

Chapter 1

The house seemed darker than I'd remembered. All the available candles were lit, but the shadows continued lurking everywhere. Continuing to walk to the main room of the house, I placed a candle on a small table. Glancing around the room I noticed the furniture was still covered with sheets that I'd placed over them, a few years ago, when I'd left. The house now seemed musty and felt damp. Feeling a cold draft I quickly located the window that had broken glass - it was then that I felt someone watching me from outside. Pretending to examine the window I tried to see anyone outside, but it was too dark to see anything but shadows. Drawing the curtains together I glanced to make sure the window was locked. Dust drifted down from the window curtains - I'd always hated dust. Coughing and sneezing I went to each window making sure they were locked - if a curtain was open I quickly closed it. I walked back to the front entrance making sure that I'd locked the door - then I slammed the heavy bolt into place - I hated the dark.

Remembering an oil lamp, in the hall closet, I rummaged through boxes until I finally found it. Praying that it would light I carefully lit the wick, waited until it seemed it would stay lit and then placed the glass dome over it. When the flame was brighter and steady I turned it higher chasing away the shadows. Returning to the main room I then managed to light the fireplace and in a few moments warmth filled the room. Now my being in the house felt safer to me and walking to the couch I carefully removed the white sheet, folding it so dust wouldn't fly about. The couch was the same as I remembered it - as if time stood still. Staring at the dark-brown, soft-leather I didn't understand why I was so surprised that it was the same. Sitting down on it felt like I'd been on it yesterday - it had the same relaxing effect as always, and watching the flames dance on the logs in the fireplace I felt myself wanting to sleep. It had been seven hours since I'd left the city and the long hours of driving here were taking its toll. Deciding to relax for an hour I set the alarm on my cell phone, in case I fell asleep.

I'd been asleep only a few moments when I heard a crash of lightning so loud that I thought it must have crashed outside the window. Rushing to the window I drew back one of the curtains and watched another blinding, zig-zagging strike of lightning hit the ground. The rain seemed to come down harder and the wind sounded angrier, as it whipped against the house. I hated the dark and I hated the storms, so this seemed fitting that I finally decided to return to the house and it was dark and storming.

Closing the curtain I curled back up on the sofa...not sleeping...as always, I was waiting for daylight. I'd always hated nightfall - being back in the house made it worse. I'd thought about going to the car and driving back to the town, but fear of the dark kept me from going outside. Every sound seemed worse than it was. Every creak of the house felt as if someone was breaking in. Why I'd thought it would be a good idea to return to this house now felt like a major error of my life, or at least one of the many errors of my life. Finally, after a night of pacing...sitting...pacing...the first light of day made its way across the lawn - I took advantage of it.

As soon as the shadows outside melted away with the light I went out and walked around the house. It was warm outside and quiet...peaceful. At the back of the house I looked up at my

previous bedroom window, but the drapes were closed...the way I'd left them. After walking through the gardens I went back inside and up the stairs to my bedroom. At the bedroom door I waited but didn't quite know what I was standing there waiting for so I finally threw open the door and tried the light switch, but of course there wasn't any electricity. Making a mental note to drive to town and get the electric turned on I walked across the room and drew back the curtains. Then a thought occurred to me that I wasn't planning on staying long enough to warrant turning on the electric so I'd better make sure there were enough candles for nightfall. Light streamed in and after unlocking and opening the window a warm breeze brought life into the room. Sighing, I looked around and walked over to my bed, still with the blue patterned pillows and cover – all exactly as I'd left it. Books, chair, desk, stuffed animals of dogs and horses, all in their same places on the day I methodically closed all the rooms, covered all the furniture, drew closed the drapes and walked out. I remembered that day clearly; since I made sure I didn't look back, not even in the rear view mirror when I drove out of the driveway and turned onto the road. I never looked back – not at all.

Now, years later, for no real reason, I was unlocking the house and opening the drapes. The feeling of wanting to return to the house had been growing and finally with vacation time on my hands I decided that I needed to see it. I figured one more time and then I'd have closure - decide to sell it, rent it out, but finally be done with the thought of returning to it one more time.

Sitting on the bed I leaned back - then lying down I felt a tremendous weight of sadness - the tears started to flow as if they'd been waiting for my return to let loose. With one arm flung over my eyes I sobbed until it seemed I couldn't breathe and just gulped air and dried tears away. I always hated crying and per usual the migraine started slowly with that low pounding, above my right eye. Within an hour it was too painful for me to move, but I managed to walk down the stairs and gulp down Fiorinal. I knew I had to lie down for a few hours or it would get worse. I walked to the front door and was about to lock it when the doorknob turned, the door opened, and I was face to face with the past. My head was pounding so hard that I wasn't sure if this was part of the migraine and he was a migraine apparition, or he was actually standing there.

I thought he smiled, but I couldn't focus. I went to close the door figuring that it was a cruel trick of my headache, but he pushed the door open and his voice was the same deep baritone, "Jessika? What the hell are you doing back here? Why? When did you get here?"

Even his voice made my head pound harder – noise! I had to whisper, since even speaking made my head pound, "I have a migraine; I have no idea why I'm back. I own the house. Last night. There, you have your answers, please close the door on your way out, I have to lie down. Oh, and did I remember to say get the hell out?"

Walking into the living room, I went directly to the couch. Holding my hands over my eyes to block out the light I felt the full force of my headache pain. At least hearing the door shut gave me a moment of relief. It was nice he didn't slam the door behind him when he left, but with my head so painful I didn't give it much thought besides that it was quiet. Cherishing the silence I realized that I faintly heard the kitchen water running...then heard steps coming back into the living room. I opened my eyes and a cold towel was being held out to me. I hated cold towels, I hated anything cold, but they seemed to make the pain lessen so I

always had no choice when my migraine's started. The next moment it was on my forehead and he walked out the front door, without saying anything, and without slamming it.

A few hours later I woke up and the pain in my head was now dull enough to feel hungry - I stood up but felt exhausted. These headaches always exhausted me for a day or two. I held onto the wall, while I walked slowly into the kitchen. I stood in the kitchen doorway staring at food that I knew I didn't have time to purchase. I'd been sleeping so I knew I didn't go to town shopping, yet on the table was fresh bread, and flowers. Quickly opening the refrigerator I found fresh milk, OJ, cheese, eggs and frozen food was in the freezer – all fresh bought food.

Then I heard her entering from the pantry area. Her, with the voice from hell, "Hello Jessika, I bought the food and this is a hot casserole that I'll just put on the stove when you want to eat. You've been sleeping for six hours and its five o'clock pm – sundown is in two hours. How long are you here for?"

I stared at the woman silently praying that I was sleeping and she was part of a nightmare that I'd soon awaken from. She looked older, tired, sounded her usual mean spirited self, but didn't seem to have the razor edge to her voice. Or, maybe I just didn't care anymore. It had been years, I didn't owe this woman anything anymore, and I had no idea why she'd come here. But, I guess it was nice she brought food instead of killing me while I slept. But, then again maybe she was being nice so I'd eat and get sick.

"I don't know how long I'm here for. I wasn't planning on returning."

She seemed to sneer, "Well, dear, you did return and now we're all aware of it."

I sat down at the table and closed my eyes, "Mrs. Colby, I'm not sure who you mean that "all" refer to, but I'm not staying. That should help you feel better about it. Thank you for buying food and if you let me know what it cost, as soon as my headache is more bearable, I'll mail a check to you."

"You don't need to pay me. The payment was already taken care of. Although, I'm sure I don't know why he'd do anything for you."

I didn't open my eyes for two reasons. The main one was that my head was pounding out pain notices to my eyes - the second was I didn't want to make eye contact with her. Not now, not then, not ever.

"Yes, I agree. I'm sure I don't know why he would do anything for me, but I'll make sure that I reimburse him."

