

What Do You See?

By Kate Simon

Prologue

“Connie, Connie, Connie...” the dark haired boy sang. The boy stood at the top of a well worn mound at the back of the new housing development. The object of his derision sat at the foot of the hill. The dirt mountain made an awesome place for the neighborhood kids to ride their bikes. That is until the guard found them and shooed them off. On good days the old guy didn't find them on purpose.

“My name is Connell...” he growled.

“Connie's a girl's name.”

“Knock it off, Johnny.” Ten year old Connell O'Hara was used to taunts about his name. It wasn't fair, darn it. Just because his parents came from Ireland didn't mean they had to stick him with such a stupid Irish name. Dad said it was to honor his grandfather and he should be proud. He was, sort of. Poppa was real nice with lots of stories about growing up in Ireland and how he met Nana and they had dad and moved here. Poppa had been a soldier and a hunter and he'd promised to show him how to shoot a gun when he got older. Yeah. Poppa was cool. If only he didn't have such a stupid name.

“Connie, Connie, Con...Ow!” Johnny shouted as he grabbed his side. A large rock laid at his feet. Connell looked up to see who through the rock. The setting sun dropping behind his defender illuminated a gangly ten year old girl. Her long black hair was pulled back in a half hearted ponytail. She stood defiant with her bike leaning on her hip. Michaela Burke. Mike to everyone but him.

They were in the same class at St. Joe's. She sat in the front and he was in the back. Nuns were very big on alphabetical order. Michaela was the cool girl. Everyone liked her. She was wicked smart and deadly at tether ball. Her penchant for looking after the weaker kids had gotten her into more than her fair share of playground fights and resulting trips to the principal's office. Oh, crap! Did she think he was weak?”

“Knock it off Johnny Holden or I'll tell your Mom. She's Mrs. O'Hara friend and she won't like it if you're mean to him.”

“Aw, Mike. I was just teasing,” he whined as he rubbed his side.

“Yeah, well I'm not laughing. Now go home.”

“Geez...” Johnny muttered as he jumped on his bike and pedaled off.

The tiny titan now directed her ire down the hill. “Connell O'Hara, what are you doing here by yourself? You know this place is dangerous. Your Mom will skin you alive.”

Connell lifted his chin. “I wasn't alone. I was here with Johnny,”

“You're lying, Connell. He had a bag from Franklin's on his handlebars which means he went to the store for his Mom. She must be out of M&M's.”

Connell gave up. It was creepy how Mike could always tell when someone was lying.

Mike jumped on her bike and pointed herself downhill. Before he could shout “Be careful” she was flying down the hill, her legs extended giving a banshee cry so fierce the ancients would have approved. Just as she reached the bottom of the hill her front wheel caught a rock and she flew over her handlebars, landing at his feet.

“Michaela, are you OK?”

“It's Mike,” she groaned.

“What?” Connell asked. He was fixated on her knees which were now scuffed and bleeding.

“If I was willing to smack Johnny Holden with a rock for calling you Connie, the least you can do is call me Mike...” She hissed as she tried to stand and failed. “Is my bike OK?”

“It's fine but your knees...”

“Yeah well, that's nothing new. My Gram is always yelling at me I'm too much of a tomboy.” Mike affected an Irish lilt. “You'll never find a husband, girlie. No man wants a girl to best him.” She winced as Connell tried to brush off her knees.

“You have gravel in your knees.” Connell reached for the water bottle attached to his bike frame. He twisted the cap and poured water over her knees.

“Oh damn, that hurts!” Mike shouted.

“I bet it does.” He cleared the last of the pebbles from her knees and helped her to her feet. “Can you walk?”

“Of course I can. This is nothing.”

“Come on. I'll take you home.”

“You don't have to,” Mike replied as she eased back on her bike.

“I'm taking you home!” Connell shouted.

“I don't need anyone to take care of me, Connell O'Hara.”

He replied under his breath. “Someone has to...”

Chapter One

“Thwack” The shot to her ass woke her with a start.

“Come on, sleepyhead. It’s 6:30 already.”

Mike Burke looked up at her ever dapper boyfriend who was already suited up and ready to prosecute the dregs of Newton’s humanity, such as they were. His perfectly chiseled frame blocked most of the doorway. “You do realize I’m armed,” she growled into her pillow.

“You know it wouldn’t kill you to get your butt in gear and run with me in the morning.” Drake Preston prided himself on his fitness, also his perfect smile, his Armani suit collection and his current year Beemer. His six feet of Norse god perfection had admittedly been a factor when she’d accepted a date six months ago.

On paper they seemed like a good idea. A no nonsense cop should be a perfect match for the up and coming A.D.A. but now...

“Reaching for my weapon in three...two...”

“Ok, Ok. My schedule is really full today so I won’t have time for lunch.”

Mike snorted into her pillow. The confidence that made Drake Preston a first class prosecutor also didn’t allow him to believe that lunch with him wasn’t the highest priority on her list of things to do.

“And don’t forget we’re having dinner with Chester and his wife on Saturday. Get something new to wear, preferably something vaguely feminine.”

Mike rolled over and drilled him with a glare too angry for so early in the morning. Dating the assistant district attorney did come with a few annoying obligations, like dinner

with his blowhard boss and his country club wife. “Explain yourself, Drake, before I really do reach for my gun.”

“The last dinner we went to you wore jeans and your gun.”

Mike threw off her covers, wide awake and full on angry. “I’d just gotten off a twenty four hour stretch finding a kidnapped child! I left to O’Malley to process the perp and do the reports so I could make it to your precious dinner.”

Ignoring her anger, John moved around the room , gathering his keys, clamped his briefcase shut, and grabbing the gym bag that doubled as his overnight bag. He turned to face her and she watched his eyes warm as he looked her up and down, admiring the thin tank top and boy shorts she’d worn to bed. He glanced at his watch. “Mmmm. I wish I had more time but I have to run.” He leaned in to get a kiss until she strong armed him back.

“Go now,” she growled.

Fully awake and fully pissed Mike walked into her kitchen and reached for the tea pot. John had been fun, in the beginning. A high powered attorney didn’t have time to make demands on her life. He’d been good for the occasional dinner and the sex had been...satisfactory. Now it wasn’t even that. Last night she’d gotten in late and crawled into bed without waking him, intentionally. It was their Thursday night ‘date’ night, dinner and sex. Dinner had devolved to take out, and the sex, well, that had devolved too.

Mike pushed Drake from her mind and tried to enjoy her chai and bagel. Vitamins taken, dishes hidden in the dishwasher and a quick shower and she was facing her mirror, wondering how so much time had slipped by. It seemed like five minutes ago she’d graduated from the academy, not ten years. One more thought to table for later along with when the hell she could find time to buy something feminine.

Securing her Beretta in its holster and adjusting her jacket she took one last look. She flipped open her jewelry box and reached for the gift she gave herself when she made detective, one half carat diamond stud earrings. They were small but nearly perfect stones. Screwing on the backs, she admired the light reflecting through the clear stones.

They were her one feminine indulgence in a otherwise neutral wardrobe. Mike never apologized for being female, but she never made a point of it either.

Her long black hair was secured in its usual ponytail, her pale skin and equally pale blue eyes betrayed her heritage, no matter how hard she tried to blend. There was no way to deny Michaela Mary Burke was as Irish as the day was long.

Chapter Two

“Morning, Mike.”

Mike secured the lock on her door and turned to greet her neighbor. “Hi, Jane. How are you doing?” Jane Stone had lived directly across the hall from her for all of the seven years she’d lived there. She’d gotten used to sharing tea and Sunday funnies with Jane and her cat, Charlie. Sixty some years old, Jane lived on a pension and from what Mike saw rarely went out. What she did have was a wicked sense of humor, and a keen power of observation. In good weather they would sit on Jane’s balcony and comment on the comings and goings of their neighbors.

“I saw Captain America leave,” Jane said.

“Jane....” Mike replied with a warning tone. She knew Jane was not a fan but she didn’t have the energy this morning to justify her choice in boyfriends again.

“Ok, Ok.” Jane replied as Charlie darted out and wove between Mike’s legs. “Meow”, he called.

“Meow,” Mike called back as she reached down to stroke his long white fur.

“Charlie, no. You’ll get her all full of hair.” Jane scooped up the cat and held him tight.

“Oh, you know I don’t mind.” Mike looked into the deep green eyes as she cuddled his chin. “You know you’re my favorite little man.” Charlie replied with a contented purr.

“You spoil him, Mike.

Mike looked up and noticed her friend looked a little more than tired. “You, ok, Jane?”

“I’m fine, just not enough sleep.” She retreated back through her open door. “You know me when I have a good book and no respect for tomorrow.”

“You sure?” she asked, not at all certain Jane’s grey pallor was exhaustion.

Jane gave her a wan smile as she gathered Charlie into her arms and planted a kiss on top on the little flirt’s head. “I’m sure, Mike. Now go keep the world safe for democracy.

Newton Pennsylvania covered twenty square miles of prime Buck County real estate. Far enough from Philly to be considered country, close enough by train that a large number of center city doctors and lawyers called Newton home.

Mike’s family had settled here along with the large influx of Irish immigrants in the late 1880’s. To this day, Irish immigrants still came to join extended family in Newton. Some came to work the outlying farms, many worked in the thriving shops and send their kids to the excellent schools. One hundred and thirty years later and Newton traditions were all but set in stone. The St. Patty’s Day Parade was the third largest in the country, after Boston and New York. There was something comforting about being in a town full of people who said ‘slainte’ before drinking and ‘Jesus, Mary and Joseph’ was an expression of frustration or a mild curse when you stubbed your toe.

Mike pulled into her assigned spot at the Newton police department. It was one of the few perks of her promotion to Lieutenant. The title also came with an office where she spent countless hours doing reports, just like when she was a lowly detective in the Newton PD. She may have been the youngest female detective in the history of the department but she’d earned every rung on the career ladder. Patrol officer, sergeant, detective, lieutenant. Some of the old school cops still gave her crap about being young and female, but most, thankfully, didn’t give a damn. She was a good cop and well respected..for the most part.

“Good morning, Maryanne.” Mike offered a cheery greeting to the receptionist. She barely glanced up as she shoved pink message slips at Mike.

Maryanne Dalton had worked at the Newton PD for nearly thirty years. She was a large, pumpkin shaped woman in her early sixties with overly processed platinum hair, black rimmed glasses and expensive taste in clothes. Today's outfit included a vivid iris printed sweater set that most likely would cover a month of Mike's rent.

“That's a lovely sweater,” Mike said.

“Thanks,” she mumbled.

When she saw a sudden light come to Maryanne's eyes she knew it wasn't for her.

Connell.

Connell O'Hara was every Irish mother's dream come true. Six feet three inches of overgrown choirboy, they'd grown up in the same west side neighborhood. They attended the same Catholic grade school and high school but lost touch when Connell won an appointment to West Point.

“Good morning, Connell.” Having spent several decades in the same job, Maryanne felt no need to address anyone by their titles.

“That's a lovely outfit,” he offered with an extra dash of Irish charm.

She nearly exploded with pleasure. “Oh, thank you. My Bobby picked it out for me. My Bobby always wants me to have the best.”

“And why wouldn't he?” smiled Connell.

It was a running joke in the office that her husband, a successful local developer, was actually named My Bobby, since it was the only way she referred to him.

Maryanne beamed as she handed Connell his messages. She then turned her attention back to Mike. “Fred called. He wants to see you when he gets in.”

“Thank you, “ said Mike.

“Humph, “ she replied as she turned to her keyboard.

Connell followed Mike into her office and closed the door. She spotted the box of Krispy Kremes tucked under his arm.. “Really, Connell? Donuts? Could you be any more cliché?”

“Come on, Mike. You know they’re my one vice.”

“You could at least have the decency to get a gut.”

He smiled as he patted his belly. “Ah yes. I am a lean, mean, fighting machine.”

“Kiss my ass,” she muttered.

Connell plopped down and reached for a donut. He glanced through the glass wall of the office and nodded back toward Maryanne. “Why does she...not care for you?”

“Don't sugar coat it. It's unabashed hatred.”

“Yeah. What's up with that?” The last of his question was muffled by his cream filled breakfast.

“She decided the day she met me she couldn't stand me. Maybe it's a pheromone thing.”

“She so rotten to you. Why are you always so nice to her?”

“Because she's such a sad case.”

“What? Maryanne? Sad? She's one of the cheeriest people I know.”

Mike nodded out the window. “What do you see?”

Connell tossed down his donut in a spray of powder. “Ah, Mike. Not now.”

“What do you see?” she repeated.

“It's too early...”

“What do you see?”

