

A close-up photograph of a man and a woman looking down together. The woman has dark, curly hair and is wearing a light-colored top. The man has a beard and is wearing a blue shirt. They are both smiling slightly and looking towards the bottom left of the frame. A large pink rectangle is overlaid on the bottom half of the image, containing the author's name and the title. The publisher's name and series are at the bottom.

CHRISTINE RIMMER

A husband
She Couldn't
Forget

MILLS & BOON
True Love

Christine Rimmer
A Husband She Couldn't Forget
Серия «The Bravos of
Valentine Bay», книга 6
Серия «Mills & Boon True Love»

Аннотация

Can losing her memory... Help her find her future?When Alyssa Santangelo, is involved in an accident she wakes to find she has no memory of the last seven years, and the fact she is divorced from the only man she's ever loved! Refusing to accept the end of her marriage she must prove she has not given up on Connor... especially when a night of passion leads to an unexpected surprise...

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The career she couldn't remember...

The marriage she couldn't forget

Aly Santangelo's car accident left her with no memory of the past seven years—not her move to New York, nor her divorce from Connor Bravo. Connor reminds the vulnerable beauty that they're no longer together, even as he lets her into his home—and his bed. But when unchecked passion leads to an unplanned pregnancy, Aly vows to play for keeps!

CHRISTINE RIMMER came to her profession the long way around. She tried everything from acting to teaching to telephone sales. Now she's finally found work that suits her perfectly. She insists she never had a problem keeping a job—she was merely gaining “life experience” for her future as a novelist. Christine lives with her family in Oregon. Visit her at

christinerimmer.com

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A Husband She Couldn't Forget

Christine Rimmer

MILLS & BOON

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A HUSBAND SHE COULDN'T FORGET

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For MSR, always.

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[Chapter One](#)

The accident never should have happened. And it wouldn't have happened if Alyssa Santangelo hadn't let herself get distracted by thoughts of the past.

With a long stay in her hometown ahead of her, Aly had promised herself that this time, she would not try to keep a low profile. This time, she wouldn't be slinking around town like a heartsick fool, trying to avoid any chance she might run into the guy who'd lied and broken her heart and had her served with divorce papers after making zero effort to work things out.

And there. She'd just done it. Let her mind stray into dangerous territory. She wasn't going to do that. She would not think about *him*.

And she *wasn't* thinking about him. Not really.

She was only reassuring herself as to how this visit would go, only bolstering her resolution to stand tall and be strong. With a deep breath and a determined smile, she focused on the road

ahead of her.

The drive from Portland International to Valentine Bay was a beautiful one. They called this section of US Route 26 the Sunset Highway. It wound in and out of the national forest, working its way west toward the setting sun.

It was just twilight on a warm Saturday evening in July. Aly had the windows down in her rental car and the air smelled of spruce and fir. Of Oregon.

Of home.

And her thoughts...

Her thoughts just wouldn't behave. They kept drifting, wandering, pretending to stay in the present, and then circling back again.

To her ex, to Connor Bravo.

Really, she hardly thought of the guy anymore—or if she did, she reminded herself firmly to *stop* thinking of him, to count her blessings instead.

And her blessings were many. She had a job she loved at Strategic Image. The ad agency had hired her as an assistant to an assistant straight out of the University of Oregon. She'd started at the bottom of the ladder, but she'd moved up fast. She'd made friends, good friends, the kind a woman can count on. Her current apartment in Tribeca was perfect, a small space, but with a huge closet for her fabulous wardrobe. She was living her dream in New York, New York.

Only one thing was missing—the right man to share her life

with.

It wasn't as though she hadn't tried to find him. She put herself out there, dating guys her friends had introduced her to and guys she met via Match and Coffee Meets Bagel. Somehow, though, that special something was always missing. Her relationships never lasted that long. The most recent of those had ended a couple weeks ago. Kyle Santos was a great guy. He just wasn't the *right* guy. It had seemed wrong to drag things out, so she'd broken it off with him.

And seriously, what was she brooding about? She was only twenty-nine and mostly focused on her job. She would find the man for her, eventually. And she would get it right the second time around.

Coming home, though...

Well, it was tough. The memories were everywhere she turned. She and Connor used to drive this stretch of highway together several times a year, going back and forth from OU in Eugene. They would stop at rustic, logging-themed Camp 18 for burgers and to give their phones a workout snapping pictures of each other, mugging it up with the chainsaw sculpture of Big Foot at the entrance to the gift shop.

Those were the good times. The *best* times.

Too bad Connor had screwed everything up, lying to keep her and then refusing to even try the life he'd sworn he was eager to live with her.

She blinked and refocused and reminded herself yet again to

cut it out.

Didn't work.

Seven years since he'd divorced her, and still it took only an hour on the Sunset Highway for the memories to come flooding back.

Did he ever think of her?

Oh, I don't think so...

During one brief visit home five years ago, she'd seen him down on Beach Street with a blonde. They'd looked like a Ralph Lauren ad, Connor and the blonde, both of them all tawny, tanned and fit. Aly had ducked into a leather goods store before he could spot her, but the damage was done. The sight of him with another woman had cut her to the quick.

