

A close-up photograph of a man with short brown hair kissing a woman with long, wavy blonde hair on the cheek. The woman is smiling and looking down. The background is bright and out of focus.

HIS BEST
FRIEND'S WIFE

GINA WILKINS

The Cherish logo features a large, stylized white ampersand on a pink background. A white rose is positioned to the right of the ampersand's lower loop. The word "Cherish" is written in a white, cursive font at the bottom left of the ampersand.

Cherish

GINA WILKINS

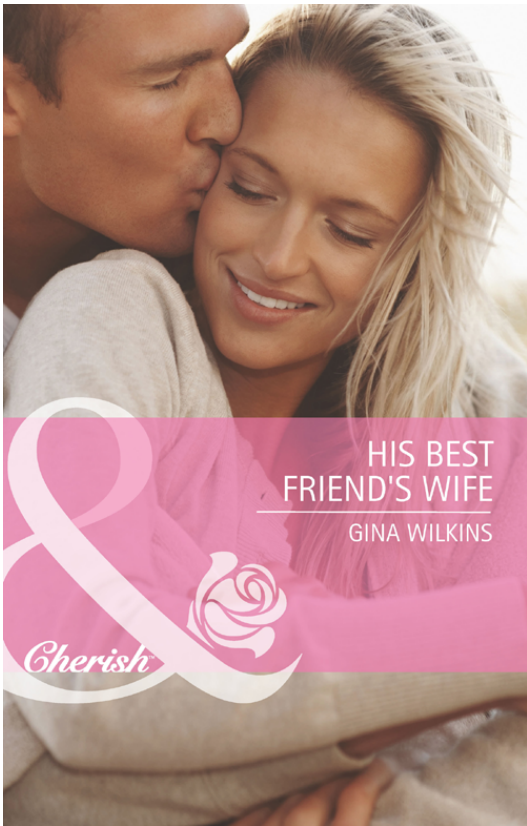
His Best Friend's Wife

Аннотация

THE OTHER MAN IN HER LIFE... He was her late husband's best friend, the man she'd been warned to avoid – the man she'd always found irresistible. Now he was back, unavoidable and attractive as ever. Renae Sanchez, after years of grieving what was not to be, had finally put her life back together again. She had her adorable little twins, her job, her friends. It was enough – it had to be. And then Evan Daugherty walked into her office and into her life once more... making her believe that, when it came to love, once in a lifetime might strike twice...

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Cherish

She moved to pass him, but he didn't immediately step out of the way, bringing them even closer together.

His gaze held hers when he reached up unexpectedly to brush the ends of her angled bob, his fingertips just brushing her cheek.

“Your hair is different,” he murmured. “Shorter and darker.”

Self-conscious, she shrugged. “I stopped bleaching it. And it’s easier to wear it shorter with my busy schedule now.”

“It looks good.”

Uncertain how to take the compliment, she merely said, “Thank you.”

He continued to search her face, as if noting every slight difference. “More than just your hair has changed.”

“That’s hardly surprising,” she answered with forced lightness. “I was just a kid when we met, now I’m a thirty-year-old mother of school-age twins. Of course I’ve changed.”

“You were a pretty girl,” he replied. “You’re a beautiful woman.”

Her eyes closed for just a moment, her cheeks going warm. His simple statement had rocked her to her toes.

Dear Reader,

Friends who become lovers has always been one of my favorite romance themes—mostly because I think friendship is an important basis for any lasting relationship. My husband, John, and I have been best friends and partners for more than thirty years, and that foundation has sustained us through both the good times and the inevitable challenges life has thrown our way.

In *His Best Friend’s Wife*, I added a few extra complications. The tangled emotions Evan and Renae have about her late husband—his best friend—her six-year-old twins, and her

very present, very meddling and very antagonistic-toward-Evan mother-in-law, Lucy. Not only does Evan have to woo Renae, he has to somehow convince Lucy to give him a chance in the tightly knit family unit they've formed. The odds are stacked against him, but he believes it's worth the effort, if he can only persuade Renae ...

I hope you enjoy this story I had so much pleasure writing for you. Visit me at my blog site, ginawilkins.com, or my Facebook page for news about upcoming Mills & Boon[®] releases!

Gina Wilkins

About the Author

GINA WILKINS is a bestselling and award-winning author who has written more than seventy novels for Mills & Boon. She credits her successful career in romance to her long, happy marriage and her three “extraordinary” children.

A lifelong resident of central Arkansas, Ms Wilkins sold her first book to Mills & Boon in 1987 and has been writing full-time since. She has appeared on the Waldenbooks, B. Dalton and *USA TODAY* bestseller lists. She is a three-time recipient of a Maggie Award for Excellence, sponsored by Georgia Romance Writers, and has won several awards from the reviewers of *RT Book Reviews*.

**His Best
Friend's Wife
Gina Wilkins**



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For my husband and best friend, John

Chapter One

“I have always been delighted at the prospect of a new day, a fresh try, one more start, with perhaps a bit of magic waiting somewhere behind the morning ...”

—Joseph Priestley

“Excuse me? Is this where I sign in for my appointment with Dr. Sternberg?”

Rena Sanchez picked up a stack of clipboards for the sign-in counter of the optometrists’ office where she worked as office manager. Pasting a professional smile on her face, she turned to greet the man who’d spoken from the other side of the open reception window.

The clipboards hit the floor with a crash that made several people in the waiting room jump in their seats. Embarrassed, Rena gave them an apologetic look before gathering the scattered clipboards and attempting to collect her composure. Only then did she approach the counter—and the man from her past who waited there.

Except for the slight hint of gray at the temples of his conservatively cut, coffee-colored hair, Evan Daugherty looked much the same as he had the last time she had seen him almost seven years ago, as a pallbearer at her late husband’s funeral.

In his early thirties, Evan’s face was slightly more tanned now from years of working outdoors, and the little squint lines that

had developed at the corners of his dark eyes only added to the appeal of his ruggedly attractive features. He'd had tears in those dark brown eyes the last time she'd seen him. He smiled now—though his smile froze when she faced him fully.

She had identified him at first glance, but it seemed to have taken him a heartbeat longer to make the connection. Had she changed so much in the past seven years? She had been twenty-three, six months pregnant with twins and in a haze of shock and grief when they last parted. Seeing him now sent those long-banked feelings flooding through her again—in addition to other complex reactions to Evan himself.

Working especially hard to ignore the latter emotions, she kept her expression carefully schooled when she set the clipboards on the counter. “Hello, Evan.”

Tactfully, he merely glanced at the clipboards, declining to comment on her clumsy response to the sight of him. “Rena. This is a surprise.”

“For me, too,” she agreed. “I didn’t see your name on the appointment list.”

She wasn’t usually the one who checked in clients, but as her luck would have it, Lisa was at lunch and Cathy was busy with a phone call.

“You’re looking well.” Though Evan spoke easily, Renae sensed that he felt as awkward as she did about this unexpected reunion.

Or was she merely projecting? Was she the only one suddenly

remembering a forbidden kiss on a tumultuous night that had sporadically haunted her dreams—and sometimes her unguarded waking moments—for almost a decade?

All too aware that they were being idly watched by the waiting clients whose attention had been drawn by the crashing clipboards, she kept her tone as politely professional as she could, considering the turmoil inside her. “What can I do for you, Evan?”

“Oh. Right. I have an appointment with Dr. Sternberg. I just need to give you my insurance information.”

He offered her an insurance card and she was pleased—and somewhat surprised—to note that her hand was steady as she took it from him and handed him a clipboard in return. “I’ll make a copy of this for your file. If you’ll have a seat and fill out this new-patient form, Dr. Sternberg will be with you shortly.”

He hesitated before turning away, looking as though he found their brief, strictly business exchange unsatisfying. “How are the twins?”

“They’re well, thank you. Growing like weeds.” She almost winced at hearing the overused cliché from her own lips, but it was the best she could do just then.