It was a game they'd started all those years ago. He'd badgered Mike into telling him how she knew Johnny Holden hadn't come with him to the hill. She explained she could see the M&M's through the plastic bag. She knew Mrs. Holden didn't go a day without them. She would have sent Johnny to the nearest store, Franklin's with orders to come right home. From then on in they played the elaborate game of “I Spy” throughout their childhood. Once he'd come to work the Newton PD she turned their childhood game into a training tool. She would always tell him *“Not everything is as clear cut as it is in the Army.”*

“Come on, Connell. What do you see?”

He knew she wouldn't give up and friend or not, partner or not, she was still his boss. He calmed his breathing and focused on Maryanne as she greeted the arriving officers. She smiled warmly, handing out messages and then returning her focus back to her monitor. That's when he saw it. The smile dissolved. She typed on her keyboard, then stopped with a sigh to answer the phone.

“It's a front. She puts it on but it's not real.”

Mike smiled. “What else isn't real? Think about your last conversation.”

He played back the conversation in his head, standing aside, watching himself talking to Maryanne, listening to her manner instead of her words. “She was overly pleased I complimented her outfit. That probably means she doesn't get complimented often.”

Mike nodded.

“But that doesn't make sense. My Bobby spoils her.” Connell paused. “That's a front too. He buys her things to make up for ignoring her.”

Mike smiled. “Ah, grasshopper, I have taught you well.”

Connell tossed a balled up napkin in her direction. “Show off.”

He looked back out the window with a new view of the woman he'd walked by everyday for the last five years. "Oh, that is sad."

"Exactly."

Chapter Two

Fred Stewart had been Chief of Police for the last fifteen years, making him a very big fish in the mid size pond of Newton. It could have made him a minor despot but he was, in fact, a really good guy. He'd earned his position and the respect of his men by being a hard working cop who looked after his people. He cared for justice more than politics. That fact had made him more than one enemy in the machinations of Newton political life.

"Morning, Chief, " said Mike as she found her usual seat in the spartan office.

"Morning, Sir, " said Connell as he offered Fred's favorite boston cream donut on a paper plate.

"O'Hara, you're hell on my diet," said Fred as he reached for his treat. His imposing six feet and four inches frame always seemed to dwarf his city issued desk. A slight paunch and a dusting of grey hair on his mostly bald head seemed to Mike the only evidence of time on her boss.

Mike smiled as Fred looked at the fresh chocolate icing with unabashed lust. "My wife will kill me," he muttered.

"I won't tell if you don't," said Connell.

The forbidden breakfast finally finished, Fred tossed a file in Mike's direction. "Hollister Jewelry have filed two insurance claims in the last six months. Both times the claims were for lost diamonds. Hollister does a lot of custom work and they bring diamonds in from New York and overseas. First claim was for a one carat stone lost from its mounting in the store."

"That doesn't sound unusual," offered Mike as she flipped through the file.

“Not normally. Three months later a second claim was filed for ten stones missing from a one hundred stone order, marked shipped but never received. The total losses from both cases are one hundred and twenty thousand dollars.”

“I’d call that a run of bad luck, but I’m not seeing a police issue,” said Connell.

“The jewelry industry is very insular. Everyone knows everyone else. They may use different vendors for the stones but the stores, the vendors, all use the same insurance company, Bailey Insurance International.” Fred paused as he flipped to the last page of the file. “Both cases were being investigated by their agent, Antoinette Masters. This morning Hollister reported a robbery but the first call Hollister made after calling 911 was to..”

Mike smiled, “His insurance agent”

When John Hollister arrived this morning he found his door broken open, alarm disabled and the safe open. He says he’s missing all his loose diamond stock, thirty two stones.”

“Now that is our problem,” said Connell.

“Masters faxed me the file. She suspects an inside job but can’t prove it.” He closed the file. “She’s tossing it into our court.”

“You two take point. CSU will meet you there.” Fred reached for his coffee as Mike stood. “Keep me informed, Lieutenant. John’s a friend.”

“Of course, sir.”

Mike stood in the center of the chaos that was Hollister's Jewelry. John Hollister was running back and forth like a hummingbird on crack. Pale and shaky, he attempted a smile when he saw Mike.

"Mike! Thank God, it's you. You'll figure this out, won't you?"

"We'll do our best, John." She pointed to Connell as he struggled with his purple latex gloves. "Have you met my partner, Detective O'Hara?"

John nodded. "Nothing like this has ever happened here. Three generations with nothing and now this." He walked them to the back room. Two large work benches showed the wear of three generations of Hollisters cutting, filling, and shaping the finest jewelry made on the east coast. Not only did they design their own pieces, they did work for some of the finest jewelry designers in the industry.

"Did you touch anything, John?"

"Nothing but the drawer." He pointed to a small box on a shelf in the safe.

Mike glanced in to see a few folded white papers and not much else. "What was in here?"

"The diamonds," he said in a numb whisper.

She snapped on her purple latex gloves and glanced at the CSU tech. "We good, Sharpe?"

"Yeah, go ahead,"

Mike picked up the square tissue and unfolded it to reveal a blue tissue lining. "What's this?" she asked.

"That's what diamonds are stored in. Each one is wrapped and stored with their certs. Thirty Two stones...all gone." His voice trailed off.

"Certs?" asked Connell.

“IGI or GIA certifications of the quality of each stone,” John replied.

Connell continued, “Do you usually have that many stones in stock?”

“The number, yes. The quality, no. Ten of the stones were ordered for a wedding set I was doing for Nathan and Katherine Cannel for their twenty fifth anniversary. A one carat D, IF and nine quarter carat matching D, IF’s for the wedding band.”

Mike looked up from the safe drawer and whistled.

“You want to translate please?” asked Connell.

She smiled. “It’s the four C’s, cut, clarity, color, carat. D is the highest color rating. IF means internally flawless.”

“Impressive, boss.”

Mike smiled as she absently fingered her diamond stud earring. John gave me an education when I picked these out.” She turned to John. “Retail value?”

“Two hundred and fifty thousand.”

Now Connell whistled.

“What about the remaining stones?”

Mike thought about her own diamond earrings. John had been so helpful picking out the perfect pair, explaining everything she needed to know to get the best diamonds for the money. “What about the serial numbers?” If they were that good, aren’t they inscribed?”

John’s face brightened. “Yes, of course! How could I have forgotten? The numbers are on the invoices in my office.” He turned towards the back of the store where the office of three generations of Hollister’s ruled their small but influential domain.

“Wait John,” called Connell. He tapped the nearest CSU tech on his shoulder. “Matt, go with him. Mr. Hollister, you show where the files are and Matt will get them.” Once the office door was closed, he turned his attention back to Mike. “Inscribed?”

“Certified stones have a serial number inscribed on the girdle of the stone.” Connell cocked his head to the side. Mike thought for a moment he looked like a big puppy. A really cute puppy. She gave herself a mental reprimand for her loss of focus and pointed to a diamond chart on the wall. “The side of the stone is called the girdle.”

“That’s a really small area.”

“It’s done with a laser. The inscription can be seen with a microscope. An alert on the stones might get a hit from a reputable dealer but there are far too many sources that wouldn’t care. The width of a good side prong or bezel could cover the inscription.”

They heard a gasp behind them. “Holy shit! What happened?”

Mike turned to see John’s assistant, Tiffany Delany. She was a unique character. Most women she knew had some form of body dysmorphia, believing their butts were too big, boobs were too small. Tiffany was the polar opposite, firmly believing that her overstuffed frame was perfect for mini skirts and v neck blouses. “They broke in last night”

“When? No one called.”

Mike approached her, noting today’s ensemble included a purple scoop neck blouse from which her ample breasts seemed to be planning an immediate escape. “Are you on the alarm list?”

“Yes. It’s just John and me and two part timers, more during the holidays. If John doesn’t answer they call me.” John returned to the room with the tech and Tiffany ran to enfold him in a massive hug. “Oh, John this is awful.”

Mike gave them their moment before interrupting. “John, did you get a call about the break in?”

“No! Damn security company. What the hell good are they?”

Mike made a note to look into anyone who was on duty last night at the security company. “All right. I think we have everything for now. We’ll see what turns up when CSU is finished. We’ll be in touch as soon as we have any news?”

“John, sweetie, you sit down.” Tiffany directed him to a chair and then bent to open a small fridge giving them an unobstructed view of her substantial backside. She handed John a bottle of water, bending at the waist, giving them full view of her cleavage. “I’ll go make the calls.”

“Calls?” John asked?

“We need someone to repair the front door and the broken glass. The safe company should come in to make sure the locks haven’t been compromised. And of course the insurance company.”

Mike glanced from her notepad. So Tiffany wasn’t all fluff.

“I already called the insurance company,” said John. He glanced up at Mike. “We’ve had a couple of incidents this past year and you know how insurance companies hate to pay out. I bet they send that bitch, Masters, again.”

Tiffany made a sour face. “She was very rude to us last time.”

“Last time?” asked Mike.

“Yeah. Some stones were lost in shipment and she gave us all the third degree.”

“As if I would disgrace my family’s legacy!” John shouted.

“Calm down, sweetie. We’ll get through this.”

Connell laughed as he buckled his seat belt. “How does John do it?”

“What?”

“Not even a blink at all that...” he cupped his hands in front of his chest. “That!”

Mike laughed. “He’s gay. Tiffany’s charms are lost on him.” She turned to him and smiled. “Your charms, however, are a different story.”

Connell smiled. "Thanks, but he's not my type."

Mike wondered for a moment what was Connell's type. She'd seen him go out with a few different girls, but the last time he was serious was...had he ever been serious?" Again, she chastised herself for her mental lapse.

"It's such a high end store, why does he let her dress like that?"

"Because most of his customers are men. Engagement rings, anniversary gifts, birthday gifts. Men like looking at boobs and she likes being looked at."

Connell set his hands up high again, "They seemed like they were looking back!"

Mike didn't know what was funnier, Tiffany's sentient boobs, or Connell's fluorescent blush.

Chapter Three

Most people though police work was pulling guns on bad guys. That rarely happened, at least in Newton. What most police work amounted to was a tough slog through mountains of paperwork to piece together a picture. Phone records, for unusual contacts, financial records for telling purchases or deficits.

Mike was just about finished with the company records for Hollisters and John's personal records. Connell was tackling the records of the other four employees.

"How's it going?" she asked.

Connell tossed the file on her desk and sighed. "God, how can someone go through fifty gigs of data themselves?"

"Translation for those of us who are geek-impaired?"

"Tiffany goes through an average of fifty gigabytes of data a month. She maxes out her plan every month."

"And that's a lot?"

"That's a butt load. I thought I was a data hog at two gigs. Most people connect their phones to a Wi-Fi signal for data."

"Like a laptop"

"Exactly. She must not have access to a Wi-Fi signal or she just can't stay off the web."

"Can you tell what she's looking at?"

"Not without checking the phone itself. I'm going through the phone numbers now, but nothing is jumping out."

A knock at the door and Mike glanced up to see the chief standing there with a middle aged brunette in an excellently tailored navy suit. She thought for a moment she

might be a transferred cop until she spotted the gold Rolex peeking out from her cuff. She knew this woman would make an appearance sooner or later.

“Ms. Masters?” Mike stood and extended her hand. She smiled and took Mike’s hand. “This is my partner, Detective O’Hara.” Connell favored the insurance investigator with his trademark smile. Master’s blush told Mike his smile hit home. Damn him.

Masters turned her attention back to Mike as she asked, “Where are we?”

She ignored Masters’ including herself in “we” as she indicated the mountains of files on her desk. “We’ve waded through Hollister’s financials, personal and business. He’s not doing as well as he did in the nineties.”

“Who is?” offered Fred.

“Exactly. He seemed to handle the economic downturn better than most. He scaled back inventory, focused on key areas including the outside work he did for other designers. Apparently, rich people still need their bling, even in this economy.”

“What about his personal finances?” asked Masters.

“Everything I’m seeing says financially he’s sound. No pricey habits. He as diversified enough that he didn’t take too big a hit in ’08. That combined with the fact that there seems to be nothing more important to him than his family’s reputation and legacy.” Mike paused and looked her chief in the eye. “I don’t like him for it.” Fred’s face noticeably relaxed as he realized she wouldn’t be arresting his golfing buddy.

Master’s, on the other hand, grimaced. “Are you telling me we’re nowhere?”

Mike ground her teeth and tamped down her temper. “No, what I’m saying is we are working as quickly as we can and have all but eliminated your primary suspect.” It came out more growl than she intended.

Masters blanched. Fred touched Masters’ back, knowing full well she was poking the tiger. “How about we let these two get back to work. As he guided her out of Mike’s office he glanced over his shoulder. “Keep us informed of any progress.”

Mike nodded her reply.

Connell leaned back in his chair and glanced at his watch. "It's after one. I'm hungry."

"You're always hungry"

"It's lunchtime."

Mike smiled. It was amazing how he this special forces vet could sound like a whiny twelve year old when it came to food. "Fine. Jessie's?"

