her feet.

“I’m done. I promised Kathy I’d walk with her to the bus stop.”

Grabbing her arm was the only way to stop her momentum. “Wait. Who’s Kathy?”

“Kathy Spencer. She moved in the house across the street. Her dad just got transferred here.”

Jeff had a vague memory of moving vans. “And you met her when?”

“Yesterday. Sara said it was ok if I went to say hello.” Emily looked over her shoulder at Sara with a bit of exasperation. “She came with me.”

Jeff glanced at Sara. “I met her mother, Nancy. They just moved here from Tulsa. She was glad to have someone Kathy’s age in the neighborhood. She asked if they could go out together trick or treating. I said yes. I hope that was okay.”

“Of course. They’ll collect plenty of candy in this development.”

Emily tugged at Jeff's hand. "Daddy, I have to go. Kathy's really, really shy and I promised to walk to the bus with her. She'll be really upset if I'm late."

He pulled her close for a kiss. "Go." He released her arm and she darted out the door. "I don't know where she gets it. She's always doing things like that."

"Taking in strays."

He glanced over at Sara and her gaze was fixed on her untouched meal. He grasped her hand lightly.

"Sara, you're no stray. You're helping us as much as having a job helps you." Jeff stared at his food looking for the right words. "Emily has a way of finding people who benefit from her particular type of...energy."

Sara smiled just a bit. "She does have a way of lighting up the room."

Jeff patted her hand and pulled back, despite the fact it was the last thing he wanted to do. "Now I'm not leaving until you finish your breakfast and my boss gets snippy when I'm late."

Sara moved in an orderly fashion from room to room. She was used to keeping a clean house. Jimmy insisted on it. If anything didn't meet his approval, she might get a backhand, if she was lucky. It seemed odd that she could dust and vacuum and straighten this huge house as quickly as she could the trailer. New furniture seemed easier to clean. In the trailer everything was so old and worn. It was never clean enough.

There were plenty of supplies, fresh bed linens and even a laundry chute to send the dirty clothes to the basement laundry room. She had the last load running while she made a shopping list for the delivery service. Sara paged through a few old cookbooks and came up with a week's menu although she didn't have to cook tonight. Dr. Goren said he'd grab take out on the way home. She would get to taste garlic knots.

Sara looked around the sparkling kitchen. Next the kitchen table was a large sliding window that opened to a beautifully trimmed back yard. He mentioned his mother's 'people' did it and not to be frightened if she saw them. Everything was so new and clean and perfect. It was like she'd fallen into one of those magazine

ads she'd seen at the library. She'd spent a lot of time at the Prescott Library. She read voraciously of a world outside her own, a world with manicured lawns and two-car garages. Now she found herself a part of that world, or at least as a part of it as she could be, like the moon circling the earth.

"Sara?"

"I'm back here, Dr. Goren."

The haggard frame of what was allegedly Dr. Jeff Goren came into the kitchen carrying two large bags of food. "You look exhausted. Sit down for a moment. I have a fresh pot of coffee."

Jeff flopped in the wooden chair. "Ah, Bless you my child," he said in a not unconvincing Irish brogue. Sara giggled as she placed the mug in front of him.

Sara sat in the chair next to him as she gathered what looked like menus together. Mrs. Price had never run such a well planned household. She looked so perfect there. His daughter was happy and well fed and best of all, well monitored. Sara had an instinct for Emily's mischief. She'd successfully convinced his reptile loving daughter that the gardener snake she'd found would be much happier in the garden where she'd found him, all done without pouting faces and histrionics.

"Sara, there is something I want to talk to you about. George has an opening for you tomorrow morning. You can ride in with me."

She glanced up from her list. "George?"

"Dr. Lynch. We talked about this."

The light in her eyes dimmed. She barely whispered "I thought everything was going ok."

Jeff took her hand in his. "Sara, you are doing a terrific job, with the house and with Emily."

Sara glanced up a bit brighter but uncertainty evident. "You still want me to see Dr. Lynch."

"Sara, it's important."

Her chin slumped again. "Yes, Dr. Goren."

“There’s something else I wanted to talk to you about.” Sara practically dissolved into her chair. “Do you think you could call me Jeff?”

He smiled to himself when she looked genuinely startled. “Oh, I don’t think that would be right.”

“All day long at the hospital I get, yes Dr. Goren, no Dr. Goren., by people twice my age. It makes me feel I’m ninety. Jeff was gratified to see a Sara tried to hide a small smile. “I do have a name. I’d like to hear it sometime. I’d like to hear you say it.”

She looked him in the eyes. “Ok...Jeff.”

To hell with the rules.

Chapter Thirteen

Dr. Lynch was a nice looking man, not as handsome as Jeff, but nice. He was about six feet tall with wavy brown hair and warm, kind eyes. His smile could be called disarming, a useful tool for his trade. Despite Sara's reservations, she returned his smile.

"Well, Sara, how do you like working for Dr. Goren?"

"I like it a lot." She smiled. Glancing down, she crossed and re-crossed her legs, hoping her nervous stomach wouldn't growl betrayal.

"You don't want to be here, do you, Sara?"

"Dr. Goren said I needed to come."

"That doesn't answer the question."

"Well...I've never done this before." She rubbed her fingers. Her heart pounded.

"You talked to me in the hospital."

"That was different. You were nice, asked me how I was feeling. It was more like a visit."

"Do you think I won't be nice now?"

Sara's head snapped up. "Oh, no! I didn't mean that."

Dr. Lynch leaned forward. Sara couldn't help but relax just a little. He really did have a kind face. His smile seemed genuine. She still wasn't sure what he was going to do, but what would it hurt? It couldn't be any worse than what she'd already endured.

"Don't worry, Sara. We are going to take this nice and slow. First, why don't you tell me about your husband?"

Sara glanced out the window. The fall leaves were in full color. "Jimmy wasn't always like that you know. We met in high school. He was really nice to me. He took me out, showed me off to his friends, he was really proud of me then."

"He's not proud of you now?"

Dr. Lynch's voice forced her attention away from a bright gold maple tree. "I doubt it. I put him in jail."

“He got himself there, Sara.” She looked into his eyes, sort of amazed. He really meant that. “What was it like being married to Jimmy?” he asked.

“It was okay at first. I was only sixteen, so I didn’t know a lot.”

“Sixteen? Didn’t your father object?”

Sara gave a small hollow laugh. “He had to sign a paper so I could marry Jimmy. He told Jimmy he’d be sorry. I guess he is...now.”

“Isn’t that awfully young to get married?”

“Not in Cat Fish Creek.”

“What now?”

Sara’s brow knitted. “What do you mean?”

“There will be a trial, of course. Jimmy will probably go to prison.”

“I suppose so. I guess I hadn’t thought about it.” Jimmy was gone and that’s all that mattered.

“Will you divorce him?”

“I don’t think Jimmy would let me.”

“He doesn’t have to. Under these circumstances I believe a judge might intervene.”

“Really?” Sara felt suddenly lightheaded. She was just getting used to a life on her own, but a life without Jimmy – forever. She could go back to being Sara Walker. Back to...what? “I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“It’s just something to think about for now. You’ve made a lot of changes in your life already. You don’t have to do everything all at once.”

Chapter Fourteen

Jenny Cruz showed her ID to the sullen deputy behind the desk. This was the tenth time this month she'd shown the same id to the same deputy. It was part of the hazing she'd endured since she was hired as a new public defender fresh off passing the bar. Cops by nature distrusted public defenders and she accepted that. It was their job to toss crooks in jail and, as they saw it, her job to kick them back out on the street. Of course that whole, right to a vigorous defense thing didn't smooth things over when she got a suspect freed because of a procedural error. She smile her best "I will not be defeated" smile "Thanks, Deputy Lester."

Deputy Lester responded with a non-committal grunt. He showed her into the interview room to today's low life benefiting from the Constitution, Jimmy Bridges. His previous PD had hung in long enough for the bail hearing which Bridges couldn't raise. Now, he was her problem. He sat slouched in the cheap metal folding chair and leered at the only person standing between him and hard time at Graterford.

"Well, well, well. Who have we here?"

Jenny sighed, "What we have here, Mr. Bridges, is a waste of skin who enjoys beating his wife and is one quick trial away from being the prom date of every convict on the cell block."

"Well then we'll have to make the most of the time we have," he said reaching towards Jenny in vain, apparently forgetting about the cuffs linked to the metal table. Jenny's briefcase met the table with force, catching Jimmy's hands underneath.

"What the fuck!"

"Oops," she said barely suppressing a grin.

"Hey, you work for me, bitch!"

“No, Mr. Bridges. I work for the Bucks County public defender’s office. They pay my salary. You are merely the beneficiary of their largess, theirs and the founding fathers.”

“Huh”

“Look, Mr. Bridges, I despise defending pond scum like you, but defend you I will.” She unzipped her case and fished out the manila file with the photos of Bridge’s wife, taken in the ER. The bruised and swollen face was bad enough. Worse was the report filed by the ER doctor detailing evidence of a history of abuse. The biggest nail in Bridges coffin was who’d written the report.

“Your best hope is to take a plea. I think I can get the DA to go for assault and battery with five to ten at a medium security facility.”

“What the hell kind of deal is that?”

“It beats the hell out of the twenty to life you could get for attempted murder.”

Jenny threw down the pictures. Jimmy chuckled.

“Juries don’t have much sympathy for wife beaters, Mr. Bridges.”

“She fell.”

“Bullshit.”

Jimmy’s head snapped up from his handiwork.

“The doctor’s report is very clear,” Jenny flipped through pages, “and very extensive. *Mrs. Bridges has extensive contusions about the head, face and neck. Further testing shows evidence of long term abuse dating back decades.*”

“That doctor is full of shit.”

She pointed to the printed name underneath the doctor’s scrawl. “See that?”

“Yeah, so?”

“READ IT!”

Jimmy flinched and sounded out the name. “Doctor Jeffrey Prescott Goren. So what?”

“Even you can’t be that stupid. What hospital was your wife treated in? What company did you work for? What town are we in?”

His voice faltered. “Sara will never testify against me. I’m her husband.”

“Don’t count on it. You’ve been beating her for a long time. This is her way out.”

“She’s nothing without me.”

“Again, don’t count on it. Your wife has already found gainful employment.”

“I don’t believe it. Who’d hire that worthless bitch?”

Jenny spoke through clenched teeth. “Your wife’s employer is the aforementioned Dr. Goren. Pillar of the community, direct descendant of the town fathers and savior of lives. You, Mr. Bridges are a petty thief. Who do you think a jury will believe? Mr. Bridges, it is my legal opinion that considering your previous history, your wife’s injuries and the credibility of the witnesses against you, you’re fucked.”

Jimmy started at her language.

“This is her fault. I’ll convince her...”

“ You are not to make any attempts to contact your wife.”

“You can’t stop me from talking to my own wife.”

“It’s called witness intimidation. Do it and add ten years to your sentence.”

She started pushing files back in her briefcase. “Look, you did this to yourself. The best you can possibly hope for is a plea that gives you a shot at a parole before you’re an old man.” Jenny stood and knocked on the door and hope the deputy hadn’t taken that moment to go to the john. “You’re trial should be sometime after the holidays .”

“What? That’s three months.”

“At least.” She knocked on the door again, Where the hell was the deputy?

“Mr. Bridges, I suggest you consider your options.”

Jimmy stared at the retreating form of his lawyer, barely considering her well-formed ass. He did, however, consider his options.

Chapter Fifteen

“I don’t know what to be?” Emily whined.

Sara placed sausage next to the scrambled eggs on Emily’s plate. “Be yourself, Em.”

“No,” her whine escalated. “For Hallo-weeeeeeen. Kathy’s going as a princess. She showed me. Her mom bought her this pretty pink dress with a poofy skirt and she has a crown and a wand and everything.”

“What did you wear last year?”

Emily pushed her eggs around her plate. “I didn’t go out last year. My mom died a little while before it and my dad...well, he didn’t feel so good. We stayed home. That was Chicago. We moved here right after.”

Sara stared at the girl who looked surprising small at the moment. She knew what she was feeling. She’d felt it herself. “Did your Mom make your costumes?”

“Sometimes. Sometimes she bought them. She was a doctor too so she was pretty busy all the time, like he is. I’ve promised Kathy I’d go with her and I don’t have anything to wear.”

“Do you want to be a princess, too?”

Emily scrunched up her nose. “Nah, that’s too babyish for me. I didn’t say that to Kathy of course.”

“Of course,” Sara smiled. “Do you like superheroes?”

“Nah, besides, we’d never find a costume my size. I’m *gangly*.”

Sara knelt beside the chair and lifted her chin. “No you’re not. You’re the perfect Emily Goren size.”

Emily smiled through watery eyes.

“What do you want to be when you grow up?”

“I don’t know...”

“Who do you most admire?”

“My daddy...and you.”

Sara felt her heart squeeze tight trying to hold on to the pure goodness she was feeling. She placed a light kiss on her forehead. “That is the nicest thing

anyone has ever said to me. Don't worry," she whispered. "We'll come up with something. I promise."

"I hope this works," said Jeff.

"She'll love it." Sara smiled as she placed an old lab coat over a small pair of scrubs hanging off the closet door.

"Will it fit?"

"I can stitch it up if I need to," she replied.

Of course she could. Sara had in only a few short weeks turned his house from a disorganized frantic mess into an efficient, well fed and above all happy home. Emily was more contented than she'd been since Maggie's death. Her homework was done with minimum of fuss, her meals consumed and her mischief-making down to a blessedly non-criminal level. He'd been unaware of his daughter's Halloween angst until his secretary announced Sara's call. He handed her a spare stethoscope.

"Here, she'll need this."

"Oh, that's perfect," she exclaimed as she draped the device around the hanger and tucked the end in the breast pocket.

"I have an old medical bag she can use. It's buried in my office somewhere." He ran upstairs and rooted through his closet. He found himself smiling as he dumped old notepads and pharmaceutical ad pens on the floor. Sara's enthusiasm was infectious.

"Here." He handed her the battered bag.

Sara gave him a broad smile. "It makes her look authentic and she can use it for candy."

The sound of the front door flying open startled them both. "Sara, I'm home," Emily screamed.

"We're in the den," answered Jeff.

Emily bounded into the room. "Hi, Daddy!" She threw her arms around his waist. "You're home early."

Jeff kissed the top of her head. "Hi, pumpkin."

Emily looked up and saw the outfit hanging on the closet door. "What's that?"

"Your dad got all this together."

"It was Sara's idea."

"I thought you might go out as a doctor for Halloween." She pulled aside the lapel. "See. It says Dr. Goren. You can use your father's old medical bag for candy."

Emily ran her fingers over the white fabric. "I could really wear your coat?"

"Actually, it was your Mom's coat."

Father and daughter stared at each other for just a moment, and Sara's heart ached. Ached for the love she witnessed but had never felt.

"Here, try it on." Jeff pulled the coat off the hanger and slipped it on his daughter. Sara bent down and rolled up the sleeves. The hem reached her ankles, but well out of tripping range. He placed the stethoscope around her neck.

"Wow," she said as she fingered the device. "This is cool. Does it work?"

"Sure. Let me show you." He placed the earpiece in her ears and the diaphragm to the right spot on his chest. "Can you hear?"

Emily's eyes widened. "Cool," she whispered.

Jeff smiled to himself at the sudden image of a father-daughter practice.

"Do Sara, do Sara," she called.

Jeff placed the diaphragm on Sara's chest. Emily listened intently. "Wow." Sara looked up at Jeff and he returned her warm smile. Here he was making a Halloween costume for his little girl, with the woman who'd made so many good things.

A weight he didn't know existed lifted from his heart. For the first time he felt something he hadn't felt since Maggie...normal.

Chapter Sixteen

George flipped open a copy of the ancient police report, such as it was. Henry had requested whatever info he could find on Sara's family, the Walker's. There had been a cursory investigation into the death of Sally Walker seventeen years ago. A fall down a flight of stairs, cause of death a broken neck.

Henry pointed to the blood spatter down the walls and Sally Walker lying face down in a large pool of her own blood. He could tell from the blue tinted skin that Mrs. Walker had been in this position for hours. "There's way too much blood for a simple fall down the stairs."

"She was helped down those stairs."

"No doubt."

"Why didn't they pursue it?"

"I talked to the sheriff down there. Lots of domestic disputes at the Walker's. As far as he was concerned this was just one more. He was more concerned with how my call was delaying his deer hunting trip."

"Lovely."

George grabbed a magnifying glass off Henry's desk and aimed it at a small corner of the pool of blood near Sally's head. "Henry, what does that look like to you?"

Henry leaned in close. "Sweet Jesus," he murmured.

"Henry, dig further. I want child welfare reports, anything you can find."

"You know I'm not even supposed to do this for you. It's not like there's been a crime."

George pointed at the old photos. "What do you call that?"

"There are jurisdiction issues."

"You're a charming fellow, Henry. Carol in pediatrics sure thinks so. I'm sure you'll find a way."

Henry sucked in his gut. "She does?"

George smiled. He left the office knowing this was all in a good cause. Now he had to explain to Carol that she found Henry charming.

Dr. Lynch made a note on a long legal pad.

“What was your father like?”

“He was different after Mama died. I tried my best but I was so little. I was always burning dinner. I wasn’t a good cook back then.”

“How old were you when she died?”

“Nine.”

“You were cooking dinner at nine?”

“Papa worked so hard at the mill. He said it was the least I could do.”

“What happened when the dinner burned?”

Sara looked back out the window. The maple was such a beautiful color.

“Sara, what happened?” Dr. Lynch repeated.

“He wasn’t happy,” she whispered.

“What happened when he wasn’t happy?”

“It was my fault. I was useless. I tried but...” her voice trailed away.

“You weren’t useless, Sara, you were nine. No nine-year-old should be taking care of a parent.” His voice softened. “Sara, did he hit you? Sara...?”

She looked into his eyes. They really were kind eyes. He didn’t look at her like the women in the grocery store. “Sometimes,” she whispered.

Dr. Lynch sat back in his chair and made more notes. He glanced back at her and smiled. It wasn’t pity, like the social worker. It wasn’t tolerance, like her teacher. It was kindness. Maybe this town was different after all.

“Why did you get married so young?” asked George.

“People get married younger where I’m from.”

“You’re evading, Sara. Did you love Jimmy?”