“Excuse me, Renae, you have a call on line three.”

She turned gratefully in response to the welcome interruption. “Thank you, Cathy. Will you make a copy of Mr. Daugherty’s insurance information, please?”

“Of course.”

With a coolly civil nod to Evan, Renae took the phone call. She handled the business issue swiftly, then murmured an excuse to Cathy and escaped to the employees' restroom. Once there, she would have splashed cold water on her face, but she didn't want to wash off the makeup she'd barely had time to apply earlier after dressing hastily for work in a simple lavender sweater and gray pants. Instead, she leaned against the wall and closed her eyes, trying to collect her thoughts.

Barely fifteen minutes ago, she had asked aloud, "Could anything else go wrong today?" Having Evan Daugherty walk into her place of business out of the blue must be her punishment for tempting fate.

This October Tuesday morning had been hectic from the moment her alarm blasted her out of bed at 6:00 a.m. The twins dashed around the house frantically searching for shoes and backpacks, complaining about the healthy lunches she packed for them, suddenly remembering they were supposed to take a favorite stuffed animal because Tuesday was "animal kingdom day" in first grade. That led to lengthy debates about the toys to choose, which necessitated sharp words from Renae to keep them from being late, which, in turn, caused Renae's live-in mother-in-law, Lucy, to give Renae wounded looks for snapping at her precious grandchildren.

Lucy knew better than to openly challenge Renae's authority. By the time the twins were safely delivered to school and Renae arrived at work, the usual chaos there was almost a

welcome relief.

As the office manager for two young optometrists, Renae performed many duties along with the two office workers she supervised, Cathy and Lisa. She answered phones, handled insurance claims, kept records for the accountant, checked in patients and scheduled appointments when necessary—anything she had to do to keep the office running with the efficiency she took such pride in. Two optometry assistants worked with Ann Boshears and Gary Sternberg, the married couple who'd moved to North Little Rock, Arkansas, a year earlier to set up their practice. They had hired Renae after she'd seen their ad in the newspaper—a nice promotion from the clerical position she'd held before in another medical office.

Renae had worked well from the start with Ann and Gary, and liked all her coworkers to varying degrees. As much as she loved her children and her mother-in-law, it was nice having a life away from home. She needed this outside interaction with other people, needed to feel that she was a competent, intelligent, self-sufficient woman in addition to being a mom and a daughter.

Yet all it had taken was an unexpected encounter with Evan Daugherty to undo her hard-earned progress and send her spinning back into the emotional mess she'd been when he had first met her almost ten years ago. Angry with herself, she drew a deep, bracing breath and opened her eyes, glaring at her reflection in the mirror. She thought she'd done a decent job of hiding her reactions from Evan and any onlookers, not counting

that one paralyzed moment when the clipboards had tumbled to the floor. Now it was time to pull herself together and get back to work.

It had probably been inevitable that she would run into Evan again sometime. After all, they lived in adjacent cities in Central Arkansas, and worked in the same metropolitan area surrounding the capital city of Little Rock. Because he'd stayed in touch once a year through Christmas cards with formal little notes written inside, she knew he'd moved back to the area three years ago after a stint in the army. A few months later, he had started a landscape design business with Tate Price, an old friend who had also known her late husband, Jason.

Probably the only reason their paths hadn't crossed before now was because they had both avoided chance encounters as much as possible. It had been stressful enough hearing from him through the mail a few times lately in regard to the scholarship he and Tate had recently established in her husband's memory.

Feeling her responsibilities calling her, she squared her shoulders, lifted her chin and left the restroom, glad to see that Evan was no longer in the waiting room. He must be in with Dr. Sternberg. She hoped Lisa would get back from lunch so Renae could leave before he came out again. As cowardly as it made her feel, she would just as soon avoid another awkwardly public exchange with him today.

No such luck. Renae hadn't yet had a chance to escape when Evan reappeared just as she delivered a file to Cathy, putting

them both at the payment window at the same time.

“I’m just leaving for lunch. Cathy will take your payment,” she said, nodding pleasantly to him when he looked at her as though expecting her to say something. “It was good to see you again, Evan.”

Cordial and poised. Exactly the tone she’d hoped to achieve, she applauded herself.

“Good to see you, too, Renae.” He glanced at her coworkers before saying tentatively, “Actually, I’ve been wanting to contact you about the scholarship program. Maybe we could have a bite together and discuss it?”

Sitting near enough to overhear, Cathy cleared her throat noisily and gave Renae a look that made it clear she thought she should accept Evan’s offer. No surprise—Cathy was always trying to fix her up with someone, and she would no doubt view Evan as an attractive, charming and intriguing possibility. Which, of course, he would be, had it not been for the convoluted history between them.

“I’m sorry, Evan, I have an appointment,” she lied without compunction, unable to face the thought of sitting across a little table from him without more preparation. But because she was interested in hearing about the scholarship progress, she scribbled her number and handed it to him. “Call any evening after work and I’d be happy to discuss the scholarship with you.”

She could handle talking with Evan on the phone, she assured herself. Maybe the painful emotions wouldn’t assail her so

forcefully if she weren't looking at him while they talked. Maybe she would be less likely to embarrass herself with her awkward reactions to him, the way she had today.

If he was disappointed that she'd declined his lunch invitation, it didn't show on his face when he folded the paper and tucked it into the pocket of the navy twill shirt he wore with neatly pressed khakis. "I'll be in contact."

She nodded, ignored Cathy's frown of disapproval and turned to make a determinedly dignified—if still hasty—escape.

She drove several blocks away, pulled into the parking lot of a fast-food restaurant and buried her face in her hands, only then letting the memories overwhelm her.

Six hours later, Evan sat in his living room, staring glumly out at the Little Rock skyline across the Arkansas River from his fifth-floor apartment. He lived on the North Little Rock side of the river, driving across the Broadway Bridge every morning to the office of Price-Daugherty Landscape Design, the company he owned with his longtime friend, Tate Price. He'd chosen this place specifically for this view. He had spent too many evenings since admiring it alone.

He'd known since he'd moved back to this area that Renae Ingle Sanchez lived on the other side of that river. He had made no effort to seek her out since his return, communicating with her only by regular mail—a Christmas card every year for the past six years, and more recently information about the scholarship he and his business partner had established in her late husband's

honor. He'd always wondered when they would run into each other again, figuring it would have to happen sometime, but he certainly hadn't been prepared to do so today.

Judging by the way those clipboards had hit the floor at her feet, she hadn't been prepared, either. Or had that moment of clumsiness had nothing to do with her seeing him standing there?

How many times had he thought about calling her, trying to see her? Too many to count. Yet something always held him back. Something that felt suspiciously like guilt. And maybe uncertainty about how she would react to hearing from him. After all, Renae's mother-in-law had once openly blamed Evan for Jason's death. While Renae hadn't echoed the words, she hadn't spoken out in Evan's defense, either.

He'd wondered if that was because she hadn't wanted to further upset her mother-in-law—or if it was because she agreed, even subconsciously, that Evan bore some responsibility for the tragedy. He had tried since to convince himself that while her silence might have hurt his feelings a little, he understood that she'd been in a bad place emotionally and hadn't been thinking clearly. He couldn't be angry with her any more than he could with Jason's inconsolable mother.

There were other emotions tangled up in his memories of Renae, but he didn't want to dwell on them too deeply at the moment. He confined himself to thinking about their encounter today.

She had changed. At first, he hadn't even been certain the

woman behind the reception desk really was Renae. But when she'd looked at him straight on and he'd seen her eyes, there had been no doubt.

Though she had been polite enough, he couldn't say she had been particularly warm in greeting him. He supposed that made sense; there was too much history between them for a chance encounter to be easy and breezy. Not to mention that their surprise reunion was rather public. He hadn't been able to read her expression well enough to tell whether seeing him was merely awkward for her or genuinely painful.