"Awesome. I could go for a burger."

They pulled into the parking lot of Jessie's, a Newton institution. The old school airstream had good food at good prices located a block from the high school. Jessie spotted Mike. Jessie, a buxom redhead with a warm smile, was the third Jessie to run the diner. Her grandmother had opened the diner nearly fifty years ago. Each succeeding generations had at least one Jessica running the place. "Hey you! Come on over." She waved them over to the only empty booth in the place. "I have a new ziti you're going to love."

Mike slid into the booth and grabbed the wrapped silverware. "Sounds great. Thanks."

"Cheeseburger and fries, Connell?" asked Jessie.

He smiled, "You know me so well." He watched Jessie's well rounded bottom as she turned their order in to the cook. He turned to see a Mike watching him with a smirk. "What?"

She took a sip of her water and sighed. "We're nowhere with this case."

"It couldn't be a random burglary. They knew what wires to cut and when there would be a big inventory. It has to be an inside job."

“What about the shipping company?”

“They don’t know what is being shipped,” said Connell. “What about the shippers?”

Mike shook her head. “They video packing the gems and it’s done by two people.”

“Like a bank opening night deposit bags.”

Mike nodded. “Exactly.”

Connell smile broadened at the sight of Jessie returning with their order. She slid the large platter in front of him.

“Ummmm,” he murmured.

Jessie laughed. “I do love a customer with a healthy appetite.” She slid a large platter of ziti in front of Mike. She smiled at Mike’s questioning look. “Don’t worry. It’s not real sausage. It’s sausage substitute and completely vegetarian.”

Mike grinned and took a big forkful. “Oh my God, this is amazing. Connell, you should try this.”

“No thanks. I’ll stick to real food.”

“It IS real food, moron.” She took a forkful and aimed it at his mouth. “Try it.” Mike drilled him with a look that was more childhood friend, not boss.

“Fine.”

He guided her hand to his mouth as he caught her gaze. Her heart jumped as he took her offering and quickly gave herself another mental shake.

“Oh, my God. This is awesome.” He grabbed his own fork and stole some more from her plate. “Are you sure this is not sausage?”

Jessie shook her head. “Nope. I spotted this at Wegmans and thought it would be a great addition for my ziti recipe. I getting more requests for vegetarian food, especially from the kids.”

“The revolution is coming, people,” Mike said as she reached for another bite. Jessie laughed as she returned to her counter.

They sat in companionable silence as they ate their lunch. It was the type of ease that came from knowing each other for just about forever. They’d met in first grade. Could that really have been twenty five years ago? She glanced up between bites as Connell devoured his burger. Images of the little boy, the young man, the Army Ranger, flashed unbidden. She couldn’t remember a time when Connell O’Hara hadn’t been a part of her life.

He glanced up and smiled as he pushed the sparse remains of his lunch aside. “Ahh, that’s better.”

Mike smiled. “It’s really a sin how you never gain an ounce.”

He patted his flat stomach and grinned. “You’re just jealous.”

She set down her fork and stared at her partner. “Yeah, I think I am,” she said quietly.

Connell pointed to her near empty plate. “You know, you never told me why you went veggie. When we were kids you chowed down on burgers and fries with the rest of us. I come back from the Army and your grazing with the cows.”

“I’m not grazing with the cows.” She pointed at her plate. “Note the evidence, detective.”

He shrugged. “So noted, but why the change?”

Mike sighed and pushed her plate away. “It was before you’d come home, about four years ago. I was working the Chancellor case.”

Connell sat back against his seat. He’d been stationed in Germany at the time but the story had made headlines. William Chancellor had been a prominent Newton attorney with a thriving practice and picture perfect family. That was it seemed perfect until

Chancellor's wife filed for divorce. The next day Chancellor murdered his wife and four children before killing himself. "Mike," he said softly "I didn't realize you'd been on that."

"They had one of those McMansions on Clark street, all windows and winding staircases. You know the kind?"

He just nodded, letting Mike tell her story uninterrupted.

"It was a mess. He'd used a twelve gauge. He killed the kids as soon as they came home from school." Mike sighed as the terrible images flashed in front of her. "Then he waited in the garage for his wife to come home from the club. He beat her before killed her." She glanced out the window to see the midday traffic. She looked back at Connell and saw, as always, his quiet patience. It's what made him such a good investigator. He never rushed an interrogation.

"It was the first major case I worked after making detective." Her chest clenched at the memory of her excitement at her first big case. Then she opened the door. Her stomach rolled at the memory of the smell. So much blood. "It wasn't much of an investigation. Chancellor left a video confession. Turns out his practice was the toilet and his wife was screwing her golf pro. He was going to lose what little he had left if she divorced him." She sighed and took a sip of her ice tea, more to calm her stomach than for thirst. "In his egomaniacal way of thinking, he said the kids were better off dead than coming from a broken home. We found the kids in the kitchen, the wife in the garage and he was in his home office. He'd saved the last shell for himself. The top of his head and a large portion of his brain ruined a perfectly lovely Andrew Wyeth original." She looked up at Connell with unshed tears in her eyes. "You know, he even shot the dog. A perfectly nice little shi tzu."

Connell reached for her hand. "Tell me."

"It took about twenty four hours to wrap everything up, notifications, reports. I finally realized it had been at least a shift and a half since I'd eaten so I stopped here on the way home. I ordered a steak, medium rare, just like I'd ordered countless times before. I cut into it and it bled. It bled all over my plate." Her breath came quick at the memory. "I ran

into the bathroom and tossed for what seemed like forever.” Her heart calmed a bit at the reassuring squeeze he gave her hand. She leaned back against the booth and rewarded him with a sad little smile. “I can’t look at meat anymore without seeing what it was in life.” She reached for the last of her soda as she straightened herself in her chair. “That’s why,” she whispered. Mike glanced up at her partner but saw the boy who’d always had such a kind smile.

Chapter Four

Connell locked his gun in his safe and poured himself an ice tea. He looked out at his backyard and wondered when he'd ever get around to building that pool. It was coming on spring. The contractors would get booked up. He should make some calls.

Sunday dinner was tomorrow at Mom and Dad's. Three brothers, two sisters various in laws, a passel of nieces and nephews and whatever aunts, uncles, and assorted cousins showed up. You would think with all those people in the house, they'd never miss him. They would. Maybe he'd call her. She'd come. Maybe. He'd think about it while he jumped in the shower.

Mike pasted on a fake smile and tried to make conversation with Drake and his boss, Martin Chester. Lily Chester was another matter. She was a throw back to the days of Donna Reed and Leave it to Beaver. She thought she might be mixing her vintage shows.

"Michaela, Lily was talking to you," said Drake through a clenched smile.

"Oh, I am sorry Lily. The job you know, it doesn't always stop at the five o'clock. Now what were you saying?"

"I was wondering when you two are going to make it official?"

"Official?"

"You know, married." The woman touched her hand like she was a friend. "You're not getting any younger. You'll want to give up all that police business once you have children."

Mike pulled her arm away from the woman like she'd been burned. She looked at Drake who was glaring at her. "It's a little soon to be discussing that."

"A single man won't get elected District Attorney," said Chester.

He gave him a fake chuckle. "You won't be retiring all that soon."

Mike looked at Drake who knew for a fact he was counting the days until he could get Martin Chester's office. She tried to hide her grin when her phone rang.

"Let it go to voice mail," he said.

"I'm the Detective Lieutenant, second in command of Newton detective squad. When I'm called, I answer." She was taking a shot at Drake because he was pretty far down the chain of the DA's office. The only reason they were at dinner with the big boss was he was a champion suck up. She looked at the Chester's and smiled. "If you'll excuse me," she said as she walked away to the lobby. She actually didn't give a damn if they minded her taking a call. She saw it was Connell "Whatever it is, yes," she said.

"Oh, crap! I'm sorry. I forgot you're at dinner with the DA."

"It's okay. What ever you need, yes."

"That good?"

"I'd rather have a root canal without anesthesia."

"Actually, I was calling to see if you want to have dinner at my parents tomorrow? It starts about four."

"If you have a buffer, they might not harass you for your single status."

"Exactly."

"I owe you and I'd love to see your family. I think I have the fixings for Poor Man's Bread at home."

"You don't have to."

"Trust me. It's going to be an early night."

Mike went back to the table and did her best to make conversation. Martin Chester was leering at her cleavage and Lily was pretending not to notice. "So I understand you have the Hollister case," said Chester.

"Yes sir, my team and I are working it."

"What's the big deal? It's Hollister. The old queen is probably doing it for the insurance money."

"Actually sir, knowing the DA's office's attention to detail I make sure my team presents an airtight case."

"Well hurry up about it. That insurance woman is making a nuisance of herself."

"I'll do my best sir."

The ride back to her apartment was torture. Silence mixed with passive aggressive comments about her clothes. "You looked nice tonight. Very girly," he grinned. He pulled up to her parking place and smiled. He leaned in close to kiss her. She was tempted to pull her weapon.

"You have got to be kidding me. Look, John. I don't want to get into this tonight. I have an early call tomorrow. I'll see you Thursday." She got out of his car before he could argue.

Mike walked into her apartment and kicked off her shoes. Saturday night and she was home alone by ten p.m., and she was happy about it. She changed into some shorts and a t shirt. She reached for her baking pan and pulled out the flour and raisins. Most people looked at this cake and thought it was an applesauce cake. They were wrong. This recipe came out of her neighborhood during World War II. Most people claimed it as their family recipe. No one was sure. The only thing they were sure of was that you needed to use margarine, not butter in the cake. Butter during the war was at a premium so they used margarine. She started the cake and got a sense of satisfaction when she saw the bubbles foam up over the heated raisins. She remembered doing this with her mother

when she was a little girl. She stirred the warm and the dry together and put it in the oven to bake. She poured herself a glass of wine and waited for the timer.

An afternoon with the O'Hara's would be a pleasant diversion from John and politics and trying to figure out who was ripping off Hollister's. It had been a few months since she'd seen them. They'd been really kind to her since her parents died. She never felt like an only child in her neighborhood. The average family had four kids. The O'Hara's had six kids but they barely touched the number of the Volm family. Eighteen kids in a three bedroom house. Triple bunk beds in every room. Somehow everyone was fine. The older kids helped with the younger kids and everyone graduated from school. Most went to college, some went to trade school, and a large number got married. There were at least three or four weddings every summer, often coordinated so they wouldn't have conflicting dates because they usually had the same guests. She pulled the bread out of the oven and smiled. The cloves and nutmeg reminded her of Mom.

Mike opened the door to Connell and tried not to blush. He was wearing jeans and a tight t shirt. "You ready to go?" he asked.

"All set." She held up the pan of bread and Connell grinned. "Ah, you are definitely my favorite person."

She buckled into Connell's car and held the bread tight on her lap. "Any thoughts on the case? I still can't figure out how they got the stones out without setting off the alarm."

"Let's table the case until work tomorrow. Let's have one day where it's just us, the family and a lot of food."

She leaned against the headrest and sighed. "That sounds great."

Breeda and Matthew O'Hara greeted Mike like the long lost daughter. "Michaela! I'm so glad you're here!" said Breeda as she gave her a tight hug. Matthew gave her a hug and kissed her cheek. "It's been too long, girly."

"I'm sorry. You know how work keeps us busy."

Breeda smiled and patted Connell's cheek. "I know. My boy hasn't been around for ages."

"Mom, it's only been a couple of weeks."

"You live only a few blocks away."

"Mike brought Poor Man's Bread," he said, desperate to change the conversation.

"Ohhh, gimmie!" said Matthew. Poor Man's Bread was popular but particularly with men. He took the food to picnic table and Mike knew she'd never see a piece herself. She sat down with Matt's sisters, Eileen and Sheilagh. Eileen was a stay at home at mom of six and Sheilagh was the mother of two and a an oncology nurse.

"Hey girls."

"Hey, Mike. Where's the hunky honey?" asked Eileen.

"Probably playing golf. How are the kids?"

"They're good. Tommy's going to the state championship for basketball."

"Shut up! Isn't he like, eight?"

"Seventeen."

"I can't possibly be that old."

"You can't?" she laughed. "How about a beer."

"God yes."

Mike sat under a tree and sipped her beer. She'd visited with all the kids she'd grown up with and their kids. It was good to be around Connell's parents. It felt good to

be with them. It felt normal, like it was when she was a kid. It was also very loud. Connell sat down next to her under the tree.

“How ‘ya doing?”

“Good. It’s great to see the family.”

He gave her a big smile. “You can’t wait to get out of here.”

“My God, how do you do it? The noise, the crowd? Don’t get me wrong, I love each and everyone of them.”

Connell laughed. “I feel the same way. I love them all but everyone together? I can only take them in small doses.” He took her empty beer can from her. “How about we bolt? Police business.”