“I guess so.”

“You guess so?”

“He was real nice to me and he promised to...”

“He promised to take you away from your father. Tell me about your father.”

Sara stared out the window. *Where were all those people going?*

“Sara?”

“Yes?”

“Your father, what was he like.”

Images flashed, odors, noise. “No Papa, please.”

“Shut up you worthless bitch!”

“I’m sorry about dinner, but you were so late. It doesn’t taste good when it sits to long.”

“So this is my fault! I paid for this food and put the roof over your head.”

Hot grease on tender skin. She felt the pain. She fought through the fog. It wasn’t her pain.

“He wasn’t very nice.”

“To you?”

“To anyone.”

“To your mother?”

She stood and placed her hand on the glass. So many people. So many cars. So many different lives.

“Sara?” George prompted.

“I don’t remember a lot of that. I was little.”

“Okay, we can talk about something else.” George paused giving the silence its own weight. “Did you ever want to be anything else besides a wife?”

Sara continued to look out the window, anything to avoid his gaze. “When I was little I thought about being a teacher.”

“Really?” George smiled.

She turned and faced him. “I know I don’t seem like much to someone like you but I read a lot, have since I was little. My third grade teacher said I was the brightest student she’d ever had. She called me her shining star.” She gave him a defiant smile.

“Sara, why do you think I would have a low opinion of you?”

“Well, I never finished high school and you...” She pointed to the diplomas on the wall. “It looks like you were in school your whole life.”

It surprised her when he laughed. “Sometimes it felt that way. Actually Sara, I think you’re quite bright.”

She looked doubtful.

“You’re well spoken and from what I hear from my goddaughter, a fountain of knowledge on just about everything.”

She blushed. “Well, she’s only eight.”

“And not easily impressed. Trust me. I know my Emily. She can spot a phony a mile off and is not above cutting them down to size.”

“I’ve noticed,” Sara laughed.

“You have a wealth of knowledge acquired on your own. The fact that you don’t have a diploma doesn’t make that knowledge less valuable.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“Sara, why do you read so much?”

“I want to know.”

“What do you want to know?”

She twisted her hands. “Everything.”

“Why?”

The words came out of her in a rush. “I want more.”

“More of what?”

“It’s funny, but I’m not sure. I just know I was meant for more. Does that sound terrible?”

“No, it sounds wonderfully healthy. A proper dose of ambition is a good thing.”

“I haven’t figured out what *it* is yet?”

“You could still teach?”

Sara gave a little laugh. “It’s too late for that.”

“No it’s not. You could get your G.E.D. Take college courses at night. I bet you could get a teaching certificate in no time.”

Sara's eyes lit as though he'd shown her proof positive there really was a Santa Claus. In all his years of listening to pain and heartache these were the moments he lived for, the moments when his patients found hope.

Chapter Seventeen

November brought a last wave of warm weather. Indian summer would last this week only according to the weatherman. Sara opened the French doors and looked out to the backyard. Fresh air washed over her skin and a smile came unbidden to her lips. Mrs. Goren's men were raking leaves. Sara couldn't wait until spring to see the garden in full bloom. Jeff said it was in deference to his mother. The entire town would expect the heir to the Prescott seed fortune to have beautiful gardens.

Her session with Dr. Lynch this morning was okay. He kept asking her about Papa and thinking about that time was difficult. It was like watching an old movie through a lace curtain. He'd also given her a lot to think about. Teaching, was it really possible? She was all a muddle. Maybe she'd talk to Jeff. Walking would help clear her head.

"Em," she called.

Emily came in from the den. "Yeah, Sara?"

"It's too nice a day to stay inside. Do you want to go to the park?"

"Sure. How do we get there?"

"Walk."

"Walk??" Emily looked at Sara like she'd told her they could walk to the moon.

"Yes, walk," Sara laughed. "It's about a half mile from here, up on Quincy."

"Half a mile..." Emily whined.

"Come on, it will be fun. Go put your good sneakers on and get a jacket in case it gets windy."

Emily ran up stairs and was back moments later, sneakers on her feet and jacket in hand. "Should we call Daddy?"

“He said to call him only in case of emergency. I’ll put a note on the fridge.”

The walk to the park was peppered with Emily’s animated description of her science teacher’s collection of bow ties. Sara smiled. She wondered what it was like to be Emily, so young, so care-free, so loved.

Oak Park was twenty five acres of mostly wooded land nestled next to the Goren’s residential community. Foot paths cut their way through century old trees. Large open fields provided space for impromptu games of touch football and soccer. Laughter came from the playground where children crawled over monkey bars and squealed with delight as their parents pushed them higher on the swings. Just as excited was the yipping coming from the only fenced in area, the dog park.

“Oh, let’s go see the dogs.” Emily didn’t wait for Sara’s response, but grabbed her hand and dragged her toward the barking. She pointed at a large dog with a friendly face, black fur on its head and body, white underneath and accented with patches of gold fur on its face and legs. “Wow, look at him. I wonder what kind he is\?”

“It’s a Bernese Mountain dog.” Sara craned her neck “and she’s a she.”

“How can you tell?” Sara looked at her and smiled. Emily blushed. “Oh.”

A small white puffball came to the fence wagging furiously and sniffing. “It’s okay. She’s very friendly,” called an older woman sitting on a bench.

Emily turned to Sara. “Can I go in and see her?”

“I guess it would be okay.”

Sara watched as Emily bent down to pet the dog. “I love poodles,” she proclaimed.

“Actually, she’s not a poodle. She’s a Bichon Frise.”

“That’s right.” Sara hadn’t noticed the owner coming to their side. “Most people don’t know the difference. Her name is Angel.”

“She’s very sweet,” said Sara.

Emily giggled as Angel smothered her face with kisses.

“So is your daughter.”

Sara smiled, not correcting the woman's impression. It was nice, even for a moment to have the world think of Emily as hers. It was more than nice.

It had been a difficult task, but Sara managed to pull Emily away from the dogs and they headed back to the house.

"Sara, how come you know so much about dogs?"

"I read a book about them."

"I want a dog but Daddy says I have to be older. Did your Daddy let you have a dog?"

"No. I never had a dog."

"Don't you like dogs?"

"I like them but my father didn't." Sara flinched as memory flooded back.

"Please, Papa. Mrs. Wilkes says I can have one of Sophie's puppies when their old enough, free."

"I'm not feeding some useless fleabag," he grumbled, never looking away from the TV.

"He can eat scraps from the table. Please, Papa. I'll take care of it. I promise, Please."

Pain shot through her cheek.

Chapter Eighteen

“Hello mother.” Jeff looked away from his patient charts to see Millicent standing over his desk hands on hips, glaring. If they erected a statue to her in the town square, it would be in this position, for very few saw her any other way, including her son.

“What can I do for you?”

“Do you know I saw that woman coming out of George’s office.”

“What woman?” he replied knowing full well who she meant.

“That tra...” Jeff’s flashing eyes cut her short. “The woman you hired.”

“Sara?” Jeff looked back at his charts. “Yes, she’s seeing George.”

Millicent’s voice raised several decibels. “As a patient?”

“Yes, mother,” he sighed. “Mother, I have charts to update.” He shot her his most engaging smile. “My boss is a real taskmaster and does like my paperwork to be late.”

“Don’t be glib with me, Jeffrey. That woman is taking care of MY granddaughter and she’s seeing a psychiatrist. What’s wrong with her? Is Emily safe?”

He tossed his tablet down. “She is MY daughter and yes she is safe. There is nothing wrong with Sara.” Jeff seethed.

“If that’s so then why is she seeing George?”

“Sara’s had a difficult time, more difficult than any of us can imagine. George will help put it behind her and get on with a new life.”

“Yes, Yes, I know. Her husband beat her. You and I both know the abused often turn into abusers. What if she snaps? What if she hurts Emily?”

Jeff didn’t care how right his mother was, he was well and truly pissed. “Not Sara,” he growled.

“I know Sara’s been a help to you and Emily but you have to face reality. You don’t know this woman.”

“I know Sara.”

“Do you? Do you really?” Millicent turned on her heels.

Damn, her. He didn't really know Sara. Not her family, her background. All he knew she was a badly abused woman who was living in his home. He stared at the door, feeling his anger ebb. Hitting the speaker button, he dialed an extension.

“Yeah?”

“George, you free for coffee?”

“I was just about to grab some lunch.”

“I'll buy.”

“Yes you will,” George laughed.

The cafeteria was beginning to fill with the usual suspects, all dressed in various shades of scrubs and hospital uniforms. Jeff and George joined the growing line. Jeff pulled a plastic wrapped roast beef sandwich off the metal counter. George reached for a Caesar salad and both grabbed bottles of juice.

George smiled at the cashier. “Hi Judy. Dr. Goren is buying.”

Two nurses slid out from their booth, remnants of their lunch in hand. “Dr. Goren, Dr. Lynch, over here,” they called.

“Thank you ladies” George flashed his most brilliant smile as they slid into the vacated seats. Both nurses returned the smile and giggled as they exited.

Jeff laughed. “Don't you ever give it a rest?”

“Hey, bud. It wouldn't hurt you to smile at the ladies once in a while. That was Carol and Susan from Pediatrics.”

“I know who they are.”

“Carol is single and Susan's divorce will be final soon.”

“And you know this how?”

“I like to keep up on important info.”

“The staff's marital status is important?”

“Hell yes! Jeff, Maggie's been gone a long time. She wouldn't want you to be alone. She'd want you to be happy. Its time you get back out there.”

“I didn't come here to get fixed up. I want to talk to you about Sara.”

George's face turned from grinning hound dog to concerned friend in an instant. "Is there a problem?"

"That's what I want you to tell me."

George played with his salad. "Why don't you tell me how she's doing?"

Jeff leaned back against the faux leather bench. "She seems good. The house is running smoothly. Emily adores her and I think the feeling is mutual."

"But?" asked George.

"She's always a little quiet when she comes back from seeing you, quieter than usual. You're not pushing too hard, are you?"

George lifted a piece of cheese dotted chicken to his mouth. "Is there a problem other than being quiet?"

Jeff's voice wavered. "You tell me, George. Is she okay?"

"Why the sudden concern?"

"It's my mother."

George nodded his head as he stuffed lettuce in his mouth.

"I know I shouldn't let her get to me, but she did. If there is the slightest possibility Sara could...I would die before I let anything happen to Emily."

George looked up from his lunch. "As it should be." He lowered his voice and leaned closer. "Do I think at this moment in time Sara Bridges is a threat to you or Emily? No, I don't believe so. But you also know there are no guarantees in this business. We've all had patients who were doing great one minute and turned south the next."

Jeff looked at his half eaten sandwich. He'd lost his appetite.

Chapter Nineteen

Houses blurred together as he drove passed. Primal energy had taken over. Jeff needed to see his baby girl. His logical self knew she was fine. But that part of himself had been overwhelmed in a wash of inexplicable fear. Speeding into the driveway, he threw the car in park and yanked the keys from the ignition and fumbled with them until he finally found the house keys. The front door made a dull thud against the wall as he flung it door open.

“Emily! Sara!” Jeff walked toward the kitchen, the usual hub of activity. No reply came.

“Emily! Sara!” he repeated, his voice wavered. He bounded up the stairs.

“Emily! Sara! Are you up here?” Only the ticking of the hall clock answered. This wasn’t right. *Four thirty Saturday afternoon, they should be here. Sara should be making dinner. Emily should be helping. Where the hell are they??*

The front door shut. Giggles rose from the hall and faded as they moved to the kitchen. Jeff bounded down the stairs.

Emily glanced up, her face shining at her father’s unexpected presence. “Hi Daddy!”

“Where the hell have you been!” he roared. He gestured wildly around the room. “I was looking all over for you.”

Emily shuddered. “Sara took me to the park,” she whispered.

“How was I supposed to know that?” he yelled.

Sara’s hand shook as she pointed to the fridge. “I left a note.” The words came out in a barely audible whispered.

He marched over and yanked the note of the door, spraying magnets on the floor.

It was such a nice day I thought I’d taken Emily to the park. We’ll be back before 5.

Sara

Crap. He'd gone off the deep end with a sound push from his mother. Not even that hard a push. Truth was he was ready to believe the worst about the woman who'd made his daughter happier than she'd been since her mother's death. What the hell was wrong with him?" Looking back to Emily he saw a tear run down her cheek.

"Ah, geez Em, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell. I just came home and you weren't here and I didn't know where you were and I kind of freaked." He folded his daughter in his arms.

"Kind of?" she asked.

Jeff gave a small laugh. "Okay. I went completely around the bend."

"That's more like it," she said with the gravitas only an eight year old can muster.

"Sara, I'm really sorry." Jeff turned around to where Sara had been standing. She was gone.

"Sara?" he called. A small hand smacked his hip.

"You scared her, Daddy." Emily pushed him with both hands. "Go find her. Fix it! I love Sara. I don't want her to leave because you went wacko."

"I did not go wacko, young lady."

"Face it, Daddy. You were wacko. Now go fix it!" Emily pushed him towards Sara's room. He wished he could argue with her.

Jeff pushed open the door to Sara's room. The bed was neatly made with a shining white bedspread, Mrs. Prince's old quilt neatly folded at the foot. Everything was just as it had been when it was Mrs. Princes' room with the exception of a vase of wild violets most likely courtesy of Emily and a book on the nightstand, *The Prescott Seed Encyclopedia*.

"Sara?"

She had to be here. She didn't go out the back, he would have seen her as she passed by. She didn't go out the front or upstairs, he would have heard her.

"Sara?" he repeated. He checked the bathroom. Nothing. He stood still wondering how she'd gotten passed him when he heard it. A slight whimper, quick breath, very muffled.

“Sara?” Jeff opened the closet door. Small sneaker-clad feet were visible under the edge of a bathrobe. He pushed the robe aside. Sara was pressed up against the furthest wall with her hands tightly clasped around her knees. She was rocking back and forth, air whooshing in and out of her mouth like a Lamaze student. Tucked between her chin and her knees was an old doll of Emily’s. He knelt down and touched her hand.

“Sara, I’m so sorry,” he whispered. “I didn’t mean to upset you. I’ll never do it again.”

Hollow eyes turned to meet his gaze. “That’s what you always say.”

Chapter Twenty

Jeff's stomach turned in revulsion. Suddenly he was bound to Sara, traveling a lifetime of pain. Images of a frightened little girl, a frightened wife, a frightened life swirled through him. He knew he'd become every abuser she'd ever known and she was running away. Running inside. He had to catch her before he lost her forever.

"Emily," called Jeff, trying not to shout.

"Yes, Daddy?" Emily whispered from directly behind him.

"Go get my bag." He heard her feet pad quickly to the foyer where he always left it. He reached back without turning away from Sara's gaze.

"Thanks Em. Now I want you to call Uncle George. He's number four on the speed dial on my cell phone." He felt the gentle tug as his daughter retrieved the phone from his belt. "Ask him to come right over."

"Uncle George? This is Emily. My Dad would like you to come over. Sara's not feeling well."

Jeff was silently in awe of his daughter's calm voice.

"He said he'd come right away, Daddy," Emily whispered.

"Thank you, sweetheart. Now I want you to go into the den and wait for him."

"Daddy, is Sara going to be ok?"

His heart ached at the crack in her voice. "We're going to take good care of her." Sara continued to rock back and forth, clutching the worn doll.

Waiting until he was sure of Emily's retreat he pulled out his bag and prepared an injection of a mild tranquilizer. Sara flinched but continued rocking as Jeff slid the needle into her upper arm.

"It's going to be ok, Sara. I promise," he whispered, then chided himself. What the hell was he doing? Day two of med school was never promise your

patients what you can't deliver. He wasn't sure he could make this all better. He didn't know if anyone could.

The rocking slowed as Sara's eyes drifted half closed. He reached under her knees and was astonished at her slight weight. Scooping her up, he carried her to her bed. Setting her down, he pulled the old quilt up over her shoulders, tucking Sara and the old doll under it.

He glanced down at the now-still form. "Christ, Sara," he whispered. "What the hell happened to you?"

The voice. So loud. Her head hurt. She tried to close it out but she couldn't move. Screams. Beer mixed with sweat. Her stomach roiled.

The voice, thick and slurred. "You're as worthless as she is. Time to learn how to take care of me the way she should."

Pain seared through her. She struggled for freedom. A scream pierced her, but not her scream.

Jeff dashed to Sara's room at the sound of her cry. He found bolt upright and as white as the chenille bedspread. Her eyes were fixed on some unknown horror. He eased himself onto the bed as he lightly touched her arm.

"Sara," he whispered.

She blinked and turned her head. She was back.

"It's ok, Sara."

Tears slid from her eyes. She hung her head as wrapped her arms around her knees. He couldn't let her retreat. He reached a hand under her chin and tilted her face toward him and looked into those beautiful, sad aqua eyes. He knew in that instant that Sara would never hurt Emily. Her pain was turned inward and it was eating her alive.

"Sara, listen to me. It's going to be ok."

"I'll have to leave." she said in a hoarse whisper.

“No, I don’t want you to go. We’re going to work this out. Dr. Lynch will be here soon.”

“You have to stay.” A small voice came from the doorway. Sara’s tears flowed freer.

“I’m so sorry. I must have scared you.”

Emily approached and slipped on to the bed opposite her father. “I wasn’t scared,” she lied.

Sara glanced down at the doll still in her lap. She grasped its small arm and handed to Emily. “I shouldn’t have taken your doll. I found her in your toy trunk when I was cleaning. She was down at the bottom and she looked so…” Sara’s voice trailed off.

“Lonely?” asked Emily.

Sara nodded. “It’s silly, I know. She’s just a doll and I’m a grown up.” Sara fingered the doll’s blonde curls. “But she was so pretty.”

Emily pushed the doll back into Sara’s hands. “Her name is Victoria. She probably was lonely. I shouldn’t have left her in there.” She closed Sara’s hand around the doll’s body. “You can keep her company now.” Sara managed a slight smile.

Jeff fought back his own tears. Tears of love for a compassionate daughter and tears of anger and frustration over the life that haunted Sara.

“I told you I couldn’t promise something like this wouldn’t happen.” George leaned against the cooking island as he sipped his coffee.

“What could you tell from her exam?”

