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Someone

To Watch

Over Me

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Teresa Hill

Someone To Watch Over Me

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Someone To Watch Over Me / T. Hill — «HarperCollins»,

His mother's death left cop Jax Cassidy to settle her estate, watch over three younger sisters...and contend with one very spoiled dog. It all seemed to be working, too, until the aptly named Romeo began sniffing around Jax's love life. The dog had to go. Jax found the perfect new owner—florist Gwen Moss, who was fighting to get over some soul-deep heartache of her own. Touched unexpectedly by Gwen's courage, faith and love, Jax embarked on a road to self-discovery where he might finally learn what's truly important in life.

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Someone to Watch Over Me

Two people died in the week before
I was supposed to turn in this book,
and I want to dedicate it to both of them.
My friend and carpool buddy of four years,
Laura Morrison, who fought bravely for
five years against breast cancer.
She would have endured anything to be here
to raise her two children, whom she loved
completely and of whom she was so proud.
I miss you, Laura. It's so odd to be in
a world without you.
And ten-year-old Jessica Harris, who played
on my daughter's and Laura's daughter's
soccer team, whose death is one of those
things I will never understand.
Soccer season is starting again, Jessica.
We miss you, too.

Someone to Watch Over Me

Teresa Hill



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Those of you who've read my work before are probably thinking, This is weird and You're writing what?

Yeah, it's weird to me, too, and definitely not something I ever expected to be doing.

What can I say? Life is strange. We never know what's coming or where life will lead us. Mine has led me here.

The last few years have been scarier and more difficult, more uncertain and more humbling than any I ever imagined experiencing, and through them all, God has shown me unequivocally that He is with me, helping me and guiding me in ways I see as nothing short of a miracle.

He also sent many people to help me along the way—my amazing children, John and Laura, whom I love completely, my wonderful husband, Bob, the kind of friends who can get me through anything and did, Barbara Samuel, Christie Ridgway, Vicki Hinze, Gail Virardi, June Taylor and most of all, my grandfather, Joseph Haggard Jr. I wouldn't have made it without all of you.

And—don't laugh—my dogs. (I was lonely and asked God for some more friends. He sent dogs.) Fletch, a beautiful Australian shepherd we found at the shelter, who was the inspiration for Romeo; and the love of his life, a sweet, little mixed-breed named Sophie, who showed up at our door during an ice storm.

Also, special thanks go out to all the wonderful writers at my workshop in New Zealand, who helped brainstorm ways to complicate this story.

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Chapter One

William Jackson Cassidy had escorted this particular reprobate before, and it never failed. The two of them walking down the street side by side drew every female eye for a half a mile.

Heads turned. Slow, admiring smiles spread across faces of women young and old. A pretty, little curly-headed thing beamed at them from across the parking lot, and Romeo perked right up.

“Don’t even think about it,” Jax warned, giving a little tug on the line that held them together.

More than one woman had commented that they resembled one another, although Jax just didn’t see it.

Oh, they both had hair that was a little longer and blonder than most. Jax’s used to drag the top of his shoulders when it wasn’t pulled back into a disreputable-looking ponytail that more than one woman had claimed made him look dangerous in a very interesting way. He now had what was, for him, a fairly short, neat trim, the ends barely brushing his collar in the back. Romeo, too, had gotten a trim, since spring was coming on strong already in north Georgia, even though it was only March. Both he and Romeo were full through the shoulders and lean in the hips, and Jax wouldn’t deny that they both probably had a little swagger to their walk.

But Jax wasn’t nearly as conceited or as much of a flirt as Romeo, who was probably the most pathetic thing Jax had ever encountered. Jax chased criminals for a living. He’d seen “pathetic” before.

Romeo was a police academy dropout and now, a kept man. Kept, unfortunately, by Jax’s softhearted, dying mother, who was completely blind to every fault Romeo had.

“She probably left you every dime she’s got,” Jax complained, just imagining the way Romeo would strut then.

For the moment, Romeo just kept on walking, oblivious, as ever, to any insult Jax slung his way.

The security guard at the hospital’s employee entrance was an off-duty cop and a friend, who let them slip in the back way and up the stairs. Jax thanked the man and tried not to sound ungrateful for the patrolman’s offer of sympathy. He wasn’t ungrateful, not really, just trying as hard as he could to deny what was happening, which was hard when everybody he saw kept wanting to talk about it.

He knew they meant well, but it didn’t help to know everyone else felt lousy about what was happening. He felt lousy, too. That bit about misery loving company just wasn’t working for him. He thought he’d be better off if everyone in town would just let him wallow in his misery and pretended to be oblivious to the whole situation.

But they all knew his mother, and they all loved her. Most of them either had known his father or had fathers who’d known his father, through the job. A good number of them had dated one or more of his sisters, and the rest—the females—had dated Jax himself.

So everybody knew, and he supposed they all wanted to help, but the hard truth was, his mother was dying.

Nothing made that better, and he wasn’t sure how much more he could stand, watching her suffer this way.

They got to the third floor, and Jax held up a hand to signal Romeo to stop.

“Remember, be quiet,” he warned as he eased open the door, which led directly onto the hospice ward. “All right. Coast is clear.”

The three nurses at the nurses’ station obligingly looked the other way, feigning a sudden and unflinching interest in a splotch of paint on the ceiling of the hall. They were sweethearts. All of them. Any other time, and he would have been as charming to them as humanly possible, giving them one of the legendary smiles for which the Cassidy men were known.

He wasn’t being conceited. His mother had told him all about the power of a Cassidy male’s charm from the moment of his birth and sworn he wouldn’t be getting away with anything with her

because of it. Supposedly he'd gurgled and slobbered on her, waved his fists madly and smiled with every bit of the charm she feared a male child of Billy Cassidy's would have.

As his grandma Cassidy had told the story, his mother had promptly started praying that God would send her nothing but female children from then on, and she'd gotten her wish. Three times. Then she'd proceeded to try as hard as she could to raise her only son to think the ability to charm women was something of a burden, dangerous, unpredictable and a completely unfair advantage to wage against the women of this world.

It was the one thing she'd never convinced him of, despite the fact that they loved each other dearly.

Jax slipped out the door and into the hall. Romeo perked up as he spotted the women at the desk.

"You say a word to them, and you'll sleep outside for a week," Jax threatened.

He got nothing but a low growl in return.

Romeo had never met a woman he didn't like. He saw a pretty one and everything else went straight out of his head.

"Just remember where we are, and that you're not supposed to be here," Jax reminded him.

As hospitals went, this wasn't bad. It was in a nice, old, whitewashed stone building with a wide, elegant, wraparound porch and tall, white columns, which used to be the main hospital seventy years ago. Now, the real hospital lay off to the right, attached to the hospice unit by a pretty atrium.

They kept things quieter over here. It was dark and peaceful. The patients slept as long as they could in the morning and throughout the day, had as much medication as their systems could stand and as little pain as was humanly possible, although it was still too much.

Jax hated the place.

But his mother was in the room down the hall, and there was nothing on this earth that would keep him away from her now or at any other time in her life when she needed him.

His three little sisters were all exhausted from the battle they'd fought to keep their mother at home, where she'd asked to stay until the end. But in the middle of the night, forty-eight hours ago, her breathing had gotten so labored and the pain so bad and his sisters had cried so many tears and hurt so badly themselves, that maybe he'd just gotten too scared to let it end like that. Because he'd called 911, and they'd carted his mother off here, where, with the kind of strength she'd always possessed and he'd never understood, she still clung stubbornly to life.

She was one amazing woman. How could she do something as ordinary as die?

Pausing outside the door, he looked over to Romeo and shook his head in disgust. "Don't jump on her or hang all over her. She hurts just about everywhere," Jax said, then thought of one more thing. "And don't you dare cry."

Jax pushed open the door. The room was dim. His mother's body nothing but a faint impression under the pretty quilt stitched by his own grandma Jackson's hand, the woman whose family name he carried. William, for his father, although everybody had called his father Billy, and Jackson, for his mother's family. William Jackson Cassidy.

His mother had realized right away what a mouthful it was.

She was the one who'd given him the nickname Jax when he was still tiny, when she'd been young and absolutely stunning, from the pictures he'd seen, and had what everyone must have thought was a long, happy life ahead of her. A husband she loved dearly, one who clearly adored her, a son who adored her just as much, and three beautiful daughters.

"Didn't quite work out that way, did it, Mom?" he whispered.

Her pretty, honey-colored hair was long gone, her eyes sunk down into her face, dark circles under them, no color at all in her cheeks. She turned her head ever so slowly toward him and managed a weak smile.

Then she caught sight of Romeo and said, "Oh, baby. You made it."

Romeo stood there and grinned like a fool. His tail swished back and forth in a move that he seemed to think made women swoon. Of course, he thought everything he did made women swoon, and Jax couldn't deny it was pretty much true.

The dog had a way with women.

Especially Jax's mother.

"Come here, sweet thing," his mother said.

"I take it you mean the dog, and not me?" Jax said, taking the chair by her bedside and sitting down.

"You know I love you," she murmured weakly, turning her cheek for his kiss.

He gave her one, trying to make it seem like any other greeting he'd given her over the years. Casual and easy, as if he had ages to say hello to her this way. As if this might not be the last time.

How could that be? The last time?

What were they going to do without her?

"You love the dog more than any of us," he said, because it was a familiar argument, and he couldn't stand to talk about her dying.

"You're just jealous... because he's prettier than you... women like him better," his mother said, actually managing to make him grin when he wouldn't have thought anything could. She was one of those who claimed he and the dog were way too much alike. Another subject he was happy to talk about, instead of what was going on here.

Romeo whined and put his front paws up on the bed, then stuck his cold nose against his mother's cheek. She smiled and turned her face to him. "Come here, baby."

The dog leaped up onto the bed.

"Romeo, what did I just tell you?" Jax reminded him.

The dog gave him a look that he could swear said, She does love me more than you, and I am prettier than you. So there.

"It's all right," his mother said, the words coming slowly, her breathing labored. "...been at this for a long time. He knows... to be careful. Come right up here beside me, baby."

Her fifty-five-pound baby crept up very slowly, feeling his way, until he was as close to her as he could get, pressed against her side, all stretched out on the bed, his head on her right arm, his nose against her cheek. He whimpered softly.

"Yes. That's my good boy." His mother leaned her head against the dog's and gave a contented sigh, then turned back to Jax. "Thank you for bringing him."

"You know I'd do anything for you," he said and worried he might be the one to start to cry.

"Yes, I know."

"Sorry about bringing you here."