He had found her attractive in her early twenties—too much so since she'd been the girlfriend and then the wife of one of his best friends—but she was even prettier at the dawn of her thirties. He remembered her hair being long and tousled, bleached to near white. Now she wore it in a sleek, darker blond bob that nicely framed her oval face. Her eyes looked larger and softer without the black eyeliner she'd favored back then, but they were still the vivid blue he remembered so clearly. Of average height, she was still slim. Maybe she'd gained a few pounds, but the soft curves looked good on her. Womanly, as opposed to girlish.

He knew she hadn't remarried, but he didn't know if she was seeing anyone. Did a working, single mom of six-and-a-half-year-old twins even have time to go out? Not that it was any of his business. She had made that clear enough at Jason's funeral, when she and Jason's mother had walked away from him without a backward glance.

It hadn't been the first time he and Renae had parted painfully. Two years earlier, while she was still dating Jason, they had shared one illicit kiss, spurred by forbidden infatuation and a few too many drinks. Though they had never crossed that line again, the attraction between them that night had been strong. Ill-advised, but mutual.

Did she ever wonder, as he did occasionally, what might have happened had he handled that episode differently?

Shaking his head in irritation, he pushed himself out of his chair and his memories. He had things to do tonight. He would call Renae, but when he did, it would be strictly about scholarship business. The past was just that—over and done. They had new lives now, new responsibilities. It was far too late for what-might-have-beens.

He'd have to remind himself of that every time those old memories escaped the deep hole where he'd buried them years ago, until he finally convinced himself.

“Mom, Daniel's feeding Boomer from the table again.”

“Am not!” Daniel set both hands hastily on the table, an exaggeratedly innocent look on his face.

Renae glanced at the small brown-and-white dog happily chewing something beneath her son's chair. “Don't fib, Daniel. And don't feed the dog from the table or I'm going to have to put him in the backyard when we eat.”

Daniel sighed gustily, his dark hair falling over his forehead. Renae made a mental note to take him for a haircut Saturday.

She would have had Lucy take him one day after school, but Lucy always insisted the barber cut Daniel's hair shorter than he liked now that he was in first grade. Renae figured some battles just weren't worth the trouble. Daniel was old enough to start expressing his preferences in clothing and hair-style—within the limits Renae set, of course.

“Hunter got in trouble in school again today,” Leslie said, indulging in her favorite pastime of gossiping about her classmates over dinner. “He wouldn't stop playing with his crayons when it was time for math lessons. Ms. Rice took his crayons away and he was mad.”

“Hunter should listen to the teacher,” Lucy said with a disapproving shake of her salt-and-pepper head. “I hope you two are behaving in your classes.”

“Yes, ma'am,” they chorused dutifully.

It had been at Renae's request that her children had been assigned to separate classes. They got along very well for the most part, for which she was grateful, but she thought it was good for them to form relationships as individuals and not just as “the twins.”

“You aren't eating much this evening,” Lucy commented, eyeing Renae's plate with a frown. Short, plump and matronly, widowed for almost two decades, Lucy dressed and often acted older than her fifty-nine years, resisting any attempts to modernize what Renae thought of as her housewife-y wardrobe, or to add any new activities to her life. She was content to keep

house for her daughter-in-law and grandchildren, and attend the many church activities that kept her occupied while the kids were in school. “Aren’t you feeling well? Do you not like the food?”

“The food is excellent, as always, Lucy,” Renae answered patiently, taking a bite of the beef carnitas just to prove her point. Washing it down with a sip of peach-flavored iced tea, she then explained, “I had a late lunch today, so I’m not overly hungry tonight.”

Lucy’s eyebrows rose. “I thought you just took a turkey sandwich and a few carrot sticks for lunch. I figured you would be hungry tonight.”

Lucy hadn’t actually prepared the sandwich, because Renae insisted on making lunches for herself and the twins. It was one of the little things she did to make herself feel that she was pulling her weight around the house, despite Lucy taking the bulk of the cleaning and cooking. Still, Lucy kept an eye on what went out of “her” kitchen in brown bags and decorated lunch boxes.

Renae was reluctant to admit she’d left her turkey sandwich in the office fridge when she’d bolted after seeing Evan. She hadn’t mentioned that encounter to Lucy yet, though she supposed she should. Maybe she would wait until the twins were in bed, and then try to find a way to break the news without unduly upsetting her mother-in-law, who still bristled whenever Evan’s name came up after all these years.

Daniel squirmed restlessly in his seat, making Boomer wag his tail frantically in anticipation of fun. “I’m done with my dinner

—may I go play now?”

“We have dessert,” his grandmother reminded him, momentarily distracted from Renae’s lack of appetite. “Fruit tarts.”

Looking torn, Daniel glanced from his waiting pup toward the kitchen. “Can I have dessert later? I’m full.”

“Go play for an hour, then you can have dessert after your bath,” Renae agreed. “Leslie, do you want yours now or later?”

“Later,” Leslie decided. “We’re going to teach Boomer how to fetch.”

“Good luck with that,” Lucy said with a laugh and a shake of her head as the twins carried their plates and silverware carefully to the kitchen, accompanied by the eager dog. They would leave the plates on the counter by the sink for now, but when they were a little older, Renae would teach them to rinse and stack them in the dishwasher. She thought it important that both her children perform daily chores, so that everyone in the household made a contribution to its smooth functioning.

With her usual tenacity, Lucy returned her attention to Renae. “Are you not feeling well? Something seems to be off with you this evening.”

Since the children were out of the room, Renae figured she might as well get this behind them. “There’s something I need to tell you. A new patient came to the clinic today. Turns out it was someone we know.”

“Oh?” Lucy stacked her fork and knife on her empty plate and

laid her napkin on the table beside it. “Who was it?”

“Evan Daugherty.”

She could almost feel the chill that settled over the room. Lucy froze in her chair, her eyes blackening to polished ebony. “Evan Daugherty showed up at your office today?”

“Yes. He had an appointment with Dr. Sternberg.”

Every muscle in Lucy’s body seemed to have gone stiff. “Why is he coming around you now? What does he want?”

“Lucy, his visit had nothing to do with me. He didn’t even know I work for Dr. Sternberg.”

The sharp sound she made clearly expressed Lucy’s skepticism. “Did he try to talk to you?”

“We exchanged greetings. He asked about the twins.”

“Their welfare is none of his business.”

“He was merely being polite. People were watching.”

“Is he coming back?”

“I don’t know. If he made another appointment, it wasn’t through me.”

Lucy shook her head. “I hope he stays away. That man is bad news.”

Renae moistened her lips with a sip of tea and braced herself for the reaction to her next admission. “I gave him my phone number. He’s going to call sometime to discuss the scholarship he and Tate started in Jason’s memory.”

Predictably, Lucy scowled in disapproval. “You gave him your number? He must have pressured you into that. He’s very good

at talking people into things.”

“He did not pressure me. He said he wanted to talk with me about the scholarship and I gave him the number because I think it’s a worthy cause. Simple as that.”

Even the mention of the scholarship founded in her late son’s honor didn’t soften Lucy’s expression. “Don’t get mixed up with him, Renae. Evan Daugherty brings trouble. He was always getting my Jason into scrapes when they were boys and then he talked him into going out on those motorcycles when Jason should have been home with you getting ready for his babies.”

There was a distinct quiver in her voice when she finished. Lucy held Evan responsible for Jason having the motorcycle in the first place. Evan had bought a used bike during his first year of college for commuting to classes, and Jason had subsequently decided he wanted one, too. Because Evan had helped Jason find a good deal, Lucy had always insisted that Evan had all but coerced her son into buying a dangerous motorbike.

Renae didn’t have the heart to remind Lucy that Jason had been the one who had stubbornly insisted on going on that last ride, even though he had promised Renae he’d help her work on the nursery that weekend. Jason had argued with her, saying he wouldn’t have many chances to get away once the kids arrived, and Renae had capitulated—as she so often had with Jason. Neither of them could have known, of course, that he would never return. That his life would end that afternoon beneath the wheels of a car that had sped through a stop sign without even

slowing down.

