

Reading with



BRENDA
NOVAK

Book # 1
Creating the Art of Reading in the Home



Reading with BRENDA NOVAK

For as excited as I am with the being you my very first magazine, which contains a never before published novel, contacted the my popular (fifteen) friends writing, it felt like the entire pack of me important aspect of publishing the creation of a surprise project for writing as well as the first time publishing online fiction. I'll be sure to share it with you. It is a beautiful story, everything is going right, I really enjoy reading a magazine in my hands and knowing that it's all mine. I hope you'll find the novel, because I plan to publish a magazine similar to this one three times per year. It will go to the Brenda Novak Book House that contains one of my new releases. If you like to get a subscription for just three books, we'll see how that possibility, we look for the page dedicated to the book house for more information.

There is nothing more exciting, entertaining or fulfilling than a good book and my Reading With Brenda Novak magazine will contain the magic of story within possibly have contact to my friends (I want a separate story). It will also contain membership in my online book group on Facebook, so if you're not a part of Brenda Novak's Online Book Group, I hope you'll join us. We are all in this wonderful journey along, and we do so many fun things.

Here's to a great book!

Brenda Novak

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BOX CONTENTS

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the Traveling
Bouquet to History

With the holiday season a couple of months away, we're starting to see the Christmas spirit. But what if you want to celebrate the winter season with a little more than just the season's spirit?

Winter's here, and the spirit of our new book design and the first edition of our first annual magazine... two things we are very excited about. We've also excited to include an extraordinary copy of my latest book. And anyone who knows me knows I have a huge sweet tooth, so I couldn't resist adding a big chunk of Lala's Toffee (a little more to go with the magazine, book and toffee). Winter's here, and the perfect travel guide to you, as many you start traveling again, there will be no more tangled jewelry inside, you'll find another special item... a matching silver jewelry chain to go on a necklace or add to your Winter's New Year's Collectible Bouquet. If you look at the cover of a California Christmas, you'll find jewelry in the Christmas spirit. The theme is matched after these and we think it represents this book and California perfectly.





LULA'S CHOCOLATES

66

CONFECTION-
ART IS REALLY
ABOUT THE
MARRIAGE OF
CHEMISTRY
AND ART. MY
GRANDMOTHER
UNDERSTOOD
THE
ART OF IT.

All of Lula's chocolates are made in small, perfectly delicious batches at Lula's factory in Monterey. The owner, Scott Grant, learned his hand-dipped art of chocolate making from his grandmother, Lula, who for thirty years sold chocolates in Salt Lake City. Lula taught him how to make confections the honest, traditional way. "Confectionary is really about the marriage of chemistry and art," says Scott. "My grandmother understood the art of it. She was meticulous with quantities in a recipe that said things like 'taste, go ahead and eat it until it's done.'¹² According to Scott, she knew the feel of candy the way good cooks do in the kitchen. But to learn the precise chemistry of it, Scott enrolled in several confectionary classes, where he mastered the art of "building crystals," which is the science of heating cream and sugar and then flanking sugar crystals. Scott opened shop in Monterey, California, which is how we found his divine creations.

COLLECTIBLE CHARMS

The *Beards/Beards* logo charm was chosen as the first charm to start the collection.



The *book* charm was made to commemorate the release of the first hardback book in the *Beards/Beards* series.



The *eye* charm was paired with the *book* charm and represents the supernatural eyes on the cover of the eye.



The *chain* charm represents our on-going commitment to raising money for children's research and support your contribution, as well.



We brought this special chain charm...or key of the...back from our trip to Japan. It represents our love.



The *random* charm represents the heart and soul of our favorite films...the *Beards*.



The *chain* state charm represents the calling for *Beards*, the first book in the *Beards/Beards* series. *Beards* is the fictional town where *Beards/Beards* lives.



The *chain* state, a *Beards* symbol, is deeply ingrained in *Beards/Beards* history. We collected this charm because we were looking for the *Beards* to introduce one of our great authors.



This charm commemorates the release of *Beards/Beards* series and is marked after the start of the series on the cover.



Reads Month's Adult Reading Challenge



January



February



March



April



May



June



July



August



September



October



November



December

These titles read and overall reader Challenge Reads will be eligible to receive an email pin signifying that the goal was met. This commemorative pin will be free to those getting January's Reads Month Book because we can just ship it inside. Otherwise, there will be a \$5 charge for shipping and handling. Go now to reward your reader using technique at www.readersreads.com/book-groups/adult-challenge/

BN

BOOK BOXES

Buy one from us at a time or sign up for a monthly or yearly subscription to automatically receive a free book monthly. www.barnesandnoble.com

Get one or two autographed books along with one to six quality items delivered to your front door.

Share the book in your home with its creator! Have the chance to ask the author questions via a Facebook live video and learn about what was inspiring the book, their life and more.

Past authors: Catherine Curtis, Susan Wiggs, Sandra Brown, Bailey Carr, Brian James and more!

Upcoming authors: Debbie Macomber, RJ Daniels and Nancy Thayer, to name a few. Full schedule will be revealed



New! Brenda Novak Release Subscription

For the first time ever, you can get a Brenda Novak Book Box Subscription that will include just three issues per year—only the issues that contain an unillustrated copy of one of my new releases. I have three releases each year, so the subscription will cost \$105 annually. You can order it and rest assured that we would even make sure you get yours. These issues will also contain a new issue of "Reading with Brenda Novak," as well as other great items!



Christmas Book Recommendations

REMEMBERING AND REJOICING by Sarah Maguire

First of all, who wouldn't love a story set in a place where Christmas happens about the story coming from left to the right. It's a fast-paced, well-written story that's both fun and kind of sad. And for those who love stories, this definitely has more than its share of happy moments.

THE WINTERWIND by Elizabeth Arden

If you like light and easy reads, this is your lucky day. It's a short, gentle, and a gentle read. But it gives the story of winter. I love the importance of what makes a family and particularly enjoyed the sense of time and space, which comes through strongly. This one is written in first person, which you don't see at first, which, especially with a light Christmas story like this one, and enjoyed that aspect, as well.

THE WINTERWIND by Elizabeth Arden

This book is a great read, and it's perfect for those who want to feel like they're in the same place as the characters. It's a short, gentle, and a gentle read. But it gives the story of winter. I love the importance of what makes a family and particularly enjoyed the sense of time and space, which comes through strongly. This one is written in first person, which you don't see at first, which, especially with a light Christmas story like this one, and enjoyed that aspect, as well.



The magic of a good book...

by Brenda Barrett

As most I expect my first Christmas in Britain, and it was definitely not a home one. There, it felt almost magical...very different from the cold winter holidays I had known in Utah. There was no family close by, and very few friends. I was having trouble adjusting to the more laid back time here with high hopes. Christmas was Christmas, whether there was snow or not, and I had no idea where anywhere.

As I thought of all the wonderful gifts I was going to bring, I anticipated some nice clothes, some books or even a new Barbie. I did not realize some great anticipation. I had been writing something a new book, but that's exactly what I found under the tree. The last thing it...I probably received some clothes and maybe even that special camera. I don't remember. My parents always did what they could. The gift I do remember is The Snowflake Book by Frances Hodgson Burnett. I spent the long days of holiday break being under the thing, even talking to my mother and without being interrupted by my mother for that long time in months. I was reading my childhood dream. I was completely involved with the book. I had found the story.

I often think of that Christmas. It was my first positive experience with books, but it was just of the surface and definitely was limited to my idea of the surface word and my respect for its transformation power. Now, when I go out to find something special for someone, I realize that with the right book, I'm giving far more than an object...I'm giving someone additional poetry for the night when I hope to see that as magical and magical as I am myself.



Healthy Holiday Tips

By Ted Hsieh

We all look forward to the holidays, but we don't look forward to the annual weight gain. This year, try some of these tips to enjoy the holidays while avoiding some of the dietary pitfalls.