George set his cup down. “Well, she remembers what happened. That’s a good sign. She remembers you yelling and the overwhelming need to hide.”

“I found her in the closet.”

“Did you see what else was in the closet?”

“What do you mean?”

“She’s stored saltines, a jar of peanut butter, bottles of water.”

“Like a bomb shelter?”

“Exactly. It’s not uncommon for victims of long-term abuse to keep a hiding place. Somewhere they feel safe.” George sighed. “Do you want me to find a facility for her?”

“No,” Jeff replied. “Sara stays here.”

“There’s no guarantee this won’t happen again.”

“I know that.”

“Aren’t you worried about Emily?”

“Sara would never hurt Em,” he answered firmly.

“Again, no guarantees.”

He stared his best friend down. Gut instinct warred with logical thinking. His gut won. “She would never hurt her.”

“What about the emotional strain on Em? Aren’t you concerned about that?”

“It would be worse if I sent Sara away. She stays and that’s the end of it.”

“Well, there’s only one thing that stops me from insisting she be admitted.”

“What’s that?”

George’s face softened. “She didn’t lock the door.”

Jeff saw him look over his shoulder and turned to match his gaze. Sara was standing in the doorway. “Are you all right, Sara?”

“It’s getting late. I should make dinner. Emily needs her dinner.” She took a halting step towards the refrigerator. Jeff closed the distance in one step, grabbing her by the shoulders.

“Whoa there. That shot I gave you hasn’t quite worn off yet. I want you to get back in bed.”

“Emily needs her dinner,” she repeated.

“I’ll order take-out. Mario’s. I’ll get an order of those garlic knots you both like so much.” She provided little resistance as he turned her towards her room. “You like the spaghetti and meatballs, right?” He sat her down on the bed and pulled the quilt back over her frail form.

“Thank you, Jeff” she whispered.

His heart skipped a beat as she spoke his name. “For what?”

Sara's body began to tremble. He pulled her close and her hands fisted his shirt. "I thought you wouldn't want me around Emily anymore."

Jeff felt the warm tears dampen his chest. "We'll get through this. You'll keep working with George. It will all work out, you'll see."

Sad eyes glistened with tears. "Why?" she asked.

He rubbed his thumb across the pale cheek, catching a heavy tear. He knew what she wanted to know but he didn't have the answers. Instead he leaned in and placed a kiss on her forehead then laid her back on her pillows.

"Close your eyes. I'll have Emily bring you some tea."

He stood in the doorway, the door closed behind him. What was he trying to do? Was he playing white knight? All he was certain of was he felt a profound anger. Deeper than when Maggie was killed by the drunk driver. That was a careless act that had cost his wife her life. This was a lifetime of pain intentionally inflicted. If he could, he would reach back in time and kill those who'd done this to her. Struggling to keep his tone even he called for his daughter.

"Yes, Daddy?"

"Why don't you make Sara a cup of tea?"

Her face brightened, happy to be able to help. "I know just what kind she likes. Camisole."

Jeff smiled. "Chamomile."

Chapter Twenty One

“This is more than a crappy marriage,” said Jeff as he pulled two mugs from the cabinet.

“Yeah, I figured that,” replied George

Jeff poured the coffee as he listened to Emily flip channels in the family room. He knew she was upset about Sara but he was also certain of his decision. Sending Sara away would hurt Emily far more than allowing her to stay.

“Did she tell you anything?”

“You know I can’t talk about what she’s told me...”

Jeff reached under the kitchen table for his briefcase. Flipping it up and open, he pulled out a manila folder. “Here. You need to see this.”

George paged through fifteen year old crime scene photos. “Holy crap,”

“And?” Jeff could always tell when George was hedging. It made him a lousy poker player.

“I can say what we haven’t discussed.” George took a sip of coffee to brace himself for a walk on the fine line of medical ethics. “We haven’t discussed...this.” George swallowed hard and Jeff allowed himself a small smile. George had always been a bit squeamish. It had been a miracle of mind over matter that he’d survived first year anatomy. Jeff sipped his coffee but found no comfort in its warmth. He glanced at the photo, the long-dead body of Sara’s mother, the huge blood pool.

George pointed to the same smudges he and Henry had seen. “Tell me they aren’t what I think they are,”

Jeff nodded. “Footprints.”

“They’re small.”

“Too small to be made by an adult.”

“Christ, Jeff. She was there,” He sighed and fell back against his chair. “Was there a trial?”

“Trial, hell. There wasn’t even an investigation. The county coroner –slash - game warden called it an accident.”

George held the picture close.

“What is it?” Jeff asked.

“More light.”

Jeff jumped to his feet and dialed up the dimmer switch. “What do you see?”

George pointed to two small smudges next to the Sally Walker’s head.

“Look at these. They’re too round for footprints.”

“That’s significant? More than a child’s footprints in her mother’s blood?”

“Come on Catholic boy, you should get this one.”

Jeff took the picture from George and looked at the pool of blood surrounding Sally Walker’s head. The small, bloody footprints leading away from the pool toward the front door were horrors he’d viewed a dozen times since Henry had given him the file. He looked closely at two round patches George had identified. The blood was not a deep, dark shade. The two spots showed a thinner layer of color, as if the blood had pooled around something. “Some things,” he thought. He looked towards Sara’s bedroom door as he whispered, “She was kneeling.”

A decade of intern and resident’s hours, double shifts in an ER in the heart of Chicago and he had never been this tired. He put the coffee mugs in the dishwasher and then cracked the door to Sara’s room. He’d left the light on as much for his own comfort as well as hers. Exhaustion and the rest of the sedative had claimed her.

He made his way back through the kitchen to the family room. Emily was wide awake, still flipping channels.

“Hi, Em.”

“Hi,”

“It’s late.”

“I’m not tired.”

“Yes you are.”

“I should know if I’m tired, Daddy and I’m not so I’m going to watch TV for awhile.”

Jeff sat down next to his weary and belligerent daughter. He took the only approach he could, the only one that ever worked with his Emily, no matter how painful to both. Honesty. "Tell me what you need to know." He waited, watching his baby girl as she stole a glance toward Sara's room. In profile, Emily looked so much like Maggie it made his heart leap.

"What happened to Sara to make her so...upset.?"

Jeff sighed. Just one more truth he couldn't keep from his girl. "I think she's been abused."

"We know that. Henry arrested her husband."

"I think it's more than that, sweetheart, but exactly what, I don't know."

"We should ask her."

"She may not know."

Emily turned to face him. "Is that why she's seeing Uncle George? To help her remember?"

"Yes, pumpkin." He allowed himself a little smile. His daughter wasn't just smart, she was wicked smart. "Now Emily, there's something I need to know. Does having Sara here scare you?"

She stole another glance towards Sara's door before turning back to the screen. "I wasn't scared for me, I was scared for her."

He wrapped his arm around his girl's shoulders and planted a kiss on her head. He took a deep, tired breath. Apparently, pure goodness smells like strawberry shampoo. Emily wasn't wearing out the remote because she was traumatized. She was standing guard.

Well, tonight, they would both stand guard. He grabbed an afghan from the hall closet and tucked his brave baby girl in on the couch. He pulled a second afghan from the back of the recliner and extended it fully. Tonight, he and Emily would stand watch against Sara's demons, together.

Chapter Twenty Two

Jail sucked. The food sucked. The jailhouse jumpsuits sucked. Most of all the people sucked. His life sucked ever since his bitch wife got him tossed in here. He looked around the cinderblock walls he'd been staring at for two months. Yeah...his life sucked big time.

They'd come up here from West Virginia because that loser Bobby Lewis had promised him a good job at the seed company. The "good" job turned out to be standing in front of a conveyor belt for eight hours a day loading seed packets into boxes. The job had lasted a month. He could find anything steady after that except for boosting the occasional beemer from those assholes who lived in the Maple Manor section of town.

The first time he's gotten busted in this town was when one of those snooty bastards reported "someone who didn't belong" in their neighborhood. When the cop stopped him he'd been carrying the tools of his trade. If nothing else Jimmy Bridges was an excellent thief. He had a way with locks of all kinds. Not that it was doing him any good now. He was stuck in this fucking cell twenty three hours a day, staring at a series of the fat ass guards, but the bane of his existence was, Dyson.

Dyson has made his life miserable from day one. He was sure the guard was queer, because no straight man would pat him down that often. He looked up at Dyson as he passed his cell and hocked a lugie in his direction.

The guard stopped and turned to stare Jimmy down. "Jones, get over here," called Dyson. Jones, another dumbass, came to Dyson's side as he opened Jimmy's cell.

"Assume the position," called Dyson. He pushed Jimmy's face against the wall and began patting up and down Jimmy's skinny frame.

"I keep telling you, Dyson. You're not my type," Jimmy sneered. "I bet Jones, here is itching for a little after hours pat down."

Dyson finished his pat down and stood. "When are you going to learn to cooperate, Bridges? Your life would be a lot easier."

"Are you done? Take your boyfriend and get the hell out of here." Jimmy pulled the door shut behind the guards.

This was Sara's fault. If his cunt lawyer was to be believed, Sara was working for some hot shot doctor. He couldn't believe it but it was the only reason he could think of why he was still here. Her new friend was keeping him in jail so he could do his wife. He couldn't imagine what he saw in her. She was a lousy housekeeper, a lousy cook and a lousy lay. He balled his fists until his nails cut into his palms.

Chapter Twenty Three

Sara stared out the window of George's office. Last week's rainstorm had blown the remaining fall leaves to the ground leaving a sea of tall skeletons.

"Hello Sara"

She turned around to see George smiling at her.

"Hello Dr. Lynch."

He closed the door and took a seat in his oversized leather chair. "How are you feeling?"

She looked back out the window. "Stupid."

"Why do you say that?"

Her gaze didn't waver from the field of trees. She could see cars whizzing by on the interstate just beyond. *I wonder where they're going?*

"Why do you think you were stupid?"

She turned toward the back wall of the office, pretending to look at the Monet print. "I was in the closet," she said softly.

"Come sit down." He pointed to the chair directly facing his desk.

Sara turned and slowly moved toward the chair, sitting as she was instructed.

"That's better. Now, can you tell me why you went to the closet?"

She stared at her fingers, twisting them in her lap. "I was scared."

"Why?"

"He was yelling."

"Are you afraid of Dr. Goren? Did you think he was going to hurt you?"

Her head snapped up. "Oh no. He would never hurt me."

"But you needed to hide."

She nodded. "I don't know why. I just... I needed to get away from the voices."

"More than one person was yelling?"

She held stock still. "No."

“But there was more than one voice.”

“It seemed like more than one.”

“Did you hear more than one voice?”

“No.” Her brow pinched together as she searched for the words. “It’s like I...felt others.”

“Others?”

She looked at George, panic on her face. Her heart thumped a heavy beat. “Oh God, I *am* nuts!” She leapt to her feet and ran towards the door. He caught her by the shoulders.

“Sara, stop.” He turned her to face him. “Sit...please.” She returned to her seat and he sat close to her on the edge of his desk. Her heart still raced. A tear slid down her cheek. He would tell Jeff she was hearing voices. She would lose Emily. She would lose them both.

“First of all, let me tell you that it is my professional opinion that you are most definitely not nuts.” George held out a peace offering Kleenex. She wiped her eyes.

“How can you say that? I heard voices.”

“You didn’t actually hear them, did you?”

“What else would you call it?”

“Remembering.”

Jeff paced his office, abandoned paperwork piled on his desk. He’d insisted on bringing her to George. He wasn’t on call today but he’d convinced Sara he needed to do paperwork so it wouldn’t be a hardship to take her to her appointment. He didn’t want her on the bus.

He couldn’t get the image of Sara rocking back and forth out of his mind. The sheer terror on her face. The doll.

He wasn’t upset about an employee’s mental state or even the trauma it may have caused his daughter. He should be, but he wasn’t. He was angry. Furious. Hell, it was blind rage. He slammed an open file drawer. Sara had endured

terrors he didn't want to imagine but could and all of them revolved around a little girl kneeling in her mother's blood. Someone had hurt her, hurt her very badly. He wanted to hurt them, whoever they were. He wanted to cause them the same searing agony Sara felt.

Maybe he should ask George to pencil him in.

"Remembering?"

"Yes. I believe Dr. Goren's outburst triggered memories of previous experiences, ones you've forgotten."

"But the voices. I hid in the closet." She averted her eyes. "I must be crazy."

George tugged on her hand and gave her a warm smile. "Hey, I'm the doctor here. I get to say who's crazy, and believe me, you ain't it." He released her hand and leaned back on his arms. "Sara, the mind is an amazing thing. It protects itself. It will block out pain it can't process."

She looked skeptical.

"Sometimes people lose hours or days surrounding a traumatic event, like a death, simply because the pain is too much to bear."

"Why did I hide in the closet?" Her voice lowered. "And I took one of Emily's dolls. I don't know why I did it, I just remember thinking she shouldn't be stuffed in the trunk...by herself."

"Your mind set up self-comfort devices. Things that you do, probably without even realizing, to make yourself feel better."

"Like hiding?"

"Like hiding. Or holding a doll. None of these things were damaging to anyone and they helped you. There is nothing wrong with that. It's actually quite healthy."

She pushed back against her chair. Now she really didn't believe him.

"It shows you have a strong instinct for self-preservation. You want to survive."

Sara's eyes narrowed. "You're not going to tell Jeff about the voices?" She didn't notice George's slight flinch.

"It's called doctor-patient privilege. I could only tell someone about you if I believe you to be a danger to yourself or others. I don't believe that."

Her shoulders relaxed just a little.

"We have a lot of work to do. It's going to take some time but together we'll figure this out. We'll get through this."

Sara smiled. "That's what Jeff says."

George made a note.

Jeff paced his office. This was taking too long. He glanced at his watch. She'd only been in with George for ten minutes. It felt like an hour.

His patients were seen, his charts caught up, the only reason for him to be here was Sara.

He thought about her pale blue eyes and the loving smile she directed to his daughter and sometimes, he liked to think, towards him. He loved watching her as she fixed meals. Sometimes he could hear her humming to herself. He chuckled at the thought of Sara drilling Emily with a look that got her to eat her veg, pick up her clothes or use her inside voice. The look that was always followed by a smile. Come to think of it, she'd used that look on him more than once. And that smile.

Her bruises had long since faded, at least the external ones. Her flawless skin was a sharp contrast to her jet black hair which was now full and shining. Her eyes shown with happiness, at least most of the time. Her regular diet had softened some of her curves, curves he was finding more difficult to ignore.

He thought of how happy she'd made his daughter, how happy she'd made them both.

He was falling in love with her.

No matter how much he wanted her, he was the last thing Sara needed.

“Tell me about your mother.”

A smile crossed Sara’s face. “She was really pretty. She used to braid my hair before school.”

“That’s a nice memory. Did you do other things together?”

“Mama was a really good cook and sometimes she would let me help.”

“How did she die?”

Sara looked toward the window. “She just...died.”

“Was she ill?”

“I guess so.”

“You’re not sure?”

“It was a long time ago.”

“Yes it was but the death of a parent is usually something people remember.”

She fought through the mist. Mama. She was there, then she wasn’t. Then Papa...

“I don’t know.”

“It’s ok. Tell me about your father.”

“Papa worked hard. He was gone a lot.”

“Did he and your mother get along?”

Her gaze fixed on the highway just beyond the hospital. Cars whizzing by, they all had a purpose. Some place to go. “I suppose.”

Doors slamming, disembodied sobs.

“Sara, did your father hit your mother?”

Her head snapped around. “He...he...” Her voice stilled.

Crying, glass breaking.

Her breath came quickly.

Mustn’t, Mustn’t, Mustn’t.

The noise, the colors. She was on a merry-go-round, everything spinning until the images were nothing but a blur, grey and hazy, then black.

“Sara, Sara? A voice called to her. She fought through the dark.

“Dr. Lynch?”

“How do you feel?”

“What happened?”

“You fainted.”

“I’m sorry.”

“There’s no need to apologize. How are you feeling? Any dizziness?” He looked at her eyes with a pen light.

“I feel ok. I don’t understand. I’ve never fainted before.”

He sat back on the edge of his desk. “Part of you is trying to remember. Part of you is trying to protect you from those memories. That’s the part that won today. It won’t always be like that. We’ll take it slow. You’ll get through this. You’ll remember.”

“Will that be a good thing?”

“It will be difficult but in the long run, yes it’ll be a good thing. I’ve paged Jeff...”

Jeff appeared in the doorway, George’s secretary behind him.

“I’m sorry Dr. Lynch.”

“It’s ok, Alice. Come in, Jeff.”

Jeff came immediately to Sara’s side. Grasping her hand he took her pulse. A little rapid. “Sara, are you ok?”

She nodded.

“What the hell happened, George?”

Sara grabbed Jeff’s arm. “Don’t be mad, it was my fault.”

Jeff was beyond listening, even to Sara. “We should do a CT scan.”

“Calm down Jeff. She just slumped in the chair. She didn’t fall or hit her head.”

“Are you sure you feel ok?” he asked, apparently ready to listen.

“Yes, Dr. Goren, I’m sure. She managed a slight smile.

He whipped around on his best friend. “You pushed too hard. I told you these sessions affect her. ”

“Jeff, calm down. Sara, will you wait with Alice for a moment?”

George closed the door and indicated Jeff should sit. Jeff continued to pace.

“Damn it, George. What happened?”

“At the moment I’m more concerned with what’s happening with you.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“You’re in love with her.”

Jeff sat and stared out at the highway.

“Jeff, this is not a complication Sara needs.”

“Don’t you think I know that?”

“So you are in love with her.”

“I could be.”

“You’re getting into very dangerous territory.”

“I know, I know.”

“She’s hurting, Jeff. The last thing she needs is a love affair gone wrong.”

Jeff snapped to attention. “I haven’t touched her. I don’t plan to either.”

“Have you told her how you feel?”

“Of course not. I’ve only told her that I’m happy with her work and how well she does with Emily.”

“Do you think she knows how you feel?”

“You could answer that better than I could.”

George stared, unmoving.

“I know, I know, privilege. George, I can’t help what I feel for her but I promise I’d never hurt her. Sara is no casual fling.” Jeff got up and reached for the door. “I keep it as professional as possible with the woman who washes my shorts.”

“And its killing you, isn’t it?”

Jeff let out a long sigh. “Buddy, you have no idea.”