Aly clutched the steering wheel more tightly. She swallowed hard and blinked against the hot pressure of rising tears.

Seriously. What was the matter with her?

Seven years since her marriage ended. She hadn't spoken to the man once in all that time and she never would. She really was over him, definitely.

"You're doing it. Again," she whispered at the windshield, her voice disgustingly breathy, weighted with despair. She flexed her fingers to relax them. It was years ago. It didn't matter. She wasn't coming home for him.

"Woman up," she muttered to the empty car.

If she saw him, she saw him. *Get over it. He has.*

Up ahead, headlights gleamed. It was weird, in the fading

light. The oncoming vehicle almost looked as though it had swerved into her lane.

Scant seconds later she realized the horrible truth. The headlights *were* in her lane.

With a sharp cry, she jerked the wheel hard to the right to avoid impact—too hard, she realized too late. The thick trunk of a Douglas fir reared up beyond the windshield.

A split second later, the world went black.



Voices.

They seemed to come from all around her. Voices and sirens and strange sounds—air escaping, metal creaking. Her chest felt like someone had whacked it with a hammer. And the skin of her face, which was buried in something that smelled like singed baby powder, burned as though she'd face-planted on asphalt.

She heard a groaning sound. It came from her own mouth.

A man's voice near her left ear said, "She's coming around."

Another groan escaped her. Gritting her teeth, she willed her body into action and somehow managed to flop back away from the smelly thing that covered her face—an air bag! The smelly thing was an air bag.

With yet another groan, she put it together. Somehow, she'd been in an accident, and it looked pretty bad...

Carefully, she turned her head to meet the worried eyes of the state trooper staring at her through the wide-open driver's-

door window. Red light from a light bar reflected on his face in strobe-like flashes.

“It’s okay,” the trooper promised, in that tone people use when it really isn’t, but what else can you say? “We’re going to get you out of there. Can you talk to me?”

“I...yes. Of course.”

“How are you feeling?”

“Uh.” She tried to decide. “I think I’m all in one piece, at least.”

“Good girl. What else?”

“There’s...some pain. My chest aches. And my face...” It really did feel as though someone had taken a cheese grater to her cheeks and forehead.

“That’s from the air bag,” the trooper said.

Aly shut her eyes and dropped her head to the seat rest again. “Everything hurts, but I don’t think anything is broken...” Or maybe she was just in shock and didn’t even realize she was almost dead.

“Hold tight,” the trooper said. “I promise we’re going to get you out of there as quickly as we can...”

It took a while. They brought out the Jaws of Life and sawed her free of the ruined car, which had folded itself around her like a big metal pretzel.

The EMTs moved in. They talked about how lucky she was—her face a little scratched up, a big bruise forming like a beauty pageant banner diagonally across her chest from the seat belt. On

her left knee, she had a cut that would need stitches.

And she'd sustained what they called a mild traumatic brain injury—seriously, who even knew you could use the words *mild* and *traumatic brain injury* in the same sentence? One of the EMTs said they estimated she'd been unconscious for less than ten minutes. Patiently, they guided Aly through the basic vision and consciousness tests.

She passed, the paramedic reassured her. She was going to be fine. The woman patted her shoulder gently. And Aly felt such gratitude, like a warm wave washing through her aching chest.

So what if everything hurt? She was lucky to be alive and relatively unharmed.

The EMTs gave permission for her to talk briefly to another state trooper, a woman this time. Aly tried to remember. She recalled passing Camp 18, but after that, it was all a blur.

“I don't know, really, how it happened, or why I hit that tree. I think there were headlights, maybe, coming at me, in my lane...”

The trooper nodded. “We have a witness, a woman in a vehicle who wasn't far behind you. She saw the other car in your lane and barely swerved in time to avoid a collision herself. She's the one who called 9-1-1. Unfortunately, her description of the oncoming car is too vague for identification. She said she thought it was a dark sedan.”

“So, whoever it was will get off scot-free?”

The trooper gave a shrug of regret. “It happens—too often, sad to say.”

Aly put her hand to her head. "I'm sorry. My head really hurts."

The officer was sympathetic. "I'll let you go, then." She gave Aly a card. "Call this number if anything more comes back to you."

"What about my things? They're still in what's left of the car."

The trooper gave her another card with a number to call to get her stuff once what was left of the car had been "processed" and "cleared."

And that was it. The EMTs loaded her into an ambulance and off they went to Valentine Bay Memorial.



At the hospital, she kept telling everyone that she felt fine, just a little banged up with a headache. She asked to call her parents. The request brought soothing noises and promises that she could make the call "soon." They took her vitals and examined her more thoroughly for any new and potentially worrisome symptoms from her head injury. The air bag burns were declared minor and treated with a gentle cleaning and antibiotic ointment.

In the end, the doctor in charge prescribed a night at the hospital for observation. Barring complications, he promised, she would be released the next morning.

They moved her to a regular room and she used the phone by the bed to call her mom, who answered on the second ring with, "If you're a telemarketer, hang up now."

