



Christmas
WITHOUT *You*

ANNA SUGG

Christmas Without You

A Christmas Romance filled with emotional love, believable deception, and disguises

The last person Jessica expects to ring her apartment doorbell is the handsome Trace Brightwell, her boss' son. When he asks if Jessica Tucker is home, she realizes he doesn't recognize her. Stunned she tells him she's Jessica's twin. She's in trouble.

For as long as Jessica Tucker can remember, she's had to prove she's more than a pretty face. Wearing a disguise to look more like a no-nonsense professional, she accepts a job on an offshore oil rig. Throughout her time on the rig, she finally earns the respect of the roughnecks. When off tour, she's back to herself, a fun-loving woman who is known as Jessie. She loves Christmas and has a doorbell that rings out "Here Come Santa Claus."

Trace Brightwell can't believe Jessica Tucker, the company's serious career oriented, intimidating geologist has a twin – a complete opposite twin, not only in appearance, but in her gregarious personality, who lights up his heart when around her. He wants to see more of her.

How will Jessie dig her way out of the lies that keep growing? Her emotional attachment to Trace is dangerous and the deeper her lies sink, the more twisted her thinking becomes. Besides, how can she love a man that isn't into Christmas.

Christmas Without You

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About the Author

Available Christmas Romances from Judy Baker aka

Christmas Without You

By

Anna Sugg



Chapter 1

Jessica Tucker walked out of her lab onto the offshore oil rig platform, shoved a hardhat on her head and hooked her harness to the jackline. Her steel-toed boots clomped toward the drilling sites to gather mud samples. The unmistakable chuf-chuf-chuf sound of the whirling rotors drew her gaze over her shoulder to watch the helicopter land on the pad. The bird was her ride home in the morning for her two weeks off tour.

Her gaze drifted toward the good-looking man strolling from the control room, Trace Brightwell, the owner's son of Brightwell Drilling Company. Jessica guessed he couldn't be much older than her, maybe thirty. Like her, he had a degree in geology and knew the rig and its operations inside and out. He stayed connected to the crew by working on the rig one or two weeks out the month, alongside the roughnecks, getting his hands dirty. He wasn't afraid of hard labor, gaining respect from the crew.

His long legs carried him toward the landing pad, even wearing the PPE (personal protective equipment), he oozed with sexiness. She detected his dark chocolate wavy hair escaping the hardhat from around the back of his neck. Too bad he never gave her a second look. She had him. But then again, she wasn't exactly the person she really appeared to be.

A strong wind gust blew loud tense voices her way, forcing her gaze and thoughts away from the intriguing man. Her brows pulled tight. A curious expression replaced her frown. The large group of drillers stood looking over the platform rail, hollering. What got their attention?

She made her way over to the edge of the platform and pushed through the crowd to look down into the ocean, a good two hundred feet below. Geez, the pitching waves were higher than normal. Looking out on the horizon, she shivered. A dark dangerous looking storm gathered over the water, heading their way. But the crew didn't pay any attention to the threatening black clouds above or the strong winds driving the storm closer to the rig. Their concerns laid below.

Scanning the rough, whitecaps plunging toward them, she searched until, there, several yards from the rig, struggled a tiny looking dog swimming for his life, toward them.

Billy hollered, "Come on boy, you can do it. You're almost to the polls. Come on"

The other drillers yelled and cheered, hoping the dog could hear and fight for his life. As if understanding, the poor dog tried to swim toward the crisscross polls below the platform. She scanned the ocean area around them. Not a boat in sight. Where did he come from? Looking back at the poor animal, she lifted her voice over the wind, and screamed, “Come on boy, you can make it, come...come on, fight...” she choked when a huge wave pulled him under. She held her breath. A sob escaped her mouth while she stared into the deep water.

His head popped up, she opened her mouth to encourage him, but tears cut her words off. She caught her breath, praying he’d make it. Her deep voice mumbled, “He’s a fighter. Come on boy, a little further.” Every second he seemed to make progress a wave pushed him back, swallowing him.

Gritting her teeth, she hollered with the others, “Come on. Come on boy, you can do it. Come on.”

Suddenly a wave crashed on top of him, pushing him a little closer to the safety of the platform brackets below. Her eyes widened, he made it, barely. With what little strength he had left, he pulled himself up on a poll at the bottom of the platform at the moment another wave washed in nearly throwing him back into the ocean.

Jessica darted Billy a terrified look. Her demanding voice drew his gaze, “Get a rope. You have to pull him up before he drowns.”

Billy ran to the control room and brought back a huge rope, tied a noose on one end and with the help of two other roughnecks, they lowered the rope to try to circle it around his head and front legs. The harder they tried nothing seemed to work.

“Jeff,” Jessica ordered, “Go from behind – over his back legs.” They tried her way. They missed. “Try again,” her firm tone demanded, “You can’t give up.”

Cautiously, they worked the rope behind his back legs dangling from the pole. A huge wave splashed up over the dog causing him to slip. They all held their breath.

Billy screamed, “I think I got him. Pull the rope up. Slow. We don’t want to lose him.”

The three men tugged, hand over hand, until the rope slowly made its way upward. With the rope tight around his backend, the poor dog didn’t put up a fight. He hung limp.

Barely audible, Jessica’s worried tone said, “Don’t...don’t lose him.” Squeezing her gloved hands together, she watched the dog rise closer to the platform.

Without a thought to her safety, she pressed against the edge, leaned out as far as she could, and when the dog swung close enough, she lunged, grabbing him, nearly losing her own balance if not for a pair of strong hands snatching her around the middle. The hands jerked her back.

Flying backward, she kept a firm grip on the dog until the hard landing on the body beneath her jarred her hold on the wet dog. The arms around her middle released her. Not hesitating, she yanked to her knees to the dog laying on his side, not moving. She touched his head. Ripping off her gloves, she pressed her palm against his ribs. He'd stopped breathing.

Billy crouched near her. "We're too late...he's gone."

"No. No, no. Billy, flip him over on the right side."

"Jess, he's gone, Jess."

"No. No. No." Her determined tone lifted, "We have twenty minutes to revive him."

Billy reached down and flipped the lifeless looking dog to his other side.

Aligning the dog's wet brown head with his shoulders, Jessica opened his mouth, pulled out his tongue and covered his mouth with her hand. Placing her lips on his black nose, she blew five quick breaths directly into his nose, afterward, she covered his side near his arm joint with her hands and compressed his heart in quick movements counting, one, two, three, four...until she reached thirty. Again, she covered his mouth and breathed five quick times into his nose. Another thirty compressions against his armpit. After the fourth round, she sat back, dropping her hands to her side – nothing. Sucking in a long deep breath, not giving up, she raised back on her knees, covered his mouth, and breathed into his nose. This time, when she pressed her hands down on his heart, the dog opened his eyes and tried to raise his head.

A whooping noise sounded throughout the rig. "You did it, Jess," hollered someone.

Jessica blinked trying to keep her grateful tears at bay. Leaning down, she gently rubbed the dog's head, and said, "You'll be okay."

Energy sapped, she dropped back on her butt. Now aware of the man squatting close to her, she looked up. Trace Brightwell looked her in the eyes. His kind gray eyes looked at her as if he'd never seen her before. He reached out and softly wiped a tear from her cheek. "You saved him."

Billy ran off and brought back a bowl of water to see if the dog needed hydrating. He did. With a slight lift of his head, he lapped up a little water, and in exhaustion rested his head on Jessica's hand.

“What do we do now?” Jeff aimed his question at Jessica as he watched Billy spread a blanket over the lucky dog.

Jessica shrugged, staring at the black and brown dog, not more than twenty pounds, she guessed. “Carry him to my lab, I’ll keep an eye on him for the rest of the day.”

“I think these are yours.” Jessica looked down at the black rimmed glasses in Trace’s hand.

“Ah...thank you.” Embarrassed, she shoved them on, hoping he didn’t notice they were fake. Reaching up she felt her hardhat to make sure it hadn’t fallen off along with her wig. With a nervous smile, she accepted his hand to stand. “Thanks.”

Pulling back, she looked up into his solid grey eyes. Eyes she hadn’t noticed until now, so close. Grey eyed people were supposed to have personality traits of kindness, energy, and passion. He seemed all business when working on the rig, even slightly antisocial.

With a slight grin, he said, “That was a crazy thing to do.”

“What do you mean?”

“You could have gone over the railing, gotten hurt and lost the dog too.”

She glanced at her tethered line still hooked to the jackline and grabbed it. Giving him a satisfied look, she didn’t reply.

With a raised brow his lips pressed tightly. “Even so, Ms. Tucker, you might have been injured severely. Yet, you did save him.”

His full sexy smile took her by surprise. “How did you know what to do? I mean, few people know how to help a dog not breathing.”

A tentative smile almost curled her lips. “I spent lots of time on my grandparents’ farm. I learned by helping newborn calves.”

Shoving his hands into his pockets, he scurried his gaze around the group of men, and said, “Way to work together. If you guys hadn’t caught sight of the dog, he would have drowned by now.”

A couple of the men high-fived Billy and the others for getting the rope around the dog to pull him up.

Brightwell waited until the men quieted, then he turned all business. “Gale force winds coming this way. Back to work men. We need to batten down everything. Let’s get moving.”

Jessica took a step when suddenly the platform swayed beneath her feet, pushing her against Brightwell. He grabbed her arm. Shifting her gaze out toward the open ocean, she took in the rough waves mounting higher. “Scary,” she mumbled.

“You better get back in the lab before the storm’s on top of us.”

Turning she hurried to catch up to Billy who had picked up the lucky dog to head to her lab. She rushed to follow, not daring to give Brightwell another glance.

Inside her lab, Billy laid the animal on the blanket, gave Jessica a happy nod, and mumbled, “Lucky dog.” He turned and hurried out. Jessica bent, reached out and rubbed the palm of her hand down the wet dog’s head, over his side and down to his tail. The platform swayed knocking her off balance. “Whoa, this isn’t fun.”

The dog’s frightened brown eyes looked up at her.

“You’re safe now,” she said in a soothing tone. Reaching over, she rubbed her hand down his head to help him feel secure. “Maybe tomorrow, you’ll wag your tail. Poor baby, where did you come from? How long have you been swimming in this massive ocean? I guess we’ll never know.”

His sad, gentle eyes looked directly into hers, but too exhausted, he slowly closed them, took in a deep breath, and appeared to relax enough to sleep.

Working well past her shift, Jessica decided to gather one more sample from Zone C to double check the mud. It was her job to make sure the gas levels were normal in the mud from the deep ocean bottom drill. With a quick glance at the dog, still sleeping, she took off to gather her mud.

“Hey Jess,” Billy drew her attention. “How’s the dog?”

“He lapped up a small amount of water and now he’s sleeping. I’m hoping he’ll try to get up tomorrow. If he does, he might eat a little.”

“Good to hear. Hey, you joining us in the galley for dinner tonight since your off tomorrow?”

“Yup, right after I evaluate the mud from Zone C. I detected a small gas spike earlier, so I thought I’d do one more run. See you in an hour.”

He gave her a thumbs up. “Hey, be careful – winds are pretty bad outside.”

Jessica stepped out, hooked to the jackline, and made her way to the zone area, pushing against the wind. Billy wasn’t kidding. With each step she took, the wind pushed her back two

steps, coming close to losing her footing. She'd worked on the rig for over a year and never experienced such a windstorm. A stinging raindrop slapped her cheek. Stepping up her pace, she rushed to the zone and back inside before the downpour started. It appeared her luck for missing out on bad storms had come to an end. She'd been fortunate missing several horrific storms by being off duty at the time.

After running the test results on the mud, Jessica noticed the reduced levels of gas. Clicking off her computers, she stood, stretched, and said, "It's yours for the night, Andy, have a good one."

"Anything I need to keep an eye on?"

"Nope, all's well with the rig," she made a face at the geologist working the night shift, "Except the wind."

"Yup, I hate the storms." He looked down at her feet. "Jess, someone's following you."

"Oh, I almost forgot," she squatted to pet the weak dog. "Maybe he's hungry."

Andy chuckled, "Or he just wants to go with you. You saved him you know. Wished I'd been there to see it all."

"He's lucky. We'll probably never know how he wound up in the middle of the ocean. What do you think? His black and brown wavy coat and flopped ears make me think he's terrier, but I'm not sure. I love his eyes. They're so expressive."

Andy shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe. He can't be more than fifteen, twenty pounds. Terriers are small, but he's tall. If I had to guess, I'd say, he's a mutt."

"Well, whatever breed or mutt, I love his round brown eyes. I think he understands every word I say." She reached down, picked him up and hugged him close to her chest. "I'll take you with me."

With a glance at Andy, she said, "Have a good night." Stepping through the door, she hugged the dog, and said, "If I bring something back from the galley will you eat?"

Hurrying to her birth, Jessica folded a blanket on the floor next to her bed. After giving him a drink of water and a pat on the head, she hurried to shower before going to dinner.

Fifteen minutes later, on her way out, she squatted next to the dog, and whispered. "Hey doggie, I'll bring you some food, you rest while I'm gone."

She felt the platform sway. Geez when will the storm pass? "Don't worry, you're safe on the rig. I think. Poor doggie. You know I can't keep calling you doggie, you need a name."

Once again, she felt the floor sway, reminding her of the dark windy storm circling the rig. She lowered her head and kissed the dog's nose. "How did you ever survive long enough to swim to our rig?" She smiled. "Hey, I got it. I'll call you Riggs. What do you think of the name?" Standing, she walked to the door. "Riggs it is."

Jessica didn't stay too long in the galley. The storm took away her appetite since it had increased in its intensity. Her nerves were beginning to show on her facial expression. The crew laughed telling her it's bad but not the worst storm they'd witnessed. One thing for sure, she didn't want to experience a worse storm. Rob lunged into a story about the worse storm he'd ever experienced while on the rig, giving her chills. Hopefully, she'd be off duty when another storm came along.

Using the dog as an excuse, she hurried back to her birth with a plate filled with cooked ground beef from the chef.

Riggs filled his tummy with the food in a ravishing manner causing Jessica to think he hadn't had anything to eat for days. Once he settled down on his bed, she sent her parents an email telling them they had rescued a dog today and she might bring him home.

Finally, crawling into bed, she lay wide-eyed, feeling the effects of the gale force winds each time the monstrous waves pounded against the rig. Unsettling. Glancing down at Riggs, she whispered. "Hey boy, are you asleep?"

His head popped up. Jessica scooted over, patted the space next to her, and with a nervous undertone, she said "Come, want to sleep next to me?"

Without more coaxing, he jumped on the bed and curled up next to her.

For more than an hour, Jessica lay staring at the ceiling, listening to the wind's furious howl as it swayed the platform.

Chapter 2

The next morning Jessica woke with a yawn. Listening, she heard no wind, nor did she feel movement on the rig. The storm had passed. Despite the howling wind throughout the night, she had finally fallen to sleep. Not a peaceful night's sleep though. Since the silence had awakened her, she decided to crawl out of bed and put in an extra two hours of work before flying off rig.

Pouring a cup of coffee, she noticed an envelope under her door from Jon, the pilot. He'd wait for her on the landing pad at ten o'clock to fly her back to the mainland for her two weeks off, along with two other roughnecks. Studying Riggs for a moment, she decided, "I can't leave you here. Want to go home with me?" His warm eyes seemed to tell her he belonged to her now.

A few hours later, Jessica showed the dog around her small apartment, fed him, and made him a bed. "You take a short nap while I shower." Tossing aside the wig and glasses, she hurried to shower, dressed, and strolled into the living room to wake Riggs from his nap. Not finding him on his bed in the corner, she glanced around. He had stretched out on her sofa, sleeping like a baby.

"Riggs, naughty boy. Off," she ordered. He jerked awake, shot off the sofa and pounced to her. "Ahhh, you're so cute, how can I get mad at you for sleeping on the sofa. But you are dirty. You need a bath." Securing a rope around his neck, she said, "Right after we see the vet, I'm going to buy you a harness and a leash – how about a pretty blue one? Or black to match your fur. You also need shampoo."

A slight woof sounded, putting a pleased smile on her lips.

After the veterinarian examined Riggs and gave him a healthy report card, Jessica left the pet store with Riggs following close wearing his new halter and leash while she carried a bag full of goodies, including dog food, treats, and a glow-in-the-dark ball. Riggs jumped into her lime green Rubicon, settled on the passenger's side, and eyed her when she climbed in.

She gave the brown-eyed dog a hug. "I'm so happy the vet gave you a good report. He thinks you're too skinny, something we'll fix with all the food and treats I bought. Boy, you're going to be spoiled. Soon you'll be a spunky boy chasing after your ball." Starting the jeep, she said,

“Come on let's get home. We'll stroll around the apartment grounds to give you a chance to do your business. After that, it's bath time.”

Once back in her apartment Jessie fed and watered Riggs, then filled the tub with warm water. Grabbing two large towels, she looked down at the worry-eyed dog. Standing with her hands on her hips, she grinned at the dog. “Guess what, Riggs? Time to bathe you. Don't be scared. It's a small amount of water, not as much as the ocean.”

Reaching down she lifted Riggs, hugged him, then gently set him in the tub. His anxious expression aimed at her seconds before he tried to jump out, splashing water all over her and the floor. She circled her arms around him to keep him from taking off. “Wow, boy.” Gently lowering him back into the water, she kissed his nose. “Ah, sweetie, it's okay, this water won't hurt you. You'll see.”

Squirring the shampoo over his fur, she began to massage him all over. After several minutes of kneading his back, legs, and chest, he relaxed, and even appeared to enjoy the massage.

“How you doing Riggs? Feels good, huh, boy? We'll get rid of all the ocean water left on you.” She rinsed the suds from his fur and carefully ran clean water over his head without causing him any discomfort by pouring too much over his face all at once. Finally, she lifted him out of the tub, quickly spread the towel over his back before he shook a spray of water from his entire body.

After a vigorous rub down, Jessie sat back and looked at him. “Wow, you're a clean, happy looking dog. You smell good too.”

Once she'd cleaned the tub and thrown the towels in the wash, she strolled to the living room with Riggs at her side. Evidently, he felt clean as he trotted to his bed, performed an upper facing doggie stretch and proceeded to circle several times before he settled in for a long nap.

By evening, Jessie took Riggs for a short walk along her building complex, afterward when she got ready for bed, she laid blankets next to her bed and patted her hand on the soft pile of blankets. “Here you go boy, your bed.” He curled up and gave her a contented look. “We're both worn-out. It's been a long day. I'm tired too.”

To Jessie's surprise, the dog slept through the night without making a sound. When he whined at her, she moaned, rolled over to look at the clock on the nightstand. She moaned again.

Six-thirty. Her gaze swung to Riggs' large brown eyes. "I guess I'll have to get accustomed to waking up early to walk you. Huh?"

He whined with a tail wag.

By mid-morning, Jessie finished her exercise class, reached for the television remote to click off the channel and switch to a Christmas music channel. She grabbed a towel and wiped the sweat off her face and neck. Glancing around at Riggs watching her, she said, "I'm through, you be good while I shower."

Her gaze caught her reflection in the mirror when she stepped into the bathroom. Running her fingers through her short thick head of hair, she thought of the wig she wore during her two-week duty on the oil rig. She liked her short natural blonde hair, it was her, not the long chestnut brown wig, not to mention the ugly rimmed glasses she wore all day while working.

Maybe it was time to be herself. Quit pretending. Hadn't she proven herself. Something to think about. With a deep invigorating breath, feeling energized, she headed toward the bathroom.

Her doorbell rang out the Christmas tune she'd programed on her phone. Riggs let out a warning bark. His ears perked up, waiting.

Doing an about face, Jessie strolled toward the door noticing Riggs' alert stance. She grinned, singing, "Here Comes Santa Claus, here comes..." the second she opened the door, she froze. Her breath closed off her throat. With wide eyes, she stared into her boss's handsome face, Trace Brightwell.

Her hand flew up to touch her hair, damp from working out.

In a smooth sexy voice, he said, "Is Jessica Tucker here?"

Hearing Riggs' throaty growl, her pulse quickened. She glanced down. "It's okay, boy."

Trace's gaze swung to the dog, drawing a confused expression. His intense slate-gray eyes lifted a questioning expression to her. "Hey, there's that lucky dog, is Jessica in?"

She blinked. Oh my gosh, he didn't recognize her, but he did Riggs. "Ah, yes...no..."

"Hey Jessie," hollered her neighbor's voice from the end of the hallway, "Merry Christmas."

Forcing her gaze from her boss to the man unlocking his apartment door, she waved.

Slightly breathless, she said, "Merry Christmas Oliver. How's Beau doing?"

The neighbor glanced down at his giant Schnauzer and nodded. "Better today. He's just an old man, like his master." Oliver glanced at Jessie's visitor. "See you later."

Jessie waved again in response thankful he didn't ask about her dog. She shifted her attention back to her unexpected guest, staring at her with a glint in his gorgeous gray eyes. His heavy stubbled beard style, like a thick five o'clock shadow, trimmed close with a clean-shaven neck and cheek, fit his striking facial features. Not usually a fan of facial hair, the stubble look on him brought out his sensual steely eyes and bright smile.

Dreamy eyes trailed over her making her aware of the tight-fitting workout clothes she was wearing. He made her feel naked. Not in a bad way, but in a rousing way. When he connected with her eyes, she sputtered, "Ah...you have the right place."

"Well...*Jessie*, is she here?"

Her eyes widened. He'd called her *Jessie*. Oh right, her neighbor had called her by her name.

His lips nearly spread in a full-blown smile when he asked again, "Is Jessica here?"

"She...ah...she's out on a...a date. I'm...I'm...her...sister."

His brow lifted. Again, he flashed his sexy smile. Her legs weakened. Wow, this serious, all business, no nonsense boss, had a flirtatious behavior she hadn't seen before. On the other hand, she'd heard enough about the playboys of Savannah, Georgia, the Brightwell brothers. Now, she understood how this Brightwell swept women off their feet. She stepped back. Not a chance on earth would she allow it to happen to her.

"A date, huh?" he grinned, "I need to pick up –"

Her phone rang out 'Here Come Santa Claus' causing his lips to widen into a teasing grin.

When it rang again, both brows lifted. "You wanna get that?"

"Ah. Sure." Jessie stepped back several feet, whirled to head for the kitchen counter where she'd left her iphone.

"Hi Amy. Yup." Jessie turned to take a closer study of her boss while her friend chatted. Riggs sat, like a good boy, with his guarded eyes on the man.

Trace stood in the doorway with his arms folded over his broad chest, leaning against the doorframe. He oozed with sexiness dressed in jeans, white t-shirt, and a short black leather jacket. Even the tennis shoes he wore added to his sex appeal. His watchful eyes slowly took in her small apartment, then back to Riggs.

"What?" Jessie blinked. Amy's irritated voice brought her back to the present. "No, I'm fine, I just finished working out." She pressed her lips and nodded. "Yes, I plan on it. Give me a half hour, I'll meet you at Papa's."

Grinning at Trace, she stepped back, pointing at the phone connected to her ear, and continued to back up until she disappeared into her bedroom, saying loud enough to be heard, “Go ahead, I’ll meet you there. I need to jump in the shower first.” Pulling the door shut, she whispered, “Amy, Amy,” demanding her friend to listen.

“Why are you whispering?”

“Amy, my boss is here.”

“So?”

“He thinks I’m Jessica’s sister.”

Amy giggled. “In other words, you’re not wearing your wig.”

“No. What do I do?”

“Tell him the truth.”

“Why? What if he fires me for lying? I’ve been wearing the wig and glasses for over a year.”

“Jessie, don’t you think you’re making a mountain out of a mole hill?”

“Thanks for the cliché, Amy.”

“Geez, Jessie, if you can’t confess, find out why he needs Jessica and let him think you’ll tell her. End of story.”

“I better go.” Clicking off, she stepped from her bedroom, laid the phone on the counter, and met his gaze with a bright smile.

He stared back. With a push from the doorframe, he straightened and shoved his hands into his jacket pockets. “Well, I better go. Sounds like you’re meeting friends. Good place to go for pizza.”

She tipped her head to the side, and said, “You know Papa’s Pizza?”

“Yup, most everyone living in Savannah goes to Papa’s. My friends and I go there often.” Suddenly, he shoved a hand toward her. “By the way—”

Riggs growled.

Not moving, he said, “I’m Trace Brightwell, Jessica’s boss, or rather one of them. I didn’t know Jessica had a sister.”

Moving forward, she accepted his hand. With a hard swallow, her brain searched for an explanation. “Ah...I’m...ah...we’re twins.” Wow, she didn’t know lying came so easily.

He shook her hand and shifted his gaze down to Riggs. “Her rescued dog looks to be adjusting to his new home.”

Jessie gave Riggs a pat on the head. “He is. He’s lucky...ah...from what I hear.”

“Yup, he is.” He turned toward the hallway, paused, then glanced over his shoulder. “When you see your sister, can you tell her I need to look over the file she has, or she’ll need to come to the board meeting in the morning. I know she’s off tour, but the board wants to go over her findings.”

Pressing her lips together, Jessie nodded.

“Maybe it’s better you tell her to be at the board meeting in the morning.”

He took a step, turned to face her, capturing her gaze. “I’m glad I got to meet Jessica’s twin.” Showing off his even white teeth in a striking smile, his eyes strayed beyond her. “It appears you and your sister have a thing for Christmas.”

Jessie moved closer to the door, aware of the music waffling throughout the apartment. “My...ah, *our* favorite holiday.”

“I can tell,” he grinned, took a step forward, reached over and pressed her doorbell. “Here Comes Santa Claus” rang out.

Giggling, she shrugged. “I’ll be sure to tell Jessica to be at the meeting in the morning.”

When he turned to stroll down the hallway, she hollered, “Oh, what time is she to be there?”

Again, his drop-dead smile weakened her knees the moment his eyes trapped hers. “Eight-thirty. Have fun with your friends.”

Jessie hurried to shut the door. Oh my gosh, what just happened. Rubbing her hands, she paced. “Oh, my gosh, oh my gosh, I told him I’m Jessica’s twin. Why did I say such a thing? Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.”

Chapter 3

Hurrying to the bathroom, Jessie showered and dressed, all the while thinking about the attractive Trace Brightwell. Her contact with him had been rare since she'd started her job on the oil rig. Mostly during board meetings. Even at the meetings he never said much to her or paid much attention to her. His father owned the Brightwell Drilling Company and gave her instructions on what to report whenever the senior boss called her to the meetings. She knew Trace Brightwell worked on the rig one or two weeks out of a month, but usually not during her time on duty.

She'd never dreamed he'd show up at her place, much less catch her without her wig.

"I'm out of here boy, be good. Sleep." She kissed Riggs on the nose, grabbed a jacket and hurried out of her apartment to her jeep to drive the short distance to the Papa's Pizza joint. Still high on adrenaline from her encounter, she parked, made a quick exit from her vehicle, and dashed into the restaurant. Zooming in on the girls sitting at a round table, she bounced over with a mysterious grin on her face.

"Well, girl, it's about time you showed up. What took so long?" Candace pushed her chair out to give her large protruding abdomen room. Placing her hand on her swollen body, she turned her gaze down. "Whoa, little one." Her lips spread wide. "Jessie, you're just in time to see this baby kicking me like a football."

Jessie's eyes watched a bulge poke Candace's stomach and move around toward the front. "Oh my gosh, I'm thinking *HE*'s ready to join the world. Look out Georgia College football, here comes a star kicker."

Amy reached over and rubbed the lump. "*SHE*'s coming on her own terms. Besides, *SHE* could be the star kicker."