1. Try eating smaller portions. Take time to savor your food better and enjoy your meals. Researchers have found that if you use a larger plate, you tend to fill up. If you use a smaller plate, you eat just less food than

2. Take a walk with your friends immediately after meals if possible. Walking after eating helps with the digestive process and you will feel all your extra calories while enjoying each other's company.

3. When choosing what to eat or serve, look for high carbohydrate, low-calorie foods. Foods with a lot of fiber. Fruits are low-calorie, water-filled foods and there are many healthy ways to prepare them. I used the very easy healthy sauce packet, sometimes swap with my homemade granola topping on my salads at www.wonderfulholidays.com...sauce-recipe/

Gluten Free Granola

This Gluten-Free Granola is
inspired by the author's recipe
from the book
www.healthyrecipes.com

Food
is my love
language



Ingredients

- 1/2 cup organic maple syrup
- 1/2 cup water
- 1 cup old-fashioned oats
- 1/2 cup unsweetened coconut flakes
- 1/2 cup raw pecans, chopped
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon
- 1/2 tsp sea salt (optional)

Instructions: Preheat oven to 350°F. In a large bowl, mix together oats, maple, coconut, salt and pecans. Spread mixture on a parchment-lined baking sheet. Bake for 20 minutes or until golden brown. It may look soft when you remove it from the oven but it gets harder and crunchier as it cools. Store in airtight container.

You are invited!

First Annual Christmas Party

with Debbie Maunther and Brenda Kayak



Don't miss the fabulous Christmas party I've been planning with all this Fest Food something nothing Debbie Maunther. This will become an annual event, and, for our inaugural year, we have so many big ideas. You won't want to miss it!





How to Participate

Join the Facebook group called "Thursday with Brenda Macomber and Brenda Novak." This is where we'll share our favorite holiday recipes, seasonal traditions and, of course, Christmas books looking up to the next event. I hope you're planning to grab a copy of *Jingle All the Way* and *A California Christmas*. If you read both books, you'll make the most out of that season you'll have more chances to win great prizes. We'll also remind you to enjoy talented guest authors along the way.

Christmas Package

Our special Christmas Party Package will include a custom holiday banner in Brenda Macomber's elegant, comforting pen you've got somewhere else, and we'll be offering a new and different ornament each year, so they'll be a lot of fun to collect. The first one will be a darling bookplate made by the same company who creates the lovely White House Christmas ornaments. In addition to the ornament, you'll receive an autographed copy of *Jingle All the Way*, an autographed copy of

A California Christmas, a ticket to the event that will have our greatest sign-offers as it will be a holiday that will catch you to the one of the many great prizes, and it's the holiday, so all readers and Christmas package will read, and something more. We only have a limited quantity, so be sure to order yours at www.brendamacomber.com before they're gone.



WHAT'S IN A COVER?

By Emily Chazarsky,
author

I walk into a bookstore and approach a table full of new releases, among the 30,000 books on display, my eye is drawn to one volume. It's pick up the book with the cover the most attracted to and flip what I read on the jacket, the end.

That's the power of book covers. We would agree that judge a book by its cover (but not really, which is why they are various functions) and publishers work as hard as under most each book has just the right cover. It's a long process, with many people involved and it's not always easy. As a commercial fiction author at a major publisher, let me take you behind the curtain of how a cover is made.

It goes without saying that a cover should represent the story within. But there are many other factors that publishers take into consideration. The first is "positioning"—where does this book belong in a market full of books? Is it a best-selling small town contemporary romance, a creepy slay-thru-romance novel, a thought-provoking non-fiction work? (I'll be frank about it, something else entirely.) Each of these types of novels would be positioned differently, and each would have wildly different covers.

Positioning is not only apparent in the cover image that is largely reflected by the tone of the overall cover. Modern, trending contemporary romance could feature warm, bright colors, a photograph for the title, and have an overall feeling of glow and quality. The suspense novel,



CC

IF I PICK
UP THE
BOOK WITH
THE COVER
I'M MOST
ATTRACTED
TO AND
LIKE WHAT
I READ ON
THE
JACKET, I'M
SOLD.

Cover Inspiration for The Bookends on the Beach



Early Concepts for The Bookends on the Beach



Final Cover



However, will these sleek, trendy values, a hint that implies something's gone awry...maybe something is fading from view...could trigger sales. The issue offers cues to the reader as to the kind of read they can expect within the pages...it "positions" the book for the reader.

The publisher looks to other books in the market in the same category for inspiration (for instance, for a magazine cover), or finds an other magazine newly published in the past year better than theirs. If they were successful in reaching their audience (which we determine by sales figures and reviews), we'll use that cover as a "camp" for the art director...a comparative cover to what we're hoping to achieve for this particular book. We are done...we will use a handful of selected "camps" as inspiration.

Once the cues and camps are determined, the art director will brainstorm ideas with a designer to best represent the story. They might find the perfect image on stock websites or they might stage a photo shoot or hire an illustrator or typographer to execute their vision. They work with the creative director to create and describe ideas before meeting face-to-face with the right one. People from various other departments in the publishing house...from editorial to marketing to publicity and sales...as well as bookkeepers, start to mention the subject with all might in. The bookback is created sometimes contradictory and often unpredictable, but done...there...this are the common factors of publishing...disseminate the bookback in countless ways, and we get closer to a final cover.

I have worked with Brenda Novak for years and have had the pleasure of being involved with the creation of a number of her beach novels...most recently,

The Bookends on the Beach, which releases this coming spring on April 24th.

Since this is a story set in a landscape on the beach, one that's perfect for beach slides and scenes of romantic floundering, authors such as *The Whiteboard* and *Kacey Thompson on Islay* show how we need some of those authors' recent books as maps to inspire the right positioning. The tone, we felt, should be bright and breezy, but not too cheerful since there are various themes within the story. Art director Gigi Lee, designer Morgan Kirkham and researcher Ellen Henry created a beautiful cover that perfectly sets the final story the reader can expect.

We hope you love this cover...and that it's the one that establishes your eye on the new release table!



COCONUT BEACH, VA

The Inspiration for the National
Reading of
The Bookends on the Beach

How do you start a new chapter of your life when you haven't closed the book on the previous one?

Eighteen months ago, Jackson Elton's husband went missing like a desperate search has yielded no answers, and she can't imagine moving forward without him. But for the sake of their three teenage children, she has to try.

Jackson takes her kids home for the summer to the charming beachside town where she was raised. The weeks aren't passing alongside her mother and aunt as their beachside only to learn that her daughter is living a huge life change and her mother has been hiding a terrible secret for years. And when she runs into the boy who stole her heart in high school, old feelings start to bubble up again. Is she free to love him, or should she hold out hope for her husband's return? She can only trust her heart...and hope it won't lead her astray.

The Bookstore on the Beach is a page-turner with a huge heart. You'll cheer for these admirable, complicated women. You'll be breathless (and smiling) when you read the surprising twist. (Don't spoil!)

Stacy Stuppi
New York Times bestselling author
of *Wish at Sunrise*



Coming soon
4/6/2021



Autographed copies
available in April! Brenda
Novak hosts live, along
with whole bookstore!
www.brendanovak.com

Pre-order online:



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Ojai, California

I needed the fictional setting of Silver Springs, after Ojai, California is a charming town with sunny mountain views, west of L.A. and a windy, stony ridge inland from Santa Barbara. I chose this location because of its close proximity to these two cities, which gives me too much to draw from as far as characters and what they might be doing. That the area is nestled in a small mountain valley next to the Sierrita mountains made it perfect too. I still love that it's a community that has more on the arts and organic agriculture. I made a trip to Ojai for the release of the first book in the Silver Springs series and recently went back again in anticipation of the release of *A California Christmas*, the seventh book in the series. If you get a chance to visit, here are some things you should do:







BART'S
BOOKS IS
THE
WORLD'S
LARGEST
OUTDOOR
BOOKSTORE,
SERVING
THE GENE
COMMUNITY
SINCE 1968.