Her cheeks still hurt, but Aly smiled anyway. “Hey, Mom. It’s me.”

Catriona Santangelo said nothing for a slow count of three, after which she stated carefully, “You’re not calling from your phone and we expected you two hours ago.”

“Yeah, well...” Alyssa let her head drop back to the pillow with a sigh. “Can you believe I don’t even know where to start with this?”

“What’s happened?”

“I’m fine, I promise you. Are you in bed?” Aly’s mom was forty-eight—and seven months pregnant with her fifth son. In recent weeks, her blood pressure had climbed. She’d had cramping and some bleeding and the family doctor had put her on modified bed rest—which was why Aly, who never came home for more than a few days at a stretch, had taken an extended leave from her job in Manhattan. At a time like this, Cat needed her only daughter at her side and Aly needed to be with her mom.

Cat scoffed, “Of course I’m in bed. I hardly dare to get up to go to the bathroom. The men in this family will be the death of me, I swear. *Overprotective* is too tame a word for your father and your brothers, let me tell you.”

“And yet here you are, having another one.”

“God never gives us more than we can handle—plus, well, you know your father.” Ernesto Santangelo was a plumber by trade. He was strong and fit at fifty and he loved Aly’s mom with a fiery passion, to say the least. Cat’s voice grew husky. “Impulsive and

so romantic. What can I say? I could never resist him.”

“La, la, la—I don’t want to hear about your, er, private life, Mom.”

Cat started laughing and then Aly was laughing, too—until she gasped at the pain around her ribs. “Ouch!”

“All right, Alyssa,” her mother said sternly. “What is going on?”

“It’s nothing that serious. I was in a little accident, that’s all. My rental car was totaled, but I’m going to be fine.”

More dead air on the line. Alyssa’s mom never got hysterical. Cat was the strong, silent, effective type in any emergency. “Tell me,” she finally commanded. “Tell me everything. Now.”

Aly explained what she could remember about the accident, finishing with, “I don’t really remember why, exactly, I veered off the road and hit a tree, but when I came to, the car was a goner.”

“Thank God you’re all right—but a *mild* TBI? That’s still a concussion, right?”

“Yes. And do not get out of bed, Mom. Do not come to the hospital.”

“But are you sure that you’re...?”

“A little battered and very relieved to be all in one piece. That’s where I am on this. They’re keeping me overnight, but only for observation. It’s nothing serious and I’ll be home with you in the morning.”

After another unhappy silence, Cat promised to stay put.

“Your father and your brothers will be there soon,” she said.
“Give me the number there in your room.”

Aly rattled it off.

“I love you, Alyssa Siobhan.”

“I love *you*, Mom.” She said goodbye.

Twenty minutes later, her dad appeared. He kissed her carefully on her forehead and called her Bella, the way he always did. She reassured him that she was doing fine.

Within the next half hour, her four brothers filed in. They surrounded her, a wall of Italian-Irish-American testosterone, their thick, dark eyebrows scrunched up with worry for her. She reassured them that it looked worse than it was and the doctors were only keeping her till tomorrow to be on the safe side.

Her dad announced that he and the boys would be staying at the hospital with her. The nurses brought extra chairs and the men settled in to keep her company. They took turns visiting the cafeteria and the beverage machines in the waiting area for refreshments. Her head was aching a little and she started to feel really tired.

“Go to sleep,” urged her dad, his warm, rough hand gently squeezing her arm. “We’ll be here when you wake up.”

“Dad, really. You guys don’t need to stay.”

He patted her hand. “Just rest. Close your eyes and let it all go...”

She followed his whispered instructions. But before she could drift off, a nurse came in and shooed the men out to take her

blood pressure and her temperature, to test her pupil reaction and ask her about her level of pain, which was minimal.

When the nurse left, her dad and her brother Marco returned to sit with her. They talked a little. Marco reported that he'd enjoyed his first year at OU. Her dad reassured her that her mom was safe at home, tucked into bed per doctor's orders, with her brother Pascal's wife, Sandy, looking after her.

Aly's eyes drifted closed again and her father's deep voice faded to a low drone in the background...



She woke late in the night, with no idea where she was. Startled, she popped up straight in the strange bed and sent a bewildered glance around the dark room.

She saw her oldest brother, Dante, slumped down asleep in the bedside chair. Something must have happened to her...

She glanced across the room and saw the institutional clock on the wall. There was a bed tray and rollers next to her bed—a hospital bed.

An accident. I've been in an accident—haven't I?

Her knee throbbed dully, her cheeks and forehead burned and she had a mild headache. Every time she took a breath, her chest hurt—from the seat belt, most likely.

She must have made a noise, because as she sagged back to the pillow again, Dante flinched and opened his eyes. "Hey, little sis." He'd always called her that, even though she was second

oldest, after him. “How you feelin’?”

“Everything aches,” she grumbled. “But I’ll live.” Longing flooded her, for the comfort of her husband’s strong arms. She needed him near. He would soothe all her pains and ease her weird, formless fears. “Where’s Connor gotten off to?”