Jessie laughed along with the others, pulled out a chair and dropped. "I'm starved. I'm glad you went ahead and ordered." Helping herself to a slice of loaded pizza, she gave each a look of needy advice. With a mouth full, she mumbled, "I'm in trouble."

Kim reached over, scooped up a slice, and squinted her eyes at Jessie. "What have you done now?"

Swallowing, Jessie frowned. "What makes you think I've done something?"

“Well, for one thing, Amy said your boss showed up at your place. Said you were in a panic because you didn’t have your wig on, and you let him think you were sisters. Besides, you came in grinning like a Cheshire cat with a secret.”

Jessie shot her a wrinkled-up nose smirk. “I did. I panicked. He took me off guard.”

“Why,” Kim asked with her mouth full. “What did the old man want?”

Before taking a bite, Jessie paused to shake her head. “Not old man Brightwell. Trace Brightwell, his son.”

Amy’s beer dribbled from her mouth. With her eyes on Jessie, she grabbed her napkin and wiped her wet chin. “You mean the good-looking boss who thinks you have brown hair and wear black rimmed glasses? You didn’t mention him.”

Candace lifted a slice of pizza to her mouth and hesitated. “We want details. What happened when a blonde-haired Jessica opened the door without a wig? Wait, what were you wearing? Wait, I know. The orange tights and that halter top. Right?”

The waitress refilled Candace’s water glass, turned, and asked Jessie if she wanted something to drink. After ordering a beer, she shook her head at the girls. “I’d been working out, so of course, no wig or glasses, and yes, I had on my orange outfit. He didn’t recognize me. Wanted Jessica...I sputtered, and without thinking told him Jessica and I were twins.”

“Are you kidding me?” Kim laughed. “Really? Jessie, leave it to you to entertain us. Now, tell all.”

Jessie shrugged, accepted the beer from the waitress and took a long swallow. Setting her mug down, she giggled when all eyes rested on her, waiting. “Okay, here it is. I told him Jessica went on a date.” Gritting her teeth, she crunched up her nose. “He asked me to give her a message about the board meeting in the morning.”

Amy lifted her elbow on the table and rested her chin in the palm of her hand. “He thinks you’re Jessica’s sister. If she’s Jessica, what’s your name?”

“Jessie.”

“Hmm,” Amy tapped her fingers against her chin and cocked her head to the side.

Kim laughed out. “Only a man would think parents would name twin girls Jessica and Jessie.”

“Hey, truth be known, Kim,” Candace corrected her friend, “in Celtic usage, Jessie is NOT related to Jessica.”

Amy rolled her eyes at the girls, and aimed her statement at Jessie, “Let me get this straight. Jessica’s the long dark-haired professional with the black rimmed glasses, always dressed conservatively and looking like a brainiac. Jessie’s the fun, smart, short blond-haired person, a dazzling long-legged, full-of-life woman. Hmm, which do you think Trace Brightwell will go for?”

Jessie bit her bottom lip and pressed the heel of her hand against her forehead. “I’m in trouble.”

“Yes, you are, girl.” Candace lifted a brow and twisted her hip, trying to shift her body into a better position. “Tell us, what do you intend to do when he asks you out on a date? I’m saying Jessie, not Jessica.”

“No, no, no, no, it won’t happen.” Jessie aggressively shook her head.

“Bet me,” Candace giggled.

“Good grief, Jessie.” Kim’s eyes widened. “How are you going to keep Jessie and Jessica separated? You better confess before you find yourself in deep doodoo.”

Amy released a funny little cackle. “I think you’re already in too deep. Won’t he think it weird never catching the twins in the same room together?”

Candace twisted to the other hip, holding her tummy. “Geez, if this baby doesn’t decide to make an entrance, I’m going to help it along. I’m not sure I can hold on for another three weeks.” Sucking in and releasing a quick short breath, she said, “Jessie, you’ve been ‘*charading*’ for the last year as two different people, maybe you should be yourself now.”

“Hmm, first of all, Candace, ‘*charading*’ isn’t a real word.” Jessie darted a teasing glance at her pregnant friend and shoved the last chunk of pizza in her mouth.

Kim held up her glass of beer to Candace. “The word works for me.” When their glasses clinked, she turned to Jessie, pooched her lips out and bobbed her head up and down. “She’s right. Time to be yourself. Haven’t you proven yourself on the job. From what you say, the men you work with all respect you and treat you as one of them. If you showed up without the wig and glasses, do you think they’d still show you the respect you’ve earned.”

Jessie swallowed a sip of beer, studied her friends’ serious expressions. “I think so. I’ll think about it. I am tired of wearing the wig anyway, and its costly to have it cleaned.” Sucking in a big breath, she leaned back against the chair. “Maybe I’m making a big deal out of nothing.”

Kim shot her a raised eyebrow look. “You’ll have to let us know what happens in the morning – at the board meeting.”

By the way, changing the subject. Yesterday, on the rig, we rescued a dog swimming in the ocean.”

“From where?” Kim asked, reaching for another pizza.

Jessie’s shoulder jerked up. “Who know. There wasn’t a boat in sight. Poor thing swam toward our polls below the platform. Billy nearly lost him trying to put a rope around his body. He nearly drowned. Actually, he wasn’t breathing when they brought him up.”

“What did you do?”

Jessie straightened her shoulder and proudly grinned. “I did CPR the way my grandpa taught me with the calves.”

“Eww, you mean you put your mouth over his mouth?”

“Nope, over his nose.”

“Eww,” they all said in unison.

“He’s a cutie. I named him Riggs. You’ll have to come by and see him.

Chapter 4

Jessica arrived early for the board meeting. When she reached for the doorknob to the conference room, she paused, inhaled a large amount of air, and held it, counting to ten. Releasing the air slowly, she demanded her jittery nerves to calm. With a pasted smile on her lips, she pulled open the door. Huh, empty. First to arrive. Good. She strolled over to the large oval table, dropped her briefcase onto a chair and pulled out her files along with a stack of copies for the board members.

How many board meetings had she attended – not many, but enough to know what to expect. So why the jittery nerves? She glanced down at her attire. She had dressed stylish and felt confident she looked professional in her harvest-gold long sleeve sweater with a brown plaid skirt and brown leather belt. Her brown leather boots finished off her smart ensemble.

Where's everyone? She strolled over to the massive wall of windows, squeezing her hands to her chest. Quit kidding yourself? Trace Brightwell is the reason you're nervous. She led him to believe she has a twin sister. Okay – once the meeting ended, she must confess...let him know she had lied. If she did, would he fire her? He couldn't, could he? She hadn't done anything wrong as far as her work. So, what grounds would he have to fire her? Other than, she lied. Not one thing on her resumé pointed to a lie.

She scanned the view beyond the window. Brightwell's Savannah office overlooked the riverfront stores and restaurants, a perfect location. She'd grown to love the city and the friends she'd made. Were the girls right about her double life? Time to become herself again. Make a change. An opening at the Petroleum Science Lab caught her eye on the internet the other day. She qualified.

Jessie rubbed her forehead. Maybe her life needed a change. Stop working on the oil rig and stay landlocked? Pressing the spot between her brows, she realized she forgot the glasses. Hurrying over to her large leather bag, she dug out her false black rimmed glasses and slipped them on just as Mr. Thomas Brightwell walked into the room, followed by six other board members, including Trace Brightwell.

With a friendly smile on her face, she tipped her head at each member, plus both Brightwells. Immediately she forced a business mindset, picked up her file copies and passed

them around the table. Mr. Brightwell, old school, insisted on paper copies whenever she gave her report. Sitting tall in her seat, she kept her eyes on her senior boss, not daring to give the younger Brightwell a glance.

“Jessica,” Mr. Brightwell drew everyone’s attention to her, “Thank you for coming in this morning to go over your charts and findings. She smiled and tipped her head at him, picked up her file and concentrated on the report and the papers they each had before them.

Trace sat next to his father with Jessica across the table from him. When he walked into the conference room behind his father, he immediately noticed her. For the first time ever, his curiosity got the best of him, taking a good look at her, like he did the other day when they rescued the dog. Any other time, he hadn’t given her much of a thought, figured she wasn’t his type. Other than her personal file, he didn’t know much about her. No doubt, smart, knew her job and the software with extreme confidence. Her reports and emails to him were always to the point and professional.

When it came to her personal life, he knew nothing, except a Georgia girl. She received her Bachelor of Science from George State University and her master’s degree in Geology from Emory University. Nothing more. He didn’t know if her parents were living, certainly didn’t know she had a twin – a gorgeous twin. A twin he wanted to get to know.

He took the opportunity to study her while she spoke to the members giving each her attention while going over the charts. Her self-confidence excelled when reporting the levels on the analysis of mud ratios, gas, methane, oil, and all the other elements she knew so well. She lifted her gaze from her report to look at his father, then him. He noticed she quickly diverted her gaze from his, but not before he detected a guarded expression.

He always thought of her as standoffish and intimidating. Jessie on the other hand, from the brief time he’d spoken to her, he could tell she would be fun, outgoing, vibrant – yet...now everything about Jessica reminded him of Jessie, except her hair and glasses.

She continued to speak to the members with poise and self-assurance, completely in her comfort zone, centered on her geology knowledge.

Squinting, he scanned her face closely. Not once had he looked beyond her ugly glasses until she lost them when she pulled the dog on board. Striking aqua blue eyes stared back at him from behind the rims.

His heartbeat stepped up. A quiver shot through him. Every cell in his body said those blue eyes belonged to Jessie, her twin. She had the same radiant skin coloring and shapely full lips. Cut Jessica's hair short and color it blonde, they could be identical.

Suddenly aware of his surroundings, he jerked his gaze from her, rubbed his forehead to smooth out his wrinkled brow. Behind his hand, he closed his eyes, listening to her voice. Decisive and efficient in conducting her task. Yet, he heard a hint of Jessie's charming voice in her speech.

When she stood, he dropped his hand to watch her stroll to the far end of the conference table to draw everyone's attention to the chart she had prepared. His gaze trailed from her dark hair, down her snug fitting sweater to the calf-length skirt and boots. Her entire outfit promised long legs beneath the skirt. Jessie had long legs.

After explaining the grid chart to the members, she turned to scoot the stand back against the wall, her movement caused him to visualize the same sexy back he'd seen on Jessie.

His reaction from meeting Jessie had surprised him. He'd dated beautiful women before, but when the door opened to Jessie standing there in her orange sports bra and tight-fitting orange leggings, showing off her long slim legs and small waist, he had to force himself to breathe – to act normal. He nearly lost it the second she turned to get her iPhone from the kitchen counter, her sexy back muscles rippled in the crossed straps. Her entire workout garb would make any man drool. He nearly did.

Trace blinked, shot a glance around the table, pushed his back into the chair, and slowly breathed in a long breath. Casually, he slid the palm of his hand down his mustache and facial hair covering his jaws. What's he doing...fantasizing about Jessie or Jessica? Forcing his attention to the words his father spoke, he tried to shove Jessie out of his mind. Jessica didn't make it easy, sitting across from him. Good thing she had dark hair. Not sure what he'd be thinking if she had blonde hair and didn't wear those ugly glasses.

Again, he glanced over at her. Why glasses? Women wore contacts these days. Without her glasses, she'd be beautiful, like Jessie. Eye catching. Before another thought could slip into his brain, he pinched his thigh and clamped his jaws, forcing his gaze on his father. *Stay focus.*

Senior Brightwell's friendly smile skimmed around the members and asked if anyone had a question. Once the men glanced over the report again, they slowly shook their heads. Mr. Brightwell turned to Jessica. "Thank you, Jessica for your thorough review. We also want to

thank you for coming in this morning even though you're off duty for the next two weeks. You're dismissed to enjoy your time off."

"Thank you, Mr. Brightwell." Standing, she glanced around the table, smiling. "Merry Christmas to each of you."

Trace eyed her when she stood to gather her belongings and gracefully walked from the room. In a heartbeat, he shifted in his chair, nearly standing to follow her out and ask for Jessie's phone number. Instead, he reached over and picked up the copy of his file and pretended to thumb through it. Glancing at the closed door, and with some difficulty he pulled his gaze away and tried to concentrate on his father's concerns about the safety protocols of working and living on the oil rig.

Once Jessie shut the door, she hurried her steps, escaping the conference room. Sucking in enough air to fill her lungs and calm her nerves, she made her way out to the parking lot. With a click, she unlocked her jeep, dumped her briefcase and bag into the backseat and collapsed in the front. She closed her eyes, leaning her head against the headrest. Her hand trembled. She had to calm down. The entire time she had given her report, she'd felt his suspicious eyes on her. What did he think?

Her cellphone rang out.

She jumped.

Expelling a quick breath, she answered, "Hi Mom." Hearing her mother's disappointed tone about the upcoming holiday, she said, "Sorry, Mom, I had Christmas with you guys last year. I know it sucks, but this year it's my turn to work during the holidays." Jessie stared at the keys in her shaky hand, waiting for her mom to stop babbling. When her mom took a breath, Jessie chimed in, "Mom, how about you guys come here, and we'll have a Christmas dinner?" She waited while her mother spoke to her dad. She knew her mother always had the speaker on for him to listen to their conversation.

Her dad's voice came over the speaker with a reply, putting a pleased smile on her lips.

"Okay, week from Friday, great. I'll call Jenna and see if they can come. I'm sure they will. We'll have a family dinner. I'll plan it."

Shoving the key in the ignition, she switched on the jeep, and backed out of the parking slot. Mentally, she listed a dinner menu while driving. They should have prime rib, and-

Her phone rang again. With a quick touch on the jeep dashboard, she greeted Amy. “What’s up?”

“Moments ago, I had a conversation with Kim and Candace. We’re planning a Christmas party and it has to be early because Candace’s baby might decide to come early, and besides, you have to work through Christmas.”

“Great, when?” Jessie drove into her parking spot at her apartment.

“We need at least one party before you fly out to the rig. We were thinking a week from Friday night.”

“Oops, sorry. My parents, Jenna and family will be here for a Christmas dinner at my place.”

“Your parents, Jenna with her husband and two little ones?”

“Yup,” Jessie replied, making her way to her apartment building.

Amy giggled. “They’ll fill up your tiny apartment.”

“Yup.” Jessie grinned, picturing the family squeezing into her small abode. She made her way to the elevator and up to the third floor.

“Hey, what if you have your family party at my house along with Kim and Candace and their families. Jessie, my house is huge, and I have room for extra tables for everyone to be seated. Besides, it’ll be fun for all the kids to get together. We’ll sing Christmas carols, and the kids can play games.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yea, it’ll be a blast.”

“Let me give mom a call. If it’s good with them, I’ll help plan the dinner.”

“I’ll call Kim and Candace back, then we can get together at our favorite pizza joint and plan the meal. I can’t wait. Oh, I’ll give your sister a call. They can stay here when they drive in. The kids will love having a sleepover with your nieces. Whoa, I better get busy and finish the Christmas tree and decorations. Chat later.”

Jessie clicked off Amy’s call, shoved her key into her door lock, and stepped inside coming face to face with Riggs, sitting in front of the door, wagging his tail. “Hey boy, did you hear my voice on the other side of the door? Good boy.”

She dropped her items and slipped out of her cape, tossing it over the sofa, and hurried to reached down to give Riggs a loving rub and kiss on the nose. “How about a treat and a walk around the park?”

Her phone rang again. Glancing down she stared at the name. *Trace*. Should she answer? She gritted her teeth. Could be about work, or he wanted to inquire about Jessie? Ignoring the ring, she tossed the phone on the kitchen counter, and rushed to the bedroom to change into comfortable clothes. Too bad if it had to do with work. She intended to enjoy tonight with a large bowl of popcorn, a glass of wine, and a movie. Right after she and Riggs had their walk.

After a vigorous walk around the park and Riggs marking several bushes, she returned to feed the dog and before she’d forget, she called her mom to inform her of the new plans for Christmas dinner, afterward she chatted with her sister, Jenna. They all agreed to get together at Amy’s house. Jessie felt lucky her family enjoyed being around her friends.

Carrying a bowl of popcorn to the sofa, she flipped on the television to settled down to watch a movie on the Hallmark Christmas channel.

Her phone rang. Shoving a handful of popcorn into her mouth, she picked up her phone. Relieved to see Kent’s name instead of Trace, she swallowed. “Hi Kent, what’s up?”

“Are you headed out and about...like going on a date?”

“Nope, I’m eating popcorn and picking out a romance Christmas movie. Why?”

“Sounds fun. I’ll be over in a minute. Don’t eat all the popcorn.”

“I’ll pop another bowl for you.”

“On my way.”

Jessie grinned and jumped up to pop more for her friend. Her phone rang again.

“Oh my gosh. Who is it now?”

Hurried strides took her back to the sofa to where she’d laid her phone. “Hi Kim.” Strolling to the microwave, she listened to Kim and the corn popping. “Sure, I’ll see you all tomorrow night at Papa’s.”

“What are you doing tonight? The kids and I decided to have popcorn and watch a Scooby-Doo Christmas movie. Why don’t you come join us?”

“Thanks Kim, but I’m popping corn now. Kent’s coming over and we’re watching a Christmas movie too, except it’s a Hallmark show.”

“Okay, tell Kent hi and enjoy.”

“Chat later.” Jessie grinned, took the bag out of the microwave, and poured the popcorn into a bowl just as the ‘Here Come Santa Claus’ doorbell chimed out.

Chapter 5

A few nights later, Trace knocked on Jessie's apartment door. He waited. Shoved his hands into his jacket pocket and shifted from one foot to the other. Glancing at the doorbell, he reached out and pressed it. Immediately, *Here Comes Santa Claus* rang out from inside. Puffing out a short breath, he hung his head and stared down at his black and white Skechers. What if she didn't want to see him because Jessica worked for him? Did the company forbid a co-worker from dating a sister of an employee? Nah. Would Jessica care? Maybe. He puckered his brow and looked at the doorbell again.

The door swung open.

Jessie's bright smile trapped his words.

A low tight-mouthed growl jerked his attention away from her to the dog standing at her side.

She reached down and gave him a pat. "It's okay boy."

Looking back at him, her soft voice hinted a question, "Hi?" He stood staring at her questioning gaze. Forcing her brain to form a sentence, she slowly said, "I'm...I'm sorry, but Jessica...ah...she's...she's gone to Atlanta to visit my parents. *Our parents.*"

He swallowed, blinked, and finally dragged himself from a stupor state and found his tongue. "Hi...hi, Jessie. I'm glad you're here." Glancing at the dog, he said, "She didn't take him?"

"Ah...no...it's a short trip. I can tell her you stopped by."

Looking directly at her, he admitted, "I'm not here for Jessica. Is this an inconvenient time, or can I come in?"

After a slight hesitation, she mumbled, "Ah...sure," and stepped aside to let him walk through.

Again, tongue tied, his gaze scurried over her from head to toe. She looked yummy in her slim jeans, long pull over sweater and bare feet. Capturing her gaze, he looked directly in her exquisite eyes. Suddenly, Jessica's reflection wedged its way into his brain. Lines tightened around his mouth.

"Is something wrong?" she asked, staring at his lips.

With a sharp head shake to clear the image, he said, “I,” *geez, spit it out, dummy*. “Would you like to walk down to the corner bean and brew for coffee?”

For a heartbeat, he thought she’d decline his invitation, but instead, her bubbly voice said, “Sure, why not. Let me slip on shoes and grab a jacket.”

With a satisfied grin, he nodded and shoved his hands into his jacket pockets and looked down at Riggs. “Hey boy. I’m not a threat. Okay?”

The dog’s large brown eyes stared directly into his. He didn’t move. Nor did Trace.

Dragging his attention away from Riggs, he looked around, listening to the Christmas music waffling throughout her small apartment. Hmm, not more than five hundred square feet, he guessed. The entire place could fit inside only a portion of his apartment. Small for two people. Only one other door which means one bedroom. Not much room, but they managed to put up Christmas stuff without looking cluttered. Christmas music, Christmas decorations, Christmas tree, huh, he might have to rethink the meaning of the Christmas spirit.

Hearing her steps, he turned. Yup, one bedroom apartment. Darting a glance beyond the door she stepped from, he noticed a decorative poinsettia bedspread. Quickly, he swallowed a chuckle before it could escape, He couldn’t stop his lips from spreading when he met her smiling, gorgeous face. She made the tiny apartment feel festive, enormous, and yet, intimate.

“Give me a second to put the leash on Riggs and we can go.”

Exiting the building, he pointed across the parking lot. “My car’s parked over there, if you would rather not walk?”

“Walking’s good. It isn’t far. Besides, Riggs likes to walk.”

“Great.”

Slipping on his aviator sunglasses, he strolled alongside her through the park following the zig-zagging trail to the other side, toward the bean and brew café. Attempting light conversation, he said, “You know, I jog past your building several times a week.”

Pausing to give Riggs a chance to pee, she gave him a side glance. “You jog here?”

“Hmm, Forsyth Park has thirty acres and a great jogging path.”

“So, you live close.”

“I do, my place is on Oglethorpe Avenue, a few blocks from here. For a change of scenery, I sometimes jog along the Savannah River trail.”

They walked on in silence, paused ever so often for Riggs to sniff, or pee. Once arriving at the café, Trace put in their order and waited while Jessie found a small round table on the patio. He leaned against the counter and glanced out the window.

What made her so different from all the other beautiful women he dated. What made him obsessed with wanting to know her. What drew him to her? Pressing his lips together, he shook his head. *Ah mystery.*

Picking up his order, he walked out and handed her a peppermint cappuccino and sat across from her. Clipping his sunglasses on his shirt, he scanned every inch of her smooth, creamy face, long dark eyelashes blinking over striking blue eyes. She seemed completely unaware of her beauty.

Shifting, he looked down at the dog and with a curt nod his way, said, “He appears to have settled in with his new master and home.”

She lowered her gaze and nodded. “If he could speak, I’m sure he’d have a story for us.” She took a taste of the hot drink. “Yum, this is good. Do you like flavored coffee?”

Clearing his throat, he shook his head, took a sip of black coffee with his eyes on hers. “Nope, I like my coffee rich, strong and untainted.” After a moment of silence and before letting things become awkward between them, he made another stab at small talk. “Tell me about yourself.”

A shoulder lifted, “Like what?”

Wow. Jessie and Jessica’s voice sounded so much alike. A trait of twins, he reckoned.

“Where do you work? Do you have a boyfriend?” Geez, he didn’t mean to be transparent – asking about a boyfriend so soon? “Sorry,” he mumbled, trying not to stare, but her large round eyes trapped his. “I can’t imagine someone so beautiful not being attached.” He detected a slight smile before she sipped her cappuccino.

She set her drink down and circled both hands around the cup. “No. No boyfriend. Not now anyway.”

“I can’t imagine someone hasn’t put a ring on your finger by now.”

Her gaze drifted down to her ring finger. “Once – a while ago, but when I...ah, no not now.”

“Lucky me. I caught you at a perfect time. Where do you work?”

“I...ah...I’m in-between jobs right now. I’m thinking, about...about, going back to school.”

“Good for you. What would you like to do?”

“Ah...I think, ah, teach. I’d like to be a teacher.” Shifting in her seat, she looked him in the eyes, and asked, “What do you do when you’re not Jessica’s boss?”

He chuckled. “I have an office here and in Atlanta where I do lots of paperwork. Boring.” Locking eyes with hers, he said, “I work on the rig at least one or two weeks out of the month. I’m usually on the rig when Jessica’s off, so I rarely see her, except maybe at a few board meetings. From what I hear, the crew enjoys working with her.”

“Jessica tells me how dirty she gets when she goes out to gather mud from the drillers. Sounds like a dirty job, I mean, when I think of water, mud and oil – it all sounds dirty.”

He chuckled. “It is, but I enjoy the hard labor. It’s good to get *dirty* sometimes.”

“Hey, Jess.”

Trace glanced over her shoulder at a tall slim man strolling to their table with a latte in his hand. He gave Jessie a hurried look when her friendly voice said, “Hi Kent.” Her bright, welcoming smile aimed at the intruder.

Without asking, the man pulled out a chair and plopped down next to her, bent down, covered the sides of Riggs’ head, and gave him a rough, loving pat. “Hey, Riggs, how you doing?”

Trace didn’t miss the fact that Riggs didn’t growl, like he knew the guy. Geez, Riggs always growls at him.

Without waiting for Jessie’s reply, Kent darted his attention away from Riggs to Trace. “Who’s your friend, Jess?”

Trace’s curious gaze connected with a pair of inquisitive brown ones.

Without hesitating, Jessie said, “Kent, meet Trace Brightwell. Trace this is Kent Sober.”

Trace forced a smile, reached out, and shook the man’s hand. “Nice to meet one of Jessie’s friends.”

“Brightwell, huh? As in Brightwell Oil Company?”

“He’s...he’s one of Jessica’s bosses.”

Kent’s brow shot up before giving her a narrow-eyed look. “*Jessica’s boss?*” he said with emphasis on her name, slowly lifting his cup to his lips, a brow lifted again.

Trace’s phone rang out from inside his jacket pocket. His shoulders tensed. “Excuse me,” he mumbled glancing at the caller. With a push to his feet, he gave Jessie an apologetic look. “It’s Dad...” he shot Kent a glance, and said, “...the *top* boss.”

Slowly strolling toward the corner near a window, he leaned against the wall, listening to his father. A slight body shift, gave him a good view of Jessie's facial features, talking familiarly to the man. Her high cheek bones, smooth silky skin, perfect from any blemishes, long lashes looked to be hers, not the false eyelashes most women wore these days. Her blue eyes were the color of the Caribbean Sea. If he fell in, he'd drown. He watched the man lean forward, whispering too close. Who was he? What kind of relationship did they have?

Dragging his gaze from the man to her buttery blonde hair, his heart stepped up a beat. He felt hopeless as if bewitched by Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love and beauty. His brow tightened when she leaned near the man with her soft pink lips speaking to him in a familiar way, as if they shared a secret. Trace wanted him to take a hike.

Suddenly, his father's demanding tone interrupted his fascination with the woman sitting across from some man who he didn't appreciate interrupting them. Zooming in on the man again, he squinted. Where did he come from? She said she didn't have a boyfriend now. Didn't mean there weren't guys out after her. After all, he wanted her too.

He focused on Jessie again, trying to ignore the man. Funny, he always loved long hair on women, but on Jessie, her short style feathered around her face in an adorable fashion. He gripped his fingers, feeling the need to run them through her hair.

His dad's sharp tone snapped him back. "Yes, Dad. On my way." Cocking his head to the side, his firm lips pressed together when he disconnected his caller. Walking back to the table, he set his eyes on her. Geez, he didn't want to leave her with *him*.

Stepping up, he said, "Sorry, I must cut this short. Duty calls." Directing his gaze on Jessie, he said, "Can I walk you home?"

She stood, gathered Riggs' leash, and picked up her cappuccino. "No. I'm going to run in next door to the boutique and pick up a few things for Christmas."

"If, you're sure." He looked at Kent. "Good to meet you."

Kent shot up off his chair, held out his hand and shook Trace's, before turning his gaze to Jessie. "You buying Candace's baby a gift?"

"I thought I would. Want to come?"

"Sure thing. I'll get her something too."

Jessie, with Riggs at her side, headed for the door with Kent following. Outside, Trace shoved his hands into his jacket pockets and studied Kent for a moment. Were they more than

just friends? He turned a regretful gaze on Jessie, wanting to ask about seeing her again, except...