“That sounds great.”

Chapter Five

Mike had promised Connell some coffee for the road when they were met in the hallway by the landlord, Tim Torres. “Mike, I’m really glad you’re here. I’ve been trying to get a hold of Jane for days and she’s not answering. Her car’s in the parking lot and her mail is piling up in the box. Did she mention going away?”

“No she didn’t. She doesn’t travel much.”

“She doesn’t have an emergency contact on her paperwork. I have a master key, you’re a cop. Would you please check on her?”

“Sure.”

Connell put his hand on her arm. “Michaela, wait. Let’s get your weapon. You don’t know what we’re walking into.”

“You’re right, of course.” Mike’s hand shook as she tried to open her door.

Connell took the keys from her hand. “I’ve got this,” he whispered. He opened the door and she went straight to her gun safe. She dialed in the combination and checked her weapon. She nodded and Connell took the master from the landlord and told him to stand back. They opened the door and they were met by an all too familiar smell. Jane’s cat Charlie rubbed up against her leg and meowed. “Tell Tim to put him in my place.” Connell picked up the cat and cleared each room like it was a crime scene, and not the apartment of one of her few friends. Connell came up behind her just as she was about to open the bedroom door. The smell now knocked her back. Jane had been dead for days. And she’d never noticed.

The EMT’s had examined Jane and the patrolmen took a preliminary report. Mike sat down on the bed next to her and looked at her friend. Her only real friend outside the department or Connell’s family. The EMT’s said she’d been dead for at least three days, meaning she died the day she saw her in the hall. She’d thought she’d looked grey, but

Jane said she was just tired. She didn't pursue it. She had more important things to do, like fill out police reports.

The EMT, Carson, she thought, interrupted her. "Detective Burke, we're seeing nothing here that indicates anything other than death by natural causes. Can we take her now?"

"Coroner?" she asked.

"Any unattended death has to go through the coroner."

Mike shook her head. "I'm sorry, of course I know that. Please excuse me. This was my friend."

"I'm very sorry for your loss," he said, probably Carson.

"Make sure all the paperwork says nothing happens to her body without clearing it with me." She turned to the patrolmen. "All the paperwork. The coroner does her job but nothing else happens without me, is that clear?"

"Yes, ma'am," they muttered.

"Excuse me?"

"Yes, detective," they repeated loudly.

"Charlie. I need to get Charlie's things."

"Who?" asked the patrolman.

"The woman's cat. Detective Burke has taken custody of him," said Connell. He put his hands on Mike's shoulders. "They need to take her now. Why don't you go tend to Charlie and I'll gather up his things."

Mike nodded and whispered, "Okay." She found Tim still standing in the hall. "Nobody goes in Jane's apartment but me, clear?"

"Sure, Mike."

Connell walked back into Michaela's apartment and found her curled up on the couch with Charlie in her lap. He set down the automatic feeder and filled the water bowl. He'd cleaned out the litter box at Jane's and set it down in Michaela's kitchen. He sat down next to her on the couch and Charlie jumped off, helping himself to the fresh food and water.

"I didn't see," she whispered.

"What?"

"I didn't see she was missing. I talked to her almost every day and I didn't see. I was so wrapped up in our case and myself I never noticed. She never mentioned any family or friends. I think she lived on a pension. I think I was her only friend and I didn't see." Michaela began to sob and he pulled her close. She wept until she couldn't cry anymore. She pushed herself back. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't. I'm your boss."

"Michaela Mary Burke, I've known you since we were six years old. Don't you dare pull rank on me tonight. Now go get changed and get in bed. I'll make sure Charlie's okay."

"Do you still have the master key? He has a bed. And his toys. Don't forget his treats." He must have wondered why she left him. She picked him up and held him close. "Poor baby. Don't worry. You're mine now." She kissed his head and he began to purr.

Connell went back into the dead woman's apartment and began to look around. It was force of habit. The apartment was tidy, with the exception of three days of trash and cat litter. And of course the smell of a dead body. He never forgot the first time he saw a dead body. It was an insurgent in Afghanistan. He was no more than a boy and he had a look of surprise Connell never forgot. He shook his head and brought himself back to the present. He found the woman's wallet and laptop. He knew his partner well enough to know she was going to want to explore what happened to Jane Stone.

He set Charlie's bed and scratching post near the front window, so he's get the sun. He knocked on Michaela's bedroom door.

"Come in."

He opened the door and tried to forget she was wearing a small camisole and shorts. Even with her eyes still red from crying she was still the most beautiful woman he'd ever known. But now was not the time. "How are you doing?"

"Better, thanks." She pet Charlie, who'd seemed to have made himself comfortable on her bed.

"I've got his bed and scratching post by the front window."

"Oh, he'll like that, thank you." She got off the bed and gave him a hug. He couldn't resist enjoying holding her close. He glanced over her shoulder and saw a picture on the dresser of Michaela and Preston. A bucket of ice water wouldn't have cooled him quicker.

"I'll always be here for you. You know that."

"Yeah, I do."

"I grabbed Jane's laptop from her apartment."

She headed toward the living room. "Oh great, I'll..."

"Oh, no you don't. Unless the coroner tells us it's something otherwise, it's a natural death. We have a very large case still unsolved and our chief and a very pushy insurance investigator breathing down our necks. Once we get this resolved I promise you, I will help you find out everything you need to know."

She looked at him and his heart broke. "You really will, won't you. You're not just placating me."

"I would never be so foolish. You've been able to kick my ass since I was a kid. Nothing has changed."

She laughed and gave him a playful punch. "You've got that right."

Chapter Six

They stopped by Hollister's to see if there was anything they missed. Tiffany immediately zoned in on Connell. Most women did but her method was akin to storming the beach at Normandy. Mike took the opportunity to talk to John Hollister.

"How's it going, John?"

"It's awful, Mike. If my customers don't trust me or that their pieces will be safe here I'm done. Business has dropped in half. Mike, please tell me you have something."

"We're still working on it."

"Mike, you don't suspect me, do you?"

"John, I can't discuss an on going case."

He buried his face in his hands. "You can't believe it was me. You know me." He wiped tears from his eyes.

Mike put her arms around her old friend. She leaned in and whispered, "You are the last person on my list, the very last."

John smiled through his tears. "Do you mean it?"

She gave him a smile. "Mean what?"

He nodded, understanding she would have to deny ever saying it. "Can I show you anything else?"

"Let me look around a bit. Connell is talking to Tiffany."

John snickered. "All the men love her." He winked, "and she loves them."

Mike walked around the rest of the store and looked at entrance and exit and was still no further ahead than she was the day of the robbery. She stopped at one of the

cases and looked at a beautiful sapphire necklace. It was a beautiful teardrop shaped stone in a gold setting with a small diamond at the point.

“Getting yourself a little something?”

Mike turned and smiled. “Just looking. Did you get anything?”

“Other than an unsolicited phone number? No.”

“Shocker,” she smiled.

“Let’s get some lunch. I’m hungry.”

“You’re always hungry.”

They sat in parking lot of the local burger joint. Mike sipped on her ice tea while Connell scarfed down his second burger. She hadn’t had much of an appetite since Jane died. She was still waiting on the coroner’s report and she was trying to put her brain back in cop mode. She glanced across the street and saw a group of kids sitting across the street at the convenience store and gas station.

She nodded across the street. “What do you see?”

“What?” he asked as he wiped his mouth.

She nodded across the street at the group of about five kids. They were sitting around the big gas station sign. “What do you see?”

“Okay.” Connell bagged up his debris and looked across the street. “Five kids, ages twelve to fourteen.”

“What time is it?”

“One o’clock. So why the hell aren’t they in school?”

“What else do you see?”

Connell watched the group and finally saw what Mike saw. “The little blonde on the end. The rest of them are into this but she isn’t. She’s trying to fit in and failing.”

“Exactly. What do you say we do some scared straight?”

“Let’s do it,” he smiled.

They both got out of the car and walked across the street. They tried not to alert the kids before they got there. “What’s up, guys?”

“Beat it pervs,” said a dark haired boy with an oversized leather jacket to match his attitude.

Mike looked at Connell and smiled. She pulled out her badge and flashed it. “Detective Sergeant Michaela Burke.”

Connell flashed his. “Detective Connell O’Hara.”

“Cops!” yelled leather jacket. He tried to bolt but Mike stood in front of him.

“Sit your ass down. Now, I can call each an everyone of your parents and waste most of my day, or I can call the school and have them pick you up.”

“We’ll go back. It’s just a few blocks,” said one of the girls.

“Yeah, let a group of minors walk unescorted. I don’t think so. And like I’ve already said we have better things to do than fill out a butt load of paperwork on your sorry asses.” She looked at Connell. “Detective O’Hara, call Wally over at the school and have him bring the van.”

“Yes, detective.” Connell made a show of Mike being in charge. She’d have to buy him some donuts for that one.

“Two Irish cops?” asked leather coat. “Stereotype much?” he snickered. His friends were wisely too frightened to respond.

Mike stepped closer. “What’s your name?”

“I don’t have to talk to you.”

“You can talk to me or I can haul you to jail and have your parents and the juvenile authorities meet us there and we can have a detailed conversation.”

“Tommy. Tommy Price.”

“Well, Tommy Price, you’ve now gotten yourself on our radar. Let me assure you, that’s not a good thing. Whenever anything happens and you’re anywhere near, we will assume you had something to do with it. Now, you have two choices, you can keep going like you’re going and eventually we will meet again at the end of these.” She pulled her cuffs out of her belt. “Trust me, you don’t want that. Of you can go back to school, take the detention you’ll get from the principal, the grounding you deserve from your parents and get on with your life.”

“Wally will be here in five minutes,” said Connell.

“Is she your boss?” asked a blonde boy and leather jacket wanna be.

“Yes she is.”

“Wow,” he laughed. “You work for a girl.”

“No, I work for a woman who happens to be one of the smartest people I’ve ever met. She’s taught me more about how to be a good cop than anyone I’ve ever worked with.” Connell’s words made an impression, and not just with the kids.

A small school van pulled into the parking lot. A grizzled man with a yellow safety vest. “You lot have thrown the whole school into a panic. Now get in the van.”

The children filed into the van but Mike held the little blonde girl aside. She could tell she was on the verge of tears. “I’m sorry, ma’am. I won’t do it again.”

“What’s your name?”

“Marcie.”

“Marcie, I don’t think you will do this again. I think you wanted to have friends and you picked the wrong bunch. You’re smarter than this, Marcie. I can see that.” Mike pulled a business card out of her pocket and slipped it in the girl’s hand. “If you ever need to talk, you call me. I’ll listen.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“My Mom and Dad are going to be so mad at me.”

“Yeah, they are, and you know why? Because you scared them when they didn’t know what happened to you. So when you see them tell them you know what you did was very wrong, beg their forgiveness, accept what punishment they give you and promise to never do it again. And then you keep your word. A person who doesn’t keep their word has no honor, and that’s no kind of person to be.”

Marcie nodded and wiped the tears from her eyes. “Yes ma’am.”

Mike smiled at her and directed her toward the bus. They waited for the bus to leave and they walked back to their car. She buckled in and noticed Connell staring at her. “What?”

“You, Michaela Burke, are a hell of a cop.”

She blushed and started the car. “Shut up,” she smiled.

Chapter Seven

They sat in Mike's office and went over the paperwork. "What are we missing?" she asked.

"Let's run it down," said Connell.

"On going thefts. Probably an inside job but we can't prove it. Did you run down all the people who had access through the alarm company?"

"Yeah, clean as a whistle."

Maryann walked into Mike's office and handed her a message. "The chief wants you in his office first thing in the morning. The insurance investigator will be there too."

"Thank you," said Mike as the woman left her office.

"Why do I get the feeling she enjoyed telling you that?" he asked.

"Because she did."

Connell reached for a tissue and sneezed, then blew his nose. "Someone really should talk to her about her perfume. It could be classified a lethal weapon."

"Yeah, it should." Mike smiled. "Tiffany's always carrying around tissues. When you talked to her did her nose look red?"

"No. Where are you going with this?"

"Her nose isn't red, so no head cold."

"Allergies?"

"When my allergies are acting up my eyes water and I don't bother with makeup. Her mascara was perfect. Not a smudge," She smiled.

"Coke?"

"Eyes were clear."

Connell pounded his hands on the arms of his chair. "That's how she's getting the stones out of the store, in the tissues. Let's pick her up!" Connell stood.

"We don't have enough yet, but we do have enough to put her under surveillance."

They grabbed their files and drove Connell's personal car. They parked far enough away from her condo as to not be seen, but they had binoculars. Mike grabbed them when she saw Tiffany pull into her assigned spot. She never noticed them because she was on the phone the entire walk from the car to the door. "Connell, that phone number she gave you, was it the same number we researched?"