Renae had been grateful ever since that she and Jason had parted with a kiss, despite the earlier quarrel, instead of hard words.

“This scholarship is important to me, Lucy,” she said, trying to make her tone both firm and gentle at the same time. “The Jason Sanchez Memorial Scholarship will help young men go to college who might not have gone otherwise, and you know that would mean a lot to Jason.”

At the time of his death, Jason had been a high school history teacher. Having already obtained his master’s degree in history, he was just starting to work toward a doctorate degree, with the ultimate goal of teaching at a college level. A scholarship for at-risk young men was the perfect way to honor his memory, and despite her complex emotions concerning Evan Daugherty, Renae had been gratified to hear that one college freshman had already benefited from the effort.

“It was very generous of Evan and Tate to start this scholarship, and I’d like to be informed occasionally of its progress,” she reiterated. “That doesn’t mean I’ll be getting mixed up with either of them.”

“They’re both trouble,” Lucy repeated in an unhappy mutter. “Especially Evan.”

Renae couldn’t necessarily disagree with that, though her own reasons for thinking of Evan as trouble were distinctly different from Lucy’s.

“I’ll keep your warnings in mind.” She stood and started gathering dirty dishes and glassware. There was no need to continue this conversation now. Lucy was in no mood to concede that Evan had any good intentions, and Renae was committed to supporting the scholarship effort in whatever way she could. Even if that meant crossing paths—or at least phone calls—occasionally with Evan, a prospect that made her pulse rate flutter erratically and annoyingly as she helped her mother-in-law clear away the remains of their dinner.

Evan called Thursday evening. Winding down from a day of school followed by Tae Kwon Do lessons, the twins, already bathed and in pajamas, sprawled on the floor watching their allotted hour of television. Lucy knitted on the couch while Renae read in her favorite easy chair. It was a rare quiet hour in the usually bustling household and the summons from Renae’s cell phone was an intrusion despite the musical ringtone.

As if suspecting the identity of the caller, Lucy frowned. “Who is calling at this hour?”

Glancing at the ID screen, Renae swallowed. “I’ll take it in another room. Kids, start getting ready for bed as soon as that program is over.”

Without taking their attention from the television, they nodded. Renae lifted the phone to her ear as she left the room, avoiding her mother-in-law’s disapproving stare. “Hello?”

Though she’d seen his name on the screen, Renae’s stomach still tightened when she heard the deep voice in her ear. “Hi,

Renae. I hope this isn't a bad time to call?"

She stepped into her tidy bedroom and closed the door. "No, it's fine."

"I mentioned to Tate that I saw you Tuesday. He said to tell you hello."

"Tell him hello back for me," she said lightly, sitting on the edge of her still-made bed.

"I will. So, anyway, he and I talked about the scholarship and we think we need to have a formal-ish meeting about it. You know, to get some guidelines in writing and figure out how to promote it and start seeking applications. We've been pretty haphazard about it so far, choosing Tate's new brother-in-law for the first recipient sort of impulsively—anyway, we want to do this correctly from now on. And we both wondered if you would like to be involved."

She followed his somewhat disjointed remarks with a baffled frown. "Involved in what way?"

"You know," he said, "working with us to outline the qualifications. Maybe read through applications and help us make our selections. That sort of thing. We've never administered a scholarship before, so this is all new to us."

"I don't have any experience with that, either," she said. And yet she found herself strongly tempted by his offer. As wary as she was about spending time with Evan, considering all the potential complications, she would hate for the scholarship to fall by the wayside because of a lack of effort on her part. "What can

I do to help?”

“Tate suggested we could have a planning meeting right after work one evening, maybe over an early dinner. I know your evenings must be busy, with the kids and all, but would it be possible for you to join us one day next week?”

An after-work meeting with both Tate and Evan at a restaurant sounded innocuous enough—as much as possible, anyway. And a public venue would make the reunion even less awkward. “I’ll be free next Wednesday evening after six. If that time is open for you and Tate, I could meet with you then.”

“We’ll make sure it’s open. How does six next Wednesday sound for our first official meeting?”

It sounded soon. But she kept her nerves out of her voice when she said briskly, “Yes, that will be fine. Where shall we meet?”

“All the paperwork and stuff is at my place. We figured we could spread it all out there and discuss it without interruption. I can provide food. My apartment’s not far from your office, so it should be convenient for you.”

“At, uh, your place?”

“If that’s agreeable for you?”

It was hardly the public restaurant she’d had in mind. Had he said all along the meeting would be at his home, she might have made an excuse not to go—but because her hesitation made her feel cowardly, she refused to change her answer now. “Yes, that will be fine.”

“Would you like one of us to pick you up?” he offered.

“No, I’ll drive. I’ll just need the address.”

She scribbled the address he gave her on a message pad she kept on her nightstand. She recognized the name of his apartment building, an upscale place only a few blocks from the eye clinic. She drove past it twice every weekday, but she’d no idea Evan lived there.

“You have my number if anything comes up in the meantime,” Evan reminded her.

His number would show on the list of received calls on her phone. She would store it in her phone’s contact list, just in case. “Yes, I have it.”

“Good.” His purported reason for the call out of the way, he moved to a more personal topic. “How have you been, Renae?”

“I’m well, thank you. And you?”

“Yeah, I’m good.” Was that an undertone of dissatisfaction in his voice? Perhaps in response to her insistence on remaining businesslike, despite his own change in tone?

After a brief hesitation, Evan said, “Renae—this scholarship. I just want you to know it means a lot to Tate and to me. I know we’ve been a little disorganized about it so far, but that doesn’t mean we don’t take it seriously. It’s something we’ve talked about doing since we started our business. We hope Jason would approve.”

She couldn’t stay quite so brusque in response to his very obvious sincerity. Her voice sounded a bit softer to her own ears when she murmured, “I know it would please him very much that

you and Tate have chosen to honor him this way.”

“Thanks.” He cleared his throat. “So I’ll, uh, we’ll see you Wednesday?”

“Yes. Wednesday.”

Disconnecting the call, she sat for a few minutes longer in the silence of her sage-and-plum bedroom. A few photos were clustered on the cherry dresser that matched her bed and nightstand, furniture she’d purchased a year ago after starting her new job. She didn’t glance at the frames that held pictures of her children and her late husband, but she was suddenly, acutely aware of them.

The meeting she and Evan had arranged was all about the scholarship, she reminded herself. There was no other reason for her to go to Evan’s home, or to see him or Tate again. Lucy would probably accuse Evan of using the powers of persuasion she was sure he possessed to talk Renae into this meeting, but he’d done nothing more than offer her a chance to be involved with the program, and she had chosen to accept.

Maybe she wouldn’t mention the meeting to Lucy just yet. It would only upset her unnecessarily. Once the scholarship was better established, Lucy would probably be more accepting of Renae’s contact with Jason’s former friends, especially since it would be clear that it was about honoring Jason’s memory.

Having lost her biological mother when she was very young, Renae adored her mother-in-law, who had filled that gaping void with love and nurturing and stability. Renae would do nothing

willingly to jeopardize that close relationship.

As confident as she had been that she'd made the right decision in choosing to attend the scholarship meeting, Renae still had second—and third, fourth and fifth—thoughts as she approached Evan's door Wednesday evening after work. She'd spent a little too much time getting ready that morning, finally settling on a cherry-red sweater and dark pants that were both professional and flattering. She carried a roomy leather tote bag that held a folder full of materials about establishing scholarships, just in case Evan and Tate were interested in what she'd learned through her research.

