

End of the Age: Final Deception

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Chapter 1

Jesse placed the finished report into the briefcase and closed the lid. Hearing the faint sound in the distance, she paused as the siren grew louder before receding into the night. She hated the noise, the shrieking reminder of a growing crime rate. The apartment was too quiet without Amber. She missed her roommate and the conversation that would have kept her mind off the commotion in the streets.

She picked up a magazine from the coffee table to study dark eyes staring back at her from the cover before flipping through pages. The picture of a model wearing a floor-length wedding gown caught her attention before her eyes moved across the room to the desk in the corner. She had placed Tom's letter in the desk weeks ago. The words ending their engagement should have brought anger, maybe feelings of betrayal, but not the sad sense of relief in knowing her fiancé had summonsed the courage she lacked.

On the sofa, Jesse stared at the envelope with her name scrawled across the front in blue ink. This would be the last time she would read Tom's letter.

Jesse –

After many agonizing days, I find myself stricken with a forming conscience, or perhaps some other force moves my hand, compelling the truth from such an unlikely vessel. I've come to realize the truth, much like the past, cannot be changed by whim or regret. When told, it is best told simply. The truth is, I have misled you, Jesse, pretending to be a man of integrity, a man worthy of your love. I am not that man. In fact, I am a fraud, an expert at deception who can role-play, design a charming character long enough to seduce a woman.

Casual relationships, a mindless fling with no strings attached, that's all I've ever wanted from any woman. That's all I was looking for the evening we met. I remember how you caught my eye the moment you walked into the restaurant. I watched you across the room with scandalous thoughts dancing through my head.

I must confess, I thought your innocence was an act, a play at being coy and I waited with typical skepticism for the facade to collapse. How surprising, refreshing, to discover you are just who you seem, a woman without pretense, the woman I became obsessed with having even through marriage based on deceit. That was my plan until my reckless scheme began to unravel. Our talks, the time we spent together, everything about you influenced me in a way I never expected. You became more than a game, more than a conquest. I came to care about you, perhaps, even love you.

I do love you, Jesse, but sadly, I do not know how to be in love. How could I go through with marriage knowing that eventually the mask would slip and you would see the impostor that I am? You would see me, the real me. You wouldn't hate me. Much worse, you would feel sorry for me. I wish I were the man I pretend to be, a man who could face you instead of running away. Perhaps, one day you will forgive me.

With Love,

Tom

She dropped the torn letter onto the coffee table. The question was inevitable. Who had been the bigger fraud? Tom said he loved her but had not been in love with her. Wasn't she guilty of the same? Tom had done them both a favor by ending the charade.

Jesse thought about Tom, wondering where he was. So unpredictable, he might be anywhere, sweeping a woman off her feet in Paris, chanting with a mystic guru in India. Like a Chameleon, Tom could blend in anywhere. Certainly, a trait she lacked. Tom was fun and exciting, but he could also be reckless, and, as she had recently discovered, deceptive. She didn't blame Tom. He had learned to survive, even excel, in the cold, manipulative world he grew up in. Tom came from a place where wealth equaled self-worth and he had plenty of both. He was right. She did feel sorry for him.

Memories of her first date with Tom brought a smile as Jesse recalled the fidgety mess she had been. Just when she thought she couldn't have been more nervous, the luxury car rolled to a stop to prove her wrong. The door attendant had stood like a sentry by the large ornate plaque engraved with the private club's address. Taking Tom's hand, she crossed the threshold into a foreign world, cringing inwardly with each step across a magnificently detailed Persian rug. The antique floor covering had been too beautiful to walk on, too expensive to be underfoot.

The lavish room with vaulted ceilings, velvet drapery and a towering fireplace had been the perfect backdrop for the city's most beautiful people. Men in expensive suits and women wearing the latest fashions lounged on Victorian sofas sipping cognac and fine wines. Tom's remark praising the club's old-world charm had gone unfinished when he turned to see her expression. Looking down at her plain sheath dress, she had said, "When you said dinner, I imagined someplace less—less exclusive."

When Tom called for the car, she had been more than a little relieved. Her mind raced for an excuse to cut the evening short, but before she could come up with anything, Tom suggested they go somewhere more relaxed. Her disappointment turned to surprise when he picked up child dogs on their way to the beach where they strolled barefoot across the sand.

Tom had kept the conversation going with talk about cultures and people he met abroad. She never quite understood Tom's role in his father's chain of retail stores but she knew he often traveled. As the evening progressed, Tom talked about his childhood, growing up as an only child with a mother preoccupied with Tiffany's and a workaholic father. By the end of their first date, she suspected Tom had needed a friend, someone who didn't care about private clubs.

Her dates with Tom were simple after that, dinner, walks along the beach and the occasional museum or art gallery. They fell into a comfortable routine, and over time, Tom began to open up about painful childhood memories. Jesse often found herself slipping into the therapist role but she never complained. The tradeoff had seemed fair. Tom needed someone to talk to and she needed the appearance of normalcy that dating offered.