Chapter Twenty Four

Damn, what a day. Maybe it was the full moon that'd made everyone nuts. Whatever it was he was supposed to be off shift at three p.m. and it was fast approaching eleven. He tossed his keys on the sideboard and flipped through the mail. Finding nothing that couldn't wait, he tossed the envelopes down.

His growling stomach reminded him he hadn't eaten since breakfast. Heading toward the kitchen he was about to call out when he heard voices coming from the sunroom just beyond the family room. Thick carpet covered the sound of his footsteps. Emily was sobbing. He stopped one step from walking through the open door. Jeff wanted to run to his daughter but something stopped him, something in Sara's voice. He peered into the sunroom and saw Sara and Emily cuddled together on the glider.

"Kids can be mean," said Sara.

"They're right. I am a beanpole. Sara, what's a beanpole?"

"It's a tall stick that beans are tied to so they grow."

"See," Emily sobbed. "I am a beanpole. I'm bigger than everyone in my class. I'm almost as big as my teacher, Mrs. Hunter."

"Em, you're tall like your father. And you said your grandfather was very tall. Was your Mom tall too?"

"Uh huh. She was always kidding Daddy the only reason she married him was so she'd have someone her size to dance with."

"Your Mom sounds nice."

"She was," Emily sniffed.

"See Emily, you are a part of them, the best parts of both of them."

Jeff smiled.

"Yeah, a tall freak."

His smile faded.

“Emily, you’re taller than most now but pretty soon most of the kids will catch up to you.”

“But what if I’m always tall?”

Sara laughed just a little. “You’ll always be tall, the way you’ll always be special.”

“I’m not special. I’m just dumb ole’ Emily Goren, beanpole.”

Sara’s voice was a bit firmer. “Now Emily, you’re not dumb. You know that. I saw your report card. You get all A’s.”

“That’s not special, not in the third grade. I’m not like you. You’re always reading some big book.”

“That’s because I’m curious about things. So are you. You told me you read your father’s medical journals.”

Jeff’s jaw clenched. He would have to talk to Em about that. Some of those journals were too graphic for a little girl. He continued to watch from his hiding place as the glow of moonlight lit the room.

“Em, look at the sky. See all those stars?”

“Yeah.”

“Our sun is a star, just like all of those.”

“We learned that in science class.”

“Well, around all those millions of stars are millions and millions of planets.”

“Uh huh.”

“And on all those planets, in all the universe, there is only one Emily Goren. I think that makes you very special.”

Jeff backed out of the of the family room and headed back to the kitchen. He yanked open the fridge and stared, his thoughts swirling. How could he know so little about what his own daughter was going through? How could Sara know so much? The scene ran in a loop in his head. His daughter’s pain. And Sara.

“Hi Daddy.”

He turned to see a visibly exhausted Emily standing behind him and Sara standing guard. Guard over his little girl. A job he’d been shirking.

“You’re up late.”

“I couldn’t sleep.”

“How about some warm milk?” Jeff walked to the cabinet and grabbed two ceramic mugs and filled each half way. He smiled. “I could use some too. You go get into bed and I’ll be up in a minute.”

“Ok, Daddy. Nite, Sara.” She leaned up for the kiss Sara planted on her forehead.

Jeff watch Emily pad out of the room. “Thank you, Sara,” he said.

“Excuse me.”

He turned toward Sara. As much as he knew he shouldn’t, he placed a kiss on her cheek.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

“For what?”

“Everything.”

Chapter Twenty Five

“I really don’t think I should go. I have plenty of food here and a thousand channels on cable. I’ll be fine.”

“Thanksgiving is for family. You’re family now, Sara. That’s all there is to it.” Jeff tried not to be too frustrated as he struggled to complete a proper knot on his tie. He didn’t know why his mother insisted they dress for holiday meals. He rarely wore anything other than scrubs. He’d learned the hard way in a busy Chicago ER that blood rarely comes out of ties.

The truth was he wasn’t all that certain his mother would welcome Sara to a family meal but he was pretty sure she wouldn’t make a scene. Not in front of Emily.

“You and Emily took forever when you picked out your outfit. Wouldn’t you hate to waste all that effort?” Jeff saw a hesitant smile creep across her face. “Go get dressed. One thing my mother hates is tardy dinner guests.”

Twenty minutes later, Jeff was standing at the front door wondering if his mother would disembowel him for bringing Sara.

“Come on, you two!”

“Coming, Daddy,” Emily shouted as she darted down the stairs. A quick glance to her tidy french braid and simple long sleeve dress told him she would pass muster at his mother’s dinner table.

Jeff glanced up to see Sara at the top of the stairs. He’d read about time standing still but he’d never experienced it until now. Her outfit, which she’d insisted on paying for herself, was perfect. He wondered if his mother could manage such style from a store that sold shoes and carburetors. Her simple blouse and royal blue sweater were matched with a black pencil skirt and flat black shoes. It was demure and classic and the sexiest damn outfit he’d ever seen. Her long black hair was set free from her usual ponytail and fell in full curls down her back. Her pale blue eyes flashed under just a hint of mascara. Damn it. He was in big trouble here.

“Is this ok?” Sara asked, smoothing her skirt.

“It’s perfect,” he replied in a hoarse whisper.

His mother managed a stiff smile. “Jeff, Emily, Happy Thanksgiving.”

“Happy Thanksgiving,” replied Jeff and Emily in unison. He could feel Sara, hanging back with a palpable fear. He drilled Millicent with a “step it up, mother” look. Thankfully, she understood.

“And Sara, so glad you’re here. Happy Thanksgiving.”

“Thank you, Mrs. Goren,” she replied in barely a whisper.

“Have a seat in the den. I just have to talk to Mrs. Williams about the...stuffing.”

Sara sat down stiffly in an boldly embellished wing chair. Jeff thought to himself how much people underestimated Sara. She came from a less than desirable section of town with a limited formal education. Yet she was well versed in a number of subjects thanks to her voracious reading. She knew just what to say to Emily even when he didn’t. She could read people as well as anyone he’s ever known. Right now she could hear the movement of place settings that told her that her presence was unexpected. He looked over to see Emily flipping channels.

“Sara, relax” he said softly.

“She doesn’t want me here.”

“No, she just didn’t expect you and that was my fault because I forgot to mention it.” Sara looked up and gave him the slight smile that said she knew he was full of shit. “Okay, so I didn’t tell her, please try and relax. We’re going to have a good time” Jeff smiled his best “everything’s going to be all right” smile and looked over at Emily. “Hey why don’t you put on the parade?”

“Okay, Daddy.”

He smiled and gave Sara’s shoulder what he hoped was a reassuring squeeze and walked toward the kitchen to take his medicine.

Millicent was pulling rolls out of the oven as Jeff stuck his head in the kitchen. “What can I do to help?” His mother drilled him with a glare.

“Jeffrey, what were you thinking?” she said not quite softly enough.

His chagrin vanished as he moved toward her. “ I was thinking Sara is part of my family and is therefore included.” He caught Mrs. Williams out of the corner of his eye shooting him a sly smile.

His mother set the sheet of rolls down on the butcher block with enough force to make them bounce. “Of course she is.”

He looked at her like he longer recognized her.

Her voice became soft. “Jeff, I understand what Sara has done for this family. You are under much less stress because your home is in order and Emily is properly cared for.” Millicent shot a raised eyebrow at her son. “At least I haven’t heard of any Emily-related mischief since Sara.”

Jeff smiled and shook his head.

Millicent rubbed her hands up and down her son’s arms. “Jeffrey, I know I have my moments, but I understand what she means to you. All I want, all I’ve ever wanted, is for my family to be happy.”

Jeff pulled his mother into a tight embrace, kissed the top of her perfectly coiffed head and whispered, “I love you, Mom.” Then he pushed her back and asked, “So why were you so angry?”

She swatted his shoulder. “Because you didn’t tell me.”

He suddenly felt six years old. “Sorry Mom.”

“You’re forgiven.” She quickly tossed the rolls in a basket. “Now put these on the table.”

“Yes, Mom.”

Chapter Twenty Six

Sara looked out the patio door at a postcard view of snow spread over the lawn and trees. Everything was so much nicer than...no she wouldn't think of that now. She would spend Christmas with her family, her new family. She was wrong to think of them that way. She was 'the help'. But she loved Emily with a fierceness she couldn't even begin to describe. Jeff...he was a decent man, good and kind, unlike anyone she'd ever known. And he was so darn handsome. She'd never told Dr. Lynch how she'd watch Jeff when he wasn't looking. She especially liked it when he wore his favorite faded jeans and an old t-shirt. It made him seem more a part of her world, less like a doctor. He would never be interested in her, but more and more she found herself dreaming of falling asleep in his arms.

"Merry Christmas."

Sara started at the sound of Jeff's voice from the doorway. "Merry Christmas."

"You're up awfully early."

"I wanted to get breakfast started before Emily got up."

He walked over to her and placed his broad hands on her shoulders. "It's Christmas. You can relax a little."

"I promised Emily blueberry pancakes."

"Tell you what. I'll start the coffee and we'll enjoy a cup before the munchkin wakes up. Then I'll help you with the breakfast."

Sara looked askance. "You cook?"

He laughed. "When the occasion calls for it."

"Like when your daughter wants blueberry pancakes on Christmas morning."

"Like then."

"You really love being a father, don't you?"

Jeff smiled. "It's the best thing I've ever done, or will ever do."

"Better than being a doctor?"

“Not even close. When she runs into my arms,” his voice hitched. “I swear I feel like the King of the Universe.”

“You are, to her.”

“That won’t last long. She’ll meet a boy and soon I’ll be an embarrassment.”

“Oh, no.”

“It’s part and parcel of the whole teenage thing. In the meantime I’m enjoying being...”

“Her hero?”

He blushed. She’d never seen him like this before. If she hadn’t been in love with him before she certainly would be now. This man loved with his whole being. His daughter was his world. She couldn’t help but wonder if she could be a part of that world.

Jeff served mugs of coffee and he and Sara sat in the family room. He savored what he knew would be the only peace of the day. Sara was curled up on the couch, feet tucked under her, staring at the decorated tree. He wished she didn’t look so wistful. He couldn’t imagine Sara had a lot of eight foot Christmas trees in her past.

“It was fun decorating it,” he said.

Sara’s face brightened. “Oh, it was. Emily was so happy.” She reached out and ran her fingers over the needles. “I’ve never seen so many decorations.”

Jeff pulled his gaze away from Sara’s face back to the tree. “I don’t recognize that little stocking and that candy cane. He stood to take a closer look. “Needlework. These are handmade. Maggie was never handy like this and I think they’re beyond the scope of a eight-year-old.” Sara looked sheepishly up at him.

“You?”

She set down her coffee cup. “I didn’t think you’d mind. I wanted to make a contribution to the tree.”

Jeff touched the delicate work. “They’re great.”

“It’s cross stitch. It’s not that hard.”

"It doesn't look easy. How did you learn to do that?"

"I read..."

"You read a book."

She smiled.

"You do that a lot." Jeff sat down next to her. "You wanted to be a part of our Christmas."

Sara nodded.

He lifted her chin. "You are a part of us, Sara. Don't you know that by now? "Merry Christmas, Sara," he whispered.

"Merry Christmas, Jeff."

He meant it to be the lightest of kisses. Just a touch of lips. But it wasn't enough. It might never be enough. She met his kiss with hesitation. Then, gradually, miraculously, she deepened the kiss. She fisted her hand in his terry robe. His hand cradled her neck as he matched her passion. His tongue met hers, teased, danced.

"Where is everyone?" Emily squealed from the top of the stairs.

They pulled apart quickly and he leapt to his feet. "We're in here," Jeff called.

Emily bounded into the family room as only an eight year old on Christmas morning can. Clad in her new red and green flannel pj's with the cute reindeer she absolutely *had* to have, Emily launched herself at her father. "Merry Christmas, Daddy!"

Jeff kissed the top of Emily's tousled head. "Merry Christmas, pumpkin."

She released her father long enough to fling herself into Sara's arms. "Merry Christmas, Sara."

Sara returned the fierce hug. "Merry Christmas, Em."

"It's going to be the best Christmas, isn't it Daddy?" Em gave her father a conspiratorial smile. Sara glanced between them both.

"Yes Em, it is."

"I should start breakfast," offered Sara.

"No. No. Presents first!" Emily demanded.

"I'm afraid if we make her wait the child will self-combust."

“Well, I wouldn’t want that. It would take me forever to clean.”

Jeff gave her a shocked smile. A joke. Sara made a joke.

Emily had already plopped in front of the tree. She handed a well-worn red felt stocking to her father. She grabbed her own well loved stocking before handing a shiny new satin stocking with a large holly and her name embroidered on it.

“For me?”

“Sure,” answered Em as if she’d asked if the sky was blue. “Santa leaves everyone a stocking.”

Sara unwrapped a new hair brush, emery boards, her favorite chocolate bar and a Pez dispenser with a little white dog for the head.

Emily giggled. “Santa must know you like dogs.”

Again, that conspiratorial smile. Before she could question it Emily grabbed at a large box.

“There’s one for everybody, Em,” her father admonished.

She slid a large box over to Sara and handed two specially wrapped gifts to her father. Jeff smiled. Emily was getting so grown up. He suddenly wished Maggie could see her now. Who knew? Maybe she could.

“This one’s from Sara.” Emily pointed to the small flat box carefully wrapped in green foil with a perfectly executed gold bow.

“I hope you like it,” she whispered.

Inside Jeff found six finely woven men’s handkerchiefs. A perfect script *JG* was embroidered in each corner.

Not looking up Sara all but whispered, “Mama always said a true gentleman carried properly laundered handkerchiefs.”

He hadn’t felt very gentlemanly a few minutes ago. If only he could be the man she thought she was. Or at least the man she needed.

He struggled with, “Thank you.”

“You open yours, Sara,” Emily said.

Sara carefully untied the gold bow and eased the paper off the box. Em was about to jump out of her skin at Sara’s speed or lack of it, but Jeff understood. It

may have been the first time she'd had a Christmas gift in years, if ever. She gasped when she pulled off the lid and looked at Jeff in shock.

"All for me?" she whispered.

He nodded.

She pulled a book from the box. Her fingers reverently touched the leather bound volume of *David Copperfield*. Inside the box were nineteen more leather bound literary classics, *Jane Eyre*, *Oliver Twist*, and her own personal copy of *Great Expectations*.

"Do you like them, Sara? Daddy said you would."

Sara looked up at Jeff and smiled, that smile he knew was just for him. "Daddy was right," she whispered. She blinked away a tear before telling Emily to open her gift. Em looked at her father.

"Go ahead."

Emily tore at the bow and shredded the paper on the large box. She opened the box with a gasp.

"What is it, Em?" he asked

Emily pulled from the box a tall brunette doll in scrubs with a doctor's lab coat and a toy stethoscope. On the pocket was embroidered "*Dr. E. Goren*." The hair of the doll had been twisted into a French braid. "Look, Daddy. She looks just like me. She looks just like I did on Halloween. And she's tall and her hair is like mine. And look, look, it says *Dr. E. Goren*." She paused and studied the doll. "It looks just like me," she whispered. Sara set the doll on the couch and slipped her arms around Sara's neck. "Thank you, Sara. She's the best doll ever." Emily kissed her lightly.

"You're welcome, Emily."

Emily looked at her with an expression he'd seldom seen on his daughter. Peace. "I love you, Sara," she whispered.

Sara held her close. "I love you too, Em." Almost out of Jeff's earshot he heard, "I always will."

"Well if I want to get my share of hugs I better get you your present," Jeff smiled.

Emily leapt to her feet. "It must be big! I didn't see anything under the tree, so its' got to be a really great present."

"Hold on to little Miss Altruism over there until I come back."

Sara laughed. "Sure."

Jeff came back a moment later with an carefully wrapped box. He set it down next to the tree. "I knew if I left it here you'd have had it opened last week."

Emily tore at the box and found a new laptop. "Wooo Baby!" she shouted. "This is the top of the line."

"I know. You taped enough pictures of it to my bag."

"This is great. We can play all the latest games and talk to anyone all over the world...."

"Just so we're clear. Same rules apply. Computer stays in the family room and no surfing on your own."

"Daaaaaddddyyyy!" Emily was smart enough to know one whine was all she was going to get and she absolutely would not win this argument. "Okay. Can we set it up later?"

"After breakfast."

"Okay, Now your present."

"I love big presents," Jeff teased.

"Sara helped me."

He glanced her way but couldn't read her expression. Her bright smile had been replaced with her more familiar, quiet demeanor.

He opened the box and found a wildly embellished scrapbook with the title "*The Goren's*" His heart stopped when he opened the cover. It was a picture of him and Maggie laughing. He remembered the day. He had just tickled her wildly for calling him a spoiled rich boy. While they were both laughing Emily snapped the picture. It was the definition of their relationship, playful fun mixed with a large dose of joy.

"Emily's voice wavered. "Do you like it, Daddy?" I was showing Sara my pictures of Mommy and telling her how nice it had been, you know, before. Sara said it would be good to remember the happy times. She helped me make this for

you. She said maybe when we were missing Mommy we could look at this and remember the good stuff.”

Jeff flipped the pages. Bring Emily home from the hospital. Her first steps. Maggie on duty in pediatrics looking thoroughly exhausted and completely beautiful. The last Christmas. He hadn't looked at any of these since the accident and he suddenly realized what Sara obviously knew. By trying to forget the misery he'd been depriving himself and his daughter of all the joy. And there had been so much joy. His eyes glazed with tears.

“Oh, Daddy, please tell me it's ok.”

He folded his daughter in his arms. “It's perfect, Em, absolutely perfect. The best Christmas present ever.”. He looked over Em's shoulder and mouthed, “Thank you.”

Sara's eyes teared at the sight of Father and child, a pure love she'd only observed, never been a part of. Like in her books.

Emily all but popped up like toast. “One more present,” she announced.

“More?” asked Sara. “We've all had presents.”

“Nope, there's one more. Isn't there Daddy?”

There was that look again. Now Jeff had it too.

Emily put her hand over Sara's eyes. “You have to close your eyes and keep them closed. Promise.”

“Okay, but I feel silly.”

“You promised.”

“Okay, Okay.” She felt the weight of Jeff leave the couch. The closet door opened. She hadn't seen anything in the hall closet. The front door opened. “What's going on?”