Connell grabbed the file and compared the numbers. "Yeah. Why?"

She set the binoculars down and looked at him. "She has a fancy iPhone doesn't she?"

"That's what the record showed."

Mike smiled. "Then why is she talking on a burner?"

"Should we go ask her about that?" he smiled.

"Not yet. Let's wait. She seemed pretty animated. Somebody's pissed her off."

They didn't have to wait too long when a bright red pickup pulled up next to Tiffany's car. The door opened and Connell gasped. "Is that?"

Mike shook her head. "My Bobby."

"Should we go in now?"

"We can't. We don't have anything on either of them. An affair between a sixty plus contractor and a twenty something bimbo may be gross but it's not illegal." A new sedan pulled up and parked behind My Bobby's pickup and Tiffany's car, making it impossible for either of them to move. Out of the car jumped a disheveled blonde. Even at this distance they could see it was Maryanne and she started running to the front door. Mike

and Connell jumped out of the car and began to chase her. They saw what she had in her hand.

They got to the apartment entrance as they heard Maryanne screaming “Where are you? I know you’re here you tramp!” Connell raced ahead of Mike up the stairs just as a door opened. Everything moved in slow motion. Maryanne fired and Connell fired at Maryanne. She hit the ground and Connell pushed the gun out of her reach. Doors on the other side of the hall opened and Mike told them to close the doors and stay put. They looked at the doorway to Tiffany’s and their lay My Bobby, a red stain spreading across his white polo shirt. Standing behind him was Tiffany shaking and pale. Mike had the sudden thought of a white-faced circus clown with bright colored spots of color.

Mike checked for a pulse on My Bobby and called for an ambulance, not that it would do any good. He was dead before he hit the ground. She looked at Tiffany and maneuvered her to the couch. Sit down and stay down.

“Yes, ma’am,” she whispered.

She knelt down next to Connell. “Maryanne, why would you do this?”

“He couldn’t leave me,” she whispered. “He was My Bobby. I loved him. She did this. He would never leave me. This was her fault.” Maryanne closed her eyes and died believing murdering her husband wasn’t her fault.

Chapter Eight

They'd processed Tiffany for grand larceny and were sitting in Mike's office. There was paperwork to be done but it could wait until morning. The coroner would have to do reports on both bodies. But for now, they were just staring at each other.

"Do you want me to order some food?" she asked. "It's pretty late."

"No thanks."

"You had to do it. She wouldn't have stopped until she killed Tiffany too."

"I know. It just doesn't make it any easier."

A knock at the door made Mike look up. "Hi Chief."

Fred came in and sat on the edge of her desk. "How are you, Connell?"

"Not great, but I'll get there."

Fred nodded. "Good. If you'd said anything else I'd be worried about you. You do know that this will require mandatory sessions with the department shrink."

"I know, sir. I'm okay with it. I just hope the rest of the squad is."

"What do you mean?"

"They saw Maryanne every day. They all knew her and I killed her."

"You shot a murderer in the course of your duty. Any of them who can't understand that I wouldn't want on my squad."

"Thank you, Chief."

Fred looked at Mike and smiled. "I can't believe you recovered all the stones."

"Tiffany broke down at the scene. It was supposed to be their stash for running away together. She gave me the name of her fence, all of it. She was pissed at My Bobby."

"Why?"

“They were supposed to just disappear but Bobby left Maryanne a note. Apparently she’d known about the affair but chose to ignore it. She didn’t want the scandal. When he said he was leaving her she knew right where to find him.”

“Well that pissy insurance investigator is thrilled. She’s aiding forensics in documenting each stone for the trial. John Hollister started crying when I called him.”

“And I bet it wasn’t because we found his stones.”

Fred looked surprised at her comment. “No, he was more upset about Tiffany. Said she’d been his friend.”

“Yeah well, that’s the kind of man John is,” said Mike. “You know, Chief, it wouldn’t hurt if the rest of the town knew that too.”

Fred smiled and nodded. “I’ll see what I can do.” He stood and looked at both of them. “Reports can wait. I want you both to take some time. Connell, whatever you need, you do it. You know the department has your back.”

Connell nodded. “Thank you, Chief.” Fred passed the coroner on the way out of Mike’s office.

“You don’t have a report this soon?” he asked.

“Ah, no sir. This is...”

Mike jumped in, not wanting to let her friend hang with the chief. “Sir, I believe that’s the report on Jane Stone.”

“Oh, your friend.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Very well, I’ll leave you to it.”

Tammy sighed. “Thanks, Mike. I’ve completed findings. Jane Stone died of natural causes.”

“You have no doubts?”

“Well not exactly. There was definitely no foul play but I got her medical records from her physician.” She began to read from the report. “Jane Stone, fifty year old white female. She died of a massive stroke.”

“Fifty? I thought she was older than that?”

“Her medical condition could do that to you. She had a history of very high blood pressure.”

“Can’t that be controlled?”

“It can. That’s why I had the patrolmen check her apartment. I found none of the medications I would have expected in her system. The patrolmen brought me all her prescriptions. They’d been refilled more than three months ago but none of them had been touched.”

“She purposely didn’t take her meds.”

“It looks like it.”

“Without them...”

“It was just a matter of time.” Tammy handed her the report. “I’m sorry Mike. I know she was a friend.”

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“No one has come forward for her.”

“Don’t do anything. I’ll look for relatives.”

Tammy put her hand on her shoulder. “I promise. I’ll take good care of her until you decide what to do.”

Mike stood and gave Tammy a hug. "Thank you." Mike watched Tammy leave and realized it had been forever since they'd had a girl's night. She'd have to do something about that. She turned and saw Connell watching her.

"Are you okay?"

"Something happened to make her stop taking those meds. I'll get into her computer..."

He took her by the shoulders. "No. Not tonight. You'll go home and play with Charlie and get some rest. Then we'll meet back here tomorrow and figure it out. Tomorrow, Rick will be on duty in I.T. and he can help us with the laptop if we have any problems. But for now, go home and get some rest. Promise me."

Mike smiled. "Are you giving me orders, Detective?"

"I am, Sergeant."

"Fine. I promise. I'll call you in the morning."

Chapter Nine

Mike couldn't remember the last time she'd been this tired. Charlie greeted her with a loud meow and a demand for his dinner. She fed him and tossed her clothes in the hamper. If she could have stayed under the hot water forever she would have. It was going to take a long time before she'd forget the sight of Maryanne Dalton's dead body. She put on a short sleep set and ran a comb through her hair. She went out to the living room and her heart nearly stopped.

"Drake! What the hell are you doing here? It's not Thursday."

"I came over to congratulate you about the case. That's a big get."

"I don't feel like celebrating." She sat down on the couch and Charlie jumped in her lap. "I can't stop thinking about Maryanne."

"Why? It's not like you killed her."

"Because I saw her every day for years and my operation is the reason she's dead." She pet Charlie and he began to purr. The vibration began to calm her.

"What the hell is that?"

"You're a smart guy. It's a cat."

"What's it doing here?"

"It's my cat. Charlie."

"You mean that dead woman's cat? What's it doing here?"

"That dead woman was my friend Jane and he's mine now."

"I don't want a cat."

"I didn't ask you if you did."

Drake put his hands on his hips in a familiar gesture. Mike knew he was trying to stay calm. "Look, I'm sorry. I know it's been a rough day. Have you eaten?"

“I’m not hungry.”

“You need to eat. How about a scrambled egg sandwich and a cup of tea?”

She managed a small smile. “Actually, that sounds good. Thanks.”

Mike crawled under the covers and closed her eyes. Charlie was curled up inside his scratching tower. He didn’t seem to want anything to do with Drake. It might take them a while to warm up to each other. She sighed with relief when Drake kissed her goodnight and turned out the light. Dealing with Drake’s awkward moves was the last thing she needed.

Mike didn’t sleep well. She kept seeing Maryanne’s face dying in denial. She got up and changed her clothes, careful not to wake Drake. She secured her weapon, cuffs and badge. She fed Charlie and then pet behind his ear. “Behave yourself.”

She pulled into her space at the police station and wasn’t surprised to see Connell’s car was already there. She put her purse on her desk and walked over to Connell’s desk. “Any donuts left?” He smiled at her and opened the box. There were two Boston cream donuts sitting in the small box. He knew they were her favorites. He always remembered things like that. She smiled. “Thanks.” She grabbed one and sat down next to his desk. “I assume you didn’t sleep much either.”

“No.” He turned the laptop around. “I got started on Jane’s laptop.”

Her eyes welled. This was Connell O’Hara. He’d given his word as soon as the Hollister case was wrapped, he’d help figure out what happened to her friend. Protocol be damned. She reached for his hand. “Thank you.”

“I found the usual, bill payments, Amazon searches and a butt load of pictures of Charlie.”

“You did?”

He handed her a flash drive. "I figured you want those."

Mike lost control and wiped the tears from her cheeks. "Damn it, Connell. Why are you so good to me?" She got up and went into her office. She took the drive and secured it in her purse. She didn't have to turn around to know Connell had followed her. She heard the office door close.

"You forgot your donuts." He placed them on her desk. "Are you okay?"

"Not even close. I missed something. I should have seen this coming and now two people are dead."

Connell sat on the edge of her desk. "You listen to me, Michaela. You followed procedure to the letter. You figured out it was Tiffany smuggling out the diamonds. We put pressure on subjects. That's what we do. What happens after that is up to them."

She felt like a heel. Connell had fired the gun. He was the one who'd killed Maryanne and he was the one who would take the heat for it. She pulled him into a tight hug. Protocol wasn't just damned, it was completely out the window. "Thank you," she whispered. She pulled back and tried to regain some level of authority. "Did you find anything else?"

"Yeah. There's a program, it's password protected. I think it's some kind of dating app."

"A dating app? I never knew her to go out."

"Struck me as odd too. She also had a separate email account that was protected. I've called Rick. He's going to take a crack at it."

"I should probably tell the Chief. I don't want Rick getting into trouble."

"I already did. The chief's a good guy. He knows Jane was your friend. He said it was okay we gave it a pass if only to look for any relatives."

"You're a great cop, Detective O'Hara. You'll be running this place one day."

Connell smiled. "Thank you, Detective Burke. I learn from the best."

Mike's personal phone rang with a number she didn't recognize. It was barely nine a.m. "Burke."

"Detective Burke, this is Tanya Gonzales from the West Side animal hospital."

"How can I help you?"

"We had a cat turned into us this morning for euthanasia. The man said he was vicious. But the thing is I recognized this cat. I ran the microchip. He's registered to one of our clients, Jane Stone. That's when I remembered I saw in the paper she'd died. I called the landlord and he said you'd taken Charlie."

Mike went pale and began to shake. "You didn't..."

"No ma'am. Charlie's fine. Right now he's asleep in one of our cages."

"I will be right there to get him. He's mine."

She disconnected the call and looked at Connell. "I'll fucking kill him!" She started rooting around in her purse for her keys. He grabbed her hand.

"Stop, Michaela. Take a breath. Now tell me what's going on."

"Drake happened. He came over last night to congratulate me about the case. He saw Charlie and said he didn't want a cat. I told him I didn't ask him. I left before he woke up this morning. Charlie must have pissed him off because that was West Side animal hospital. Drake dropped him off and told them to kill him," she started to cry.

"That fucker!" said Connell. "Come on, I'll drive."

"I'm okay."

"Bull shit. I'm driving."

They got to Connell's car and buckled in. Mike wasn't surprised when he turned on the lights and sirens. He would bend the rules a little for her. When they pulled in front of the animal hospital Connell shut them off as they both bolted into clinic.

Mike flashed her badge. "Detective Burke. You have my cat, Charlie."

"Yes ma'am. I'm Tanya. I'll take you to him."

They walked through the double doors and the girl led them to a bank of cages. Charlie stood up and meowed. "Oh, baby, I'm so sorry." She stuck her fingers in through the bars. "Was he dropped off by a tall blonde man?"

"Yeah. He wouldn't leave his name but he was dressed really sharp. Looked like a lawyer."

She looked at Connell "I'm going to fucking kill him."

"Do you have something we can put Charlie in to take him home?"

"Sure. I'll get you a carrier." The girl left and Connell tried to get Mike's attention.

"Mike, talk to me."

"I want my cat," she said, never taking her eyes off Charlie.

Tanya returned with a cardboard carrier and another woman wearing a set a scrubs. "I'm Dr. Spiers. I've been treating Charlie for several years. I was very sorry to hear Jane had died. Will you be adopting him?"

"Yes, he's mine now. Jane was my neighbor," she paused and tried to control her tears. "and she was my friend." She pulled a business card and a pen from her purse. "This is my business card, I'm Detective Sergeant Michaela Burke." She wrote her address and personal cell number on the back of the card. "This is my personal information. Can you update his chip for me?"