When people at the office heard Tom had broken off their engagement, Jesse knew her co-workers were secretly waiting for the emotional meltdown that never came. With no details coming from her, colleagues gathered in whispering circles to draw their

own conclusions. The looks of sympathy and abrupt silences when she walked into a room were endured with a teeth-clenching outward appearance of calm. Eventually her breakup would be relegated to the back pages of office news. Until then, she would smile and assure those asking that she was doing fine.

Even if she wanted to, Jesse couldn't explain feelings she was still sorting out. After all, she had been dumped. She shouldn't feel relieved. Was she relieved? Some days she felt sad and lonely, other days regret, or was it self-reproach? She had agreed to settle, after all, to marry a man she wasn't in love with. Would she have settled? As the wedding day neared, she had felt trapped.

At least Amber didn't ask questions about the break up. Then again, why would she? She had let Amber read Tom's letter. Maybe she should have told her friend the truth, admitted she had never been in love with Tom. She should have, but she didn't. Instead, she brushed Amber's concern aside with the offhanded remark that she was more resilient than her friend was giving her credit.

Had her confident talk provoked fate? Jesse would wonder a few days later when she received a disturbing phone call. If Amber had been there, she would have known just how unprepared Jesse was to deal with a real tragedy. Awakened just before dawn, Jesse fumbled for the telephone receiver. The male voice on the other end sounded vaguely familiar. "Is this Jesse Hart?"

"Yes—yes it is," Jesse, confirmed.

"Jesse, this is Gabriel James. I'm sorry to wake you at such an early hour but your grandmother asked me to call. Florence is in the hospital." Silence hung in the air. "Jesse, are you there?"

"Yes," she croaked the word through a tightening throat.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, she stared blankly at the receiver in her hand. Her grandmother was in the hospital and tests were being done. What else had been said before she promised to catch the first flight out? She wasn't sure.

Ignoring items falling to the floor, Jesse tugged the suitcase from the closet top. Her grandmother was the only family she had left. How ill was she? Why hadn't she made the call herself? Was she too weak to talk, unconscious? The thought shook Jesse to her core. She turned slowly in the bedroom, mind in a fog. If only Amber were home. Practical and in control, Amber would know what to do. Mentally stepping back from the edge of panic, she pulled herself together. Call the airline, pack—her mind began to list the steps that would take her to her grandmother.

Although she had never been fully convinced God exists, Jesse said a silent prayer as she stood in her apartment window looking down into the busy street. The taxi should have been there already. As if summonsed by the thought, a horn blast had her hurrying downstairs. After giving instructions to the driver, she looked up at the balcony of the apartment she and Amber had shared the last four years. The twelve-story concrete building seemed heavy, even formidable, in the stark morning sun. As the taxi pulled into traffic, her eyes fell to the gum wrapper next to her feet. The white slip of paper became a blur as images of her grandmother, scared and alone in a depressing hospital room, began to fill her mind.

The weight of the world pressed down on Jesse's shoulders as she boarded the plane. Forcing a halfhearted smile in response to the flight attendant's greeting, she moved down the aisle to stuff her carry-on into the overhead compartment before slumping into a seat. Her grandmother, the person she loved most in the world, was in the hospital. Was she dying? A hand came up to silence a sob as she thought about her grandmother's open arms waiting to hug her to pieces as a child.

Stuffing the shredded tissue into her pocket, Jesse forced herself to focus on positive memories. Childhood scenes from summers spent in the mountains began to play out like clips from a cherished movie—lines of untended fishing poles dripping into still water, her grandmother's bubbling laughter, walking trails and picnics. The image of her grandmother smiling over an open book came easily to mind. Her grandmother loved to read. That's why she had become a teacher, books and children.

Jesse's mind wandered back over her childhood and time spent with her grandparents. Their playful, easy affection had shaped Jesse's romantic notions about love and marriage. She smiled, recalling the story of how her grandparents first met. Two people falling in love at work would sound ordinary, even boring, to some, but not to Jesse. She loved to hear the tale of her grandmother, a young woman just out of college, walking into the teachers' lounge to find a handsome gym teacher pouring coffee. As their eyes locked across the room, coffee overflowed the cup's rim. Each time her grandmother told the story, Jesse would sigh, "Love at first sight."

"Clumsiness," her grandfather once whispered in Jesse's ear before dodging the end of the dishtowel her grandmother snapped. *Yes*, Jesse thought, *her grandparents had been in love, able to communicate with just a glance.*

Folded arms tightened across Jesse's chest in an unconscious effort to ward off the unbidden question. What would she do if her grandmother died? Although her mother died when she was just a toddler, she had not understood the tragedy of death until her grandfather suffered a massive heart attack. Her grandmother had knelt in front of her chair to say, "To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord."

Not understanding, Jesse had asked the question any nine year old might have. "When is Grampy coming home? Is Grampy coming home?"

Jesse had never seen a person smile and cry at the same time before that day. "Grampy isn't coming back, Jesse. He was called home to be with Jesus, but he's okay. He's okay now."