"It's fine... Doesn't hurt much now. The medication is... They keep the really good stuff here. I needed it."

"If you want, we'll take you back home." And somehow they'd find the strength to see this through to the end. If she could do it, so could the rest of them.

"No.... Better this way," she said, lightly caressing the dog who'd been her pride and joy for the last year and a half. Romeo had flunked out of K-9 school and Jax had brought him to his mother after someone had broken into old Mrs. Watkins's house, three blocks down from his mother's place. Romeo was supposed to protect her, although if anyone ever broke in, the worthless dog would probably try to charm them to death.

Romeo was practically purring now. Female attention of any kind did that to him. He was the most ridiculous excuse for a dog Jax had ever seen.

"Don't worry," his mother said. "Won't be long now."

Jax stiffened. How did she know that? How could she sound so calm about it? How could he want so badly to get up and run away? She was his mother, and she was the one who was dying. If she could handle it with such dignity and grace, surely he could find a fraction of her courage and strength.

“Did you run the girls off?” she asked, about to drift off. It didn’t take long to wear her out these days.

Jax nodded. “I told them you didn’t want anyone but your two favorite boys tonight.”

“Good. Done all they can. I know that. Make sure they do, too.”

“I will.”

She lifted her right hand off the blanket, a sign that he knew meant she wanted him to hold it. He did, wrapping both of his around hers, which was like ice. He thought it got colder every day.

“I know you’ll take good care of them,” she said. “You always have.”

“No, you have. You’ve taken care of all of us.”

He’d done what he could after his father died. Jax had been eleven, the girls eight, five and almost two. His mother hadn’t had a paying job since before Jax was born. Raising four kids, his parents hadn’t had any real savings to fall back on. Just living had taken everything his father made and then some. He’d moonlighted from his job as a policeman by working security at a furniture warehouse, and had been shot and killed after stopping late one night at a convenience store on his way home from his second job, killed by a stupid kid trying to clean out the till.

Just like that. Boom. No more dad.

Jax still remembered the way he’d screamed when they’d told him. Just for a minute. Then he’d pulled himself together for his sisters, who’d come running into the room to see what was wrong.

Life had changed in an instant.

It was like that.

You never knew when someone was going to snatch something you loved away from you, a lesson he’d learned young and taken to heart.

He really didn’t need to go over this ground again, and neither did his sisters, and yet, it seemed, that’s exactly what they were doing.

“Jax?” his mother said maybe twenty minutes later. She did that. Just drifted off without warning, scaring him every time she did it now. Because one time, it would happen and she wouldn’t wake up again.

“We’re right here,” he said, Romeo on one side, him on the other.

“I just wanted you to know...I’m not scared.”

Jax didn’t see how that could possibly be. She was dying. But then, she was a religious woman. He wasn’t a religious man, something she simply didn’t understand, although she didn’t pester him about it, either. She had complete faith that he’d come to his senses one day, as she put it.

“I’m glad you’re not scared,” he said, carefully skating around the whole religion thing. He wasn’t lying. He was grateful. He wasn’t sure he could have handled her being scared and facing something he couldn’t stop or change in any way. Anything that brought her comfort right now was fine with him.

She closed her eyes and smiled dreamily. “Guess who I saw last night?”

“Who?” She’d had all kinds of people dropping by.

“Your father.”

Jax stiffened. He doubted his dad had dropped by, since he’d been dead for nineteen years.

“He hasn’t been far away today,” his mother said as easily as she might have told him her cousin Ruth dropped by.

Okay. She was on a whole lot of morphine. The doctors had warned that it did funny things to people, that people said odd things and believed they saw odd things, too. The doctors had said not to be alarmed by it.

Sure. Jax could do that. He was not alarmed.

“So nice to see him,” she said. “He looked so good. Like always. In his day, he was even prettier than you and Romeo.”

“Oh,” Jax said. What else could he say?

“He’s waiting for me.” She smiled at that.

Jax gave a little choking sound, couldn’t stop it, and he really, really wanted to get up and run away. But obviously, it made her feel better to think his dad was there, waiting. Fine. She could see all the dead relatives she wanted if it made her feel better.

“But I’ll still be with you,” she said. “Always be with you. And the girls.”

“I know, Mom.”

“No, you don’t. But...that’s all right. You don’t have to believe for it to happen, Jax.”

“For what to happen?”

“For me to help you.”

“Mom—”

“Girls will lean on you...you’ll let them. But who’ll take care of you? Have to be me.”

He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. “Whatever you say, Mom.”

The dog started to make this pathetic, whining, crying sound that drove Jax absolutely crazy.

Take it like a man, Romeo, Jax wanted to say. He hadn’t cried in years. Probably not since his father died.

“Want you to know...no regrets,” she said. “Except not more time...with you and the girls. With my grandchildren. I wanted a dozen. But even that...doesn’t sting the way it used to. No regrets...important to be able to say when you’re where I am. I want you to be able to say it, too. No regrets.”

“I’ll say it now,” he claimed. “I don’t have any.”

He lived his life exactly the way he wanted, and it suited him just fine.

“You don’t even know,” his mother said.

“Know what?”

“What’s really important. You need to make some changes, Jax. It’s time.”

“What do you want me to do?” he asked, because he’d promise her anything and he hated so much to think that she was disappointed in him in any way.

“Believe.”

“Believe in what?”

“Love.”

“I love you,” he said. “I love Kimmie and Kathie and Katie.”

“You’ll get it right. In time,” she said, moving from one subject to another, as she tended to do of late. “I know you will.”

“Get what right?”

“Try not to miss me too much. And don’t worry. I’ll be fine.”

No, she wouldn’t. She’d be gone. He didn’t care what she believed, what she thought she’d seen. There was nothing else. She’d be nothing.

“One more thing,” she whispered, her lips barely moving, the words slurring together. “One more favor.”

“Anything,” he said.

“Left you a job to take care of. In my will.”

“Okay. I will. Promise.”

“You know? Doesn’t really hurt anymore,” she said, and for a moment it was as if someone had taken the weight of the world off her emaciated body, eased all the stress lines on her face and put some color back into her cheeks. “Doesn’t hurt at all.”

“Good.” He sure didn’t want her to hurt.

“Billy,” she said, the faintest of smiles on her face.

That was his father’s name.

It was the last word she said.

She died with a smile on her face and his dead father's name on her lips, Jax's hand in one of hers, and the other buried in the dog's fur.

Jax froze for a moment, staring at the quilt over her chest, willing it to rise and fall as she took more air into her lungs. But nothing happened. There was no more of the wheezing, labored sound of her struggling for one more breath, that hideous, hideous sound.

Romeo seemed to know what had happened. He looked at Jax, as if to say, Do something!

"I can't," Jax said. "I already did too much bringing her here, and she signed all the papers weeks ago."

No one was coming to try to make her breathe again or get her heart going. Her choice, and he'd accepted it. No one would do anything.

Romeo whimpered pitifully. He licked her face frantically for a moment, until Jax got up and pulled him off. Romeo growled and showed his teeth. Jax swore and said, "She's gone. Let her be."

He thought for a minute, the two of them might go at it, right there in his mother's room, and he wouldn't have minded that. He was up for a good brawl right now. But all the fight went out of the dog. It was like his whole face just fell. He curled back up next to Jax's mom, his snout laid over her chest, and started whimpering again. Jax sat back down in his chair and buried his face against her other shoulder, because he still needed to touch her, to not let go yet.

A nurse came in sometime later to check on her, halted in the doorway at the sight of him and the dog leaning over her.

"Go away," Jax said, glancing at her briefly, and then pressing his face against his mother's shoulder again.

"I...Is she gone?"

"Just go away," Jax yelled.

Another nurse came in twenty minutes later, asking if she could do anything, if he'd like her to call anyone.

"Just go away," Jax said again.

The girls would be mad that he hadn't called, but what was the point? It was the middle of the night, and none of them had slept in days, and he'd screwed up and brought his mother here and sent the girls home.

"It wasn't supposed to happen like this," he said to no one but the dog.

Romeo whined, as if he agreed for once with something Jax said.

"And it wasn't supposed to happen yet," he yelled.

Romeo frowned, then laid his head back down on Jax's mother's chest, the two of them in complete accord. Neither one of them wanted to do anything but sit here and hang on to her and pretend she wasn't gone.

Chapter Two

Jax and the dog stayed until morning came and with it Jax's three sisters. Katie, the oldest, was twenty-seven, part owner of her own mortgage-finance company and a junior real estate mogul. She wore crisp, no-nonsense power suits with matching pumps, never a hair out of place, and she arrived issuing orders as usual.

"Jax! You haven't taken the dog home yet? It's seven! The place is full of people. The doctors will be making rounds soon—"

"Katie?" He stood up slowly, stiffly, every muscle in his body aching, and went to her, taking her by the arms.

"We promised we'd get him in and out without too many people seeing him—"

"Katie?" He looked her right in the eye. "It's over. She's gone."

"And they're about to serve breakfast. Romeo will want to know where his plate is, the beggar...."

Her voice finally trailed off. She looked to the bed, where the dog was still curled up next to their mother. Romeo whined and put his head down over her silent heart.

"But...we were going to take her home," Katie said.

"I know."

"She wanted to be home. We promised."

"I know."

Her expression shattered, mouth falling open, lips trembling, eyes blinking furiously at the tears overflowing, as she stepped back, away from Jax, and looked to the bed. He still hadn't let anyone do anything to her, hadn't been able to bear it.

Katie reached out and brushed her fingers over their mother's forehead. "She was supposed to be home."

As if their plans mattered in this. If they'd had any say in the matter, she wouldn't be dead.

"Look, I offered to take her last night," Jax said. "She said it was fine to stay, said the medication was better here, and she didn't hurt as much. She was ready to go, Katie."

"But we were all supposed to be here with her." She sobbed once more.

Order was very, very important to Katie. If she broke things down into a checklist, she could handle anything, and their mother hadn't died the way she was supposed to. This was a completely typical Katie response. Jax answered all her questions, accepted the blame for sending her and their other two sisters home to rest, for not calling immediately when their mother died, everything.

And when she started to cry harder, he held on to her until she got herself under control.

The middle one, Kathie, was the quietest of the three, and shy in the sweetest of ways. She had the same pretty, blond hair they all did, tended to wear hers long and loose. Her eyes were blue, and she dressed like a Gypsy, except without the bold colors. She liked pastels, long, gauzy skirts that blew in the wind like her hair and peasant tops. Everything about her was soft, including her heart.