I'm not sure why I added anything to the conversation - it must have been the pain, or the smell of the casserole that was so inviting. "Thanks for the hot casserole – I've missed home cooked food."

I heard her laugh and she walked out without another word. I sat in the kitchen not knowing if I wanted to eat, or go to sleep on the kitchen table. I rested my head on my arms and fell asleep.

Chapter 2 – And then there was darkness

It was hours later when I woke and the house was dark. All the candles were out, there was no electric. I grabbed my cell phone and pressed a number so I had some light – actually it didn't do anything but it still felt good seeing light. I didn't move – I couldn't move from fear of the dark. I slid under the kitchen table and stayed there listening to every sound. Was that footsteps? My mind was starting to imagine that every sound I heard was something else. Then I was sure I heard the front door open. I held my breath to hear better and then I saw a light from a flashlight and heard him calling to me.

“Jessika? Are you in here? Why do you have the lights off? HEY, are you okay?”

I felt like an idiot but answered, “I'm in the kitchen under the table. I fell asleep.”

I heard every footstep in the silence of the night and finally the light was shining just below my face so it wasn't in my eyes, “Okay, Jessika, why are you sleeping under the kitchen table?”

I had to laugh at that, “Uh, I fell asleep on the table but crawled under it because I still have a fear of the dark. I have candles in the living room.”

“Well, how about coming out from under the table and I'll get you set up back in the living room?”

I followed him into the living room and noticed the front door was open and a woman was standing there. Then I heard her voice.

“Robert? Did you find your friend?”

As one of the candles came to life and the rest quickly followed I noticed that she'd now stepped into the hallway and was watching us in the living room.

“Yes, Karla, she was in the kitchen sleeping and didn't realize how dark it had gotten. I'll be with you in a moment.”

She turned and said, “Okay, perhaps I can meet Jessika another time. I'll tell Richard that you'll be out in a minute.”

She didn't sound mean spirited, jealous, or nasty and I didn't remember her from when I used to live in the area, but I didn't ask. I was here for a purpose and curiosity wasn't one of them. I did remember that Richard was his older brother but he'd been away quite a bit and I never knew much about him.

“How is Richard? Tell him and his friend thanks for stopping.”

Robert didn't say anything, for a moment, but then explained, “She isn't his friend she's mine, and Richard was the one that suggested that we drive by – then we noticed the lights were out. I think that should about do it. You'll be okay?”

I laughed, "Quite okay. I've been doing okay until tonight. No worries. Thanks, and thank your friend and brother."

"Jessika, her name is Karla and I met her a few months after you left. She's been with me since then."

"Well, that's nice it didn't take you long to find someone, but then I didn't quite think it would."

I heard the door close, on his way out, and it seemed final. Another reason to sell the house quickly was to get rid of the past – all of it. Relaxing lasted only a moment when the doorbell rang. I knew it was him, again. He always had to have the last word, so walking to the door I opened it quickly saying, "This has to stop, I need to get this place sold and get the hell out of here."

Richard was smiling at me, "Well, I don't think any buyers will stop by tonight, may I come in for a while? Robert is driving Karla home and then he'll stop back here to pick me up. I thought perhaps you'd like some company. Is your headache over? My mother said you get unbearable pain."

For a moment I stood there wondering if I was today's topic of conversation, at their house, and I resented it. I must have had a look of disgust since he said, "I'm sorry for bothering you. I can sit down on the wall and wait for Robert to come back." He turned to walk away but I called him back and turned toward the living room.

"Richard! I apologize, come into the living room and thanks for coming back."

Sitting on the couch I watched him sit down in the recliner chair. Leaning forward he stoked the fire and the warmth again flowed gently over the room. When he moved the glow from the flames flickered over his face. I never knew him very well since he was ten years older than me and this was the first time I noticed he had blue eyes, compared to Robert's black eyes.

"Richard, I'd make you some coffee but there isn't any light in the kitchen and the dark makes me nervous." I was uncomfortable when he said he already knew that about me. I never liked feeling someone knew me better than I knew them.

"Jessika, how about we make some hot chocolate. Hot chocolate usually soothes you from what I've heard. We can go to the kitchen and make it - then we can sit in the kitchen, or come back and drink it here."

I wondered what else he knew about me but only answered, "Okay, that sounds good, but I'm not sure we have any."

He stood up and picked up the candle – "Follow me and I'll make sure things stay bright, so you can see." As we passed another candle he picked it up and we walked through the candle lit hallway to the kitchen.

Chapter 3 – The Kitchen

“You can sit right here, Jessika, while I take a quick look at what my Mother brought over. I know she’d have brought you hot chocolate.”

I thought that this was getting stranger by the minute and tried to sound nonchalant as I asked, “Do you and your mother discuss all the returnees to this town?”

He grinned at me, “Nope. Only discussion was you. Hey, I’ve found it! And we’re in luck, it’s double chocolate with marshmallows. I’ll have us some made in a moment. You can decide where you want us to drink it.”

Thinking that it would be more formal and proper in the kitchen, but then warmer and lighter in the living room I decided on the living room. I should have preferred the kitchen, since I didn’t quite know how I felt about him being in my home.

We walked back to the living room and after sitting a moment watching the bright flames I knew I made the correct decision. It was quiet for a few moments, as we stared at the fire, and then he quietly asked, “Did you come back to see Robert?”

He didn’t ask it nastily and he almost seemed concerned - I was formal when I answered, “I came back for personal reasons, none of which encompasses your family, so don’t worry.”

He didn’t show any emotion and his voice still had the same concerned tone, “I’m not worried. It never seemed that you and Robert could make a go of it. I think that’s one of the reasons you left, isn’t it, that you knew the two of you just wouldn’t make it as a married couple?”

I laughed, “Oh jeez, yeah, that and finding him fucking my neighbor, Mrs. Myung, the town whore, on the floor - about where your chair is. I have no idea why he told everyone I broke his heart and then walked out on him.”

Richard was staring at me like I had two heads, “Mrs. M? They moved about two months after you left. They never said anything to anyone. One day there was a sale sign on their lawn and they’d turned it over to a local real estate broker. They accepted an offer below the value of the house, so I was surprised. I guess now I know the reason they moved so quickly.”

Then repeating it more to himself, then to me, he said, “My little brother plugging Mrs. M.?” He looked like he was about to laugh.

I grinned and said, “Your little brother plugging away like a jack hammer, on Mrs. M, on my damn carpet!”

We both started to laugh and he lifted his hot chocolate in a toast, “Well, I guess here’s to Mrs. M, wherever she is and to me finally having the right story. Although, picturing that, is kind of a nightmare.”

I lifted my hot chocolate in a return toast, “Yes, it wasn’t something one would want to have a painting of hanging with the family portraits, for remembrance.” I started to laugh, and then

laughed harder when he jumped up, like the chair was on taboo ground, and sat next to me on the couch.

Sitting next to me he smiled. “Sorry, about asking. Now, I don’t quite feel like sitting over there. Well, now that I have that fact corrected, are you going to live here, after you replace the carpet?” He was smiling when he said that last sentence, but before I could answer it there was a knock on the door.

We glanced at each other knowing it was Robert. He smiled, “Well, we both know who that is – I’ll take door duty.” After a moment he came back and said that Robert was waiting in the car, “Are you going to be okay tonight? I drive down this street on my way to work in the morning. How about I stop by, for no reason other than to stop by?”

I wasn’t sure why or where he was going with all of this but figured his mother wanted him to make sure I left town, so I only said, “Sure, suit yourself, my only requirement is hot coffee - I assume you already know I like French Vanilla.”

Walking him to the door he answered, “Yeah, I knew that.”

“Richard thanks for the company - guess I’ll see you in the morning. Do you have a specific time, but it really isn’t necessary.”

He was already walking down the steps when he yelled back, “Nine on the time question. Coffee – French Vanilla – 2 Sweet & Low.”