Confused, Jesse had stared at her grandmother without responding. Wasn't Jesus her grandmother's best friend? Why would he take her grandfather from them? Years later, Jesse would look back and marvel at the strength and grace her grandmother had shown in the face of absolute heartbreak. She stared out the airplane window. "Please, don't take Grammy," she whispered to the azure sky.

Walking down the quiet, sterile hallway was almost more than Jesse could manage on shaking legs. The flight had given her too much time to think. The smell of antiseptic, at first faint, became smothering as she eyed the wood-grained door standing between her and her deepest fear. She pushed the metal handle to stand frozen in the

doorway. Nothing she imagined had prepared her for what she was seeing. Although only five, the room seemed to be bulging with visitors standing around the bed where her grandmother sat up laughing. All eyes turned to Jesse when her grandmother exclaimed her name with outstretched arms.

“Grammy,” Jesse whispered. With her first step forward, she became a child again, rushing into her grandmother’s embrace.

The voice next to her ear was comforting. “Jesse, I’m fine, sweetie.”

Weeping, Jesse clung to her grandmother, relief washing over her. Minutes passed before she pulled back to reach for the box of tissue on the nightstand. Quickly wiping tears, she turned to apologize to her grandmother’s visitors. “I’m—I’m sorry...” Her voice trailed off in the empty room before looking back at her grandmother. “I’m sorry for such an outburst, Grammy, but, I—I,” she began to stammer as fresh tears filled her eyes, “I guess I imagined the worst.”

Her grandmother squeezed her hand. “I’m fine, child. Just a fainting spell. I don’t even remember fainting but Gabriel said I did. All I remember is feeling dizzy when I stood up to go to bed.”

Jesse’s eyes widened with worry. “People don’t just pass out, Grammy.”

“Now, don’t make a fuss. I’ve had all kinds of tests and everything came back normal. Dr. Haynes said I probably just stood up too fast. He said that happens to people sometimes—probably won’t ever happen again.”

“The doctor said you’re okay?” Jesse asked, anxious for reassurance.

“Healthy as a horse,” she said, patting Jesse’s hand.

A river of stress flowed out in a slowly released breath. “I can’t tell you how relieved I am, Grammy. I was just frantic—” She stopped, her head tilting questioningly. “Did you say Gabriel was at your house?”

“Yes, dear. He drove me to the hospital.”

Puzzled, Jesse waited for her grandmother to say more, to explain why Gabriel had been at her house so late in the evening. Did he visit often? Just as Jesse would have asked, the telephone rang. Handing over the receiver, she watched her grandmother’s face light up before telling the caller she was well and would be going home soon.

Replacing the receiver a few moments later, Jesse sat down on the edge of the bed. During the flight, she thought of all the missed opportunities to tell her grandmother how much she loves her. Wrapping her grandmother in her arms, she inhaled the sweet vanilla fragrance that had always been such a part of her. “I love you, Grammy,” she said before pulling back to study clear brown eyes and rosy cheeks. “You look good.”

“I feel good,” she said, smiling. “I feel even better now that you’re here.” Her eyes sharpened on Jesse’s face. “You’ve been away too long, child.”

“You’re right,” Jesse said. “I have stayed away too long. I should have visited sooner.”

Her grandmother's face softened. "Oh, now, don't feel bad. You're home now and that's what matters."

Hearing a knock at the door, Jesse turned to see Gabriel standing in the doorway. "Come in, Gabriel," her grandmother called.

Seeing Gabriel coming toward the bed, Jesse moved to a nearby chair. "Jesse," he said, acknowledging her as he passed before his focus moved to her grandmother. "Your visitors asked me to say good-bye, Florence. I don't want to intrude but I'd like to come back later if you don't mind."

"Mind? Why, of course I don't mind," her grandmother scolded lightly.

When Gabriel asked her grandmother if he could bring anything when he returned, she looked at Jesse fondly. "No, thank you, dear. I have everything I need right here."

"I understand," he said, kissing her cheek. If you change your mind, give me a call. The doctor said there are no restrictions."

Remembering the sweet coffee she'd had that morning, she said, "Come to think of it, the coffee you brought earlier was good. What was that?"

He smiled. "One French vanilla cappuccino. Anything else?"

With his focus on her grandmother, Jesse had the chance to study Gabriel's profile. The teenager she'd last seen ten years ago had matured into a tall, powerfully built man. His dark, curly hair was shorter than she remembered but long enough to fall loosely across his forehead just as it did when he was a boy.

Seeing Gabriel turn, Jesse quickly looked away. "It's good to see you again, Jesse," he said.

She looked back at him. "Hmm? Oh, um, it's good to see you, too." Remembering he had taken the time to call, a twinge of guilt made her add, "Thank you for calling me, Gabriel."

On his way to the door, he stopped in front of Jesse's chair. "One decision can sometimes change a person's life," he said before walking out the door.