His phone rang. "Sorry, Dad again." Answering he said, "Hold on a moment, Dad?" Dropping the phone away from his ear, he said, "I best run." He didn't want to leave, especially with that man standing at her side.

"It's nice seeing you again, Trace," Her sexy low voice pumped blood to his brain. She said, "Thanks for the coffee." Before he could reply, she whirled to hurry toward the boutique shop with Kent on her heels. The moment Kent opened the door, she paused, told Riggs to sit and wait, and then, she looked back at him and waved.

He melted when her little wave included a gorgeous grin.

Trace flipped around leaving the boutique shop behind him and slapped the phone to his ear, scowling. Of all times to be interrupted – twice – by his dad and her guy friend.

Releasing a short breath, he said, "Yes, Dad. On. My. Way."

One thing for sure, he intended on seeing Jessie Tucker again. Maybe he should speak to Jessica about dating her sister. Geez. He forgot to ask for her phone number. Dummy

Jessie strolled into the boutique shop and stopped near the wide window to watch the handsome boss walk away with his phone to his ear. She liked his sexy laugh when she asked what he did when not Jessica's boss. Why did she have coffee with him? *Admit it. You're playing with fire.* Her reactions to his charm weren't easily overcome. Even his nearness made her aware of how emotionally dangerously she felt drawn to him. Her skin tingled when those grey eyes narrowed, too closely, making her feel like the only woman in his life. She'd noticed the sparkle in his eyes when she said she didn't have a boyfriend. *Whoa girl. Stop.*

"Un-oh, someone's infatuated with the boss."

She whipped around facing Kent, completely forgotten. Glancing down at the tiny baby blankets on display, gritting her teeth, she crunched her nose up, then admitted, "Maybe, but it can't happen."

"Okay, Jessie, what's up? I played along like you asked. Now, why the façade?"

"He thinks I'm Jessica's twin."

“Whoa. We’ve got some serious talking to do.” Kent took her by the elbow, led her out of the boutique, and grabbed Riggs’ leash. “Come on boy, we’re going back to the coffee shop for a long-detailed discussion.

Once seated, he said, “Spill it. I want to know everything.”

When she explained her situation, it all sounded foolish. Kent thought it hilarious. “Well, Jessie girl, you’re in trouble with this guy. He’s smitten with you.”

She crinkled up her nose and looked sideways at him. “You think?”

“I know. I saw how he looked at you. I might add, I noticed a disapproving expression when I joined you two.” He took a sip of coffee, watching her. “You like him too. Don’t you?”

Lowering his gaze, he said, “Do you like him, Riggs?”

Riggs released a slight woof.

Jessie laughed. She nodded. “I do…”

Kent chuckled. “But…”

She took a quick short breath. “Gossip around the rig said he’s a womanizer. A playboy. If he’s a playboy, I don’t want to be another notch on his belt. He’s one to stay away from.”

Kent shrugged. “Granted, he has charm and polite manners. From my short encounter, he didn’t seem fictitious – nope, no pretense about him. You might want to reconsider. Next time show up as Jessica and flip off the wig.” Kent laughed out. “I’d like to be there.”

Jessie reached over and knuckled his arm. She lowered her gaze, staring at Riggs. “Maybe you’re right. I keep lying. I told him I didn’t work, thinking about going back to school to be a teacher. I nearly admitted my engagement to David.” Jessie straightened her shoulder to look at Kent.

“I can’t believe I’ve worked on the oil rig over a year, and it’s been that long since David’s death.” Her vision blurred.

He reached out and gently covered her hand.

“Oh, Kent, if I could go back in time, I wouldn’t have broken off our engagement.”

“Jess, it wasn’t your fault. It’s time to move forward. You like this guy. Be straight with him or you might regret it. Sometimes I think you want to keep all interested men at arms’ length.”

“Why do you say such a thing?”

“Be honest. It’s guilt. Think about the men you’ve dated.”

Her furrowed brow raised.

“What?” Kent said. “Right. All two of the men you’ve dated this past year. The moment they started getting serious, you kiboshed the relationships. Be honest, you played it safe with Trace by not telling him the truth. It’s easier to pretend and tell him to get lost if he got serious. Let go of the past Jess, move on.”

Riggs whined, nudged her arm, and stared up at her with his big brown eyes, as if he agreed with Kent.

Chapter 6

The next morning, Jessie slipped on her white v-neck sweater, threw on a pair of denim jeans with enough flare for her favorite brown low ankle boots. Checking out herself out in the mirror, she pressed her lips into a grin, reminding her of why she loved these boots. They were pretty enough to go with her skinny jeans or her boot jeans, or casual dresses, or shorts, and they were comfortable. Hurrying, she ran a brush through her hair, added a pair of dangly silver earrings, then grabbed a cashmere cardigan to go over the thin sweater which sufficed for Savannah's sixties degree winter temperatures.

Turning off the Christmas tree lights, she seized her red shoulder strap purse and strolled over to give Riggs a kiss on the nose. "I'll be gone for a couple of hours. You be good. Don't pee. Don't poop. Don't puke. I'll walk you when I get back. Lov you." Heading to the door, she paused to glance back at him. He jumped on the sofa, looked at her as if to say, *lov you too. I'll nap.*

Stepping out of her apartment, she heard the elevator ding. Hurrying to lock her door, she shouted, "Hold please." Rushing down the hallway, she stopped dead in her tracks when Trace Brightwell took a step out, holding the doors open.

"Hi," he said, giving her a once over which deepened his dimple.

His overpowering grin hit her like an alarm clock. "Ah, hi yourself."

"Looks like I caught you heading out."

"Ah...yes, yes, I'm going Christmas shopping."

He glanced behind her. "Alone?"

His surprised question took her off guard. "Ah, yes," her tone held a questioning hint.

He stepped aside for her to enter the elevator. "Can I follow along?"

"Ah, why?"

His shoulder jerked up. "I'd like to spend some time with you. Since you've made plans, I'd like to be a tagalong."

Wide-eyed, she searched his charming smile, confirming his seriousness. "I guess. You'll probably get bored."

"I doubt it. You're anything but boring."

He followed her to her jeep, settled in, and asked, “Where’s Riggs?”

“Ah...with Jessica.”

“So, where we headed?”

“Toy Store on fourth street.”

“Who’s the lucky kid getting a Christmas toy?”

“Not kid, kids. My friends...” her amused look aimed at him, “...have five kids and one on the way. I like to spoil them.”

“The friends you meet at Papa’s Pizza?”

Interesting, he remembered her telling him where she met her friends.

Nodding, she said, “We’re the four buds. Amy and I went to college together, moved here after graduation and met Kim and Candace. We’ve been a foursome for many years now. They’re more than friends, they’re like sisters.”

“Nice. A bouquet of four buds. I’m sure they’ve bloomed beautifully, like you.”

Jessie felt her face heat from the complement.

“Must be nice to have friends who feel like family.”

She raised a curious expression at him. “Don’t you?”

“I have a few friends I do things with, but out of all my friends, I’d say, Rick’s my devoted friend. He’d back me up through thick and thin. He’s always there for me. My mother said if a person has one loyal friend throughout his life, then he’s been blessed.”

“Smart mother. I guess I can say, I’ve been blessed multiple times.” Jessie’s soft voice drew his gaze.

Once inside the store, Jessie strolled, pushing a basket along the aisles, searching the toys, all the while aware of Trace patiently walking alongside her with his hands shoved in his jacket pockets.

Suddenly, spying the item she wanted, she mumbled, “Ah-hu.” She reached up and pulled a box off the shelf to drop in the basket.

“What is it?” he asked.

“I found the first toy on my list. She grabbed another one and put it in the basket. He reached down and flipped over the box. “LeapFrog Talking Words. Perfect for two-year-old girls.” His gaze lifted to hers. “Who has two-year-old girls?” he asked glancing at the assorted toys on the selves.

“Both Amy and Jenna.” Jessie looked down at her list.

“Okay, I thought the four buds, besides, you, were Amy, Kim, and Candace. You didn’t mentioned Jenna?”

Jessie stared at her list. Oops. “Ah, my older sister. She lives in Atlanta. She and her husband have two girls.”

“Oh, any more sisters or bothers I should know about?” She heard the curiosity in his voice.

“Nope,” she mumbled, tossing him a slight smile. Hurrying to change the subject, she said, “Let’s see, I need a present for a four-year-old boy...ah...there it is.” She stopped the basket and pulled a large box off the shelf, with big letters, titled, Magnetic Building Blocks.”

“Hey, what a fun gift, especially for a boy.” He took the box from her and followed along while reading about the types of things a kid could build with the magnetic blocks.

Jessie slowly walked a couple of aisles until she found the next thing on her list. “Now, for Amy’s six-year-old and Jenna’s five-year-old.” She looked at Trace, putting the box he’d been reading in the basket.

Slowly strolling along, she searched the shelves. “Oh, my gosh, I changed my mind.”

“What?”

“Look, Fairy Princesses Castle Tents. Aren’t they cute?” she showed the picture on the box cover to Trace.

“Yup. Pink. It lights up?”

“I know. What I wouldn’t have given for a present like this as a kid.” Jessie reached into the basket and grabbed the LeapFrog boxes, and said, “Will you please return these. I’m getting the tents for the girls. I can’t resist.”

He looked at her with a glint in his eyes, and chuckled. “Will do.” Off he went doing as told.

Trace returned, slowly meandering down the aisle, looking at the toys. Her wide grin aimed at him when he caught her gaze. When he strolled up next to her, she eagerly raised her shoulders. “I’m so glad I found the tents. The girls are going to love them.”

With a sparkle in his gaze, and in a curious tone, he asked, “Were you a dolly girl?”

“Yup,” she bobbed her head. “I loved playing with baby dolls. When I got a little older, I liked Barbie dolls.”

He shoved his hand into his pocket and with a teasing smile on his lips, he asked, “What do you like to play with now?”

Ignoring the implication of his question, she giggled, “If what you’re asking is what my hobby is – I golf and hike.”

His head drew back. “You golf?”

“Un-huh, I love being outdoors. Both hiking and golfing gets me outdoors to enjoy the good weather.”

“Where do you go golfing?”

“I belong to the Women’s Association at Glenmoore Gates. I have fun playing with the ladies and they’re a forgiven bunch when someone duffs the ball.”

“Are you good?”

“Hmm, I’d say, average, but I have fun trying.”

“Would you consider golfing with me?”

“Depends.”

“On what?”

“Your patience.”

He chuckled.

“Do you get impatient golfing with someone not up to your standards?”

He laughed, shaking his head. “I’m not like my brother. He’s good. So much so, he won’t golf with me because I’m not up to *his* standards. You’d be safe with me.”

Jessie found her last present as she darted Trace a quick glance. “It wouldn’t bother you if it took me eight strokes to get the ball in the hole?”

“Nah, I’m easy, patient,” he winked at her, “And I just want to enjoy outdoors playing golf with the person I like. I like you, Jessie.”

She felt her face warm as she busied herself trying to pull a box off the top shelf. He reached up and grabbed it for her.

“Now this is a present I like,” he said, reading the label. “What I would have given for one of these when I believed in Santa.”

She laughed. “This didn’t exist when you were a kid.”

“Hmm,” he mumbled reading the box. “Smart Robot contains robotic senses for interactions...whoa...it can high-five you. Great present. Lucky the kid who gets this.”

Jessie gave him a sidelong glance. “You actually believed in Santa?”

“I did, like most kids. For a little while, anyway.”

Jessie laughed, “I know. Didn’t we all.”

When he placed the box inside the basket, she said, “I need two more.” She nodded toward the upper shelf. “That one’s for Amy’s six-year-old boy, and I need two for Kim’s twin boys. They’re five.”

He handed her two more. “Here you go.”

“Now, I need one more.”

Handing down one more, she said, “Better get a pink one. It’s for Jenna’s five-year-old girl.”

“Right.” He grinned replacing the blue for the pink. “Now what?”

“Let’s see,” she read over her list. “Amy’s three, check. Kim’s two, check. Jenna’s two, check.” Looking up, Jessie met his gaze. His gray eyes twinkled. Tilting her head, she asked, “Is all this shopping giving you the Christmas spirit?”

“Maybe. It’s fun watching you get so much enjoyment out of buying for others. Now what?”

“Now, I need to find wrapping paper – it’s probably toward the front of the store. Afterward, I’m ready to check out.”

“Good. I’m starved. Can we get something to eat? Or drink. All this shopping triggered my thirst and appetite.”

“Not yet. Candace’s baby is next on list. The baby store is next door.”

“But I didn’t think she had her baby yet.”

“She hasn’t – doesn’t matter. It’s Christmas. Baby gets a present too.”

“I thought you and your friend, Kent, bought presents for the baby yesterday.”

Hearing the curiosity in his voice, she shrugged, “Nah, we got sidetracked, wound up back at the coffeeshop talking. Let’s check out.” She hurried to the counter to avoid him asking questions about Kent. For some reason she didn’t want him to know they were just friends.

Trace helped put all the packages in her jeep before making their way to the baby store. Searching the baby clothes, Jessie said, “Everything has to be neutral,” she gave Trace a grinning shake of her head. “You know basically yellow, white or green. We don’t know if she’s gonna have a boy or a girl.”

“Interesting,” he remarked. “I thought nowadays expectant mothers wanted to know.”

“Nope, not Candace. She and her husband decided to not know this time around.” Jessie lifted a troubled gaze to Trace. “She’s lost two babies, a boy and later a girl. They opted not to

know until the birth this time. But Candace is doing great with the pregnancy and according to the doctor, all's right with the baby.”

“I’m sorry. I truly hope she has a healthy baby, and it all goes well.” Trace’s sincere expression touched her.

After Jessie bought the baby items, he held the door open, and said, “Now, can we go somewhere and have a drink – I’m parched? All this shopping has made me thirsty.”

“I thought you were hungry?”

“Hmm, I am, and I’m thirsty too.”

Stepping up to her jeep, he held the door open for her. “What about dinner? Will you have dinner with me?”

Jessie glanced at her watch. “Oh my, I can't, not tonight. I'm meeting the girls for pizza to plan a family Christmas dinner, and matter of fact, if I don't get going, I'm gonna be late. I didn't realize how long we've been shopping.”

“Okay, why don't you drive on over to Papa’s and I’ll walk from there to my car.”

“Nooo. I don’t mind dropping you off at your car. That’s the least I can do since you’ve helped me Christmas shop all afternoon. And you’ve been such a pleasant shopping partner.” Her teasing grin flashed his way.

“Well, if you have enough time.”

When she drove up next to his parked car in front of her apartment building, he opened the door, and paused. “Have dinner with me tomorrow night.”

Jessie raked her brain for an excuse.

“I want to see you again, Jessie. What if I come over and make dinner for us?”

“You cook?”

“I do. I like cooking and I’m rather good at it if I so myself. Is it a date?”

She nodded.

“Great. See you about seven o’clock.”

She waved at him when he backed out, screaming inside her brain. *Noooooo, you’re crazy, girl. A date? You’re letting him cook for you? Gosh, I should have said NO.*

Once he drove off, she quickly, punched the ignition button, jumped out, locked the door, and rushed to her apartment. Poor Riggs had been left alone for four hours and probably needed to pee.

The second he heard the door lock, he barked.

“Yeah, I know, you need to go out.” Quickly hooking his leash, she hurried to walk him around the block. “Oh my gosh, Riggs, do you have to pee on every bush?” After a good fifteen minutes of peeing, she said, “Come on, I have to meet the girls. I promise, we’ll take a loooong walk when I get back.”

Chapter 7

Entering the restaurant Jessie dropped into a chair at their table when Amy demanded, “Where’ve you been girl?”

Her guilty look shifted from Amy to Candace, and then Kim. She gritted her teeth. “Shopping.”

Candace squirmed in her seat, squinting in her direction. “Who with? Kent? Jessie, you wouldn’t be late unless you were with someone.”

“What,” Jessie’s innocent tone didn’t play true to Candace.

Rubbing her bulging tummy, Candace stated, “I know you’re dying to tell us something. You’ve got that look on your face. Who did you go shopping with?”

Jessie crinkled up her eyes. “Trace and I went Christmas shopping today.”

“Whaaaa?” Amy’s mouth dropped. “Mr. Gorgeous went Christmas shopping with you?”

Kim covered her mouth to stifle her laugh. Dropping her hand, she said, “You. Are. In. Trouble.”

Staring back at the startled expressions, Jessie mumbled, “I’m in trouble.”

“I knew it,” Candace declared.

Amy shoved her elbow on the table and rested her chin in the palm of her hand. “You’re telling us, you took Mr. Gorgeous Christmas shopping. What did you shop for? What store?”

“Amy,” Kim reprimanded, “Get to the point. Why did Trace go shopping with you?”

Jessie shrugged. “Toys. We went to the store in the mall. I bought all your kids Christmas presents, including Jenna’s.” Jessie’s wide smile reflected a gleam in her eyes.

“Nice.” Kim muttered. Amy sneered at her.

Kim pouched out her lips. She turned a quizzical gaze at Jessie. “Why would you take him shopping?”

Jessie flipflop her shoulders. “He asked if he could come... I couldn’t think of any reason he couldn’t, other than boredom.”

Candace shot a sweet smile at Jessie. “You likkkkeee him, don’t you?”

Jessie leaned back and took a deep breath. After a quick release, she connected eyes with Candace. No denying it, she did. She nodded.

Kim leaned toward her. “When are you seeing him again?”

Again, all eyes stared at her. She scrunched up her nose at them.

“Come on, out with it.” Candace coaxed.

Jessie grabbed her coke glass and pressed the edge to her lips, and before taking a swallow, she said, “He’s cooking dinner for me tomorrow night.”

“Whaaat?” Amy sputtered. “Where? His place?”

“Nooooo – my place.”

In unison, all three said, “You’re in trouble.”

Amy slapped the table. “Time to get down to business. There’s no doubt about it. This episode will be continued. Now, let’s get to working on our menu for the Christmas party, which I’m having at my house.”

Jessie changed clothes three times before she finally settled on an outfit. Her intentions were to appear casual, but not too casual or overdressed, yet she wanted to look – what? *Desirable*. Oh, my gosh, quit kidding yourself. You want him to like what he sees. You shouldn’t, but you do.

Looking around to face the mirror, she stared at herself. With a slight tip of her head, she travelled her gaze down her attire. Wearing her favorite comfy, soft white pants with a soft ribbed knit white sweater, she hoped Trace would approve.

Tonight, she promised to tell him the truth. She is Jessica.

Strolling out of the bedroom, Jessie hurried to put on Christmas music, flipped on the Christmas tree lights and one other light to add a subtle ambiance to the place. Biting her bottom lip, she scanned the room. Too romantic? Did she want it to be? Maybe. If she looked desirable and her place romantic, maybe he’d forgive her for lying about a twin.

The doorbell rang *Here Comes Santa Claus*.

Whipping around, she almost glided to the door to meet Trace’s gorgeous, white-toothed grin, a bottle of wine in one hand and a brown bag filled with groceries in the other. He smelled outdoorsy, fresh, with a slight hint of musk.

“Hi gorgeous.” He stepped inside, glossing over her entire being.

She didn’t miss the approving spark in his eyes, flooding her with warmth.

He slowly drifted his gaze down her body, sending a tingly thrill up her spine. Unsettling.

“Wow,” he whispered, drawing his wanting eyes to hers. “You remind me of a delicious white marshmallow. I’d eat you up if I didn’t have an armful.”

Jessie giggled, feeling electrical charges in the air. She quickly darted a glance at his loaded arms and took the bottle of wine to place on the counter. “You must like marshmallows.”

“I do now.” He chuckled and strolled to the counter, set the bag down and faced her with an observing eye. “Change of plans.”

“Oh?”

He stepped into her space with a warning look in his eyes. She hurried to inquire before he could take her in his arms and kiss her. “You said, change of plans, are you cooking something different, or are we going out to eat?”

“Out. My friend, Rick and his wife, Rachael, have invited us over for dinner.”

“Oh.”

When I told them, I had plans with an extremely beautiful woman, they insisted I bring you.”

“Oh.”

He reached out and took her hand. “Jessie, I said I had to ask you first.”

She shifted her eyes from his captive gaze toward the groceries.

“I can still cook dinner. It’s up to you.”

She brought her attention back to the man standing so close she could feel his warm breath on her face. She took a step back, lowered her gaze to his white button downs shirt with the cuffs rolled up, showing off his muscular arms and his sexy fitted jeans hugging his narrow hips. “Ah...” she cleared her throat, “...you say he’s your best friend?”

Trace nodded, turning to the grocery bag. While he took out the items, he said, “Rick’s the one I mentioned to you yesterday. I’ve known them for years. Rick and I served in the Airforce together – friends ever since. Even Rick’s best man at their wedding. He’s more of a brother to me than my own brother. Sad to say, but true.”

Trace shot a side glance at her. “I should probably put these vegetables in the fridge.”

Jessie moved to the refrigerator, opened the door, and put away the items when he handed them to her.

Leaning against the counter, Trace cocked his head to the side and studied her. “Jessie, I mean it. We don’t have to go. I’d enjoy cooking for you.”

Jessie cocked her head, studied him for a second, and then sent him an agreeable grin. “No. I’m good with going. Let’s not disappoint them. I’d love to meet your friends.” She slapped the sides of her thighs, and said, “Should I change into something more presentable?”

His captivating eyes widened. “Not on your life. You look perfect.”

He glanced around the small apartment. “Where’s Riggs?”

“Oh, ah, out...with Jessica.” In truth, Amy volunteered to watch him for the evening since she had a dinner date. Oh my, another fib.

Chapter 8

Twenty minutes later, Jessie followed Trace through the door of his friend's home, without knocking.

"Hey, where's everyone?" he hollered, pulling Jessie along by the hand.

"In here," came a feminine voice.

Trace led her to the kitchen where suddenly he met the outstretched arms of an older darkhaired woman. She hugged him with a wide happy smile, then kissed him on the cheek.

"Merry Christmas, Trace."

"Mom," Trace said with love in his voice. "I didn't know you were in town."

Thomas slapped Trace on the shoulder. "Son, glad you made it. Got in this morning, ran into Rick at the store. We couldn't turn down an invitation to dinner."

"Dad, good to see you." Trace gave him a hug and shot out his hand to Rick stepping up behind his dad. Shaking Rick's hand, he glanced at his wife. "Hi Rachael. This is a surprise," he mumbled, reaching over to give her a hug.

Her pleasant laugh rang out. "Christmas is meant for surprises."

Thomas took a good look at Jessie. "Why don't you introduce us to your beautiful and slightly familiar looking woman standing behind you." Thomas Brightwell looked her in the eye with a questioning frown.

Trace glanced around at Jessie, releasing a throaty laugh. "Everyone, this is Jessie Tucker." He shot his dad a glance. "She looks familiar to you dad because she's Jessica Tucker's sister. Her twin."

Jessie darted Mr. Brightwell a glance before connecting eyes with Trace. Uh-oh. Not good. She forced a bright face when Mr. Brightwell stepped forward to shake her hand.

"It lovely to meet you, Jessie. This is Trace's mother, Andra."

Jessie accepted the woman's hand, released a nervous smile, and said, "Mrs. Brightwell--"

"Oh, please call me Andra." She took her by the elbow, and said, "Have you met Rick and Rachael."

Jessie only had a chance to shake her head in reply before Rachael took her hand, saying, "We've been waiting all week to meet you. Trace hasn't been able to stop talking about you."

Standing at Rachael's side, Rick winked at her when he said, "I must say, his description of you is nail on."

Her eyes widened. What did he mean?

With a worried expression, Jessie looked over at Trace. He grinned, stepped up, and put an arm around her shoulder. "Okay, okay, enough, you'll give Jessie the wrong impression of my family with all your rhetoric." Taking her hand, he led her out of the kitchen. Glancing back, he said, "We'll take a seat in the living room while you guys continue with your preparations or whatever."

"I hope you like eggnog."

Jessie took a seat, drawing her head around to find Andra walking in with a tray load with glasses filled with eggnog.

Accepting a glass with a smile, she said, "I do, thank you."

Trace took a glass from the tray, shifted his gaze to her. "Mom makes the best homemade eggnog around."

Rachael wandered in with Rick at her side, each carrying their glass of eggnog. Rachael took a seat near the fireplace while Rick sat on the chair arm. "I have a toast to make." He turned an adoring gaze to his wife and lifted his glass. "By this time next year, we'll have a new addition to our house. Rachael is expecting."

Andra flew off the sofa to give Rachael a hug. "I'm so happy for you both." She sniffed. "I guess I'll have to ask if I can be a surrogate grandmother," her inquisitive gaze shot to Trace.

A few hours later, Jessie waited for Trace to unlock her apartment door. Swinging it wide, he gave her a solemn look. "I appreciate you coming with me tonight. I hope it wasn't too overwhelming meeting my friends...family. Mom."

Jessie couldn't stop her teasing grin. "Don't worry about your mom. All mothers want their sons and daughters to give them grandkids."

"Yea, well, it's embarrassing. Sometimes they can be overbearing when it comes to watching out on my behalf."

Jessie giggled, "What do you mean?"

"Every woman I've dated, they've managed to guesstimate the outcome of my relationship. Most of the time they've been right."

“Wow,” Jessie frowned.

“Ah, shall I say, they have strong opinions as to the type of woman I should be dating.”

A sexy chuckle rolled from his mouth. “Before you say more. Both Rick and Rachael gave me a thumbs up before we left them. You also made a good impression on my mother.”

“Hmm, I’m not sure what to make of it, but they’re your family, and nothings more important than family. Would you like to come in?”

A provocative grin crossed his lips. “I brought wine, remember. Shall I open it?”

“Sure.”

The moment she entered, she strolled to a kitchen drawer, took out a corkscrew and handed it to Trace along with the wine bottle. Collecting two wine glasses, she set them on the counter and waited for him to pop the cork.

Trace filled their glasses and handed her one. Taking the wine glass, she led him to the sofa, but paused to flip on the Christmas music and a couple of lamps.

Taking a seat, Trace said, “Did you get your Christmas party all planned out with your friends?”

“Hmm, we did. We’re having the works. Prime rib dinner with all the trimmings and carrot cake, pies, fudge, and sugar cookies.”

“Which item are you cooking for the party?”

“I love to bake, so I’m making a carrot cake.”

He raised his wine glass to take a sip, then paused. “Is it a box mix?”

Shaking her head, she lifted her glass. “Yuck, no. I make my cake from scratch, plus it’s topped off with the most delicious icing made with cream cheese. Oh, I also put black walnuts in it, so if you don’t like nuts...to bad.”

“Sounds delicious. By the way, I love nuts – all kinds. You’ll have to save me a piece.”

“Sure.” Consciously, Jessie took a sip, realizing they had just admitted to seeing each other again.

Trace gave her an endearing look sending a quiver down her spine. He reached for her hand, took a sip of wine, and rested his head against the sofa back. Jessie felt his weight lean toward her, pressing his shoulder against hers. His sexy voice softened when he said, “This is relaxing. I’m even enjoying the Christmas music.”

Giving him a side glance, she used her quiet voice, and asked, “Don’t you care for Christmas music?”

“It’s okay on Christmas day, but afterward I can do without it.”

She didn’t say anything.

He raised his head, giving her a teasing look. “Un-oh, we’ve discovered something we don’t agreed on – Christmas music.”

“To each his own,” she muttered in a sincere tone.

He twisted to the side to study her fully in the face. “Are you one of those people who listens to Christmas music year-round?”

She shrugged. “Noooo, I usually start in August.”