After much deliberation, she had decided not to tell Lucy what she was doing this evening. This was the only day of the week when it would be possible to get away with the omission. The eye clinic was open until six on Wednesdays, an hour later than usual. Lucy picked up Leslie and Daniel from school, fed them an early dinner, then took them to church where she had Bible study and choir practice, and the twins attended kids' Bible classes and children's choir. They were never home until almost eight, so Renae took that evening as Mom's night out, shopping or getting a manicure, sometimes meeting friends for dinner or a movie, other times just going home to read in rare, uninterrupted peace.

She wondered now if she should have gone home to read tonight.

She had announced her arrival downstairs and Evan had buzzed her in, so it was too late to cancel, though at least half a

dozen times in the past few days she had reached for her phone to do just that. She had resisted the impulses only by refusing to allow herself to think about Evan and the past. She'd stayed busy with the life she'd made for herself, preparing for this appointment as she would any business meeting, and the days had flown past. Now she found herself standing in the hallway outside his apartment, not at all sure she was ready to see Evan again.

At least Tate would be there to defuse the tension, she reminded herself firmly. While Tate had also been a friend of Jason's, he and Renae had no personal baggage between them. If he was still as chatty and jovial as he'd been back then, there should be few uncomfortable silences. She would keep the conversation focused on the scholarship and then they would go their own ways again.

Evan opened the door before she could even knock. "Renae. Hi, come in."

He smiled at her as he invited her inside, and her pulse rate fluttered crazily in response.

So much for keeping her unwanted reactions to sexy Evan Daugherty firmly under control.

Chapter Two

Holding her head high and keeping her smile as relaxed as possible considering the chaos inside her, Renae stepped past Evan, looking around his home as she entered. The furnishings were tasteful—minimal, but nicely accented with plants. No surprise there, since that was Evan’s career specialty.

“Very nice,” she said, moving to admire the panorama of the north bank of the Arkansas River and the Little Rock skyline on the other side. The swirling river water reflected the deepening blue sky and mirrored the trees splashed with fall color. The scenery brightened up the beige-on-beige decor inside Evan’s apartment.

“I have to admit that view is why I chose this place.”

She realized Evan had stepped next to her to admire the panorama, standing so close that an unguarded movement would cause their arms to touch. While she did not suspect he meant anything by the proximity other than affable view-sharing, she still moved away. “Something smells good.”

He remained where he was, keeping a respectable distance between them. “I picked up dinner on the way here. I hope you still like pizza.”

“Doesn’t everyone?” Ignoring his implication that he remembered her fondness for pizza, she glanced toward the other end of the room. Three flat boxes sat on a dining table on the

other side of a low serving bar, next to plates, napkins, flatware and a stack of papers she assumed to be scholarship materials.

“Three pizzas? Just how many people are on this committee?”

“Three,” he admitted rather sheepishly. “I wasn’t sure what toppings you like, so I got an assortment. I’ll dine on the leftovers for a few days.”

“When it comes to pizza, I’m not picky.”

“Can I get you something to drink while we wait for Tate? Or we could dig in and let him catch up when he gets here. I know your time is limited.”

His cell phone buzzed before she could answer. “That’s Tate,” he said with a glance at the screen. “There are drinks in the fridge, glasses set out on the counter. Help yourself while I find out what’s keeping him.”

She had just poured diet cola over ice when Evan joined her in the kitchen. She could tell by his expression what he was going to say even before he spoke.

“I’m sorry, but something has come up and Tate can’t make it. Looks like it’s just you and me.”

Renae swallowed hard and set the soda can down with a thump.

It flashed through her mind that Lucy would surely accuse Evan of arranging this so he would have Renae alone. Renae rejected that possibility as soon as it occurred to her. Judging by Evan’s expression, he was just as dismayed as she was that they wouldn’t have Tate as a buffer.

He must have seen the reservations in her eyes. “If you’d rather reschedule when Tate can join us ...”

She shook her head, telling herself she was being foolish. Keeping her expression schooled and her voice brisk, she picked up her glass and moved toward the table. “Since I’m here, let’s take a look at what you have. I brought some information about other private scholarship programs, if you’d be interested in seeing it.”

He nodded cordially, matching her impersonal tone. “Yes, of course. Have a seat and help yourself to pizza, and we’ll go through the notes Tate and I have compiled so far.”

She sank into one of the four chairs at the slate-topped, bar-height table, hoping he would sit across from her, well out of accidental touching distance. Instead, he chose the place to her right, pulling a pizza box and a stack of papers toward them.

All too aware of how close he sat, of his elbow almost brushing hers when he moved, of the way he looked at her every time she glanced his way, she reached quickly for a file folder.

As he had warned her, the progress thus far was somewhat haphazard. At this point, the award was only a thousand dollars, but that helped with books and supplies. Evan and Tate had paid the scholarship out of their own pockets for the one check they had awarded thus far, but they’d started an account for future donations. They’d had several modest contributions from friends and associates. Financially, the program seemed to be off to a fair start, though Evan admitted they’d had little time to initiate

fundraising efforts. He'd thought about sending out a letter to their old friends from high school and college, but he wasn't very good at composing those things, he admitted.

"I can draft the letter," Renae offered, making a note on the pad she'd opened beside her. She seemed to have stepped in as secretary of this informal committee, but that was fine with her. It played to her particular strengths and made her feel that she made a valuable contribution to the cause—and most of her input could be through email, she couldn't help thinking.

Keeping her gaze on the paperwork, she listened to Evan's explanation of the direction he and Tate had in mind for the scholarship and offered a few suggestions of her own. He was very receptive to her ideas, making annotations of his own to share with Tate later, and she was gratified by how open he was to her input.

The first recipient of the Jason Sanchez Memorial Scholarship had been nineteen-year-old Stuart O'Hara, who had since become newlywed Tate's brother-in-law. There had been no formal application—Tate had offered Stuart the scholarship on an impulse when the young man had announced that he would not be attending college because of finances and other family issues. Evan had gone along because he and Tate had been discussing the establishment of a scholarship anyway, and he figured it was time to get started.

When Renae saw how seriously the young man was taking the honor, she felt a bit more comfortable with the nepotism of that

first award. Evan had printed out three emails Stuart had sent about his academic progress that semester, each ending with a repetition of his gratitude for their assistance.

“He has an academic scholarship paying for his tuition and a student loan to cover living expenses, but this thousand-dollar award for books and supplies seems to mean a lot to him,” Evan explained. “I think it’s because he was on the verge of not attending college at all when Tate offered him our scholarship as a sign of faith in him. He was at a point in his life when he needed to hear that, I guess. Apparently, there were some family issues holding him back. But he seems to have committed himself completely to making a success of college. That’s why he keeps emailing us about his grades, even though he’s only been in school a couple of months. Tate’s actually had to remind him to make a little time for fun.”

“Stuart sounds like a good kid,” Renae said, glancing again at the grateful notes.

Evan nodded. “I haven’t actually met him, but from what Tate has told me, he is.”

She should have known better than to meet his eyes. Their gazes held, and she felt a shiver of awareness course through her. It had been too long since she’d been near an attractive man, too long since she had felt physical awareness warm her blood.

She forced her attention back to her notes. Was she really so starved for a man’s attention? How foolish.

Sure, she was young and there were times when she longed

for a man's touch. She'd told herself she would date again, once the twins were a little older and her schedule a bit less hectic. In the meantime, her life was almost perfect just as it was, she reminded herself firmly. She had no intention of doing anything to change that. Most especially with Evan Daugherty, who had already caused her more than enough heartache and confusion.

To distract herself, she stayed focused on the conversation. "Okay, so I'll start putting together an application form to send to local schools and to make available on the website you and Tate are working on. We still need to draft a more formal statement of the qualifications we're looking for in our applicants."

Though Stuart attended a small, private college in Missouri, Evan and Tate had decided it would be easier to limit future awards to students in Arkansas, and Renae agreed. They would choose two recipients for next year, in addition to renewing Stuart's award, but eventually they hoped to spread the assistance to even more young scholars. Maybe even increase the award amount to cover more than books and supplies, if they were successful with their fundraising efforts.