I closed the door thinking that I never told him about the 2 Sweet & Low. Walking to the living room I sat down and decided to sleep there since it was light and warm. I’d figure the rest out in the morning. To be safe I put four more logs in the fireplace and turned on two flashlights incase the fire went out before dawn. After checking the front door to make sure it was locked, I snuggled under the quilt hoping that I wouldn’t have the usual nightmares. I was wrong, it was worse than nightmares, it was the night I came home early.

Chapter 4: The Night Before - The New Day After

Sitting in the coffee shop I’d been taking bites from the new doughnuts my friend had baked. I had met Marnie during high school and we’d always remained friends. When she’d opened her Coffee & Tea Shop I was always there when she’d try a new recipe. This particular afternoon I was suppose to meet Robert later in the evening. I’d called and told him to use the spare key under the Geranium potted flower and let himself in. Then I’d called again and said I’d be at the house at about 10:00 pm since I was going to help Marnie bake for the morning crowd.

While Marnie did the preliminary baking, I cleaned tables and laid out the sugar, silverware and napkins. The shop was special to the town and always had fresh table cloths, flowers, cloth napkins and antique silverware. The walls had oil paintings of horses and landscapes. It was relaxing and always filled with patrons. At about 8:30 I had a cup of chamomile tea and a freshly baked chocolate scone. I’d called the house but Robert didn’t answer. I was about to tell him I was heading there but since I couldn’t reach him I drove the half hour home. I usually parked in the driveway but his car was already there and not wanting to

block his car I parked by the lower wall. Then walking up the walk I entered through the back patio area into the back hallway. That was when I thought I heard something but wasn't sure what music he had on in the living room. Not thinking anything of the door being closed I opened it and walked in.

To say the least that was not a good idea – to say the most all I saw was his ass and then heard her, “SHIT – I thought you said she wasn't coming home.” All I said was, “SHIT – guess you're both wrong and get your fucking asses, out of my house.” When she stood up I gasped, “JEEZ, what the fuck are you doing here?” Why I asked such a stupid question I have no idea, as if she was going to answer something like, “Oh, hello dear, I thought I'd fuck your fiancé prior to the wedding.” I quickly grasped the entire situation and was going to walk out but then a rage started building within me, but I felt calm at the same time. This was my house - I felt in control yet out of control. My voice sounded far away and as cold as ice. I'd a moment where I didn't think it was me speaking, “Well, children, let me put this to you succinctly. Mrs. M, I'd suggest you move. Or, I'll methodically destroy your reputation. Robert, I'd suggest you tell people we've decided that we don't quite suit the other's lifestyle - call off the engagement. I'm going to my kitchen and you can let yourselves out the front door.” When the door shut I walked back into the living room. I kept staring at the floor and then turned and walked out. I walked up to my bedroom, packed, and meticulously made the bed. Then, I walked out. I drove to town. I walked into the coffee shop. I explained to Marnie I needed help to close the house. The next day after placing sheets over the furniture, I left. Marnie finished closing the house for me, sent me pictures showing that everything in all the rooms were covered. The last picture was my bedroom, and that was the last day I looked at them.

Of course, Robert called with excuses. He drove down to talk with me, or rather talk at me. I listened. I wasn't quite sure what he was sorry about. Something about hurting me but I think it was more he was sorry he got caught – on my rug. He asked me to forget what happened. I laughed. I tried to explain it was difficult to forget since it was on my rug. He got angry and stormed out the door.

Of course, Robert's mother called with excuses that he was under stress, had too much to drink and passed out drunk in my house on the rug. He obviously didn't tell her the correct story. She asked me to forget what happened. I laughed. I tried to explain, without going into the truth, that it was difficult to forget, since it was on my rug. She got angry and hung up.

I was expecting his brother, Richard, to call to finalize the family phone calls, but he never did. Marnie had mentioned he did ask her if she knew what happened, but she refused to talk about it. Then, within a few weeks she told me that Robert was with someone new and they'd come in for coffee. A few weeks after that Richard had stopped in for a thermos of coffee and that he was leaving the area.

That was then, this was now - I'd decided it was time to go home and see the house.

Chapter 5 – Morning Coffee

I was really glad when I opened my eyes and it was morning. I'd slept in the living room. I was in the same clothes and felt stiff and ached from sleeping on the couch. Looking at the

clock I panicked but thought that perhaps he wouldn't remember, or care that he'd mentioned he'd bring coffee. It was past the time when he was to show up. I'd started walking to the stairs but then the doorbell rang. I'd been hoping that he'd forgotten but opened the door trying to look awake and cheerful.

"Hi, Richard, I didn't think you'd remember."

He stood there a moment - then walked past me toward the kitchen. I followed and felt uncomfortable but went to the cabinet and brought out some muffins.

I smiled at how quickly and efficiently he placed everything on the table with napkins, spoons, forks, the coffee and plates.

Laughing I asked, "Did Marnie send you with a complete breakfast?"

Then out of the bags he brought egg sandwiches, and fruit.

Sitting down at the table he smiled, "Yes, but she said to tell you that she used low calorie cheese in the egg sandwich and the fruit is healthy for you. She also asked me to tell you to stop down at the shop for an early dinner with her, if you have no other plans."

I was tired and didn't mean to answer nastily, "Oh sure, I have so many plans to do in this town. Oh, I can start the day by ripping out the living room rug and dumping it on Robert's lawn." As soon as I said that I was sorry to take things out on him since Robert was still his brother.

"I'm sorry, I know Robert's your brother and that was rude of me. I'll call Marnie later and have dinner. I haven't seen her in months and should have already gone to see her, since I'll be leaving again."

I looked up and he was watching me. He didn't say anything but sipped his coffee. Pushing the plate of fruit toward me he only said, "Eat some fruit. It's healthy."

I felt annoyed when he said it, I hated fruit - but picked up the slice of apple and ate it. I asked him what time he had to be at work, but he didn't answer that question. Instead he answered, "Jessika, if you're thinking of staying a week why not get the electric turned on today, so tonight you have lights in the house. The refrigerator is running on a generator but you have to get gas for it today, or it will run out of gas tonight."

I groaned and took a large gulp of coffee, "Oh damn, I completely forgot about it running on a generator. Probably your mother bought the gas and cranked the damn thing."

He laughed, "Yep, that's how I know that tonight it will run out. I'm actually surprised she hasn't called the electric company to have your electric turned on. I guess she's being discrete?"

I laughed, "Nah, if I don't do it today? She'll be on the phone trying to get it turned on."

Shrugging one shoulder he smiled, "Don't throw any fruit at me on this next enlightening moment but Karla works at the electric company as the customer representative. If you rather not go down and have to speak with her I can call her and get it set up."

I felt like I turned to stone and couldn't move. I kept wondering if there wasn't any part of this town I could go without his family being involved but finally answered, "I'll go down to the electric company before I go to the coffee shop." Glancing at the clock I realized he'd been in my kitchen for two hours! "Richard, it's been two hours! I'm sorry, now you're probably late for work!"

He stretched and seemed very relaxed. Then in a moment he leaned forward, "Jessika, I have a confession of sorts. I don't work on Tuesday. But, if I did, this would be the route I'd be taking so that wasn't a lie."

Standing up I started cleaning the table, "Richard, I appreciate you stopping over, especially on your day off - I really have to get things going - if you don't mind I really need to finish up and get started." Walking to the kitchen sink I started washing the dishes and looked back to see what he was doing. He was sitting there a moment and then standing up he brought the remaining dishes over to the sink.

"Jessika, thanks for sharing breakfast. I'll let myself out. I'll leave my business card on the front table. Call me, if you need anything or just feel like saying hello. I hope you turn on your electric."

I tried making things easier with chit chat, but this was too awkward, "Oh, that sounds great, I'll call." I sounded too phony so just said, "Richard, I'm just not sure about what I'm doing, so I'll let you know about the electric."