"Of course."

"Thank you." She tried to smile. "What do I owe you?"

“Nothing,” said Dr. Spiers. “I’m just happy Charlie wound up with someone who obviously loves him. He’s such a good boy. That other man, the one who dropped him off...”

“You’ll never see him again.”

Tanya opened the cage and Charlie all but leaped into Mike’s arms. “I’m so sorry baby,” she whispered. “We’re going home now.”

Connell followed Mike into her apartment as she let Charlie out of his cardboard prison. “Baby, I’m so sorry.” Charlie crawled up his cat tower and hid in one of the openings. “He hates me,” she cried.

“No he doesn’t. He’s just freaked out.” He grabbed a can of treats off the kitchen counter and Charlie popped his head out. Connell handed her a treat. “Give him one.” She did and he licked her hand. “I told you so.”

“You love being right.”

“Almost as much as you do.”

“I wasn’t right about Drake.”

“No you sure as hell weren’t. For a smart woman he was an incredibly stupid choice.”

“Excuse me?”

“I’ve been watching his bullshit for six months. I see it, the chief sees it, the squad sees it, everyone but you!”

“What’s got into you? I’m the one who’s pissed. Why are you so mad?”

He got very close. “What do you see?”

“What?”

“Come on, detective. You do this to me all the time. Now it’s your turn. What do you see?!”

“I see my partner losing his grip.”

“What else?”

“He’s protective of my cat.”

“What else?”

“He doesn’t like my choice in men.”

He stepped closer. “What else?” he asked quietly.

She looked into his eyes. She studied him, like she did when she was sure he wasn’t looking. Then it hit her. She didn’t know what was worse, that she never knew or that it had been there for years, since they were kids. “Oh my God,” she whispered.

“It’s about damn time. Now let’s go.”

“Where?”

“To get your key back.”

Mike had built up a good head of righteous Irish rage by the time she’d reached Drake’s office. His secretary tried to stop her but nothing short of God himself could have stopped her. Even then it would have been a struggle.

“He’s with the D.A.” she said as she grabbed Mike’s arm. Mike glared at the woman.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you,” said Connell.

Mike didn’t bother with knocking or even turning the doorknob. She just kicked in the door.

“Mike! What the hell?!” said Drake.

“Detective Burke,” said Martin Chester, who was promptly ignored.

“You tried to kill Charlie!”

“Kill who?” asked Chester.

“He pissed on my briefcase! Do you know how much that cost? We don’t want a cat.”

“No. You don’t want a cat. What I want is my key back.”

Drake took on a placating tone. “Now, Mike, calm down. We’ll talk about this later.”

“We won’t ever talk again. Now give me my key!”

He reached into his pocket and pulled a key off a chain. “Here. We’ll talk when you can be reasonable.”

“Reasonable?” she smiled. “You think I’m not being reasonable.” She turned to her partner. “Detective O’Hara, do you think given all the facts do you think I’m being reasonable?”

“Actually, quite reasonable.”

“How about now?” Mike whirled around and punched Drake in his perfect nose. Blood sprayed out on his perfect white shirt and added dark red spots to his perfect red tie. She glanced back at Connell and smiled. “Now?”

Connell wiggled his hand back and forth. “Borderline.”

Chapter Ten

“Why are we going to the station?” asked Mike.

“Do you really want the Chief hearing this from anyone else?”

“Good point.”

They walked into the station and noticed everyone staring at them. There were enough smiles to tell them everyone had already heard. Mike knocked on the Chief's door.

“Come in.”

They walked in and Fred stood still for a moment. “Tell me it's not true. Tell me you did not break the nose of the ADA in front of the DA?”

“Well sir...” she started.

Fred grabbed her hand and saw the bruised knuckles. “Damn it, woman. If you were going to break up with that tool couldn't you have changed the locks or sent him a text. No, you had to break his damn nose in front of the DA.”

“She really broke it?” Connell chuckled.

“This isn't funny, O'Hara.”

“It would be if you'd been there.”

Fred glared at Connell then looked at Mike. “Explain yourself.”

“When my friend Jane died, I took her cat, Charlie. Drake said he didn't want a cat and I said I didn't ask him if he did. I got a call this morning from the West Side Animal Hospital. Drake had dropped him off and told them to put him down.”

“What?”

“Thank God they recognized him. Jane had him chipped so that's how they found me.”

“He tried to have your cat put down? Without your knowledge?”

“Yes, sir.”

Fred looked over at the family portrait on his desk. He and his wife were sitting on a couch with his son and daughter. Each child was holding a cat. He shrugged. “Oh. Okay.”

“Okay?”

“You could have Preston charged with a felony and theft. Animal cruelty is a felony in Pennsylvania. The guy could be disbarred. I’ll talk to Chester, have him back off.”

“Back off?”

“He wanted you brought up on charges. I’ll explain having his ADA charged with felony animal cruelty will look a lot worse than an angry girlfriend breaking up with him in public.”

“In the meantime both of you are off duty for a week,” he said loud enough to be heard. “With pay, of course,” he added quietly.

“Thank you, Chief.”

“Now, get out of here and try to stay out of trouble.”

They got what they needed from their desks and Connell drove her back to her apartment. “It might not be a bad idea to get your lock changed. Preston may have a copy,” said Connell.

“Oh damn, you’re right.” She picked up her cell phone and called her landlord. “Hey Tim, it’s Mike. How long will it take to change my locks?”

“Did you dump that loser?”

“Yes and how long would it take?”

“Twenty minutes. I have them in stock.”

“That would be great. I’m on my way home. I’ll stop in for the new key.” She disconnected the call and looked at Connell. “Did everyone hate Drake?”

“Yes,” he said quickly.

“That’s pretty decisive.”

“It wasn’t that hard to figure out. He’s a pretentious snob who’s brownnosing his way up ladder. He knows you’ll be Chief of Police one day. You make the perfect mate for a guy like him.”

“Chief of Police?” she smiled.

“Oh, please. Like you don’t know that too. Youngest detective sergeant in the history of the department. Everyone respects you. It’s just a matter of time before you’re running the show.”

By the time they got to Mike’s, Tim was just finishing putting in her new lock. “Oh God, I forgot to tell you about Charlie?” she said.

They walked into her living room. “Don’t worry, the little man is fond of me. He didn’t bolt. You are keeping him, aren’t you?”

“Yes, definitely.”

“Oh that’s good. I’m not much of cat person, but he’s different.” Charlie walked between Tim’s legs. “I know Jane would be happy that you have him.” He handed Mike two new keys. “I don’t want to press but about Jane’s apartment...”

“Give me a week. I need to see if I can find any relatives.”

“Thanks, Mike. You know I’d let you go as long as you need but I need to get painters in.”

“I understand. I’ll do my best.”

“We’ll do our best,” said Connell.

She closed the door behind Tim and looked at her partner. He was entertaining Charlie with a feather toy and smiling. He caught her staring. “What?”

“We’ll do our best?”

“In case you’ve forgotten, I’m on leave this week too.”

“Connell, I didn’t mean to drag you into this.”

He walked toward her and put his hands on her shoulders. “I’m always in it. We’re partners. If it matters to you, it matters to me.”

“Why didn’t you ever tell me?”

He looked suddenly awkward and walked toward her kitchen. “Do you have anything for lunch? I’m hungry.”

She chased after him. “You’re always hungry.” She turned him to face her. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I thought you knew.”

“You thought I knew you had feelings for me and I ignored you?”

Mike had seen Connell in all sorts of moods over the last twenty five years. The temper tantrum of a child, the goofy pranks of a teenager, the quiet strength of her partner, but she’d never seen the adult Connell O’Hara lose his shit. “Yes, I thought you were ignoring it, Ms. What do you see? You see things no one else does. You see a little girl who doesn’t belong with the crowd. You break a case because you see someone’s on a burner. Of course I thought you were ignoring it, for all these years.”

“I swear I didn’t know you had feelings for me.”

He started pacing around her kitchen. “Feelings for you? Is that what you think this is? Do you think I have some school boy crush? He took her face in his hands. “Is that what this feels like?” He pulled her into a deep kiss. Mike felt herself falling, falling into

flames, into passion, into something, until this moment, she'd never known. She pulled back and gasped. Connell was flushed and his blue eyes had gone dark. She looked into his eyes and everything suddenly made sense. Everything she and Connell had been to each other their whole lives. She ran her hands up around his neck and pulled him close. He backed her against the refrigerator and kissed her again. He ran his hands down her sides and pulled her tight against him.

"Michaela," he whispered. He pulled back and ran his hand along her cheek. "Michaela, I don't remember a time when I didn't love you. I've waited a long time for this. I can wait a little while longer."

"Wait?!"

"This has been a hell of a week. You've just dumped the doofus."

Mike smiled. "You don't think he has anything to do with why I kissed you?"

He smiled. "I don't think so but let's take a breath."

She rubbed her hands up his arms. "Are you okay about what happened?"

"You mean about the shooting?" He stepped a side and grabbed a water from the fridge. "I hate that it happened but she didn't give me a choice. I'll talk to the shrink. That will help." He sat down at her kitchen table. "You know there's a lot we have to get done here?"

"What do you mean?"

"De-doofusing the apartment?"

Mike laughed and walked out of the kitchen. She walked back a few minutes later with the picture of Connell had seen on the bureau, a toothbrush and a bottle of hair styling spray. She stepped on the latch that opened the waste basket and ceremoniously dropped each of them before closing the lid.

"That's it?" he asked.

“That’s everything. He wanted to leave more here but I never let him. I think a part of me always knew it wasn’t right.”

Connell looked down at his buzzing phone. “Hey Rick.” He mouthed “I.T.” “No, I’m not suspended because of the shooting. Yes, she really did break his nose. No, I didn’t stop her. If she hadn’t broke it, I would have.”

Mike covered her mouth and snickered.

“Do you have anything for me besides office gossip? Oh, great. How about we meet you at Jessie’s at two? Great. See you then.”

“What was that?”

“Rick’s got the information from Jane’s computer.”

“Why wait until two? I thought you were hungry now?”

“One, we have shopping to do and two, Rick can’t meet us for lunch. Meeting with two technically suspended detectives is not a good career move.”

“Okay, I get that? What do we have to go shop for?”

Connell smiled and pulled her into a kiss. “Sheets.”

Chapter Eleven

Connell put the last of the bags of pillows in his back seat. The trunk was already filled with new sheet sets and a new comforter. He'd be damned if he sleep on the same sheets as the here-to-forever-known-as doofus. He'd also insisted on paying for them. That irked Michaela a bit, but she let him win that one.

They pulled into Jessie's and parked the car. They found a booth and Jessie waved at them. She brought Michaela her ice tea and Connell a soda. "The usual?" asked Jessie. They nodded and Jessie put in an order for Connell's burger and fries and Michaela's feta salad.

"Now what?" asked Michaela.

"We eat lunch?" he smiled.

"No," she smiled. She leaned close and whispered. "You and me. I can't be your boss and...you know..."

"Knock boots?" he grinned.

"Will you be serious!"

"Michaela, I've been waiting twenty five years for this so yeah, I'm going to have a bit of fun."

"You keep saying that, twenty five years. We were just..."

"Eight years old. I'd never met anyone like you. You were so tough. All the boys were afraid of you."

"Most people thought that was a bad thing."

"I didn't. You always knew who you were and you never let anyone change you. That's a great thing. And you liked me, just as I was, bookish and with a funny name."

“You were always smart and Connell is a fine name. Your grandfather was a wonderful man.”

He smiled. “Yes, he was. He liked you too. Maybe he knew. He always told me, That Burke girl is speisialta. That’s Gallic for special.”

Michaela smiled. “He was so sweet. But, Connell, eight?”

“I knew I liked you then. I knew you were unique and I’d never meet anyone else like you. Remember the hill? We were ten.”

“The hill?”

“Johnny Holden was tormenting me.”

“Oh, yeah I remember. I nailed Johnny with a rock for teasing you.”

“Then you yelled at me for going down the hill.”

“It was dangerous!”

“That didn’t stop you from doing it.”

Michaela giggled as she took a sip of her tea. “Yeah, it never did.”

“That was the day.”

“What was?”

He leaned close. “That was the day I knew I would never love anyone the way I loved you.”

“Connell,” she whispered. “Why didn’t you do something, say something?”

“You were always so focused. I knew you’d never be happy being just part of Mike and Connie. You were going places. You had a full boat to Villanova. That’s one of the reason’s I applied to West Point. I needed to get away from you.”

“For God’s sake why?”

“I needed to see if there could be anyone else in my life. If you were just my school crush. But there wasn’t anyone. No one could come close. No one ever did. That’s when I knew I had to come home.”

Michaela’s eyes started to tear. “I hated you for leaving.”

“What?”