"We can draft the statement and make some more decisions at our next meeting. Since all the materials are here, we might as well just keep my apartment as our meeting place. Would there be any time you could meet next week?"

"Next week?" she asked with a little frown.

He nodded, studying her face. "Tate should be able to join us then. He wanted to be here today, but his wife's car wouldn't start

and she was stranded at work. Tate had to pick up their daughter at day care, then arrange to have the battery in her car replaced.”

“They have a daughter?” Though she knew Tate was a newlywed, this was the first she had heard about a child.

“Her name is Daryn. She’s about a year old. Tate married a single mom. He met Kim when the baby was only a couple months old, right after she went back to work after her maternity leave. They had sort of a whirlwind romance and surprised everyone with a sudden marriage. It’s pretty amusing how they got together, actually. Maybe he’ll tell you about it next week.”

Again, Evan was making the supposition that she would meet with him again next week.

He must have read the hesitation in her expression because he added, “Is next week too soon? I understand if you can’t arrange a sitter for the kids again so quickly. Maybe you would rather Tate and I handle this from now on and email you?”

That was exactly what she should do. But she really didn’t want to be left out of this project now that she’d become so emotionally invested in seeing it succeed.

She shook her head. “No, if we’re going to get everything in place to start accepting applications for next fall, we should probably meet again soon. Next Wednesday will work for me.”

She assumed each meeting with Evan would get easier, especially since he had cooperated with her in keeping the tone between them strictly business. And in the meantime, she would decide whether it was time to let Lucy know about these

meetings. She couldn't say she was looking forward to that, but she was reluctant to deceive her mother-in-law, even through omission.

Evan insisted that she leave the dinner cleanup to him. She gathered her notes and stuffed them into her bag in preparation to leave.

He glanced at his watch as he walked with her into the living room. "I'm sure you're eager to get home to the kids. Do you have a regular sitter for them?"

"Lucy takes care of them when I'm not home. They always have activities at church on Wednesday evenings, which gives me one free night a week on my own. That's why I'm available to meet with you and Tate next Wednesday."

"Lucy." Evan cleared his throat uncomfortably after repeating the name. "You mean Lucy Sanchez?"

She nodded, understanding why his tone had suddenly changed. It hadn't occurred to her until just then that Evan probably wasn't aware of her living arrangements. "Jason's mother."

"She still lives close by, I take it."

"Actually, she lives with us. After Jason died, she took early retirement from her job with the Revenue Department and moved in with me during the last couple months of my pregnancy. She stayed to help with the twins when we brought them home from the hospital. When we saw how well it was working out, she sold her little house and we've shared a home

since. It's been an almost-ideal arrangement for all of us."

She could tell he was startled to hear that she and Lucy shared a home. He wouldn't be the first person to find it odd that a thirty-year-old widow chose to live with her mother-in-law for seven years after her husband's death, with no plans to change the situation. Renae rarely bothered to explain and never made excuses. It was a choice that suited her family, and she had no qualms about saying so.

Evan pushed his hands into his pockets, his expression shuttered, his brown eyes darker than usual. "Does she still spit on the ground every time she hears my name?"

She didn't really know how to answer that only partially facetious question. She settled for, "Not quite that bad."

A muscle flickered in his set jaw. "Okay, but does she still blame me for Jason's death?"

Renae sighed wearily and pushed a strand of blond hair behind her ear. "She still grieves for her son. She gets caught up in 'if only.' If only he hadn't gone riding that day, if only he hadn't bought a bike in the first place ... that sort of thing."

"All of which lead back to blaming me."

She was unable to argue. It seemed best to take her leave then, instead. "Thank you for the pizza, and for letting me be a part of establishing the scholarship."

He nodded and walked her to the door. They reached for the knob at the same time, his hand landing on top of hers. Rather than moving it immediately, he went still, his fingers

warm around hers. His face was somber when he looked down at her. “Renaë?”

Her heart was racing much faster than it should have been, especially considering they were barely making contact. Yet that touch of skin on skin, the warmth that radiated from him, the nearness and strength of him—all sent her thoughts winging back to a stolen kiss on a dark, summer night. A kiss that had left her bewildered, conflicted and crying into her pillow for several nights afterward. A kiss that still brought up feelings of guilt and confusion on the very rare occasion when she allowed herself to remember it.

“What?” she whispered, unable to pull away just yet.

“Do *you* still blame me?”

She didn’t know if he referred to the kiss or to Jason’s accident, but her reply applied to both. “I try not to let myself dwell on the past.”

That muscle twitched again in his jaw. “That’s not really an answer.”

She drew her hand from under his, moving away so that no contact remained between them. “Jason made his own decisions.”

Just as she had made hers.

She shifted restlessly toward the door, making it clear she wanted Evan to open it. Without further delay, he did so. “I’ll see you next week,” he said as she walked out.

She merely nodded and kept walking. Perhaps she should find

an excuse to handle the rest of their scholarship business through the safely impersonal distance of email after all.

“You’re quieter than usual today, Evan. Is something wrong?”

Resting his chopsticks against his plate, Evan shook his head and reached for his teacup.

“Just hungry,” he explained in response to Lynette Price’s concerned question from across the restaurant table. “I overslept this morning, so I had to gulp down an apple for breakfast on the way to a client meeting.”

Lynette nodded as if that fully explained his introspection. “I hate when that happens. I forgot to set my alarm last Friday and I was fifteen minutes late to work. Threw me off schedule for the rest of the day.”

A week after Evan’s meeting with Renae, he and four friends had gathered for their every-Wednesday lunch at a Little Rock restaurant. His business partner, Tate Price, sat on the opposite side of the table flanked by his bride, Kim Banks Price, and Tate’s sister, Lynette Price. To Evan’s right sat Emma Grainger, who worked with Kim and Lynette.

Lynette, a physical therapist, and her coworker friends had started the Wednesday lunch outings almost a year ago. Lynette had invited her brother and Evan to join them a few weeks later. That was when Tate had met Kim. Now Tate and Kim were newly married.

Though Tate and Kim’s wedding had been a spur-of-the-moment event, none of the others had been particularly surprised

when they paired off. Sparks had flown between them from the start, though it seemed that the couple had been the last to acknowledge the attraction between them.

“I’m sorry I caused Tate to miss your scholarship meeting last week,” Kim said to Evan.

“It wasn’t your fault your car wouldn’t start,” he assured her.

Evan remembered how hesitant he’d been to tell Renae that Tate had to cancel. He had sensed that she had been more comfortable at the thought of meeting with both of them rather than with Evan alone. He’d done his best to set her at ease, and he thought he’d succeeded for the most part—with the exception of their rather emotional parting.

He still didn’t know for certain if Renae held resentment toward him for Jason’s death. After all, it had taken several years for him to stop blaming himself. Being outright accused at the funeral by Jason’s grieving mother had certainly not helped him with that slow healing.

“How was your meeting with Mrs. Sanchez?” Emma asked curiously. Like the others, she’d heard about the scholarship launch, and had been told that the widow of the man in whose honor it was established wanted to be involved.

It still rather startled Evan to think of Renae as Mrs. Sanchez, a name he associated with Jason’s mother. Renae had been so young when she and Jason married, and not much older when she’d been widowed. She was still young, for that matter, and yet she lived quietly with her children and her mother-in-law. Was

she still in mourning for Jason?

“It went well,” he said, keeping his thoughts to himself. “We made some decisions, outlined some of the things we need to do next.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Kim offered. “I’m still so grateful to you both for making my brother your first recipient.”

“He wouldn’t have gotten it if he hadn’t been deserving,” Evan reminded her, not for the first time. “I’ll let you know if there’s anything you can do.”

“I’d like to help, too,” Lynette offered. “Maybe we can come up with an idea for a fundraiser.”

Evan nodded. “That would be good.”

