

End of the Age: Final Deception

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1. Fiction / Christian / Suspense
2. Fiction / Christian / Romance

CHAPTER 1

Jesse placed the finished report into the briefcase and closed the lid. Hearing a 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.

Picking up a magazine from the coffee table, Jesse flipped distractedly through pages before the image of a model wearing a floor-length wedding gown made her stop mid-turn. Her eyes moved to the corner desk where she had placed Tom's letter weeks ago. The words ending their engagement should have brought anger, maybe feelings of betrayal, but not the sad sense of relief in knowing that her fiancé had summonsed the courage she lacked.

Dropping the magazine, she started across the room toward the desk. This would be the last time she would read Tom's letter.

Jesse –

After years of toying with women, I find myself stricken with a forming conscience—or perhaps some other force moves my hand—compelling the truth from such an unlikely vessel. In the past, I've made excuses or just walked away from relationships, but not this time. I can't do that to you. You deserve to know the truth. Simply stated, I'm not the man I pretend to be. I'm a fraud, someone who can role-play a charming character long enough to seduce a woman.

Casual relationships, mindless flings, that's all I've ever wanted. That's all I was looking for when we met. You caught my eye the moment you walked into the restaurant. Your sweet smile and air of innocence was irresistible, intriguing. I found myself fantasizing about teasing sensuality from such a novice. Are you shocked? Of course, you are.

Over time, you became more than a conquest. I came to respect and appreciate you as a person and looked forward to our talks. I could have never shared such personal details with anyone else. You helped me to understand so many things about myself, my parents. The time we spent together changed me, and for a moment I thought I could be the man you deserve. That's when I proposed—impulsively. Within days, I found myself returning to old behaviors.

I do love you, Jesse, but I don't know how to be in love or in a long-term relationship. 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 regret disappointing you, Jesse. Perhaps one day you will forgive me.

With Love,

Tom

Ripped pieces of letter floated to the table. She didn't need a reminder of her failings. 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.

Relaxing back against the sofa, Jesse thought about Tom. She tried to imagine where he might be. So unpredictable, he could 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. Tom was fun and exciting, but he could also be reckless. Even so, he was right about one thing. She could never hate him. He was, after all, a product of his environment. He had learned to survive, even thrive, in the cold, manipulative world he grew up in. In a world where money equals status and achievement, Tom would be considered a great success.

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 had purred to a stop to prove her wrong. The door attendant stood like a sentry by the large ornate plaque engraved with the private club's address. Taking her hand, Tom had led her into a foreign world. Each step across the magnificently detailed Persian rug had left her cringing inwardly. The antique floor covering was 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 said, "When you said dinner, I imagined someplace less formal."

When Tom called for the car, she had been secretly relieved. Hoping to save him from the awkward chore of cutting the date short, she had racked her mind for any excuse to do it herself. As it happened, no excuse had been needed. Before getting into the car, Tom took off his tie and jacket and suggested they go someplace more relaxed. He later surprised her by picking up chili dogs and suggesting a walk along the beach.

With his outgoing personality, Tom had easily kept the conversation going by describing different cultures and people he'd 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, the conversation turned more personal and Tom began to talk 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 needed a friend, someone who didn't care about private clubs.

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. Over time, Tom started to share painful childhood memories. Jesse often found herself slipping into the therapist role but she never complained. The tradeoff 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 would never come. With few 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 practiced appearance of calm. Eventually the breakup would be relegated to the back pages of office news. Until then, she would continue to 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 the feeling 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, her anxiety had grown into an overhanging cloud of uneasiness.

At least Amber didn't question her about the break up. Then again, why would she? She had let her roommate 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 assured Amber that she was strong, resilient and doing just fine.

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 seen firsthand just how unprepared Jesse was to deal with a real tragedy. Awakened just before dawn, she 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 managed through a constricting throat.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, Jesse stared blankly at the receiver in her hand. Her grandmother was in the hospital. 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 around slowly in the bedroom, mind in a fog. If only Amber were home. Practical and organized, Amber would know what to do. Mentally stepping back from the edge of panic, Jesse closed her eyes and willed herself to breathe. Call the airline, pack—her mind began to list 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 out at the busy street. She glanced at her watch. The taxi

should have been there already. As if summonsed by the thought, the sound of a horn had her hurrying downstairs. After giving instructions to the driver, Jesse 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 focus drifted 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.