“I was so mad. We were best friends all our lives and then you tell me you’re leaving. Not just leaving, after graduating, depended on where you got assigned, you might get killed. After graduation you eventually stopped writing. Do you know how many lunches I had to sit through with Captain Tucker to keep tabs on you?”

“You did what?” he laughed. “Captain Tucker? From the VFW?”

“Yes! You would not believe how much that man can eat. Apparently he still has enough connections that he could let me know you were okay. He never told me where your were,” she wiped a stray tear from her cheek. “Just that you were still safe. I was so relieved when your mom called to say you were coming home.”

“Why didn’t you say anything when I got home?”

“Why didn’t you?”

He sat back against the booth. “I guess neither of us were ready.”

Michaela chuckled. “A couple of slow starters.”

Connell looked up and nodded. “Hey, Rick.”

He slid in next to Michaela. “Not so loud.”

“It’s okay,” she said. “The chief approved you helping trace Jane’s family.”

“I doubt he’d approve of me reading about her love life.”

“What love life? I never knew her to date.”

“Oh she did alright. What I read was pretty steamy stuff.”

“Rick, you didn’t,” Michaela started.

“Don’t worry. I only read enough for the highlights. She was involved with her boss at an accounting firm. From the look of it the relationship lasted seven years.”

“Seven years?”

“What happened?”

“I don’t know. I do know the communication stopped about four months ago. Rather, his communication stopped. She wrote several emails after that but she finally gave up.”

“Who is he?”

“That’s the weird bit. He kept it on the down low. I guess because he was her boss. They communicated under fake names.”

“But you traced him,” said Connell.

Rick slide a piece of paper out of his shirt pocket and Connell snatched it before Michaela could get it. She shot him a look but didn’t say anything. Rick pulled Jane’s laptop out of his messenger bag and put it on the table. “I looked but I found no relatives.” He looked down at the laptop.

“What is it?” she asked.

“She wrote you a letter. I printed it out so you wouldn’t have to search for it.” Michaela tried to take the laptop but Rick didn’t want to let it go. He looked up at Connell. “Don’t let her read it alone.”

Chapter Twelve

They brought their bags in and put them in the bedroom. "Let's take care of this now," said Mike.

"Are you sure?"

"I'm pretty sure I'm not going to want to do this after I read the letter." They bagged up the old linens and Connell took them down to the dumpster. By the time he got back Mike was tucking the new pillows under the new comforter.

He took her hands. "Are you okay with this?"

"With us?" She smiled and gave him a soft kiss. "Yes I am. Of all the things that have gone on in the last few weeks, the one thing I'm sure about is you."

Connell smiled. "Let's have some wine."

"Oh Lord, you've read my mind."

Mike pulled a bottle of Malbec out of the cabinet and handed it to Connell. She pulled the corkscrew out of the drawer and gave it to him. She grabbed two large glasses from the cabinet and set them on the table. "Don't be stingy with the pour."

"Yes, ma'am," he smiled. He poured two generous glasses and set it on the table. He pulled her into a hug. "Are you ready for this?"

"No, but I'm better because you're here."

He placed a kiss on her forehead. "Okay, let's do this."

Mike took a sip of wine and began to read.

Dear Mike,

If you're reading this, well, I'm dead. I hope you're not too upset about it. I'm not. I've been sick for a long time. Doctors and hospitals for years and I was over it. Every day was a struggle. Whenever it happened, I was ready. I never told you about my health for a reason. You were the one person in the world who didn't see me as a patient. We were friends.

I want to thank you for your kindness. You've been my best friend for years. I know that might seem odd to someone like you. You know so many people and have such a busy life. That was not a life I ever wanted or even could have. But you were the perfect friend for me. A sarcastic smart ass who loved my cat and watching action movies. Help yourself to what's left of the wine. I can't bear the idea of it going to waste.

I knew whenever I called you, you were there for me.

Knowing you, you'll probably look into my history to find some long lost family. Save yourself the aggravation. I don't have any family. The only one who'll miss me is Charlie, and I'm guessing you will too. Try not to.

Do yourself a favor and dump Captain America. I know you never listened to me before but now you have to because I'm dead. He's a tool. Get rid of him. That partner of yours, Connell, he's dreamy. And he's perfect for you because he adores you. He may never say it but I see how he looks at you. He's a good man. He'd be loyal to you. He's the kind of man you deserve.

Now for the particulars of what's left of me. I'm sorry to leave this task to you but Charlie's not that good with details.

Cremate me and put me someplace pretty. Maybe that park I'd meet you at for lunch. I don't have much in the way of personal items. I was never fancy like that. If there's something you don't want give it to someone who can use it. In my top dresser drawer is an envelope with instructions. My lawyer's name is on it. I named you my beneficiary. This was not a last minute decision. I made it several years ago. It's not a fortune but I want you to have it.

Okay, that's enough of the morbid stuff. You are a hell of a woman, Michaela Burke. You've been a good and loyal friend. I hope I was as good for you.

Right now I'm sitting on some porch in heaven, drinking the finest Malbec and passing judgement on the new arrivals. I'll save a seat for you, but don't make it too soon. Go have a life with that man who loves you.

On the days you can't do it for you, do it for me.

I love you,

Jane

Mike set the letter down and finished off her wine. "I was never a good friend. Not like she deserved."

Connell stood and pulled her to him. "You heard her. You were the friend she wanted." He looked at her and smiled. "She was obviously a woman of discerning taste."

Mike looked up at him and gave him a push in the chest. "You just like her because she wanted me to be with you."

"Like I said, discerning taste."

Mike laughed until she began to cry. Connell held her until she didn't have any tears left. She reached for his chest pocket where he'd put the paper with the name of Jane's lover. He pushed her hand away.

"No."

"What do you mean, no?"

"I mean not tonight. This is enough for one day."

"I want to know what happened."

“Of course you do. So do I. But I think it’s been enough for both of us today. Now let’s see what you’ve got for dinner before we get hammered on this very excellent wine.” He opened the fridge and looked inside, then back at Mike.

She smiled and pointed to a drawer. “Take out menus.”

“We’ll have to work on that,” he smiled.

They curled up on the couch with the last of the wine and the pizza and watched Arnold Schwarzenegger melt into a pot of molten steel. “Always a classic,” said Connell as he started cleaning up the dishes. They washed up the glasses loaded the dishwasher. “I’ll be back in the morning.” He patted his chest. “Then we’ll figure out what we’ll do about this.”

“No.”

“No?”

She touched his chest. “Not this.” She took his hand. “This.” She led him into the bedroom.

“Michaela, are you sure?” She pulled him into a passionate kiss. He looked at her and grinned. “I’ll take that as a yes.” He pulled the paper out of his pocket. He turned and put it in the top drawer. “Time for this tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” she nodded. Then she grinned and slipped her hands up to his tie and loosened it. She smiled as she unbuttoned his shirt and slipped it off his shoulders. “Holy shit,” she whispered.

“What?” he snickered.

She rubbed her hands over his six pack. “Damn, dude. I thought...but I had no idea.”

“Thought what?”

Michaela blushed. "I used to sneak a peak once in a while. But I always felt so guilty."

"Why did you feel guilty?"

"First, because I didn't think you felt like that about me. And then we worked together and well, then I shouldn't think about you like that."

"Oh yeah?" he smiled. "How do you think about me now?"

"You're enjoying my awkwardness way too much."

He reached around and loosened her ponytail. "Do you know when I first noticed you? You know, really noticed. We sophomores and we were lab partners in chemistry class. It was one of the few times you had your hair down. We were going over the text and you leaned close." He whispered, "I could smell your strawberry shampoo. I looked at you and wondered when someone would come along and take you away from me."

"What?"

"I knew someone as beautiful as you would find someone."

She touched his face. "There was never anyone for me. It was always you."

Michaela pulled off her blouse and she unzipped her skirt. She kicked it off to the floor and smiled. "Holy shit, yourself, woman." He ran his hands down her waist. "My God, you're beautiful."

"Connell,"

"Yes," he whispered as he ran his fingers over her skin.

"Could we take inventory later? You're driving me crazy."

He looked at her and laughed. This is the way it would be with them. The way it should have always been. She gasped when he scooped her up and tossed her on the new comforter. He divested himself of his slacks and boxers and enjoyed Michaela's wicked grin. He pulled off the rest of her lingerie and stared at her for a moment. She was

finally his. He covered her with his body, kissing and tasting. Michaela pulled him tight against her and they lost themselves in each other. All those years of waiting and wanting were finally over.

Mike rubbed her hand across Connell's chest. Her heart had finally stopped racing and her brain was circling around to conscience thought. "Connell, why didn't I know? You're right about me. I notice everything. It's what makes me a good cop."

"A great cop."

"Thank you, but that still doesn't explain why I never knew."

"Maybe it's your confidence."

She pushed herself up on her elbow. "Excuse me?"

"You're always so sure of yourself you don't look inward. You don't need to."

"Is that your way of saying I'm self-involved?"

He pushed himself up on his elbow and brushed a long strand of her black hair over her shoulder. "Michaela Burke, I have loved you for as long as I can remember. I'll still love you when we're old and gray and I'm telling our grandchildren about their clever Nana who need a few more years than I did to realize she loved me." He gave her a soft kiss. "You do love me, right? I think with our history we should spell things out."

Mike smiled and gave him a kiss. "Connell O'Hara, I've loved you since before I knew what love was. I'll still be loving you when we're old and gray."

Connell gave her another kiss. "Good to hear."

"Grandchildren?"

"You don't think I'm just in this for laughs?"

Mike grinned. "I thought you were in it for the blistering hot sex."

"That was pretty spectacular."

"You're talking about marriage."

He pulled her close and kissed her forehead. "Someone wore me out. Let's talk about it in the morning."

Chapter Thirteen

Mike made some eggs and Connell poured the orange juice. Charlie jumped up on the counter and meowed. "Down you." She pointed to the floor. Charlie knocked a pot holder to the floor. She looked at Connell. "Am I in a stand off with a cat?"

"Apparently," he said. "I'll feed the beast while you finish breakfast."

They sat at the kitchen table picking over the left over bacon while Charlie groomed himself in the front window. "He seems to have adjusted to his new digs," said Mike.

"I think the fact that they are similar to Jane's place helps. You're familiar to him. He obviously likes you."

"He likes you too. He was sleeping on your feet this morning."

"Don't worry sweetheart." He patted his chest. "There's still plenty of room for you."

Mike balled up her napkin and threw it at him. "Goofball." She picked up the plates and Connell got up to help her. He loaded the dishwasher while she washed up the few pans. He slipped his arms around her waist.

"Talk to me. What's wrong?"

"I'm trying to figure out what to do when I finally look at the name. When I know who he is?"

"What do you want to know?"

"From what Rick said this guy had a relationship with her for years and then ghosted her. He cut her off. I want to know why."

"You want him to know Jane's dead."

"Yeah."

"You want him to feel guilty."

"Maybe. I don't know. I need to know what happened."

"Okay. We'll go see the guy. It's Saturday, he's probably home."

"You'll come with me?"

"Michaela we're partners more than just at work. I'll always be there for you." He pulled her into a hug. "Besides I think you've got your quota for broken noses this week."

Mike laughed. "I love you, Connell."

"I love you too."

“I think the first thing we should do is look at the instructions she left for us. You still have her key.”

“Yeah. Let’s do it.”

They walked across the hall and entered Jane’s apartment. It felt too quiet. Mike walked into Jane’s bedroom and stopped. The last time she’d been in this room was when she found Jane’s body. She felt Connell’s hands on her shoulders.

“No, sweetheart. Don’t think about that. Let’s get the letter and get out.” She turned around and looked in her dresser drawers. She found the envelope and Connell took it from her hand. “Come on, let’s go back to your place.” They sat down at the kitchen table and Connell handed her the envelope.

“No, please. I can’t. You read it.”

“Okay.” He opened the envelope and started flipping through pages. “It’s like she said in the letter. She’s left everything to you, including a life insurance policy.”

“Life insurance? Well, I guess that will cover her final expenses.”

“It’s a little more than that. It’s for one hundred and fifty thousand dollars.”

“What?”

“We should call the attorney. The lawyer’s contact information is here.”

“Will you call?” she asked.

He grabbed her hand. “Sure.” He pulled out his phone and dialed the hand written number on the back of the card.

“Armitage.”

“Mr. Armitage. I’m Detective Connell O’Hara. I’m calling about Jane Stone.”

“Yes, I heard Jane had passed. Such a shame. I liked her.”

“I liked her too.”

“I’m here with Detective Michaela Burke. Jane had left a letter for Michaela that led us to her documents and your name.”

“Of course. I’m sure she has some questions.”

Connell handed her the phone. “Hello?”

“Ms. Burke, when I heard Jane passed I was expecting your call.”