After he left I walked into all the rooms looking at things and trying to decide what would be sold, what I'd take back, what I'd give away. It was quite a while later when my cell phone rang and I agreed to meet Marnie at the coffee shop.

Walking into my bedroom I automatically smiled at the picture of my horse Cody and wondered how he was doing. When I left town I'd quickly given money to Marnie to have him boarded and paid extra to have him exercised three times a week by an experienced rider. I suddenly realized how much I'd missed riding since I'd left town. Maybe tomorrow I'd ask Marnie for directions to the ranch that he was at and go visit. I couldn't afford to board him where I now lived and couldn't bear the thought of selling him, so thought that would be the best solution. Now, I wasn't so sure about the decision I'd made. Now I felt guilty that he might not like where he was.

I'd thought coming home was going to be a slam dunk of packing and leaving, but now thinking of my horse I realize that a lot of things had to be settled. Resigned that I'd be here at least a week I dressed, put on makeup, my favorite perfume, and headed to town – to the electric company.

Chapter 6 - The Day the Past, Ran Into The Future

I waited until 3:00 hoping it would be a coffee break for her, but as soon as I walked through the electric company front door she smiled and waved to me.

“Hello, Jessika. Come on over and have a seat, I can help you with the electric.”

I quickly looked around the office but the other customer service representatives were busy assisting customers. I walked over, held out my hand in friendship and smiled, “I know you’re Karla and thanks, I need to have the electric turned on so what’s the quickest way to arrange it.”

Karla brought up my account, “Well, all was in order and paid in full when you turned it off. The deposit was noted to keep on hold and not to close out the account. That was a wise decision, since now there’s no initial paperwork needed to start out with and it’s only a matter of a service order - actually it can be turned on by 9:00 this evening. I think that should be safe, the generator should be good until at least 11:00.”

I must have given her an odd look since I couldn’t understand how that damn family knew everything I was doing, going to do, needed to do, or didn’t want to do!

She seemed embarrassed and continued, “Richard called and asked to let him know if you didn’t come in, by the time we closed.” When I didn’t say anything she seemed very uncomfortable and went on, “I know it isn’t any of his business and I certainly don’t know why he asked. All I can tell you is that he called, but your information is private.”

I laughed, “Nothing in this town is ever private - if it is then it makes it that much more of a challenge for Mrs. Colby to want to find out. She relishes causing gossip and trouble.” I quickly looked away and then knowing she’d go back with what I just said I quickly added, “That didn’t come out quite right.”

Karla smiled, “Jessika, I know how she is and she does relish gossip, causing trouble and you left out butting into other people’s lives. But she’s Robert and Richard’s Mother and that’s the way life is here in town. Can I ask you something?”

I sighed knowing here it comes, she will ask about am I here for Robert, “Sure, why not, let’s get it asked, all the cards on the table and over with.”

She laughed, “No, it’s not about Robert at all. I know what happened...”

I cut in, “No Karla, I don’t quite think he told you the right story, but go ahead and ask what you wanted to, I have to go meet someone.”

She finished the account information and called for service to be at the house later that night. Then she looked directly at me and quietly said, “Jessika, I know the real story. I know you went home and to put it delicately it wasn’t him baking you a cake, if you know what I mean.”

I started to laugh at her description and answered, “Well, I guess he was kind of rolling the dough on the floor?” I laughed harder and Karla laughed and said, “I know it was Mrs. M. that must have been gross to walk in on.”

I smiled, “Well, it wasn’t the epic moment in my life - I can’t believe we’re talking about that. Anyway, long time ago and not something I want to keep picturing.”

“I sure can understand that – long ago - been there, same scenario with someone else. I didn’t know Robert when you and he split - what I wanted to ask was if you were going to see your horse?”

“How do you know about my horse?”

Again, she seemed very uncomfortable but answered, “I ride him. He’s really wonderful. I was going to say I think you should go see him but I know you’re sick of anyone butting in what we think. I just know how great he is.”

I was shocked but didn’t show any expression and asked, “How long have you been riding him? He likes to jump – he doesn’t quite care for western.” I remembered that Robert only liked western, he always hated English Riding and anything to do with Dressage.

I was more shocked by her answer, “Well, a friend asked me since I ride Centered Riding style, and Dressage. I give English riding lessons. No one had a saddle so I brought out my Passier saddle and it fit perfectly. I brought my jumping saddle and after that first day I’ve gone out two or three times a week. But, when I’m walking up to him it seems as if he’s looking past me and looking for someone else. Then when he realizes no one else is with me he enjoys the attention.”

As I stood up to leave I turned to her, “I’ll go see him. My friend boarded him and I’ll get directions, where he is. Thanks, for liking him.”

Before she could say anything else, I left. I knew she could give me directions to the ranch my friend had boarded him at, but I really didn’t want to be friends with her. I didn’t even want to like her, but she was at least honest and apparently a better rider than I was.

Chapter 7 - The Café

It was almost time for dinner so I headed to the Café. The moment I walked into the café it made me feel relaxed. It must have been the soft music, and fresh bakery smells of breads and cakes. Marnie pointed to a table in the smaller room, which was more private, and walking over I gratefully sat down. A hot thermos of coffee was already on the table, and I poured myself a cup. In a few moments Marnie pulled out the other chair, sat down and poured a cup of tea from the other thermos. “So, Jessika, tell me everything – I heard you were at the electric company and Karla waited on you!”

I was tired of feeling shocked but I asked, “Marnie, How the hell did you know that?”

Grinning she answered, “Gina sits at the next desk and sent me a text message the minute you sat down, here I’ll show you.”

Taking out her phone and handing it to me I read, Jessy is sitting with Karla. I’ll let you know if there’s any bloodshed.” Message 2 read...They’re laughing. I can’t hear what about... Message 3 read...Something about a horse - she just left...

Handing her back the cell phone, I smiled and said, “And here I was wondering how you knew to have the coffee hot and waiting, at this moment. Well, I guess I should ask, where’s Cody?”

Taking a sip of her coffee she said, “Oh, he’s at a nice ranch a few miles out from here, in the Valley. I had him in town but it was expensive, and then I had the offer to board at the RCR. I went out to look at the place and it seemed great. Plus it was half the price, so I had money each month to find a rider.”

“Marnie, they hired Karla!”

She looked at me, “Well, it isn’t like there’s a lot of choice in this town for Jumping Exercise Riders, or whatever they are called. Now, I had tons of people wanting to barrel race him, take him on western outings - he looked board. The owner of the RCR came in and I was speaking with him about horses. He offered to board Cody. He had a paddock available and has indoor and outdoor arena’s set up for western. Plus there are two arena’s for English riders. It’s on 40 acres and Cody has a stall, paddock and small pasture to use.”

“Marnie, I wasn’t being critical. I know when I left, you got a lot dumped on you to finalize. I left the house, closing it, my horse, all the details I couldn’t deal with. Oh, and thanks for not closing out the electric – it made it easier. “Look, enough about my problems how’s everything going with you?”

It seemed that since the other day, everything had turned into one shock after another. At that moment a tall, blonde haired man walked up to our table, kissed her on the head and stated, “Hi Hon, I see you and Jessika are catching up. I’ll leave you two girls for your catch up news.” Then holding out his hand to shake mine he continued in that friendly baritone voice, “Hello Jessika, I’ve heard a lot about you. Actually your name comes up at least once a week. I can tell by your expression that you and Marnie haven’t gotten to the girl talk part about me. I’m Jeremy Kincaid. Karla’s brother.”

I sat there for a moment staring up at him, then all I could say was, “How nice.” He laughed and kissing Marnie again he said, “Catch you girls later. I’m heading home. Marnie, call me and I’ll come back and pick you up.”