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—fishing lines dripping into gently moving water, her grandmother's soft laughter, walking trails and picnics. The image of her grandmother smiling over an open book came to mind. Her grandmother loved to read. That's what had drawn her to teaching, her love of children and books.

Jesse's fondest memories were of summers spent with her grandparents. Their playful, easy affection had shaped her 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 seem ordinary, even boring, to some, but not to Jesse. She loved to hear how her grandmother, a young woman just out of college, walked into the teachers' lounge to find a handsome gym teacher pouring coffee. As their eyes locked across the room, hot liquid overflowed the cup's rim. Each time the story had been told to Jesse as a girl, she had sighed. "Love at first sight".

"Love at first sight...or clumsiness?" Her grandfather once joked before dodging the dish towel her grandmother snapped. Yes, her grandparents had been in love, able to communicate with just a glance.

Jesse's folded arms tightened across her chest in an unconscious effort to ward off the unbidden question. What if her grandmother died? Although her mother died when she was just a toddler, Jesse had not understood the real tragedy of death until her grandfather suffered a heart attack. Jesse could still remember her grandmother kneeling in front of her chair to tell her the news before saying, "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?"

Jesse had never seen a person smile and cry at the same time before that day. Her grandmother had taken her hand to say, "Grampy isn't coming back, Jesse. He was called away to be with Jesus."

Confused, Jesse had stared at her grandmother without responding. All the things her grandmother said about Jesus had flooded her mind. Wasn't Jesus her grandmother's best friend?

Why would Jesus take her grandfather away? Years later, Jesse would look back and marvel at the strength and grace her grandmother had shown in the face of absolute heartbreak. Jesse 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 about this moment. The smell of antiseptic, at first faint, became smothering as she eyed the wood-grained door standing between her and her deepest fear. Swallowing nervously, she slowly pushed the metal handle until the door moved forward. Frozen, Jesse stood in the doorway. Nothing she imagined had prepared her for what she was seeing. Although only five visitors, the room seemed to be bulging with people standing around the bed where her grandmother sat up laughing. The room fell silent as all eyes turned to Jesse before her grandmother exclaimed her name with outstretched arms.

“Grammy,” Jesse responded, moving into the room. With her first step forward, Jesse 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. A few minutes passed before she pulled back. Sitting on the edge of her grandmother’s hospital bed, she quickly reached for tissues and wiped her eyes before turning to apologize to her grandmother’s visitors. “I’m sorry...” Her voice trailed off in the empty room before looking back at her grandmother. “Sorry for such an outburst, Grammy, but I—I,” her voice trembled as she swallowed back tears. “I guess I imagined the worst.”

Her grandmother’s face softened. “Oh, now, don’t you worry, child. I’m fine. It was just a dizzy spell.

Jesse’s eyes widened. “Dizzy spell? Did you pass out? Did you fall? What happened? What’d the doctors say?”

Chuckling softly at the barrage of questions, her grandmother patted Jesse’s hand. “I stood up to go to bed and felt a little light headed. And no, I didn’t pass out or fall. Gabriel noticed I stopped for a second and overreacted. And the doctor said I’m fine. He just wanted to run a few tests to tell me what I already knew—that I’m fit as a fiddle.” Her expression softened as she studied Jesse’s face. “I’m glad you’re here but I’m surprised you flew in. I didn’t think much of it when Gabriel said he’d call to let you know what’s going on. Didn’t he tell you it was just tests?”

Jesse thought back to the call she received. She vividly remembered hearing her grandmother was in the hospital and tests were being done. Gabriel had said more, but what? For the life of her, she couldn’t recall. She shook her head before mumbling, “I don’t know”. She didn’t want to admit that she had panicked. Changing the subject, she said, “So, all the tests have come back and the doctor said you’re okay?”

“I’m fine, Jesse. The tests came back normal. Dr. Haynes said maybe I just stood up too fast. He said that happens sometimes. Since I was already here, he wanted to run a few tests.”