She stepped into the room, realized what had happened and got very, very still, as if moving might break some spell, as if by freezing in place she could stop time and never move forward into the time when she had to accept what had happened and go on.

She sat by their mother's bedside and fussed over the dog, who snuggled against her and buried his nose in her sweater, as if he was hurting as much as the rest of them, and Jax stood behind her with his hands on her shoulders, wishing he could do more.

The last to arrive was Kim, the baby, who bounced into the room with the same enthusiasm she did everything else, her arms full this morning with flowers and the newspaper and another book of crossword puzzles, which their mother loved but couldn't concentrate enough to do anymore. Kim did them for her, talking through all the answers with her.

She was a tomboy, wore her hair in one, long braid, wore a comfortable pair of jeans and plain, cotton T-shirt. As a girl, she'd tagged along after Jax, trying to be as rough and tough as him or any of his friends, getting muddy, dusty and wet, with scraped knees, bruised shins and the occasional busted lip. A hockey puck had been the culprit, last time he remembered her bruised and bleeding.

"Kimmie, I'm so sorry," he said, when she slowed down enough to realize what had happened.

She fought not to cry then, to be a true tough-girl. But there was nothing of the tough-girl that morning. Her entire body racked with sobs, and she went from Jax's arms to Katie's to Kathie's and then back to Jax's.

They were a mess. No two ways about it. All of them heartbroken and lost in a way Jax didn't think grown-ups could ever be. He was thirty, after all. Surely a man knew who he was by then and knew that he could take care of himself and his family. Surely he didn't panic at the loss of his mommy when he was thirty.

But she'd been one amazing woman. A rock. Funny, happy, even bubbly at times. Open, honest, trusting as could be. Generous, hardworking, a woman who would have done anything for them.

Life had been hard for her. She'd worked so hard once his father was gone, and she hadn't had any particular job skills to fall back on, except a mountain of pride. Tons of people had offered to help, but she hadn't taken a dime from anyone.

It had been him and her, trying to hold things together. Mostly her, he feared, although he'd done what he could.

And now it was just him.

Him and the girls.

They were still crying. One of them would stop and then two, and he'd think the worst was over. Then in trying to get the last one to stop, the other two would start. Or the dog would, and then everyone would get going again.

"Look, we've got to go," he said, feeling like someone had kicked out every tooth he had, broken every bone in his face, in his entire body. He felt like a lump of putty about to fall, and he couldn't look at the bed anymore, at the woman he loved so much who was in it. "We have to let the hospital do whatever it has to do, and we have all that stuff on Katie's list to take care of. Staying here...it's not going to change anything."

"But I'm not ready to let her go," Kim cried.

"She's already gone, Kimmie."

They hadn't been able to hang on to her tightly enough to keep her. There was something so wrong in that idea. If you loved someone, and you hung on as tightly as you could, you should be able to keep her safely by your side.

Jax felt a stinging in his eyes, felt raw and weak and uneasy in a way he never had before. He felt alone, even with his sisters clustered around him, wasn't feeling all that confident in his abilities to even take care of himself, much less them, something he'd never doubted before.

He drew in a deep breath, then another, reminded himself that he never, ever cried, and that it sure wouldn't do any good even if he did. Look how much his sisters had cried. They didn't feel any better.

"We have to go," he said again, thinking that surely they did. There had to be a funeral. They had to put their mother in the ground.

His stomach churned.

The girls started talking about what they had to do, what their mother would want done, what she'd wear. He bit back a curse, along with something like, Who cared what she'd be buried in? They debated it with enough honest interest and concern that he knew what he'd hear if he said anything.

A woman thing.

He'd grown up outnumbered and badly misunderstood.

Fine. He let them debate her wardrobe, right down to earrings and shoes. Shoes? It wasn't like she'd be walking anywhere.

They were almost together again. They had a plan, Katie's, and her lists. Everyone had been assigned jobs to do.

His sisters fussed over their mother one more time. Touching her cheek, holding her cold, cold hand, straightening the quilt covering her body. Kim put her head over their mother's chest, as if she had to make absolutely sure her heart had stopped beating.

They gave him forlorn looks like the ones they'd worn when stupid boys had broken their hearts over the years, or when they'd had a falling-out with each other and vowed never to speak to each other again. Like the ones they'd had when their mother was first diagnosed with cancer. When she heard that it had come back. When she and the doctors agreed it was pointless to fight anymore. When their father's friend and partner had come to tell them their dad was gone.

They'd huddled around Jax then, little stair-step girls, all blond and blue-eyed and innocent. Kim had sucked her thumb. Kathie had taken to hiding in Jax's closet at night until she thought he was asleep and then creeping over to sleep on the floor by his bed. Katie started making lists.

So this was all familiar territory. Dreaded, but familiar.

He got the girls on their feet and by his side, and then there was just the dog. Jax was afraid he'd have a fight on his hands, but Romeo seemed to understand. He took his turn nuzzling her cheek and whining over her, and then jumped off the bed and stood quietly by Jax's side.

"Good dog," Kim said, stooping over to hug Romeo and then wrapping her arm around Jax's waist.

He took the dog's leash. Kathie leaned into his other side, her head on his shoulder, and Katie linked her arm with Kathie's.

"Okay. Ready?" he asked.

"We should say a little prayer," Kathie said. "Mom would like that."

"Okay," Jax said.

They could say anything they wanted, as long as they left. He bowed his head with the rest of them, and Kim did it. She started off by thanking God for their mother and ended with something that sounded vaguely like a threat, a take-good-care-of-her-or-else thing.

Or else what?

Katie raised her head and gave her sister an odd look.

"Well, He'd better take care of her," Kim said. "All those prayers she said. All the ones people said on her behalf. And she's still gone."

"It's okay," Jax said. None of them were particularly religious, except their mother, and he understood exactly how Kim felt. "Now we go."

They pivoted around as best they could without letting go of each other and trooped out.

Two of their mother's friends were outside the door, one crying. One of her neighbors was standing there holding fresh flowers. At the nurses' station, three women stood staring, sad, understanding expressions on their faces. Jax looked down at the floor, and then looked away. He just didn't have anything left, not for anyone.

The girls pulled themselves together and thanked their mother's friends for all their kindness during her illness and over the years. They thanked each and every one of the nurses on the floor, showing all the graciousness and kindness their mother had taught them. She would have been proud. His sisters could be a little flaky, each in her own way, but they were strong, smart women, good down to the core.

Their mother had loved them well.

She'd loved Jax, too. Completely. Powerfully. Joyously.

But she'd been disappointed in him, too. He knew that.

She'd said it, right there at the end, in that jumble of thoughts where she'd believed she'd seen his father again.

And it wasn't as if it was a surprise that she was disappointed in him. She thought he was playing at life, wasting it, letting it slip through his fingers. That he had no faith. Not just in the God she trusted so completely, but in other people as well.

In life and in love.

Losing his father hadn't weakened her faith in either of those things. Nothing had.

So where had it come from? he wondered. The trust? The faith? The hope?

He trusted that life would hurt him sooner or later, that people would disappoint him and disappear, had faith that there was nothing more to this world than what he could see with his eyes and touch with his hands.

And yet he wanted to believe what she'd said, that she'd watch over him, even now. That his father had been waiting for her, even after all this time, and God had come for her, taken her by the hand and led her... Wherever it was that people went. That nothing hurt her anymore, and she'd never even be sad or miss him and his sisters or her silly dog.

That's what he wanted to believe.

But he didn't.

So once more, he gathered up his poor, brokenhearted sisters and the dog. Arm in arm, they walked out of the place where they'd lost their mother.

Gwendolyn Moss dragged herself out into the midday sunshine in the town park across from Petal Pushers, the bright, cheery flower shop where she worked.

On the north end of the park, on a bench beneath a huge, sprawling oak and a cluster of magnolias, she sat and ate the sandwich she'd packed that morning, all the while trying her best not to be afraid.

It was high noon, sunshine raining down through the branches of the trees, dappling the ground with spots of light among the lazy shadows. The temperature was a perfect, balmy seventy degrees with an ever-so-slight breeze, and the park was smack-dab in the middle of a small picturesque, Southern town.

No one was going to grab her and drag her off into a dark corner because there were no dark corners here. Gwen had made sure of that. Otherwise, she wouldn't have come outside.

She sat off on the fringes of the park, keeping to herself but careful not to stray too far from the crowds, even in broad daylight.

There was a playground a little off to the right, where mothers gathered to gossip while their children pushed each other on the swings and climbed into the tree fort, athletic fields to the south where adults and children alike played and friends clustered around to watch them.

Magnolia Falls Park was shaped like a crescent moon that ran from the north to the south end of town, all along the west side, following the path of and surrounding Falls Creek. For the most part, the creek was not much more than a wide, shallow stream of water rushing over a slick, smooth, sloping rock face. But to the south, still surrounded by parkland, the creek bed dropped all of thirty feet over a quarter of a mile, into a wide, rounded pool of water surrounded by a dozen magnolia trees, forming Magnolia Falls, for which the park and the town was named.

It was especially pretty there, and Gwen liked the soothing noise the rushing water made, but for now she preferred her little corner on the fringes of the park. It was farther than she'd have come just a month or so ago. So this was progress of sorts.

There was sunshine on her face and her bare arms, heat when for so long she'd been so cold, light when for so long she'd hidden in darkness, air when at times she'd found it hard to even breathe.

As she munched on her sandwich, she eyed a bench closer to the playground. Maybe next week or next month, when the sun was even hotter and more pleasant, she'd lunch there and not be afraid.

Finishing her lunch, she crumpled up her napkin, put it in her little brown bag and tossed the whole thing into a nearby garbage can, then set off around the far western perimeter of the park, toward the flower shop where she'd worked for the past three months.

There were towering trees, oaks, pines, a willow here and there, in addition to the magnolias, walking paths, playing fields, a playground, an amphitheater and just about anything else anyone had been able to think of. The park hosted outdoor arts festivals, music festivals, kids' festivals, garden shows, town celebrations, all sorts of things. It seemed any excuse to fill the park with people was welcomed.

Gwen was going to attend one of those festivals one day. For now, she watched a baby in a stroller throw a fit and fling her rattle onto the sidewalk, then cry and pout when she didn't get the toy back after the mother picked it up.

Pretty, yellow tulips edged the sidewalk that must have just burst into bloom, and there were leaves in that brand-new green of spring slowly unfurling on the trees. Tiny baby squirrels chattered and scampered about. Birds were raising a ruckus in the trees.

Two kids squabbled loudly and vehemently over a ball, a disagreement that quickly led to shoving and parental intervention. Gwen actually grinned at that.