Dante’s mouth fell half-open, as though in bafflement at her question. “Connor?”

He looked so befuddled, she couldn’t help chuckling a little, even though laughing made her chest and ribs hurt. “Yeah. Connor. You know, that guy I married nine years ago—my husband, your brother-in-law?”

Dante sat up. He also continued to gape at her like she was a few screwdrivers short of a full tool kit. “Uh, what’s going on? You think you’re funny?”

“Funny? Because I want my husband?” She bounced back up to a sitting position. “What, exactly, is happening here? I mean it, Dante. Be straight with me. Where’s Connor?”

Now Dante sat very still, as though he feared the slightest movement might set her off, make her do something dangerous.

And she *felt* dangerous. A scream of fear and longing crawled up her throat. She swallowed it down and demanded, “I want Connor. Go get him and tell him I need him. Now.” Her headache was worse, pounding so hard, a merciless hammer inside her head.

Dante patted the air between them, trying to soothe her, to settle her down. “Aly, you have to—”

“Connor!” She practically shouted. “Get me my husband, Dante. Bring him in here to me. Now.”

“Okay.” Dante leaped to his feet. “Take a deep breath and try to relax. I’ll be right back...” He raced out the door.

She pressed a hand to the sore spot on her head as it throbbed all the harder. “Connor,” she whispered, shutting her eyes, *willing* him to come to her. *Connor, I need you. I need you so much...*

A nurse bustled in, Dante close on her heels. “What can I get for you, Alyssa?”

“My husband,” she demanded. “I want you to get my husband in here now.”

Chapter Two

Wednesday morning, just as Connor Bravo was about to leave for work, the doorbell rang.

Connor dropped his briefcase on the floor by the stairs leading down to the garage and went to answer, half expecting it to be Mrs. Garber from next door looking for Maurice. The lean, black cat was always getting out. He would strut around the neighborhood, his skinny tail held high, like he owned every house on Sandpiper Lane—and the people in them, too.

But it wasn’t Mrs. Garber.

“Hello, Connor.” Dante Santangelo, dressed in Valentine Bay PD blues, stuck his fists in his pockets and gave Connor a barely perceptible nod.

“Dante.” What was he doing here? Once, they’d been best friends. But for the past seven years, they’d both taken pains to

steer clear of each other.

Alyssa? The name ricocheted in his brain, a boomerang with sharp edges.

Had something happened to her? Just the thought had him widening his stance to keep from staggering where he stood. “What?” he heard himself ask, the single word ragged, overloaded with equal parts fear and regret—fear for whatever could be so bad it had brought her brother to his door again.

And regret for all the ways that he, Connor, had messed up. He’d been a complete ass and he knew it, a selfish kid who’d screwed up his marriage to the most amazing woman in the world—and then refused to even try to fix what he’d broken.

How many times had he wished he could have another shot?
Too many.

But he didn’t deserve another shot. He’d thrown away what he wanted most. And when he’d finally admitted to himself what an idiot he’d been, it was a long way past too late.

The hard fact was that the best thing he could do for Aly was to leave her the hell alone, let her live the life she loved in New York City and find a better guy than him.

Dante’s expression gave him nothing. “We need to talk.”

His heart in his throat and his gut twisted into a double knot, Connor stepped back and gestured his ex-best friend inside.

Dante refused Connor’s stilted offer of coffee. In the living room, Aly’s brother stood by the slate fireplace and flatly recited the scary facts. “Four days ago, driving home from Portland

International, reportedly in an effort to avoid an oncoming car, Aly swerved and ran into a tree. She wasn't speeding, but she was going fast enough that her rental car was totaled."

Connor's heart, still stuck in his throat, seemed to have turned to a block of solid ice. "What are you telling me? My God, is she...?"

"She's alive, but she's pretty banged up. And she had a concussion. She was knocked unconscious, though not for that long."

Connor's heart slid down into his chest again and recommenced beating—too fast. "So then, you're saying she's okay?"

"Not exactly..."

Connor shoved his hands in his own pockets to keep from grabbing Dante and shaking more information from him—or worse, punching him a few times until he finally explained what had happened to Aly. "Is she okay or not?"

"At first, we thought she was going to be fine."

"But...?"

"She woke up before dawn the morning after the wreck, and asked for you."

For a split second, he was the happiest man on the planet—until reality hit him. "She hates me. Why would she ask for me?"

Dante looked at him kind of warily. "Look, man. Maybe you ought to sit down, you know?"

"Just answer the question."

“Suit yourself. It’s, well, it’s some kind of weird amnesia.”

“What? Wait. Amnesia? What are you telling me? You’re making no sense.”

Dante glared. “I’m trying. But you need to shut up long enough for me to explain.”

Connor winced. “Sorry.” He forked his fingers back through his hair. “I’ll keep my mouth shut. Go on.”

Dante eyed him with skepticism, but then laid it right out there. “My sister is firmly convinced that the two of you are still married.”

Still married. Him and Aly? “That’s crazy.”