“No peeking,” Emily whined.

“I'm not peeking.”

“Are you sure?” Em tilted her head. Sara grabbed at her long braid. “I'm not peeking you little monkey. What is going on?” The front door opened and closed again.

Emily arranged Sara's hands palms up in her lap. “Almost...”

She felt a ball of fluff and her eyes snapped open. The fluff, a puppy of pure white with coal black eyes and nose, went into a full body wag. Around her neck was a red bow equal to her size. Sara tried to gasp but the puppy leapt up and began smothering her with kisses. She couldn't help but laugh.

"It's a Frizzy dog, like we saw in the park."

"A Bichon Frise," Sara corrected. "She's beautiful." Sara looked at Jeff. "I don't understand."

"Emily told me how you'd always wanted a dog and she swears she's old enough to help take care of it."

"Oh, I am, I am," Emily added, getting her share of puppy kisses.

The puppy licked salty tears from her cheeks. She buried her face in the downy softness. A voice inside her, the voice of a very little girl whispered, "Mine, all mine." Warm breath and the squirming body made her giggle.

She looked up at Jeff and Emily, her family. That's what they were now. Books needed a bookcase. A dog needed a place to sleep. These were things you had when you had a home. A real home, with a family.

"You were right, Em," Sara said. "This is the best Christmas ever."

"See Daddy, I was right."

"Yes, Em, you were right." He answered his daughter but couldn't take his eyes off Sara. She nuzzled the puppy and laughed. She held it close and the puppy curled in her arms and began to doze. He saw on Sara's face a look of pure happiness.

"I think our new addition has tuckered itself out," Jeff whispered.

"I should get a box and put..." Sara lifted the dog slightly. "her in my room."

"You won't need a box. Up in my office is everything the fashionable young pup about town needs. At least that's what the pet store guy said. Em, go to my office and get the bed and some of her toys."

"Okay!"

"Quietly."

"Okay," she whispered.

"What are you going to call her?"

“Her hair is so soft and white and she has pretty curls. She reminds me of Mama’s lace curtains. How about Lacey?”

The dog looked up through half-closed eyes.

“I think we have a winner,” Jeff said.

“I think we do,” said Sara.

Sara could hear Jeff and Emily chatting and laughing in the kitchen while she got the sleepy Lacey settled into her new bed in the corner of her room. She touched the puppy’s delicate curls and began to weep. In all the days of her life, she’d never been happier than she was with Emily and Jeff. She was important to them, she knew she was. She took good care of them and the house. Jeff was always saying so. They included her on dinners out and family game night. The winner of Monopoly or Pictionary whatever game they played won control of the remote and subsequent movie of choice. She smiled at the thought of last time she’d skunked Jeff in Trivial Pursuit.

They had been so happy together, why did he have to go and kiss her? Why did she kiss him back? This would complicate things. Men like Jeff did not marry ‘the help’.

Marry? Where did that come from. She couldn’t, wouldn’t contemplate marriage. Not again. Besides. She was still married to Jimmy.

Slipping into her jeans and the outrageously loud Christmas sweater Emily had insisted on, she ran a brush through her hair.

“You look beautiful, angel” she heard.

Her heart pounded.

“Don’t let anyone tell you different. You’re my beautiful angel”

“Momma?”, she whispered.

She turned the handle to her room and moved toward the kitchen, wondering if Jeff would notice how pale she’d gone.

Chapter Twenty Seven

"It happened again, Dr. Lynch."

"What happened?"

"The voices," she said quietly. "I heard them again."

"Tell me what you heard."

"It was Momma. She was talking to me."

"What did she say?"

Sara looked at her own hands, as if concentrating on twisting her fingers would make this all ok. "She said I was her beautiful angel."

"What were you doing when you heard her?"

"Brushing my hair."

"Did your mother ever brush your hair?"

Sara looked up and smiled. "Oh yes. She used to plait it, that's braiding," she explained.

George smiled to himself, knowing what plaiting was but letting her have this one.

"She used to brush it a lot and put ribbons in it. She called it my 'crowning glory'," she said.

"You do have very pretty hair," George said. "With your black hair and pale eyes your ancestry must be black Irish."

"That's what Momma said. That I was the spitting image of my great grandmother. She showed me pictures."

"Did your mother tell you that you were pretty?"

Sara pressed her hands against imagined wrinkles in her jeans. "Yes."

"It's okay, Sara. You don't have to be embarrassed by that." George looked up from his notes. "Did your father tell you that you were pretty?"

A buzzing in her head, the smell of stale beer. Her vision narrowed to nothingness. "*So pretty. Just like she was.*" "Sara, Sara," George called as he shook her arm. "Sara, where are you?"

Hands on her... touching... pain. *"No, no...no more."*

Lights exploded around her, sounds, voices, a man, grabbing her. She lashed out. "No! No!" Her forearm connected with George's nose and blood sprayed down his face onto to his white lab coat.

He put pressure on his nose as he tried reach her, this time from a safe distance. "Sara, Sara. It's Dr. Lynch. Sara, you're safe. No one will hurt you here."

A calm voice was calling her name. She looked through the fog, trying to find the voice. It wasn't Mama. It was a man. Papa? No, not Papa. Who was calling her? She thought she knew the voice but she couldn't be sure. Staying here for a while might be good. She didn't think Papa could find her here. Quiet. Dark. Alone.

A voice came. A whisper. "Sara, it's ok, you're safe."

No, she was safe here. It was quiet here.

"Please come back, Sara."

No, it was quiet here.

"Sara, Emily needs you to come back."

She looked up and there was a light, getting brighter. She didn't want to go, but she had to. She was needed.

She saw a familiar face. A kind face. A white coat splattered red. Blood. Screams. The voice broke the screams, her screams. "Sara, it's Ok, it was an accident. I'll be fine."

She looked at him through tear filled eyes. "Dr. Lynch? Oh my God, did I do that?!" George's firm hand on her shoulder stopped her from bolting to the door.

George reached for his bag and rummaged for some gauze. Ripping the package open with his teeth, he pressed the bandage to his nose. He glanced over at Sara to find her head down to her chest, almost sunken into her chair, defeated.

"Sara, please, look at me."

No response.

"Sara, please. It's ok."

“How can it be okay?” she muttered. “How can anything be ok?” Then she looked straight into George’s eyes and his heart skipped.

She remembered. All of it. Whatever *‘it’* was, he’d brought all the horror to the surface.

Now came the hard part.

He had waded into these waters and now it was time to dive in, head first and pull this drowning woman back to the surface. He knew it was a risk, pushing at this stage, but he knew if he didn’t the truth might be lost forever.

“Tell me, Sara. What happened.”

She looked out the window, staring once again at the highway of cars speeding by.

“Sara, you need to tell somebody.”

“I’m not supposed to tell” she answered in a whisper.

George’s stomach flipped. He had a feeling where this would end up, but now, he braced himself for horror was behind Sara’s eyes.

“Was it your father? Did he hurt you?”

A single tear slipped down her cheek. She stared for a long time at the cars but he could see she was looking for the words. “He said I had to.”

“Why?”

“Because Momma wouldn’t.”

“Did Momma know?”

Sara’s attention snapped back to George. “Oh, no. Momma loved me,” she said with an aching vehemence.

“So you had to keep it secret from her.”

“How old were you?”

“I don’t remember.”

“Momma was still alive.”

“Yes.”

“So you were seven or eight years old.”

“I suppose so.”

“He raped you.”

“Not then. Not when Mama was alive. He just did stuff. After Mama died, that’s when he made me...you know, do it with him.”

“Mama found out, didn’t she?”

The voices, loud screaming, fights, red, the smell. She closed her eyes and tried to block out the voices. She moved from the chair to the far edge of the couch and pulled her legs up under her. “It’s my fault,” she whispered.

George joined her on the couch but sat at the far end, not from his fear, but for hers. “None of this was your fault. I know as a psychiatrist I’m supposed to understand and have empathy for the workings of a sick man like your father. But I admit my own failure. I can’t understand it, don’t want to understand it. A man who sexually assaults a child is a evil. A man who assaults his own child rates a special place in hell.”

She managed a small smile. “You’re a nice man, George.”

“Thank you, Sara.”

“It’s my fault Mama died.”

“What do you mean?”

“Papa said I should never tell, that no one would believe me. But I knew Mama loved me. He was hurting me and I wanted it to stop. She would protect me, so I told. It was the only time she ever spoke against him. She yelled at him and called him names. She said she was going to call the police. That’s when he hit her. Then he pushed her down the stairs.” She looked at George but he knew she wasn’t seeing him. “There was so much blood. I tried to wake her up. I waited for her to wake up. She got cold. Then the police came and took her away.”

“Sara I want you to look at me.” He waited until he thought she was back in the present. “Sara, nothing that happened was your fault. You were a little girl who was trying to survive. It sounds like your mother was a good woman who tried her best to protect you. It’s going to take a lot for you to sort this out and put it behind you, but you will. You are a very strong person. I respect and admire you.”

Sara looked stunned. “You do?”

“I most definitely do. You have made a life for yourself despite circumstances that would have destroyed most people.

“What about the hiding in closets and the voices?”

“These were devices you used to keep yourself safe until you were strong enough to process what happened to you.”

“Do you think I’ll stop hearing them?”

“Yes, I do, eventually.”

Sara looked panicked. “You’re not going to make a police report are you? He could still come after me.”

George’s heart pounded. She didn’t know. Would it help or hurt? The truth would always help, at least in the long run. “Sara, I will never reveal anything you don’t give me permission to reveal. No, I will not call the police. I do need to tell you something, something you need to know. Can you imagine if you were hiring a stranger to live in your home and take care of your child? You’d want to know about that person.”

“Does Jeff know?” her eyes welled.

“About what you just told me? No. What he did, on my advice, was run a background check on you. He found out you had a completely clean record. He also knew where you came from before Jimmy. He knew your mother died when you were young. He also knows something apparently you don’t.”

“What?”

“Sara, your father died five years ago. Cirrhosis of the liver.”

Sara’s eyes rolled back as she collapsed.

Chapter Twenty Eight

Jeff was surprised to see George's car pull in the driveway. He opened the door and watched George help Sara out of the passenger side of the car.

"George, what the hell? And what happened to your nose?"

"Not now. Let me get her to her room."

Emily had come up from Jeff. "Sara, are you okay?"

She nodded and tried to smile. "I'm okay, Em. I just need to lie down."

He looked at his daughter and saw the worry on her face. "Sweetheart, why don't you get out Sara's pj's and maybe pour her a drink."

"Okay," she said and ran off ahead of them.

"What happened?"

George looked at Sara. "Wait. Let's get her settled." He took her into her bedroom and she sat on the edge of the bed. "Sara, would you be comfortable if I helped you change?" She nodded her head. George walked over to him. "Do you have something mild I can give her? She needs to rest."

"Yeah, in my bag."

"Good, go get it."

He came back with a syringe and found George tucking Sara under the covers. "Sara, I need to ask you something before Jeff gives you the injection."

"Okay," she said quietly.

"I want your permission to tell Jeff what happened to you. You are part of his family now. Jeff and Emily can be a part of your recovery. I know they will offer you whatever support you need."

Sara looked at Jeff and her eyes welled. "I don't want Em to know too much. She shouldn't know about such things at her age."

Jeff sat on the edge of her bed and took her hand. "Sara, if you trust me with what happened to you, I promise to only tell Emily what is necessary. What George said is true. You are my family, Sara. We will do what ever it takes to help you, to protect you. I will protect you. I swear."

She gave him a slight smile. She looked at George and nodded. "You can tell him. I trust you both."

George smiled. "Thank you, Sara. I am honored to have your trust."

Jeff took her arm and gave her the injection. "You're going to sleep now. You'll be out for a while."

She whispered, "Thank you," and closed her eyes.

They turned and found Emily in the doorway, holding a glass of ice tea. "Is she okay?" Jeff took the glass and set it on Sara's nightstand.

"I'm going to talk to Uncle George and then you and I will talk. Where's Lacey?"

"She's in my room. We were playing and she got tired. Now she's sleeping."

"Okay, you go stay with her and I'll be up later." He kissed her forehead. "Thank you for helping." Emily nodded and walked upstairs to her bedroom.

"That is one tough kid," said George.

"Yeah, she is. I just wish she didn't have to be." He closed Sara's door and they sat down at the kitchen table. "Tell me."

"It's worse than we thought. Today she had a breakthrough. She was able to remember what happened to her mother. She also remembered what her father had done. He'd been molesting her since she was a child. She finally got the courage to tell her mother what he was doing. The mother threatened to call the police. That's when he murdered her."

"Jesus, we were right. She was there, wasn't she? Did she see it?"

"Yes. She's blamed herself all these years for her mother's death."

"Christ."

"After the mother's death, the molestation became rape."

Jeff buried his face in his hands. "My God. I'm glad the bastard's dead because I'd kill him."

"Yeah, well that's another issue. She was terrified that I'd file a police report. She was afraid her father would come after her."

"What?"

“She didn’t know he was dead. I told her that you’d done a background check as part of her employment.”

“What? She’s going to be angry with me.”

“I don’t think so and she’s got more important things on her mind. I told her you’d done it at my insistence, and you’d found her clean record. That’s when you found out about the death of her parents. When I told her that her father had died five years ago, she passed out.”

“Dear God. How is she going to deal with all of this?”

“I think she will. It’s going to take time but she’s remarkably strong. She’s been through ten kinds of hell and managed to make a life for herself. She educated herself. She found the courage to get away from her abusive husband. I think I can help her.”

“I know you can. What happened to your nose? Do you want me to look at it?”

George gave him a winced smile. “No, it’s well and truly broken. I think it will give me some character.”

“Was it Sara?”

“Yes, but it was an accident. When she was in the middle of remembering she was back there, a small child being molested. I touched her shoulder and tried to rouse her. In her mind I was her father attacking again. She caught me with her forearm.”

“Does it hurt much?”

“It’s nothing compared to what that poor girl has been through. Nothing is.”

Jeff shut the door behind George and rested his head against it. It was worse than he thought and he’d imagined pretty bad. He hoped Eddie Walker was roasting in hell. He peeked in on Sara and saw she was out cold. What he’d given her wasn’t that strong but it would insure several hours of sound sleep. Now he had to try and explain all of this to Emily. He walked up the stairs and knocked on the door. “Can I come in?” Emily opened the door and he could tell she’d been crying. He pulled her into his arms. “Oh, Em, I wish I could keep this from you.”

“No, Daddy. I need to know so I can help.” Lacey came running up to her.
“Lacey wants to help too.”

Jeff smiled and pet the puppy. “I’m sure you do.” They sat down on the edge of the bed and he took her hand. He’d always been honest with Emily. She was too intelligent to hide the truth. But how much truth could his baby handle? “You know how Sara wound up in the hospital.”

“Yeah, her husband hit her. But he got arrested and her can’t hurt her anymore.”

“Yes, that’s right. She went to Uncle George to help her with the pain that caused.”

“You fixed her hurts.”

“I fixed the ones on the outside. Uncle George fixes the pains on the inside. Do you understand?”

“Like when Mom died and he said it was okay to be angry.”

“Exactly. Sara’s hurts are a lot more than just from her husband. Her father was a very bad man and hurt her, a lot.”

“You mean like sex stuff.”

Jeff was stunned. “How do you know about things like that?”

“I know, Dad. I read. I hear things. Sometimes if it’s bad I turn away.”

He hugged her and kissed the top of her head. “Oh, baby girl, I wish I could protect you from knowing things.”

“No, Daddy. I need the truth.”

“Today, while talking to Uncle George, she remembered things. Things she hadn’t remembered for a very long time. It frightened her.”

“Is that what happened to Uncle George’s nose?”

“Yes. Sara got really scared and didn’t realize where she was. She accidentally hit him with her arm.”

“Of course it was an accident. Sara would never hurt anyone.”

Jeff smiled. “You’re right. Sara would never hurt anyone.”

“How can I help?”

“I think we can both help by being her friend. By making sure she feels safe and understanding those times when she doesn’t, even if it doesn’t make sense to us.”

“Like when she hid in the closet?”

“Exactly like that.”

“Like hugging my doll, Victoria. Most grownups wouldn’t do that but she likes it so it’s a good thing.”

“Yes. You understand. Those things made her feel better when she didn’t know why she felt bad.” He took a breath and needed to broach something he told Emily to never do, to keep a secret. “Sweetheart, not everyone would understand what Sara is going through. I don’t want you to discuss this with anyone except me and Sara, if she raises the subject.”

“You mean I shouldn’t tell Nana.”

“I don’t know what she’ll do and she can be very judgmental. Sara needs our support.”

“I understand. Are you telling a secret? Will Sara be mad?”

“No, I asked her permission to speak to you.”

“Oh, okay. Do you think she’ll get better?”

“Yes, I do. Uncle George is an excellent psychiatrist. He’s going to help Sara through this.”

Emily wrapped her arms around Jeff’s waist. “So will we.”

Chapter Twenty Nine

Sara played with Lacey in the backyard. It was a remarkably warm day for February and she was taking advantage of it. She smiled as Lacey dropped the ball at her feet and she tossed it away. It had been a rough few weeks. George had increased her sessions to twice a week. He'd offered her medication but she'd refused. She was responsible for Emily when Jeff wasn't home and she didn't want to feel impaired. The one thing George kept stressing was none of this was her fault. Not her parents, not Jimmy, none of it. He kept telling her she was strong but there were days she didn't believe it. She took Lacey inside for a drink of water. When she heard the front door she realized it was later than she thought.

"Sara! I'm home," Emily shouted.

"I'm in the kitchen."

Emily ran into the kitchen and threw her backpack on the table.

She stopped and pet Lacey. "Sara, Sara, guess what!"

"What?" she smiled. She loved Emily's enthusiasm.

She unzipped her bag and pulled out a small Valentine. "I got this from Bobby Price."

Sara looked at the small card. It was a cute Dalmatian puppy with a heart around his neck. It said "Happy Valentine's Day." It was signed, from Bobby. She looked front and back and saw nothing inappropriate for an eight year old girl. "That was very nice of him."

"You don't understand. I'm the only one he gave a Valentine too."

"He must like you."

"That's what I thought. He's a lot shorter than me but he's always been nice to me. He never made fun of me."