Fight back. Don't let anyone walk all over you like that.

The parents would be horrified. Her parents certainly would have been. She'd been raised never to lift her hand to anyone, never to raise a fuss. It certainly wasn't the reason for what had happened to her, but still, she had to wonder what would have happened if she'd screamed long and loud. If she'd struck out with her fists or her knee.

Not that it really mattered. She hadn't.

People said attackers could pick out someone born to be a victim just by the way she walked, that attitude alone could dissuade a criminal from going after one woman and targeting another one instead.

She didn't want to be a victim anymore.

Feeling bolder by the minute, Gwen, born a follower of all rules great and small, stepped off the sidewalk that skirted the park and trudged toward the creek, walked along its banks and then crossed it on one of the pretty, arching, stone-and-wood footbridges that crossed it at various points throughout the town.

Looking around, she saw there were power walkers, arms pumping energetically, making a trek around the fringes of the park, a vendor selling ice cream from a cart, little boys shrieking and trampling some of the new spring flowers as they played a wild game of chase. No victims there.

Walking on, she lifted her head high, threw her shoulders back and tried to strut confidently, not at all sure if she was succeeding or not. The motion felt awkward at best. She hoped no one was laughing or even paying her the least bit of attention.

Now that she looked about, she realized no one was.

In fact...How odd. It seemed nearly every eye was on something or someone else at the opposite end of the park. At least, every female eye. She turned, thinking something might be wrong, and that's when she saw them.

"Oh, my," Gwen said, stopping altogether and staring.

Runners, a man and a dog, both impossibly masculine, with dark blond hair, broad through the shoulder, narrow at the waist, and just so pretty it was impossible not to look. Sunlight caught in their hair and haloed around them. They were moving quickly, at a grueling pace that would have defeated her within a half mile. But they looked like they'd been at it forever.

The allover tan of the man, the leanness of his muscles and the rhythm in which he moved said he did this often. The look on his face said he was completely oblivious to the attention he was receiving.

Women were all but falling at his feet. If he stopped running long enough, surely they would.

The dog pranced. There was simply no other word. Nose stuck high in the air, as if he were king of all he surveyed, tail twitching proudly. He wasn't even looking where he was going. He was too busy soaking up the attention of all the women.

"It has been too long since that man graced us with his presence," a woman Gwen passed said to her friend. "He certainly brightens up the atmosphere in the park, doesn't he?"

"Oh, yeah. We could sell tickets for his run," her friend said. "People would pay just to watch."

Gwen's mouth started to twitch into something that might have been an honest-to-goodness smile. What a pair. The gorgeous man and the equally gorgeous dog. No reason a woman couldn't appreciate the sight. There were all sorts of nice things to look at here in the park in the soft, spring sunshine today.

She decided to circle back to the ice-cream vendor and have a scoop of chocolate. Why not? She could use it.

She was still savoring the last bite when she came across the man and the dog again at the edge of the park. He was swiping at the sweat on his forehead, still breathing hard, power positively radiating from him.

Gwen had never been that comfortable with men like him. Very pretty men. Confident ones. Powerful ones. He was probably pushy, probably expected all sorts of things from a woman, just because he bought her a nice dinner. She wasn't that kind of girl.

Not that he'd ever pay attention to a mouse like Gwen.

At the moment, three little boys were clustered around the dog, who was breathing hard, tongue lolling out. He seemed to be grinning, if that were possible, in between showing his appreciation for their attention and lapping at a cup filled with water, provided by the man standing at his side.

"Come on," said the first kid, on his knees in the dirt beside the dog. "What's his name?"

"Killer," the man claimed with a straight face.

The dog looked at the man and gave a low growl, then whined sympathetically to the kid, as if to say he was completely misunderstood and unappreciated.

The kids giggled, and the next one took up the cause. "No it's not. Tell us his name."

"Butch," the man said, glancing for the first time at Gwen, who quickly looked away.

The dog whined once more, laid himself flat on the ground, his tail wagging enthusiastically, as if begging the kids to play with him.

"Is not," the biggest kid said.

"No, it's not. But you can just call her Sweetpea. She loves that."

The dog gave the man a look of pure disgust, and then turned puppy-dog eyes onto the boys, begging them to save him from such humiliating treatment.

Gwen couldn't help it. She grinned.

"Mister, I don't think your dog likes you very much," one of the boys said.

"She's just a little upset because she lost her pink bow on our run."

"Uh-uh," the littlest kid said. "She's a boy dog."

"Oh, I guess so. How about that. He just acts like a girl."

Gwen had a feeling the dog might just turn around and take a hunk out of the man who'd insulted him so, but instead, the dog caught sight of her and forgot the little boys completely.

He made a little purring sound. Beautiful, blue eyes gazed up at her with a kind of interest she seldom inspired in males, and yes, he could do something with his expression that looked distinctly like a smile.

He swished his bushy tail back and forth for a moment, and then walked over to her, nuzzled his snout against her shins for a moment, then dropped to the ground and rolled over onto his back, presenting her with his soft, furry belly for her to rub.

"That's it, boys," the man said. "That dog won't even remember you're alive when there's a woman nearby to impress."

The boys grumbled, tried to get the dog's attention again, but to no avail. The dog didn't so much as look at them. They finally gave up and walked off in a sulk, and the gorgeous man came closer.

"Romeo, believe it or not, not everyone falls in love with you at first sight," the man said, shaking his head, looking both mussed and disreputable.

Gwen tried very hard not to look at him anymore. The dog grinned some more at her, waiting, as if he definitely believed he was irresistible and was sure she would, too.

It wasn't so bad, being the focus of his admiration, Gwen decided.

She grinned back at the dog, thinking he probably made friends so much more easily than she did. Just walk up and grin at someone and fall onto his back in the grass, inviting her to pet him.

"What a sweet thing you are," she said, forgetting all about the dirt or the dampness of the grass and her favorite, mousy-colored skirt as she got down on her knees and rubbed a hand through the luxuriously soft fur of the dog's belly.

He whimpered. His tongue lolled out of his mouth, and then he started licking her knee, a wet, silly touch that nearly had her laughing out loud. Her entire day had brightened.

"Romeo, you are such a dog," the man said.

"Romeo?" Gwen said, daring a quick look up at the man whose hair sparkled like gold in the sun.

"Yes."

"That's really his name?"

The man nodded. "Believe me, he earns it every day."

She let her hand linger on the dog, thinking it had been a long time since'd she touched any living thing, surprised at how pleasurable something as simple as rubbing the dog's fur could be.

The detective who'd handled her case had wanted her to get a dog. For protection and for company. She'd never really considered it, but maybe that was a mistake. Maybe she should. If she could find one as sweet as this one.

"You're so pretty," she told him.

Romeo licked her knee one more time, and then gave the man a smug-looking smile, as if to say, So there.

And then Gwen started to worry about the dog. "You really do like him, don't you?" Gwen asked the man.

"I tolerate him. That's it."

"Oh." Gwen puzzled over that, then thought she'd figured out what was going on. "So, he's not your dog?"

"No," the man said, all the light, all the gold and sunshine, fading away in an instant.

What had she said? The dog was such a sore spot?

"But you know him?" Gwen tried. "I mean...he has a home? Because if he doesn't...He seems so sweet, and I was supposed to get a dog."

"Believe me, sweetheart, I'd love to give him to you, but I'm stuck with him for the moment."

"Oh."

So...maybe it was his wife's dog? His girlfriend's? His son or daughter's? A man like this wouldn't be all alone in the world.

"Come on, Romeo. Let's go home," he said, nodding tightly in her direction, and then turned around, leaving.

The dog was more polite, rolling to his feet and nuzzling his wet, cold nose against her hand before trotting off behind the man, who didn't give Gwen so much as a backward glance.

Chapter Three

Jax broke into a light jog, then a flat-out run, wanting to leave everything behind. How far would he have to go to do that?

He wore himself out before he got past the falls. Giving up, he collapsed onto his back in the soft, spring grass, close enough that the swish of the water sliding over the falls was just about the only sound he could hear.

Romeo caught up with him and gave a little, confused whine by Jax's right ear, and when Jax didn't answer, Romeo licked the side of his face.

"Get back." Jax shoved him, and stayed where he was, flat on the grass.

Romeo snarled at first, then whined pitifully.

"Give me a break, Romeo."

Gazing up into the branches of the tree, Jax recognized where he was. Beneath the oldest tree in the park. His mother had picnicked here as a girl. His father had fallen out of this tree and broken his arm in two places, and twelve years later, Billy Cassidy had proposed to Ellen Jackson, right under this tree. They'd sneaked off one night after she was supposed to be home safe in her bed, to come here. As his father told the story, he'd barely gotten the proposal out when Grandpa Jackson had come along looking for his little girl, and he hadn't been happy at all with their engagement. Billy Cassidy had a reputation with the ladies, after all, and Ellen had only been eighteen at the time, to Billy's twenty-two.

But nothing Grandpa Jackson said had swayed Jax's mother from her decision that Billy Cassidy was the man for her. Eventually her father had given in and walked her down the aisle of a little church two blocks away.

From everything Jax had ever seen or heard of their marriage, neither one of them had ever regretted it, until the day his father died.

Restless and angry and lost, Jax sat up and watched the water come over the falls and swirl and churn into the wide pool waiting below. No matter what, the water just kept moving, just the way the world insisted that it had to keep turning and changing.

He'd seen children playing and arguing this morning on his run, mothers pushing baby strollers, the team from the Elm Street firehouse playing a fierce game of softball against a bunch of city policemen, many of whom he knew.

He'd stared at them, wondering how things could go on in such a completely normal way, just like the water coming over the falls.

Didn't they know? His mother had died last night. She was gone. Everything had changed.

One minute, she'd been talking to him about the husband who'd proposed to her under this tree, and the next, she'd been gone.

How could someone be here one minute and just gone the next?

How did that work?

It seemed like too great a change to happen so imperceptibly.

Here and gone.

Gone.

Shouldn't the world stop for something like that? Shouldn't everyone take note of the fact that a wonderful woman like his mother was no longer a part of this earth? He fought the urge to go stop the softball game and tell them all what had happened. He'd stop cars in the street, shout the news from the rooftops.

And they'd all think he was crazy.

Glancing up, he saw that the sky was still blue. The sun was shining. Water was flowing. Cops were playing softball. Kids were arguing. Babies crying. The whole world was moving, and he was left standing still, still trying to figure out what had actually happened.

He still couldn't quite believe it.

She was gone.