“Now you’re getting the picture.” Dante’s expression was bleak. “We’ve tried everything—arguing, reasoning, begging, pacifying. Nothing seems to get her past it. She will not accept that you two have been divorced for years.”

“But...her doctors, they must have some idea of what to do, how to handle this.”

“They’ve tried. There have been CT scans and MRIs, long visits with a therapist—and with Father Francis, too.”

Father Francis. The name brought back memories. Of the little Catholic church on Ocean Road where all the Santangelos had been baptized. Of Aly, a vision in white, coming down the aisle to him. Their wedding had been small, just the families, and put together quickly because they wanted to be married more than they’d wanted all the trappings of a big ceremony and a fancy reception. Father Francis had led them through their wedding

VOWS.

Dante continued, “The brain imaging tests revealed nothing out of the normal range. Father Francis keeps reminding us that God will find a way. The doctors predict that over time she will remember she’s not married anymore and hasn’t been for years. Her real life will come back to her.”

“But...what about right now? How is she now?”

“She’s suffering.” Dante’s dark eyes accused him. “She keeps demanding to see you. At first, she cried and carried on, refusing to listen when we told her that you’d divorced her years ago. Now, she just quietly insists that she doesn’t believe us and she needs to talk to you. We’re kind of out of options at this point. And she’s only getting calmer—and at the same time, more scarily insistent. She says that if you won’t come to her, she’ll hunt you down and demand to know what’s going on, why you’ve suddenly deserted her.”

Connor swore low and sank to the fireplace seat.

Dante went on, “It got worse this morning. She’s started to think that something bad must have happened to you. She’s staying at my folks’ house. Mom called me a half an hour ago to tell me that at breakfast Aly called Dad a liar right to his face. About broke the old man’s heart. I mean, she *is* his favorite. She told Dad she needed him to tell her why we were all keeping the awful truth from her. My mother’s pregnant, on bed rest. She doesn’t need the extra stress of worrying that Aly’s going to climb out a window and run off in search of you.”

“Of course not.” Connor had always liked Aly’s mom. “Cat’s having another baby?” She had to be almost fifty.

Dante sneered at him. “Didn’t I just say that?”

Connor put up a hand. “Can you dial back the hostility a notch or two, maybe? It’s not helping.”

“Yeah, well. Let’s just be honest here. I don’t trust you. You bring out the worst in me.”

“What do you want me to do, Dante?”

Aly’s brother shook his head. “I hate it. I don’t want you anywhere near her. But she really needs to see you. She needs to hear the truth from you.”

“No problem.” He’d deserted her once. This time, he would be there when she needed him. “I’ll go to her. You said she’s at your parents’ house?”

“Yeah. They discharged her from Memorial day before yesterday.”

“I’ll go over to your folks’ house right now.” He stood.

“You’ll talk to her new shrink first,” growled Dante. “And you’ll do what the doctor tells you to do.”

Connor put up both hands in complete surrender. “However it has to be, I’m in. Where do I go to see the psychiatrist?”

“*You* don’t go anywhere. I’ll drive you there.”

“Why?”

“The family won’t have you taking this over, trying to run this show. You’re not her husband anymore. You’ve got no claim on her and if you want to help, you’ll do it our way.”

A spike of adrenaline had Connor on the verge of saying something he would almost certainly regret. But he wasn't the same hotheaded, self-centered kid he'd been when he'd ruined his marriage to Aly. This wasn't about him. It wasn't about Dante. It wasn't about their lifelong friendship that had been tested more than once and ended up turning into something hard and dark and ready to explode.

This was about Aly. Connor *would* remember that. "Fine. I'll ride with you." He took his cell from his pocket. "Let me just call Daniel." The oldest of Connor's siblings, Daniel ran the family company, Valentine Logging. Connor was CFO.

Dante eyed him with furious suspicion. "We don't need the family business on the street. What's your brother got to do with this?"

"For God's sake, chill. I need to let Daniel know I won't be in today."



Dr. Serena Warbury had her office in Valentine Bay's downtown historic district. She'd taken a room on the second floor of a rambling two-story Craftsman-style house repurposed for professional use. Connor and Dante sat in the downstairs waiting room until Dr. Warbury was ready for them.

Dante didn't even try to make conversation. He sat with his elbows on the chair arms, fingers laced together between them, and never once even glanced in Connor's direction.

Connor thumbed through a dog-eared *Sports Illustrated*. When that got old, he stared out the window and tried not to worry too much about Aly. Eventually, the therapist came down the stairs and led them up to the second floor.

Right off, Connor liked Dr. Warbury. She was smart and direct. It took her no time at all to figure out that Dante's hostility toward his ex-brother-in-law wouldn't help the situation. She sent Dante back downstairs to wait. He wasn't happy about it, but he went.

Connor refused a cup of herbal tea. He took a chair by a window with a partial view of the Pacific a few blocks away. The therapist repeated what Dante had already told him about Aly's condition and how it would most likely fade over time on its own.

She went on to explain, "Right now, we want her to take it easy. That's unlikely to happen until we can reduce the anguish and confusion she's suffering, with her brain telling her one thing and everyone else insisting otherwise. She needs a lot of rest and as little excitement and stress as possible."