Jesse felt a river of stress flow out in one long breath. “I can’t tell you how relieved I am, Grammy, I—” She stopped mid-sentence, her expression questioning. “Did you say Gabriel was at your house when you were getting ready for bed?”

“That’s right. He drove me to the hospital.”

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

Replacing the receiver a few moments later, Jesse sat down on the edge of the bed. During the flight, she had plenty of time to think of all the missed opportunities to tell her grandmother how much she cares. “I love you, Grammy,” she said, wrapping her grandmother in her arms to inhale the sweet vanilla fragrance that had always been such a part of her. Sitting back, she took in clear brown eyes and rosy cheeks. “You look pretty good for a woman in a hospital bed, Grammy.”

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

Jesse felt a twinge of guilt. “You’re right, Grammy. I have stayed away too long. I should have visited sooner.”

She patted Jesse’s hand. “You’re home now and that’s what matters.

“Hearing a knock at the door, Jesse turned to see Gabriel standing in the doorway.

“Gabriel, come in,” her grandmother called to him.

Seeing Gabriel coming toward the bed, Jesse moved to a nearby chair. “Hello, 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 on your time with Jesse, but I’d like to come back later if you don’t mind.”

“Mind? Why, of course I don’t mind,” her grandmother said.

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

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

Before Gabriel could turn to go, her grandmother’s eyes lit up, recalling the drink she’d had earlier. “That coffee I had this morning. What was that? It was like dessert and coffee all rolled into one.”

Gabriel smiled at her description. “One French vanilla cappuccino. Anything else?”

Gabriel listened patiently while her grandmother debated whether she should have something so sweet and rich in the evening. With his attention 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, wavy hair was shorter than she remembered but still 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."

"Huh? Oh, sure. It's good to see you, too." The forced smile didn't reach her eyes. Remembering he had taken the time to call, she added a perfunctory, "Thank you for calling."

"You're welcome," he said turning to leave. At the door, he stopped and looked back at her.

"One decision can sometimes change a person's life."

She stared after him. What? What was that supposed to mean? Before she could give it much thought, her grandmother called to her.

"Jesse, come over here and sit with me."

With Jesse sitting on the edge of the bed, her grandmother studied her face 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, there hadn't been too many questions. Instead, she had focused on persuading Jesse to 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.

Jesse took a moment to pull her thoughts together before answering. "I'm doing okay, Grammy. Sure, I was a little sad, but also relieved. It's hard to explain—it's complicated. But I think everything worked out for the best."

Sensing that her granddaughter was telling the truth, she decided to let the matter rest. "You know I'm here if you ever want to talk. Breakups can be hard."

Jesse nodded. "You're right. Breakups can be tough, but there's something much worse. When I heard you were in the hospital, that was a shock. I don't know what I'd do if anything ever happened to you, Grammy."

She smiled fondly at Jesse. "Well then, I guess it's a good thing God has plans for me right here. I'm just so thankful to have you home. God is so good."

Ready to change the subject, Jesse's face brightened. "Okay, Grammy, enough about me. Now it's your turn. Tell me what you've been doing."

Her grandmother happily launched into a discussion about church functions to include who cooked what, the activities and decorations. Jesse also learned that Beth Reynolds' son, who Jesse had never met, recently married a very pretty woman named Aaliyah—such a lovely

name—and how happy Beth is that her son and Aaliyah moved into the house next door. Her grandmother was still chatting about friends from church when Jesse noticed her cover a yawn.

Getting to her feet, she said, “Grammy, I’m so sorry. I should have realized you were up all night. You must be exhausted.”

“But I’m not really sleepy,” her grandmother protested just before trying to smother another yawn.

Not convinced, Jesse said, “I’ll tell you what, Grammy. You rest, take a nap and we’ll talk more when you wake up.” She switched on a small lamp attached to the wall and turned off the overhead light. “In the meantime, I’m going to stretch my legs, maybe get a soda.”

Her grandmother started to sit up. “But I’m not—”

“I know, Grammy. You’re not sleepy. But I’m going to stretch my legs and get some air whether you sleep or not.”

Knowing she’d lost, her grandmother relaxed back against the pillow. “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 shoulders and kissed her cheek. “You do that, Grammy. Go ahead and rest your eyes a little while.”