His low chuckle reached her ear as he leaned back. For several minutes they sipped their wine and let the saxophone of *Kenny G* flow through the room. When it ended, Trace sat up, leaned forward, and placed his glass on the end table.

Jessie felt him shift his head to the side to gaze at her. Her heartbeat accelerated when his deep voice sent his feathery breath toward her ear. “I must say, I’ve enjoyed Kenny G in a way I never have before. I’m sure it’s the company.”

Not sure how to reply. She felt it too. A calm, quiet contentment had consumed the room, and her.

Still holding her hand, he suddenly stood. “I better go. It’s getting late. I’m flying out early in the morning for the rig.” Continuing to hold her hand, he strolled to the door before he faced her, trapping her gaze in his. “I’d like to see you again,” he said, pausing to wait for her reply.

She should say no and tell him the truth. “Trace...” The passionate light in his eyes tightened her chest. Before she could stop herself, her head tipped in a yes, putting a satisfied smile on his face.

Suddenly, he cupped her face in the palm of his hands and softly kissed her lips, and all too quickly released her.

“Good night, Jessie.”

Before she could respond, he opened the door, stepped through, and shut it.

Chapter 9

Two days later, Jessie sat on the floor wrapping presents while listening to Christmas music. Her thoughts centered on Trace and the gentle kiss he had given her the last time she'd seen him. She hadn't heard from him, but knew he'd flown out to the rig. Besides, there was the issue of the phone.

She cut a sheet of decorative red paper with snowmen dotting it, laid the pink robot box on top and glanced at Riggs. Releasing a quick short breath, she said, "The next time Trace shows up, I'll be honest – no twin – just me."

Riggs' ears perked. He cocked his head, staring her straight in the eyes.

"Don't look at me like that." Rubbing the back of her neck, she reached for the wrapping paper. "I will." She nodded, determined. "Why do I get myself in these situations? Stupid. It's like my brain gets all mushy and clogged. My thought process goes haywire when he's around." Looking back at Riggs, she frowned. "He's like you. Those big brown eyes of yours can get away with murder, same as his expressive slate eyes, looking at me beneath those dark lashes."

Ripping off a long strip of tape, she covered the box, set it aside, then reached for another package to wrap. "What if I tell him, I'm Jessica? What if he doesn't like Jessica?" Her brows tightened, darting a tension-filled expression at Riggs. "Dummy, how can he like one and not the other?"

Jessie sat back, leaned against the sofa. He'd never given her – Jessica – much of a glance the few times she attended the meetings. Actually, he'd observed her during the last board meeting more so than any time before. She could tell he was drawn more to her real person – not the serious, stoic no-nonsense Jessica, who she pretended to be when around the board members, Mr. Brightwell, and Trace.

But truthfully when with the crew workers, she didn't pretend. She had no problem being herself. She could chat, laugh, share, and eat with them in comfort. They honestly knew her as Jessie. She knew they would treat her the same way the second she walked onto the platform with short blonde hair and no glasses. Sure, they'd make all kinds of remarks in jest because they already knew her and showed her respect. But they'd only be shocked at her changing her

appearance, not her person. On the other hand, Trace believed there were two Tucker twins. He'd be shocked. Mad? Disappointed? Unforgiving?

Her phone rang out interrupting her thoughts. Glancing at the screen, she gritted her teeth. *Trace*. Sucking in a deep breath, she grimaced. He'll surely ask for Jessie. What to say.

Releasing a quick breath, she answered. "Hello Mr. Brightwell. What can I do for you?"

"Hi Jessica, please call me Trace. Would you mind if I speak to Jessie?"

"Ah...Jessie? She isn't here. Out...ah...out shopping."

"Would you mind, I mean, could you please give me her phone number?"

"Her...ah...maybe, hum, I should ask her first. Why don't I have her call you?" Geez, she sounded fake. An idea popped into her head.

"Oh, here she is – walking in. Hold on," she said, covering her hand over her phone.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid."

Riggs cocked his head to the side, looking at her as if agreement.

Squeezing her eyes, she took a deep breath, cleared her throat, and removed her hand. "Hi Trace. What's up?"

Looking at the ceiling, Jessie heard his sexy voice invite her out. She wanted to go. She shouldn't. She would go and make a point to tell him the truth. Right. "Okay, I'll see you in fifteen minutes."

"Good. Be sure to wear tennis shoes and something cool."

Clicking off her phone, she stretched out her legs, and proceeded to pound the heels of her feet on the floor, screaming, "Stupid. Stupid. Stupid."

Riggs barked.

"I know, you agree." Jumping up, she hurried to change into shorts, t-shirt, tennis shoes and a lightweight jacket. By the time she strolled into the living room, her doorbell rang.

"Hey," she greeted, with eyes connecting his. Her legs weakened. He looked great in shorts, tennis shoes, and the green tee molded to his sculpted body like a second skin. Gee whiz, she needed to get over this infatuation. How?

"Ready."

Glancing down at her attire, she asked, "Is this, okay?"

"Perfect," he said, trailing his appreciative gaze down her legs making her feel like a giddy teenager.

She hurried, and asked, “Where are we going?”

Before he closed the door, he glanced back inside the apartment. “Is your sister here?”

With a quick dart at him, she shook her head. “She’s out now.” At least it wasn’t a lie – almost not – she was out the door. Glancing down at Riggs, she lifted her brow. “How long will we be gone? I’m watching Riggs.”

“Several hours, unless you need to be back sooner.”

Retrieving her iphone from her purse, she said, “Let me send a text.” Stepping inside, she strolled toward the kitchen counter. Quickly, texting Amy, she pleaded for her to come for Riggs. *An unexpected outing with Trace. Please, please watch Riggs, I’ll pick him up later this afternoon.* Jessie glanced at Trace waiting patiently by the door.

Within seconds Amy texted back. “Sure, but I want a detailed explanation about your DATE.”

She shoved her phone back in her purse, looked at Trace, and said, “We’re good. We can go now.”

“Great,” he said, turning toward the door.

“Wait.” She whirled, rushed back inside, gave Riggs a kiss on the nose, and said, “You be good.” She flipped the switch to turn off the tree lights and followed Trace out.

Locking her door, she sent him a shy grin feeling silly and guilty about her lie – again. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“Right. It’s a warm beautiful day. I thought a drive to Hilton Head Island would give us a chance to visit and maybe get to know each other better.”

“Ah...Trace, have we not seen each other almost every day this past week?”

He shrugged, stepped out of the elevator, and led her toward his car. “Yes, but we’ve always been around people. Don’t get me wrong. I enjoyed meeting your friends and learning about their kids when we went shopping. And I’m glad you got to meet my friends and my parents, but today...” the corner of his mouth twisted into a smile, “...I want you all to myself, do you mind?”

She nodded, feeling warm and special. “Isn’t Hilton Head Island thirty miles from here?”

“Twenty. Not far. I thought we’d take a bike ride around the loop at Sea Pine Forest Reserve, afterward, lunch at the Ocean Lounge. Have you been there?”

“Hmm, years ago, with my parents. I do remember a breathtaking view.”

The relaxing drive in Trace's presence proved to be enjoyable. Why? She recognized how content and at ease she felt when talking, or quietly sitting alongside of him. She stared out the window at the ocean beyond the terrain. *Now's the time to be truthful. Isn't it?*

"Jessie, can I ask you a question?"

"Sure, if you don't mind if I don't answer," her flirtatious grin aimed at him.

He smiled, staring down at her lips. "Fair enough." Reaching over, he took her hand. "I assume your sister knows were dating. Or does she?"

Jenna popped into her brain, but quickly realized he reference Jessica. She stared at his warm hand swallowing hers. Without looking at him, she answered. "She knows, why?" A curious frown formed, looking him in the eyes.

Tell him. Tell him. Her brain demanded – *tell him.* "Trace—"

"Jessie," he shrugged, "When I called her earlier today to talk to you, she seemed to have an attitude when I asked for you."

Jessie released a short laugh, scrambling her brain for a comeback. "Jessica's good – she's like me, ah, easy going."

A slight chuckle reached her ear. "Are we talking about the same Jessica? Your twin. Easy going isn't how I'd label her."

Shifting in her seat to study him, her brows tightened. Pulling her hand from his, she queried, "How would you *label* her?"

When he darted her a glance, Jessie could tell by his expression he wondered if he had overstepped a line. She wasn't going to let him drop the subject. Curiosity got the best of her. Her bold, transparent look said he better explain.

"Don't get me wrong. I think Jessica's a smart woman. She knows her job inside and out. An intelligent geologist. The roustabouts and supervisors trust her judgement and reports. She's all professional and to the point when it comes to her job." He paused to take a breath.

"But..." she continued to scrutinize him.

He cleared his throat. "She's different from you."

"How so?"

He took a deep breath and puffed out his cheek to slowly release the air. With a guarded glance her way, he said, "She's uptight, not like you. You *are* easy-going, full of life – fun."

Jessie straightened in her seat. “Okay, you have no idea who Jessica Tucker is or anything about her life.”

After a moment of silence, Jessie added, “Did you know she’d been engaged to get married before she accepted the job on your rig?”

“No, I didn’t. What happened?”

Jessie slowly turned her head to stare out the window, wishing she had kept her mouth shut. Without turning back, she mumbled, “He died three days before the wedding.”

“Oh, Jessie,” Trace took her hand in his again. “I’m sorry. How devastating.”

With a slight nod, she continued to stare out the window without seeing the view, only remembering.

“They...they argued. She wanted to take your job offer, but he demanded...ah...well, he told her not to accept the position.” Jessie filled her lungs and held her breath to control her emotions. Exhaling, she glanced at Trace.

Straightening her shoulders, she said, “Anyway, to make a long story short, he left in the middle of a heated argument and later a drunken driver hit his car killing him on impact.”

“So, your sister blames herself.”

“I...she...if she had been willing to rethink the job, maybe...maybe he wouldn’t have left in a rage.” Jessie locked eyes with Trace, then hurried to add, “– at least, that’s what she thinks.”

Without saying a word, he pulled into a parking lot, turned off the engine, and rested his gaze on her. His head cocked to the side. With a kind smile, he squeezed her hand, and said, “Let’s think of nothing but happy thoughts for the rest of the day. Deal?”

“Deal.”

Chapter 10

Once Trace rented the bicycles, Jessie rode behind him as he led the way. Surprisingly, the well-groomed, flat winding trail under its large shady overhanging trees made it a leisurely ride. She noticed markers along the trail about the fauna and flora in the area. Beautifully colored flowers with large blossoms of bright pinks, yellows, reds, and blues. Slowly peddling along, she couldn't stop taking in the scenery.

Trace slowed his bike and waited for her to come alongside of him. He pointed. "A black racer."

Her gaze followed the long black snake slither across their path. "Is it poisonous?"

"Nah."

Once it gracefully slithered into the shrubbery and disappeared, they continued.

Jessie couldn't remember the last time she'd enjoyed an outing so much. She loved the surroundings and wildlife. Coming to a stop, she rested her feet on the path to take in a small lake with great herons and a turtle with three little ones on the edge of the water. She stared at the serene scene for a long moment before glancing ahead. Trace had disappeared around a corner.

Speeding to catch up, she came to a halt next to him.

"Where'd you go?" he asked.

Her wide grin caught his sparkling gaze. Small beads of sweat covered his forehead. She had noticed the humidity too, but it didn't bother her like some people. "I stopped to watch herons in a small lake beyond the trees, oh, and a mommy turtle with her babies. This place is wonderful, full of wildlife."

"Look over there," he pointed.

Jessie caught her breath. A huge alligator rested on the edge of the swamp area. "If I'm not mistaken, he's watching us. Look at his eyes. We should get moving."

"Yup, he reminds me, I'm getting hungry." Following the loop for another ten minutes brought them back to their starting point. Stepping off her bike, she followed Trace to the rental return area.

"Come on," he took her hand. "We'll walk, it isn't far to the restaurant."

Shifting her gaze out over the swampy lake, Jessie commented, “It’s peaceful here and so quiet. Did you see the coyote near the end of the trail?”

“I did. I wouldn’t think he’d have to hunt too far for his meals.”

“I’d say not. Not with all the critters running around. I can’t imagine how much more one can see if they go deeper into the reserve.”

“Next time we’ll take the long way around. Here we go.” Trace held the door open for Jessie to enter. After they were seated, Jessie checked over the menu. “Since you’ve been here before, what do you recommend?”

“My favorite is the salmon with veggies.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Glancing up, she noticed the waitress give Trace a flirtatious eyelash flutter, before asking what he would like. After ordering for them both, he gave her one of his charming smiles, then ordered a bottle of wine.

Trace reached over and covered her hand resting next to her plate. “Have you enjoyed the day so far?”

Sliding her hand free, she picked up her napkin to spread on her lap. “It’s been fun. I’m thinking I should bring my friends and their kids. They’d love it. Maybe after the holidays, in the spring when the animals and birds have babies.”

“Speaking of holidays. Since you’re a Christmas spirited person, what are your plans for Christmas?”

Her eyes widened looking directly at him. *Working on the rig*. She pressed her lips thin. “Well, I think you know we’re having a big Christmas family party. My parents will be driving up from Atlanta.”

“Right. I helped you buy Christmas presents for all those kids, remember?”

“Oh yeah.”

“What I mean is, what are you doing on Christmas Day? I know you’re having your party early because Jessica works through the holidays. Right?”

“Un-huh.” She nodded, once again scrambling for what she’d be doing Christmas Day. If he wanted to see her – it couldn’t happen. Afterall, *she’d* be on the rig.

“I’m going to meet my parents in Augusta to have Christmas with my sister, Jenna and her family. What about you?”

“I’ll be in Atlanta with my parents and brother. Mom’s like you. She loves Christmas.”

Jessie imagined his parents owned a big house with a huge Christmas tree, all decorated and lit up for the holiday. “Do your parents have a big party during the holidays?”

“They do, but it’s usually after Christmas, but before the New Years. They have lots of friends they’ve known since the beginning of my dad’s career in oil.”

She cocked her head to the side. “Since your mother enjoys Christmas, why don’t you? I mean, you don’t care for the holiday much do you?”

His brow tightened. “I’m not sure.” He released a little chuckle. “I think I’ve listened to more Christmas music in the past week since I’ve met you, than I have my entire life.”

“Have I corrupted you?”

“Maybe. Surprisingly, I have enjoyed your music, or is it you?”

Jessie felt her face heat, looking down, she stared at the delicious meal placed in front of her.

Trace cleared his throat, and said, “My brother and I are expected to have Christmas Day dinner with my parents, but it always seemed like another dinner – nothing special. After dinner we retire to the living room where we open our presents, one from my parents and their present from my brother and me. Anyway, once presents are opened, my brother takes off with friends, Mom goes to her office to plan the big party, and Dad grabs a book to read.”

“And you?”

“I used to join Rick at his parents’ house before he married Rachael.”

“Now?”

He shrugged. “Last year I worked on the rig to give a few roughnecks extra time off to be with their families.”

“That’s nice of you.” Taking a sip of wine, she couldn’t help but wonder if he’d be working on the rig this year.

He leaned forward, placed his wine glass down, and went to say something, but the waitress stepped up. “Are you finished sir? I’ll take you plate.” He leaned back and nodded.

“Anything else?” she asked.

Trace looked at Jessie. “Coffee?”

“Please,” Jessie said, as she waited for the woman to take her plate.

Nervously folding her napkin, she took in a deep breath and searched for courage. Finally, she said, “Trace, there’s something I need to tell you—”

“Your coffee, sir,” the cute waitress batted her eyelashes, and asked, “Would you like cream and sugar?”

Accepting the coffee, Trace gave her a bright smile. “No thank you.” Once the woman served Jessie her coffee, she strolled off, aiming dreamy eyes his way.

Appearing completely unaware of the waitress’s interest, he continued, “I’m sorry. Where were we? Oh, I was thinking, it appears our Christmas holidays are all planned out for us. What about after Christmas, can I see you then?”

Before Jessie could answer, he said, “Better yet, will you go to Atlanta with me to attend my parents party on the twenty-ninth.”

“No, no, I don’t think so.”

“Why, my parents are great people. They loved meeting you at Rick’s.”

Yup, she already knew they were as charming as their son, but to go to their house as Jessie, under pretense, it couldn’t happen again.

Taking a sip of coffee, she looked at Trace, and finally said, “Let me think about it.”

“Agreed,” he said, seemingly satisfied.

On the drive home, his invitation kept seeping into her brain. What excuse could she make to get out of going? Of course, she couldn’t go. She’d be working. End it now, before it gets out of hand. Break it off or tell him the truth before you go back to work.

By the time he drove to her apartment building, she still had not found the courage to speak out about herself. When she unlocked her door, and before she could step inside, he turned her toward him, circled his arms around her, touching his lips to hers.

This time the kiss overpowered her, enticing, demanding her response. She did. Unable to stop herself, she melted against him answering his call of passion.

With a satisfied glint in his eyes, he kissed her on the cheek and strolled down the hallway to the elevator. When he went to step on the elevator, he glanced back at her and winked, then disappeared.

Rushing inside, Jessie slammed the door, dropped back against it as if to keep him out. Whoa, she was in trouble.

A knock vibrated against the door. She jumped.

Cautiously, peeking through the peephole, she gritted her teeth. Trace. Slowly, opening the door, she slid her head to the side, and asked in a calmer voice than she felt, "Forget something?"

His soft sexy voice said, "This." He stepped to her, kissed her lips with a gentle wanting demand. Before she responded, he pulled away, and said, "I forgot to ask you for your phone number."

"My...my phone number?"

He nodded.

She crinkled up her nose, and said, "I lost my phone several days ago. You'll have to call my sister's number. She's usually here."

"Or I'll show up on your doorstep." He grinned, then shut the door.

Chapter 11

Jessie spied her friends sitting at a round table the second she strolled through the door of their favorite pizza joint. Making her way over, she greeted them with a worried expression. “Why the emergency meeting?”

Kim shrugged. “Not me...I’m all ready for the party, plus you all have your food assignments.”

Heads turned in Amy’s direction. Jessie said, “I guess it’s your meeting – what’s up?” Jessie glanced toward the door. “Where’s Candace?”

“I didn’t call her.” Amy paused to take a drink of pop. “She hasn’t felt well.”

“Is she alright? Baby?” Jessie’s concern furrowed her brow. “She still has another three weeks, doesn’t she? Did she talk to the doctor?”

“She did. Her doctor checked her over and said her baby is doing good. Candace on the other hand has a slight increase in blood pressure. He doesn’t think it’s anything serious but is keeping an eye on her. She’s excited and thinks she is overdoing it with all the preparations and wanting everything ready for when they bring the baby home.”

Jessie released a sigh of relief. “If all is well, why the meeting?”

“I thought we should have a special present for her baby at the party.”

“What are you thinking?” Kim asked.

Amy scooted a slice of pizza off the plater, held it up and took a quick bite. Jessie did the same. Chewing, she eyed Amy when she placed the pizza on her plate.

“I have a small Christmas tree. I think we should decorate it with baby items. You know, things like toy rattlers, pacifiers, little musical toys, stuffed animals...you know – things.” She looked at each waiting for an answer.

Jessie turned her gaze on Kim, shrugged, remembering Candace’s request. “Amy, how do you think she’ll feel about us showering her baby with presents? After all, she adamantly said not to give her a baby shower before she delivered the baby.”

“I understand. It’s scary. I mean we gave her a big shower and afterward she lost the baby – twice.” The three sat for a minute in silence.

Amy added her thoughts, “It’s not like we’re giving her a shower. It’s Christmas. Christmas presents. Right?”

Suddenly, Kim threw up her hands. “I for one, think it’s a great idea. She’s close to term and the baby is healthy. It’s Christmas. Her baby needs everything. If we’re celebrating Christmas with our kids, she should too.”

Jessie shared a smile with Kim. “I’m in. Let’s be positive. We’ll show her we know her baby will enter this world screaming at her, keeping her awake in the middle of the night for the next eighteen years.”

Laughing, the three threw up their hands to high-five each other.

Kim’s gaze trailed beyond Jessie’s shoulder. Her eyes widened.

Curious, Jessie glanced back to set eyes on Trace strolling up to the table. His dazzling smile shot right to her. She couldn’t help but return it.

Stepping to her side, he placed his hand on her shoulder and addressed her friends. “Hi ladies.”

All eyes stared at him, then shifted to her.

Looking up she swallowed the drink in her mouth, and sputtered, “What are you doing here...I mean...ah, hi.”

He aimed a charming smile on Kim and Amy, reaching out his hand. “Hi, I’m Trace Brightwell, and you two must be Jessie’s friends she’s always talking about.”

“Ah, yeah, I’m Kim,” she accepted his hand. “This is Amy.”

He glanced at the three. “Kim. Amy. Nice to meet you. There’s one more, Candace. Did she have her baby?”

Kim jumped in with an answer. “No, not yet. She isn’t feeling well.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” His sincere tone had their heads nodding.

Trace gave her a glance before fixing his gaze on the others. “I don’t mean to interrupt – well, not true. I need to steal Jessie away. She won’t be long.”

Both Kim and Amy nodded.

His sexy smile flashed at them. “Thanks ladies.”

Reaching for Jessie’s hand, Trace’s smoldering eyes consumed her causing her to stand and follow him like a puppy dog. Helpless, she hurried to glimpse back at the girls, meeting Kim’s big smile and her thumb raised in approval.

Trace led her to the other side of the room to a booth. Jessie sat across from him freeing her hand from his. “Trace why are you here?” she asked, already knowing the answer.

“You don’t have a phone and Jessica isn’t answering hers...” he looked around. “Where is she?”

Jessie shrugged.

“Never mind.” He brought his seductive compelling eyes back to her, making her feel special and the only person in the restaurant. “Will you go to Atlanta with me on the twenty-ninth. I’d love for you to come to my parents Christmas party.” He covered her hand resting on the table. “Please say yes.”

She stared at his handsome face, eyes drowning hers with a want she felt too. Oh my, pulling away, she moved her hands beneath the table to rest in her lap. Lasing her fingers together, she squeezed. If she confessed right now, he’d walk out on her. She wouldn’t blame him. She had been lying to him from day one.

Jessie sucked in a breath, straightened her shoulders, and shook her head. “Trace, I can’t.” Not daring to look at him, she mumbled, “I can’t. I don’t think we should see each other anymore. I have to stop this pretense.”

“What?”

His startled tone brought her head up.

“Why? What pretense? What are you saying?”

Jessie slid to the edge of the bench to stand.

He stopped her, grabbing her arm. “What have I done? Is it the invitation to go to Atlanta with me?”

She shook her head and stood.

Scrambling to his feet, he faced her. “Am I moving too fast? Jessie, I promise I’ll slow down and...and, you don’t have to come to Atlanta.”

“No, Trace, it isn’t the party...well, yes, it is, but it’s more complicated.”

“What is it? Wait – it’s Jessica – she doesn’t approve, does she?”

Jessie stepped back, “Trace, it’s too complicated – please...goodbye.” Before she changed her mind, she whipped around and hurried to her friends’ table and plopped into her seat with her back to him.

Kim and Amy stared at the tears in her eyes. Kim whispered, “What happened?”

Jessie shoved her elbows on the table and stabbed away a tear. “Is he gone?”

Amy looked over her shoulder. “He’s standing there staring at you.”

After another minute, she quietly muttered, “He’s gone.”

Kim reached over and touch her hand. “What happened?”

“I told him we couldn’t see each other anymore.” She covered her mouth to stop her lips from quivering, blinking back her tears.

Amy’s eyes widened. “But you really like him. Why would you say such a thing?”

With the palm of her hands, Jessie wiped her face. “He wanted me to accompany him to Atlanta to his parents big holiday party.”

“Oh my, Jessie, from the look on his face, he wasn’t only stunned, but hurt from your rejection. That man’s falling in love with you – if he hasn’t already.”

She darted a frown Amy’s way. “If he is, he’s in love with Jessie, not Jessica.”

“Well, maybe it’s time you confronted him and end this entire ruse.”

“What are you going to do?” Kim’s sympathetic tone nearly brought Jessie to tears again.

After a quick swallow of coke, Jessie straightened, squared her shoulders, and said, “I’ve been thinking about applying for an opening at the Petroleum Science Laboratory. I qualify. It’s probably time to get off the rig.”

Kim gave Amy a serious scowl before darting it to Jessie. “Aren’t you running away, Jessie. Wouldn’t it be better to face him with the truth?”

“She’s right, Jess. Maybe you’ve shoved Trace aside because of David. Honey, you must move on. Stop feeling guilty for something you had no control over.”

Jessie rubbed her forehead. “I thought I had. I guess I’m afraid to commit. How do I tell the truth now, after so long and so many lies?”

Kim, the ever practical one, said, “Jessie, it’s not like you to not correct a wrong. Trace deserves better. He’s falling in love with you. I know you have feelings for him, I see it when you look at him.”

Amy covered her hand. “Sweety, don’t let a good thing slip away. Admit your lies and if it’s meant to be, it will happen.”

Jessie stood, looked at her friends with a sad expression. “You’re probably right about everything, but it’s too late now. I need to go. I’m sure Riggs is dancing at the door.”

Chapter 12

Two days later Jessie dragged herself out of bed, exhausted. Ever since she'd sent Trace away – ending their brief relationship, she couldn't stop thinking about him. How could one fall for a guy so fast? Easy, if he's Trace Brightwell.

Riggs whined.

“Okay,” Jessie yawned, shuffled her feet to the kitchen and hurried to put on a pot of coffee. While it brewed, she threw on a sweatshirt and rushed out the door with Riggs leading the way.

Once she returned, she switched on the tree lights, flipped on Christmas music, and pulled a cookbook off the shelf. Smelling the rich coffee aroma, she poured a cup and with paper and pencil in hand, plopped down at the bar to work on a list of ingredients for baking cookies and her carrot cake. Her day would be spent baking lots of cookies for the family party and boxing them for the crew members when she returned to the rig.

Her doorbell rang out, *Here Come Santa Claus*. This time, Jessie didn't have the heart to sing along. Her feelings for Trace went deeper than she had expected and rejecting him hurt.

Opening the door wide, happiness replaced her sense of overwhelmed emotions. “Mom. Dad. I'm glad to see you. Come on in.” Desperate need of affection, Jessie hugged them both longer than usual.

Riggs barked at the newcomers, reminding Jessie to introduce him.

“Hey, is this the dog you rescued?” Her dad squatted, holding out his hand.

“Yes.” Jessie dropped next to him. “Riggs, come here. Meet my mom and dad.”

Slowly, Riggs moved forward, sniffed at her dad's hand, looked at Jessie, then back at the man waiting patiently. Jessie stroked his head. “It's okay.”

“Hey Riggs,” he coaxed. “Want to be buddies?”

Riggs wagged his tail and let the man pet his head.

Jessie's mother strolled into the room. “Hi Riggs. You'll have to get used to your grandparents. We like dogs.” Riggs looked up at her and wiggled his entire backend and strolled over to sniff her hand.

“Do I smell coffee?” Her dad asked, standing.

“Yup. Help yourself.”

He walked to the cabinet and took out two cups. Poured one for Jessie's mother and one for himself. Leaning against the counter, he saluted his cup toward her, and asked, "What's on the agenda for today?"

"Cookies, want to help decorate them?"

Her mother grinned, "Of course we do."

Her dad shoved himself away from the counter and strolled over to the television. "Only if I can watch football at the same time," he said, picking up the remote.

"Walter." Jessie heard her mother's reprimand.

"Hey, Dad, the television is in full view of my little kitchen. You and Riggs watch television while Mom and I run to the store.