"I get all that. But what can I *do*?"

"To help her, you will have to be patient and kind—and honest, too. The whole point is to reassure Alyssa that everything will work out, while at the same time never giving her any less than the truth. You can't 'humor' her or go along when she insists something's true that isn't. You have to be frank. You are divorced and have been for several years. If she tries to insist otherwise, you must quietly and firmly tell her that's not true."

“No lies. I can do that.”

“And you mustn’t indulge your own emotions, either. You have to be calm and steady. Let her lead the conversation. And no matter what she says, you must not become defensive or angry. This is not about you, not an opportunity for you to justify your past actions, whatever they might have been. I’m not privy to the details of your divorce, but I understand from what members of her family have said that it was not amicable.”

“They’re right. I was a dick, okay?”

“Well.” Dr. Warbury seemed to be hiding a smile. “Don’t be overly hard on yourself, either.”

“I get it. I honestly do.”

“If you’re going to become upset, you will upset Alyssa.”

“I won’t upset her,” he vowed, and wondered at himself to promise such a thing. Anything could happen. She might take one look at him and realize he really just pissed her the hell off, no matter how bland and even-tempered he managed to be.

Dr. Warbury smoothed her yellow skirt. “I believe it could be helpful to her, to see you and reassure herself that you are all right, to hear it from you that you two are divorced. But if you don’t think you can keep control of your emotions, please say so now and I will recommend to you and to her family that you stay away.”

By then, he was seriously considering backing out. If seeing him ended up only making it worse for her, he would never forgive himself.

But at the same time, he really wanted to help—and he needed to see her, to find out for himself just how bad off she was, to do whatever he could to make things more bearable for her. She'd always been so strong and focused, so totally in charge of herself and her life. It must be killing her to have her own mind betraying her, to have everyone telling her that reality was not as she believed it to be.

He had no illusions. There was no possibility of a future for them, together, anymore. They'd had something real and true and beautiful. All that was gone now, broken beyond repair, mostly by him. He didn't want to fix it. He didn't believe it could be fixed.

He just wanted Aly to be whole and happy. He wanted her to be ready, the way she'd always been, to take on the world. He wanted to be able to picture her living the East Coast life she'd created for herself, making it big in New York, New York.

"I'll follow your instructions," he said. "Please tell her brother it's all right that I see her."



The ride to Cat and Ernesto's house was as silent as the one to Dr. Warbury's office had been.

Dante seethed. Connor had the feeling that anything he said might set him off. He and Dante were the same age, both of them two years older than Alyssa.

It was sad, really. What they'd come to. All through

elementary school, middle school and high school, it was Connor and Dante, joined at the hip, the best of friends. Alyssa had been off-limits to Connor then. A guy didn't put moves on his best friend's little sister—no matter how much he wanted to.

Aly hadn't helped. She'd done everything in her power to get him to give in and make a move on her.

She'd started crushing on him when she was thirteen. By then, she already had serious curves to go with her beautiful face, her thick, dark hair, cobalt-blue eyes and milk-white skin. She started wearing shorts and tight T-shirts every chance she got, just to drive him crazy.

But he'd pretended he didn't notice. His mom and dad had died that year, the year Aly was thirteen. They'd drowned in a tsunami during a vacation in Thailand, of all the awful ways to go. He was all broken up about it, like everyone else in the Bravo family. Whenever Aly tried to get close to him, he would think of his lost parents and nurture the ache inside himself, the feeling of bitter loneliness to be without his mom and dad. He'd always felt a little guilty that he used his parents' death to protect himself, to keep from getting too close to Dante's gorgeous little sister.

After a year or so of trying really hard to get his attention, Aly seemed to get the message that he wasn't going there. She went totally the other way, completely ignoring him. He'd told himself that all he felt was relief. She was Dante's precious sister and Dante was his best friend in the world. He didn't need that kind of trouble.

Not long after she turned fifteen, Aly started hanging out with her first boyfriend, Craig Watson. Connor had managed to keep his cool about that, but barely. He'd had a lot of violent fantasies wherein he beat the crap out of Craig. Somehow, he'd managed not to act on those fantasies.

Over time, he'd even succeeded in convincing himself that everything was cool between him and Aly, that he thought of her as an honorary little sister and nothing more.

Until they met up at OU. She was a freshman and he was in his junior year, and Dante was miles away at Portland State. At first, they pretended to each other that they were just friends, that Connor was looking out for her, taking the big brother role while she adjusted to college life.

That pretense died fast.

They were lovers within a week, and by the second week of classes, they were inseparable. Dante completely lost it when he found out. He came after Connor. They fought hard and dirty. Connor broke Dante's nose and ended up busting the metacarpal bone of his little finger in the process.

But their injuries healed. In time, Dante forgave him and agreed to be best man at the wedding.

Everything was pretty much perfect. Except for Alyssa's dream for her future, the one Connor had pretended he shared.