“We’ll all help,” Emma said. “It’s definitely a worthy cause. But I’d like to hear more about Jason Sanchez. You guys haven’t told us much about him, other than that he was a high school teacher who died in a motorcycle accident. What was he like?”

Evan and Tate exchanged glances, and Evan was sure memories were flashing through Tate’s mind, just as they were his own.

“Jason was great,” Evan said finally. “Smart, funny, outgoing. Every kid’s favorite teacher in school, you know? He made a real effort to keep his classes interesting, to bring history to life for his students. He’d only been teaching a couple years when he died, so I guess you could say he hadn’t had time to burn out yet.”

“He wanted to teach college history,” Tate contributed. “He liked academia, enjoyed the challenges and even the politics of

it all.”

Evan nodded. A good-looking guy, Jason had savored being the center of attention, knew he was admired by his female students, fancied himself in the role of popular professor. His dad had died when Jason was a young teen, leaving him an only child to be pampered and indulged by his adoring mother.

Several years his junior, a lonely young woman with a deep-seated longing for family and stability, Renae Ingle had fallen under Jason’s spell while she was an occupational therapy student and Jason was studying for his master’s degree. Evan had been doing an internship in urban gardening in Chicago that year. By the time he returned home, Renae and Jason were a couple.

Which made it all the more wrong when Evan had fallen for Renae himself.

“You knew him from childhood?” Emma persisted.

“I did,” Evan confirmed with a nod. “Jason and I became friends in junior high and remained close after that. I met Tate in college, where we were both studying landscape design. I introduced him to Jason and the three of us spent a lot of time together after that.”

“Jason was a good friend,” Tate agreed. “We had some fun times, didn’t we, Ev?”

Evan nodded.

“I saw Jason a couple of times when he stopped by the house on his motorcycle to meet up with Tate and Evan,” Lynette volunteered. “He was really good-looking, had a smile that made

my teen knees melt. I had such a crush on him, and I think he knew it.”

“Did you ever meet his wife?” Emma asked.

Lynette shook her head. “No. The guys weren’t hanging out as much when Jason started dating her.”

Tate shrugged. “We got busy. I was working for a landscape design company in Dallas, Evan was away doing an internship, Jason was getting his master’s degree. Then Evan went into the army, Jason and Renae got married, and Jason started teaching and studying for his doctorate. After that, we were lucky to all be in the same town for an afternoon to shoot some hoops or ride our ...”

Tate’s words faded. Obviously he had suddenly remembered that final motorcycle ride Jason and Evan had taken. “Anyway,” he continued quickly, “Evan spent more time with Jason and Renae when they were dating, before he went off to the army, so he knows her better than I do.”

Evan still clearly remembered Jason introducing him to Renae. Shaking his hand, she had gazed up at him with a smile in those vivid blue eyes and Evan had felt his heart take a hard flop in his chest. Clichéd, maybe, but true. During the next few months, he’d spent some time with Jason and Renae, even double-dating on a few occasions, though his own dates hadn’t led anywhere. Maybe because he’d had a hard time taking his attention from Renae whenever she was in the vicinity though he’d done his best to ignore his attraction to her.

There had been times when he thought he'd sensed an answering awareness in her when their eyes had met, but he'd tried to convince himself he was only projecting. It had been easier for his peace of mind to believe he had no chance with his buddy's girlfriend, and he thought Renae had made an equally determined effort to ignore the sparks between them. Until the night they had found themselves alone in a pretty little garden at a friend's house, standing beside a moonlit fountain.

"Jason has asked me to marry him," barely twenty-one-year-old Renae had confided tentatively, her face young and vulnerable in the pale light as she had gazed up at Evan.

He'd felt his stomach twist, even as his fingers tightened around the beer can in his hand. He'd downed a few too many at that gathering to celebrate Jason's master's degree in education. Yet he found Renae's eyes more intoxicating than the beverage as he asked in a gravelly voice, "What did you tell him?"

Glancing downward, she had hesitated, moistening her lips and nervously tucking a strand of long, bleached hair behind her ear. "I told him I'd think about it."

Evan used his free hand to lift her chin so that he could look hard at her expression, as if he could read her thoughts in her glittering eyes. "Do you want to marry Jason?"

"I've been alone a long time," she had whispered. "Jason and Lucy love me and want me to be a part of their family."

Lucy had been all in favor of Jason marrying Renae. There had been times when Evan had wondered even back then if Lucy

had pushed the match even harder than Jason had. Though Jason had seemed oblivious, maybe Lucy had sensed Evan's attraction to Renae. Maybe that was part of the reason Lucy had been so cool toward him before Jason's death, and downright hostile afterward.

"That's not what I asked you," he had growled. He'd told himself he was asking for Jason's sake, not his own. "Do you want to marry him?"

"I—" She had paused with a hard swallow before saying, "I think I do."

Evan had felt his heart drop. His first reaction had been pain—his second, an illogical anger.

"Well, let me be the first to kiss the bride," he'd said on a beer-fueled impulse. And he had pressed his lips to Renae's, intending nothing more than a brief, forbidden, curiosity-satisfying kiss.

It had instantly flared into so much more.

"I'm sure Mrs. Sanchez is pleased that you guys want to memorialize her husband with this scholarship."

Emma's comment brought Evan abruptly back to the present. Realizing he had been staring at the noodles on his plate for several frozen moments, he stabbed his chopsticks into the pile, avoiding Emma's entirely too-perceptive dark eyes. "Yes, she seems to be. Tate and I will tell her this evening that the three of you want to be involved with fundraising. I'm sure she'll be touched."

To his relief, Tate changed the subject then with a funny story

about something little Daryn had done the night before. Though Evan participated in the conversation, he still found himself drifting back to that night so long ago, to a kiss that had flared into a hungry, passionate embrace that had almost burned out of control before Renae had broken it off with a shocked gasp.

Staring up at him with tear-filled eyes, she had asked in a choked voice, “What was that?”

“Something I’ve been wanting to do for weeks,” he had admitted grimly. “But if you’re going to marry Jason, it will never happen again.”

“He loves me,” she had whispered, wringing her hands and looking at Evan with raw vulnerability. “Can you give me any reason I shouldn’t marry him?”

Evan had felt the words trembling on his lips. But then he’d stared down at the crushed aluminum can in his hand and asked himself what in the hell he was doing. Jason was his friend. And Evan had plans that did not yet include marriage or children.

Renae was young, confused, maybe suffering cold feet at the thought of major commitment, but he knew she cared deeply for Jason. He would do nothing more to come between them.

“I’m sure you’ll both be very happy,” he had said as he’d turned to walk away without looking back. A month later, he’d been in boot camp, and Renae had been wearing a diamond on her left hand.

For a long time afterward, he had wondered what Renae would have said if he’d told her that Jason wasn’t the only one who loved

her.

That was something he would never know, he reminded himself as he finished his lunch with his friends. Too much had happened since, too many reasons for him to keep his distance—not the least of which included her mother-in-law who blamed him still for Jason's death.

Chapter Three

“Renae.” Holding her right hand in his, Tate greeted her with a warm smile Wednesday evening. “It’s so good to see you. You look great.”

She returned the smile, noting that time had made few changes in him. Though his cheerful, guy-next-door good looks had never affected her in quite the same way as Evan’s darker, more solemn appeal, she had always liked Tate. “It’s nice to see you again, too, Tate. Congratulations on your new marriage.”

He grinned. “Thanks. I got lucky. I have a beautiful wife and an adorable little girl who’s almost a year old. Want to see a picture?”

Standing nearby, Evan shook his head. “You’re in for it now, Renae. Tate whips out those photos every chance he gets.”

Rather charmed by Tate’s enthusiasm for his family, Renae assured him that she would love to see the photo. She smiled when he handed her his phone, on which was displayed a sweet snapshot of an attractive, honey-haired woman and a laughing baby.

“This must be your wife.”

“Yes. Kim. And the baby is Daryn. The next picture is a close-up of Daryn.”