Dropping onto the sofa, he patted the seat next to him. "Come on boy, I think we can manger to relax while the ladies take off."

Riggs jumped up next to him and settled down with his eyes on the television as if agreeing.

After returning from the grocery store, several hours were spent baking and decorating dozens of sugar cookies with her parents, mostly her mother.

Later her dad and Riggs sat on the sofa, watching a football game on the television, while Jessie iced her carrot cake. Her mother retrieved the last batch of cookies from the oven, turned to scoop them onto the wax paper, asking, "Sweetheart, did Jenna call to let you know they were driving in today?"

Jessie's eyes widened. "No, oh my." She scurried her gaze around her apartment. "How will we all sleep?" Staring at the sofa, she chewed her bottom lip. "Hmm. I suppose you and Dad can sleep in my bed. Jenna and her family can sleep on the floor – there's the sofa. I..."

"Jessie," her mother laughed. "Your sister reserved a room at the riverfront hotel. but when Amy called her, she insisted they stay at her house."

"Whew. I nearly panicked. Amy's a sweetheart. I wasn't sure if she had invited them. You and Dad can have my bed, like last time you came, and I'll sleep on the sofa." She darted a glance at her sofa. "The old sofa's comfortable. Maybe I should look for a larger apartment next time I move. What do you think, Mom?"

The doorbell rang. "Must be Jenna." Expecting her sister, Jessie's smile froze the second she came face to face with Trace.

“Hi,” his somewhat reserved tone registered with her.

“Trace, what—”

Riggs jumped from the sofa and met Trace at the door with a grin on his face and a wagging tail.

Trace reached down and gave him a pat. “Hey boy.”

“Jessie?” Her curious mother stepped up.

Jessie noted the doubt in his expression. “Your parents are here. I—”

“Jessie, aren’t you going to introduce your friend.”

Without giving her mother a look, she said, “Mom, this is Trace, a friend.”

“Well, come on in. We’ve been busy baking cookies.”

Nothing more to say, other than stepping aside to let Trace stroll through, her brain scrambled to control the conversation.

Without any hesitation, Trace followed her mother to the bar where the decorated cookies covered a large amount of space.

Jessie’s dad stood and strolled over to stand by his wife.

“Ah, Trace, this is my dad.”

Trace held out his hand. “Mr. Tucker.”

“Please, all of Jessie’s friends call me Walter.”

Accepting the coffee cup from Jessie’s mother, Trace said, “Walter.”

“How about a cookie, Trace?”

Alarms went off in Jessie’s head when her mother dropped a cookie in his hand. Her mother ignored Jessie’s glare, and said, “My daughter makes the best sugar cookies in town. Tell me Trace, how did you two meet?”

He sank his teeth into the iced cookie. “Hmm, delicious. I’m Jessica’s boss, Mrs. Tucker.”

“Oh, please, it’s Beth.”

Jessie didn’t miss her mother’s questioning look. When Trace swung his head around, scanning the apartment, she knew his next question would be *where’s Jessica*.

Rushing to cut him off, she hurried to say, “Ah...Trace, let’s go for a walk. Riggs needs walking.” Turning, she grabbed the leash, darted a panicked look at Riggs, and hollered, “Come on Riggs, let’s go walk.”

Hearing the word 'walk' Riggs hurried to her side for her to attach the leash. She quickly straightened, grabbed Trace's arm, and pulled him off the stool to lead him to the door, barely giving him time to shove the remaining cookie in his mouth and set his cup down.

"Mom, Dad, we'll be back shortly. Dad will you help mom finish decorating the cookies?"

With hasty steps she flew out of the apartment, slammed the door, hurried to the elevator. He never said a word on the ride down.

Jessie exited the building and rounded the corner, heading for Forsyth Park. Relieved to be separated from her parents, she slowed her steps and took in a deep breath. The walking path filled her senses with the fragrant flowers while strolling to the middle of the garden toward the large fountain.

Trace stopped at the fountain, dug out a coin and threw it in. Riggs jumped upon the side, looking down into the water. He whined.

Jessie frowned. "Riggs. No. You can't." Too late. The dog jumped in splashing water out onto Jessie and Trace. "Riggs...bad boy." Jessie giggled.

He barked. Jessie noticed he looked like his lips were grinning in jest. Wiping the water from her face, she darted her gaze at Trace. His shocked look and wet shirt took him by surprise. She laughed.

He chuckled. "Well, that's one way to cool off."

Jessie pulled back on the leash. "Come, Riggs. Out." Obediently, he jumped to the edge, spraying more water over Jessie, "Whoa, thanks buddy," Jessie hollered, flipping her wet sweatshirt, while flashing a look at the man standing a few feet away. His sexy laugh squeezed her chest, longing to tell him. "Trace."

His amorous grey eyes sank into hers. *He's your boss.* Taking a step back, she swallowed, and said, "What are you doing here?"

For a few seconds, he didn't speak, but dug into his pocket, pulling out another coin...a penny, and tossed into the fountain.

Jessie watched the penny settle on the bottom of the fountain, waiting for Trace's answer. Lifting her head, she watched the water gurgling over the sides of the large, tiered fountain, echoing a pleasant bubbling sound before splashing to the bottom. Out of the corner of her eye, she could tell Trace stood stiff next to her. Finally, his low voice barely reached her ear.

"You have nice parents."

“Thanks,” Jessie stared down at the penny shining in the rippling water. Sucking in a deep breath, she turned to him. “Trace, what are you doing here?”

He reached out and took her hand.

She jerked it away. “Stop.”

“Stop what, Jessie?”

Taking a step back, she stared into his compassionate eyes. “Stop playing with my emotions. I want you to go away. Leave me alone. It’s not going to work out.”

“What isn’t going to work out?”

“This...this...this thing you want.”

He whipped around and dropped on the fountain edge. Leaning over, he rested his arms on his thighs and clasped his hands together. In a controlled voice, he said, “What is it you think I want?”

Wringing her hands, she paced in front of him. Finally, she halted and looked down at him staring up at her. “You want more than I can give you.”

Straightening, he narrowed his gaze at her. “I admit, I want a relationship with you. I think you do too. What makes it so complicated? Be honest with me, Jessie. We have a connection and you’re fighting it.”

“Because I’m not who you think I am, I’m—”

His phone rang out.

A grimace spread over his face. Standing, he jerked his phone from his pocket. Keeping an eye on her, he answered and listened. “On my way.” He shoved his phone back, took her hand, and said, “This conversation will be continued. Right now, I must drive to Atlanta. My brother’s been in a car accident and he’s in the hospital.”

“Oh Trace,” she reached out and clutched his arm before she could stop herself. “I’m sorry. Is it bad?”

He stared at her hand pressed against his arm. “Dad said he has some broken ribs and a slight concussion. I’m sure he’ll be fine, but I need to see for myself.” Covering her hand on his arm, his disappointing tone, said, “Come on, I’ll walk you back to your place.”

“No, no, you hurry, take off. It’s a long drive.”

Unexpectedly, Trace trapped her head between the palms of his hands and crushed his lips to hers. She froze. Just as quickly, he released her and took off without giving her another look.

Slowly sitting on the edge of the fountain, she stared into the water, listening to the soothing, relaxing sound bubbling around the fountain in a circle.

Riggs whined, rested his head on her lap. Her hand rubbed down his wet head to his neck. Closing her eyes, she reached up and touched her finger against her lips. How did she let things get this messed up? Did she want him to stay away for good? How would she feel if he wanted nothing to do with her? An emptiness filled the pit of her stomach.

Riggs whined again with his big brown eyes staring up at her.

Standing, she took her time meandering back toward her apartment, giving him time to sniff out smells, and her own thoughts of whether to listen to her heart or her head. She needed Mom. Mom always had good advice.

Chapter 13

When Jessie entered her apartment, she heard her mom say, “Walter, don’t you think three cookies is enough?”

He lifted his cup, took a sip, and reached for another cookie. “One more to go with the rest of my coffee.”

Jessie giggled drawing their gaze.

Her dad watched her unleash Riggs. “Why’s he all wet, Jessie?”

“He jumped in the fountain before I could stop him. I was surprised since he nearly drowned in the ocean.”

“I’ll get a towel.” Walter hurried to the bathroom and returned to rub down Riggs. “There you go, all dry now?” He straightened and strolled back to the bar, and stuck a finger into the icing bowl, then in his mouth. He mumbled, “Where’s you man?”

Jessie pulled out a barstool and dropped, resting her elbows on the counter.

Her mom’s squinting eyes studied hers. “What’s going on sweetie?”

“Yeah, you took off in a hurry like you didn’t want us to talk to your man.”

She rubbed the palms of her hands down her face, took a quick breath, and said, “He had to go back to Atlanta. He’s *not* my man, Dad. He’s, my boss.”

“Yeah, he said that.” Jessie’s mom picked up a reindeer cookie and smeared a large amount of icing on it and placed it on the tray. She leaned against the counter with a narrow-eyed study of her daughter.

Jessie squirmed on the stool. “Mom, don’t look at me like that.”

“Honey, we know you. Come on out with it.”

“Hey,” her dad’s brows furrowed over an expression showing alarm. He leaned toward her. “If he’s hurt you in some way, he’ll have to answer to me.”

Jessie stood, grabbed a cup and filled it with hot coffee. She sat down and patted her father on the arm. “He hasn’t. Trace is kind, sweet and gentle.”

Her mother said, “From our perspective, he’s more than just a boss. Out with it, what’s going on between you two.”

“To him, I’m Jessie. Not Jessica.”

Her dad shrugged. “We all call you Jessie.”

“Not the people I work with. I’m known only as Jessica. The dark-haired Jessica.”

Her mother let out a short laugh. “Oh, my, are you still wearing the wig and glasses you wore when you had your interview?”

Pressing her lips together, she nodded. “Yup.”

Her dad picked up another cookie. “I don’t see a problem, sweetie.”

Beth slapped his hand. “Walter,” she scolded before turning her gaze back to Jessie. “Go ahead dear,” she said giving her husband a warning scowl.

“When he showed up here at my apartment, I answered the door without the wig or glasses. He asked for Jessica – long story short. I told him I was her twin, Jessie. Now he wants a relationship with Jessie, not Jessica.”

In a slump, she raised her brows, looking at both. “What do I do?”

Walter carefully placed the iced cookie on the platter, stepped over to the sink and rinsed the stickiness off his fingers. Picking up a towel, he dried his hands, walked around the bar to Jessie and circled his arm around her shoulder. Shifting his gaze to Beth, he said, “Listen to your mom. She’s never steered you wrong, has she?”

Jessie looked up at his smiling, sympathetic eyes. She watched him stroll to the sofa, picked up the remote and plopped down. He said, “Come on Riggs, time to watch a golf tournament.”

Riggs obediently jumped up next to him with his eyes on the television.

Turning to her mother, Jessie cocked her head to the side with a pathetic expression.

“Mom...”

“Well, sweetheart. He seems like a nice man. Do you like him?”

Thinking, Jessie rubbed her forehead. Sucking in a breath, she reached over, picked up the reindeer cookie and bit off its head.

“Come on honey, be honest, not with me, but yourself. How do you feel about him?”

Dropping her hands on the counter, she stared down at the half-eaten cookie. “If...if I’m honest, I’d have to say I like him – a lot.” She turned her confused gaze up to her mom. “Now what?”

“I think you already know the answer. The next step is to be honest with him. Talk to him. I’m sure if you explain – he’ll understand.”

“What if he doesn’t, or I get fired?”

Beth shrugged, “There’s consequences in lying dear, the longer it stretches, the more lying is required.”

Jessie stared at her cookie. “Believe me. I hear you.”

“Honey, look at me.”

Jessie lifted her gaze to her mother’s.

“What are you afraid of? Is it because of David? Are you hanging on to the guilt you feel for his death? Is that what’s keeping you from admitting you have feelings for Trace? Life’s unpredictable sweetheart, it wasn’t your fault. Don’t let losing someone keep you from moving forward in life and loving.”

Suddenly she felt her mom’s arms hugging her shoulders. “Sweetie, happiness means you must let go of the past heartbreaks. I’m not saying forget David. Just don’t let his tragic ending control your life.”

She turned into her mother’s hug, and mumbled, “Thanks Mom.”

Jessie glanced at the wall clock. “Oh my. We better get dressed for dinner if we’re to meet Jenna and the kids at Papa’s. You two get dressed in my bedroom while I box up the cookies and cover the cake.”

Her phone rang. Ending a quick call, she stepped to the bedroom door, and knocked. “Mom. Dad. Jenna called. They just drove into town and will meet us at Papa’s.

Jessie spent the entire next day, trying not to think of Trace while shopping and having lunch with her parents at their favorite restaurant, Savannah’s Southern Dishes. When evening rolled around, her mood couldn’t help but change the moment she stepped into Amy’s house. The second Riggs bounced inside, the kids were all over him and she could tell he was loving every minute, especially their chasing game.

How could her mood not change in an atmosphere filled with delicious smells, Christmas music waffling throughout the rooms, decorations covering every inch, and the huge Christmas tree lit up to give everyone the Christmas spirit. A long table covered with a red and white tablecloth filled with eggnog, goodies, and the decorative sugar cookies Jessie and her parents brought. At the end of the table Christmas plates, utensils, and glasses invited the group to fill to their heart’s content.

Amy certainly stepped up to be the party planning queen when it came to celebrating Christmas with all the families.

The evening's greatest surprise met with tears, happened when Candace laid eyes on the three-foot Christmas tree decorated with baby paraphernalia. They stood around the tree watching Candace touching each item like it was the most precious thing in the world. She gave the girls all a hug, shedding tears.

Jessie took a sip of her eggnog, flipping away a tear while watching Candace. She swung her head around to watch the kids playing. She loved the sounds of their laughter, high on Christmas, hollering and singing. The wonders of Christmas had smiles sprinkled on everyone's faces. A feel-good feeling, lifting everyone's spirit. A slight giggle escaped her mouth, watching Amy's twins sneaking a peek at the presents under the large Christmas tree.

Thoughts of Trace slipped into her head. Did Trace want kids? He's not into Christmas. He's not even fond of Christmas music. How could she ever be happy with someone not into Christmas?

"Jessie," Amy mumbled in her ear. Shifting her gaze to her friend, she took another sip of eggnog.

"Jessie, have you heard from Trace?"

"What—"

Candace stepped over and hugged her. "I heard Amy. Your sad expression a moment ago. You were thinking about Trace. Right?"

"Have you heard from him?" Amy asked again.

She nodded. "He came by this morning. We talked."

Candace squeezed her shoulder. "He loves you. Don't over think it, Sweetie. Go with your gut feelings. Look at me..." she rubbed her belly, grinning from ear to ear, "...I didn't want to have another baby, but here I am soon to welcome my little one into this world. Doctor said all is well with her, or him."

Amy leaned near her. "She's right. You need to follow your heart."

"Thanks," she reached up and patted Candace's hand resting on her shoulder. "I'll think about it."

Chapter 14

Trace knocked on Jessie's door. He glanced at his watch, shifting from one foot to the other, and praying he wasn't too early. He rang the doorbell again and at once heard *Here Comes Santa Claus* ring out over Riggs' bark. The door opened. Trying to hide his surprise when Jessie's dad stood before him, he held out his hand, and said, "Good morning, Mr. Tucker. I hope I didn't wake everyone."

The big burly man stepped aside. "Nope, come on in. It's Walter, remember? Beth has coffee on. We're early risers."

Trace glanced down, "Hey Riggs, mornin' to you too," he said, petting his head. He shot a glance at the sofa, thinking it must be a sofa bed. Walter drew his attention when he said, "If you're here to see Jessie, I'm afraid she's still sleeping."

Trace strolled toward the kitchen bar, giving Beth a nod. "Good morning, how did the party go?"

Beth handed him a cup. "Oh my gosh, we had fun enjoying the kids, and by the end of the day we had eaten way too much." She looked at her husband and grinned. "And Walter ate too many sweets."

"Hey, it's Christmas."

Beth nodded and turned to Trace. "You wouldn't believe how excited the children were when they opened their presents. We were out late, that's why we're dragging at getting a start."

"Are you returning to Atlanta today?" He glanced around the small apartment as she confirmed they were leaving around noon. "If you don't mind me asking, where do all of you stay when you visit your daughters?"

Both darted each other a glance before Beth answered. She tipped her head toward the sofa. "It's a comfy sofa bed. Jenna and her family usually stay at Amy's house so the kids can play together when they come."

Walter sat next to Trace at the bar, circled his large hands around his cup, eyeing him with suspicious eyes. Trace returned his gaze, pushing aside the man's intimation. "Walter, is there something you want to ask me?"

The corner of his lips lifted. "Since you've asked. Yes, what's your intentions toward my daughter?"

“Walter,” Beth’s reprimanding voice quickly drew his gaze.

Trace shot Beth a pleasant grin. “It’s a fair question, Mrs. Tucker –”

“Oh, please, Beth.”

“Beth. I’d be concerned too if I had a daughter like Jessie.” He shifted to face Mr. Tucker, shrugged, and said, “Honestly, I’m not sure.” With a raised brow, he looked at him, and then Beth. “I do know I’ve developed feelings for her, but she keeps pushing me away. Yet, I feel like she doesn’t mean it.”

“Hmm, good for you,” Beth mumbled, handing him a cookie.

Trace accepted the cookie and started to ask what she meant when the bedroom door opened drawing their gaze. Jessie strolled out with a wide mouthed yawn, running her fingers through her hair.

Trace, about to decapitate Santa’s cookie head, stopped in mid-air taking in the sleepy-eyed woman. He couldn’t wipe the grin from his face. She looked adorable standing there with her long, gorgeous legs hanging out of her shorty pajamas, her pixie blonde tousled hair and smudged mascara. Geez, he wanted to gather her up in his arms and kiss her beautiful face.

“What’s all the noise in here...” Her eyes widen connecting with his. “Trace.”

“Good morning, sleepyhead,” her dad mumbled with a lighthearted chuckle. He strolled to her, gave her a peck on the cheek and with a wink he took his mug of coffee and headed over to switch on the television. “Come on Riggs, let’s see what on TV.”

Jessie drilled her begging glance into her mother’s smiling expression. But much to her chagrin, her mother strolled over, handed her a cup of steamy coffee, and said, “Good morning, dear, you look like you need caffeine.” With a twinkle in her eyes, she scooted past her to join her husband and Riggs on the sofa.

Trace watched her gaze shift from her parents to him. He waited for her to speak, took a sip of coffee, and wanted to chuckle when she raised her hand and tried to smooth down her pillow-mussed hair. Without saying a word, she plopped down on a barstool at the end keeping distance between them.

Her hand flew up to wipe beneath her bottom eyelid, aware of her mascara smeared beneath her bottom eyelids. Even in her sleepy state, smudged eyes, and disarrayed hair, she pulled at his heart strings. Geez, he’d fallen in love.

“Your sister still sleeping?”

Jessie stared at him, and with wide eyes, she nodded.

“Your parents were kind enough to offer me coffee this morning. We had a good talk.”

Her sleepy eyes widened. “You did? About...about what?”

He silently chuckled when her gaze swung to her parents like they were traitors. Connecting with him again, he said, “Jessie...” reaching for her hand, he leaned near, “...I have a flight out in the morning. For the next week, I’ll be working on the rig. Do me a favor, promise to think about what we have here. I have feelings for you, and I think you do too. Whatever is holding you back, we can fix. Promise me, we’ll talk when I return.”

Not waiting for an answer, he stood, glanced over his shoulder, and said, “Walter, Beth, thank you for your hospitality.” Leaning forward. He kissed Jessie on the lips, turned and walked to the door. With a glance back at the woman he’d fallen for, he winked at her, praying she’d miss him as much as he would her.

When he opened the door, he came face to face with a woman who, undeniably had to be a Tucker with her natural blonde hair and blue eyes. Holding out his hand, he said, “Hello, you must be Jenna. I’m Trace Brightwell.” Looking at the two little girls, he glanced at their dad, smiling. After a warm handshake from their dad, he looked down and said, “Merry Christmas.”

The cute little blonde headed girl, grinned. “Hi, you’re Aunt Jessie’s boyfriend.”

Trace noted it wasn’t a question, but a statement. He turned a wide smile on Jessie. “Yeah, I want to be her boyfriend.” Looking back at the little girl, he said, “You tell her it’s a good idea.”

Stepping out the door, he paused glancing back over his shoulder. “Tell Jessica I’ll see her in the morning on the helicopter pad.”

Jenna’s brows shot up when she turned on Jessie, she lifted her hand and shook it, saliently mouthing, *WOW*.

Trace took his time strolling to his parked car, thinking about Jessie and her family. They were a loving family. He liked her parents. They were lucky. His mom and dad were great parents too. Jessie seemed to be close to her siblings. Too bad he and his brother didn’t have a close relationship. They never seemed to agree on anything. Maybe one day Jed would settle down and stop being such a playboy. Being a brother to Jed Brightwell had its drawbacks. People always put him in the same category. He’d never been a playboy. Many of the women he

dated expected him to be like his brother. Maybe it's why he'd been drawn to Jessie. She didn't judge him. Thoughts of her put a smile on his face. She loved Christmas. So did her parents.

He chuckled thinking of Beth handing him a platter of cookies for breakfast. She had laughed, said it's Christmas. He laughed. They probably had an intimate family Christmas dinner. Not like his parents. Christmas celebrated by the Brightwells meant a huge party for all their friends. Sure, they had a family dinner on Christmas Day, but it seemed like an afterthought, nothing special.

Suddenly, Trace, turned and drove to a corner tree lot he'd noticed a couple of days ago. Stopping, he got out and strolled between all types of evergreen trees, looking for a small one. Taking in a deep breath, he smelled the pine scent, and on a whim, he bought a five-foot tree. On the way to his place, he stopped by a store to buy a bag full of decorations. It dawned on him that he'd never decorated a tree before, not even as a kid. Remembering Jessie's little tree, he picked out lights, brightly colored balls and a snow man, a Santa, and a Reindeer ornament to hang on the tree.

The moment he got to his apartment, he put on Christmas music and decorated his tree. Lowering the lights, he flipped on the colorful tree lights, grabbed cup of coffee, sat down, and listened to the relaxing music, feeling content for the first time in a long time.

“Jessie Tucker, I'll win you over before the New Year arrives.”

Chapter 15

Trace's phone rang out, interrupting his contentment. He leaned back, answered it, staring at the Christmas tree. "Hey Rick, what's up? Sure, lunch is good...okay, I'll meet you there."

Hanging up, Trace hurried to turn off the lights and music, grabbed his jacket and strolled from his apartment. It didn't take long to drive, park and stroll into Papa's to find Rick sitting at a table. Automatically, Trace glanced around, looking for Jessie and her friends, Of course, the table was empty.

Sitting across from his friend, he noticed a worried grimace on his face. "What's wrong, Rick. Is it Rachael? Her pregnancy? You look upset."

Rick glanced up at the waitress placing their drink on the table. "I ordered you a beer and a pizza."

"Good. Now, what's going on?"

"Rachael had her ipad out this morning surfing Facebook friends. Out of curiosity, she searched for Jessie Tucker."

Trace took a swallow of beer, and asked, "Did she find her?"

"Yup." Rick took a slice of pizza and hurried to bite off a sizable chunk.

"Well," Trace asked, helping himself to a slice.

"Interesting," he muttered, swallowing.

"How so?"

"You say, Jessie's a twin to Jessica – the woman you work with, right?"

"Yup."

"Rachael and I went through her Facebook pictures. You should see the cute pictures of her, a sister named Jenna and her parents. Evidently, they're a close-knit family. Lots of pictures of Jenna and her two little girls with Jessie, and their mom and dad."

Trace shrugged. "Okay, it's all normal stuff for Facebook. What's got you worried? Or is it Rachael – she doesn't like Jessie?"

"No, no, she liked her. Rachael thought it weird for twins to be named Jessica and Jessie, since Jessie comes from Jessica. But parents can name their kids out of the norm anyway, you know like Apple."

“Get to the point?”

“Like I said, a bunch of pictures, except for Jessica. If Jessica’s her twin, why isn’t there any pictures of her with the family? There’s none. It’s as if Jessica doesn’t exist.”

“You’re crazy. I work with Jessica. She exists.”

“Trace, take a second and think for a minute. Since you’ve been dating Jessie, have you ever seen them together?”

He stared at Rick searching his brain. He hadn’t. How often did he ask Jessie to give Jessica a message? He turned his head to stare at the table where Jessie and her girlfriends often met. The time he walked in with Jessie to meet with them to plan a family Christmas party...no Jessica present. What excuse had she given? There were many excuses when he asked for Jessica. Her parents gave each other a weird look when he asked about their daughter Jessica. What about the time Jessie hurried him out of the apartment as if she didn’t want him talking to Walter and Beth?

Switching his gaze back to Rick, he queried, “What exactly does Rachael think?”

Rick took a long swallow, sat his mug down, and said, “She thinks Jessie and Jessica are the same. There’s no twin.”

With one hand on the beer mug, he swept the other hand down over his mustache and his cleanly shaven jaws. “Why? Whatever would possess her to pretend such a thing?”

Rick shrugged. “What happened when you first met Jessie?”

He shook his head in wonder. “I needed a file from Jessica for the board meeting. I went to her apartment and Jessie opened the door.”

“Did you not see a resemblance?”

Trace leaned his elbows on the table, shaking his head. “Honestly, I couldn’t see anything other than her. She mesmerized me. Those large blue eyes trapped my brain into wanting to know her. Rick, it’s like she put a spell on me. I couldn’t think straight. When I finally started acting like a grown man, I thought I had the wrong apartment and asked for Jessica Tucker.” He combed his fingers through his hair, squinting. “Come to think of it, she looked shocked and sputtered before coming right out and saying they were twins. Huh, she lied.” His brow tightened. “Wow. How stupid could I be?”

“Don’t worry, Trace. Women can make all men feel stupid at one time or another, even Rachael.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Why would you not know Jessie wasn’t Jessica?”

“For one thing. I’ve only seen Jessica a few times throughout the year – at board meetings mostly. Another thing, she has long brown hair and wears the ugliest black rimmed glasses.”

“Really?”

With his hands circled around the mug, Trace leaned forward. “Frankly, I took a long look at Jessica at the board meeting last week. I remember thinking they could be identical twins if Jessica cut her hair and colored it blonde.”

Rick flipped his hand. “Well, there you go.” He leaned back with his mug in his hand, and before taking a drink, asked, “Is Jessica wearing a long, dark wig or is Jessie wearing a short, blonde wig?” he chuckled, “I’d bet on Jessica wearing a wig.”

Trace sucked in air and bellowed out his cheeks releasing it. “I’d guess Jessica, too. I’ve watched Jessie run her fingers through her hair – it’s hers.” He stared off in the distance.

“Jessica’s hair is always perfect.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Jessie told me to get lost. When I asked why, she said it’s *complicated*. Yet, it doesn’t ring true when she tells me she doesn’t want to see me again. Now, I know why. Well, not really. Why the ruse? Why wouldn’t she tell me the truth?”

Rick shook his head. “I guess you’ll have to ask her. When are you going to see her again, Jessie or Jessica? Or are you?”

“I’m flying out to the rig in the morning. *Jessica’s* flying out too. Oh my gosh, now, I know why Jessie didn’t want to go to my parents Christmas party – she’s working on the rig during Christmas.”

Suddenly, Trace laughed out, running his fingers through his hair. “It couldn’t have been easy for her to play two different people. There must be a reason. She did say I didn’t know Jessica. Told me about her fiancé who died three days before the wedding.”