With eyelids beginning to flutter shut, she breathed a contented sigh. “God answered my prayers and brought my Jesse home.”

Roaming the hospital in search of a vending machine, Jesse considered her grandmother’s words. According to her grandmother, 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 fully adopt her grandmother’s 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 more direct when expressing their views.

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 progressives in the class. From her perch on the fence of neutrality, Jesse had silently noted the irony of one side touting tolerance while insulting and shutting down debate from the other side.

Returning to her grandmother’s room less than thirty minutes later, Jesse was pleased to find her grandmother sleeping soundly. She sat down quietly, content to watch her grandmother sleep. Tendrils of white hair framing her grandmother’s face contrasted with her naturally brown complexion. Her grandmother was still a lovely, vibrant woman. Reassured by even, rhythmic

breathing, Jesse relaxed back into her chair. Before long, she began to feel her own eyelids growing heavy.

A few hours later, a soft moan escaped Jesse as she sat up 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. She lifted the corner of the blanket. Where did that come from?

"I dropped by earlier," a male voice said.

Jesse winced in pain as she twisted in her chair to see Gabriel coming through the door carrying a cardboard tray holding two cups.

Checking to see if her grandmother was still asleep, Jesse spoke in a hushed voice. "You covered me with a blanket?"

He came closer to hand her one of the cups. Glancing at her sleeping grandmother, he kept his voice low. "The room was cool and I didn't want to wake you. Sorry if I startled you."

"No—no, you're fine," she said. The thought of him in the room while she slept was somehow unsettling. How long had he watched her? She closed her eyes with an inward groan. Had she snored, or worse, drooled?

He set the other coffee on the dresser before rounding the bed to pick up the other, lighter, chair in the room. Carefully, quietly, he placed the chair next to hers before handing her a coffee stirrer and a few small packets. They sat in silence a few minutes before he leaned in to say, "You don't snore, by the way."

The empty sugar packet crumpled in her hand. She knew it. He watched her sleep. Eyes narrowing, she slowly turned to face him but before she could respond, a snort of laughter erupted from the bed. Still laughing, her grandmother held down a button on the side rail panel to bring her bed into a sitting position.

"Giving the snore report, Gabriel? Well, let's hear it. Do I snore?"

Seemingly amused by her grandmother's question, Gabriel smiled. "You're a portrait of loveliness when you sleep, Florence, but, yeah, you do snore—softly."

Jesse stirred her coffee, pretending to ignore their banter. How did he know what she'd been 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. Listening to their silliness, she gave in to the smile tugging the corners of her mouth.

After a few minutes of fun, her grandmother's face sobered. "What time am I getting out of here tomorrow, Gabriel?"

As if comfortable being in control, he answered. “Dr. Haynes is doing his rounds early in the morning and should be here no later than nine to sign off on the discharge papers. Of course, I’ll be here earlier to pack your things.

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.”

“Well, actually...” She fidgeted with the blanket before dropping the bombshell that rocked Jesse back in her seat. “Gabriel is staying at the house, so you might as well drive out together in the morning.”

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

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

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

Her grandmother set her cup on the nightstand. “Guess it’s settled, then.” Looking at Jesse, her brows furrowed with worry. “Sweetie, you look pale. You’ve had a long flight and it’s getting late. Why don’t you and Gabriel go on home and get some rest?”

Jesse stared at her grandmother. Go home...with Gabriel? Was she serious? “You know, Grammy, I was just thinking. We have so much to talk about. I should spend the night here with you.”

The glint of excitement only lasted a second. “No—no, you go on home. You’ll be more comfortable at the house.”

“Comfortable? Are you kidding?” Jesse patted the chair arms. “This chair—I was thinking earlier that this chair is...unbelievable.”

Her grandmother was quick. She didn’t miss the hesitation and carefully chosen word used to describe the chair. “Unbelievable, is it?” She smiled knowingly before saying, “I’ll still feel better knowing you’re tucked away comfortably in bed at home.” She raised a hand to stop any further argument. “I’d also like to read a while.”

Gabriel stood to his feet. “We’ll leave you to it then, Florence, let you relax and read.”