Working at the flower shop, Gwen heard all the town news, both good and bad. That afternoon, she heard that the nice lady who lived around the corner from her had finally died following a long, hard battle with cancer.

Gwen hadn't actually met Ellen Cassidy, but Gwen's aunt considered her a good friend, and judging by the number of flowers and plants sent to Mrs. Cassidy from the shop where Gwen worked, so did many people in town.

As she drove herself home that night, Gwen saw that Mrs. Cassidy's house was overrun with visitors. Which meant people might like something to eat and drink, which meant Gwen had been right when she'd walked three doors down from the flower shop after work and purchased a quiche to take to Mrs. Cassidy's family.

The closest parking space she could find was nearly a block away. She'd probably have been closer parked in her own driveway. But this street was well lit, with lots of people coming and going. She felt safer here.

She walked briskly to the front door, stood up straight and tall, and rang the bell. When the door opened, she found herself face-to-face with the gorgeous man from the park.

"Hi," he said, looking somber yet still very pretty all in black, his blond hair slicked back and still kind of wet.

"Hi." Gwen's mouth was hanging open, as if she were incapable of even talking to such an attractive man. Funny, she hadn't had any trouble earlier in the park. Of course, they'd had the dog between them then. The man just looked at her, waiting, and finally she remembered why she'd come and held up the dish. "I brought a quiche."

"Thank you." He stepped back to give her room. "Come in, please."

"Oh, I don't need to do that. I didn't even know your... Mrs. Cassidy. Was she your mother?"

He nodded, looking like he had when she'd asked about the dog.

"I didn't really know her," Gwen said. "I just heard about her from so many people. I work at the flower shop on the edge of the park—"

"Joanie Graham's place?"

"Yes. So many people came by to send things to her. And my aunt spoke highly of her. She must have been a very special woman."

"She was," he said. "Please. Come in."

"All right. Just for a moment." She stepped across the threshold, saw the house was packed with people.

"This way." He closed the door and then fell into step beside her, guiding her through the crush of friends and neighbors with a polite hand at her back, down the hall.

She felt a little tremble shoot down her spine, a little spooked at his touch, a little... well, pleased was the only word that seemed to fit. Honestly, she wasn't sure which feeling was stronger. She wasn't scared of him. Not here in the middle of a house full of people. No one was going to hurt her here. But the thought of finding it pleasant to have him touch her was just as unsettling.

She'd thought for a while after the attack that she would be happy if no one ever touched her again, but her therapist had warned her that touch was something the human body craved, much in the same way it needed food to eat and air to breathe. Not necessarily a romantic touch, but any kind of touch. A hug. A hand in hers. A friendly shoulder to cry on. Anything.

No one touched her anymore.

It was one of the saddest realizations she'd had in months.

What in the world was she going to do about that?

Gwen glanced guiltily up at the good-looking man at her side. He would not be helping her with that particular problem.

She started babbling, as she tended to do when she was nervous.

“I saw the cars on my way home.... I live just around the block. My aunt was Charlotte, and when she moved to Florida a few months ago, she offered me the use of her house.” Aunt Charlotte had admitted to being in a terrible rut after her husband died and very, very lonely. Her two sons, their wives and children had settled in Florida four years ago, and she missed them terribly. Now that her husband was gone, there was nothing keeping her here. She’d leased a furnished condo, left all her things behind and gone to Florida to try out living there. If she liked it, she was moving permanently. “She spoke very highly of your mother,” Gwen said. “And...well, when I saw that you had a crowd of people dropping by, I thought someone might be hungry....”

Her voice trailed off at the end. They’d gotten to the kitchen where the counters were already overflowing with culinary offerings.

“I guess everyone else had the same idea,” she said, feeling both foolish and intrusive now.

“No, it’s good.” He took the quiche from her and found a place for it on the counter. “My sisters were in a panic this afternoon, claiming the house would be full and that we didn’t have anything to offer anyone. They were about to call the deli on the corner and beg them for an emergency delivery of some trays of food, when friends and neighbors started arriving, bringing things. People have been very kind.”

Gwen nodded, seeing clearly that no matter how kind anyone had been, this man was still sad and tired. And she’d been having entirely inappropriate thoughts about him at a time like this.

He’d probably been exhausted before he’d set out to run today, maybe intent on exhausting himself even more to forget for a little while what had happened.

“I’m sorry you lost her,” she said. “I know how hard that is.”

He nodded. “Thanks.... Uh. Sorry. I didn’t even ask your name.”

“Gwen,” she said. “Gwen Moss.”

He held out his hand, gripped hers for a moment and said, “Jackson Cassidy. Most people call me Jax.”

“If there’s anything I can do...” she said.

He nodded. “I guess we’ll need flowers. I forgot. I want her to have lots of them. Pretty, colorful ones. Not funeralish stuff. She liked big, bold colors.”

“Whatever you want,” Gwen promised, although she hated doing funeral arrangements.

“I’ll come in. Soon. My sisters and I have about a million things to do, and I think flowers ended up on my list of things to take care of.”

She wanted to tell him they’d make it as quick and painless as possible for him, but doubted anything about this would be painless. Life was so difficult at times.

She’d been completely unprepared for that. Somehow, she’d gotten the idea that life was supposed to be a breeze, that bad things would somehow simply not touch her.

Was that the way it was supposed to be? Or had she just gotten unlucky, been in the wrong place at the wrong time?

That’s what the detective had said to her. Wrong place, wrong time. While she’d sat shivering on a darkened curb near an even darker alley, on a cold, dreary night that still had the power to send her shooting out of bed screaming.

Gwen looked up to find Jack Cassidy staring down at her. She wondered exactly how his mother had died. In a warm, safe bed surrounded by the people who loved her and not feeling any pain? The kind of death a person saw coming from miles away, which gave her all the time she needed to say her goodbyes and tell the people she loved how important they were to her?

Gwen hoped Mrs. Cassidy went just like that, then wondered if it really mattered at all. If anything could lessen the pain of losing someone you loved. The woman was still gone, after all.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

Gwen nodded. “I just...It’s been a tough year. I should go.”

She turned to do just that, and then saw the dog. Romeo, if possible, looked even more solemn than Jackson Cassidy had. His head hung low as he moped into the kitchen and whined pitifully.

“Oh, you poor baby,” Gwen said.

He looked up at her with sad, puppy-dog eyes, and she bent down and fussed over him, taking his snout between her two hands and touching her nose to his wet one. She kissed his face, then released him and stood back up.

Romeo brushed up against her, leaning into her side, and she rubbed the soft fur on his equally soft head.

“He was your mother’s dog?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“I remember my aunt talking about what a gorgeous dog your mother had, but I hadn’t seen him since I came to the neighborhood.”

“My mother hadn’t been out much in the last few months, and Romeo didn’t want to leave her side.”

“Oh.” It made her even sadder for the dog. He was sitting at her feet, and she leaned down and hugged him. He gave a little whine and stuck out his bottom lip, as if to show the depths of his misery.

One of these sad, lost males was going to make her cry tonight if she didn’t watch out.

She stood up one more time, determined to go. “I’d be happy to help with the dog. Or with anything. Honestly. Just give me a call. I’m at—”

“I know the house,” he said. “I grew up here, and Mrs. Moss has been there ever since I can remember. I’ll come see you about the flowers tomorrow.... Wait. That’s Sunday, isn’t it? I guess Monday morning.”

“We can do them tomorrow afternoon, if you’re having visitation on Monday.”

“We will. I guess.” He frowned. “Sorry, it’s just—”

“I know. All a jumble.”

“I hate to ask someone to come in on a Sunday,” he began.

“We deal with this sort of thing all the time at the shop.” People just kept dying. She hadn’t expected to be in the middle of it, in a flower shop, although she supposed she would have known, if she’d just given it some thought. Flowers didn’t only mark happy times. “It’s no problem.”

Gwen would go to Sunday-morning services at church and to the shop afterward.

“Thanks,” Jax said.

She nodded. “I should go now. The front door is this way?”

“Yes, but your house is just three houses down, if you use the back alley.” His hand was back, resting in the small of her back. He must be used to leading women around, because he did it with a certain amount of grace and effortlessness she couldn’t help but admire.

He probably did everything that way. Some people were just born with an incredible sense of confidence.

“I think Romeo needs to go out, anyway,” he said. “We’ll walk you.”

“Oh, no.” She panicked a little, in spite of herself, trying to save herself by adding in a much friendlier tone, “You don’t have to do that.”

He stopped right there in the middle of the kitchen, his gaze narrowing on her face. She wondered exactly what he saw in her expression. For the most part, she thought she managed to keep the worst of it fairly well hidden. She’d just been surprised, and it was dark out and she really didn’t know him. She didn’t want to be in a dark alley with anyone, let alone a big, powerful man she really didn’t know.

“It’s all right,” he said, still watching her more closely than she would have liked. “You’re in good hands. I’m a cop and Romeo’s a K-9-school dropout. Between the two of us, I think we can handle any trouble that could possibly come along in the alley. Although, I have to tell you, I’ve been traveling it since I was five, and the only trouble I’ve ever met with there was skinned knees from bicycle wrecks and a bloody lip here and there, if we really crashed or another kid threw a punch at me.”

Gwen was afraid she was trapped. That she’d have to go with him or look foolish for not going. She stalled instead. “You...uh. You get into fights in the alley?”

He grinned. “Not since I was nine. But I think I could handle myself if someone happened to jump us tonight.”

Gwen could feel the blood draining from her face. It was as if her whole being sagged, all the strength going out of her, a paralyzing fear moving in, in its wake.

He saw it all, too. She could imagine exactly what she must look like to him as he watched her turn into a pathetically fearful creature, a grown woman afraid of the dark.

She thought she might actually have swayed on her feet. His hands shot out to steady her. “It’s all right.”

But it wasn’t, and maybe it never would be, and she really hated it when people saw that. How much she truly was not “all right.”

“I have to go,” she said in a shaky voice she despised, as well.

“Okay.”

“That way.” She pointed toward what she thought was the direction of the front door, then added, “By myself.”

“Okay,” he said quietly, using a tone she imagined he might use on a spooked child. “Did you drive?”

She nodded, not caring how foolish that seemed. She didn’t walk down dark streets at night.

“Can I watch from the front porch, until you get to your car?”

She nodded again, so very foolish. He was either afraid she’d fall apart before she even made it to her car or afraid she’d freak out if he followed her to the door, because she thought he meant to follow her out onto the street. And she might have. She fought not to cry. It would have been the final humiliation.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

“It’s all right. Whatever you need to do to feel safe, you do it.”