Cat and Ernesto Santangelo still lived in the big two-story

house where they'd raised their family. Their four sons were all grown up. Pascal and Tony were married, with kids. Dante was divorced with twin daughters. Marco, the youngest, would be nineteen now. Last Connor had heard, Marco still lived at home.

Dante parked in the big graveled turnaround in front of the house, filling an empty space between two other vehicles. A mud-spattered quad cab was parked several yards away. Had all the Santangelo sons shown up for this?

Dante turned off the engine. "Mom and Aly are both fragile right now," he warned. "You give either of them the slightest hint of grief and you will be dealing with—"

Connor cut him off with a wave of his hand. "I get it. Let's go in."

In the house, the full gauntlet of Santangelo men waited for him in the big living room. All four of them—Ernesto, Pascal, Tony and Marco—stared at him through identical angry, coffee-brown eyes. Dante, too, for that matter.

Ernesto, as the patriarch, did the talking, his voice low and carefully controlled. "We don't want you here, but what else can a man do? My Bella won't quit asking for you. You'd better not screw this up or we'll make it a family project to rearrange your face for you."

Okay, the threats were getting really old. He was here, wasn't he? He'd promised to keep himself under control. What more did they want? About now, it was getting pretty hard not to imagine how much he would enjoy mixing it up with a Santangelo or two.

Aly, he reminded himself. *She's why you're here.*

Connor kept his voice calm and said what Dr. Warbury had warned him to say. "I'm not here to cause trouble, only to help."

Several seconds of cold stares ensued. Finally, Ernesto nodded at Marco. "Go on, get your sister."

"Wait a minute," Connor put a lot of effort into keeping his voice low and easy. "I'm guessing Aly would rather meet with me in private. I have promised before and I'll promise again to behave myself. I'm just thinking she'd rather do this without her father and her brothers breathing down her neck."

"Forget that," Ernesto and Dante said almost in unison.

Ernesto went on, "You know nothing about what my daughter would rather do. It's happening here, in the open, where we can keep an eye on you. You will tell her that you're not married anymore, that you haven't been married for a long time and that's gonna be that."

Connor let a shrug speak for him. He'd tried. At this point, it seemed counterproductive to push the issue.

Marco vanished into the front hall. Nobody spoke. An endless couple minutes ticked by.

And then, at last, Aly appeared in the open doorway to the foyer, with Marco right behind her. She had bruises on her pale arms and two black eyes. A white bandage covered a spot on the left side of her head. The gorgeous, milky skin of her cheeks and forehead was scraped raw and scabbed over. Cuts and scratches marred the soft column of her neck. Only her glorious mane of

dark hair appeared unscathed, except for that shaved area on the left side. It was covered with a white bandage. She looked like hell—and so damn beautiful it hurt.

She gasped at the sight of him. He probably did the same. It rocked him, rocked him deep, just to see her again.

There was a moment, endless and so sweet. They stared at each other. God, it was good. A complete lie, yeah, but perfect nonetheless. She was looking at him the way she used to before he screwed it all up. Like he was everything that mattered, the center of her world.

As the seconds ticked by, he grew more and more certain that she would throw herself into his arms. He could not wait.

She didn't do it, though. Instead she came forward with her head high and held out a hand. Every nerve in his body on fire with hopeless yearning, he took it.

“Come on,” she said, and turned for the foyer again.

“Hey!” Dante started after them as the other Santangelo men let out a chorus of protests.

“Aly, no...”

“Aly, stay here.”

“You're not leaving this room,” said her dad.

Still holding tight to Connor's hand, Aly stopped in the doorway. She turned and pinned them all with a look. “I will talk to my husband *alone* if you don't mind.”

Dante froze where he stood.

And Ernesto, who never could refuse her anything, gave in.

“Let them go.” Suddenly, he looked old.

Not another word was spoken. Aly led Connor across the foyer and up the stairs. She entered the second room along the upstairs hall, the room that had been hers when she was growing up.

He remembered that room. Even after they got married, her mom had kept it for Aly, with her purple satin bedspread and black lacquer furniture. Pictures of him and Aly and of her school friends had remained stuck beneath the mirror frame of the vanity table.

Not anymore, though. Cat had redone it—as a guest room, apparently. The walls were a tan color, the bedspread a soft blue.

He heard Aly shut the door, and turned from studying the room to face her.

“Oh, God,” she whispered. “Connor. At last.”

And then she did throw herself at him.

Heedless of the rules not to encourage her, he opened his arms and grabbed her close. She hopped up, the way she used to do, and wrapped her arms and legs around him.

“Aly...” He tried to be careful of her, to remember her injuries. But at the same time, he couldn’t crush her close enough. She felt like heaven and the ginger scent of her was so sweet, so well remembered. It filled him with longing and regret.

“Connor...” She lifted her head from where she’d buried it against his shoulder. “Oh, Conn...” Tipping her chin high, she offered her mouth to him, surging up higher, eager to meet his lips.

He'd never wanted anything so much in his life as to steal a kiss from her right now.

But he couldn't do that. It wouldn't be right.

"Hey, now..." Reluctantly, and much more gently than he'd grabbed her, he eased her thighs from around him. Setting her carefully down, he stepped back.