"What did you say to him?"

"I said thank you."

"That was good."

"I'm going to put it on my bulletin board." She started to run out of the kitchen.

“Wait, backpack, then homework.”

Emily turned and grabbed the backpack and ran out of the kitchen.

Sara poured herself a cup of tea and sat down at the kitchen table. This was the kind of thing for which she felt completely unprepared. She would have to start advise her on boys and what was the right behavior. How the hell would she know? She was sipping her tea when she heard the door again.

“Sara?”

She walked out to the hall and saw Jeff flipping through the mail. “You’re home early.”

“Yeah, I had the chance so I grabbed it.”

“I’m glad. I need to talk to you.”

“Is Emily okay?”

“She’s fine but I have some concerns. Could we talk?”

“Of course.” They walked into the den and sat on the couch. “What’s going on?”

“Emily is very excited. She got her first Valentine from a boy.”

“Oh? Did you see it?”

“I did. It was nothing inappropriate. Just a picture of a puppy and a Valentine heart. She’s put it up on her bulletin board.”

“I admit I’m a little thrown. I thought I’d have a couple of years before boys were an issue.”

“I think she’s more excited at the idea of getting one from a boy rather than the actual boy.”

“It seems like there’s something more that’s going on.”

“How am I suppose to advise her about boys? I haven’t a clue what’s right.”

“What did you say when you saw the card?”

“I asked her what she said to the boy. She thanked him. She said he’s always been nice to her. He’s never made fun of her for being tall.”

“Well that sounds to me like you asked her all the right questions. I don’t think we should make a big deal about this. I think between the two of us we can handle Emily growing up.”

“Jeff, how can you be so sure? I’m not. I don’t know anything about healthy relationships.”

Jeff took her hand. “Sara, you’ve done so well here. I’m not talking about just taking care of the house. You’ve taken care of us. You’ve turned two people who were just getting by into a happy family. You are a big part of that family. Emily is my heart and soul and I trust you with her. I know what ever you do comes from a place of love. I have every faith that what ever you tell Emily will be the right thing. And when you have doubts, we’ll talk, just like now. We’ll figure it out together.”

“What did I do to deserve you and Emily?” Sara couldn’t help the tears that fell. Her heart pounded when Jeff brushed the tear away.

“I often think the same thing,” he smiled. “When my wife died I didn’t think anyone could put us back together again. Then you came along.” He let go of her hand and sat back. “You know I have feelings for you, more than just as a member of my family.”

Her heart started racing. “You do?”

“Of course. You don’t think I would have kissed you like I did if I didn’t mean it?”

“Well, I...”

“Christ, I really am an idiot. You’ve only know men like Jimmy. How would you know?”

“I don’t think you’re anything like him.”

“Sara, I care for you, very much. But you’re going through a very difficult time right now. I don’t want you to feel any pressure from me. You are family and always be. If things never change between us then I’ll be okay with that.”

“You would?” she smiled.

He chuckled. “Well, I would admit a preference but I’m more concerned that you feel comfortable.”

She covered his hand with hers. “Thank you.”

“There is something I need to talk to you about. You know Jimmy’s trial is coming up soon.”

“Yeah,” she said. “I’ve been talking to George about what it’s going to be like to testify.”

“I’ve been thinking that you should have representation.”

“A ? Why do I need a lawyer?”

“Well, I thought it would be in your best interest to have someone who could advise you about your rights.”

“Lawyers are expensive.”

“Don’t worry about that. I have a friend, Matthew Blake. I went to college with him. He’s a lawyer and has agreed to represent you.”

She gave him a sly smile. She knew what Jeff was like. He’d been going full tilt to take care of her, first with George and now with this lawyer. “You’ve already got him on my case, don’t you?” She was rewarded with a blush.

“Yeah. Are you mad?”

“No, of course not.”

“I didn’t reveal anything to him other than the facts of Jimmy’s being arrested for assault. I also gave him a brief history of where you came from and both your parents were dead. I didn’t tell him about the previous assaults by your father or what he did to your mother.”

“I know you wouldn’t. I trust you, Jeff.” She paused and thought. Jeff had made so many things possible for her. For the first time in her life she had a purpose and most of all a safe place to call home. Do you think he could help me with a divorce?”

“Yes he could.”

She smiled. “You already asked.”

“Yes I did.” He smiled and shrugged. “Still not mad? I’m not trying to control things for you. I just want to see you have options.”

“No, Jeff. I’m not mad. You’re helping me take care of myself. I want Jimmy Bridges out of my life.”

Chapter Thirty One

There were few perks of being a Prescott that Jeff cashed in. The one exception was Sundays. Barring major pileups on the interstate, Sundays were his. At first it was to make sure Emily was adjusting to her new circumstances. They would sleep late, have pancakes for brunch and then plop themselves in front of the tube where Jeff would explain the intricacies of a quarterback sneak.

Over the past five months, Sundays had evolved, thanks to Sarah. Brunch was now breakfast and Sunday dinner was a roast and all the fixings served at two. Now it was spring training and the grapefruit league. There are priorities in life, after all. He saw Sara putting out plates and fussing more than usual. "What's going on?" he asked if he didn't know.

"I've never cooked for her before. I don't do fancy. I hope she'll like it."

"Sara, calm down. Yes, my mother is a pretentious pain in the ass but Emily and I love your cooking." He patted his comfortable belly. "Probably a little too much."

"You said she likes apple. I made my apple crumble."

"Vanilla ice cream for the top?"

"Of course."

"Hot damn!" He was rewarded with a smile. "I will go see where Emily is and you calm down. Okay?"

"Okay."

Jeff marveled that his mother was being on her best behavior. He knew she wasn't thrilled that his housekeeper was a beautiful young woman but she couldn't argue with success. She also couldn't argue with the fact that she didn't have to act as babysitter for his rambunctious daughter. She got to be Nana with a visiting grandchild, which she much preferred.

"Tell me Emily, how is school?"

“It’s okay. It’s kind of boring.”

“I think it doesn’t challenge her enough,” said Jeff. “She’s ahead of her peers but I don’t want to move her to advanced courses.”

“Why not? She should be challenged.”

“No, Nana! I don’t want to leave my friends.”

“That’s no reason to deny your potential, Emily.”

“I’m not. Sara gives me books to read.”

“Sara gives you books?”

“Yeah, I just finished Anne of Green Gables. Did you ever read that Nana? It was really good.”

“Yes, I read it and I agree, it’s a good book. I’m sure Sara means well but she hasn’t...well, she doesn’t have the experience a tutor would have. Jeffrey I could find someone qualified...”

Jeff saw the conversation spinning out of control. Sara was pulling into herself and Emily was winding up for a fight. “Mother, Sara has given Emily a number of titles to read, all of which I reviewed and approved.” He looked at Sara and smiled. “She has excellent instincts.” He was relieved when Sara smiled at him. “But you know Mom I think Emily would benefit from your suggestions too. Maybe you could make a reading list for her.” His mother sat a little straighter. “Of course, I could provide a list to engage her mind. We could review it after she finishes each list.”

“Dad...” Emily started to whine. They both knew what his mother meant.

“Mom, a discussion of the work is fine, but no tests. These lists are supposed to engage her mind. I want her to enjoy our lists, not dread them.”

“Very well, but her academic development is critical at this age,” said his mother.

“I agree but her social development is equally important.” Jeff was trying to divert the conversation to something more pleasant when Lacey barked. “Emily, I think Lacey needs to go outside.”

“Now that Emily is outside, I’d like to talk to you about this trial business,” said his mother. “I think this is too much for her to be around. I think she should come stay with me.”

“What? Not a chance.”

“Jeffrey, dear, I’m only thinking of Emily. All this martial discord between Sara and her husband isn’t a good example for her.”

“Discord! Mother, how can you be so blind?”

“Jeff, it’s okay,” said Sara. “I understand. She’s doesn’t want Emily hurt any more than I do.”

A very loud “No!” came from the patio door. Emily was standing in the doorway. “Daddy and I have to be here for Sara. She’s our family. Family takes care of each other.”

Jeff could see his mother was stunned at Emily’s vehemence.

“Emily, would you please take Lacey into my room,” asked Sara.

“But...”

“Em, please. Lacey’s brush is on her cage. She could do with a good brushing.”

“Okay,” she muttered as kissed Sara’s cheek. “Thank you for dinner.”

“You’re welcome, angel.”

They waited to hear Sara’s door close before they started speaking. “She seems very fond of you,” said his mother.

Sara smiled. “She does that every night. She’s a dear girl.”

“Mother, Emily is...”

Sara reached her hand to his. “Jeff, please. I think it’s time we tell your mother everything.” She sighed and put her hands in her lap. Jeff knew the sign. He didn’t have to look to see she was twisting her fingers together like she always did when she was nervous. “Mrs. Goren, I know you are concerned about Emily’s well being. We all are. Emily knows the trial is next week.” Sara smiled. “She’s been on her very best behavior. She knows more than I’d like. I wish I could protect her from all of it but she doesn’t know the worst of it. You know I’ve been seeing George for therapy. With his help, I’m starting to deal with what’s happened to me.”

My father started molesting me when I was younger than Em. When I was nine, I finally got the courage to tell my mother how he'd been hurting me. It's the only time she ever raised her voice to him. She told him to get out and that she was going to call the police. That's when he murdered her. I was there when he did it."

Jeff heard his mother gasp but he was focused on Sara. He could tell she was fighting to get it out. He caught her gaze and nodded. He was here for her.

"Did the police arrest him?" asked his mother.

"No. They called it an accident. They left me with him. That's when he started raping me. I married Jimmy when I was sixteen to get away from him. It was fine for a while but soon enough he became just like my father. That last night, He said he was going to kill me and I believed him. I managed to get away from him and I walked down the highway to the hospital. That's when your son found me and took care of me. He took care of my physical wounds and George took care of my emotional wounds. Your son put everything in place for me to take care of myself." Sara looked at him and he couldn't imagine where she found such strength. "He didn't just give me a job. He gave me a purpose. Thanks to Jeff and George I understand how strong I am and what I'm capable of. I have a future. But first, I need to put the past behind me and that includes seeing Jimmy pay for what he's done."

Sara looked at Jeff and nodded. She was done. It was all out. He glanced at his mother and realized she'd gone pale. "Mother? Are you alright?" She didn't seem to hear him. She stood and walked to the other side of the table. She took Sara's hand and pulled her to her feet.

"You poor girl," she whispered as she pulled Sara into a tight hug.

"Does this mean I can have my apple crumble now?" asked Emily who was standing behind them with a freshly brushed puppy.

Jeff closed the door behind his mother and sighed. He loved her but she could be exhausting. He walked into the kitchen to see Sara cleaning up after the dinner.

“You don’t have to do the dishes now.”

“Yes, I do.”

“I’m your boss.”

“Do you want potatoes crusted on your dishes?”

“Ok. I’ll wash, you dry.” Sara looked at him with amazement mixed with a heavy dose of doubt. He gave her a cute half smile. “I do have skills beyond bandaging skinned knees.”

Emily jetted into the kitchen, jacket half on, and Lacey tugging at her leash. “Daddy, I’m going to Kathy’s. Sara said I could take Lacey.”

“Did Mrs. Spencer say you could bring Lacey?”

“Yeah she did. She says Lacey keeps Kathy and me out of mischief, whatever that means.”

Jeff reached down and ruffled the puppy’s fur, “It means Lacey is a fuzzy miracle.” He smiled at Em. “Go, but be back by six.”

“Daddddyyyy,” She whined.

“Lacey’s just a baby. She needs her rest.”

Emily’s “Ok” was absorbed by the slamming of the front door.

“I got that beer you like,” said Sarah.

Jeff popped his head in the fridge and saw a six pack of chilling Heinekens. “God Bless you, my child,” he said as he reached for one and twisted off the cap. He smiled as the first sip slid down his throat. He turned to see Sarah loading the dishwasher. “Hey! I said I’d wash.”

“Technically, this is not washing, this is loading.” She said with an easy smile.

“I give,” he said hands in the air in mock surrender. “But those pot and pans are all me,” he said as he set his beer next to the sink and slipped his hands under the water.

She grabbed a damp sponge and tossed it at him. "Ok, let's see those skills you're bragging about."

Jeff 's heart skipped a beat. He knew what she meant. But...God what he wouldn't do to show her skills beyond dishwashing and knee bandaging. He reached for the roaster but Sarah grabbed his wrist.

"Uh, uh," she said and thrust a saucepan with a few stray peas at the bottom. "Small stuff first. That way the water doesn't get too dirty too fast."

He took the pan and slipped it below the bubbles. He swirled the sponge a bit too hard and splashed water over the edge of the sink, soaking the front of his jeans.

Sarah bent in half laughing, "I thought you said you had skills."

"Oh, think that's funny , do you?"

"Uh huh," she nodded .

Jeff flicked his wet fingers at her.

"Oh, no you didn't," she smiled. She plunged her hand into the dishwasher and thrust a handful onto his shirt.

Jeff set down the sponge and grinned. "You realize, this...means...war..."

He grabbed the sprayer and blasted the front of her shirt. Sara stopped cold and he thought, "*Crap, too far.*" That was until Sarah snatched the sprayer from his hand and turned it on it him. She soaked his head and his shirt until he wrestled it away from her.

They both laughed and slid on the wet floor as Jeff pushed her up against the fridge. "I claim victory," he declared. He looked down at her dripping wet hair and her drenched shirt. "You're all wet," he whispered.

"So are you," she said quietly.

He captured a drop of water off the tip of her nose, then placed a light kiss where the drop had been. He couldn't walk away, not yet. He pressed his lips to hers, then pulled back. Then she did the most amazing thing. She kissed him back. It was soft, tentative and achingly lovely. She slipped her arms around his neck and he knew he was lost, quite possibly forever. He deepened the kiss. His hands

traveled down her trim frame and the curve of her waist. "Sara," he whispered as he placed kisses on her neck.

"It's okay, if you want to, you know."

He stopped cold, feeling like he'd be doused in ice water. He brushed her cheek with his hand. "You know how much I want you." He blushed. "I'm sure you can feel it. But it needs to be right for both of us." He put a kiss on her forehead. "I can wait. I'm not going anywhere."

Sara smiled. "Neither am I."

Chapter Thirty Two

Sara hadn't laid eyes on Jimmy in five months. The trial was in a few days but this was just as important. Today was her divorce hearing. Jimmy had been served with the papers in prison last month and his lawyer said he was less than pleased. He tore up the papers and threw them in her face. Jeff had come with her but her lawyer advised he should wait outside. Jimmy had the right to appear at the hearing via closed circuit TV from the prison. Seeing Jeff present could complicate things. Her attorney, Matt, sat her down on the bench outside the court room.

"Are you ready for this, Sara? It could be difficult."

She took a breath and straightened her shoulders. "I've been working with George on how to deal with this. I've been working on it as a preliminary to the trial. I'll be okay."

"If it get's too much, let me know. I may have to cross examine him."

"I will."

They walked into the court room. Already seated was a young woman who Sara assumed was Jimmy's lawyer. She leaned over to Matt and spoke quietly. "How can Jimmy afford a lawyer?"

"That's Jenny Cruz, his public defender."

"Isn't that unusual?"

"Yes and I'm curious."

The judge was announced by the bailiff and the all stood. "All right, are we ready to proceed?" asked the judge.

"Yes, your honor," said Matt.

Jenny looked uncomfortable. "Your honor, my client, James Bridges, has declined to participate."

"Oh really? Did you advise him he could participate by CCTV?"

"I did, your honor. He did not respond favorably."

"Explain."

"He tore up the papers and his response was 'Hell, no.'"

“Did you advise your client that refusal to participate could result in summary judgement against him.”

“I did, your honor.”

“Very well. I’ve reviewed the case and see no reason to deny the petitioners case. I hereby rule a summary judgement in favor of Mrs. Bridges.” The judge signed the papers and handed them to his clerk. “Okay, we’re done.” He banged his gavel and left the room.

Sara watched as Matt closed up his case. “Is that it?” she asked.

Matt smiled. “That’s it. You’re officially divorced.”

She leaned back against her chair. “Oh my God,” she whispered.

“Are you okay?”

“I will be.”

They stood and began to walk out at the same time as Jenny Cruz. “Jenny, do you always represent your PD clients in divorce?”

“Not always.” She glanced at Sara. “Sometimes it’s necessary.” She nodded at Sara. “Good day, ma’am.” Jenny walked down the hall and Sara looked at Mark.

“Why do I get the feeling something is very different here?” she asked.

“Because I think you’re right. Jenny’s a good attorney. She’d never violate privilege. She only answered the judge’s direct questions. But what she said ensured you’d get your divorce.”

“So it’s over?” asked Jeff.

“It is. I’m not married anymore.”

“Are you okay?”

She answered by wrapping her hands around his waist and resting her head on his chest.

After court, they went back home. Home. It was truly her home too. Jeff had insisted on making them some lunch. She went into her room and changed out of her skirt and jacket to jeans and a t shirt. She opened her drawer and pushed aside her underwear to pull out a carved wooden box that had belonged to her mother. It was a cheap dime store box but it meant the world to Sara. It contained

everything of value she'd taken from her old life. She opened the box and took out her great grandmother Mary's cameo. She put it up to her neck and held up the picture her mother had given her of Mary. "See angel, I told you so." She heard her mother's voice but it didn't frighten her. It was a comfort. She heard a knock at the door.

"Come in."

"Lunch is ready." He looked at the reflection of the picture in the mirror. "Wow, who is she?"

"That's my great grandmother, Mary Reilly."

"You look just like her."

"That's what Mama always said. Now I can see what she meant."

He glanced down at the box. It was full of shiny bits. Earrings, hair combs, and a few necklaces. "What is all this?"

"When you took me to the trailer to get my things, this was the only thing I really wanted. It's all I have left of my mother. We didn't have much but this was where she hid her treasures. She reached under the jewelry and pulled out a small picture. "This was my Mom."

"She was very pretty."

She looked at Jeff and smiled. "You're not asking me why I have her picture in a box."

"No, I'm not," he said quietly.

"Because you understand what I've been through, that this picture might trigger bad memories." She looked back at her mother's face and smiled. "I don't think that's true anymore." She tucked the picture in the frame edge of her mirror. "She was a meek woman, but given her life, I can understand it now. I also know that no matter what, she did love me. She died trying to protect me." Jeff slipped his arm around her waist.