Marnie was sipping her tea and then looked up at me, “Well, you could’ve been more polite. You haven’t been around. You didn’t have to deal with any of the fall out. Now you come back with your attitude like Ms. High and Mighty. As if the rest of us were supposed to just sit and not move forward with our lives, until you decided it was time to make an appearance.”

I smiled, “I’m sorry. You’re right. Marnie, I feel like I’m suddenly in a reality TV show. I feel as if there’s a camera following me. It’s odd - I swear it feels as if all roads keep leading back to the Colby’s. At least Cody isn’t boarded here in town, at their house!”

I could tell by her look that there was more, “What? He’s boarded here at their house? I thought you said he was at the RCR Ranch, out of town, in the valley.”

She laughed, “NO, he isn’t in their backyard. Actually, I knew Kinkaid before Robert knew Karla. Remember I was seeing someone from Oregon that liked horses? He was at the University and his name was Kade? That was short for Kinkaid. He moved here and his sister came with him. He’s raised her since she was ten. Their parents died. He was eighteen and he wouldn’t let her be adopted, or go to any other family members. He moved to Oregon, got a job, finished high school, and then did his Ph.D. I met him during a course I was taking via the internet. We hit it off, eventually I met him and he moved here. This all happened after you left including Karla meeting Robert. Kinkaid was here having dinner and Karla was with him. Robert came in to order a cake, for his mother’s birthday the following week. I was running short of help the following week, and Karla offered to deliver it for me. And that’s how she met Robert and how that relationship started. I’m sorry, it was a coincidence and I never knew how to explain it to you. I never thought you’d be coming come back - after a while, I stopped thinking about trying to tell you.”

I thought about it all for a few moments and smiled, “Well, I do remember our talks about Kade and at least it isn’t what I was thinking that some reality show camera was following me around town. Karla was friendly – she’s difficult to dislike. So, what’s Richard’s story that he’s never been married. Is he gay?”

She didn’t answer, but instead got up and only said, “I have to lock the front door and put up the closed sign. Richard’s not gay. He tends to keep to himself, even when he comes in every morning, on his way to work, to get coffee.”

I thought about what I did know about him which wasn’t very much, “Okay, then, I give up - where exactly does he work and what does he do? I never really knew him. He was away at school when we were growing up, and even when I was seeing his brother he seldom came home. I do remember his mother visiting him every weekend - Robert never talked about him very much. Was he in reform school, or something?”

We were walking to the front of the café and I helped her close things for the night. The conversation stayed on simple topics until she brought up Richard.

“Jess, to answer your question about Richard, he was away at a boarding school because he never got along with their father and that’s all I know. Karla had mentioned it once and then wouldn’t say anything else. Even Kade questioned her, but all she answered was Mrs. Colby had said he didn’t get along with their Dad. I honestly don’t know much else. The café is closed tomorrow, how about Kade and I come to the house and visit. If you want we can drive you out to the ranch to see Cody. I’d like to get out of town for the day anyway, so how about we call it a day together.”

Agreeing that it sounded like a great idea, we decided on breakfast, at the house at 9, and then drive out to the Valley. Heading to my car I drove home. Home. The thought felt odd and out of place. As I turned down the street I could see the house at the end, on the hill. I could see the front porch light on, and there was a light in the kitchen and my room upstairs. At least the electric still worked, and per Karla it was on before the generator ran out of gas. I slowed down before the driveway and stopped the car in the street. For a few moments I looked at the house – I could turn and drive away. Then I decided this has to play out for closure and pulling into the drive I turned off the motor. Walking to and opening the front door I walked into the hallway. It seemed different with lights on - not as scary as that first

night. Walking into the living room I started to put wood in the fireplace when the doorbell rang. Thinking it was Marnie I walked back and opened it to find Richard standing at the door. I didn't move aside.

"Hi, Richard, can I help you with something?"

Richard smiled but didn't make any move to enter, instead he handed me a map, "I saw Kade at the market and he mentioned you would be seeing your horse and I had a map. I just thought I'd drop it off on my way to the house."

I still didn't move from blocking the door but took the map, "Thanks. But, I'm driving out there tomorrow with Marnie and Kade, so I won't need it. I have to get up early in the morning so thanks." I didn't want any company and still blocked the door.

He smiled and turned to go, "Well, Jessika, keep the map. I was going to explain something to you before tomorrow. I guess it will keep and things will go the way they'll go." He kept walking.

I thought about calling to him and asking what he meant, but I was too tired to think. I didn't feel I could process any more local town information. Walking upstairs to my room I laughed how Marnie and Kade were almost related to the man I disliked the most in this town.

Chapter 8 – Nightmares, or Dreams - It's All Just Sleeping

Finally it was quiet - I was in my room. The house was too quiet. The house was too dark. I thought about turning on the lights in the other rooms, but didn't want to walk alone through the house. I hadn't changed anything after I'd inherited the house. Everything was the same...as all the year I'd grown up here. My parent's room was still at the opposite end of the hall. I did change their room into more of a studio type design, but still referred to it as my parent's room. I decided to sleep and forget about the other rooms. Tomorrow I'd see my horse, make arrangements to sell the house, leave this damn town, and find a boarding stable closer to my office.

I didn't know the exact time I fell asleep. The dreams always started the same way by slamming the past into the present. It was as clear as the day it all happened...all those years ago.

I was walking out of high school, and then ran to catch the bus. Tripping over a crack in the sidewalk I fell hitting the side of my face on pavement...books flying all directions. I could hear people laughing and someone close remarking how funny I looked. I felt blood dripping into my eye where my eyebrow split open, and pain shooting into my ankles. I tried to get up... my ankle was too painful...I was dizzy and fell back down. I was crying...people were laughing...I sat up holding my face and it seemed that no one would help me. I couldn't find my glasses and realized one eye had a gash over it, where my glasses hit my face when I fell...my other eye was swollen shut and the bridge of my nose hurt where my glasses smashed onto it. Then I felt my hands being pulled away from my face and a voice telling me to let him see what happened.

Still crying I let my hands fall to my lap, but I couldn't see. I heard him yell for someone to call an ambulance and then something hurt as it pressed against my eyebrow.

"Stop crying, honey, or this will keep bleeding. I have pressure from a handkerchief on it, but it's very deep and will need stitches, your other eye took a hit from your glasses and is swollen, but I don't think damaged, your left ankle seems fine, your right is very swollen but I don't think is broken...probably very badly sprained."

I didn't know him but whispered, "Thank you. I'm sorry I'm crying. I got scared. No one would help me and I couldn't see. It felt dark. I don't like the dark." I felt him lift the end of the handkerchief that was covering my eye and I could see light but everything was very hazy without my glasses.

"See? It's daylight and here comes the medics. No one is laughing. Robert, stay with this young lady while I get the car. Keep pressure on her eyebrow."

Then I heard Robert's voice, "Jessika, it's me from your science class, Robert Colby. Don't worry. Principal Benson called your parents and they're going to meet the ambulance at the hospital. My mom's a nurse with emergency and she's probably coming with the ambulance. I'll come to the hospital. Don't be afraid, okay?"

He took my hand and I felt safe. I wasn't actually crying too much, but I didn't actually stop crying. I was now mentally exhausted. Then I heard Dina Figari's voice, "So Robert, you gonna hold the weirdo's hand all night?"

Everything was happening too quickly for me to think. I had to get out of there. We were now standing and someone from the ambulance walked up to me.

"Jessika, you need to stop crying. Robert, your brother Richard is waiting at his car. I'll be home later, after my shift. Jessika, we need you to help us get you on the gurney and we'll go to the hospital. Can you walk?"

I started to try and walk but pain shot up my leg and I started to cry again. The nurse sounded angry, "Jessika, I told you to stop that crying. We're here to help you. Carl, bring that gurney over here. If she can't stop crying then she won't listen to directions." Before anything else happened I heard someone in back of me...the next thing I knew I was picked up in strong arms. I immediately thought I was too fat and he'd drop me.