She stared after him, confused by the remark. Before she could ponder the odd comment, her grandmother patted the bed at her side. "Jesse, come over here and sit with me." Her grandmother studied her face with keen eyes before saying, "I haven't talked to you in weeks. Tell me how you've been doing."

The words, since the breakup, weren't said but Jesse heard them all the same. She thought back to the last call placed to her grandmother to say the wedding had been canceled. To her relief, her grandmother had not asked too many questions. Instead, she had spent the time insisting Jesse come home for a visit. Convincing her grandmother that she couldn't possibly get away from work had taken the better part of an hour.

Shrugging, Jesse said, "I don't know, Grammy. I guess I'm okay. You know, after the breakup, I was a little confused. I felt sad, but maybe a little relieved. It's

complicated, but I think it all worked out for the best. I think marrying would have been a mistake for both of us.”

”I’m sorry, dear. I know it’s been hard on you,” she said, sighing.

Jesse shook her head. “No, Grammy. Don’t feel sorry for me. When Gabriel called to say you were in the hospital, I was scared, really scared. I realized then what’s important. I can get over a breakup,” she said, holding back tears stinging the backs of her eyes. “I can survive almost anything, Grammy, but not losing you. I could never get over that.”

“Now, Jesse,” she said, patting Jesse’s hand, “there’s no need to worry about things like that. I think God still has plenty for me to do here. I’m sorry you were upset, sweetie, but I thank God for bringing you home.”

“I’m glad I came home, Grammy. I needed to see for myself that you’re okay.” Her face brightened to say, “Well, enough talk about me and sad things. Let’s talk about you. Tell me what you’ve been doing.”

They were still chatting when Jesse saw her grandmother cover a yawn. Getting up from the bed, she said, “Grammy, I’m sorry. I should have realized you were up all night. You must be exhausted. You should rest, take a nap and we’ll talk more when you wake up.”

“But I’m not sleepy,” her grandmother protested even as she tried to smother another yawn.

Jesse switched on a small lamp and turned off the overhead light. “I’m going to stretch my legs, maybe get a soda. You can take a nap or stay awake. Either way, I’ll be back in a little while.”

With a hint of a smile, her grandmother said, “Well, I guess if you’re going out anyway, I may as well rest my eyes a bit.”

Jesse pulled the blanket up around her grandmother’s shoulders and kissed her cheek. “You do that, Grammy. Rest your eyes for a while.”

Watching Jesse, she breathed a contented sigh. “God answered my prayers and brought my Jesse home.”

Roaming the hospital in search of a vending machine, Jesse thought about her grandmother’s words. Her grandmother thought God often intervened on her behalf. Her philosophy on life was simple. When things went wrong, she turned to God. When things went right, she thanked God, and when bad things happened, she accepted it as God’s will.

Although she had gone to church with her grandmother when she was young, Jesse had never been able to adopt her religious beliefs. She had always struggled with doubt. College, particularly graduate school, had reinforced those doubts and eventually turned her off the topic of religion altogether. While professors masked their negative opinion of Christians in clever subtlety, students had been less inventive.

When the topic of religion came up, as it often did in humanities, Jesse would hear classmates criticize and label Christians as closed minded and brainwashed. The few

brave enough to defend the faith had been ridiculed and quickly silenced by the more outspoken freethinkers in the class. From her perch on the fence of neutrality, Jesse had silently noted the hypocrisy of one side calling the other critical and closed-minded.

Later that evening, Jesse awoke to a dull pain in her neck. She sat up with a soft moan in the chair where she had fallen asleep. Rubbing her stiff shoulder, she looked across the room at her grandmother's sleeping form before her eyes fell to the white hospital blanket across her lap. Curious, she lifted a corner of the blanket.

"I was here earlier," Gabriel said, coming through the door.

Turning quickly in her chair, Jesse gasped at the sharp pain slicing through her neck. Her hand went to the ache as she watched Gabriel coming toward her carrying two cups and a small bag. "You covered me with a blanket?"

"The room was cool and I didn't want to wake you." Offering her one of the cups, he said, "Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you. I would have knocked but my hands are full."

Taking the coffee, she said, "Thank you," without looking up. The thought of him in the room while she slept was somehow unsettling. How long had he watched her? She imagined herself snoring, or worse, drooling.

"Cream and sugar are in the bag," he said, setting the other cup he carried on the nightstand before taking the chair next to hers. His tone was casual when he said, "You don't snore. In fact, you look like a little girl when you sleep."

The comment surprised her but before she could respond, a snort of laughter erupted from the bed. Still laughing, her grandmother held down a button on the controller to bring her bed into a sitting position. "Tell me, Gabriel. Do I snore?"

Seeming amused by her grandmother's question, Gabriel smiled. "You are a portrait of loveliness when you sleep, Florence, but not nearly as quiet as your granddaughter."

Flustered by the accuracy of Gabriel's guess, Jesse stirred sugar into her coffee, pretending to ignore their banter. How had he known what she was thinking? Her expression must have given it away. That was the only plausible explanation. Pushing the thought aside, she turned her attention to her grandmother who was still teasing Gabriel, asking him to describe her snore. *What a silly conversation*, Jesse thought, giving in to the smile tugging the corners of her mouth.