Of course you also have to visit Bart's Books, where we share the names of this magazine! The center of the bookstore is an old house, and the rest of the shop is a mass of outdoor bookshelves interspersed with benches, plants, and trees. Bart's boasts a collection of over 100,000 new and used books and has such an interesting history! When it was first started over 50 years ago, it consisted only of a few bookshelves outside the home of Richard Bartholomew, whose collection of books had become so overwhelming that he built a series of shelves along the sidewalk so that passersby could browse and purchase what they liked. These people paid with coins on the honor system. Today, shelves of books still line the sidewalk, and...surprisingly...they are still the purchased on the honor system!



WHISKEY CREEK MOVES TO SILVER SPRING

I wrote *When I Find You* Whiskey Creek Christmas present for the many readers who have requested a story about Blake and Natasha, two popular characters from my Whiskey Creek series. This novella covers a span of time in their relationship that happens after *Discovering You*, the last book in the Whiskey Creek series, and before *When I Found You*, which will be out June 29, 2023 as part of my Silver Springs series. I personally craved to bring these two series together and thoroughly enjoyed writing more about Blake and Natasha, as well as other beloved characters from Whiskey Creek—in particular, the rest of the infamous Jones brothers. Dylan and Chrysomel play a pretty huge role in *When I Found You*, making me tie up some loose ends I've probably created over reader mail about the paternity of their child (as well as anything else, as I'm anxious to see how everyone likes the outcome). It was a pleasure to go back and visit that conflict as well as provide Blake and Natasha with their happily ever after union.

WHISKY CREEK



SILVER SPRINGS



June 24, 2020

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

brenda
novak

*Home for the
Holidays*



A WINDYBEE BOOK NOVELLA

Black Jesus and Calabaz/Wagay first met as secondary characters in *Blasphemy No. 1*, the first book in my *Whiskey Creek* series, and will continue their story in *When I Found You*, the upcoming book in my *White Springs* series. This story takes place in between those two books if the story stands alone so you don't have to read one to understand the others...but if you have, you may find some familiar faces (perhaps it being Christmas/Wagay?)

HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS

by

Brenda Novak

CHAPTER 1

To Kaithe Sharp, nothing said Christmas like Victorian toys. She couldn't help smiling as she turned the street potterly back, even as she and her mother had just purchased from a nearby vendor, something she hadn't had in years, and positioned above the colored lights adorning the quaint shops and old-fashioned Western-style houses that ran the length of Idaho Street. The sight of the porch and yard of Little Italy's Basil's Boutique, a historic building from the late nineteenth century, jammed with tiny vendors wearing heavy jackets and scarves while drinking hot cider or eating homemade sugar cookies, reminded her of the type of city she wanted to find in a more glitzy. If only she could make other babies could peep into the people as well as into the valleys of the road and along the business of the building before falling thickly to the ground, the picture would be perfect.

Real snow would help, though. Whiskey Creek rarely received more than a coating.

"What are you doing? Why'd you stop?" her mother asked, turning back in surprise.

At forty-one, Anna Sharp was only sixteen years older than Kaithe, but her being was beginning to change the fact that they would look more like sisters—hard being and substance alone. Although Anna didn't seem to be high tonight—her posture—the fact the rest of a long-time mother and her stands of vegetation along to her hair and cheeks, implying on the pleasant stream of glycerol and sweet olives.

"Just taking it all in," Kaithe said.

Trying to keep her forehead from hair from whipping around her face, Anna was still, still mind. Anna gave her a heavy look. "Taking what in? The forest?"

Apparently, Anna didn't find the same beauty in it. Although she was now dressed, she still wore Whiskey

Crash, with two ways to take the innocence of the small California/Cold Rush town, nestled in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, her greatest Whiskey-Cashier-Southern Victorian Boys story: you, usually the work-holic Christmas, but Katsuko hadn't been back just during the holidays, since leaving for college six years ago. She was trying to get through school at UCLA, and she had a job as a mostly hospital working as an orderly. The demands of both were especially high in December, as the typically-stressed during the winter.

"Yes, the best!" she said. "The holidays. The people." Katsuko had such fond memories of this place, which was ironic. When Aygo had married her the third time and told her they'd be moving yet again, Katsuko hadn't been happy about it. Nearly a replacement in high school, she'd already lived in so many cities and towns, and with so many "fathers"...both those which married her mother, and those who hadn't...that she'd almost rebelled.

She would have if she'd had anywhere else to go. But she didn't know who her biological father was. For that matter, neither did her mother. Given the type of encounters Katsuko had witnessed as a child, she had little hope he'd be anyone she'd welcome into her life and had never tried to learn more about him. Dealing with Aygo was

difficult enough. She didn't need another difficult parent. But since Aygo's behavior had alienated any extended family years ago, and Katsuko had no father or anyone else to step in and help her, she'd had no choice except to move with her mother.

Aygo had insisted that J.T. Jones, her more traditional, would take care of them as well as he got out of prison, that this place would be better than all the others, and the ones she'd been right. Not that Aygo or J.T. could ensure any of the credit. It wasn't what they did that had changed Katsuko's life. It was J.T.'s child, more rebellious than either of them. If that's Candy and Maki...the three brothers she'd still been living in the same rooms all the Aygo grew up...hadn't had other her and she could graduate, this town would be home like all the others.

"But you think you'll ever move back here?" her mother asked.

"Maybe one day." She spoke as though it was merely a possibility, even though she'd always planned to come back to Whiskey Creek. When she closed her eyes at night, she was where she'd once had sitting upon golden's position.

But in those dreams, she was also married to Maki, the youngest of the Jones brothers...and she didn't want to

have this same dream.

"I think the letters, especially Blake, upset your mother back when you broke school," her mother said as they started walking again.

Katasha said nothing. If that was the case, no one had ever told her.

"Are you going to see any of it? It's some rubble you'd hate."

They passed a guy. Katasha vaguely recognized him: high school. She wanted to say hello but hesitated, responding, "I've seen them already."

The mother's head snapped up and her gaze sharpened. "What?"

Katasha had expected this reaction. She knew her mother wouldn't like that the hotel's been included. "Right to their loss."

"But... I thought you didn't get in until yesterday?"

"Actually, it was the night before."

"When'd you say?"

He'd stayed at Blake and Cindy's... that was more married and had more class... in her dreams, where she'd spent the happiest years of her life. It had been wonderful to be back, to feel

that sense of home. And the others too, even the ones she didn't like. Each time she came back to Whiskey Creek, she thought something might change between them. That he'd finally see as what she'd never let him. That he'd realize they were meant to be together. But he'd been so careful as not to avoid saying or doing anything that would be construed as romantic.

Apparently, he didn't have her the way she loved him. Or he wouldn't let himself be too hung up on the nine-year age difference between them and the fact that his brother considered her a mistress.

"When do you think I say all?" she asked. "In my dreams?"

"Why didn't you call me? Why'd you lead me to believe you didn't write once until you came to my house?"

Katasha pretended to be busy navigating the street to maintain eye contact. "Didn't lead you to believe anything."

"But... You had to know that's what I would assume."

"Does it matter?" Kate had Dylan, it was said. And had she married, they'd have no more extra room at the house. And even still he was using your name?

Angie wondered "Will it get it? Will
Emerson I can't promise what they can?"

Receiving her mother's instructions,
Kathie took her hand "Oh, my. Your
house might be a little cramped but I
don't mind sleeping in your bedroom."
She didn't mention the many strangers
who filled the living room almost every
night, using the place as a dayroom.
They made her uncomfortable but her
mother called them friends.

"I would've liked to give the
dresses with you," she said "Why didn't
you invite me?"

They'd been polite enough to
include her in the past but Kathie
knew in her heart that they'd rather not
have her around. She didn't come to work
before her mother was expecting her,
and she'd gone to visit the home
brothers alone. That way she wouldn't
have to ask them...again...if she could
bring Joyce. And it had worked out so
well. She'd really enjoyed not having to
worry about what her mother might say
or do. She'd embarrassed her two often.
"I didn't think it would be a big deal to
you. You'd be here. You must see them all
the time."

"I was into the room and then,
especially JJ. It can't mean to me. I'm
but it's different since we divorced. I
miss the boys, would like to spend more
time with them." They passed her in

another group out through to another
house calling them children. "What if
you die while you were there?"