Then I heard him calmly give orders, "Robert, go to my car - I'll be right there. Mom, go the ambulance and I'll carry her there. She can't walk, she's scared and reprimanding her isn't going to get her to listen."

I thought I heard the nurse say something nasty to him, but I just wanted to sleep. I wanted my Mom and Dad. I wanted my room. I wanted anything but being here in public where everyone was laughing at me. I also wanted whoever this was that picked me up to carry me out of town and ride away on a white horse to his castle.

He only carried me to the ambulance. At the hospital my parents were there - I felt safe again. I heard Nurse Colby telling them I was difficult to work with, refused to listen and that I wouldn't stop crying. After three stitches in my eyebrow and my ankles being wrapped, my

parents brought me home. The next day Robert came over and that was the beginning of Robert. He explained the other person that helped me and that had carried me was his older brother Richard. I tried to call Richard to thank him, but Mrs. Colby never let me speak to him. I questioned Robert about Richard but he was always evasive. He'd only say Richard went back to boarding school, and would be back in a few months.

We graduated...Everything was magical and a few years later we were engaged. The dream would then somehow change to the night that he asked me to marry him. My parents were out of town and we were sitting in my living room, in front of the fireplace.

Turning to me Robert handed me a small box, "Jessika, I know this isn't a surprise but I'd like to make it official. Marry me?"

It felt like the world suddenly lit up with thousands of lights and would stay lit forever. The fire was blazing...the den was my favorite room...this floor in front of the fireplace would forever be my favorite place. We kissed. I felt him pressing me back and then I felt the thick carpet on the back of my bare legs and I felt happy.

Then the dream would change again and I'd be standing in the door staring at him on the floor, but I wasn't on the floor. Some woman would turn and look at me with my ring on her finger. I'd start screaming and then.... I'd wake up.

I knew I'd screamed out loud and quickly sat up in bed. Luckily I could see the sunrise was starting and the night would be over in a matter of minutes. Wrapping myself in the blanket I sat in the rocking chair, watching as morning took over the town and the shadows and memories of betrayal were forced back to hell.

Smiling, I thought of the den...the carpet... the ring...the betrayal. Then I began thinking of Richard and that I never thanked him, all those years ago, for helping me. Today I would thank him. But then insecurity took over, as it always did...what if he didn't remember helping me. He probably forgot all about helping me that day, or worse maybe he'd remember how heavy I was to carry. I'd sound stupid thanking him for something that he didn't remember, or wanted to not remember. The morning was here.

I dressed and went downstairs to the kitchen.

Chapter 9 - Time for a new day.

I was half way down the stairs, when I realized that fresh brewed coffee was coming from the kitchen. I could hear Marnie and Kade speaking about the Café and how Marnie could possibly improve it, if she could get the bank loan.

Sitting at the kitchen table now and watching the interaction between Marnie, and Kade, everything seemed out of place, yet this was home. Years ago Marnie and I used to sit for hours, at this table drinking tea, or hot cocoa and having lunch. Time goes by swiftly at a certain age, and changes occur rapidly in life, some wanted and some forced upon you.

Walking into the kitchen I asked, "Marnie, what kind of loan are you applying for at the bank?"

She smiled, "Well, that's like you to start business questions before you relax with your morning coffee. Actually, the store next to mine is being sold and if I could buy it, then I could expand. I have most of the down payment and was just going to look into options on mortgages, and expanding. I actually wanted the house I rent to be the Café, but I found out this part of town is the commercial zone and I am renting in residential only."

I was going to ask more questions when the doorbell chimed and Kade said that he'd answer it. He was only gone a few moments and when he returned and said that as soon as I was finished with coffee that we need to get going.

I asked who was at the door and he answered, "It was Karla – I'd left my wallet home. She's on her way to work and dropped it off. I'll get the truck started so we can get out to the ranch. I've a few things to speak to Karla about so I'll head out to the car and speak with her."

Looking up at Marnie I said, "They can speak in the living room rather than sit in his car."

Marnie laughed, "I think it best to keep things as separate as possible."

In a few minutes we left and the drive was fun catching up on what had been going on the last few years, since I'd left. I was looking out the side window when Marnie pointed to a ranch and we drove under its high wooden gate arch. The first thing I noticed was the landscape and hills. Trails were winding their way up the hill, and I could see a group of riders starting out on a morning trail ride. Then we drove past a large stable with stalls on each side of a wide breezeway. After we parked we started walking into the stable and I saw Cody looking at us from the first stall. We stopped in front of it and I asked if I could go in or what the stable rules were. Marnie smiled, "I think you can do whatever you feel comfortable doing, walk him, ride, anything." Opening the stall door I walked in as Cody turned to me. The moment I touched his soft nose, it felt like I'd never left him - I realized I'd never leave him again.

Marnie was speaking with Kade and finally said, "We're going to look at two horses that we're thinking of buying. We'll be back in less than an hour but cell phones do work out here so call if you want to leave sooner. The tack room is at the end of the breezeway and his other brushes are in a bucket on the hanger that says Stall 1."

I answered while using the one brush in his stall, "I think I'll stay out here forever. Take your time."

The brush wasn't doing very good on his mane so I walked to the end of the hall. One door said tack room and there was another door on the opposite side that said office and it had an open sign. I decided it would be a nice gesture to tell the person that the barn was beautiful.

I knocked and walked in. At the far end of the office a man had his back turned to me so I said, "Excuse me, I don't mean to disturb you but can you please tell the owner that the barn is beautiful and I'm glad my horse, Cody, has been staying here."

The man turned and answered, "I'm the owner and I'm glad you're pleased that Cody has been here. I made it my business to make sure he was taken care of."

Standing there all I could answer was “RICHARD?”

Chapter 10 Who owns this ranch?

Richard smiled, “Hi Jessika, I did try to tell you once, or twice, that I’d be here but I didn’t quite get to finish explaining.”

I knew I still had an astonished look on my face, “Richard, you didn’t tell me you would be here and you never mentioned anything about owning a ranch, a horse ranch, the horse ranch where my Cody is.”

“Jessika, didn’t you ever want to say something to someone but kept putting it off and off and then the opportunity didn’t present itself anymore. Did you ever?”

I thought for a moment and then blurted out, “Yes, thank you for helping me when I was in school and fell on the pavement. I tried to thank you but could never find you. I kept asking and all anyone said was that you left. So, thank you. You probably don’t remember helping me anyway, so forget I even said anything. I’m going now, but thank you for taking care of Cody.”

I got as far as the door - felt his hand on my shoulder – his voice close to my ear, “WAIT!

Stopping wasn’t a difficult choice, since the door was still closed, but I didn’t turn around and still had my hand on the doorknob.

“Jessika, things were very confused when that happened. It was so long ago, but I did try and speak with you. You’re welcome. I remember. Can you stay so we can get a few things cleared up?”

I turned and smiled, “Richard, it was really a long time ago and doesn’t matter anymore. I need to see Cody. I need to ride. Can we speak about this another time?”

“That depends on if you’re leaving after your visit. Are you staying around town for a while, or packing up and heading back south. When do you have to return to work?”

I wasn’t sure where this was heading but I was tired of games, thinking, wondering, hating, “I do my work wherever I am – it’s computer based. Does it matter to you, or does it matter to anyone if I stay or leave?”

He looked out the window toward the mountains for what seemed like ages, then gazed into my eyes and slowly said, “You have always mattered to me. The timing was never right. The feelings were and still are right, yes, it matters to me.”

I laughed, “Okay, I’m staying. BUT, for six months, and we’ll see what happens. We may as well figure it out. And I promise I’m not going to pack up in the middle of the night leaving Marnie a note to close the house up. I’m staying. Wow, that was the quickest decision I think I’ve ever made. Want to come see my pony? I’ve heard he’s boarded here.”