"I think she'd be very proud of the woman you've become."

"I think so too."

Jeff helped with the dinner dishes and enjoyed the comfortable silence. Sara was outside with Lacey and Emily was staying overnight with her friend Kathy. Sara came in from outside with Lacey. The dog took a drink of water and went into Sara's bedroom.

"I think she's tired."

"It's been a busy day."

"Yeah, it has."

He set the towel down and took her hands. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine and that surprises me."

"Why?"

"I feel...lighter. Does that make sense?"

"Yes, it does."

"For the first time in my life, I feel normal."

"You are normal."

"My life was never normal. Now I have you and Emily to take care of, the house. These are things normal people do." She snickered. "Even normal people go to the shrink."

Jeff smiled. "How do you think they stay normal?"

They watched a movie for a while but Jeff couldn't tell you what it was about. All he knew was Sara was sitting next to him and she felt comfortable enough to sit next to him. Emily wasn't around so he risked putting his arm around Sara's shoulder. He was relieved when she leaned into him. The movie ended and Sara sat up.

"It's getting late. Do you have an early call tomorrow?" she asked.

"No. My boss gave me the weekend off so I could spend time with my family."

"Your mother is being surprisingly supportive."

"She is, isn't she? I admit it surprises me too but I think she can't argue with success."

"Success?"

“She can see how happy Emily and I are now.”

“It does help to have a something besides take out.”

He smiled and brushed his hand across her cheek. “You know that’s not what I mean.” He leaned close and gave her a soft kiss. He pulled back before he got carried away. He didn’t want to frighten her. “What do you say we take the munchkin and the pooch to the park tomorrow?”

“After blueberry pancakes?”

“Perfect.” He stood and pulled her to her feet. “I’m really proud of you, Sara. You’ve reclaimed your life. I’m firmly convinced you can do anything you set your mind to.”

“That’s the nicest thing anyone ever said to me.”

Jeff got out of the shower and threw on a fresh pair of boxers. He pulled back the covers and grabbed a book he’d been meaning to read. He didn’t think he’d absorb anything tonight. It had been too big a day. But he knew for certain he wouldn’t sleep. He was startled by the knock at the door. He opened it and saw Sara standing there in her bathrobe.

“Sara, is there something wrong?”

“No. Can I come in?”

“Of course.” He stood aside and she walked in. She looked very nervous.

“Jeff, you said before that things had to be right for both of us.”

His heart started to pound. “Yes, I did. I still mean it.”

“Jeff, do you think you could fall in love again, with me?”

He smiled and put his hands on her shoulders. “Sara, I’m already in love with you. I have been for a long time.”

“You are?”

“I am.”

“I’m in love with you too, but I never thought someone like you could love someone like me.”

“Well, I am very happy to tell you, Sara, for the first time I can remember, you were wrong.”

Sara's face blushed an adorable pink. "Wow." She reached for her belt. "Jeff, do you still want me."

"Very much so," he whispered.

She undid her belt and robe fell open. "I want you too."

Jeff's breath caught. "Sara, are you sure?"

"Yes, I am."

He leaned in and gave her a kiss. "You have to tell me what you need. I never want to hurt you. Not ever."

"I know that. But you'll have to show me, too. I don't know... well, I don't know much of anything."

"You know the most important thing. I love you." He pushed the robe off her shoulders and smiled when he saw underneath she was naked. He'd seen most of her body when he'd been treating her, but now he was seeing the woman he loved. The woman who was stronger than he'd ever be. He pulled her close and kissed her. Sara wrapped her arms around his neck and deepened the kiss. He lifted her slight frame in his arms and set her on the bed. He slipped off his boxers and climbed in next to her. He kissed her and whispered, "Let me love you." He kissed her neck, shoulder and risked a nip. Her gasps and moans became a road map to her pleasure. He traveled her body, worshipping every part of her, carefully, gently. He stroked her strong legs, moving carefully to her inner thighs. He felt her stiffen. "Sara, I promise, I won't hurt you. If you say stop, I'll stop."

"I'm feeling things."

"What things?"

"I don't know. Whatever it is, please don't stop."

He grinned and turned his attention back to her thighs. He licked and nipped as Sara writhed under him. When she was more than ready he took her in his mouth. He nipped and licked and teased until she flew apart, calling his name. He pulled himself over top of her and kissed her deeply. "Did you like that?"

"Like it? I didn't know what it was. What ever it was it was great."

"You never felt that before?"

She shook her head, too embarrassed to answer.

He held her close and whispered in her ear, trying not to make her feel awkward. "Sweetheart, what the was, was a powerful orgasm." He kissed her neck. "I'm very pleased I'm the first one to make that happen for you." He raised himself above her. "I will be delighted to make it happen again," he kissed her lips, "and again," he kissed her neck, "and again."

Sara smiled and ran her hands down his back. "Jeff, I want to make you feel the same way."

"Sweetheart, I want you, so much, but I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't. Please, Jeff."

He carefully positioned himself over her, hoping that the months she been away from Jimmy had given her time to heal. He eased inside her and caught her gasp with a kiss. "Tell me if it's too much."

"No, please don't stop. He slid deeper and Sara wrapped her legs tight around him. "You feel so good." He started a slow rhythm, waiting for Sara to match his movements. She let herself go, matching his moves, holding him tight. She gasped into his ear and whispered "Yes, please, don't stop."

It was all Jeff needed to lose control. He sped up until he gasped her name. He rested his head on her shoulder. He place a kiss on her shoulder and then her neck. "Oh sweetheart," he whispered. "That was so good."

She touched his cheek. "Was it?"

He knew what she was asking. Did she measure up? Was it as good as it would be with another woman? "Sara, my love. It was perfect. You were perfect. You trusted me and we both had pleasure." He gave her a sly smile. "And you know what?"

"What?"

"It will only get better."

Chapter Thirty Three

Jeff found Sara in the kitchen, getting started on the blueberry pancakes. He wrapped his arms around her waist and kissed her neck. "You weren't there when I woke up."

"I didn't know when Emily would come home and I didn't want to complicate things."

"Sara, you know how smart Emily is."

"Boy, do I?" she grinned.

"You know she'll know something has changed between us. I don't mean give her details but I think we could tell her we're a couple."

Sara smiled. "Is that what we are?"

"Most definitely," he pulled her close into a kiss. "I love you, Sara."

"I love you, Jeff."

They were interrupted by the slamming door. "Daddy, Sara, I'm home." They pulled apart as Emily bounded into the kitchen.

"Did you have a good time at Kathy's?"

"Yeah, we always have fun. Her mom showed us how to make brownies. They were yummy." She pulled a container out of her backpack and handed it to Emily. "Mrs. Spencer sent some home with me."

"That's great but after breakfast. We're having pancakes," said Sara.

"Blueberry?"

"Of course," she smiled.

"Yay!"

"Go put your things away and come right back down," said Jeff.

"Okay." Emily grabbed her backpack and ran up the stairs.

"Do you want me to give you two some privacy?"

Jeff took her hand. "No. We're a couple now. We do things together."

"Oh really?" she smiled.

"This is the real deal, Sara. I'm not playing."

"Neither am I."

Emily bounded back into the kitchen and reached for a loose blueberry. "Pumpkin, can you sit down? We want to have a talk with you."

She climbed up on the bench and looked cautious. "Is something wrong?"

"No angel. Nothing's wrong. Em, you know how much I loved your mother. I always will."

"I know, Daddy."

"You also know that Sara is family to us. You love her."

"Of course I do."

Sara gave her a kiss on top of her head. "Thank you, poppet."

"Em, I love Sara too."

"Well, sure."

"Em, how do you feel if I'm in love with Sara?"

"You mean like a girlfriend, in love?"

"Yeah, like that."

Emily looked at Sara. "Are you in love with Daddy?"

"Yes, Em. Very much."

Emily squealed and threw her arms around Sara. "This is great." Then Jeff got a death grip hug. "Daddy, this is so great. We can be a family, forever."

Jeff and Sara looked at each other and smiled. Neither one of them contradicted forever.

Sara couldn't remember ever being this happy. She felt like she'd taken on a life she'd only read about. She had a man and a child she adored and a home. They had walked up to the park and taken Lacey with them. She and Emily laughed at Jeff when he tossed Lacey's ball and the dog looked at him like he was mad.

"Daddy, Lacey doesn't fetch. She expects you to get it for her."

He stood with his hands on his hips. "Well what does she like to do?"

"She likes you to pick up the ball and run. Then she'll chase you."

"Okay, that's all you, Em." Emily ran after the ball, showed Lacey and then started running. The dog chased her around and Lacey looked like a defensive

player protecting an end zone or base. Jeff walked next to Sara and took her hand. Then he pulled it to his lips and kissed it. "Are you having a good time?"

"The best."

They played with Lacey until she made it clear she was done. She sat down in front of Sara and wouldn't move. Sara bent over and picked her up. "I believe we're done." She started walking back down the street toward their home, Emily on one side, Jeff on the other with his arm around her shoulder, for all the neighbors to see. She smiled knowing this was his public declaration that they were a couple. She looked over at Emily who was smiling.

"I'll carry her," she said.

Sara handed the puppy to Emily and Lacey tucked into her arms. Jeff smiled and took her hand as they walked back to their home.

Chapter Thirty Four

The past week had been the happiest of Sara's life. She and Jeff were together. Emily was happy. She was beginning to understand what being in a real relationship was like. She'd hesitated to tell George that she and Jeff were sleeping together but he could tell something was changed. When she confessed, George was more concerned how she was handling the physical aspect of the relationship. She explained that Jeff was very careful with her and she felt completely safe with him. Once they'd addressed her love life, they went back to their main focus, the trial.

"I'll be there for you." he asked.

"No, you have other patients who need you. Jeff has taken off for the trial so I won't be alone. Actually, he's been called as a witness."

"I'm not surprised at that. He did treat you for your injuries. The prosecutor will need him to testify to your injuries." He set down his notepad. "How are you feeling about seeing Jimmy again. He will have no option of whether or not to be there."

"Honestly, I'm frightened. Thinking of seeing him again makes my heart race. But I keep reminding myself what we've talked about. Just because I'm strong doesn't mean I won't get scared. I have to remember I have people I can depend on."

George smiled and stood. "Okay, Dr. George is gone and this is friend George. I'd like to give you a hug." Sara smiled and accepted the gentle hug. "I'm really proud of you."

Emily was nervous as she got ready for school. She put all her books in her backpack but dropped her lunch box. Sara took her hand. "It's okay, sweetheart. I'm going to be okay."

"I don't like that your husband is going to be there. He hurt you."

She smiled at her. "Ex-husband. Remember, I'm not married to him anymore. He can't hurt me anymore."

"Are you scared?"

"Honestly, a little. I have to testify in front of a judge and that makes me nervous."

Jeff came up from behind her and put her hands on her shoulders. "I'll be right there with her, Em. I promise. Sara won't be alone."

Emily threw her arms around Sara's waist. "I just hate that you're upset and I don't know how to make it better." Sara tipped her face toward hers.

"You do make it better, so much better. I love knowing I have you and your father to come home to. You are a wonderful, kind soul, Emily Goren. You make everything better." She gave her a kiss on the cheek. "I love you."

"I love you too."

"Now, you better run now. You'll miss the bus."

"Promise me you'll be home tonight."

"I'll come straight home after the trial. I promise."

"Okay." Emily gave her father a quick kiss. "Bye, Daddy." And the whirlwind that was Emily Goren was out the door.

"She does blow in and out of rooms in a rush."

Jeff sighed. "She gets that from her grandmother." He pulled Sara into a tight hug. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm nervous but I'll be okay."

He gave her a light kiss. "Yeah, you will."

Chapter Thirty Five

Sara and Jeff sat in on the bench in front of the court room. Her attorney, Matt Blake sat opposite them, going over the case file. The prosecutor, Bill Hague, came toward them. He spotted Jeff and Sara holding hands and stopped. "Is this...are you two..."

"Yes, we are," said Jeff.

"Well, try not to make it too obvious in the court room. It could cloud the issue. It could look like you are trying to get the husband out of the way."

"Don't be ridiculous, Bill."

They looked behind the prosecutor to see Jeff's mother. "Millicent, please. I'm trying to do my job."

"My son is in love with Sara and she's in love with him. And in my opinion, he couldn't have chosen better. Now, deal with it."

Jeff stood and gave his mother a tight hug. "Thank you, mother. This means so much to me, to us."

Sara stood and accepted a hug from Jeff's mother. "We weren't expecting you."

"Of course I'd be here. As my granddaughter recently reminded me, family supports family."

"Actually, it couldn't hurt," said Matt. "Having Millicent Prescott Goren in your corner couldn't hurt with the judge."

"Matt, what are you doing here?" asked Bill.

"I am here to answer any questions my client, Ms. Bridges, may have."

"I thought there'd be a jury," said Sara.

"Apparently, Jenny Cruz convinced your ex-husband that he wouldn't stand a chance with jury. That was actually pretty sound advice. The judge will only look at the facts. A jury would see a slime ball. No offense."

"None taken," she smiled.

A bailiff came out to the hall. "The judge is ready." Bill opened the door but Sara stopped cold.

“Is he in there?” she asked.

“Yes, he is. You don’t have to go anywhere near him. He’s at the table with his attorney. You will sit behind me in the gallery. You will only have to walk past him when you’re called to the stand.”

Jeff held on to her shoulders. “I’ll be right there with you.”

She nodded and walked into the court room. Her heart raced at the sight of her ex-husband. She was glad she’d only had coffee this morning. Anything else might have come back on her. Almost six months in prison had not served him well. He looked thinner and older, even though he was the same age as she was, twenty five. The one thing she did notice was his eyes weren’t glassy. He must not be getting any drugs or alcohol in jail. Jeff led them to the bench behind the prosecutor and his mother went in first, then Sara, then Jeff, sitting closest to Jimmy. She could tell he was maneuvering himself so she couldn’t see Jimmy. One more reason to love him.

They stood when the judge entered and he called the proceedings to order. Sara could feel Jimmy’s eyes on her but she wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. The judge started by restating the charges. “Mr. James Bridges is being charged with first degree attempted murder.”

“That’s bullshit!” Jimmy shouted.

The judge hit his gavel. “Ms. Cruz, control your client.”

“I’m trying your honor.”

They heard her his threw her teeth, “For once in your life, shut up.”

The judge continued, Mr. Hague, do you have opening remarks?”

“Your honor, I think we can dispense with opening remarks and go to the facts of the case.”

The judge looked at the defendant’s table. “Ms. Cruz?”

“No objection, your honor.”

“Mr. Hague, call your first witness.”

“The state calls Dr. Jeffrey Goren.” Jeff nodded to Sara as he took the stand and repeated the oath. “Dr. Goren, did you treat Sara Bridges at Prescott hospital on October 23rd of last year.”

"I did."

"Please describe Ms. Bridges injuries."

"She had been beaten..."

"Objection. Dr. Goren does not witness how Ms. Bridges received her injuries."

"Sustained."

"Dr. Goren please describe how Ms. Bridges presented in the ER."

Sara could tell Jeff was steeling himself. "Ms. Bridges had collapsed inside the ER entrance. Her face was swollen to the point that her eyes were nearly closed. She was barefoot and her feet were cut and bleeding. Upon further examination we found bruised handprints around her neck. X-rays showed years of physical, including multiple breaks and concussions."

"Objection," said Jenny. "Dr. Goren can't possibly know when an injury occurred. They could be years old."

"Actually, it's true that some were years old, but I can tell you how old each injury is."

"Dr. Goren, please explain," said the judge.

Jeff pointed to screen. "Your honor, if I may?"

"Proceed."

Jeff opened a laptop that had been linked to the big screen. He pulled up X-ray after X-ray and pointed to lines on her bones. He explained how he could date breaks dating back more than twenty years. He paid attention to breaks he could pinpoint were less than eight years old, the time that Sara was married to Jimmy." Sara closed her eyes and felt the tears drop down on her cheeks. Then she felt a hand grab hers. She looked over and Millicent had taken her hand.

"It's okay, dear. We're here."

"Thank you," she whispered.

"Ms. Cruz, so you have anything for Dr. Goren?" asked the judge.

Jenny stood and looked at Jeff and then Sara and Millicent, who was still holding her hand. "No, your honor."

"Very well, Mr. Hague, call your next witness."

“The state calls Sara Bridges to the stand.” Jeff and his mom both squeezed her hands. She walked to the stand and took her oath. “Ms. Bridges, how long were you married to the defendant?”

“Eight years.”

“How old were you when you married?”

“Sixteen.”

“In those eight years, did your husband ever strike you?”

“Yes.”

“Was it a frequent occurrence?”

“Yes,” she said quietly.

“I’m sorry, ma’am. You will need to speak up for the court reporter,” said the judge.

“I’m sorry, your honor. Yes, striking me was a very frequent occurrence.”

“Please excuse me for asking this, Ms. Bridges, but this is a question I have to ask. Why did you stay?”

“I had no place else to go.”

“What made you think the night of October 23rd was different than any other night? Why did you think he was going to kill you?”

Sara stiffened her spine and took a deep breath. “When he came in that night he was very drunk. He hit me and knocked me to the floor. He jumped on my chest and beat my face. Then he put his hands around my throat and said he was going to kill me. I’d been with him long enough to know he meant it. I don’t know where I found the strength but when he moved to get a better grip on my neck I kicked him in the groin as hard as I could. He fell off me and screamed at me that he would catch me and kill me. I ran out the door and down the highway to the hospital. It was the only place I could think of to go.”

“Ms. Bridges, how far is it to the hospital?”

“I’m not sure.”

“I am. It’s four miles. The temperature that night was thirty three degrees. You made that walk barefoot, wearing only a t shirt and jeans.” He looked at the judge. “I have no further questions.”

“Ms. Cruz, your witness.”

“Ms. Bridges, why did you divorce your husband while he was still in jail?”

Sara gasped. This was not a question she’d anticipated. “I divorced him because I want nothing to do with him ever again.”

“Was this divorce encouraged by Dr. Goren?”

“Objection, relevance!” yelled Bill.

“The relevance is Ms. Bridges may have been encouraged to abandon her husband.”

“I’ll allow it.”