They were still chuckling when her grandmother's expression sobered and she turned to Gabriel to ask, "What time am I being released tomorrow?"

"Dr. Haynes said he'll sign off on the discharge forms by nine but I'll be here earlier to pack your things," he answered.

Surprised at her grandmother's reliance on Gabriel, Jesse spoke up. "Gabriel doesn't need to inconvenience himself, Grammy. I can take you home in the rental."

Her grandmother eyed the blanket she was busily adjusting before dropping the bombshell that rocked Jesse back in her seat. “Gabriel is staying at the house.” She cast a hopeful look at Jesse before saying, “You two could drive out together in the morning.”

Jesse began to stammer before knowing what she would say. “But—but Gabriel—
I”

“Will be here early,” Gabriel cut in smoothly.

Jesse looked from Gabriel to her grandmother, dumbfounded, caught like a leaf in a strong current headed for a waterfall.

Setting her cappuccino on the nightstand, her grandmother said, “It’s settled then.” Her smile turned to a look of concern when she noticed the pallor of Jesse’s face. “You’ve had a long trip, Jesse, and it’s getting late. Why don’t you and Gabriel go home and get some rest.”

“You know, Grammy,” Jesse said quickly. “I was just thinking. We have so much to talk about. I should spend the night here with you.”

Her grandmother’s expression softened at the suggestion. “That would be nice, but, no, we can talk tomorrow. You’ll be much more comfortable at the house.”

Not ready to give in, Jesse patted the arms of the chair she sat in. “I’ll be comfortable right here. I was thinking earlier that this chair is—well, unbelievable.”

Shaking her head, her grandmother said, “No, sweetie. I’ll feel better knowing you’re tucked in bed at home. Besides, I’d like to read a while.”

Sighing, Gabriel got to his feet. “We’ll leave you alone to read, Florence.”

Jesse’s eyes narrowed on Gabriel’s back as he stepped forward to kiss her grandmother goodnight. *He has some nerve*, she thought, *speaking for people that way*. Maybe she wasn’t ready to leave. Just who does he think he is, anyway? She leaned forward, prepared to ask him that very question, but as he stepped back she stopped. She couldn’t miss the look of relief on her grandmother’s face.

As Gabriel turned, Jesse looked away, avoiding eye contact as he passed her chair on his way to the door. She hoped he would leave but she was disappointed. Hearing, “I’ll walk you to your car, Jesse,” she turned to see him leaning casually against the doorframe with his arms crossed, waiting.

She stared at him with tightening lips before glancing back to see her grandmother watching. Forcing a quick smile, she went to kiss her goodnight. “I guess I’ll see you in the morning, Grammy.”

Jesse turned off the car engine and looked around at the lit porch with a feeling of coming home. She had always loved the large rustic house. Her grandfather built the house with hand-hewn logs salvaged from an inn slated to be torn down in a neighboring county. Her eyes traveled up the stone walk leading to the covered porch that testified to her grandmother’s love of plants. The thickly padded benches and rocking chairs brought

a nostalgic smile as she remembered long summer days relaxing on the porch reading mystery novels.

Gabriel tapped the car window before opening the door. "I'll carry your bags," he said, offering a hand to help her from the car.

Standing, her eyes were just level with his chest. She lowered her gaze to fumble for the trunk release button. "My—my bags are in the trunk."

She took her time to look over plants and flowers overflowing hanging baskets as she crossed the porch before following Gabriel through the front door. Stopping just inside the living room, she inhaled deeply, enjoying the light smell of cedar. Her eyes traveled up the rock fireplace to wide ceiling beams. The warm, country feel of the room was just as she remembered. Hearing her name, she went to the door to see Gabriel starting up the stairs. He called to her over his shoulder, "Are you staying in your old room?"

"Yes," she answered, going to the lacquered banister she had sailed down countless times as a child. She ran a hand over the smooth surface as she started up the stairs. No matter how much she practiced, Gabriel had always beaten her distance down the smooth slope.

In her room, Gabriel placed her suitcase on the bed and turned to say, "If you don't need anything else, I'll let you get settled."

She meant to thank him, let him leave the room, but as their eyes met, she found herself searching a man's face for the boy she had once known. Something was different, she noted thoughtfully. Brown eyes that had once been laughing and carefree seemed darker, more intense.

The corners of his mouth tilted up a fraction. "Are you okay, Jesse?"

She blinked, puzzled by the remark. Why had he asked that? Then she knew. Not only was she staring but also blocking his path to the door. "Yes—yes, I'm fine," she said, quickly stepping aside to let him pass. Thank you for carrying my bags." When he didn't move to leave, she looked up to see his amused expression. Did he find her discomfort entertaining? A ripple of anger bristled up her back to sharpen the edge in her voice. "I've taken up too much of your time already, Gabriel. I'm familiar with the house and more than capable of managing on my own the rest of the evening."