Jesse’s eyes seared into Gabriel’s back as he stepped past her 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 was preparing to ask him that very question but as he stepped back, the words stuck in her throat. She couldn’t help but notice 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 a few seconds. Her tone held just enough sarcasm for him to pick up on. “Thank you, Gabriel. You’re too kind.” Turning to her grandmother, her expression softened with genuine affection. “Do you need anything before we leave, Grammy?”

“Oh, no, dear, thank you. You just get a good night’s sleep and I’ll see you in the morning, Lord willing.”

Jesse kissed her grandmother’s cheek. “Alright, Grammy. First thing tomorrow, then.”

Turning off the car engine, Jesse looked around the place with a feeling of coming home. She had always loved the large rustic house built from hand-hewn logs salvaged from an inn slated to be torn down in a neighboring county. Her eyes traveled up the stone walkway leading to the covered porch that testified to her grandmother’s love of plants. Jesse knew firsthand how comfortable the thickly padded benches and rocking chairs were. She had spent many lazy summer days curled up on the porch swing reading mystery novels.

A tap on the car window pulled her to the present before Gabriel opened the car door. “I’ll carry your bags,” he said, offering to help her from the car.

Ignoring his hand, she exited the car to find herself staring at bronzed skin just beneath the opening of his shirt collar. She fumbled for the trunk release button. “My—my bags are in the trunk.”

Following Gabriel across the yard, Jesse took in the array of flower beds, pink peonies, different shades of purple and lilac irises. Further away, blue clematis tendrils wound their way around a fence. She paused to enjoy the faint smell of sweet vanilla coming from flowers overflowing pots and hanging baskets on the covered porch. Jesse wondered if the house was so pleasant and inviting through careful planning or by chance. Stepping through the front door, the light smell of cedar, the rock fireplace and wide ceiling beams all added to the general country feel of the place. Hearing her name, she crossed the room to see Gabriel starting up the stairs with her luggage. He called to her over his shoulder. “Staying in your old room, right?”

“Yes,” she called back, hurrying toward the stairs. On the first step, she paused to run a hand along the lacquered banister. How many times had she sailed down the smooth slope as a kid? And yet, no matter how much she practiced, Gabriel had always beaten her distance.

In her bedroom, Gabriel was placing the smaller bags onto the dresser. Turning, he said, “If you don’t need anything else, I’ll let you get settled.”

She meant to thank him, let him leave the room, but she didn’t. 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 boyish and innocent seemed darker, more intense.

One eyebrow lifted slightly before the corners of his mouth quirked up a fraction. “Are you okay, Jesse?”

She blinked, puzzled by the remark before realizing her mistake. Not only was she staring but she was 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, as you know, and capable of managing on my own the rest of the evening.”

Hands in his pockets, his eyes crinkled at the sides with restrained laughter. “Your concern for my time 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 crossed the room to stare out the window. “I won’t intrude on your free time, then.” Hoping 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. “You are more than welcome, Jesse.”

Hearing him call to her from the doorway, Jesse’s teeth snapped together before turning slowly to see his sober expression. “You’re not an intrusion. 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. Expecting her? What’s he talking about, expecting her. Before now, she had no reason to come home. She sat on the end of the bed, trying to make sense of the comment. Then the answer came. Her eyes slammed shut as she fell back onto the bed with a groan. 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,” she grumbled aloud in the empty room. Did all her grandmother’s acquaintances know about the breakup? No, of course not. Her grandmother wasn’t one to gossip about someone’s private business.

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 couldn’t remember. Like siblings, she couldn’t say when they had first met. “Siblings,” she muttered. That’s how he thought of her, like a sister.

The heels of Jesse's hands pressed against her eyes as she tried to ward off memories bursting through new cracks in an old, weather-beaten dam. She and Gabriel had been inseparable as children. Her grandparents’ house had been Gabriel’s home away from home. She and Gabriel had been best friends, sharing toys as children and secrets as teenagers. He had known her better than anyone.

Falling in love with Gabriel had been easy. She found his quirky shyness charming, his intelligent, thoughtful views fascinating. At the age of sixteen, she had been hanging on his every word. And then one day her hopes had been dashed, leaving her devastated as only a sixteen-

year-old can be. The romantic fairy-tale she created had been a masterpiece of self-deception. His smiles and kindness had been nothing more than protective affection. To put it simply, she had been an infatuated dolt.