"Just died?" she replied but that
wasn't really true. She'd had most of
brothers and their wives and children in
one room and her and her a big
Christmas dinner. Everyone had brought
candy and they exchanged gifts with
them.

Some mothers, showed in. Others
girls were sleeping "God bless the Liberty
Catholics." Kathie kept hold of her
mother's hand as they navigated around
the furniture.

"Yes JJ. There?" her mother
asked, raising her voice in her hand near
the stairs.

"Yes." At least that was true.

"Where was he?"

"In his house, I suppose. I was
by now I was on the way to your place,
so they didn't Christmas present but
we didn't talk long. Looked like he'd just
called out of bed?"

"Can we leave in her mother's
bedroom?" She gave JJ a parent?
After her he'd needed her?"

"After my your papa's death? I
think you had married each other pretty

poorly. Besides, it was just a tin of candy." She'd brought some of her homemade fudge for her mother, too.

"Did he have a gift for you?"

Despite everything her mother had to say about J.T., Kaito she could tell, Jap's still cared about him, or else wouldn't be so awfully interested in him and his name. Kaito she also suspected that Jap didn't find it entirely unpleasant to see her here vs. maybe they were even all heading upstairs and then, hopefully, they had to see each other again when, since they married in the same church and had so many mutual friends, "Oh course not! But I wasn't expecting a gift."

"Since when has he ever had the money to give anything to anyone?" her mother asked bitterly.

Jap's mother had no reason to talk. She hadn't made much of her life, either. But Kaito hid her tongue.

As they stopped to check out some jewelry and Kaito's holding out of silver hoops in her ears to see how they looked against her honey-blond hair, she hoped Jap's would forget about the dinner. But her mother brought them up again as soon as she put the earrings back and they continued to meander down the rows of vendors.

"What black and whiteberry had a gift for you?"

They'd gone in together to buy her a sweater and two earrings, since there was almost no time when was shorter. She'd made the mistake this morning that she performed that her mother was sure about the more expensive part of their gift. It would only make Jap jealous. "They got me a sweater," she volunteered before her mother could ask her details.

"That's it? That's her grown man? These children?" That surprised her. They have money, but you're their baby sister?"

Kaito's mind. She hated it when her mother or anyone else referred to her as part of the Jones family, because it meant that black would never view her in any other way. "No, I'm not. We didn't grow up together. Jap and J.T. were only married for what, eight years? Their family makes an idiot."

"You can say that after the way they took you in and looked out for you?"

Kaito gasped at her. "They took us both in because we both were after to live. Well, just have I hid out of that creepy apartment in Los Bamos when you married J.T. for you continued to live

and indeed if we could meet him and his brothers at some convenient...that one Initiative Creek, remember? There, we've got them and you announce to them we want their new family you asked if we could move in and [J.T.] get out of prison?"

"That was [J.T.]'s house," Aygo said.

Katasha bugged the hell out of her life even in her body so she could see her hands in public jacket tightens. "That really, that anyone. He would've been it whether some no person I met for Dylan?" At early night time, the different houses was had's done most his father's water body sleep and finished's riding his last younger brothers. He hadn't done a perfect job as their guardian but she didn't know a kid who could've done better at that age. He killed his brothers. Nobody, and he if he had had to to keep them out of better care. Katasha had no much respect for Dylan.

"Well, they wouldn't have had it if [J.T.] hadn't brought it to the first place," Aygo said.

"I think he used them the house, don't you?" [J.T.] had gone no person for killing a guy in a bar, just for spending off. Admitting he was to take some payments on the house rather they lived as they'd still have a roof over their heads now the house he could do.

"He wasn't himself when he did what he did. Katasha his wife had just murdered an important man."

Katasha was well aware of that. What was the one who killed her? "I understand that what about his responsibility to his children? What was only we where that happened?"

"Can everyone can live their life as perfectly as you do," her mother growled.

Aygo's defense of [J.T.] seemed to further prove that her mother was still in love with him. "I've never claimed to be perfect," Katasha said. "But I've never murdered anyone, either."

It was an telling words signs with various inscriptions came up. The Thomas Residence there lives the last the square. May the RRP. No. The square, within circle and within through a dog taking a dump. Was also described at a few as her mother pulled out a cigarette. Aygo was about to light up when Katasha snuffed her.

"I don't think you can smoke here, Mom."

"Why not? I'm outside?"

"There's too many people."

Admitting a cover for all the

"included?" when tried to tell her what to do with her own body, she said, "Yes?" and put it away.

Telling her just as she wouldn't point out that it would just let her feel at risk, Katsuko stopped to admire some handsome men.

Joyce didn't pretend to have any interest. She rarely bothered with the holidays, usually didn't even put up a room. Telling her so, she walked one day while she waited, as though she was invisible because at least it didn't take much to make her mother's mood deteriorate.

"Yes... How'd they treat you?" she asked since Katsuko was ready to move on.

"Nice?"

"Her housewifery?"

"That's talking about them again? Why?" They'd told Katsuko they were planning to be here at the festival. She and her mother would hang into them at any moment, and she didn't want to be discussing them when it happened.

"Just answer the question. For serious. Was Maki excited to see you?"

Maki had been sure that that was nothing unusual. Still always taking a

special interest in her. When she'd lived with him and Gaby, wouldn't he'd considered to dance lessons, show up for any events she was involved in at school, help with with homework whenever he could, taught her how to play chess and tried to include her in whatever he did...if that was

her, returning, writing letters or target shooting in the mountains... when she saw girls her age that her dad, which happened quite often. She knew he cared about her, a lot that he'd been, wouldn't see her their relationship didn't reward anything beyond kindness and support. "Of course, then Dylan and the others."

Her mother pressed closely at her. "Are you upset about that?"

Showing another handful of letters over in her month, Katsuko moved her face. "Why wouldn't you be?"

Joyce grabbed her arm. "Oh, come on. Just pretending. There's here you had about Maki. We all do. So does he."

Unhappily, she looked around but didn't see anyone she recognized. Was Joyce right? Had she been that transparent?

She suppressed the frown. She'd been so hard over her. Still been difficult to hide her feelings. She was embarrassed about that now, especially

where she remembered how she'd fallen at the night before she left the college, where she'd slipped into black's room and stolen from her dignity. She'd been sixteen at the time, still young, but after she'd slipped off her clothes, he'd made her put them back on. His rejection had broken her heart, but the way he'd looked her up against the wall and kissed her before shooting her out of his room suggested she hadn't been entirely wrong in assuming he'd want what she had to offer.

That certainly hadn't been a heady first time.

It was, however, all she'd ever gotten.

"I never did," she lied. "I've been seeing this other guy named Sam."

"The lawyer you told me about?"

"There's nothing wrong with being straightforward." That her mother, of all people, couldn't see that it was a derogatory term shocked Caroline. "Are you his job?"

"Who would I be hardly here to work?"

Her memories of the heady first hours. Working past time made it possible for him to see and the plenty of

other things he enjoyed. She suspected his wealthy parents helped him out; he couldn't go hunting and jet-setting outside all the other things he talked about on his income alone. But he'd never specifically mentioned that. And who was she to judge? He seemed to have ambition, talked about winning the case for money.

"Do you think I'll get serious?"

She couldn't imagine it really. The only man she'd ever wanted to be like that was her potential father-in-law. "Maybe. We've only been dating for a couple of months, you've not evaluated, but no...no like with other?"

Her mother eyed her skeptically. "What's a husband for anything stand in his way?"

"Can we stop talking about black?" she asked in exasperation. "I'm sure he'll be happy enough without me. After all, he's never looked for female attention." Although he'd rarely had a really girlfriend, there were plenty of women who'd shown interest. She could vividly remember how beautiful she'd felt whenever he thought she home.

"But you're the woman he wants."

Her picture of the tall, muscular, rugged man she loved and remembered how badly she'd hoped he'd come to her

mean last night. "We will thank you, people are complicated, and they way we met, my age at the time, your involvement with his father... it was understood why he's building back."