His eyes crinkled at the sides with restrained laughter. "Your concern is duly noted, but as it happens, I have no pressing business to attend to this evening."

In no mood to provide him further amusement, she turned and walked to the window. "I won't intrude on your free time, then." Trying for a dismissive tone, she added, "Thank you, Gabriel."

She didn't have to turn around to know he was smiling. She could hear it in his voice when he said, "You are more than welcome."

Hearing him call to her from the doorway, her teeth snapped together before turning slowly to see his sober expression. "You are not an intrusion, Jesse," he said

quietly. “I have been expecting you for some time.” Before she could begin to form a response, he walked out of the room.

She stared at the closing door. Why would he be expecting her? Before yesterday, she had no reason to come home. Placing the heavy suitcase on the floor, she sat down on the end of the bed. Expecting her—what was that supposed to mean? Her eyes closed before falling back onto the bed with a groan. Oh no, he knows. That’s why he made the comment, he knows about the breakup. Don’t all heartbroken, rejected people go home to lick their wounds? Her grandmother must have told him. “Well, thank you small town, USA. The place where a mere acquaintance knows your business,” she grumbled in the empty room.”

Staring at the ceiling, Jesse grudgingly admitted the truth. Gabriel was certainly more than an acquaintance. They had grown up together. She had known him since—since when? She tried to remember, but couldn’t. Like siblings, she couldn’t say when they first met. Sibling, that’s how he had always thought of her, as a sister.

Pressing the heels of her hands against her eyes, Jesse tried to ward off memories bursting through new cracks in an old, weather-beaten dam. Gabriel had been one of several children to come to her grandparents’ frequent cookouts. They had been friends, best friends, sharing toys as children and secrets as teenagers. Gabriel had known her better than anyone had. He often seemed to know what she was thinking.

Falling in love with Gabriel had been easy. She had been charmed by his shyness, fascinated by his intelligent, thoughtful views. At the age of fifteen, she had been hanging on his every word. The romantic fairy tale she created had been a masterpiece of self-deception. She deluded herself into thinking his kindness and smiles were born of love rather than protective affection. She had been an idiot.

Memories that should have been forgotten bubbled to the surface with a clarity reserved for yesterday. After years of pining and months of wavering, at the age of sixteen, she had decided to tell Gabriel how she felt. With butterflies in her stomach, she watched the station wagon pull into the drive only to be disappointed. Guessing at the reason behind Jesse’s downcast face, Gabriel’s mother paused to say her son would be driving himself up later. Then, she whispered the words that had sent Jesse’s spirits soaring. “My son mentioned plans to ask a very special young lady out for a drive today.”

When the older model Jeep pulled up forty-five minutes later, Jesse had been waiting. Gabriel returned her wave before walking around to the passenger side. The girl that latched onto his arm had been pretty, more than pretty. The love struck smile melted from Jesse’s face as she stared blankly, stupidly, from the porch railing. She had stood that way until one of the younger boys called out, “Gabriel’s got a girlfriend.” The words, the teasing singsong voice, had etched itself into Jesse’s mind with laser precision.

She never told anyone how she felt about Gabriel but her grandmother had known. Sitting on the large rock overlooking the upper pond, Jesse turned a tear-stained face away when her grandmother sat down next to her. Maybe the long silence had given her grandmother time to sift through well-meaning platitudes others might have offered. When she finally spoke, her words were simple, words to let Jesse know she cared. “I’m sorry, Jesse.”

The pain of Gabriel's rejection had gone deep. She would later watch girls in high school and then women in college flit from one romance to another while she continued to be haunted by one face. How often had she reminded herself that she and Gabriel had not dated? They had never even kissed, for heavens sake. In spite of everything, her heart had stubbornly refused to obey her head and forget. Psychology books she pored over had not given her the answers she searched for. In the end, she had come to one conclusion. Matters of the heart defy reason.

Buttoning the pencil skirt, Jesse murmured, "We were just kids then." She looked down to see the skirt droop just below her waistline. "Great," she grumbled. I'm sure Grammy will notice I've lost weight. She already thinks I'm too thin. She looked up to study sad green eyes staring back at her from an average, oval face. At five foot four, she was average height with long, straight, average brown hair. There was nothing striking or beautiful about her. The question had plagued her for years. If she were prettier, would things have turned out differently? Her shoulders fell a fraction. She had resigned herself to the truth long ago. "I am what I am, average." Sighing, she whispered, "And I can live with average."

Jesse blew out a long breath and started down the stairs, preparing to face Gabriel. In her room, she had convinced herself that she could be calm, casual and courteous, nothing less and nothing more. Calm, casual, courteous, she mentally chanted the mantra. She stopped inside the kitchen. Gabriel was setting plates on the large oak table. Trying to sound pleasant, she said, "You didn't have to fix dinner."

He pulled out a chair with a smile she might have described as charming if she weren't on guard. "Long flight, long day, I thought you might be tired and hungry."