Memories of her heartbreak bubbled to the surface with a clarity reserved for yesterday. After a year of pining and months of wavering, at the age of sixteen, she had decided to tell Gabriel how she felt. She remembered the day, beautiful and sunny, a perfect day for the church to have a cookout, as they often did, at her grandmother's house. And Jesse had known that Gabriel would be there. With butterflies in her stomach, she had watched the station wagon pull into the drive only to be disappointed to see the empty backseat. Guessing at the reason behind Jesse's downcast face, Gabriel's mother had paused on her way into the house to say her son would be driving himself up later. Then, she leaned in to whisper the words that had sent Jesse's spirits soaring. "Seems my son plans to ask a very special young lady out for a drive today."

When the late model Jeep pulled up exactly thirty-three minutes later, Jesse knew it was Gabriel. She rushed to the porch rail to wave. With her focus on Gabriel, she didn't notice he had someone with him until he walked around to the passenger side to open the door. Jesse's fluttering heart had stopped just before it sank. The girl was pretty, more than pretty. Jesse had stood there paralyzed, staring blankly, stupidly, from the porch railing. 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. Gabriel's got a girlfriend...Gabriel's got a girlfriend. The words had repeated in her head with each step into the house and for months, even years, beyond.

Jesse never told anyone how she felt about Gabriel but her grandmother had known. Sitting on the large rock overlooking the upper pond, Jesse had 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 her grandmother finally spoke, her words were simple, words to let Jesse know she cared. "I'm sorry, Jesse. I'm always here for you if you want to talk."

The pain of Gabriel's rejection had cut 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 heaven's sake. But despite 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 fitted skirt, Jesse reminded herself that they were just kids back then. She looked down to see the skirt droop just below her waistline. "Great," she murmured. "Can't wait for Grammy to notice that I've lost weight." Crossing her arms, she stared at herself in the mirror. Insecurities of a rejected sixteen-year-old came rushing back. If she had been prettier, would things have turned out differently? Squeezing her eyes shut, her fingers came up to run through the sides of her hair before closing at the top of her head. Opening her eyes, she stared at her reflection. She bit her lower lip, trying not to laugh. With long hair pouring between her fingers

on each side of her head, she looked like a crazed Medusa. Letting her arms fall to her sides, she leaned forward with her hands on the dresser. It's okay to be ordinary, she reminded herself.

At the top of the stairs, Jesse hesitated. Even with all her mental preparation to meet Gabriel, she was beginning to lose her nerve. In her room, she had convinced herself that she would be calm, casual, and courteous...nothing less, and nothing more. She lifted her chin and started down the steps. Calm, casual, courteous, she mentally chanted the mantra.

Jesse stopped inside the kitchen where Gabriel was setting plates on the large oak table. Trying to sound pleasant, she said, "That's nice of you, but 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. "You've had a long flight, long day, I thought you might be hungry."

"Yes, I am," she admitted, taking the seat he held. The 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 Gabriel to be seated before asking, "Is that pot roast? It looks great."

"Pot roast with red wine sauce," he answered, sounding pleased with his accomplishment.

She picked up a roll and pulled off a small piece. "Mm, that's really good," she said before taking a large bite.

Smiling, he laced his fingers. "Glad you like it." Then he bowed his head.

Realizing his intention, she froze, horrified, before dropping the half-eaten roll onto her plate. Swallowing and bowing her head at the same time caused the bread to lodge at the back of her throat. The prayer was short, but not short enough. The stuck bread triggered her gag reflex. The tickling in her throat was unbearable but she fought, with watering eyes, the impulse to cough.

The end of his prayer was met with a spasm of coughing. "Amen," she croaked before clearing her throat several times. Without looking at him, she took a drink of water.

"Are you okay?"

"Mm-hm," she said, suppressing a cough. After a few seconds, the tickling sensation in her throat began to ease. She couldn't help but wonder what her coughing fit must have looked like from across the table. Her ears began to heat up as the image of a cat hacking up a fur ball came to mind.

With her throat more relaxed, she took another drink before starting to explain. "Something just went down the wrong way." She thought about that—something going down the wrong way. For some reason, it struck her as funny. Biting her lip, she tried not to smile.