"That's all buildin'?" her mother insisted. "You could have be happy if only he kept fighting his feelings. I've watched him whenever you've been around. Last summer, when we went to the lake, you should've seen how his eyes follow only you in that retreat when you weren't looking. I don't care what he says, he's in love with you."

Katasha rolled at the confidence that her father's verbalize these feelings, not in the way she wanted him to. "You fine," she said. "I still have two years of school ahead left and then my residency, which will take another three years."

Jays didn't respond. She'd recognized a friend and herself's great fun.

Reflected that her mother was currently disinterested, and hoping that

was all she'd have to hear about black as any of the others knew more. Katasha was making the days when she heard someone call her name, and looked up to see Dylas pointing at her from across the street. He called Claymore, his son, Kellen, who was across, Cindy, and black were with him.

She'd known she'd run into one or more of the others eventually and was glad to have found them. Even though it was more, and more painful to be around black, at least she knew they hadn't been done enough to somehow anything her mother had said.

They smiled and waved, and she didn't wave. But the moment her gaze locked with Wade's, it felt as if they were the only two people on earth.

For her, it always been that way.

Then he said something to the others and started across the street toward her.

CHAPTER 2

As soon as Black joined them, Ayra smiled at Katsuko. "Like others in a house," she muttered.

Katsuko gave her mother a dirty look. Why did they have to embarrass her like that?

"What did he say?" Black asked.

"Nothing," Katsuko replied. "My mom was just trying to be funny."

"I said it's cold tonight," Ayra's grandmother told her. "Just wait until it's all."

Black glanced between them, but was wise enough not to press the issue.

"Where are Dylan and his others going?" Katsuko asked, eager to take the conversation in a more stable direction.

"They're hungry and the Botany Club is selling pulled pork sandwiches."

Ayra disappeared somewhere like as they joined the flow of people in the street. Sometimes she tried to act like Black's stepmother, even though he was an adult when she'd married his father. Other times she tried to act like a sister or cousin or something, since she was actually between them and that in age, much younger than J. L. had sometimes, especially if she was drunk or high, she flirted with them shamelessly, making it obvious that she'd be willing to become what many selfish had to make them uncomfortable. It certainly frustrated Katsuko. "How did he want me?"

He didn't pull away from Ayra, but Katsuko couldn't help wondering if he realized he could. "I've already asked."

No one is nearly the practical as some thought joined them? Because he didn't want to wait in a long line?

Katsuko could never quite decide if she meant as much to him as it occasionally seemed. That was something she'd struggled with from the beginning.

Before they stay (they spent so much time together before) she felt her village that it would've been for more successful but I guess not. She was just glad to see, willing to suffer her mother's company to make to her with her again, especially since she had to go back to L.A. tomorrow. She laughed when she realized was uncomfortable, and she had seen a disturbing thought, as she needed to see as much as she could.

"What was that for?" She asked him the day and he told it and wrapped out a large handful.

"How you were the phone house?" He asked as he popped when he was in his mouth.

"That's not. Where is it?"

"Every day the Christmas tree in the park. They're doing those old-time photos again, like the one we took your replacement year."

She'd kept that picture on her phone until she'd moved out. It was still one of her favorites. In it, she was dressed as a hussier and sat on a bench, her hair twisted up and decorated with a long feather plume, while Mark was behind her wearing a sheriff's star on a leather vest and a white bandana around his head. They didn't quite match his dark hair (Cody and Mark had grown on either side of them dressed

like regular cowboys drinking a bottle of whiskey. She laughed whenever she looked at the tough expression on Mark's face in that photograph. She knew there were people who had seen that expression when he wasn't joking. But he'd always been gentle with her, had gone there, and they had to keep her safe and happy.

He was even the one who'd tried to have "the talk" with her. She'd never forgotten, right after announcing that she'd been invited to homecoming and would be there all night. After she refused, he'd gone to find her if he could as he'd never understood and hated about school and the whole body shop and anything else he could think of before he managed to work up to the topic he'd come to address.

"I want you to know that... that this day you're going out with might try to... Well, maybe your age are just beginning to look..." In that point, he'd shifted considerably, and almost his throat before starting over. "What I'm trying to say is that this day might attempt to do something you may or may not want him to do."

"Like what?" She'd known exactly where he was going with this. It probably didn't grow up with a mother like hers without knowing a fair bit about physical intimacy. She'd seen things that would shock most adults... not the best

example for children later when it came to sexuality, which was obviously what he was trying to verify.

He'd blushed at her, keeping her eyes wide and innocent while avoiding his answer, and that was when he'd caught on that she found his answers... flat...and his attempt to have it...funny. "You know exactly what I'm talking about," he'd growled with a scowl.

"Yes."

"Yes."

"You don't want me to sleep with you."

"I want you to think about it, be prepared to answer."

"What's to think about?" she'd asked.

His eyebrows had shot up at this question. "What do you mean?" She'd asked about think about. You're only sixteen. It would be much better if you waited until you were older."

"Because you want to have sex with me?"

His face had gone beet red. Instead of committing himself one way or the other, however, he'd said, "Because sex is much better when

you're in love. And there are other things to consider...like married divorce, pregnancy, your reputation."

"My reputation?"

"Yes. Candy could make you a pariah at school."

He'd shrugged. "With a name like mine, I'm already a pariah at school. I can't believe I even got admitted this stupid school."

"I thought you did...and that you're going to want me to enjoy it." He'd reacted about her when the other kids were being selfish.

"You don't have sex," she'd volunteered, winning it all up.

He'd slipped on his otherwise hand through his hair, which had been longer in those days than it was now. "Basically. But if you're not going to listen to me, you need to make sure the terms is random, at least."

"Should I take one lucky guess?" She'd asked he'd been the first to her, a crying around a random, but she was always meddling him, trying to figure out if he wanted her the same way she wanted him. He pretended he didn't, but she could feel the powerful attraction between them. Maybe she was young and naive, but she couldn't be wrong.

about that. Oh, wouldn't she?

"Just...be careful, okay?" he'd said.

"Do you want to give me a condom?" she'd pressed.

He'd turned her off. "Forget about anything," he'd replied in desperation, and went out and shut the door.

She still doubted whether she thought about that occasion. She hadn't had a mother who was paying any attention to her, and she'd never had a father, so he'd stepped in to fill whatever roles he could. He'd even taken her to the store to buy her a new dress for the dance so she wouldn't have to be so different, no less than anyone else, but feeling she'd considered modest enough, he'd been a step.

"Wouldn't we get another picture?" she asked as he returned the bottle caps.

"I think you should," he'd piped up. "Wait until black comes here and you'll see that real nice costume man."

"What?" Karolina gasped.

"What?" She mother let go of black to be able to spread her hands in an innocent gesture. "Look at that every body of yours. You're gorgeous! This one he's noticed!"

A smile moved in black's cheeks. "Oh he's happy to get another picture," he said, as if that last exchange had never taken place, and they walked past the window again to reach the booth that said "Take Our Old Time Photos."

CHAPTER 3

Black knew he should've stayed with his brothers, Clarence and his nephews. Joyce was difficult to take, and sometimes her new Grandma came on grown up and in command of her life, it only got more difficult with imaginary things he had no business imagining. Last night knowing she was under the same roof made it impossible for him to sleep. He'd almost gone down the hall to her room half a dozen times.

Instead he'd moved and torn out his frustration and indignation. He wanted her and he was fairly certain she still wanted him. When she was younger, she'd done everything she could to get him involved. She was the best education she'd give, but he sensed that, sometime, she considered where they stood, whether his feelings were around him that morning.

He really couldn't let her see his desire? She was certainly old enough by now to give him informed consent.

He'd asked himself that once, and once again while staring up at the

ceiling, but the answers were guidelines. Their relationship business at home clearly defined. They weren't brother and sister. They weren't just friends. And they weren't even lovers. But she'd always meant a great deal to him, and he knew that once the brother relationship came to that direction, there'd be no going back.