"Yes, I am," she admitted, taking the seat he held, "thank you." The food looked delicious and the tempting smell was beginning to make her mouth water. News about her grandmother had pushed everything from her mind and she had not eaten since yesterday. She waited for him to be seated before picking up a roll to take a bite. "Very good," she said, taking a second bite.

Lacing his fingers together, he said, "Thank you," before bowing his head. Her expression froze. When he started to pray, the half-eaten roll dropped to her plate. The quickly swallowed bread lodged at the back of her throat, triggering a gag reflex. Eyes watering, she fought to stay quiet and wait for the prayer to end. The word, amen, was met with hacking coughs. Taking a drink of tea, she croaked, "Sorry," before clearing her throat several times.

When she finally quieted, he asked, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," she said, clearing her scratchy throat again. *Fine*, she thought—*oh, sure, fine, just fine*. Other than performing a spontaneous rendition of a cat coughing up a fur ball, she was great. When her throat began to relax, she took another drink before saying, "Something just went down the wrong way." Thinking about the remark, she smiled and shook her head.

He looked at her curiously. "Choking amuses you?"

"No. The comment I made amuses me," she said, starting to laugh softly. I said something went down the wrong way but I'm wondering if that's even possible. I mean,

really, if something goes down our throat at all, chances are it's headed in the right direction."

"You have a point," he said, smiling. "I'm glad to see you haven't lost your sense of humor."

With the mood lightened, Gabriel began to chat about people she remembered from summers spent in the mountains. Listening to anecdotes about his work as a youth minister, she began to relax. Remembering him as kind and generous, his choice of profession didn't surprise her. Even as a boy, he often talked about Bible verses he was studying.

Watching Gabriel cut a piece of meat, Jesse hid a smile. She wouldn't ask if he had ever recovered from the fourth grade trauma of being teased for having girly eyelashes. Boys, they could be so cruel. In all fairness, his dark eyes and soot black eyelashes would draw attention. She cast a quick glance at his left hand, noting the absence of a wedding band. She found it curious that he wasn't married after all these years. With a mental gasp, she reined in her wayward thoughts. What was she doing? Calm, casual and courteous, she reminded herself.

After talking a while longer, Gabriel leaned back in his chair to say, "Psychology, interesting career choice. How did you come to select that field of study?"

Distractedly brushing a strand of hair behind her ear, she propped her chin on her hand. Like him, she cared about people. Curiosity, interest in the human mind and hopes of touching lives in some positive way were among the reasons for choosing psychology. She explained this to Gabriel before admitting that she had grown somewhat disillusioned during the course of her career. At his questioning look, she explained that insurance companies rather than individual need often dictate the level services a client receives. One shoulder lifted and fell lightly before saying, "So, I recently stopped seeing clients for therapy. I do assessments and referrals instead."

He looked at her with a puzzled expression. "A therapist who doesn't provide therapy."

She smiled. "I'm afraid I didn't explain very well. You might expect a therapist to communicate more effectively. Let me try again. You see, I used to provide therapy but I stopped, temporarily. I'm not comfortable ending treatment when people can't pay. Technically, I'm not abandoning clients, but it feels that way to me. As the recession deepened, several in the area lost their jobs and insurance. The situation was difficult for everyone."

"I think I understand," he said, nodding. "You sacrifice what you want in order to do what's right."

She considered his comment. "Maybe...maybe not. Some might think my motivations are rather selfish, an attempt to avoid uncomfortable situations. I mean, really, I may not like the firm's policies but I do understand their position."

He studied her downcast face. "The fact that the situation made you uncomfortable is telling in itself. Whatever the motive, Jesse, your reasoning seems justified."

Lifting one shoulder, she said, “No big deal, really.” She watched him over the rim of the glass she lifted. *He’s a good listener*, she thought. Glancing up at the wall clock, she said, “Can you believe we’ve been talking an hour?”

“Doesn’t seem that long,” he said, placing his napkin on the table. “I guess time has a way of slipping by in good company.”

“Yes,” she said, nodding, “I guess it does. Thank you, Gabriel. Dinner was very good.”

Jesse was clearing the table when she heard a soft chuckle. She walked over to the sink where Gabriel was rinsing dishes. Handing him the plates she carried, she asked, “What’s so funny?”

“I was just thinking about some of the disasters I created in your grandmother’s kitchen. When Florence insisted I learn to cook, I don’t think she knew what she was getting into. She has proven to be a woman of great patience.”

Imagining Gabriel in her grandmother’s apron, Jesse smiled. A few seconds later, the smile faded. She had been more than a little surprised to hear Gabriel was staying at the house. Why was he staying with her grandmother? She wanted to ask but was afraid she might embarrass him. Was he having financial problems? Maybe he needed a place to stay. She wasn’t sure what the salary for a youth minister in a small town might be.

With the last glass in the dishwasher, she said, “I don’t guess you’ve been staying here too long since Grammy didn’t mention it before today.”

“Hmm,” he murmured, continuing to wipe the counter without looking her way.

She watched him, waiting. When he stayed quiet, she asked, “How long have you been here?”