Renae dutifully admired several more shots, then returned the phone to Tate. “You have a lovely family.”

“Thanks. They’re hanging out with Lynette this evening, watching a chick flick on TV—though I imagine Daryn will expect them to pay more attention to her than the movie. What about you? Do you have photos of the twins on you?”

After only a split-second hesitation, Renae handed her phone to Tate. Evan moved closer to look over Tate’s shoulder at the duo displayed on the little screen.

“Wow.” After studying the photo, Tate lifted his eyes to Renae. “Your son is a carbon copy of Jason.”

She nodded. “Yes. If you set their first-grade photos side by side, you can hardly tell them apart.”

“Leslie looks very much like him, too,” Evan observed quietly. “Definitely has his eyes.”

“They both do,” she agreed.

She slipped her phone back into the pocket of the black slacks she wore with a gray-and-black-striped sweater. Though she’d been told the twins shared many of her mannerisms, and that both had her smile, she knew there was little physical resemblance between them. They had inherited Jason’s near-black hair and eyes rather than her blond, blue-eyed looks. She saw him so often in them, as she knew Lucy did, and the resemblance comforted them both, letting them feel that Jason lived on in the children he’d never had the chance to meet.

Just as his memory would live on in this scholarship in his name, she thought, reminding herself firmly of the reason they were all here now.

“I brought the donation request letter for the two of you to look over,” she said, digging into her bag. “If you have any recommendations, feel free to let me know.”

Seeming to understand that she needed to bring the topic back to the present, Evan moved toward the table. “Let’s get comfortable. We’ve got deli sandwiches this time. Turkey or veggie on whole wheat with fruit cups and chocolate chip cookies for dessert. Help yourself. I’ll get drinks. Iced tea, soda or bottled water?”

“You don’t have to keep supplying food, Evan,” Renae said even as she took a seat and reached for a plate and a sandwich.

He shrugged as he set a glass in front of her. “I’m always hungry after work and I figured you might be, too. Let’s see that letter.”

As Renae had expected, it was a little easier having Tate to defuse some of the tension between her and Evan. The undertones were still there, though she hoped Tate was unaware of them. Maybe they were all in her own mind, but still she was grateful to Tate for his easy chatter and ready laughs while they made several big decisions about the scholarship fund.

Only forty-five minutes after they’d gathered, Tate glanced at his watch and pushed away from the table. “Sorry to jet, but I’ve got a late business meeting in Benton in less than an hour. I’d better head out. I’ll give you a call later to let you know how it goes, Evan.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

Renae set down her pen, thinking of the decisions still to be made. “Do you want to meet again next week to talk about the website?”

Standing, Tate reached for his jacket. “I’ll be out of town next Wednesday, but I’m fine with whatever arrangements the two of you make. I know we’re under pressure to get everything up and running by the beginning of the new semester after Christmas break.”

So she and Evan would be alone again next week. Renae cleared her throat and glanced briefly at Evan. “We can wait until the following week when Tate can join us again.”

Evan shook his head. “Tate’s right. We don’t have much longer to get this all ironed out. If you’re available, I think we should go ahead and have our meeting.”

The scholarship, she reminded herself. That was what was truly important here. “Yes, all right. But I’ll bring food next time.”

Evan smiled. “If you’re sure you have time.”

“Later, guys.” Tate dashed for the door, snatching a cookie from the table to take with him. Because he had always been casually demonstrative, he brushed a kiss on Renae’s cheek on the way past her. It startled her a little, but made her smile nonetheless.

The apartment seemed smaller somehow with Tate gone. More intimate. Definitely quieter.

Renae gathered her notes and stuffed them into her bag. “I

guess that's all we can do today. I'll compile that list of state high schools this week so we can start mailing the application forms as soon as we have it printed. We'll start sending the donation requests out at the same time. With the potential donors we've identified, I think we should have a decent response, especially since we're making it clear that no contribution is too small to be appreciated."

Evan seemed to have no issues with her summary of their progress. Once again, she was pleased with how much input he and Tate wanted from her, even though the scholarship had been their idea and was initially being funded by their company.

"We should need only a few more meetings to finalize all the details," he said, "and then we can take a break until we start reading applications in April."

She told herself it would be a good thing when there was no reason to see Evan every week. She found herself thinking of him entirely too often during her days, and rarely solely in connection with scholarship business.

She insisted on helping him clear the table this time, since they'd finished a bit earlier than the week before. She carried glasses into his galley-style kitchen and placed them in the dishwasher, turning just as he entered with the leftover cookies, so that he unintentionally blocked her exit.

"Sorry," he said, setting the cookies on the counter.

She moved to pass him, but he didn't immediately step out of the way, bringing them even closer together.

His gaze held hers when he reached up unexpectedly to brush the ends of her angled bob, his fingertips just brushing her cheek. “Your hair is different,” he murmured. “Shorter and darker.”

Self-conscious, she shrugged. “I stopped bleaching it. And it’s easier to wear it shorter with my busy schedule now.”

“It looks good.”

Uncertain how to take the compliment, she said merely, “Thank you.”

He continued to search her face, as if noting every slight difference. “More than just your hair has changed.”

“That’s hardly surprising,” she answered with forced lightness. “I was just a kid when we met, now I’m a thirty-year-old mother of school-age twins. Of course I’ve changed.”

“You were a pretty girl,” he replied. “You’re a beautiful woman.”

Her eyes closed for just a moment, her cheeks going warm. His simple statement had rocked her to her toes.

“That’s one thing that hasn’t changed about *you*,” she said, her voice sounding a bit strangled to her own ears. “I still don’t know how to respond to some of the things you say.”

“It was just an observation,” he said, and moved out of her path.

She gathered her things quickly. “I should go. I’ll see you next week.”

“I’ll try not to make you uncomfortable with uninvited accolades.”

Though the words could be interpreted as somewhat defensive, he didn't seem to be annoyed. She looked at him from beneath her lashes and saw that his mouth was tilted with a very faint smile. Which made her feel a little foolish for overreacting to what he had apparently considered a simple compliment.

What was it about Evan that made her so often feel like such a fool around him?

She moved toward the door. "Next week," she repeated, vowing she would have herself firmly under control by then.

"Renae?" His voice stopped her just as she reached for the doorknob.

"Yes?" she asked without turning around.

"I miss him, too."

Once again, he had floored her with a few simple words. Unable to respond, she merely nodded and opened the door, stepping through it and closing it quickly behind her.

Sitting in her car a few minutes later, she gripped the top of the steering wheel and rested her forehead against her hands, remembering Evan's words. His tone had been sincere, and his voice had held an old pain she believed was genuine. Whatever still simmered between her and Evan, Evan did miss his friend.

She reminded herself that their one impetuous kiss hadn't exactly been a betrayal of Jason, especially since they'd walked away quickly and had never allowed themselves to be alone together again after that. It hadn't been long afterward, in fact, that Evan had joined the army, saying he wanted to make a

contribution to the war against terrorism that had been raging so furiously then. He'd been home on leave the weekend Jason died.

Even knowing they'd done nothing wrong, she still struggled with old guilt Evan probably couldn't understand. Guilt because she and Jason had parted with an uneasy truce after a quarrel. And guilt because, even though she had been a good wife to Jason and had loved him very much, she'd never been quite sure what she would have done had Evan answered differently when she'd asked him to give her a reason not to marry Jason.

Thursday evening, Renae sat in an uncomfortable, straight-backed chair in the school auditorium, watching Leslie and Daniel take their bows on stage along with the other first graders who had participated in the program at this month's PTA meeting. Along with the other audience members, Renae clapped heartily, laughing wryly when irrepressible Daniel pumped a fist in satisfaction that the performance was over.

"They did so well," Lucy said, beaming with pride. "I think they were the stars of the show."

Because neither of the twins had been featured singers in the medley of children's tunes the classes had performed, Renae merely smiled.

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