I liked Richard's smile, as he laughed answering me, "You don't say, well, then lead the way and let's see Cody."

We walked together to the end of the barn, but when I got to the stall Cody was already out. I could see the arena and there he was, being ridden by Karla.

Richard quickly explained, "I didn't realize the time, this is the set time Karla has come every day to groom or ride Cody. Don't be upset – she has really taken quite good care of him."

I walked away from him, answering, "Yes, she seems to enjoy taking care of my things...whether they're past, or present. Wonder what she does for you?"

As I headed away from the barn, Kade and Marnie walked up to me. I quickly said, "I can't ride, since someone is busy with him. This afternoon I'd like to see other boarding facilities and maybe check on horse transport. Anyway, things have to move on and I think I was wrong about staying."

I saw a look pass between Kade and Richard. I looked over and as Cody trotted by in the arena Karla waved, "Hi, I didn't know you would be here so early – want to ride now?"

I smiled, "No, I have to leave, but I will move him later so don't get too happy today."

Marnie and Kade quickly finished up a conversation with Richard and the drive back to the house was quiet. As I got out of the car Kade said, "I will be out of town tonight – maybe you and Marnie can get together tonight for girl talk?"

I didn't want to make this worse than it was, "Thanks, Kade, sounds perfect – Marnie I'll call you later."

I walked in, closed and locked the door. I began walking into the living room, but then decided I didn't feel like looking at that floor where it all happened. I walked up to my room, fell onto the bed, closed my eyes and didn't realize I fell asleep.

Chapter 11 Rewriting History

I almost jumped out of bed, there was pounding on the front door – then again it began - this loud knocking on the front door. Sitting up I quickly turned on the light, grabbed my bathrobe and raced down the stairs, sure there had been some terrible accident. Why else would this loud banging on the door be happening at 1:00 AM in the morning?

Looking through the lace side window curtain I saw Richard. All I could think and feel was disaster involving my pony. I slammed open the door and he walked past me into the living room. I could feel myself starting to panic, but held back tears knowing Cody must be gravely ill if Richard came over so late. I bolted the door and ran into the living room to find him starting a fire in the fireplace. Then he walked to the couch, sat down and crossed his arms in front of him, "Jessika, sit down, I have to speak with you and this can't wait."

I quickly sat down on the couch next to him, "Richard, how bad is Cody?"

He looked at me and answered in a low voice, "Cody is fine and probably sleeping, dreaming of carrots and apples and a new saddle."

The look on my face must have been one of pure shock since he said, "Relax, no one is hurt. I was home and woke up thinking over what transpired at the barn. I was going to wait until the morning and bring over coffee, but I'm tired of always waiting. Karla didn't deserve what you said to her today."

I nearly coughed out the words - I felt a rush of anger, "Karla? You woke me up at this hour to defend Karla? Get the fuck out of my house!" I started to get up but felt him grab my arm and he pulled me back down on the couch. I didn't quite land gracefully and snidely remarked, "I bet you don't pull her down on the couch like that!"

He didn't let go and I could hear him controlling the anger that wanted to creep into his voice, "I don't pull her down on the couch, the bed, the grass, the meadow, the barn, the office. There, have I quite covered your theory that I'm fucking my brother's wife. I may add that I've never even kissed her!"

He didn't say anything for a few moments but didn't let go of my arm, although his grip was not as tight and his thumb was making small massaging circles on my skin. "Want to know in this town who I want to pull down, since you're so curious?"

I didn't look at him, but answered, "Sure, since I'm already awake we may as well get all the cards on the table."

He didn't say anything. He smiled, "I agree. All cards, none hidden." He then stood up and walked over to the fireplace. Gazing into it he asked me to join him. I thought it was a tad odd but the room was now warming up and feeling tired I just wanted to get this over with and back to bed. "Okay, but I'm getting tired so let's stop fighting and just get it done."

I walked over and he sat down on the floor. He reached for my hand and then tugged so I knew he wanted me to sit down. Laughing I thought that this was really getting odd but sat down on the floor. "Okay, Richard, why are we on the floor. This isn't my favorite room and certainly the floor isn't my favorite either, so what are you doing?"

Gazing into my eyes he ran his fingers through my hair stopping at the nape of my neck. He didn't move his hand just held my gaze. I was nervous and I knew my voice was a whisper, "Richard? What are you doing?"

He moved so slowly it seemed like we were in a dream but when he leaned forward just before his lips touched mine I heard him answer, "Rewriting history."

I heard the words and suddenly realized where we were sitting on the floor - the exact place I saw them all those years ago. But, for now all I could feel was his lips on mine. My fingers gripped the front of his shirt pulling him closer to me - I could feel his chest pressing me down. My mind kept thinking that we are at the same location and then the thought went to, so what? The fire was hot in the fireplace and the more his hands roamed over me the more the fire within me was burning out of control. We didn't speak, it wasn't needed, or maybe it just wasn't wanted. It was feeling...touching...wanting. We fumbled quite a bit with getting

clothes off. I was embarrassed but didn't care, I was naked but didn't care, I was fucking Richard and that was the only thing I did care about. I felt his skin burning against mine. I felt his thigh pressing mine apart...quietly demanding that the nights were never going to be the same again. Then time stood still. We were consumed in the moment that both our lives must have been culminating to - and we never knew it. His lips were burning on mine with heat and passion. His lips were kissing my neck, my breasts and then back to my lips. It felt as if we were rushing, but the longing was finally released and there was so much to touch, kiss, and feel. It felt chaotic, in a way, until he arched his back, and with a gentle, smooth, thrusting motion he joined us as one. Gripping his shoulders, I gazed into his eyes. I could see within them the depth of what this meant to him. I could feel in his touch how much I meant to him. I could feel in his thrusting within me how much we were joined forever, as one. I was finally seeing Richard for the first time, and knew I loved him.

With our eyes gazing into the other's I felt myself spiraling to the point with him where we both couldn't stop. We went on and on...moving...kissing...heated passion building over and over until finally his body stiffened and we both felt the release and completion that we must have needed, with each other, for years.

We were both out of breath, holding each other as if we would fall off a cliff if we let go. I knew I needed to say something...but had no idea and could not think of what to say. Leaning up and looking into my eyes he said, "This is our place and this place in front of the fireplace is ours, only think of us."

I am not sure why I answered, "I want to rip out the carpet and get new carpet. We can do it again on the new carpet." Then I quickly added, "Unless you don't want to do it again, that's okay, I just want new carpet...I think I better keep quiet, I'm not sure what I'm saying."

He smiled, "I like the idea of new carpet – out with the old – in with the new. Yes, we'll break in every place on the new living room carpet! Don't suppose we can head over to the couch? My knees now have rug burns that are killing me!"

I smiled when he wrapped his shirt around my shoulders knowing somehow that I was not about to walk naked over to the couch. In another few minutes we were both under the same cover, on the same couch. As I drifted to sleep being held by Richard it felt safe. It was as safe as when he first held me after I fell all those years ago. I wondered what tomorrow would bring - for now didn't want to think about anything. The rest of life could wait.

Chapter 12 – The Morning, After The Night

Waking from a deep sleep and trying to stretch I realized that I was wedged between the back of the couch and a warm body. WARM BODY? My eyes flew open faster than a jet breaking the sound barrier and I didn't move. I was frozen in time...frozen in thought...other than my brain screaming OH MY GOD, I DID IT WITH RICHARD! OH MY GOD, ON THE CARPET! I tried to calm my thoughts with visualization of positive thoughts - but it went right to last night on the carpet. Then I heard him speaking quietly to me, "Jessika, I know you're awake. Don't second guess last night." I felt him kiss my forehead and then his finger tilted my chin up so I was looking into his eyes.

I was insecure, I had no clue as to what to do, or say, “Oh, Hi Richard.”