“Not very long,” he said, not looking at her.

His elusive answer only served to further pique her interest. She crossed her arms, waiting, knowing he realized she was watching him. Finally, he stopped what he was doing to look back at her. “Florence and I are working on a project. Since we work here, she suggested it might be more convenient if I stay at her house.”

“Project,” she said under her breath, trying to imagine possibilities. Drawing a blank, she asked, “What kind of project?”

He didn’t respond for several seconds. When he did, he sounded apologetic. “I hope this doesn’t offend you, Jesse, but I would prefer Florence tell you about the project she’s involved with. Do you mind?”

“Well—no, I guess not,” she said, a little embarrassed.

She focused on putting dishes away before looking back to see him watching her with a thoughtful expression. Just as he started to speak, his cell phone rang. Looking at the number, he said, “Excuse me, I need to take this,” before walking from the room.

In her bedroom, Jesse finished unpacking before running a bath. Soaking in the tub, her mind drifted to Gabriel, thinking about how he had changed. He was taller and

the soft edges of youth had given way to a more mature face with sharper, strong lines. What had been doing the last ten years? No wedding ring—she didn't think he was married. Was he divorced? Did he have children, a girlfriend? The call he received so late made her wonder.

The worry and strain of the day had taken its toll and Jesse snuggled into the soft bed expecting sleep to come quickly. An hour later, she was still awake. Resisting the urge to ponder on Gabriel's private life, she forced her mind in a different direction. What project were her grandmother and Gabriel working on? Why hadn't her grandmother mentioned her houseguest? Her open palm came up to her forehead. *I'm such an idiot*, she thought, remembering the time her grandmother had innocently mentioned that she and Gabriel attend the same church. Hadn't she asked her grandmother never to mention Gabriel's name again? She had regretted the impulsive comment then but she regretted it even more now.

She picked up the remote from the bedside table, hoping television might take her mind off the nagging questions. Turning to the news, she followed the headlines running along the bottom of the screen—economic crisis, protests, violence. Shaking her head, she pressed the off button. "Skewed," she murmured. The news is completely skewed toward the negative. Surely, one positive newsworthy event has happened in the world.

Tossing and turning, Jesse sat up to fluff her pillow before snapping her head back into the soft mass. Something felt wrong. Lying perfectly still, she listened until the answer came. The sounds were different—no sirens, horns or squeaking brakes. Rolling onto her side, she studied the yellow light of the moon through the window until her eyes began to grow heavy. She blinked sleepily at the glowing disk. The quiet is better, she decided.

Chapter 2

The noise of high-pitched beeps pulled Jesse from sleep. She fumbled for the button to silence the noisy clock before lifting her head to squint at red numbers. She rolled onto her back with a soft moan—seven o'clock. Each blink felt like sand being dragged across her eyes. Fighting the temptation to turn her face into the pillow, she swung her legs over the side of the bed to pad barefoot to the window seat. Shielding her eyes against the bright sun, she watched birds scamper across the front lawn in search of their morning meal. At the sound of squawking, she noticed a blue jay flapping its wings at competition before claiming a place at the bird feeder. As the larger bird's weight tilted the feeder, a sparrow darted across the yard to pick at the seed trickling down. She smiled at the smaller bird's cunning.

Yawning, Jesse stood up to stretch, thinking she should get dressed. What time were they supposed to be at the hospital? She couldn't remember. Had Gabriel said nine? No, that's when the doctor would sign off on release forms. He told her grandmother they would be at the hospital earlier. At the sound of a knock, she pulled on her robe and went to open the door. Gabriel stood on the other side holding out a mug. "I thought you could use this."

"Just what I need," she said, taking the offered cup. "Thank you."

He glanced at his watch. "I was hoping to leave before eight if you don't mind."

She nodded. "Sure, twenty minutes."

"Twenty minutes," he repeated, looking doubtful.

"Less than twenty," she said, smiling before closing the door. Taking a sip of coffee, she closed her eyes, savoring the rich taste. He remembered she took sugar.

Gabriel walked into the kitchen just as Jesse was finishing the last bite of pancake. "The maple syrup is really good," she said, coming around the table with her plate.

"Thank you. It's an old family recipe." He smiled, to say, "At least that's what the label says." As she neared the sink, he took the plate from her hands. "We'll leave these until we get back. It's getting late."

Surprised, she stared at her empty hands before her eyes shot up. "I don't appreciate being treated like a child," she snapped.

His back went rigid before turning slowly to look down at her. They were standing so close that she could detect the clean, woody quality of his cologne. When he crossed his arms over his chest, she fought the impulse to step back. Instead, she crossed her own arms and lifted one brow to match the arch of his. After a few seconds, he broke the silence. "I've been courteous since your arrival, Jesse, nothing less. Perhaps, courtesy has become obsolete in Long Beach. Have manners become so uncommon as to be misconstrued as odd, maybe even offensive, by some? Whatever the case, I refuse to discard civility to pacify you or anyone else."

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