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

She couldn't hold back the laughter then. "No, of course not. I was just thinking about what I said—something going down the wrong way. That's very unlikely, you know. Anything going down our throat is probably headed in the right direction."

The corners of his mouth tipped upward, amused. "You're right. Not a lot of offramps, now, is there." He leaned back in his chair, watching her. "Glad to see you haven't lost your sense of humor."

They both laughed and the mood was lighter after that. Gabriel kept the conversation light by talking about people he thought she might remember from summers spent in the mountains. He also told amusing anecdotes about his work as a youth minister. His choice of profession didn't surprise her. Even as a boy, he spent a lot of time studying the Bible.

With Gabriel preoccupied cutting his roast, Jesse took the opportunity to study his face. She was struck by his dark lashes. She smiled, remembering how he had sometimes been needed by other boys for having girly lashes. In all fairness to the impish teasers, Gabriel did have striking eyes as a child. His eyes were still striking, she noted, but in a deeper, more mysterious way. Mysterious—yes, Gabriel had always been different from other kids. He was what some might call an old soul. He had many friends but few people he spent a lot of time with. Other than her, he seemed to be more comfortable around older people. As a teenager, he would sometimes spend hours talking to her grandmother about philosophy, the Bible and spiritual things most boys weren't typically interested in.

Girly lashes or not, Jesse very much doubted anyone would risk teasing the man sitting in front of her today. During a lull in the conversation, she mentally played a game often employed with clients. What three words would she use to describe Gabriel's personality? The words that came to mind were relaxed, confident and perceptive. She cast a quick glance at his left hand, noting the absence of a wedding band. 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 relaxed back in his chair. "Psychology, interesting career choice. How did you come to select that field of study?"

She took a moment to consider the question. Like him in his job as youth minister, she wanted to help others. There were also other reasons, curiosity, interest in the human mind, understanding personality, figuring out what makes people tick. She had a lot of 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 of services a client receives. "So, I recently stopped seeing clients for therapy. I do psychological testing, assessments and referrals now."

"Hm," he said, "a therapist who doesn't provide therapy?"

“No—I mean, yes.” She paused to collect her thoughts. “I’m afraid I didn’t explain that very well. You see, I’m still a therapist, but I’m on break, temporarily. I’m just not comfortable ending treatment when people can’t pay. Technically, I’m not abandoning clients, but it felt that way sometimes, to me. As the recession deepened, people lost their jobs and insurance.”

“I see. You sacrifice what you want in order to do what’s right.”

She looked past him, thinking. “I don’t know if I can say that. Maybe I just removed myself from an uncomfortable situation. Clients still have the same problem, just different therapists. They’re still stuck. And then there’s the agency’s point of view. They have to get paid or go bankrupt.” Sliding the tips of her fingers across her forehead, she said, “It’s confusing. To be honest, I’ve been looking for a change—non-profit, private practice, I don’t know.”

He watched her a few seconds before saying, “I’m sure you’ll do what’s right. It sounds like you’re looking at it from all angles.”

She nodded. “I’m sure I’ll figure it out.” Taking a drink, she watched him over the rim of her glass. She was surprised at how easy he was to talk to. She glanced up at the wall clock. “Wow. Can you believe we’ve been talking for over an hour?”

He smiled. “Doesn’t seem that long. I guess time has a way of slipping by in good company.”

Good company? She was pleased to hear him say that. “I agree,” she said. “Catching up has been nice and dinner was delicious.”

Jesse was clearing the table when she heard a soft chuckle. She walked over to the sink where Gabriel was rinsing dishes. Handing him plates, 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 that I learn to cook, she had no idea what she was getting herself into. She has proven to be a woman of great patience.”

The image of Gabriel in her grandmother’s apron made Jesse smile. A few seconds later, her smile faded as unanswered questions resurfaced. She had been more than a little surprised to hear that 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.

She placed the last glass in the dishwasher and turned to watch him. “I don’t guess you’ve been staying here too long since Grammy didn’t mention it before today.”

“Mm-hm,” he murmured, continuing to wipe the counter without looking her way.

Had he heard her? She decided to be more direct. “How long have you been here?”

His answer was noncommittal. “I don’t know. Not too long.”

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