Sara stood in her chair. “That’s insane! Jimmy beat the crap out of me for eight years. I had enough and filed for divorce. He chose not to respond. The judge granted me my divorce.”

“Who paid for your divorce lawyer?”

She sat back down. “He’s a friend of the family.”

“The Goren family.”

“Yes.”

“You work for Dr. Goren.”

“Yes.”

“In what capacity?”

Sara knew what she was implying. She tried to calm herself, the way George taught her. “I am their housekeeper.”

“Both Dr. Goren and Mrs. Goren are here on your behalf. That seems like more than a housekeeper.”

Sara looked at Jeff and Millicent and nodded. She looked at the public defender and stared her down. Dr. Goren was called to testify. Mrs. Goren is a good hearted woman who is here to offer me support during this difficult experience.” She pointed at Jimmy and stared at him. “My life now has nothing to do with what that man did to me. He tried to kill me and it’s time he pay for what he’s done.”

The judge banged his gavel and Sara sat back in her chair. “That’s enough.”

“I’m sorry, your honor.”

“Not you, Ms. Bridges. That’s enough Ms. Cruz. You have used up any leeway you may have had. Do you have any questions related to the night of October 23rd?”

“I have no further questions of this witness.”

Sara left the stand and took her seat between

“Very well. Mr. Hague, do you have any further witnesses?”

“No, your honor.”

“Very well, Ms. Cruz?”

She sighed. “I call to the stand James Bridges.”

Jimmy took the stand and stared at Sara. She knew what he was doing but she wouldn’t let him win. Not this time. She took Jeff’s hand in hers and took a breath. She would stay calm, no matter what he said.

“Mr. Bridges, please tell the court what happened the night of October 23rd.”

“I’d been out with my boys, so I had a few, I don’t deny that. Me and the Mrs. had words. She fell, that’s all. She’s always exaggerating. A real drama queen.”

“How do you explain her other injuries?”

“She’s a klutz, always tripping over something.”

Jenny Cruz sat down and sighed. “No further questions.”

“Mr. Hague, care to cross?” asked the judge.

“Yes, your honor. Mr. Bridges, the breaks in your ex-wife’s arms are spiral fractures, made from twisting forces.”

“Ah, her old man was a tough old buzzard. I can’t be accountable for what he did.”

“Several of those fractures are less than five years old.”

“So.”

“Edward Walker, Sara’s father, died more than five years ago.” Jimmy stared at the prosecutor with his mouth open. “No further questions.”

“Ms. Cruz, anything further?”

She tossed her pen on the table. “Nothing further.”

“Fine. I will retire to consider my decision. He looked at both attorneys and pointed his gavel. “Don’t go anywhere.”

Sara sat down in the hallway. “What did he mean, don’t go anywhere?”

Matt smiled. “I think that means your ex-husband should get used to the idea of the next ten years in Graterford.”

“Matt’s right,” said Bill. “It was obvious Jenny didn’t want to put him on the stand but it was his right. Stupid, but his right.”

Jeff put his arm around her. “Are you okay?”

“Actually, I am. I said what I had to say and I think the judge was listening.”

“I think you can count on it,” said Bill.

“What do you mean?”

“Judge Stone has a notorious intolerance for domestic abuse, particularly child abuse.”

“But he can’t let his opinion affect his decision but he has all the evidence and he’s less likely to think,” Bill made air quotes “you’re clumsy.”

“Can I get you a drink, dear? I think the coffee machine looks questionable,” asked Millicent.

“Yes, please. I’d love a water.”

“Jeffrey?”

“Yes, Mom, that would be great. Thank you.”

“Wow, you’re mom is being so nice.”

“Yeah, she is.” He looked at her and gave her a quick kiss. “You bring out the best in all of us.”

Sara tried to hold back her tears. She leaned against his shoulder. “Thank you.” Millicent came back with their waters and they sat down. They barely finished half a bottle when the bailiff came out. “The judge is back.”

Sara looked at Bill Hague. “Is this normal?”

“Not at all. Let’s go.”

They took their places behind Bill and rose when the judge entered. They sat down and Sara noticed a police officer taking a seat behind them. It was Henry Roberts, the officer who'd taken her statement in the hospital and arrested Jimmy.

"I have examined the evidence and I've reached my verdict. Will the defendant please rise?" Jimmy stood and slouched next to his attorney. "James Bridges I find you guilty of first degree attempted murder. Your previous record mandates a minimum of a fifteen year sentence with ten years served before eligibility for parole."

Jimmy exploded in rage. "This is bullshit!" He pointed at Sara. "This it that stupid bitches fault. She's a liar!" Then he cold cocked Jenny Cruz. "You! You bitch! You should have gotten me out of this. She's a crap lawyer! The bailiff came up from behind him and pulled his arms behind him. Henry Roberts slapped cuffs on him as the judge banged his gavel. "Sergeant Roberts, get him out of my court room."

"Yes your honor."

The judge stood and came around his bench to see to Jenny Cruz. "Are you alright, Ms. Cruz?"

"I will be, sir, thank you."

"I'll get her to the ER," said Matt.

"Thank you, Mr. Blake." The judge left the room and everyone else gathered around her. Sara started to cry.

"I'm sorry he did that to you."

"This is not your fault, just like his being in jail for the next fifteen years isn't your fault."

"Why did you let him testify?" asked Matt. "You knew how that would turn out."

"He insisted. I warned him but he wouldn't listen."

Matt smiled at her. "Did you ever consider private practice?"

Jenny touched her swollen eye. "Every damn day." Marked helped her to her feet.

"Let's talk about on the way to ER."

Sara didn't think she'd ever been this tired. It had been a rough few weeks but now it was over. Jimmy was gone from her life and she could start think about the life she had as her new life. Jeff and Sara and even Millicent were her family now. She came into the kitchen and began to fix lunch.

"How do BLT's sound?" she asked.

"It sounds delicious," said Millicent, "But you should be laying down. You're exhausted. You go get changed and lay down. I'll bring it to your room." Sara and Jeff looked at her like she'd lost her mind. "What? Jeffrey go change your clothes and I'll get lunch ready."

Jeff smiled, "Yes ma'am."

Millicent looked at Sara and saw her eyes welled. "Are you alright, dear?"

Sara gave her a tight hug. "I am now. Thank you, for everything." She went into her room and changed her clothes. She sat down on her bed just a Millicent brought her sandwich and a glass of milk. "Jeffrey said you like milk."

"Yes ma'am, thank you."

"Alright, you eat up and get some rest."

Jeff knocked on the door. "I'm sorry. I just got a page. There's been an outbreak of food poisoning at the grade school and I have to run."

"Emily!" Sara shouted.

Jeff smiled. "No, she's fine. She's already text me. She ate the lunch you made. She's fine."

She leaned back against her pillows and Lacey jumped up against her. She let the dog get next to her and accepted some doggie kisses. "I'm sorry for shouting. It's just been..."

"I know, dear," said Millicent.

"You lay down and rest. I'll wait until Emily gets home."

"Oh, that's not necessary. Jeff will lock up when he leaves. I'll be fine."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive. You've been wonderful, Millicent. Thank you for everything."

In a move that shocked both Sara and Jeff, Millicent gave her a hug. "Please dear, call me Mom."

Jeff saw his mother out and came back and sat on the edge of her bed. He snickered when he saw she'd finished her sandwich.

"I was more hungry than I realized."

"Good." He gave her a soft kiss. "I hate that I need to go."

"Please, all those puking children need you," she smiled.

"I love you," he said as he gave her another kiss.

"I love you too." Sara listened to Jeff leave and heard the front door alarm beep. She closed her eyes and tried to dream of a new life.

Sara woke to the sound of the pounding on the front door. Jeff and Emily would have called her if they'd lost their key. It could be a delivery man. She looked out the peep hole and her heart stopped. It was Jimmy and he was holding a gun.

"Let me in Sara!"

"Go away, Jimmy." She reached over to the panel and hit the silent alarm button. Jeff had explained when he installed the system that this button would summon the police without alerting anyone in the house. "How did you get loose?"

"Ah, they were no match for me. No you can let me in or I can wait right here for that little girl to come home from school."

Sara thought she might faint. How would he know about Emily?" She opened the door and let him in. He looked around and whistled. "Damn girl. You really fell into it here."

"I just work here."

"Yeah, right. I saw the way that doctor looked at you. You're doin him."

"Jimmy, I'm just the help."

"Bullshit."

"What do you want?"

"I want my wife."

"I'm not your wife anymore."

"You'll always be mine."

Jeff had just taken care of one of the last of the puking school children. All he wanted was to go home to Sara and a big cup of coffee. Henry burst into the ER.

“Jeff, Jeff, where are you?”

“I’m here. What the hell is going on?”

“It’s Bridges. He’s escaped from the transport van. He shot the deputy and he’s loose and armed. We have no idea where’s he’s gone.”

Jeff looked down at his beeping phone. “We do now. That’s the silent alarm at my house. You need to call the your people and not to go in hot. Sara’s there by herself. He looked down at his watch. “Shit.” Emily is already on the bus home.” He ran with Henry to his patrol car as he called his mother. “Mom, I need you to get back to the house. Park down the block. Sara’s ex has escaped and the alarm at the house went off.”

“Emily!”

“The bus stops a block from the house. You wait there and get her. Keep her away from the house.”

“What are you doing?”

“Anything I can.”

They pulled up to the house and there was a large number of cars parked at a distanced from the house. Jeff stood behind the local police chief, John Bennett “Have you spotted him in the house?”

“No. We think he’s after his wife and they’ll go out the back. We’re coming up from behind the house. They’ll probably get what ever they can out of the house before they take off.”

“There is no way Sara is in league with her ex husband.”

Jeff turned around and saw his mother behind him. “Mom, where’s Emily?”

“She’s with Kathy’s mother and they’re in her house. John Bennett you listen to me. There is no way Sara is in league with that monster. If you ever want to be elected sheriff again you better make sure Sara is safe.”

“Mrs. Goren, are you threatening me?”

“You bet your ass, I am.”

Jeff put his arm around his mother and gave her a kiss.

Sara tried to stay calm. Jimmy would feed on her panic. She couldn't think about what he'd done to her or what he'd done to escape from jail. All she had to do was make sure Emily never got close to him. She'd pressed the silent alarm and hoped that they'd know what to do. Jimmy was checking the rooms and found Lacey in her room. Recognizing the threat Lacey charged. Jimmy took aim but Sara jumped between them. “Jimmy no! Let me put her in her cage. I'm just the help. They won't look for me. You hurt their dog and you'll make the news and every animal lover in the state will be looking for you.”

“Fine, but be quick about it.”

Sara locked Lacey in her crate and whispered, “I'm sorry baby. I love you.” Her eyes welled thinking she'd never see her again, but at least she's be alive. “All right, Jimmy, you need to get out of town quick. I don't have a car. Dr. Goren is at the hospital and his daughter is at school.” She reached into a drawer and pulled out an envelope. “Here's two hundred dollars we keep for groceries. That'll get you out of town.”

“We need more than that.”

“We? I'm not going anywhere with you.”

“You're my wife. You go where I do.”

“Not anymore.”

Jimmy grabbed her arm. “You belong to me. I don't care what some judge says.”

Jeff was pacing back and forth behind the barricade. “John, you’ve got to get her out of there!”

“Jeff, if we go in guns blazing we’ll get her killed. Give my people a chance to see what’s going on. Do you have any nanny cams?”

“What?”

“Cameras to watch when you’re not there.”

“No.” A deputy came up to John.

“We got a shot of Bridges through the window. He’s got a gun held on his ex-wife. Do we have permission to take the shot?”

“No, you can’t!” Jeff shouted. “You’ll hit Sara.”

“Jeff, you calm down or I’ll have you restrained. My men are trained. They know what their doing.” He got closer to Jeff. “I just got word when he broke loose it was at the back entrance of the courthouse. He shot the guard, Frank Wolfe. Jenny Cruz and Matt Blake were coming out of the courthouse just as he broke lose.”

“Oh my God. How are they doing?”

“Mark will recover. Frank and Jenny are dead.”

Jeff felt like he couldn’t breathe. He leaned up against the police car. “John, you’ve got to get her out of there.” He didn’t stop the tears. “I love her.”

Sara noticed a police cars had blocked off the street. It didn’t take long for Jimmy to notice too.

“Shit! Shit!” He looked at her glancing out the window. “This is your fault. This is all your fault!” Sara darted sideways and grabbed a carving knife. He took aim and fired. She fell to the ground and saw him standing above her. She knew she was hit but she hadn’t let go. She pulled the knife out from behind her and stabbed him in his leg. Blood poured from the wound and he fell back “You bitch! I’ll kill you!” She stomped on his hand and kicked the gun down the tile floor.

“No more! She screamed. “No more!” She drove the knife into his chest. She scrambled to her feet, slipping on the blood, just like before, the blood. So

much blood. She reached the front door and pulled opened the door and stood still. She knew he'd be there. "Jeff!" she screamed before everything went dark.

Chapter Thirty Six

Sara opened her eyes and saw acoustical tile. There were beeps and noises she recognized. She sat up quickly and regretted it. "Ow!"

"Sara, Sara, you're awake. Daddy, Sara's awake," yelled Emily.

Jeff ran into the room. "Sara," he took her hand and smiled. She looked at his beautiful blue eyes and warm smile. He was wearing his doctor's coat and had a stethoscope hanging around his neck. She'd never seen anyone look so good. Emily came up to the side of her bed. "You'll be home soon. Daddy said so."

"Em, please. Let me talk to Sara and check her vitals."

"Okay, but I'll be right outside in the hall, Sara."

"Don't wander," said Jeff.

"Nana's out there. I'll sit with her." Emily left Jeff and Sara alone.

Sara was stunned when she saw his eyes welled up. "Jeff, what's wrong?"

"Nothing. Not any more." He smiled. "First things first." He leaned over and gave her a deep kiss. "Oh, sweetheart, I thought I'd lost you."

"Did you get Jimmy?" Jeff stood back and got a bit pale.

"Jimmy's dead."

"What? I killed him? Oh my God? Are they going to arrest me?"

He took her hand and tried to calm her. "Sara, no one is coming after you. You were defending yourself."

"No one will believe me," she said as she began to cry.

"Sweetheart, when he broke away from the deputy, he got his gun and shot him. Just as he got loose Jenny Cruz and Matt Blake were coming out of the back exit. He shot them too."

"Oh God," she whispered. "Are they okay?"

"Mark is going to make a full recovery."

Sara knew the answer before she asked. "What about the others?"

"Deputy Frank Wolfe and Jenny Cruz are both dead." Sara started crying and couldn't stop. "Sara, you need to understand, you did what you had to do. Once he knew he couldn't get away he would have killed you."

Her eyes flashed. "Lacey! He was going to shoot her but I convinced him to let me lock her in her crate. Please tell me she's okay, please!"

"She's fine, absolutely fine. She and Emily are staying with my mother until you come back home."

"I'm coming home? You still want me after all this?"

He leaned over her bed and gave her a kiss. "Sara, I will always want you. I love you."

"I killed a man."

"You defended yourself."

"Jeff, could you do something for me?"

"Anything, sweetheart."

"I need to talk to George."

Chapter Forty

Sara sat on the chaise lounge while Lacey sat on her lap. Since the shooting she'd gone from playful lap dog to watch dog. She'd become very protective of not just Sara but of Emily and Jeff. Her shoulder still hurt from the bullet wound but it was getting better. At least it was getting better than her nightmares. She'd started seeing George twice a week again. He kept assuring her that she would get past this but she wasn't so sure. She had the germ of an idea. She'd run it past George and he thought it was a good idea. Well, it was two ideas.

"Sara, where are you?" Jeff called.

"I'm in the back yard." Jeff opened the screen and Lacey woofed at him. "Lacey, that's Jeff. You know him. Put your hand out and let her have a sniff. She's still a little skittish."

Jeff allowed Lacey to sniff him before he could give Sara a kiss. "I can't believe I need permission to kiss my girl."

"She'll get better. I talked to the vet. She said Lacey just needs time. How come you're home so early?"

"I heard from Matthew Blake."

"How is he doing?"

"He just had a graze so he's just about healed. He was looking into your family's history."

"Really? Why?"

"He's very through. He's discovered there was an inheritance."

"Well, I'm sure my father drank it all."

"No, you're father never knew anything about it. It was left in trust for you by your great grandmother, Mary Reilly."

"For me? I was only a few years old when she died. I barely remember her."

"Well, she obviously care for you. It wasn't a large amount when it was invested, but she chose wisely. Matt said now it's worth about fifty thousand dollars."

Sara started to gasp. "How, How, much?"

“Fifty thousand dollars.” Jeff glanced down. “You could do what you wanted or go where you wanted.”

Sara saw the look on his face and knew what he was thinking. She often thought for such a brilliant man he was an open book. “When you came in I did want to talk to you about something and now it seems like great granny has started the conversation. I was talking to George. Even though I’m divorced, my name is still Bridges and I hate that name. If I go back to my maiden name, Rogers, it just reminds me of my father. I was thinking of taking the name Reilly.”

“Sara Reilly. I like it,” he smiled.

“So do I. There is also something George and I have been talking about for a long time. When I was Emily’s age I wanted to be a teacher. My teacher said I was gifted, her shining star. I thought she was just being nice.”

“I can see you’d be an excellent teacher. She have a way of explaining things to Emily and getting through to her that I can’t. That’s a gift.”

“I’d have to get my G.E.D. of course but George said I could probably get recommendations to get into a college, and now that I have the money for tuition, I could go, or at least start.”

“Sara, you’ve made a number of friends in Prescott, including my mother. And that’s no easy feat, let me tell you.” He paused again and glanced down. “I’m sure you could go to any college you chose.”

Sara took his hand in hers. “What ever I do, I don’t want to leave you and Emily.” She was relieved when he let go of a breath he was holding.

“Oh, thank God. I would never stand in your way but you’ve become so important to Emily and to me. We love you” He leaned closer. “You mean the world to me, Sara Reilly.” She giggled at the use of her new name. And maybe, one day, when you’re ready, you wouldn’t mind a hyphen.”

“A hyphen?”

“Like my mother and Emily and me. We’re Prescott Goren. I think Reilly Goren sounds pretty good.” He grinned that lopsided smile that made her fall in love with him.

“I think that sounds perfect.”