He laughed, “Oh, Hi Richard? That’s the best you can think of after how great last night was between us. Not anything like Oh, Richard, I’m so glad you’re here? Or, Oh Richard, let’s have breakfast and spend the day together?”

He was smiling down at me and pulled the cover up higher over us, “Okay, how about Richard, let’s have breakfast. I guess we need to get dressed.”

He smiled and laughed, “Nope, not quite good enough. We’ll go by my idea – You run up and take a shower...then I’ll take a shower...then we’ll get dressed and have breakfast. We can figure out the rest over coffee. You have on my shirt so you can run up the stairs, while I head to the kitchen and start the coffee. Does that sound okay?”

He was already starting to sit up - I quickly pulled the shirt around me and buttoned it. Then we both stood up. Hugging me to him I could feel the warmth of his thighs against mine. I wrapped my arms around him and he held me. “Jessika, if we keep up this hugging I’ll be pulling you back down on the carpet.”

I laughed, “NO way! I’m heading up the stairs!” Grabbing my clothes off the floor I quickly ran up the stairs.

The hot water of the shower felt good. Standing with it streaming down my face and body I began to think about last night. I laughed that it was the same spot that all those years ago I saw his brother, my then fiancé, and our neighbor. But, nothing good could come of this. I had things to do back home. I had to sell this house. I had to get my pony. I had to get out of the shower and explain to Richard that last night was just...just...just then a knock on the door made me realize how long I was in the shower. Quickly turning it off, I wrapped a towel around me.

“Jessika, Are you okay?”

I opened the bathroom door, “Sorry, I got caught up thinking of things. Here, your turn and I’ll dry off in my room and get dressed.” I tried to sound upbeat - I walked past him at a fast pace...got dressed...ran down to the kitchen. I poured two cups of coffee, bringing them to the table and sat down. Jumping up I quickly put down napkins and sat down. Jumping up I put two pastries on a dish and put them the table – I quickly sat back down. Sipping the coffee I heard him walking down the stairs and into the kitchen, sitting down as if we’d always done this. Nervously smiling I said, “Hi, coffee and pastries – guess this is breakfast in a way. Not as good as Marnie’s Café, but I could drive down there and get something else if you want?”

Sipping his coffee he answered, “This is fine. Perfect. Relax.”

Sipping my coffee I answered, “I can’t relax. I feel like we’re in a movie and I have no control of the script.”

Biting into a pastry like he had all the time in the world, he finally answered, "Let's get out of here. Let's go to the ranch and see the horses. Let's go for a trail ride. Just let's go, so you stop thinking." Standing up he held out his hand, "Come on, please?"

Once outside I felt more at ease and once we drove out of town it was like a weight had dropped off my mind. We didn't talk about the house or last night but listened to music and made small talk about the type of music we liked, saddles, riding style, even favorite authors. I was surprised we had so much in common and then we were on the ranch property driving toward the barn. Just as I was hoping that Karla would not be there he said, "We have the place to ourselves – once a quarter the ranch is closed for a day for a complete detailed look over for needed repairs – only people owning a horse can be on the ranch. So far no one has complained. We have to go to the office first, I need to get some book work done, but then we have the day for ourselves, sound good?"

I wasn't sure why but it suddenly felt very good, "Yes. That sounds great!" And I thought a whole day without conflict would be the order of the day. Somehow, it seems, conflict must have been on my birth certificate.

Chapter 14 – There is always chaos before peace.

The minute we drove through the ranch gates we saw the veterinarian's white truck at the barn. Racing to the barn I jumped out before it even stopped, and found my pony, being walked by the vet. The vet turned toward Richard, "Morning – got a bit of colic, with the pony. His temperature is now okay - gums getting back to pink. No blockage. I gave him banamine and just watch him for a few hours. Karla, can you take over walking him? If he stands without wanting to roll just let him stand. I'm going to head over to Gina and write up instructions for her new foal.

I turned and there she was - KARLA! She was holding out the reins toward me and apologizing, "I'm sorry, I was here last night with Gina. Her horse finally gave birth about 5 a.m. and I noticed Cody was off feed and it was still in the stall. He looked like he rolled quite a bit. We were calling the vet for the foal and Cody started rolling and would not get up, so we grabbed a halter and started walking him until the vet got here. It all went so quickly...I was going to call...but then you both drove up."

I reached for the reins – "Karla, thank you. I'm glad Cody has someone here that cares about him like I do." I smiled and she smiled. I didn't think of her as the wife of my ex-fiance. I only could think of her as saving my pony. She could have ignored it all – she could have thought to herself that Cody belonged to a person that disliked her, so to hell with the pony. But she didn't, she kept him safe. "Where's the new foal? Is it okay?"

She laughed, "Oh that little filly gave us a time. We stayed awake all night and the moment we fell asleep for only a half hour, when we woke up there she was. They are in the other barn – when Cody feels better why not come over and meet Gina. Help us pick out a name?"

Richard had just walked back, "Well, I think we need to ride another day. With a new foal and watching Cody I vote we just stay here at the ranch all day and we have pizza ordered for lunch."

Karla started walking away but smiled at Richard, “Not for me. I need to help Gina and then get to work. Both of you stop by the foaling barn later and see the new pretty girl who will drive the colts crazy!”

I walked Cody a few more times but he didn't want to roll and wanted to sleep so putting him back in his stall I went into Richard's office, He was going over the customers boarding and who was late on board.

Walking to his desk I sat down reaching for my laptop and placed it on his desk. “Richard, I guess how about a working morning? I have some things to do – are you wired here for internet?”

He grinned, “Yep, wireless is set up here and in the other two barns. Each barn has a small office if anyone needs to write up their lessons, or anything. I have a three people waiting for stalls and one waiting for pasture. I need to interview call them back and set up and interview. I don't board to anyone that I don't feel will fit in to how I want the facilities kept, and they have to have references, including one from their vet and farrier. Look, if this is going to be too boring since I said we'd be riding, I can drive you back to your house. Would you rather I do that?”

I got mad, but I wasn't sure why, “SURE, my pony just got over a vet call and I'm supposed to just leave because it may be boring making sure he's okay! Or, is it that you're having second thoughts about last night and want me to leave?”

He looked at me for moment, “What happened last night that I'd be having second thoughts?”

“Richard, you know damn well what I mean.”

“No, Jessika, I can't think of anything - exactly what part of last night are you thinking about...that I may be having second thoughts about?”

I knew that he knew what I meant and rather then stutter, or explain more, I decided to take the direct approach – something I rarely did but then last night was something I never did. “Richard, to be succinct – do you regret doing it on the floor?”

Smiling he answered, “Yes, I do, as a matter of fact. I'd have preferred the bed. Actually to be succinct – I'd like to go to my house and do it in the bed. Yes, actually, I think that is a damn good idea. What do you think of that Jessika?”

“I think we need to check on Cody. Then I think we need to see how comfortable your bed is compared to my floor. Of course, this is strictly, for scientific comparison purposes...carpet vs. mattress?”

Smiling he answered, “I'm going to close out the books. Then we'll check on your pony and head to the house.”

It wasn't long before we seemed to be walking hand in hand to his house. Karla was in the barn and for once I didn't mind when she offered to watch over Cody. She'd mentioned that she had to stay with the new foal and it seemed the chaos was over. She didn't ask Richard

any questions when he said we'd be up at the house for a few hours. I'm sure there were people staring at us, while we walked to the house, but for once it didn't matter to me what anyone was thinking. I needed some quiet and calm. Actually I was very curious about what his house was like inside. I'd have preferred the entire day as we'd planned it before we arrived at the ranch...just a closed ranch and riding all day. Walking along the path to the ranch house we finally reached the porch and then he opened the door.

Standing back he said, "Come on in – we can have coffee and lunch and then decide what we want to do. No rush, no pressure."