He made it not sound so foolish after all, and she was grateful enough for the understanding that it alone might make her cry.

Maybe it was one of those nights when tears were inevitable.

Just not here, she begged. Please, not here.

She put a hand in her pocket and came up with her keys. She knew to have them in her hand, her thumb on the panic button that had come along with the alarm system on the new car she’d bought just for that safety feature. And so she could be reasonably assured that she wouldn’t be breaking down anytime soon on any dark roads alone at night, and that if she did and someone tried to get close to her, the alarm would shriek and, hopefully, scare them away.

So many things she did differently these days.

She put her head down, forgetting all about not looking like a victim, and made it down the hall and past all those people in the living room without speaking to anyone. Jackson Cassidy followed her, keeping his distance so he wouldn’t scare her.

He opened the door for her and stood back to let her pass through alone. Romeo waited there by his side, looking concerned for her, as well.

“Sorry,” she said again.

“No problem,” he claimed. Maybe he was used to paranoid, frightened women from his job.

She made it down the stairs and up the sidewalk. Her car was halfway down the block, probably farther away than the walk in the alley would have been. But here she was on a brightly lit street and not alone with a man she really didn't know. She felt foolish but safer.

As he'd said, seeing so clearly, whatever she had to do to feel safe...

That was a problem she wasn't about to explain to him.

She wasn't sure if she'd ever feel safe again.

Jax watched her all the way, Romeo by his side. She sat in the car for a few minutes before turning on the lights and pulling onto the street.

"Let's go to the backyard," Jax told the dog.

He headed around the house and climbed the steps to the back porch. He could see old Mrs. Moss's house from there, waited and watched as the car turned into the driveway, as Gwen got out, opened the door and started flicking on lights in the house. Until she was inside, safe and sound.

Romeo stood beside him, watching every bit as intently.

"Wonder what the story is there," Jax said.

One thing was certain, it wasn't the normal reticence a woman would show at the idea of walking down a dark alley in a small town with a man she barely knew. It was fear, pure and simple, the kind that came not in imagining what bad things might happen, but in knowing, firsthand.

Someone, at some point, had attacked Gwen Moss.

"You know, Romeo. Some days, life is rotten."

Chapter Four

Standing safely in her own driveway, her car locked, house keys in her hand and ready, Gwen glanced back at Mrs. Cassidy's house. On the back porch, watching her, stood a tall, shadowy figure. She couldn't see his face, not at that distance and in the dark, but she was certain it was Jax.

Was he worried about her? Or simply wondering if she was capable of getting herself home without falling apart?

Not that it mattered in the least what Jackson Cassidy or any other man thought of her.

But she was caught up in the idea of him waiting and watching to see that she got safely inside, feeling for a moment like it wasn't all up to her. That if something happened on her way home, he would have helped her.

Gwen turned and unlocked the back door. Inside, she punched her code into the security system she'd had installed and then turned on lights. All of them. Gwen liked lights. Bright ones. Especially at night.

She clicked on the TV, which was usually set to one of the music channels because she didn't like a completely quiet house any more than she liked a dark one. It was too easy to hear the normal things that went bump in the night and wonder if they were actually normal or something she should be concerned about.

So she let the music drown out the little sounds.

She'd do anything she could to make it easier on herself, and she didn't care if that made her a coward or weak. She just didn't care.

She went into the kitchen, automatically checking to see that everything was in its place, just as she'd left it, reassured to see that it was. Then she made herself a plate with chicken salad and some apple slices, which she ate at the breakfast bar in the kitchen while glancing at a magazine.

She'd look at the pretty pictures of happy people and try to think about whether her skirts were the right length or whether lemon-colored or chartreuse shirts were going to be in this spring. Not that she cared in the least, but it did keep her mind occupied.

Sunday loomed, long and lonely, before her. Usually, she went to church in the morning, more out of habit than anything else. Sometimes she shook up her schedule by trying to sleep in, then going to Sunday-evening services. Either way, the day was long.

Maybe she should join one of the volunteer groups at church. There was one that built or repaired houses for the elderly. That might work. She'd be outside and surrounded by a lot of people. She could whack a nail with a hammer every now and then. That might feel good—to hit something.

Gwen had that urge from time to time, and it didn't shock her anymore, the way it had at first. It was simply how she felt, and it wasn't like she was going to actually hurt anyone. She'd be helping, pounding nails into boards in someone's house.

Maybe next week she'd find the name and number of the project leader and volunteer.

Gwen finished her dinner, eating no more than half of it, and quickly cleaned her plate and utensils and then faced her tidy, empty house.

She felt safe inside its walls most of the time.

Relatively safe. She might actually be getting better. Oh, she got impatient with herself and just plain mad at the whole world sometimes, but that's just the way life was. Things happened.

Bad things.

People got hurt. They got scared. They got mad. They ran away. They got lost.

Why was that? Gwen just didn't know.

She sat down on the sofa, curling up on one end, her head against the left arm, her feet tucked under her. Her eyes wandered around the house that still didn't feel like her own, and she happened to glance at a figurine on the mantel, one her aunt had left behind. It was an angel.

A woman in a beautiful, long, flowing gown with something that looked like wings. She had the kindest expression on her face.

Gwen was at something of a standoff with God ever since the attack—she didn't think she really believed anymore—but she liked having her angel on the mantel, liked to imagine a real angel sent by God watching over her. There was something motherly about the idea, and Gwen had been missing her mother since she moved here.

Her mother hadn't quite understood what had happened to Gwen. Gwen understood not wanting to believe awful things could just happen to people. But when that led to people thinking she was somehow responsible... That's when she stopped understanding and was just plain hurt.

Plus, there was that whole mad-at-God thing Gwen had going on, which her mother really disapproved of. The attack had somehow become a test of faith that Gwen had failed, at least in her mother's eyes.

Things had gone from bad to worse at home, and Gwen had just wanted to get away. So when her aunt had decided to move, Gwen had jumped at the chance to come to Magnolia Falls.

She curled up on her couch, her head on a pillow tucked into one end, all the lights still burning, the music still playing softly to cover all those pesky little night sounds, her little figurine seeming to watch over her in a way she found comforting beyond any kind of logic, and in that moment, the day didn't seem so horrible or overwhelming.

She needed someone to listen, to say that yes, sometimes life was really scary and so very difficult, and that people on Earth really didn't quite understand why; she needed someone to even be a little angry on her behalf.

As if what had happened to her had been so bad, it could make God mad? It hadn't been. Not in the grand scheme of things.

It had just shaken her to the core, left her feeling vulnerable and alone. It was like being dropped in a deep, dark hole and not knowing how to get out.

So she'd come here, to a place where no one really knew her, a place she'd visited a few times and always felt safe. To a place where the man who'd attacked her wouldn't be able to find her once he got out of prison. That had been important to her—that he wouldn't know where she was.

She'd told herself she'd rebuild her life here, that she'd get better.

Maybe she would.

In the meantime, she curled up almost in a ball and miserably poured out her troubles to an empty room and wondered if anyone was listening.

I'm so tired, Gwen said. Everything seems so hard, like such an effort. Sometimes, I don't know how I'll be able to go on, if things are always this hard. Help me. Please. Couldn't you just help me? Couldn't you just take all the pain away?

And when she was done, she cried a little bit, closed her eyes and imagined someone stroking her hair, telling her everything was going to be okay.

Jax woke disoriented, with the sun blazing into his eyes. He groaned and rolled over, to get away from the light, then realized he was on the sofa in his mother's living room.

Wincing at the pain in his head, he stared at the clock, and saw that it was six-thirty. Late for him.

He rolled up and onto his feet, shrugging out the kinks as he walked down the hall, had the bedroom door open and actually stared at the empty bed for at least fifteen seconds before he remembered his mother was gone.

It hit him once more, as if it were happening all over again. He'd counted on this day being a tiny bit easier, but it didn't seem to be working that way. He didn't know how to do this, how to say goodbye to the woman who'd taken care of him his entire life, how to be without her.

The bedsprings creaked ever so slightly, and his heart gave a lurch, thinking maybe it had all been some horrible dream. He rushed over to the bed and started digging through the covers.

And uncovered the dog.

“Romeo?” he yelled. “What are you doing?”

The dog whined and laid his head down on the pillow. Big, sad puppy eyes seemed to ask where Jax’s mother was, why she wasn’t in her bed where she belonged and when she’d be coming home.

“She’s not coming back,” Jax said. “She’s gone.”

How would he ever make this ridiculous creature understand, when Jax didn’t understand himself?

Romeo made a pitiful squeaking sound and buried his nose in the pillow, as if he might find Jax’s mother there.

Jax was getting ready to yell at the dog again, when he heard a sound behind him. His sisters, all three of them, standing in a row like the little stair-step girls he remembered, crowded into the doorway watching him with the dog.

They’d spent the night, not wanting to be alone any more than he had, and now they looked bleak, exhausted, angry, as surprised as he’d been to see that today might even be harder than the day before and probably wondering how they, too, would get through it.

There was nothing to say. The reality of the situation said it all.

Romeo started whining again, low, heartbroken sounds, something like Jax might have made himself, if he’d allowed himself the luxury.

He was getting ready to yell once more, but Kim got to Romeo first. She knelt by the side of the bed, fussing over the dog and hugging him and crying.

Fine.

She could comfort the canine, offer him something Jax denied himself. He looked back at his other two sisters, who gave him a look that said plainly, What else is there to do?

Katie finally offered to go make coffee. Kathie said she was getting dressed because they had so much to do. Jax walked out onto the back porch, just to get out of the house and all the misery that seemed to be contained inside it. He stood there and listened to the birds making a racket, a car being started down the block, a siren blaring in the distance.

Day One without his mother.

It had to get better, because if it didn’t, he wouldn’t be able to stand it.

Jax got elected to go to the funeral home, something that made cutting off his right arm sound not so bad. He shoved open the door and marched down the hall, determined to get it over with as quickly as possible. He didn’t care what the funeral cost, and he really didn’t care what the service was like.

Sorry, Mom, he whispered, as if she might hear.

Jax knew the director, John Williams, who also served as the county coroner. How in the world did he handle those two jobs day after day?

John met him at the door and tried to put him at ease with small talk, but Jax cut him off.

“I need to do this and get out of here,” he said, taking a seat in John’s office.

“Sure,” John said, opening up a file on his desk. “I understand. And I have some...well, relatively good news. Your mother wanted to spare you and the girls as much as possible, so she came to see me a few months back and took care of all the planning herself.”