“What I’m reading here, it’s all very confusing. We were friends, drinking buddies, but I never expected something like this.”

“She said you would, to quote her, ‘Tell Mike to get over herself.’”

Mike smiled. “That’s Jane. I don’t understand why she would make me her beneficiary. She said she had no family but a charity or something...”

“Again, I was instructed to say ‘Get over yourself’. She had great respect for you, Detective Burke. She said you were the best person she ever knew and she liked the idea of leaving you a little something. She said she would have loved to see your face when you found out about it.”

“I was pretty shocked. “One hundred and fifty thousand dollars is an awful lot of money.”

“Actually, that was just the life insurance. She also had made some clever investments. The total is closer to three hundred thousand.”

Mike started to hyperventilate and she handed the Connell the phone. “This is Detective O’Hara. Michaela looks shocked. What did you tell her?”

“Well, this is really a private matter.”

“I’m Detective Burke’s fiancée.”

Mike looked at her and gasped some more. She ran to the fridge, pulled out a bottle of water and chugged half.

Connell smiled and nodded as Armitage filled him in on the details. “Yes, I can see how Michaela would find that shocking. Yes, we can come to your office on Monday. We’ll see you then. Thank you. Goodbye.” He disconnected the phone. “We have an appointment in his office at nine a.m. Monday.”

Mike stood there, frozen.

“Michaela, sweetheart, are you okay?” He took the bottle from her hand and set it down. “Michaela?”

“Did you just call me your fiancée? Did you say that so he’d talk to you?”

“Michaela! You know me better than that.”

“Then what did you mean?”

He smiled and took her hands. "I guess I did put the cart before the horse. I love you, Michaela. I'm in this for good, whether you want to take your time or not, I've waited my whole life for you. I'll wait as long as you need."

Tears ran down her cheeks. "I'm done waiting too." She pulled him close and gave him a deep kiss. "If you want a fiance, you've got one."

Chapter Fourteen

They sat outside the man's house. It was a typical suburban home, nothing out of the ordinary. Except Jane had been in love with the man inside for seven years.

"Are you ready for this?" asked Connell. "This isn't going to be your typical interrogation. You're not investigating a crime."

Mike grabbed his hand. "I'll be okay because you're here with me."

They walked up to the front door. The door opened and Mike could see what she'd seen in him. He was fifty five, tall, handsome and had salt and pepper hair. He was by any societal standard a good looking man. "Are you Mark Callahan?"

"Yes, what can I do for you?"

Mike flashed her badge. "I'm Detective Sergeant Michaela Burke. This is Detective Connell O'Hara." The man's face blanched. He knew her name. "We'd like to talk to you about Jane Stone."

"Come in," he said as he stepped aside. He led them to a living room that seemed as ordinary as such rooms usually were. A big TV, a lounge chair, and pictures on the mantle. He'd been deep sea fishing with buddies, golfing and one picture next to a Christmas tree. He was standing with a woman, decidedly not Jane. She was at most thirty five and aggressively blonde. They all took places on the long couch. "You're a friend of Jane's. She mentioned you."

"I was."

"Were?"

"She died last week."

The man's skin went from pale to chalk white. "I didn't know. How did it happen?"

"She had a massive stroke and died in her sleep."

He seemed to regain some of his color and Mike decided she hated him for it. "Oh, so you're not investigating a crime."

"No," Connell interjected. "We're just trying to understand what happened to our friend."

"I don't know what I can tell you. She worked for me at my firm but had to retire for her health last year."

“Let’s not dance around this, Mr. Callahan. You were sleeping with Jane for seven years.” Mike thought he might faint.

“We had a casual, off and on relationship. It was nothing serious.”

“Not from the messages I read,” she bluffed. She felt Connell’s hand on her back. It was his signal to back down.

“It was just sex.”

“What happened four months ago?”

“Four months?”

“You cut off all communication four months ago. From what I read she didn’t understand why.”

He sighed and ran his hand through his hair. “It just got too much. She wanted more than I was ready to give. And she was ill. She had a bad heart and high blood pressure. She always had something going on. It was just too much.”

“Mark, honey?” they heard a voice come in the hallway. A woman with hair normally seen only on albinos came into the living room. “What’s going on?”

“These are Detectives Burke and O’Hara. They’re here about Jane Stone.”

Mike was surprised when he mentioned her name.

“I remember her. Nice lady. We all worked for the same accounting firm. I think she retired last year.”

“She did. Cassie, they came to tell me that Jane has passed away.”

“Oh, that’s so sad.” The woman turned to Mark. “Why are they telling you?”

“I was her last boss. Pensions, life insurance, that sort of thing.”

“Oh.”

Mike could tell the woman wasn’t buying it. The woman turned to her and extended her hand. “I’m sorry, I’m being rude. I’m Cassie Callahan, Mark’s wife. Can I get you some coffee?”

“No thank you, Mrs. Callahan. We were just going.” Mike glanced at the now blushing Mark. “We were just notifying Mr. Callahan.”

“I am sorry about Jane. She was such a nice woman.”

“Yes, she was, Mrs. Callahan.” Mike spotted another picture of Mark but this time with Cassie in a barely there bikini in a tropical location. “Oh my, that looks like a beautiful location.”

“That was our honeymoon. We eloped on Valentine’s Day.”

Mike pasted on a fake smile. “How romantic.” She looked at Mark. “Thank you for your time, Mr. Callahan. We’ll be going now.”

“I’ll see you out.” He walked them to the front door and then closed it behind the three of them. “You have to understand. I just didn’t want to do it anymore. I’m not a bad guy.”

Mike looked at him. “No, Mr. Callahan. You’re not a bad guy. What you are is a coward.” She felt Connell’s hand on her back as he turned her toward his car. She got in the passenger side and she turned to him. “Are you going to say anything?”

“I don’t have to. You know what you did.”

“I crossed the line.”

“You didn’t just cross it, you fucking pole vaulted over it. What so you think you achieved?”

“Four months ago, Valentine’s day. Jane probably saw a notice in the paper that he’d gotten married. That’s when she stopped taking her meds. That’s when she gave up.”

“Probably. But that was her choice. What did you accomplish here?”

“I wanted him to know what he did.”

“You also wanted his wife to know.”

“She already knew.”

“Excuse me?”

“The look on her face. She wasn’t surprised. Maybe surprised that it was Jane, but not surprised he had other women. He probably still does.”

“You called him a coward.”

“He was. He didn’t have the stones to break up with her so he just walked away. I wanted him to know what he did had consequences. He broke her heart and that killed her.”

“You didn’t just do this for her, you did it for yourself. You still feel guilty you didn’t see this coming.”

“Damn, you Connell. I shouldn’t have taught you so well.”

“That wasn’t what I observed as a cop. That’s me knowing you for your whole life. You hate injustice. Always have. That was you throwing a rock at Johnny Holden when I was bullied. You were throwing a rock at this guy and you hit two people.” Mike lost control and began to weep. Connell pulled her close and let her cry herself out.

Connell stroked Michaela’s hair as she curled up on his chest. He’d hoped she’d rest, but he knew her too well. Her mind was in overdrive.

“Do you think that will ever be us?” she asked.

“Who? Jane and Mark?”

“Yeah?”

“God, no,” he said with a marked emphasis. “First of all you know me. I’ve loved you forever. I have never, nor will I ever love anyone else. Second, you’re a scary good cop. If I ever tried to keep a secret from you, all you’d have to do is look at me and you’d know.”

She raised up on his chest and gave him a genuine smile. “Damn straight.” She gave him a quick kiss. “How are you so sure? How do you know for certain?”

He stroked her hair and tried to think of the words that would convince her. He couldn’t leave any doubt. “Michaela, there are some things for which I need no proof. I need no proof of God. I know he’s there. I’ve seen too many things in my life that were flat out miracles not to believe.”

“You have? Like what?”

“Like you.”

“Like me?”

“You have been a force of nature since the day you were born. You’re heart is pure.”

“Hah! No one’s ever accused me of that.”

“I’m not talking about the easy stuff, like never swearing, which you do with great style I might add,”

“Thank you.”

“I’m talking about not being like Jane’s ex. It would be physically impossible for you. You believe in truth and justice. You have always been kind to the kids with the funny names, not because someone told you to but because it’s your nature. You believe in kindness,” he smiled and gave her a quick kiss. “And you’re not above breaking a nose to prove your point. How can I be so sure? Because it’s you.”

Michaela’s eyes welled with tears. “How could I have gone my whole life and not had you by my side?”

He tucked his hand under her chin. “Silly girl. You always did. You always will.”

Chapter Fifteen

“Are you sure you’re ready for this?” asked Connell.

“It’s kind of like pulling off a bandage. We should just do it all at once.”

“Okay, let’s do it.” They got around the car and walked around to the back of house where they heard the young O’Hara’s running around.

“Oh my God,” she whispered.

“Michaela, look at me.” She turned and looked at him. “What do you see?”

“What? You want to do that now?”

“Michaela, what do you see?”

“I see my partner.” She smiled. “My partner in everything. I see a man who loves me and I know I will never have to doubt that.”

“Why will you never doubt my love?”

“Because you believe in miracles. And now, so do I.”

Connell pulled her into a deep kiss and then took her by the hand. “Let’s do this.”

They walked into the backyard and everyone shouted greetings. Breeda came over and smiled. “Two weeks in a row? To what do we owe this honor?”

Matthew walked over and looked Michaela up and down. “No Poor Man’s Bread?”

“I’ve been a little busy,” she blushed.

Breeda looked at her son’s smile and at Michaela’s blush. Then she realized they were holding hands. “No,” she gasped with a smile.

“Yes,” said Connell

“What?” asked Matthew.

Breeda looked to the heavens and shouted, “Saints be praised!” Then she pointed to the clouds as if she were having a direct conversation. “But it sure took you long enough.” She hugged her son and then hugged Michaela and whispered, “He’s loved you his whole life.”

“I know that, now.”

“Ma, there’s a bit more too it.” He took Michaela’s left hand and showed it to his mother. John Hollister was more than happy to open early for them. On her left hand was

a beautiful oval sapphire surrounded by diamonds. The flood gates opened and Breeda cried on her son, on her soon to be daughter in law and on her husband.

“What’s happening?” asked Matthew.

Breeda tapped his skull. “They’re engaged, Matthew.”

“Oh! It’s about time, son. I thought you would waste away for loving this one. And a ring already?”

“Once she decided she loved me I wasn’t going to give her a chance to change her mind.”

Matthew smiled and patted his back. “Well done, son. Well done. This one’s speisialta.”

He hugged his father and fought back the tears. “Yes, she is, Da.”

Chapter Sixteen

Michaela sat in her office and watched as Connell talked to some of his men. It amazed her how easy it had been to go from being Mike Burke to Michaela O'Hara. It sounded right to her ear. They had told the Chief right away that they were engaged because they could no longer work together. It hadn't been a problem because Connell had been promoted to head the new cold case unit. She had been slightly annoyed with Fred when he'd won the pool the bullpen had started as soon as she'd broken up with Drake. He'd won with a guess of two weeks before they got together. Connell had laughed and told the chief he'd appreciated his confidence.

She smiled as she watched her husband. He had the most beautiful blue eyes and he was trim and fit. Good God in heaven was her man fit. Yes, he was handsome but a lot of men were handsome. Connell O'Hara was special. He always had been. It had just taken her a while to figure out just how special. He caught her staring at him and he gave her the smile that was only for her. He stuck his head in her office.

"Good morning again, Detective Lieutenant 'Hara.

"Why hello yourself, Detective Lieutenant 'Hara."

Connell laughed. "This is getting confusing since my promotion." She stood up and slipped her arms around his waist. He glanced over his shoulder and saw they had an audience. "Ah, babe, we're not alone."

"What do you see?" she asked with a smile.

"Really, now?"

"Yes, really, now. What do you see?"

"I see a fantastic cop."

"What else?"

"I see my beautiful wife." Audience be damned he gave her a quick kiss.

"What else?"

He stood back and looked, really looked. "You're looking particularly beautiful and happy and..." his eyes got wide. "Really?!" She smiled and nodded. Connell threw his arms in the air and shouted "Woo hoo!" He pulled her into a deep kiss. "I'm so happy, are you happy?"

"I'm very happy. Queasy, but happy."

"How are you, is everything okay, should you be sitting down?"

"Connell, calm down. I'm fine. I'm not due for another six months." She saw the crowd trying to sneak look into her office and failing. "We better tell them." They walked out into the bullpen holding hands.

"Can I have everyone's attention?" asked Connell.

One of Michaela's men pulled a cigar box out of his desk. "Who had three months in the baby pool?"

"Seriously guys?" asked Michaela. "Again?" The Chief walked over to the cigar box, opened it and took out the small stack of bills. "Chief?"

Fred smiled and counted his money. "I know what I see."