She stared up at him, shattered. "Tell me." Bright red stained her battered cheeks. "Say it."

"I'm sorry, I..." Words failed him.

She'd always been the stronger one. Now, she said it for him in a flat voice. "We're not married. You filed to divorce me seven years ago. I live in New York and I have a fabulous career. And you and me, we're just...*not* anymore."

He blinked down at her. "So then, you do know? You remember now?"

She laughed then, a wild laugh, and tossed her midnight hair. "No, I do not remember." She put both hands to her head, as if to steady her brain after shaking it. "But it's what everyone keeps telling me. It's what I see in your eyes when I look at you." She held up her left hand, poked her thumb at her ring finger. "Bare. That's a big clue, right? My laptop is toast, but they recovered my purse and phone from the wreck of my rental car. I have a New York driver's license. It says my last name is Santangelo. And I'm on social media. I've seen a bunch of great pictures of me with my friends and colleagues in Manhattan. I wear a lot of black and I have amazing shoes." She put her hands to her

head again. “Also, everything’s pretty fuzzy in here. I *believe*, I’m absolutely certain in my heart, that you and I are still married. But I don’t really *remember* much specifically—about you and me and our life now. I can’t tell you where we live or what we do, together, day by day...”

“Because we aren’t together.” The words came out of him sounding cold. Cruel. He tried for a gentler tone. “Not anymore. Not for seven years.”

“My family has explained it all to me, over and over, that we broke up because you wanted to stay in Oregon and I was determined to have a career with a major advertising firm. That you divorced me when I took a job in New York.”

“That’s right,” he said gently. “That’s what happened. That’s the truth, at least basically.”

She sneered at him. “Basically, huh? So then, what is the deeper truth, Connor? Tell me about that.”

He’d come here to be honest with her, but still he hesitated, reluctant to admit what a rotten jerk he’d been. “You really don’t remember any of it?”

She raised her hand and laid it carefully over the white bandage on the side of her head. “Just...random images. Nothing makes sense.”

He stared down at her. Where to even start?

“Tell me,” she demanded again.

He made himself do it. “From the first, when we were at OU together, you were all about getting out, getting away. No small-

town life for you, you told me. And I went along with you, I *agreed* with you. I said I wanted what you wanted, that I would go with you. I would get a job in finance. We would take New York by storm. I pretended to be all gung ho about it. You interviewed with your dream company in Manhattan and they hired you. We even signed a lease on a postage stamp of an apartment.”

“But you didn’t really want to go?”

He shook his head. “We were packing for the move when I finally admitted I didn’t want to do it. I wanted a life here in Valentine Bay, working with my brother, building the family business.”

She seemed more confused than before. “You lied because...?”

“I didn’t want to lose you. I told myself you’d change your mind, that deep in your heart, you didn’t want to go, either.”

“But I really *did* want to go?” It wasn’t quite a question.

“Yeah. You did. You really did. Still, when I finally admitted I wasn’t going, you were...patient with me. You tried to compromise, begged me just to try New York for a year and then we would reevaluate.”

“And you?”

“I dug in.” He couldn’t meet those bruised blue eyes. “I said forget it, I wasn’t going. I was so sure that when it came right down to the wire, you wouldn’t leave me, that you would give it up and stay home.”

“But I didn’t.”

“No. You went. I didn’t reach out. You didn’t, either. Two months after you left, I had you served with divorce papers.”

“Connor.”

He looked at her then. Her eyes were wide, full of wonder—or maybe just complete disbelief.

“Nothing?” she whispered. And then her voice gained strength. “You gave me nothing for two months and then, without so much as a phone call, you filed for divorce?”

“That is exactly what I did.”

“You were an assh—”

“Yes, I was. And that’s not all. I scrawled a note on the envelope the divorce papers were in. I wrote, ‘Or you could just come home.’”

She blinked. “Wow. You make yourself sound even worse than what my brothers told me.”

“Yeah, well. You signed the papers and wrote your own little note. Two words. *Or not.*”

That brought a low, husky laugh from her. “Good for me.”

“I can’t say I thought so at the time, but yeah. Good for you.”

“So then what you’re really saying is that you were a total douche-basket who threw me and our marriage away?”

He held her gaze and told the painful truth. “That is exactly what I was and what I did.”

She just stood there looking at him for the longest time. He had no clue what she might be thinking, though he was pretty sure it wasn’t anything good.

And he was having a little trouble not surrendering to his insane compulsion to drop to his knees and beg her for another chance.

He didn't give in to that. He had no right. It was way too late for second chances, for big, dramatic gestures. He was here to help her, not add to her confusion.

In time, she would remember her real life in Manhattan. She would realize that she had everything she'd ever wanted, that she was better off without him.

"I don't know what more to say, except that I am so sorry. And if there's anything I can do now, anything at all to make it better for you, just let me know, okay?"

"Anything." She scoffed. "You'll do anything for me."

"I just want to help."

"Well, okay then. Thank you for coming, Connor. As for what you can do for me, you can get the hell out."

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