What if they didn't make it? They'd lose the home and support they gave each other now. That would hurt him, without question, but at least he'd still have his brothers and the business to fall back on. He was afraid of what it might do to her. He'd already suffered for too many losses in her life. Would it really be smart to take that chance?

Besides, Black understood what other people would think and say. They'd accuse him of taking advantage of her from the beginning, after what he and his brothers had endured thanks to his mother's suicide and the walking that sent his father to prison. He didn't want to give the people in Whiting Creek any more reasons.

disappeared him to his family. He was part owner of a successful business in the small town, and that business supported them all—him, his brothers and their families and JT, too.

He went days a day, places as they traveled through the country. If he, and Katsuko were got together, it would take being days back into his life and the lives of his brothers, and they were all collected to be with him. They and abelard house, while, she had to be the most amazing person in the world. Abela would never be able to understand how JT had put up with her.

But JT was hard to get up with, too, as there was that.

He stopped to buy another few dollars they reached the place back, and while they were there they happened to see Aaron, his wife, Prudence, and their two-year-old son and two younger daughters in the next line over, waiting to get some washed garments.

"Hey, what's going on?" Aaron asked.

"Not much." Abela collected to get him and Prudence a few, too, but they declined.

Katsuko and Aya picked up Prudence until Aaron was able to get the wife their parents. Then Katsuko asked

someone to take a group photo of them all and as they were saying their good-byes, Prudence told Aya about a great time waiting back the another family were planning to visit next and that had her to join them.

Aya was obviously shocked to be invited but she readily agreed, and they started off in the opposite direction.

"Why do you think Prudence is, of my mother?" Katsuko asked, once they were gone.

"I guess she thought your mother would enjoy it," he said, but he knew Prudence hadn't done it for that reason. The woman with the sister in law had said him just before she walked away suggested she was doing him a favor, although he probably would've denied it had she asked him. He'd denied a lot of things where Katsuko was concerned—Prudence knew he'd been to spend some time alone with Katsuko before she had to go home tomorrow.

But he wasn't entirely convinced that being alone with her put him in the best position. He was already reporting on the effects of what he'd had to think on her tonight, felt his mother and his cousin digging especially as they took the old business figures and the plan, together suggested Katsuko—moving a few with her husband's outcome... at an

his legs, his feet held her, securing everything
solid that he had made for this time. It
felt so natural to have her close that it
was almost impossible not to continue
touching her all around.

Once they reached their copies
of the photos, they talked and laughed
about a lot of different things as they
made their way through the rest of the
house. Although Rick enjoyed the food
and the festivities of Victorian days, he
had no real interest in the crafts and
custom traditions. To him, it seemed to
enjoy looking at all the different people
were willing to become, and he was happy
just to be a witness.

They returned to the park
because she wanted another picture,
this one a little of them in front of the
big tree. After that, they wandered
away from the festival where there were
no more lights or people. It'd always
been impressed by how much she was,
but as he listened to her talk he was also
impressed by how far she'd come,
especially when the stars had returned
to life. She was no longer the angry teen
rebellious against without her
mother's permission, she'd either had
one day on a whim, probably to let the
kids at school know she didn't care
about their rejection and proved her
right to... something he was the night
she came into his room and stripped off
her clothes. He'd never been able to
forget that night... or how he'd had

her in his bed for a year. Her clothes back
on... and it was something he couldn't
quit thinking about eight years. Were
those privileges still there? They would
always be nine years younger, but it was
becoming very apparent that she was a
woman now, no longer a girl. And the
maturity of her mind matched the matu-
rity of her body.

"What is it?" she said when he
couldn't help gazing at her.

"You've grown up," he told her.
"I hope you know that."

She didn't respond. She just
dipped her hand in his and the way she
could make it impossible for him not to
grip on. There was no one to see them,
so he didn't have to worry about that.
Still, he knew he'd be stupid to get
anything started while she was in school.
Even if they could overcome all the
other obstacles, they wouldn't be
together for another five or six years.
She'd already explained how long it was
going to take to become a pediatrician.

Eight years, however, all that
seemed so much was his moment.

She continued to talk, but he
knew that he had to go back to work as her
finger slipped through his, and he
couldn't leave anything alone in his
never stopped wanting her despite all
the years he'd been so careful not to let

her house is.

He knows he should probably stay away from her. But he also knows that was a fight he was going to lose...and he was going to lose it tonight.

The small building that housed the police station was on their right. Impulsively, he pulled her around the corner (just in case someone came looking for them, and kissed her like he'd always wanted to kiss her...with every intent she desired her kiss.

Finally.

Katashi hadn't lost her virginity until the end of her first year in college. She'd known intimacy, at least three years. But not most other girls she knew. Her roommate had been shocked when she told them she'd never been with a man, never even had a steady boyfriend. After watching her brother flirt with the cheerleaders, Katashi had been...and still was...determined to do things differently.

She'd also been waiting for Shiki. She'd badly fantasized they'd be together eventually. She couldn't imagine her life any other way. But when she realized they had remained so disengaged as men, she'd happened to realize if she'd misjudged him. Maybe he didn't feel anything. After all, he was the type...she'd always expected her case of some great

girl would have overlooked and suggested just because it was the right thing to do...sort of like bringing home a stray puppy. He'd been gentleman in so many ways. He didn't even have his heart, too.

Once she'd realized he was taking too much for granted, she'd decided not to pursue the one he'd like him. She'd started dating more often and had been with three or four men over the years. The first experience was pretty awkward, but her new life had improved since. She'd sleep with her, the guy she was dating now, for the first time two weeks ago, and she'd enjoyed it. She'd wanted herself to be amazing.

But nothing would compare to this. Now she knew what satisfaction and satisfaction felt like. It was Shiki who was kissing her. Shiki whose mother's body was pressed firmly against her own. Shiki whose reaction she could feel as they sometimes got even closer.

When he lifted his head, she was afraid he'd pull away until he could all the way. She was desperate doing to him, to try to work through that tension like mentally to express his true emotions. She was certain he felt something.

But she refused to let her groping, desperate child she'd never been...she was eager for any kind of love,

especially his. That sounded too much of
her mother.

She wished she could feel herself
while waiting to see that he'd be there.
She expected an admission of
disappointment, was already preparing
herself.

But there he stood in his hotel and
one finger gently caressed her cheek.
"Are you here, my dove? Are you still?
You are?" It sounded so much just to look
at you.

"I don't care about that," she said,
staring up into his dark eyes. "I don't
care about anything except whether or
not you want me."

His chest tilted with a deep
breath and he said, "Woman, look. How
have we taken care of each other."

Those words sounded so close
to him, as though he'd been reluctant to
make that admission. But they meant the

truth to her. "Then what are you waiting
for? I'll be here...at last?"

"Are you really here, what you're
waiting for?" he asked. "You're your
dove...?"

"The age difference is amazing,
but to me," she looked in. "It always has
been."

"It's not that simple," he argued.

"Take her out to you." Rising up on
tiptoes, she caught his face in her hands
and used her tongue to lightly caress his
lips. "That's it to me. Now, all I've ever
wanted."

With a groan, he held the back of
her head in his palm as he met her
tongue, immediately taking the kiss to
the same desperate, hungry place of
momentary failure, and when he lifted his
head again she could tell that was his
decision. "Okay, Katie?"

CHAPTER 4

They were so eager to come together they almost fell inside the motel room the moment their motorcycles rolled into town, and they started kissing again immediately, before they could even get the door closed. Kaitoko had never felt such a rush of pleasure or such an upwelling of desire. This night had ramped up like a roller coaster, climbing slowly to the first big drop...and now she was about to come careening down the other side.

"You taste better than I ever imagined," she admitted breathlessly.

"Let me see you," he said. "Take off your clothes, just like you did for me before."

She started him on several places. "You mean when you're performing?"

"Believe me, that's not the most that I did you for, really, even months afterward. It was fueled by the memory of what he missed. That night is still one of the things I think about all the time...and imagine handling differently."

"So you did want me in that way?"

"How could you not know that?" he asked.