He picked up his drink and looked at Rick. “Oh, geez, she was talking about herself.”

“Well, buddy, the only advice I can give is to drop her. No more contact. You should run a background check on her. She might be a con artist or a murderer.”

“She isn’t. The company did a background check on her before they hired her.” He slowly shook his head. “Besides, I have a problem, Rick, I’m in love with her.”

Rick's head drew back. He exhaled. "Who? Jessie or Jessica?"

Trace dropped his head in his hand. "Both, I guess."

"Hey," the sparkle in Rick's eyes met Trace, "In any case, I wonder what Jessie would say if you made a pass at Jessica while on the rig?"

"Hmm, something to consider. She'd either slap my face or admit to the deception. You think?" Trace swiveled his head toward the table where Jessie and her friend usually sat. He had a lot to think about.

Chapter 16

Early the next morning, Jessie packed the boxes of sugar cookies safely away in a carry-on case, then rushed to don her dark wig and glasses to leave. After staring at herself in the mirror, her expression tightened. For the next couple of weeks, Jessica ruled her life. Time to stop and be her true self, Jessie. She flipped around to grab her cases, mumbling, “Now’s not the time to think about it.”

Her phone alerted her about an in-coming message. Reading it, her heart skipped a beat. She hadn’t expected an answer so soon after applying for the job at the Petroleum Science Lab. She re-read the email with mixed feelings. They wanted to interview her at her convenience.

Slowly sitting down at the bar, she rubbed her forehead, looking around. She missed Riggs. Spending two weeks without seeing him would be hard, but she was sure he’d be busy playing with Amy’s kids and having a blast. She hoped he’d miss her as much as she’d miss him.

Her gaze rested on the message. Several minutes passed before she decided how to reply. She keyed in letting them know her duty kept her on the oil rig until after the New Year. *If they were willing, she’d be available for a Zoom meeting any time in the evening after seven o’clock. Otherwise, she’d be available for an interview the first week of January.* Send.

Noticing the time, she now had to rush to get to the airport on time.

Greeting the parking garage attendant, Jessie parked her jeep in her designated spot and carried her cases to the pad where the helicopter rumbled to life with its blades slowly rotating in a hurry to lift off.

The pilot gave her a welcoming grin. “Enjoy your two weeks off, Jessica?” he asked taking her cases to place behind her seat.

“Great. Thanks Jon. How’s the newlywed?”

His lips broke out in a radiant smile. “I’m loving marriage.”

She laughed, settling into her seat. With a glance at Trace – all buckled up and waiting, she nodded his way. “Sorry. A phone call delayed me.” Buckling up, she put on the earphones, wondering why she bothered to apologize since she arrived right on time with thirty seconds to spare.

Settling back, her gaze swung to him eyeing her. His lips didn't smile at her, but his eyes were...what? Laughing at her? Why? Did he have a secret? Shifting her gaze out the window, she ordered her body to keep still, not fidget. And, quit imagining things.

“Jessica.”

She jumped.

He chuckled. “Sorry.”

Darting her gaze his way, she held her breath. Oh, my gosh, he grinned at her, so unlike him with Jessica. She said, “Yes?”

“I heard you ask Jon about him being married. When did that happen?”

Jessica glanced at Jon looking over his shoulder toward her. With an affirmative nod, he said to his boss, “Last month, Sir.”

Trace slapped him on the shoulder and said, “Congratulations.”

Her phone buzzed. She jumped. Trace gave her a quirky look when she reached into her bag for her phone. Sure, she was jumpy, and he had no idea why. Glancing at the message, she hurried and clicked it off before the guy next to her had a chance to glance at it. A quick message from Petroleum Science Lab confirmed her appointment on January 2, at ten o'clock.

“Jessica, I'm curious, where's Riggs? Is Jessie keeping him?”

She swallowed before turning to look at him, and without further dialog, she nodded. In truth, Amy volunteered to keep him during her tour on the rig. Her kids were delighted to doggie-sit Riggs for two whole weeks.

The two-hour flight proceeded in silence, except for the unique sounds from the blade's vortex interactions, making its whopping noise. She gripped her hands together to control her movements, desperately wanting to reach up and make sure her wig fit properly. Of course, it did. She made sure before leaving her place. Relax. But her tense muscles made it hard, and her fragile nerves didn't help. Every muscle in her body wanted to fidget – all because Trace sat next to her.

She took in a slight breath and quickly stole a peek at him. He wasn't looking at her, but she noticed when he shifted to stare out the window, his drawn expression gave her the impression his thoughts centered on a heavy problem, weighing him down.

Finally, when the platform appeared in the horizon, Jessie released her tense muscles. She couldn't wait to get out from under Trace's constant scrutiny, even though he'd only glanced at

her a couple of times during the flight. Once when she connected eyes with him, the questioning smile in those grays seemed to search beyond her glasses for something.

Jessie shifted her gaze out toward the rig far below in the distance. She studied the floating city with nothing but ocean surrounding it. Every time she flew in for duty, the sight amazed her. The Brightwell oil rig ran roughly the size of two football fields – small in comparison to some deep-water rigs. The Brightwell rig towers reached down four thousand feet to the sea bottom, drilling six miles into the earth’s crust or thirty thousand feet below sea level. A two-hundred-foot drop from the platform of the rig would certainly do you in. A floating city with a crew of one hundred and thirty workers with all the amenities of home. The crew wanted for nothing during their days on tour. Teams worked together during the long grueling hours of manual labor, most of the time pushing themselves to the outer limits of strength. She always felt exhilarated being part of the floating city.

Once the copter touched down and the engine cut, she dropped out of the opening, and waited for Jon to dig out her cases.

“Hey Jessica,” hollered Billy, the roustabout in training. The young kid, barely twenty-one had the kind of personality everyone loved. Kind, gentle, and willing to work harder than the others to prove himself.

Jessica turned to wave at him and three other crew roughnecks striking out toward her. “Hi guys.”

Both Jeff and Rob gave her a friendly pat on the arm like any other roughneck. Jeff said, “Billy has something to tell you.”

Jessica squinted her eyes at Billy. “You’re a daddy. Right.”

“Yes,” his jubilant laugh sounded above the helicopter blades slowing. With a proud tone, he said, “I have a boy.”

Jessica gave him a hug. “Congratulations. I want to see pictures.”

“I got ’em. Show you at dinner tonight.”

“Can’t wait.”

Jeff and Rob picked up her cases. “We’ll take these to your room.”

Rob held up one of the cases. “I hope this is full of our Christmas cookies.”

Jessica laughed out loud. “How’d you guess.”

“Woohoo,” they all hollered, then stopped short, recognizing their boss stepping out of the copter.

Billy stepped up, “Hi Mr. Brightwell. Welcome aboard.”

He politely shook their hands, gave a nod, and with a polite smile, he said, “What’s this about a baby?”

“Yes, sir,” Billy grinned from ear to ear. “I have a boy.”

“Congratulations Billy.”

“Thank you, sir.” Trace shook his hand, and then sidestepped them to stroll toward the foreman who walked out of the office to meet him.

“Hey Jess, we got you a Christmas present, but you’ll have to wait until your shift is over, then we’ll show it to you.”

With a wrinkled-up nose, she said in jest, “Fine, then you’ll have to wait for your Christmas cookies.”

“Ahhhh geez, Jess.”

She laughed, hurrying to her lab – her home away from home. Without hesitating, she set to work, flipping on her computers. Stepping to the closet, she slipped on her gear. Taking her time, she pulled her orange flame retardant overalls on over her jeans and her sweater, shoved her feet into her safety, steel toed, water and oil resistant boots, and with a hardhat on her head, she grabbed the safety harness off the peg and buckled it around her coveralls. Once out on the rig, she hooked the safety line from her harness to the jackline connecting her to the rig.

Strolling out toward the drilling sites, she waved at her coworkers welcoming her back to work. Stepping up near a drilling pipe, she bent to gather the mud into the canister. With a marker she labeled the container with the time and zone she had collected the mud. After several other samples, she whipped around to make her way back, slamming into Trace’s solid chest.

He grabbed her. The collision nearly caused her to spill her samples, if it hadn’t been for his quick reaction in steadying her against his chest. Looking up into his gorgeous greys, her gaze slowly drifted down to his lips, recalling his kiss. Butterflies in her stomach shot reality to her brain. Instantly, she pushed away from him.

His gaze looked beyond her glasses, searching. She mumbled. “Sorry.”

“Did you spill your mud?”

“Ah...no, no, I’m good.” Daring to look up at his handsome face, slightly shaded by the hardhat he wore, she realized it didn’t matter what he wore, his good looks drew one’s eyes. If anything, he appeared just as sexy in his work gear and hardhat as he did at the board meetings in suit and tie. Not to mention how sexy he looked in his causal clothes, or those well-fitting jeans and his black leather jacket.

Jessie took a quick step to the side and hurried to her sanctuary lab without glancing back. Once her jittery nerves settled down, she reprimanded herself for being stupid in reacting to Trace the way she did. She had to remember. She’s Jessica.

Settling her eyes on the computer in front of her, she mumbled, “Get to work, girl.” Why did she feel so guilty? She knew why – stupid.

For the next several hours, she studied the mud she’d collected and entered its breakdown into the computers.

With her focus on the analysis, she’d been studying for the last hour, Jessie failed to hear the door open until interrupted by someone clearing his throat.

She twirled around in her chair. “Mr. Brightwell.”

He strolled in her direction, glancing around her lab. “I don’t believe I’ve been in the lab when you’re on duty.”

“You’re not usually on the rig when I’m working.”

“Ah, true. I usually connect with Joe in here.” He looked at her. “Do you know Joe?”

“Only on the computer. We sometimes compare analysis online.”

Absently, Trace nodded. Jessie watched him stroll around her lab. Following his moves, she felt the heat rise over her head beneath her wig.

What would he do if she took off the wig and glasses right now in front of him? Shifting back to look at the computer, she thought, stupid. Stupid thought. He’d fire her. She wouldn’t blame him either.

Suddenly her eyes rested on the lined chart in front of her, staring at the results. Gas? Touching several keys, she waited to analyze the mud again – rerunning the sample to make sure.

“Did you see something suspicious?”

Jessica jumped. His closeness shot a quiver down her neck feeling his breath on her ear.

Forcing her mind to concentrate on the screen chart, she pointed to a line. “It appears to be a slightly increased percentage of gas.”

“What drill zone?” He pulled over a chair and sat next to her, focusing on the computer.

She picked up her notebook, flipped to a page, and said, “The sample of mud came from the Zone C pipe.”

When he edged his chair closer, Jessie felt his shoulder lean against hers. She glanced at him, met his questioning gaze, which seemed to sink deep inside her soul behind her glasses. His steady gaze unnerved her, yet she was unable to break the connection.

Finally, he turned to the computer chart, his brows pulled together for several seconds. Then, he shoved back his chair, and said, “Since the chromatograph reads low hydrocarbons...” he leaned in to look her straight in the eyes, close enough she felt his breath on her face. His sexy deep voice said, “Its *sweet* gas.” Suddenly he stood. “I’m sure. Keep me posted. Instead of every two-hundred feet – for now, read out every one-hundred feet. Do you agree?”

He looked directly at her, as if seeing her without her glasses. Her hand flew up to rub her neck. Swallowing hard, she nodded.

He strolled to the door. “I’ll inform Phil.”

“Sure...ah...how long are you staying on the rig?”

He aimed a striking grin her way. A grin he had showered Jessie with several times. “I’m not sure.”

When the door shut, a chill ran down her back. Oh my gosh. She rubbed her forehead. Had he just flirted with her? She didn’t miss the emphasis on *sweet*. Jerking out of the chair, she paced, twisting her hands together. The way he looked at her – uncanny. Did he know? Suspect? If he did, why wouldn’t he say something. Maybe, if a chance presented itself while he worked on board, she’d confess.

She checked her watch. Time to get another mud sample from Zone C.

Trace slipped out of the lab, shut the door, and headed toward the galley. An amused grin spread his lips. When he looked close into Jessica eyes, he saw Jessie. He had made her nervous. He could tell from the way she tried to avoid meeting his gaze, especially when he flirted with her.

Chapter 17

Jessie turned off the shower, listened and sure enough, she heard three rapid knocks sounding on her birth door. “Coming,” she hollered. Grabbing a towel, she wrapped her wet head, making sure she didn’t leave any tail-tail signs of blonde hair sticking out, shoved her arms into a white fluffy robe, and rushed to the door.

“Hey mud logger,” Billy’s grinning face met hers.

“Hey roustabout. What? You here for your Christmas cookies. Sorry, you’ll have to wait like the rest of the guys.”

“Well, get in gear, everyone’s waiting for you.”

Jessie laughed and slowly shut the door, “I’m getting dressed – be right there.”

Once she blew her hair dried, she pulled on her wig and glasses, collected the case filled with the crew’s treasure and headed for the galley.

Immediately spying the table with five crew members she had come to consider close friends and work companions, she waved and hurried across the room. Suddenly, she stopped short.

Near their table, against the wall, stood a tall Christmas tree lit up with hundreds of multicolored lights, winking at her. Slowly, she made her way to the table with her watery eyes on the beautiful tree. Looking at the roughnecks, she covered her mouth and connected eyes with each.

“Well, cat got your tongue?” Rob chuckled.

“It’s beautiful.”

“Merry Christmas, Jess,” hollered the crew sitting around the table.

“How did you manage to get a tree on board?” she questioned with raised brows.

“We won’t tell.”

“Hey, Jess,” shouted a one of the drillers from the other table. “It’s a gift from Santa.”

She laughed out loud. “I love it.”

Rob flipped a switch on a small recorder and the music rang out – *Winter Wonderland*.

“Hey Jeff,” yelled another driller across the room, “Turn it up. We like Christmas too.”

Jessica couldn't stop her smile from spreading when she glanced at the men in the galley. At the far end of the room, her gaze landed on Trace having dinner with the foreman, Phil. He didn't seem to notice all the commotion going on. With a quick shift, she turned her back to him and took a seat.

When Jeff turned up the music, the men sent him a thumb's up.

Silence fell around her while all the crew members at her table stared at her.

"What?" her wide eyes gleamed with excitement.

"Jess, where's your Christmas spirit?"

She giggled. "Right here," she held up the case. Standing, she unzipped it and took out a box of sugar cookies for each one.

One of the drillers on the other side of the room stood to get her attention. "Jessica Tucker, did you remember to bring you cookie recipe for the chef?"

"No worries, I emailed it to him so he could work it into his Christmas menu."

Like little boys on Christmas morning, they all sent up a joyful glee, while the crew at her table dug into their special boxes with delightful grins.

With eight more boxes gathered in her arms, she stepped to the other tables and put a box in the middle for all to share. Loud cheers shot up filling the galley with joyful Christmas spirit.

Jessica strolled to the table where Phil and Trace sat. "Merry Christmas guys," she mumbled, placing the box between them. Without making eye contact with Trace, she hurried back to her table.

Trace sat at the table with Phil. He appreciated his foreman making a point of having meals with him when he worked on the rig. He hated eating alone. Lifting his gaze from his plateful of tasteless food, he said, "How's your family, Phil?"

Phil gave him a nod. "Doing great. Kids are excited for Christmas..."

Trace tried to listen, but the noise from across the room distracted him. Skirting his gaze around the galley of men, he knew they respected him, but being the boss, they held him at a distance. None of them knew him personally. A boss couldn't make close friendships with employees. Sure, he worked one on one with the drilling crew. Working side-by-side he pulled his weight along with them. He understood how taxing the laborious job demanded, both

physical and mental endurance. Dependability was the most crucial part of the job, and he wasn't about to let them down when working as one of them.

He fought to keep his attention on what the man had to say. Jessica, on the other side of the room kept drawing his gaze. All the crew members treated her like a peer. No doubt, they liked and respected her. She had a connected camaraderie with them. He envied her.

She hadn't noticed him when she walked in, but he'd certainly noticed her. She had that little hip sway like Jessie. She'd waved at her coworkers with a big smile just like Jessie's. When she bumped into him earlier, it had taken him back by the shaken realization of suddenly holding Jessie's body even through all her protective gear, making him involuntarily pull her closer to him. Her blue eyes had trapped his like Jessie's eyes did. It all happened in a split second, good thing she jumped out of his arms when she did, or he would have kissed her.

Jessica laughed out loud. He closed his eyes for a second, swearing he heard Jessie. Darting his gaze at the woman across the room, he thought of Rick's warning. Jessica and Jessie were the same person. After his little flirtatious act in the lab, he knew Rick was right. They were the same.

When the music rang out the jolly Christmas song, *Here Comes Santa Claus*, Jessie's doorbell came to mind. He couldn't help but grin, which he tried to hide by taking a bite of toasted garlic bread. She'd been singing it the first time she had opened the door to him. Right from the get-go, he'd been taken with her, not only her natural beauty, but her personality.

Jessie said he didn't know Jessica. He always thought of Jessica as a no-nonsense career-woman without a personal life. He never thought of her as passionate or a full of life person outside her responsibilities on the rig. If he didn't know Jessica, did it mean he didn't know Jessie, like he thought he did?

He'd never been around twins. He didn't know much about twins other than they could be identical or fraternal. Jessica with her long dark hair and wearing glasses, and Jessie with her natural short blonde hair framing her smooth complexion and dreamy blue eyes, would mean they were fraternal twins. If they were twins. He had to admit when he studied Jessica closely, he noticed the same beautiful complexion. He supposed he'd never looked past her ugly glasses.

His gut told him Rick was right. Social media proved it, or else there'd be pictures of the twins together. With their parents. And their sister Jenna. His brows pulled tight.

You idiot, you should have notice how weird it's been not ever seeing them together?

Suddenly Phil chuckled at something, bringing Trace back to the man sitting across from him. He'd been staring at Jessica for a while now. Had Phil noticed? Shaking his head. He gave Phil a side glance, eating one of the sugar cookies. He glanced at the reindeer iced cookie, like the one Jessie's mother had given him. With a quick shake of his head, he forced his thoughts back to business, "Phil, did Jessica give you an update on the gas levels before she went off duty?"

"She did. It appeared there's a slight increase again, but nothing alarming. I spoke to the toolpusher coming on duty, he said he'd keep an eye on the site and increase the mud weight."

Trace nodded. "Good idea. If there's nothing more, I'll turn in." He stood, took one more glance toward the crew chatting, laughing, and enjoying a meal together with Jessica. Jessie said he didn't know her. Did he really know Jessie?

"Hey, don't you want a cookie?" Phil asked digging another one out of the box.

"Nah, you can have mine." He'd already tasted the delicious Tucker cookies. Cookies Jessie and her mom baked. Yet, Jessica brought them to work. No one asked if she brought her sister's cookies, as if they assumed Jessica baked them.

Chapter 18

The next morning, Jessica walked out of her lab, hooked her harness to the jackline, shoved her hardhat on her head and headed out to gather mud samples. The unmistakable chuf-chuf-chuf sound of the whirling rotors drew her gaze over her shoulder to watch the helicopter land on the pad. Trace strolled out from the control room toward the landing pad. Leaving.

She couldn't help but wonder if he'd go by her apartment – well, too bad. How many times had she told him she didn't want to see him again? Why didn't he listen. Why's he so persistent? Did he know she wasn't being honest? Why did she have a problem telling him the truth? Chicken. She wanted to, so what's the problem? She wasn't just chicken, she was afraid. Whenever trapped in his vision, she felt like she'd drunk too much wine, intoxicating. Her brain turned to mush. She'd forget everything but him.

Forcing her gaze and thoughts away from the sexy man leaving, she headed out to gather mud samples. A worried expression pulled her thoughts from her boss to the worrisome gas levels coming from Zone C. Even though the gas increases weren't alarming on each test, her gut told her a continuous increase meant something. Returning to her lab, she hurried to analyze the mud again.

Minutes later, Jessie stared at the printed chart of the rising levels of gas she'd tested from the cuttings. Go with your gut feelings, Jess. What if it was a warning sign of a leak?

Throughout the day, the plaguing zone levels kept creeping into her thoughts. Since she'd worked well passed her shift, she decided to check Zone C one more time to double check the levels. She took off to gather her mud.

“Hey Jess,” Billy drew her attention, the moment she stepped out on the rig. “You joining us in the galley for dinner?”

“Yup, right after I collect mud from Zone C. I detected a small spike earlier, so I thought I'd do one more run. See you in an hour.”

He gave her a thumbs up

An hour later, Jessie stared at the printed chart of the rising levels of gas she had tested from the cuttings. Her instincts pulled her brows together. What if it's a warning sign of a leak. Picking up the phone, she called the foremen's birth.

“Phil. I took another sample from Zone C. The gas levels increased another small amount. I’m thinking there might be a leak.” Hanging up, she sat back in her chair. “Okaaay,” she muttered, “I’ll sit tight like he ordered, until he gets here.”

She whirled in her chair when the door opened and smiled at her co-worker stepping inside. “Hi Andy – ready for a long night?”

“What are you still doing here?”

“Phil’s on his way. He wanted to see the chart I printed out from Zone C – I’ve been watching it all day. The gas levels increase little by little each time I analyze a new sample of mud.”

“Let me take a look.” He walked over and took the printed-out chart to study it closely. “I agree. Not much though, but still, there’s an increase with each test.”

When the door opened both glanced around. Phil gave a curt nod to them, and walked over to Andy, handing him the chart to study. Andy strolled to his station, took a seat, but lifted curious eyes on Phil, waiting for his opinion.

Jessie waited for his thoughts too. After several seconds, he released what sounded like an irritated breath. He shoved the chart toward her, and said, “Geez, Jessica, you made it sound like we were going to have to declare a work-stop. I agree there’s a slight rise of gas, but nothing alarming.”

“But it keeps rising with each analysis, don’t you think there might be a problem? You’re right, I’m thinking a work-stop will be worth it to make certain it’s nothing.”

“Nah, I don’t think it’s increase is something to worry about. More than likely sweet gas. Go to the galley, Jessica, have something to eat and relax – you can take another look at the results in the morning.”

“But it keeps rising with each analysis, don’t you think it indicates a problem?”

“I’ll repeat myself, go to the galley, Jessica, have something to eat and relax – you can take another look at the results in the morning. Understood?”

She nodded, but her worried gaze didn’t relax.

He left, pulling the door behind him. Jessie stared at the door, chewing on her bottom lip. Turning to her computer, she studied the last four charts. Suddenly, Andy hurried to look over her shoulder.

“Do you see it?” Jessie asked, pointing to the significant amount of gas level on each page.”

“I do. But you heard him. He’ll see what the charts say in the morning. I’ll keep a close eye on it tonight.”

“Thanks.” Jessie opened her email and before she could change her mind, emailed all the reports to Trace. After sending it off, she stood to leave, walking to the door. Darting a glance at Andy, she said, “Have a good night.”

Chapter 19

The second she walked in she glanced across the room. “Good morning, Andy. How’d your night go?”

“You’re here early. What’s up?”

“I thought I’d see what your reports showed this morning.”

“You mean Zone C?”

“Yup.”

“I checked about three hours ago, and there’s barely a noticeable increase.”

“I’m glad to hear it. I think I’ll get some samples.” Hurrying, she pulled on her overalls, boots, and hat to start her rounds to collect rock cuttings, but Zone C interested her the most.

Throughout the day, Jessie kept a close eye on the special interest from the zone in question. Staring at the last two results, she shook her head. Weird. The one chart showed an increase in gas and when she checked again, it read no increases. Up and down. Weird. By the end of her shift, she decided to leave Andy a note to check the zone closely during the night.

Joining her fellow padres in the galley, Jessie listened to all the small talk circling around the table. After answering a few inquiries about Riggs, she said her goodnights and headed for the exit door.

“Jessica,” Phil hollered at her, drawing her attention to his table.

“Yes Phil.”

“I stopped by and read your charts on the gas level at Zone C. It appears it’s leveled off, but if you don’t mind, get one more sample before retiring?”

“Not at all. I’ll get right to it.”

“If things are still looking abnormal, call me, or if you want, I’ll come to the lab.”

Making her way back to the lab, she greeted Andy, her counterpart for the nightshift. “Phil asked me to take one more sample from Zone C since it’s showing low levels of gas again. Do you mind?”

“Good idea. I noticed it on your report and the note you left. I haven’t had a chance to get to it yet.”

She hurried to put on all her gear, popped on a hardhat, and stepped out to hook up to the PFAS (Personal Fail Arrest System). She hurried toward Zone C, located at the other end of the rig.

On her way, she waved at several of the night crew and picked up a small shovel to collect mud samples flowing into the trough. After she dumped the rock cuttings into a bucket, she turned on the hose, and sprayed the rocks clean, pouring the cuttings into a strainer. When the rocks were thoroughly cleaned, she poured them into a small plastic cup.

Returning to the lab, she settled in her chair by the microscope and once again washed clean the rock cuttings before she poured some into a small dish. Sliding the dish under the microscope, she began her analysis.

Her eyes blinked in surprise. Straightening, she stared at the computer readout. This time there showed a slight increase of hydrocarbons detected. Not good. She glanced around at Andy working at his station.

“Andy, will you come look at this chart.”

“Sure.” Not bothering to get off his chair he wheeled over. For several minutes they both stared at the computer readout. She hit the printer button.

Jessie grabbed the printout showing the activity from two-hundred feet earlier.

She studied the chart, then the computer. “There’s definitely an increase,” she mumbled.

“I agree.” Andy rolled back to his station. “You better give Phil a call.”

Jessie had already reached for the phone. After explaining the results of the gas levels to Phil, she listened to his instructions.

“But, sir, don’t you think we should do a work-stop? All the readouts have been bouncing back and forth for a while now. It isn’t normal to have levels go up and down for no reason. I think it indicates a—” Jessica’s brows pulled tight, listening when he interrupted her. With a grimace, she hung up the receiver, and looked at Andy.

“What did he say?”

“He said to take samples every two hours and call him if there’s a larger increase.”

Andy shook his head. “What’s your take on the situation?”

“My gut says to declare a work-stop, but Phil disagrees.”

“I’m with you Jessica. You don’t wait for a problem to get worse. You find a way to solve it.”

She shrugged. “Money talks, Andy. A work-stop cost thousands of dollars.”

Two hours later, Jessica stood by the mud flowing through the trough. The drillers were straining their muscles, working to direct the pipe lowering into the wellbore.

“Jessica, what are you doing out here in the middle of the night? Something wrong?”

Looking over her shoulder at James, the night Toolpusher observed her with a worried expression. He should be, after all she had never been seen out in the middle of the night since she’d started working on the rig.

When a suspected problem like a gas leak presented itself, working around the clock was required until all safety protocols were resolved. “James, hi, I’m taking another sample. How far down are you drilling now?”

“We’ve hit forty-three hundred feet.”

Jessica slowly nodded. “Good.” Quickly spraying the rock cuttings, she had shoveled up, she glanced at the drillers situating the pipe to attach and lower. Shifting her gaze back to the Toolpusher. “James,” she lifted her voice above the drilling noise, revealing a troubled tone, “I’ve been keeping an eye on the gas levels for the past couple of days. They’ve increased. Have you smelled any gas surfacing?”

“No. I’ll let the crew know. Have you informed Phil?”

“I did. Phil wants me to check levels every two hours.” Jessica poured the rock cutting in a cup, before she took off for the lab, she paused. “James, the level raises in small increments, I recommended a work-stop, but at this point, Phil disagreed.”

“Good to know.”