“She did?” Jax asked.

“Yes.”

“Thank you, Mother,” he said aloud, sagging into the chair, thinking he might just slide right out of it if he wasn’t careful. Then found himself near tears thinking about her, able to think clearly enough and unselfishly enough to do this herself to make things easier for him and his sisters. “She tried to make the whole thing as easy on us as possible. I mean, there she was, dying, and still trying to take care of us.”

“I know. That’s the kind of woman she was.” He went over all the details of the service, then said, “That’s it, really. Unless there’s something else I can do?”

Bring her back to life? Jax thought.

Wasn’t going to happen.

Explain to him why it was that people had to die?

He doubted that was in the funeral-home instruction manual.

Tell him how people got through this?

That was an idea. This man faced death every day. He had to know so much more about it than Jax did.

Tell him what was left of his mother was nothing but flesh and bones. That it wasn’t really her. That she wasn’t here and she wasn’t dead? That she never would be?

That would help. But Jax didn’t think he believed that, either, although right now, he very much wanted to. He wanted something to hang on to, and it just didn’t feel as if there was anything.

“I wish there were more I could say.” John shook his head. “But the only real thing I’ve learned in this business is that life is precious. Every day is. A lot of people spend so much time worrying about silly, inconsequential things or chasing after things that, in the end, really don’t mean a thing.”

“The make-every-day-count stuff?” Jax asked.

“Yeah. Something like that. Your mother did that. She was a happy woman, walked in here with a smile on her face while she made all the arrangements. She brought two of her favorite blouses—a pink one and a yellow one—and asked me which one I thought she’d looked better in. She went with the pink because she thought it was the cheeriest color, nothing dark or gloomy or anything like that. And a pretty, matching scarf for her head. I guess she hated all the wigs she tried.”

“Yeah. She said they were all too hot and itchy.” She’d used the most brightly colored scarves she could find. They’d turned it into a joke, all of her friends and family trying to outdo each other in finding the loudest, funniest scarves they could for her, and she’d worn them all with a smile on her face, refusing to feel sorry for herself.

“That reminds me,” John said. “She wanted you to spread the word for her—no black at the funeral. Her request.”

“Okay.” He could do that and he even managed not to blurt out, Like that’s going to help?

He found tears welling up in his eyes once again. What a horrible day.

“I have to go,” he said abruptly, getting to his feet.

“Sure. Take this,” John said, handing him a piece of paper. “Everything’s written down. Call me if you have any questions. We’ll take good care of her, Jax.”

“I know. Thanks.”

He drove back to his mother’s house, but it was empty except for the dog, who looked up hopefully when the door opened, only to be severely disappointed when he realized it was only Jax.

Jax went to the refrigerator and found neat, precise notes from his sisters, all of whom had set off to take care of their assigned tasks, plus a note that Gwen Moss called, saying she’d be at the flower shop anytime after 1:00 p.m.

Flowers were the only thing left on his list, and it just so happened that the flower shop was on the edge of the park where he and Romeo ran.

Jax changed into a pair of running shorts and shoes and a ratty T-shirt, and ran until his legs absolutely burned and even Romeo looked exhausted. He stopped, dripping with sweat and dying for about a gallon of water, near the edge of the park not far from the flower shop, frowning. He hadn’t planned to run quite that far or to be this much of a mess when he got done. Did he have to go home to shower and change, or would Gwen take pity on him and let him into the shop this way? He thought she probably would.

“All right, Romeo. Time to turn on the charm, and we can probably get in the door. What do you say?”

Romeo had plopped down beside him, sprawled on the grass, panting heavily. He gave Jax a look that said, *You expect me to move? Now?*

“She’s a nice lady. Look sad and she’ll fuss over you, like she did yesterday.”

He took off toward the shop, urging the dog to follow. The flower shop was in a row of old, brick buildings, renovated completely about fifteen years ago and now prime town real estate. A few doors down, the café had built a tree-shaded patio overlooking the park, and people had taken to eating outside on nice days. The sidewalks were wide and prettily landscaped, the shop owners often setting up merchandise outside, too, on nice days. People lingered here and chatted with neighbors and enjoyed the view. His mother had loved coming here, when she wasn’t sick.

Petal Pushers was an eccentric little place, its windows decorated with cartoon girls and boys playing with flowers, something new every couple of weeks drawn by its owner, Joanie Graham. Today, there was a tiny, stick-figured girl holding a bouquet behind her back, shyly ready to present it to a stick-figured boy on the windows.

Jax should own stock in the place, with as much money as he’d dropped at Joanie’s over the years, but he’d never come to pick out flowers for a funeral before.

He tried the door but found it was locked. When he knocked on the glass, Gwen appeared out of the back room and came to let him in.

“Romeo, too? Is that okay?” Jax asked, halting in the open doorway. “He won’t bother anything.”

“Of course.” They came inside, and Gwen knelt down to talk to Romeo. “Hi, baby. Did you have a good run?”

Romeo made sad-puppy eyes at her and touched his nose to her cheeks, first the left then the right. Gwen grinned at him.

“His version of a kiss.” Jax rolled his eyes. “My sister Kim taught him that trick.”

“What a sweet thing.” Gwen fussed over him some more, petting him and kissing his snout. “He looks tired. Is he thirsty, too?”

“Oh, yeah. We’re both kind of a mess. Sorry about that.”

Gwen glanced up at Jax. He’d wiped himself off as best he could.

“It’s okay. Come on into the back. We’ll see what we can do.”

Romeo trotted after her, taking only a moment to sniff at a few of the more outlandishly bright sprays of flowers in big, bright pink containers spread around the room. Joanie often mixed her bouquets right out here in front of her customers, letting them point and choose what they wanted and her filling in with whatever it took to finish an arrangement.

The shop was done in a wildly bright palette of colors—teal, lime green, pinks and purples. It positively shouted cheerfulness and made the woman who stood before him stand out all the more in contrast to the attitude and color of the shop.

He wondered why Joanie had hired her, because she definitely didn’t seem to fit in. Gwen was a study in browns. Brown hair, brown eyes, khaki slacks and a plain, loose, chocolate-colored T-shirt beneath a trademark green Petal Pushers apron with more stick kids and flowers on it, a very plain, tentative woman in a shop that was anything but plain or tentative. She stood in the back room looking serious and uneasy, as if Jax might do just about anything in the next few moments. He stopped where he was, a quick glance telling him they were alone among the refrigerated compartments and industrial-size sinks.

He didn’t want to spook her, as he had last night.

She found a bowl that was probably meant to hold flowers and filled it up with water and sat it on the floor, for the dog, then handed Jax a small, white towel and a bottle of water from one of the big refrigerators in back.

“Thanks,” he said.

“You’re welcome.”

“And thanks for meeting here today.”

“It’s no problem. I didn’t have anything to do and…” She frowned, looking away. “It’s fine.”

Scared and at loose ends, in a town where she probably didn’t know a lot of people, Jax figured. And kindhearted, just as he’d suspected.

He took a long drink of water and then started dabbing at the sweat on his arms and face with the towel.

She glanced at him, and then just as quickly looked away.

Shy, scared and lonely, he corrected himself. Not at all his type. “I’ll hurry,” he promised.

“Okay. I’ll be uh… I’ll be out front. Whenever you’re ready.”

Jax wiped off the worst of the sweat. When he came back to the front of the shop, with Romeo trotting after him, Gwen had her head stuck in a cooler full of flowers by the front window.

“Gwen, is it okay for me to be here with you?” He hesitated five feet away once again. “Last night… I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

She whirled around to face him. He saw heat blooming in her cheeks. She closed her eyes for a moment, then managed to give him the barest of smiles. “It’s all right. And it’s not you. Not your fault.”

Yeah, but it was some man’s.

“So…” She put a determined smile on her sad face. “Did your mother have a favorite flower? Do you have any idea what she would have wanted?”

Which meant she didn’t want to talk about this with him, which was fine too. Her right. He was just curious, thinking there might be something he could do to help. But he’d leave that for another day.

Not one when he was planning his mother’s funeral.

“She liked anything bright and cheery,” he said, frowning at the flower case, full to overflowing. “You know, I just thought of something. She made her own funeral arrangements, and she might have specified something in her instructions. Which I just left on the refrigerator at home.” He frowned yet again. “Sorry.”

“It’s all right. I know how difficult this is. I mean, I don’t really know. My mother’s… She’s fine. But we do a lot of flowers for funerals, so I’ve seen a lot of people trying to handle this and… I understand. You’re welcome to use the phone by the cash register, if you think anyone’s home.”

“Sure. I’ll try that.” He found the phone, made the call. Kim was there, and he frowned as she read the arrangements his mother had made.

“Couldn’t find it?” Gwen asked once he hung up.

“No. We did. She didn’t want any flowers. She said people had already spent a fortune on flowers for her, while she was sick—”

“They had. She had a lot of people who cared about her.”

“Yeah. And she was really into her cancer support group, said the group needed money for their programs a lot more than she needed more flowers, so she asked everyone to make a donation instead.”

“Lots of people make requests like that. If you’ll leave a name and address for the support group, we’ll keep it here, in case people call to order flowers.”

“Okay. Thanks.” He rubbed his hands against his forehead, which absolutely ached, and then remembered. “I’m sorry. I took up your Sunday afternoon for nothing.”

“No,” she said. “It’s fine. I didn’t have anything planned, and honestly, it’s… Well, sometimes the days are so long, you know?”

“Oh, yeah. I know. Cancer time, we called it, like the regular rules of time didn’t even apply.” Days could creep along so that every minute was agony.

“You miss her terribly, don’t you?”

He nodded. “And it’s selfish of me, that I’d wish one more day like that on her, but...I guess everybody thinks they’re going to have time to say everything they wanted to say, and now I wonder if anyone ever gets enough time to say it all or to do everything they always thought they’d do.”

Jax looked up self-consciously, realizing he’d said a lot more than he intended. Judging from the look on Gwen’s face, he’d either said way too much or something terribly wrong.

“I’m sorry. Did you lose someone recently?”

“No.” She hesitated. “Not really. I just...I almost lost myself.”

Chapter Five

She said it with a sad, apologetic smile, as if that wouldn't really count, losing herself. And he wondered if she meant it literally—if she'd nearly died—or if she was talking figuratively.

How out of line would he be to ask that question? Not that they seemed to be observing any of the boundaries of what ordinarily constituted polite conversation. He supposed having someone die did that to people.