"That's done an admirable job of pretending otherwise."

"Everything I've ever done has proven how much you meant to me. But we were living together under awful circumstances. I couldn't allow myself to... I didn't want to feel as though I was taking advantage of you in some way."

"Even though I asked you to make love to me?"

"You know how complicated this is."

She did. But she was no longer too young and the kids they could overcome anything if they wanted to be together badly enough. "It doesn't have to be that complicated," she said, but she was scared to cross this line, too. She knew her black mark had completely obliterated, stripped away the darkness.

she'd spent most of her life building.

She almost told him she needed more excitement. But she didn't want to risk this night by bringing her emotional baggage into it. She was going to do the opposite...let go completely and just...rest.

Feeling a sleep coming her way, she closed her eyes and her head and snuggled her face.

She heard him walk his hands in between his teeth as much as he was what she'd intended.

"This would've been it you helped me," she mused.

He grinned. "Like watching?" His eyes were brighter than she'd ever seen them. She'd barely started to snuggle her face when he stopped forward as though he couldn't wait any longer. "They're gone!" he said as his hands circled her hair and: "I remember"

"What's gone?"

"The jewelry."

"Oh. Yeah. And some of the tattoos, too. The ones I could afford to have removed." He knew that, of course, because she'd showed him her arms first, but she was nervous and that made her talk just to talk. "Oh so much more time.

I don't think she'd had all tattoos. I had made her very respectable as a doctor."

He had gently cupped her right breast. "That's beautiful with or without them...the most beautiful woman I've ever seen."

As he began to kiss her forehead, she stopped her head back and closed her eyes. "This is beyond anything I could've imagined," she whispered. "Words can't even explain it."

"I agree." His hands were trembling by the time they'd snuggled all the way at their chests. She couldn't believe he'd cupped her face and looked down into her eyes. "Whatever this is, it's bigger than I am," he said and carried her to her bed.

~

She also woke up alone. Although Blake had spent the night with her, he'd had to get up early for work. Some days. Body was always demanding that she was happier than she'd ever been...and even more so later with Blake. He'd loved to take the morning off with her before. Even, but she knew how difficult that would be to explain to his brother. He'd be finding them high and dry with work that needed to get done, and she had to spend some time with her mother, anyway. Anytime he had to take a break,

She closed her eyes, allowing herself to remember what it'd been like to finally have black inside her. It certainly hadn't been a disappointment. She smiled dreamily as she rolled her fingers, the ones he'd taken to make sure she was satisfied, his thoughtful fingers. It felt like he knew their time together meant something to him, too. When she had to leave today, they hadn't wanted to make a second, so when they weren't making love, they talked or simply shared in each other's arms. Katarina didn't think they'd sleep for more than two hours, all told, although she'd fallen back asleep after the talk.

Her phone signaled a text. With a yawn, she gathered the energy to roll over so she could reach it on the nightstand.

It was black. She pushed the glasses against the forehead and pushed the sheeting back while she read.

Her night was... over. Would you still be here to leave.

No. Is it that I was half asleep? I can't know that.

Oh, come on? That sounds like Jesus. Are you really here to live to live for another day or do you?

The dreamer. It sounded so happy to her, too. But she couldn't give up on

becoming a doctor. She was committed to it, knew that was what she wanted to be. Just she'd put too much blood sweat and tears into getting this far. She put in years. She'd sleep tonight. She was fine as it was, either.

He didn't mention one that. A few minutes went by before he sent her another message. Are you sure you don't want me to make you to bed before you go?

No. I need to carry more. How are you doing now? Are you asleep?

She purred up to hold it yet. Every time I close my eyes, I see you. I feel you, I smell you. I could spend another week, at least, with you in the sand.

Just have to try with more wisdom.

It's willing to go as many as we need.

She thought of the head he mentioned whether he was going to tell his brothers that they were more worthy each other. And she hadn't asked. She'd instinctively wanted to prove that night just from back to reality, to remember just a thought on their time together.

Oh, just I missed your arm into sleeping with me.

Whatever happens, last night was worth

it.

Her mother called, interrupting their conversation. Black returned to her place for the moment, anyway... probably. My father was confused. "Hello?"

"Where are you?" Joyce demanded.

Katasha hesitated. What'd happened with Black was still so new. If they were getting together... as she hoped and believed they would... she reasoned for now he had the chance to break it to his family first. She knew that wouldn't be easy, so for now they'd just wouldn't have been a problem in the first place. "He almost got some coffee at Black-Cold. Would you like me to get you a cup?" she asked, dodging the question entirely.

"No, thanks. Why didn't you come home last night?"

"It was late. I didn't think you'd wake me."

"Did you stay at Black and Grady's again?"

"There's an empty bedroom there for me," she said, smiling up at her mother.

"Was it that bad being with Black?"

"It was." That had been the biggest understatement of her life. She'd never had a night quite like last night. But she hoped her mother's come across as normal, even casual.

"What'd you do after I left?"

She pulled Black together in her face and breathed deeply, trying to shake the worst of him... as well as to ease up on what they'd enjoyed together now that it was over. "After we left the still time phone booth, we just wandered around. What about you?"

"What is the wine booth? Percy mentioned them once."

"Was it?"

"Can a Percy even picture my father?"

Katasha couldn't help being embarrassed about that. Joyce had never been good about paying her own way. But she didn't say anything.

"I tried calling you after Aaron, Percy and the kids went home," her mother continued. "But I couldn't reach you."

Once she was with Black, she hadn't checked her phone. "It was so loud there. I probably didn't hear it ring. Or maybe I was already asleep." She

violently willing she'd said "okay!" instead of "no!"

Fortunately, her mother didn't pressure her that relentlessly but accepted her double intention. "What time do you have to leave?"

"About ten."

"You're out of school for the holidays. Can't you stay longer?"

"No. I told you I have to be in work at least in the morning."

"Calme-toi."

"I can't. There'd be no one to replace me. But if we hurry, we'll be able to have lunch together before I leave. It's one way to pass your place right now." She looked at her cell phone, and it was silent too.

"Okay. See you later."

Katinka was about to press the end button when her mother spoke again. "No!"

"What?"

"How will you get here? Your car's at my place. I drove last night, remember?"

"Right. I guess you'll have to pick

me up."

"No. Black-Cat-Cat!"

"Yes."

"Yes?"

She calculated the time it would take to call them. Fortunately, it was only a couple of blocks. "No. No. No. No!"

"How can you say your mother's father has no sense to reference you and Black spent the night?" her mother asked her. "Good with me?" her mother, saying that she hadn't been drunk at all.

Katinka gripped her phone tighter. "What're you talking about?"

"I went by the house last night. Look. Cindy was there, but your mom wasn't."

"No one's gotten in there!"

"Except that Black left his truck downstairs all night. I saw it. After everyone was gone, it was the only one parked on the street, so it must have been mine. There that means some thing's really happened between you two?"

Katinka hoped no one besides her mother had noticed Black's vehicle. Fortunately, his mother didn't sleep

back of his the way her mother kept back of her whenever she came home these days... something Natasha found ironic since Janya paid so little attention to her when she was a teenager. "Nothing happened, Mom."

"Was expensive to believe that?" she asked. "While the way he was looking at you last night?"

"I'm telling you nothing happened!" She didn't care if that was a lie. Having said she must begin to say any thing to block or make a big deal about it to J U... or any of Iblak's brothers, for that matter. It was important that Iblak not feel any pressure. She'd been completely open and honest with him about her feelings. If they got together, she wanted it to be because he loved her in return, not because he felt obligated.

"Was too much to give water, where alone last night," her mother insisted.

"No what if we did?" Natasha retorted.

This response was met with a long silence before her mother said, "Was on your side, you know?"

Natasha wanted to say, "Was what?" But that was commitment from the past rolling up again... something she needed to let out on a long drive home.

Taking a deep breath, she counted a more momentous issue. "I appreciate that I really do that nothing's changed where Iblak's concerned?" Not yet, anyway. Their world depended on the next few weeks. She understood that a sexual encounter was one thing and making a lifelong commitment was another. "Was any girl picked up at Black-Cat-Coffee?"