Even though Jessica knew James had worked the rig a lot longer than her, yet she felt compelled to warn him. “With the detection of hydrocarbon increasing – if it continues, James, you know any static electricity or frictional heat is enough to set off a blaze.”

His concerned expression didn’t dissipate as he nodded. “Thanks Jessica, let me know of any more increases.”

Jessica hurried back to the lab to run her test.

An hour later, she sat back in her chair and stared at the computer.

“Jessica,” Andy looked up eyeing her. “Got results?” The second she indicated she did, he stood to move to her station to take a look.

A heavy sigh escaped her lips. “Another increase, but small. I’ll call Phil.”

Andy nodded and returned to his station.

After the third ring, a groggy voice answered.

“Phil, sorry to wake you, but I have another sample tested – there’s a slight increase again, not as significant as the last report two hours ago.” She glanced up at the clock. Three o’clock. She’d never worked throughout the night before. “I’ll call you with the next readout, if it’s warranted.” Jessica dropped the receiver into its cradle, staring at it.

“What did he say, Jess?”

A slight smirk pressed her lips, shaking her head. She looked at Andy. “He sounded more annoyed with me for waking him, than concerned about the gas problem.” Standing, she strolled to the closet for her gear. “I better get another readout.”

Andy shifted his frown back to his computer with a head shake.

Later, Jessica yawned, sitting at her station, waiting for the three o’clock analysis. Once the computer beeped the final read out, she pressed the print button. The gases showed another slight increase.

Since every analysis showed an increase over the last readout. She decided to send an email to Trace, thinking he should hear about the rate of increases, even though small. He’d surely read it first thing in the morning.

Jessica hit the send button and hoped she wasn’t overreacting.

Chapter 20

By six in the morning, Jessica had another mud sample analyzed. Leaning back in her chair, she yawned while keeping her eyes on the computer, waiting for the results. This took the longest – waiting for the final readout. She closed her eyes. Within seconds she felt her brain shutting down. Jerking, she shook her head and pushed to her feet. “Coffee, Andy?”

Stretching his back, he shook his head, glancing up at the wall clock. “Not for me. I’m off duty in three minutes – unless you want me to stay.”

“Nah, I’m thinking I’m wrong. When the first two spikes happened, I worried, but now the last test showed hardly any movement.”

Filling a cup, she smiled at Andy covering his yawn. He strolled over and opened the door with one last concerned look her way. “Call if you want me.”

“Will do,” she lifted her cup and took a sip of the much-needed caffeine and spit it back into the cup.

Andy laughed. “Time for a fresh brew.”

“I’d say. It’s going to be a long day.”

After brewing a pot, she poured her coffee, and slowly strolled to her station. Standing behind her chair with her eyes glued to the computer readout, she held her cup in both hands, took a sip and stretched her tired back. Suddenly, the computer chart took a jump and without warning an increase spiked shot upward. A jolt jetted through her body causing her to nearly drop her cup.

The lines on the chart revealed a massive spike in gas levels.

Shoving her cup on the side table, she grabbed the phone and punched in her boss’s birth number. This time she knew she’d wakened him, but she didn’t care. “Phil, you should come to the lab – there’s an increase. Alarmingly so – a dangerous alarm.”

In his sleepy voice, he said, “On my way.”

Jessica printed out the test results and stood reading the long sheet showing the gas levels and its rising when Trace walked in.

“Your...you’re back?”

“I got you emails. What do you have, Jessica?” he asked stepping to her side with eyes on the printout. It only took a moment for him to glance at the chart, asking, “Did you call Phil?”

“I did – he’s on his way.”

Instantly he shoved the chart into her hands and rushed to the door, stopped, and said, “When he gets here send him to the zone.” Trace swung open the door – without warning a massive boom rattled and shook the floor.

The explosion swayed the entire rig. The floor beneath her moved, causing her to grab her chair.

Trace’s alarming gaze locked with hers.

Boom. Boom.

Trace took off running. Without thinking, Jessica followed.

Stepping out, she froze. A massive cloud of black smoke and fire roared upward like a destructive dragon, shooting into the air. The thick deluge of oil spread a blackness over the platform, shocking her heartbeat upward with the smoke. She knew exactly where the explosion had come from, Zone C.

Running to catch up with Trace, he stopped so fast she bumped into him. Barely glancing at her, he hollered, “Get the hell back and get your fire retardant clothes on and hook up,” his harsh voice demanded.

“But I can help.”

“When you have your safety gear on.”

“What about you.”

“Go.”

The look in his eyes sent her running back to hurry and scrambled into her coveralls, boots, and hat and hook up to the jackline. She didn’t waste another minute but ran toward the area in danger. She hadn’t heard another explosion, hopefully that was a good sign.

Coming upon the scene, the blazing intensity stopped her feet. The crew running back and forth, trying to smother out the fire, much too close. Her gaze caught sight of Rob and Jeff helping with a water hose. Billy stood too close for comfort trying to twist open a valve. Heat from the flames and smoke whipped against Jessica’s face, filling her lungs. She coughed, wondering how she could help, knowing all along the compressed air with contained energy could rupture into another dangerous blast.

The second she started to holler she heard a deafening explosion, sending flames into the air along with several men. Wiping the smoke from her eyes, she recognized Jeff crawling to Rob. Her thumping heart didn't stop racing even when he sat up.

Trace ran to them making sure they were not harmed, he flipped around and headed toward her with a tight mouthed scowl on his face.

Without warning, it happened again – another massive explosion caught them off guard, sending bodies flying several feet in the air. Trace's protective arms flung around Jessica seconds before crashing on top of her. Her head bounced against the platform hurling a swarm of stars through her brain until she gradually opened her eyelids. Fighting for breath, she realized Trace's dead weight laid on top of her.

“Tr...”

“Jess. Mr. Brightwell.” The loud voice shot her bury gaze upward.

Though she heard her name, she couldn't suck enough air in to answer. Suddenly Rob pulled Trace off, freeing her. Taking in a lung full of smoky air, she coughed, struggling to sit up. Rob touched Trace's head and in a worried voice said, “He's been hit by debris. He's out cold.”

Coughing and shaking uncontrollably, Jessica crawled to Trace's side. Unable to stop coughing from all the smoke, she reached out to touch his bloody head. “Trace. Wake up. Trace,” she pleaded with a tremble in her voice.

The second he opened his eyes, he jerked up, grabbed his head, then looked at the blood on his hand.

“Mr. Brightwell, stay down.” Rob wiped his forehead. “You've been injured.”

Trace glanced beyond Rob at the roaring fire spitting upward. He hollered, “Get the hose. Let's get the fire under control. Use the foam. Move,” he yelled, pushing to his feet.

Jessica felt his hand on her shaking shoulder. “Jessie, are you hurt?”

The instant she shook her head, he took off to help douse the fire before another explosion occurred. Fear covered Jessica's face when she glanced toward the bellowing flames. “Please don't let another explosion happen.”

Her gaze drifted down to a body too close to the fire, almost consumed by black smoke.

“Billy,” the unrecognizable shrill voice came from her own mouth.

With a jolt she leaped to her feet and took off at the same moment Trace rushed to him. Trace stooped to rest his hand on the side of his throat. He mumbled, “He's not breathing.”

Jessica hollered, “Billy.” Dropping to his side she held his head in her lap with tears running down her cheeks. Trace’s piercing eyes drilled into hers when he dropped on his knees. “Trace, he...he isn’t breathing.”

Immediately, he compressed Billy’s heart, shot Jessica a demanding glare. She didn’t have to be told, instantly, she pinched his nose and breathed into his mouth.

“Boss,” Phil squatted next to Trace. “The coastguard just arrived.”

They continued to repeat the CPR until the coastguard took over.

Jessica dropped back on her butt, covered her mouth, unable to take a deep breath in fear they were too late. “Billy,” she whispered, “You have a newborn to live for...breathe. His pale face looked lifeless. She squeezed her eyes shut and whispered, “Breathe, breathe, breathe, Billy...your baby can’t grow up without his dad.”

A couple of minutes later, Jessica peeked through her heavy eyelids when she heard the coastguard medic stand.

He said, “He’s breathing.” Turning to his co-worker, he ordered, “Put the oxygen mask on and let’s get him to the hospital.”

She pushed to her feet. “Will he make it?”

“Sorry ma’am,” he shook his head, “He’s alive for now and breathing on his own. He has a bad burn, but for now, he’s stable. We’ll transfer him to the hospital as quickly as possible. They’ll check for more injures.”

“Understood.” Trace said.

Tears slid from Jessica’s eyes while watching the coastguards carry him to their boat. She turned her watery eyes on Trace. This time, Trace didn’t wipe away her tears with concern in his gaze, instead, his gray eyes were hard with condemnation.

Trace turned away in a huff and hurried to the area where the smoke still billowed up from the doused fire.

She blinked. Coughed. Her lungs felt stifled with smoke. She swung her head to set eyes on the heavy black cloud covering the damage the explosion had caused. Thank goodness the foam spray had done the trick. A catastrophic disaster had been averted. Jessica understood how frightened Trace felt. They all had been frightened. Her entire body still trembled.

She wiped the palm of her hand over her cheek. Like everyone else, black residue from the fire probably smeared her face too. Black soot had streaked Trace’s face but the thing hurting the

most – his accusing gray eyes stabbing a sharp blade through her heart. He blamed her. She read it in his expression. Did he think she was the one responsible for the disaster and nearly killing Billy?

Suddenly, a swift wind pushed against her. Turning, she stared out toward the landing pad.

Jessica watched the helicopter touchdown on the pad. A little late for Billy since the Coastguard took off with him minutes ago. Her gritty eyelids blinked, making out Thomas Brightwell dropping down out of the bird. Her gaze shifted to Trace's long strides hurrying him to his dad. Pausing to talk, probably over the cause or blame, she noticed Trace's angry stance. He darted a glance her way. Even with soot covering his face, she could tell they were discussing her.

Did she blame herself. Could she have done something to prevent this disaster? Jessica shifted her gaze back to assess the damage. Black smoke bellowed out from the drilling pipe, but no signs of fire. Phil stood talking to James, more than likely trying to figure out why it all happened. Nothing more for her to do, she turned to make her way to the lab.

Rubbing the palm of her hand against her wet cheek she felt the grit and dirt on her skin, smudged with black smoke as Trace and the other drillers were. The smoke hadn't dissipated, and the stifling air still made it difficult to breathe.

"Jessica," Trace stepped up to her. Looking around, she recognized his distress and something else in his eyes. Concern? No, remorse? Why? A sinking feeling in her stomach set off alarms. "Trace, is it all under control?" She coughed, realizing she had called him by his first name.

He looked at her. "It is, but we were lucky. Dad said you should have called a work-stop."

Behind the dark smudges surrounding his eyes, she could tell, he had to blame someone, and she happened to be the person. When she opened her mouth to explain, she pressed her lips, realizing it wouldn't matter what she said at this point. Brightwell needed a scapegoat.

"I'm sorry Jessica. Dad said for you to gather your belongings and leave while the helicopter is here." He turned to leave, and without looking at her, said, "You have ten minutes."

Stunned, she stood staring at his back while he walked away. Taking in a deep breath, she coughed. It wasn't right. How could he blame her? She'd done her job. Slowly, she turned to do as told. No point in arguing with him. In a disaster, fear ruled, and they had to have someone to blame.

Fighting back tears, she rushed to her birth, gathered a few items in her overnight bag and hurried to the lab

Jon waited for her with a grim look. Without saying a word, he helped with her bags. Before climbing in, Jessica glanced over her shoulder at the crew cleaning up and completing their task to make sure no more leaks happened. Her gaze paused when Jeff and Rob waved at her with sad expressions. They knew the truth. After a quick wave, she climbed into the helicopter and in no time felt it lift off. Her lips trembled. She kept her gaze on the men and the platform growing smaller the further away as they flew, taking her away from her friends and the life she'd known for more than a year.

Chapter 21

Two hours later, Jessie stood in her apartment, exhausted. All the chaos, only a few hours ago, seemed days ago, and yet, the wall clock showed a few minutes past noon. What happens now? Life changes in a second. Her life changed the second David died. Now again with an explosion. No one has total control over their life. What direction did life want her to take from here?

Sobs echoed through her flood of tears. Leaning against the bar she slid down to the floor and hugged her arms around her chest. Several minutes passed before she finally hiccupped and wiped her eyes.

She thought about calling Amy and reached for her phone. Too emotional, she threw the phone over on the sofa and took a deep breath through her nose, sniffing. Her clothes reeked of smoke. Phew. She smelled smokey. Shower first. With a heavy heart, she made her way to the bathroom and caught her reflection in the mirror. Her gaze circled her face. Telltale signs of soot still lingered on her skin. Her red eyes lifted to the wig she wore, smelling of smoke. She had jerked the ugly glasses off her face the second she'd crawled into the helicopter. Now, grabbing the wig, she yanked it off and tossed it in the garbage can.

In an obstinate tone, she said, "You're Jessica Tucker. No one else. Jessie's your nickname. All the people that matter and love you – your friends and family call you Jessie. Never again will you pretend to be someone different."

Quickly showering, she hurried out to dry her hair, and pull on a pair of jeans and a pullover sweater.

Jessie poured a cup of coffee, grabbed her phone to call the hospital. Once she inquired about Billy's condition which turned out serious, but not life threatening she released a relieved sigh. The nurse wouldn't give her more information because she wasn't a family member.

She plopped down on the sofa and punched in Amy's number and waited for her to answer. She switched on the television.

Her gaze caught the news showing a video of the fire on the Brightwell Oil Rig. She listened. *An investigation will be conducted to pinpoint the reason for the explosion.*

"Hey girl. What's up, you rarely ever call while working on the rig."

Jessie flipped off the television. "I'm...Amy...I...oh, Amy, have you seen the news? An explosion happened on the rig this morning..." Jessie covered her mouth, trying to stop the sob, but didn't quite make it, "...they," she sobbed, "...they blamed me." She thought she had emptied her tear well, but a flood rolled down her cheeks.

"Jessie. Honey, are you hurt?"

"Nooo...oh Amy, they fired me."

"What? Sweetie, I'm coming over."

She nodded, wiping away a tear. "Will you bring Riggs."

"Of course, dear. I won't be long."

Jessie clicked off her phone, wiped the tears away and sipped her coffee.

A good fifteen minutes later, when a knock sounded, Jessie ran to the door expecting Amy, but instead when she pulled the door wide, she confronted the sympathetic faces of Candace and Kim. They shoved their way in to give her a group hug. Again, tears rolled down her cheeks. Fighting to control her emotions, she led them to the sofa. "Amy's on her way," Candace's soft voice mumbled.

In another few minutes Amy showed up with two bottles of Chardonnay.

After a tight hug from Amy, Jessie dropped to give Riggs a kiss on the nose and a hug. Returning to the sofa, Riggs curled up next to her as if detecting her sadness.

While Candace and Kim gathered glasses, Amy opened the bottle and filled each one with wine, except Candace's glass was filled with water. They settled down to hear the entire story of what went on hours ago.

Between sobs and tears, Jessie explained the chaos surrounding the explosion and her dismissal.

Riggs stood, looking at her, then licked a tear from her cheek. Jessie smiled. "It okay, Riggs. Come," she patted the seat next to her on the sofa, "I'm okay." He laid down resting his head on her lap but lifted his round brown eyes up into hers to make sure.

"Ah, what a sweetie." Kim took a sip of wine. Candace and Amy took a drink, but the room filled with silence.

Jessie wiped her hands down her wet cheeks, smiled at the girls and said, "Let's discuss something more positive and no more about my problems."

"Sounds good," Amy held up her glass, and said, "What about Christmas?"

“Yes,” Kim chimed in, “Jessie, will you go home for Christmas now?”

“Christmas.” Jessie’s shoulders drooped. “I haven’t had time to think about it.”

Candace rubbed her swollen belly. “Maybe you’ll be here when the baby come.”

“I hope so.”

“Jessie, what are you going to do now you’re unemployed? Geez, I guess you haven’t had a chance to think about it or anything.”

“No, I have. Last week, I applied for the position at the Petroleum Science Lab. They want an interview right after Christmas.” She rubbed her forehead. “If they hear I’ve been fired, they might not want me. If it happens, I guess I’ll have to step back and rethink my future as a geologist.”

When the two bottles of wine had disappeared, and all conversation about what direction Jessie could take in her career, the women stood to leave. Hugging her, Amy said, “Call if you need to talk.”

Candace hugged her. “We’ll talk later. Keep your chin up.”

Kim wrapped her arms around her, and said, “I *ditto* everything the girls have said. Remember, we love you, and we’re here for you, day or night.”

Jess gave them one last wave as they walked to the elevator, shut the door, and turned to study Riggs, sleeping soundly on the sofa. “You look like you’re happy to be home.”

Strolling over, she poured a much-needed cup of caffeine after the wine she drank with her friends. Not sure what to do with herself, she sat on the sofa soaking in the subtle Christmas lights and the Christmas music of Kenny G, reminding her of Trace. Not wanting to think about Trace, she thought back over the early morning chaos. Should she have done something different to prevent the explosion?

What could she have done? Didn’t she warn Phil and tell him to call a work-stop, didn’t she warn the night foremen, didn’t she send an email to Trace about the increases. Should she have been the one to call a work-stop. No one wants to call a work-stop and risk getting in trouble if nothing wrong happens. It cost thousands of dollars, main reason no one takes the initiative.

For several minutes she sat quietly listening to the Christmas music.

Riggs raised his head and nudged her arm.

“Well, hello boy. Did you enjoy your nap? Good for you. I’m sure it’s been exhausting for you staying at Amy’s house. Those kids wore you out, didn’t they?”

He nudged her arm again.

She frowned. "What? What do you want?" Staring at him, she wondered, "Are you hungry?" She straightened. "Oh my. Do you have to pee?"

He whined, wagging his tail.

Jessie hooked his harness on along with the leash and grabbed a jacket. Hurrying down the elevator and out the door, she headed him toward the park. Unable to wait, Riggs stopped to pee on her neighbor's bush before she could go any further.

"Good grief, you had to go. Another minute, I'm sure you'd had an accident. I'm sorry. You know, this relationship is still new to me too. We'll have to get to know each other. I promise I'll remember to walk you several times a day so you can pee. Oh, and do your business."

For a long time, Jessie meandered around the park path, letting Riggs pause to smell, lift his leg, walk a little, smell, lift his leg, and walk again. Blue skies and sunshine should lift her spirit, but her mind kept drifting back to the morning disaster. Retracing her steps, she headed toward her apartment building. "I think you've peed a dozen times, Riggs. The well should be dried by now. Ready to go in?"

Strolling along the sidewalk toward her building, she glanced ahead and stopped dead in her tracks. Trace stepped out of her building and paused. He seemed to be waiting. She moved further into the shadows of her apartment building. Her gaze darted at Riggs. He seemed to be preoccupied with smelling the multiple senses around the bushes.

She stared at Trace with his phone pressed against his ear, while opening the car door. Just as he got inside and slammed the door shut, Jessie's phone rang out.

Oh my gosh. Her jaws clamped when she stared at her phone. Did he think *Jessica* wanted to talk to him? She watched the car pull out, driving off. She didn't move until the red dots of the taillights disappeared in the distance.

Chapter 22

After the unexpected appearance of Trace, Jessie entered her building and shot up the three flights of stairs to her door. Short of breath, she looked down at Riggs breathing heavy too.

“Oh, poor boy, I'm so sorry. Did I overdo it? You haven't made a complete comeback, have you? We'll take it easy for another week, afterward we'll enjoy hiking and later, jogging. For now, no more running upstairs.” Once inside, she unhooked his harness and leash giving him his freedom. He ran straight to the water bowl.

To sooth her nerves, she opted for a cup of tea and music to relax the tension he'd caused. He, being Trace. Rubbing her neck muscles, she reached for the television clicker to turn on the Christmas music station. One thing for sure, she didn't want to listen to more news about the oil rig catastrophe. According to the news, Billy had survived with a few burns and a concussion, and the best news she'd heard, the doctors were able to save a severely damaged eye. She'd wait until tomorrow to go to the hospital to visit him.

When her phone rang, she half expected it to be Trace, but instead, her eyes widened in surprise. Why would Petroleum Lab be calling her? Of course, they had heard about the fire. They probably knew she'd lost her job and decided not to interview her. Clearing her throat, she answered the phone with a pleasant tone.

Within minutes, she hung up and released an encouraging smile for the first time all day. Sitting on the sofa, she took a sip of tea. Riggs jumped up next to her, bumped against her to settle down causing her to quickly lift her cup to avoid a hot spill on her and the sofa. “Well, make yourself at home. Does this mean you're the boss around here now?”

His gentle eyes looked up at her. With a wide yawn, he laid his head against her leg and closed his eyes.

Her phone rang again. Glancing at the caller, a sharp guilty pang shot through her. She should have called earlier. “Hi mom, no no... I'm not. Yes, it was horrible, but I'm okay.” They were fishing for some reassurance their daughter didn't get hurt.

Jessie sipped her tea, and on her parents' insistence, launched into her morning and the near disaster. “Yes, the explosion was frightening, scary...” She reassured her parents, “Mom, the

disaster would have been worse if it hadn't been for the quick actions of all the crew members." When her mother asked how long before she'd go back to the rig, she took a swallow of tea, sucked in a breath, and finally admitted in a slight disturbed tone, "I won't be going back. I've been dismissed."

Her father's gruff voice sounded through the speaker. "They're wrong. You know your job. Honey, it wasn't your fault."

A slight smile spread her lips. Her parents hadn't heard the whole story and yet they believed in her.

"You hang in there, sweetie. The truth will come out or they'll have to answer to me. They're looking for a scapegoat and you're not going to be theirs."

"Thanks Dad. I love you both. And I did do my job. You're probably right dad. They need a scapegoat."

"Well, you're not it. Look on the bright side. Now, you can have Christmas with your family."

After a few encouraging words, Jessie promised to let them know if she'd be home for Christmas. A tight expression formed when she hung up. Hopefully, she convinced them she was fine. Did she feel fine? Not only had she lost her job, but they also blamed her for the accident. No one bothered to ask if she'd followed protocol. She had. Hadn't she? On the bright side, she still had an interview with the petroleum company the next morning.

For the third time, her phone rang again. Trace's name appeared. She tossed it to the other end of the sofa. Riggs's head popped up to give her a 'what' look. She patted his head. "Jessica doesn't want to talk to him. Besides, he's only calling to get ahold of Jessie."

The next morning Jessie slipped on a pair of leggings with a gray pullover sweater. The color reminded her of Trace's gray seductive eyes. Immediately dismissing the thought, she hooked up Riggs for their walk. "Come on boy, this has to be a habit *you'll do every day*, oops – not *you, me...I've got* to form a habit of early morning walks, now that you're my roommate. I suppose there's no more sleeping in, huh?" Giving Riggs a kiss on the nose, she said, "Besides, it a healthy habit to walk every day."

Returning from their walk, Jessie dressed in a smart professional outfit to hopefully make an impression at her interview, along with her knowledge as a geologist. She pulled on a black form

fitted straight skirt and chose a soft red cashmere cowl pullover sweater with Lantern sleeves and fitted cuffs. She studied herself in the mirror. After an approving nod, she hurried into her closet to choose a pair of suede booties with three and a half inch heels adorned with a gold chain down the side. One more observation of herself in the mirror, she shifted her gaze to Riggs, who had made himself comfortable on the bed, watching her every move.

“What do you think? Do I look professional enough?”

Woof.

“Right, I'll take your word for it.” She kissed him on the top of his head, and said, “Don't pee, done poop, don't puke in our house while I'm gone. Be a good boy.”

Jessie sat in front of a large mahogany desk in a plush office overlooking Savannah. The door opened drawing her gaze around to the distinguished looking man strolling in. His friendly smile drew her lips into a thin line to return his greeting smile.

“Miss Tucker,” he stepped near with his hand out, “I'm glad you were able to come on such short notice. I'm Jonathan Holloway.”

She shook his firm hand. “Mr. Holloway.” She said but opted to let his comment or remark slide. He settled in his luxurious office chair behind the desk, shoved a file aside, rested his forearms on the desktop and clasped his hands together.

His warm brown eyes connected with hers. “I received your application, and I must say, I'm impressed. So much so I did a background check on you, and even searched you out on social media.”

Jessie stared at him. No one had ever admitted to checking her social media before. She knew of course employers did, at least, she'd heard stories of people being fired for what they put on their social medias. It didn't matter – she had nothing to hide.

“I assume you're still interested in the position since you're here. You'd be working with one of our top scientists in the geology department.”

Sitting straight, she tried to keep a blank expression. Resting her hands in her lap, she laced her fingers and nodded. Of course, she's still interested in the position, otherwise she wouldn't be here. But...geez...hadn't he watched the news about the fire? If they hired her and discovered Brightwell blamed her, they'd probably fire her. Wow, she'd make a first-time record – fired

from two jobs in less than a month, or week, or a day. Whatever. Honesty. Best approach. Be upfront.

“Mr. Holloway,” she swallowed, and with confident stated, “I’m very much interested in the job and would love to work for your company.”

When he started to say something, she held up her hand to halt his words. “Before you make a decision about hiring me or not, I want to tell you about my last job.” Her gaze followed his hand when he pulled the file over in front him and glanced inside.

“Yes,” he stared at the opened file. “Brightwell Oil.

She felt his eyes on her. “I’m acquainted with Thomas Brightwell.”

“Right,” she lifted her head and looked him straight in the eyes. “I’m sure you’ve heard about the explosion yesterday and the fire on the rig. They blamed me and...I...I—they fired me yesterday. I no longer work for the Brightwell company.”

Again, he stared down at the file for several long minutes before his kind eyes lifted to meet hers. “I did see the story on the news. They said one person is in the hospital. Sounds like they were lucky none of the others were injured.”

“I’m thankful none were. A few bumps and bruises, but none injured as bad as Billy. The crew hurried to get the fire under control and avoided a catastrophic disaster.”

He stood, strolled around, and sat on the edge of his desk, looking her directly in her eyes, he asked, “Are you to blame?”

Returning his stare, she suddenly drew her brows together and rubbed her forehead, recalling the terrible feelings the explosion caused. Squaring her shoulders, she met his gaze. “I did my job, but if I had insisted on a work-stop, maybe...maybe it wouldn't have happened.”

“Are you second guessing yourself now? You said you did your job. Did you?”

“I did.”

“Well,” he stood and strolled back to his seat. “Thank you for your honesty. It took guts to mention the rig explosion.” He gave an approving smile, or did the smile mean something else - a rejection now he knew she had been fired.

“I’ll be honest with you. You’re probably wondering how I knew you were available for an interview instead of the first of the New Year. I called Thomas Brightwell when I heard about the explosion. He had several positive things to say about you. Plus, the fact that you were fired, and he added you were fired against his son’s disapproval. Ms. Tucker, I understand how a

work-stop can cost an oil company thousands of dollars. Many have lost their job by calling an unwarranted work-stop. This causes many to hesitate, and that's dangerous. You can't second guess a disaster. Usually there's warning signs you shouldn't ignore."

Geez, Trace had taken her side. Yet, she had been fired. Probably couldn't go against his dad's orders.

Mr. Holloway stood, held out his hand to shake hers. "I'll give you a call tomorrow morning."

Jessie stood, accepted his hand, and said, "Thank you, Mr. Holloway." Somewhat relieved, she hurried her steps to leave the building. Safely inside her jeep, she locked the doors and struggled to breathe deeply to calm her trembling body. She hadn't realized how nervous she'd been holding her body still throughout the interview. Every muscle in her body ached. Breathing deeply, she held her breath before releasing it and counting to ten.