“Gwen, just so you know, I'm going to be staying at my mother's for a while. The lease on my apartment was up two months ago, and she really didn't need to be alone then, so I moved back in. I haven't even started to think about finding my own place again. So if you need someone to talk to or if anything happens, anytime at all, just give me a call or come knock on the door. Or you can always call the police department and ask for me. I'm off this week and maybe next week, but I'll be back there soon.”

“Thank you,” she said. “It's good to know there's someone I can call. Especially someone around the corner.”

“Anything I should know about this situation?” he tried. “I mean, if I were keeping an eye on the place, watching out for trouble, it would help to know what to look for.”

“You don't have to do that,” she offered.

“Sure I do. It's my job.”

“Oh. Okay. It's...It's a man...” She turned pale and hugged her arms around her own waist. “But then, you probably guessed that much.”

Jax nodded. “What does the guy look like?”

“White. Five-ten, a hundred and eighty pounds, short brown hair, brown eyes, nineteen years old. I could get you a picture.”

“Okay.” Sounded like she'd given out that description more than once. “Is this guy on the loose or locked up?”

“Locked up. In Virginia.”

“Good. Is he going to stay that way?”

She looked truly frightened then. Her eyes got so big, and she looked like he'd just knocked the breath out of her. “He's supposed to.”

“I mean, has he been convicted and sentenced already?”

She nodded.

“Okay. No reason to think he wouldn't stay locked up. I know that's easy for me to say, when I'm not the one he hurt or whatever it was that he did to you.” Jax really didn't want to know exactly what the guy had done. “He'll stay there, Gwen. Trust that. And I'll keep an eye out for you.”

“Thank you,” she said.

Romeo came up to her and nudged her hand until it was resting against his head. He looked up at her with something that bore a remarkable resemblance to a smile and made silly dog noises at her that Romeo probably thought were both soothing and charming, and she just ate it up.

His mother swore Jax could do the same thing in a heartbeat with a skittish female crime victim and that his father could, too. Jax was highly skeptical of that notion, and offended, too. He didn't flirt with women who'd just been traumatized by crime. That would be crass, and he tried never to be that. And he wasn't nearly as shameless as Romeo.

Gwen rubbed the dog's ears and hugged him to her side for a moment. Romeo gave her his poor-misunderstood-hound-dog look. He got a lot of affection out of that expression, too.

Shameless. The dog was absolutely shameless.

And women were never skittish around Romeo.

Not that Jax was jealous of a dog.

“Give it a break, Romeo,” he said finally.

Romeo made a face at him, then turned back to Gwen and most likely laid his poor-misunderstood-hound-dog look on her again.

“He really is the sweetest thing,” Gwen said.

“Oh, yeah. He’s a prince. He’ll help watch your house, too.”

“Thank you, sweet boy,” she said, fussing over him some more.

“I’ll get you the name and address of my mother’s cancer support group. And you bring me the photograph, Gwen.”

“I will.”

“Thanks for today.”

“You’re welcome.”

He took a long, slow breath and escaped, one more thing taken care of.

Fighting off an odd, restless energy, Gwen watched Jax and the dog leave. Hearing him talk about how he wished so much for just one more day with his mother made Gwen think she’d squandered the past year, like a woman who had all the time in the world to pull her life back together. Or a woman waiting for things to magically get better on their own.

How often did that happen?

Impatient with herself and her fears, she locked up the shop, marched off through the park, across Falls Creek and to her aunt’s house, suddenly impatient with everything.

It was an absolutely beautiful spring day, with plenty of sunshine and a perfect temperature, birds chirping, flowers blooming, the whole world seeming welcoming. And she was going to lock herself away inside her aunt’s dreary house again? Surely not.

Although her aunt had assured Gwen that she was free to make any changes she liked, Gwen hadn’t done anything, and the house was truly dark and dreary. No wonder Aunt Charlotte had wanted to get away.

In the meantime, she was happy to have Gwen here, so her house wouldn’t be empty.

That was how Gwen had come to run away to Magnolia Falls.

It had seemed like a smart move, an easy move, a furnished house just waiting for her, in a little town where she’d always felt safe, a chance to start over. Except she hadn’t started over. She hadn’t really done anything.

What if things weren’t going to get better unless she did something to make them better? What if she couldn’t afford to wallow in her own misery anymore?

Gwen went to the picture window at the back of the living room and pulled open the curtains she’d always left shut tight to keep anyone from seeing inside. Afternoon sunshine poured in, and bits of dust flew off the curtains and a nearby table, floating freely on a ray of light.

She went and found a feather duster and got rid of all the dust she could find in every room in the house. Then she pulled open all the curtains and shades, then the windows themselves. The spring breeze was strong and felt as if it was capable of stirring up all sorts of things, which surely wouldn’t be a bad thing.

She pulled open the big, solid wooden back door, leaving only the screen door, just to see if she could stand having nothing but a thin wire mesh between her and the outside world.

Her aunt’s house and every one else’s on the block backed up to the alley, including Jax’s mother’s. So she had at least eight little old ladies that she knew of and one really cute cop who could see her backyard and back door. It wasn’t exactly a prime spot for crime, and this did happen to be a bright, sunny, spring day.

Surely she could risk airing out the house.

The light changed the house so much, made it feel so much more alive. There were blinds hung at most of the windows, she saw now that she’d pulled the curtains aside, which meant she could put

up pretty, light-colored sheers instead of the curtains and just close the blinds at night. That sounded like a good change and certainly not a dangerous one.

She could pack up some of her aunt's things and unpack some of her own, but that could wait for another day. She wanted to be in the sunshine today.

Gwen ended up pulling weeds in her mess of a yard. She pulled until her hands ached, uncovering what must have once been a well-planned yard, with neat, tidy bushes and a multitude of flowers. Some of them had survived being smothered, and she decided she wanted more. Some color here and there. Something bright and decidedly cheery. A quick trip to the market down the street, and she had three flats of bedding plants, all of which she managed to install before dinnertime.

By then, she was pleasantly tired, even a little achy, but it felt good. The house looked so much better.

She'd brought some daffodils and crocuses inside with her. They were in a pretty, green vase in the kitchen. She liked them so much, she went out and picked a few more and set them on the mantel next to her angel.

Maybe she'd stumbled upon an answer to feeling better. Maybe she just had to plow ahead, back into life, stay as busy as possible. The yard could certainly use the work.

Some of the ladies on this street had beautiful gardens and so many flowers were in bloom now. Which made her think of Jax when he'd told her his mother didn't want any flowers at her funeral. It seemed to make him so sad, and Gwen really didn't want him to be. There were too many sad people in the world already, and he should not be one of them.

Then she had an idea, one little thing she could do to help. He'd made her feel better today, and she wanted to return the favor.

The first thing Jax and his sisters noticed when they walked into the visitation room was the huge spray of flowers draped across their mother's casket. A bright, cheery, full-of-life bouquet of colors.

Jax was glad someone had ignored her wishes.

Sorry, Mother, he said to himself.

He'd developed a habit of talking to her in his head, and why shouldn't he? He'd talked to her nearly every day of his life, and he feared it was going to be a hard habit to break. So he'd just keep doing it.

"She said no flowers!" Katie hovered in the doorway with the other two. None of them had wanted to walk into this room.

"But they're so lively," said Kim, who was hanging on to Jax's arm, Kathie on his other one.

"It doesn't matter. She said no flowers," said Katie, who'd probably never broken a rule in her life.

"Let's see who dared flout the no-flower rule." Jax disentangled himself from his sisters and went just far enough into the room to grab the small card tucked into the arrangement. He pulled it out and read, Hope you don't mind. They came from the gardens of her neighbors, who were very happy to give them up for her. Gwen.

Jax actually grinned.

How 'bout that, Mom? Nice, huh? He'd wanted her to have them. He didn't care what she'd asked everyone to do. They hadn't cost anything, and they'd distracted him in that first awful moment when he'd had to walk into the visitation room, something he'd been dreading all day.

Thank you, Gwen.

"Well?" Katie demanded, from her spot in the doorway.

"It's all right." Jax went back to where he'd left his sisters. "They're from Gwen."

"Who's Gwen?"

"One of Mom's neighbors," Jax said. "Mrs. Moss's niece. She moved in a few months ago, when Mrs. Moss left for Florida. She works at Joanie Graham's flower shop."

“The woman who came by the house with a quiche the day Mom died?” Katie frowned. “Do you know this woman?”

“Not really. I just met her that night. Well, no...Romeo and I met her earlier that day. We went running, and she was having lunch in the park.”

“You picked up a woman the day Mom died?” Katie asked.

“No,” he insisted. “It wasn’t like that.”

“Honestly, Jax. What is wrong with you?”

“I didn’t pick her up. I didn’t do anything with her. She’s a nice woman.”

“Oh.”

“What does that mean?” Jax asked.

“That you’re not interested? That she’s not your type? A nice woman?”

“Hey, that was mean,” Jax said. “And I never said I wasn’t interested because she’s nice. I’ve dated lots of nice women. I just mean, she’s a nice person. You’d like her if you got to know her.”

Katie looked chagrined, and then she looked like she might cry.

“Whoa,” he said. “Sorry. Bad day.”

“I know. I’m sorry. I just thought...”

“That I’d hit on somebody at my own mother’s funeral?” he asked.

“Maybe.”

Okay. If he was honest with himself, he’d admit that he might. It would beat crying in front of half the town or feeling so lousy he wished he could die, too, which seemed like his main options at the moment.

“I just don’t want to walk into that room,” Katie said. “That’s all.”

“That’s no reason to pick on Jax,” Kim said, leaning in closer to his side and taking his arm once again.

“I know,” Katie admitted.

“Okay,” he said. “If we needed to, we could critique my relationships with women, all the way from grade school to the present, if we really needed to. That would take some time.”

“All day,” Kim said.

“All week,” Kathie claimed.

“No,” Katie said. “At least a month.”

Jax glared at them, more than happy for a good sibling brawl to take his mind off everything else.

“I just don’t want to do this,” Kathie said, turning her face into his shoulder. She was the most tenderhearted one of them all. And one least likely to give him a hard time about anything.

He wrapped his arm around her and pulled her close. “I know.”

“And I feel like such a baby.”

“Yeah,” he teased. “Almost twenty-four, and all grown up. You and Kim probably think you know everything.”

“I don’t think I know anything anymore,” Kim cried.

“Me neither,” Kathie said, snuggling closer to him.

Katie just stood there, stubbornly on her own and fighting back tears, looking worriedly at him and her sisters.

We’ll figure this out, all of us together, won’t we? her look said.

He nodded and hoped he wouldn’t make a liar of himself one day soon.

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