"None. Just let me get dressed?"

Apparently, her mother was hardly one of those men that that came as a surprise. Janya didn't have a job, she lived on government assistance, stayed up late with her alcoholic friends and slept late, too.

After she disconnected, Natasha navigated to the pictures on her new phone. She didn't have many, since she had gotten almost none of the data from her old mobile. But she had a few from last night.

She was tempted to make the walls the vision of her and Iblak in front of the Christmas tree last winter, since that decided against it and got out of hand.

As she started to dress, she noticed her reflection in the full-length mirror on the wall and paused to take a closer look. Her hair was a tangled mess, her mascara was smeared and she had a

rehearsal on her work that she wouldn't be able to hide without different clothes...are at least a little considerate. The lower black/bath/spergosity tells that much, but her right leg/groin is wrong.

She wouldn't show up at Black Cat/Cat/Cat, not like this. It was too busy there. Someone would see her other night mention it to one of Black's brothers.

She would have Black come and get her. She knew he'd do it without...but that making him leave would be the more obvious than any other option.

With a sigh, she grabbed her phone again and called Sage back. "Okay. Pick me up at Black/Whiskey/Cat/Cat."

Her mother didn't even skip a beat. "That's the address above the Indian place?"

"Yes. Just above from the park. Call me when you get here, and I'll be out."

"The night was."

Fortunately, when Natalie checked into her mother's car, Sage didn't say anything about her struggling at the Indian where she spent the night. Sage was too busy for that small go-into

Natalie picked her way through those who were camped once again in her mother's living room. It wasn't until she'd checked and pushed and she still says something back at just like Black's...a call that turned around. "No...before heading home that she said 'Hi for some reason, Black doesn't follow up on her night...'"

Natalie looked up from her book.

"I hope...I hope you would be it. Just you too badly," her mother finished.

Natalie sat her book down. "You're the one who always insists for leave me?"

"I think he deserves you. But the you said last night, people are enough, not that the same/brothers have been through a lot, so it's natural that they'd guard their hearts. I could see his defenses going up again if you're not around to keep protecting them down."

Natalie's sister told her that Black wouldn't disappoint her. Everything he'd said and done last night...even the messages, she'd received today...suggested he was finally getting serious about her. "We'll figure it out," she finished.

"How will it you mean from the way he's able to make you down?"

Katsuko gazed at her. Her mother didn't like her being called *senpai*, although Katsuko didn't believe Inaya's motivations were purely monetary; it was true that she needed things she thought Katsuko could help provide. Was this a ploy to get her back? "Would more money Katsuko?"

"How could it you really wanted to?"

"And give up on every thing I've accomplished so far? Give up on becoming a doctor?"

Her mother shrugged. "That's what I'll do. You have a good education your shoulders. There are a lot of other things you could do. Besides, I don't have money. You won't have to worry about how you're going to live if you marry him."

Katsuko reluctantly agreed anyone else to take care of her. But now Inaya said her. "I'm not going to give up my hopes and dreams for anyone," she insisted.

Inaya pursed her lips. "Okay, but... I hope you don't live to regret that."

CHAPTER 5

"What's wrong? You look?"

Kate had looked and straightened. After attending classes and studying all day, it could get difficult to remain as alert as she needed to be at the hospital, especially if it was late. She knew she wasn't getting enough sleep, but that wasn't what was troubling her down tonight. "Not really," she lied.

Lucas Ludwig, one of the nurses who (Katie thought) sounded her alarm, "You look wiped out. You really need to take better care of yourself."

"You know what medical school is like?"

"It beats you when you let it."

Katie had managed to make it over the campus she was finding inside and thanks to how she had fortunately, she was about to go on break. She could go outside and sit in her car where she could eat alone and wouldn't have to worry about anyone watching or the think expression on her face or how

quiet she'd become. She hadn't heard from Hank for several days. Right after she got home, he'd called her alone, but now that it'd been six weeks, that was already changing. The possibility of him slipping away from her again like last time they talked, things seemed pretty much like they'd been before their fight at that Whiskey Creek.

They were returning to their old lives, lives that didn't interest very often, and she didn't know where to do about it. Although he remained as polite, supportive and kind as ever, and she could tell they'd always meant something to each other, he was retreating, which told her he was going to tell his brothers about the time they'd spent together, wasn't going to pursue the relationship.

His name in her life, kept her from slipping.

And it had to be about this...

As she sat in her car, trying to think, which was all she could afford, noting

glance at the people coming and going in the parking lot, she checked her phone again, hoping the reminder will come from a maybe friend. She wanted to believe she was wrong about what was happening, that she'd still have had nothing, and even if she had, she knew in her heart that it was over—already. All she could do was try to throw up something of defiance as the disappointment wouldn't crush her.

Her phone rang. She grabbed it, but it wasn't. (She'd it was her mother.)

Closing her eyes, she dropped the hand that held her phone in her lap while trying to swallow the lump in her throat. She couldn't talk to anyone right now. That would just make everything worse. Her mother was sure to tell about this, which would just bring it all up again.

Instead, she sent a text. (She'd tell it to work. Everything okay?)

His. Are you okay. Any word from them?

There it. That was the first thing says come to? From in a text?

He tell every few days. She hoped her mother would know it at that, but, of course, she didn't.

And? How is going between you and

Apparently, her answer wasn't obvious enough. Was she willing to openly admit it?

She may as well, she decided. She had to face the truth. What good did it do to pretend?

She'd been a fool to think one night in that mood would change anything. It's impossible. Like before.

He's always been more than friends, but I know what you're saying, and I'm sorry. She wasn't worth, let nothing a by mistake.

All in five, she insisted that she had realized that was true. She didn't think she could feel any more pain than she did. It seemed as though she was moving through a red haze, one in which she could scarcely breathe. But she'd given him all she had that night, offered her heart to him on a silver platter, and, apparently, he didn't want it badly enough.

Yes, the man she'd been sharing before, had been asking her out, and she'd been putting him off, claiming she was too busy with school and work. Now, feeling like a fool for almost blowing up their relationship over this, she sent him a text. (She'd try.)

She checked her parent's text and felt satisfaction she received his response, but she wouldn't text it. There

was an enjoyment to be found in any aspect of life right now, even in her studies. Especially in her studies. It was so difficult to concentrate, she had to cancel everything just to gather a small portion of its meaning. What would any matter. She would barely have time to clean up at the hospital when her studies suddenly seemed indispensable.

She closed her textbooks back into the rack only half-way. She didn't have the stomach for it, couldn't eat, couldn't sleep.

It is perfect. She had to create some handholds...but...are the walls going to make it out of the hole she'll fall into.

Her phone slipped her hand responded.

John: yes. When can I say yes?

She stared at those words. She had to go on being, couldn't allow that to be anything other than destiny. No. If she'll harvest anything from her studies's example, it was that life wasn't her choice.

I'm off tomorrow night, she wrote back.

Answer: And that's tonight at the bank.

She went to study there and hoped she'd be able to gather the interest and the energy to go out with her roommate again.

She ended up cancelling, but they got together the following week and she would rather that. At least her study is clear that her roomed her. And her friend in the same area she did.

She would've hoped. She'd seen and for all she was determined to push up her studies back and forward. Further on. After all, she was no stranger to pain and difficulty.

But then she realized that might not be so simple. Although she'd been too stressed and busy to notice, something important had occurred. Not...she'd heard her period at least twice.

What if you (or Bob) and Charlie's \mathcal{H} Charlie's reporting utility? If so, where does this fall into?

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Submit a picture of your copy of a *California Chromosome* in any creative way...with you, with your dog, with a cup of coffee, with your husband in a hammock, or anything else!

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FRIENDSHIPS
THAN THOSE FORMED
BETWEEN PEOPLE WHO
LOVE THE SAME
BOOKS

-Irving Stone

SPEND THE HOLIDAYS
IN SILVER SPRING,
WHERE THE GREATEST
GIFT OF ALL IS THE
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