Better. Switching on the jeep, she thought about the interview. He'll call tomorrow. What did he mean? She knew what it meant. *Thomas Brightwell*. She didn't have to guess. His next conference call would probably be with her former employer, again, before making up his mind.

Chapter 23

An hour later, Jessie stepped into the hospital elevator, touched the third-floor button while allowing her mind to drift back over the interview with Mr. Holloway. She'd try not to get her hopes up for the job, but she needed, no wanted, the job. Besides being a perfect job for her, the position kept her in Savannah. Otherwise, she'd have to look elsewhere and move. Something she didn't want to do.

A ding sounded stopping on the third floor of the hospital. When the doors slid open, she stepped out into the space of Trace Brightwell. Taken by surprise, she stepped back. She didn't miss the astounded recognition on his face before it faded into a pleased look, followed by a wide grin.

"Jessie—"

Catching her breath, she blinked, connecting eyes with him. "Trace." Her gaze averted his questioning gray eyes.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Visiting a friend," she mumbled with a casual shrug, glancing down the hallway.

A sincere worry crossed his face. "Is it Candace?"

"No, not Candace."

When she finally brought her gaze to his, they stood for several seconds staring at each other. Refusing to fall into his trap, she pulled her gaze away and stepped to the side. "I must go see my friend." She felt his hand on her arm.

"Jessie, can we talk? Have coffee with me."

"I can't."

"Please."

"No," she jerked her arm away, turned to walk down the corridor, and heard him say, "Jessie."

She paused.

In a deep serious business tone, he said, "Please, tell Jessica she's required to be at the hearing in the morning."

Her head whipped around. "Where?"

“In the office building – board room. I tried calling, but *she* doesn’t answer. I...I don’t blame *her*, but it’s important *she* comes to the meeting.”

Without saying another word, she twisted back around and forced her steps to move at a normal pace while all along her body demanded her to run – get out of his sight. From the disappointment in his gaze, she blinked to rid the tears forming against her eyelids. Nope. Jessica is not attending the board meeting. She’s done.

Stopping in front of Billy’s door, she wiped her damp eyes before knocking. She entered when a voiced said to come in. Plastering a broad smile on her lips, she peeked in and said, “Hi.”

Billy’s lop-sided smile aimed her way as soon as he set eyes on her. “Wow, Jess, I love your new hairdo and color. What did you do? Get contacts?” His eyes widened. “You’re beautiful.”

“Oh Billy,” Jessie felt her face heat from embarrassment. She hurried to him and took his hand. Her gaze traveled over the wide bandage coving one side of his face, including his eye. She didn’t dare ask about his eye.

Her phone rang. Pulling it from her purse, she stared at Trace’s name. Clicking off, she looked at Billy. “I’m sorry. Billy, are you...are you–”

“I’m going to be all right, Jess. I’m glad to see you even if it’s with one eye.” He chuckled, reached up and touched the bandage area. “Literally.” He gave her another grin. “A few scars from the burn, but I’ll be able to see. The doctor covered my eye to give it rest and time to heal. Fragments from the explosion left a large scratch on my eyeball.”

Tears blurred her vision. “I’m relieved to hear such good news. You scared me to death, Billy.” Squeezing his hand, she said, “I’m sorry. It’s all my fault.”

He shook his head. “Nope, not going there. It wasn’t your fault. Besides, they tell me I can leave the hospital in a couple of days. By the way, you just missed Mr. Brightwell. He assured me the company will handle my hospital bills. Which is a relief to hear. You know – new baby adds more bills to the household.”

“Of course.” She grinned at the young man. “I’m thrilled you’re doing so well. Is there anything I can do for you? Get you?”

“No, nothing. Clare brings me anything I want.”

“How’s your baby and Clare doing? I can’t imagine how frightened she must have been when she heard you were in the hospital.”

“Yeah, talk about one upset woman. Wow. She caught the news about the explosion on the television minutes before she received a phone call about me being rushed to the hospital. Of course, she imagined the worse until she found out it wasn’t life threatening, she’s thankful I didn’t lose my eye. Me too. My boy’s great. I want you to see him.”

“I tell you what, when you’re out of the hospital and up to it, I’ll come by your house. I owe your baby boy a present anyway.”

“I heard there’s a hearing tomorrow about the explosion. They must have found out the cause.”

“I’m sure they did. Mr. Brightwell will probably keep you updated.” Jessie didn’t see any point in telling him they blamed her for nearly causing his death. He’d find out soon enough about her dismissal. Afterward, he might not want her to see his boy.

“Well, I better go and let you get some rest. I’ll call when you get home and come by to see you, Clare, and your newborn.” Jessie squeezed his hand again and stepped to the door.

“Jess, I really love your hair. It looks natural. I’m thinking you should have been a blonde all along.”

Giving him a big grin, she waved goodbye, and slipped out the door.

While Trace held the elevator doors open, he watched Jessie walk down the same hallway he’d just come from his visit with Billy. She was the last person he expected to see when she stepped out of the elevator. It shocked him. When he went to step into the elevator, he hesitated. Hmm. He took a turn and slowly headed in her direction. When she disappeared around the corner, he paused.

What’s he doing, stalking her?

No, he wanted to wait for her and try to convince her to at least talk to him. She’d surprised him when they bumped into each other seconds ago. She’d been surprised too. He saw it in her eyes, she didn’t cover her feelings for him quick enough. Why did she suddenly reject him? If she had told him to get lost after he fired Jessica, he’d understand, but it had been something else holding her back from being honest with him. It had to be the deception she was living.

Determination spread over his face, moving his feet down the hallway nearing Billy’s room.

She's visiting a friend. Maybe he should wait by the elevator. When he turned to retrace his steps, he glanced into the door window of Billy's room, and stopped. Jessie sat next to Billy, holding his hand. Her familiar smile told him she knew him. Of course, she did...

His brows pulled tight. How did Jessie know Billy? If Jessie came to visit him, wouldn't Jessica come too. He remembered Jessica's tear-stained face when she thought him dead. He shook his head.

His eyes glued to Jessie through the window. He snatched his phone out of his pocket and hit Jessica's number. The moment he heard it ring, he watched Jessie reach for her phone and look at it. Immediately, she clicked it off and dumped it in her purse – his phone went dead. Jessie, Jessie, Jessie, why the deception?

Slowly moving away from the door, he whirled and hurried to the elevator. Jessie didn't have a twin because they were the same person. Why? Why had she lied to him all this time? His blood boiled. She'd played him, made him fall in love with Jessie when all the time she's Jessica.

Jerking his car door open, he dropped down on the seat and started the engine. Slapping the palm of his hand against the steering wheel, he shook his head and chuckled. What a dump-ass. He should have seen the signs long before Rick opened his eyes. Jessie didn't have a phone – what excuse did she have? She lost it? Sure. He'd have to call Jessica. Of course.

Driving home he finally stopped cursing himself for being such a fool and started wondering why she had hidden her identity. Making his way into his apartment, he sat down at his desk and turned on his computer. After doing a social media search, he stared at Jessie's face with Amy, Kim, and Candace at their favorite pizza joint. Further down, he viewed her parents sitting near a Christmas tree – just the three of them – and, the sister he'd met, Jenna. Not another daughter in all the family pictures.

Suddenly he paused, staring at a picture of Jessie's bright happy face kneeling next to the dog, Riggs, licking her cheek. For the longest time, he stared at it. Several other family pictures of them together, some with her nieces and sister, Jenna. None with a twin sister named Jessica.

He scrolled back up to Jessie's bright smiling face, enjoying the affection the dog showered on her.

Right after he'd dismissed Jessica, rather fired her, he'd watched Jessica climb into the helicopter with remorse. It didn't seem right for his dad to blame her. An investigation should happen first. Trace wasn't the son that argued with his dad, maybe this time he should have.

Dropping back, Trace rested his head against the sofa. Billy didn't appear to be surprised at seeing Jessie, instead of Jessica with chestnut brown hair and hideous black rimmed glasses. She held his hand as if he knew her all along. Did the rest of the crew know? Was he the only one deceived? Why wouldn't she tell him? Why did she pretend to be someone else?

When he first went to her apartment, why didn't she admit being Jessica? He shifted his gaze to the Christmas tree he had bought because of her. Slowly getting up, he strolled over and turned on the tree lights. She's probably home now with her tree lights twinkling and Christmas music flowing through her place. They had enjoyed a quiet evening drinking wine. He'd kissed her. Her lips were full, soft, enticing, he wanted more, but had been afraid of moving too fast. He didn't require time to know how he felt about her.

She had lied. Why? Why can't he forget about her? Would she show up at the hearing tomorrow? Why should she? He'd blamed her for the accident. She should have called a work-stop. Deep down, he didn't blame her. More his fault. She'd sent him the reports showing the increases. He should have...what? Called a work-stop earlier? She'd done her job. His dad lost his temper and jumped to a decision too fast thinking she should have done her job and called a work-stop. He didn't agree, but his dad always had the last word.

Chapter 24

By eight o'clock the next morning, Trace sat at the conference table with those requested to attend, including the foreman, Phil, and the night Toolpusher, James. The company's attorney, Mr. Manning and his assistant sat at one end of the table, along with his father.

Trace sat next to his father and couldn't stop glancing at the door, but when the time came to start the meeting, Jessica hadn't appeared. He didn't blame her. Why should she? Of course, she'd be the scapegoat in this disaster which could have been so much worse? She'd been fired. He had fired her. His father had demanded her to be fired. Why would she not attend the meeting to defend herself?

The attorney, Mr. Manning spoke up reading through the investigation results on the rig explosion. He addressed the dialog recorded from each person sitting at the table, except for Jessica Tucker, who happened to be unavailable.

The attorney spread the table with the printouts showing the increases as he explained his findings. "The data showed the increases for several consecutive days which should have warned the mudlogger, Jessica Tucker, of the coming danger. A disaster of this magnitude should have been avoided but has cost hundreds of thousands of dollars."

He looked at Mr. Brightwell for confirmation, then continued. "Human error led to the damage done, including one injured person. All could have been averted if Ms. Tucker had done her job."

When the door opened, Trace shot his gaze in its direction, expecting Jessica, but instead his father's secretary quietly walked in. Making her way to his father, she leaned near him, and whispered in his ear.

Trace watched with curious concern. What's important enough to cause her to interrupt a meeting.

His father listened intently, nodded, and stood. "If you'll excuse the interruption, I'll take a moment to deal with a matter at hand."

Since his father didn't ask him to follow, Trace kept his seat and shrugged a shoulder when all eyes aimed his way. He took the opportunity to glance at his phone, hoping he'd get a call from Jessie, or Jessica. Nothing. Would she answer if he texted her? Probably not.

Several minutes dragged by long enough for Trace to feel some apprehension. Those around the table began to get restless. He stood to go look for his father.

The door opened. Thomas Brightwell entered.

All eyes darted his way. Trace took his seat.

Suddenly, a crowd of men followed his father into the conference room. Gathering around the wall, they looked displeased and serious. They were on a mission.

Trace recognized each one of them. What were they up to? Trace turned his attention to his father taking a seat.

Thomas Brightwell directed his gaze to the men around the table, and in his authoritative voice said, "Gentlemen, meet the crew members of the Brightwell Oil Company. Many of these men have worked with Jessica Tucker for over a year. Since she's been dismissed, and...accused, they have come to testify on her behalf."

The attorney, looking annoyed, said, "Mr. Brightwell, in all due respect, as your attorney, I've completed the investigation with a conclusion being human error by Jessica Tucker."

"I understand. Mr. Manning. You questioned each person sitting at the table, did you not?"

"Correct."

Mr. Brightwell looked directly at his attorney. "Take a look at each man standing and tell me which one you questioned regarding the accident."

The attorney looked at the men, taking his time before returning his gaze to Mr. Brightwell. "Sir, none. We didn't feel it necessary since communication happened between the mudlogger, the foreman and the toolpusher. I might add we also questioned your son, about the emails Miss Tucker sent him."

Mr. Brightwell sighed. With a strong head shake, he lifted his disgusted glare toward Mr. Manning and his assistant. "I thank you for your input, Mr. Manning, but for now, you're dismissed."

"Sir?"

"We're done here. What I have to say is between my employees and me."

The company attorney stood, gathered his papers, and objected to not being included. "Sir, as your company attorney, I should hear their testimony."

With a flip of his hand, Mr. Brightwell ordered, "Please take your leave."

Trace noticed the infuriated man, clearly upset with his client, walk flat footed to the door. At the same time, Bertha, his dad's secretary strolled in again, all business, gave a nod to his dad and sat apart from the table with her recorder, a pad and pencil. Ready to record and dictate. Trace's questioning glance studied his dad.

The owner of Brightwell Oil Company scanned the entire room of employees, before he quietly said, "I have a few questions to ask." Mr. Brightwell's piercing gaze aimed at his foreman. "Phil, did Jessica request a work-stop?"

For several seconds Phil stared at his boss. Finally, he diverted his gaze and looked at James sitting next to him. He said, "Yes sir, she did...but, I...I didn't think the test results were alarming enough."

"When did she request the work-stop?"

"Sir, I... I don't recall."

Mr. Brightwell picked up a stack of papers. "I have a paper trail." He cleared his throat, glanced at the group standing along the wall. Shifting his focus on the paper he held up, he said, "Day one. Ms. Tucker reported a slight increase in gas levels. She reported it to Trace through this email." He held up the paper and looked at his son.

Trace nodded. "At the time it appeared to be sweet gas. Nothing alarming."

Mr. Brightwell continued, bringing his gaze back to the group in front of him.

"Day Two. Ms. Tucker again reported an increase to Phil, and according to Andy, she said she believed a warning issue needed to be dealt with. She sent another report to Trace through another email, showing increases, although small." He paused.

"Do you agree with this Phil?"

"I do."

"Day Three." Mr. Brightwell turned his gaze up to Andy, leaning against the wall. "Did you agree with Miss Tucker there might be a problem? Did she work through the night to keep close tabs on the test results from Zone C?"

He pushed away from the wall with a nod. "I do, Sir."

“Andy,” continued his boss, “You witnessed that she worked through the night collecting cutting samples from Zone C?”

“Yes, she did.”

He looked directly at James. “Did you talk to Miss Tucker during your night shift?”

Without hesitating he nodded. “I did. She told me about the spikes. I asked if she had reported to Phil. She had and he told her to keep an eye on it. She also warned me if the levels kept spiking, the danger increased, which we all know.”

Mr. Brightwell turned his gaze on his son. “Did you get another report from Jessica?”

“I did, early – about four in the morning. The report worried me enough I woke Jon. He flew me to the rig. I got there somewhere around six in the morning.”

His father lifted his brows. “Day Four. Morning of the explosion. Did you find Miss Tucker still working?”

Trace slowly nodded. “I walked into the lab where Jessica had finished printing out the report to show Phil. She had called him earlier. He was on his way. One look at her expression, I knew a genuine problem needed addressing. The explosion happened before I could call a work-stop.” Trace watched his father stare at the papers in his hand.

Mr. Brightwell took in a deep breath and slowly stood. “I agree with Mr. Manning, this incident happened because of human error. As you all know, I dismissed Miss Tucker because of incompetence...”

An opposed grumble filled the room from the group standing against the wall.

The man held up his hand. “Let me finish.”

The room quieted.

“I want to thank you men for coming today to back up your coworker. I should not have dismissed Ms. Tucker before a thorough investigation. My only excuse is how frightened I felt for your safety and for what could have been a catastrophic disaster with loss of lives. I’m thankful Billy will be able to return to the rig in a few weeks.”

He turned to Trace. “I should have listened to Trace. He adamantly tried to get me to not fire Ms. Tucker, but he did so under my orders. Now, I want to send all of you home for Christmas...”

An exciting buzz sifted through the room.

“Dad,” Trace’s shocked tone chided, “How? The company can’t afford a shutdown for four days.”

“No, I have a crew coming in to continue the drilling until the twenty-ninth. Men, you’re due back to work on that date.” His dad grinned. Trace blinked. His dad never grinned. The moment he thought it, his dad turned a serious look at the group. “While home with your families, I want you to think about how this company can avoid another situation like this one. I understand how reluctant one would be to call a work-stop, after all, it does cost an ungodly amount of money to stop the drills. Men have been fired for calling a work-stop when it turned out false.”

Mr. Brightwell stepped to each man, shaking their hand, saying. “I want your opinion on the matter. We’ll have a meeting on the rig after the holidays. Go home and enjoy your family during the blessed holiday.”

“Sir,” Andy stepped forward, asking the question everyone had on their mind. “Sir, what about Jess...ah...Miss Tucker?”

Mr. Brightwell shook the last crew member’s hand and strolled to the door. He opened it, looking at the group. “I intend on apologizing and asking her to come back to work.”

When the room emptied, he turned to his son. “Are we good?”

Trace stepped to his dad and circled his arms around him to give him a hug, something he hadn’t done for a long time.

“Do you think Miss Tucker will accept my apology and return?”

“I don’t know, Dad. I’ll see if I can talk to her.”

Chapter 25

Jessie poured a cup of steamy black coffee, turned on her Christmas music and curled up on the sofa next to Riggs. She stared at the Christmas lights twinkling on her tree. Her entire body had been on pins and needles, waiting all morning for a call from Mr. Holloway. Her gaze darted at the wall clock again for the tenth time. It proved to show how the hours continued to move toward the afternoon. Still no call.

Her phone rang.

She jumped. So did Riggs.

“Oh hi, Amy. Sure, why not. I’ll be there in fifteen.” Clicking off her phone, she dropped her feet to the bare wood floor, and stood. “Stay home and nap, Riggs, I won’t be long. The girls want to meet at our pizza joint.”

Grabbing her purse, she strolled to the door, paused to look back. “I’ll leave the Christmas music on for you. It’ll relax you.”

Opting to walk the short distance to the restaurant, Jessie took in the fresh cool air, thinking about Christmas. What to do? Maybe she should go home, spend the holidays with her parents in Atlanta for a change. Or stay here and...do...what? Have her own pity-party? Shake it off, Jessica, she reprimanded herself, reaching for the door.

When she stepped inside the restaurant, she spied the women sitting at a round table in the middle of the room. Aware of Winter Wonderland waffling throughout the place, she waved as she approached, they all waved.

“Hi ladies, what’s going on?” She dropped on a chair, ordered a drink from the waitress who had hurried over, and turned her questioning eyes on her friends.

“We’re wondering what you’re doing for Christmas.” They all cocked their heads with eyes directly on her.

Jessie lifted her shoulder and shook her head. “I haven’t decided. I thought about going to mom and dad’s or staying here and feeling sorry for myself.”

Candace laughed. “Jessie, you’re not one to sit around and mope.”

“Okay, listen up.” Kim straightened in her chair, and said, “Back to Christmas Day. If you don't drive to Atlanta, will you have Christmas dinner with us. My boys love it when you come over and bring your dog...what's his name.?”

“Riggs.”

“Hey, I have an idea,” Amy spoke up with a clap of her hands, “Why don't you visit all of us on Christmas Day. You can come to my house for Christmas breakfast, go to Kim's for dinner, and...” she hesitated, turning her eyes on Candace.

Candace's agreeable grin aimed at Jessie. “Come to my house for coffee and dessert. Actually, all of you should come for dessert to finish off a full day of celebrating Christmas.”

Everyone lifted their hands up for a high-fi, except Jessie.

“Wow,” her shoulders drooped. Jessie mumbled, rubbing her forehead, “You make me sound pathetic...”

“No, no, no,” Amy slapped the palm of her hand on the table while the others chimed in shaking their heads. “Jessie, you're part of our sister group – we've been together for a long time. We love you and don't want you to spend Christmas alone.”

“Thank you, Amy. Girls, I love each of you too. Well,” she pressed her lip and gave them a sharp nod. “You've helped me made my decision. I'm going to spend Christmas with my parents.” Noticing their disappointed expression, she added, “I'll be here to spend New Year's Eve with you if you want.”

“Of course, we do,” they all chimed in at once.

Amy reached over to give her hand a loving squeeze.

“Anyway,” Kim changed the subject, “Tell us how your interview went yesterday.”

Jessie took a swallow of Pepsi. Glanced at her friends and gritted her teeth. “I think I blew it.”

Kim's hand, holding her drink, stop in midair on the way to her mouth. “How?”

“I confessed. I told him I had been fired for causing the explosion on the rig.”

“Why would you volunteer such information?” Amy questioned.

“Honestly, I decided to be straightforward with what happened about my situation and not have to deal with it later if he offered me the job. I mean, what if he offered me the job and I accepted it, and later he found out and fired me. Not sure I can take being fired twice in the same month,” she shot both shoulders up, “or in the same week, or the next day. Geez.”

Candace rubbed her swollen belly, and said, "I'm sure it's for the best. How did he react?"

"Polite. Said he'll call in the morning – this morning."

"Did he call?"

"He didn't." Jessie heard the regret and disappointment ring out in her voice. "I guess he wasn't interested in me after all."

The table quietened when their pizza arrived, and everyone turned the subject to Candace's baby and what he/she needed. Leaving Jessie's situation behind, they enjoyed the excitement of Candace's baby coming soon.

A good half-hour later, Jessie's phone rang. Not recognizing the number, she nearly clicked off the unknown caller. Out of curiosity, she answered. "This is Jessica." Her eyes widened. "Yes Sir, I do. I appreciate it. Sure, I'll be there at eight in the morning."

When she clicked off the phone, she shot her arms and hands above her head and waved them back and forth, dancing in her chair.

Kim laughed, "Who called?"

"I know," Candace giggled, "Mr. Gorgeous, boss-man, right?"

Jessie's wide-teeth grin aimed at the group. "Nope. Mr. Holloway offered me the job and wants to go over the logistics in the morning. Yeah." Jessie continued her hand dance.

"Good for you, girl." Amy raised her glass followed by the others, and said, "Way to go Jessie."

Jessie clanged with their glasses, and said, "Thanks ladies. You're always there for me and encouraging me and I love you for it."

Amy's teasing smile turned on Jessie. "I guess you were right. Honesty's the best route to go. Which reminds me... have you seen the good-looking boss of yours? Since he fired you?"

Jessie's bottom teeth grabbed her upper lip. "I ran into him at the hospital when I went to see Billy yesterday afternoon."

"What happened?" Kim scooted up to rest her elbows on the table. "Was he surprised to see you?"

Wide eyed, Amy asked, "Did he know you were there to visit Billy?"

Candace slapped her arm in jest, "Did you wear your black wig and those ugly black glasses?"

“Oh. My. Gosh. Guys.” Jessie couldn’t help but laugh. “No to all your questions I told him I came to visit a friend.” She shifted her gaze to Candace, “He asked if you were the friend. Funny, he seemed truly sincere and relieved when I said it wasn't you, Candace.”

Candace’s surprised expression turned to a pleasant smile. “What a thoughtful man. Honey, I think maybe he’s the one you should consider hanging on to.”

Jessie,” Amy reached over and patted her hand, “Sweetheart, when you see him again, you should confess your sin.”

Jessie giggled. “You're right, I know. But I don't think I'll be seeing him.”

Jessie stood, “I think I’ll go home and pack for my trip.”

“When will you leave?” Candace pulled a face at her, clearly not wanting her to leave.

“Right after I meet with Mr. Holloway in the morning. So, all of you, give me a hug and I’ll wish you a very Merry Christmas and see you afterward.” After hugs all around, Jessie gave Candace an extra hug. “Don’t you let that baby come until I get home. I don’t want to miss him coming into our world.”

She strolled back to her apartment, thinking how lucky she felt to have loving friends like them.

Chapter 26

Trace left Jessica two messages and was about to leave her a third when he touched her number. He waited. Still no answer. “This is Trace, Jessica, please give me a call, we have to talk. You didn't come to the hearing, and I want to explain the results of the investigation. Please call me back.”

Hanging up, he realized what he wanted. He wanted to see *Jessie*. He wanted her to tell him the truth from her own mouth. He also wanted her to apologize. He didn't blame her for being upset with him. After all, he did fire her and insinuated she had been at fault. Fine, he'd go to her.

Within minutes, he stood in front at Jessie's apartment door knocking. No answer. He rang her doorbell. Twice. If he had to, he'd bang on the door for as long as it took. He intended on talking to her. Determined, he knocked again. And again. She had to be home. He could hear Christmas music inside.

Stepping back, he ran the palm of his hand down his face and over his well-groomed beard. Whoa, he'd lost it. He'd never, ever chased after a woman like he was chasing Jessie. In the past, if a woman didn't want to be with him, he'd drop her without thinking twice. Jessie's different. She'd gotten under his skin. How did he allow it to happen? Shouldn't he be the one mad? She lied. Why?

Clamping his jaws, he stepped forward, and knocked again. “Jessie. Jessie this is Trace, please can we talk? Talk to me and if you still want me to leave you alone, I promise, I will never bother you again. Can we talk...please?”

“Hey, mister,” hollered a male voice behind him.

Trace whirled to lay eyes on a man stepping out an apartment door with his giant Schnauzer. The man he'd seen the first time he'd knocked on Jessie's door.

“Man, I don't think Jessie wants to talk to you. Should you be escorted out of the building?”

“No sir, there's no need.”

Suddenly, the door opened.

Jessie stood before him in an oversized Georgia State sweatshirt and sweatpants, looking gorgeous. Her pixie hair cut framed her soft creamy face surrounding her blue eyes, jump starting his heart. Dear God, he'd fallen in love with her.

"You alright Jess?" asked her neighbor.

"I am, thanks, Oliver, but we're fine. Out to walk Beau?"

"Yup. Okay, if, you're sure." He eyed Trace with a warning.

She waved, opening the door wider for Trace to enter.

Before Trace could walk in, the dog ran to Jessie's side and with protective brown eyes, glared at him. Trace noticed his hair standing up on his back. He also heard the low growl rumbling up from his throat.

Jessie patted his head. "It's okay boy."

Stepping to the side with his eyes on the dog, Trace strolled over to a chair next the Christmas tree. He waited for Jessie to move to the sofa and when she took a seat, he did too. The dog jumped up next to her and laid down with his eyes glued to him. "I don't think he wants me here."

"Riggs doesn't know you," her sensual voice drew his gaze. "Dogs can sense if you're a people dog, or not. Which are you?"

Looking directly into her beautiful blue eyes, he searched for a sign of warmth, or something... geez. He leaned forward with his arms on his thighs and clasped hands together and glanced back at the dog. "On the contrary, I love dogs. My dog died last year. He had a good life, lived to be fifteen years old. I miss him. We spent a lot of time together. He enjoyed hiking with me. It broke my heart when he died."

"Do you ever think about getting another dog?" she asked, rubbing Riggs's head with a gentle smile on her lips.

"Maybe, one day. It's hard when you lose someone you love." Looking up, he trapped her gaze in his vision. Leaning back against the chair, his left brow lifted. "Jessie, I have to talk to Jessica."

Suddenly, her lips tightened, and her gaze hardened. She stood, looked at Riggs, and said, "Stay."

Trace watched her walk from the room. He turned his gaze on Riggs. "What now?" he mouthed. Riggs's head cocked to the side.

Jessie strolled in and dropped a dark wig in his lap. “You’re speaking to Jessica. I am Jessica...my friends and family call me Jessie.” She sat down by Riggs and shot him a daring glare.

He picked up the wig and fumbled with it in his hands. Huh, it felt real. Finally, he looked at her. “Glasses?” He couldn’t help himself – there had to be some humor in all this deception.

“I...I don’t wear glasses. They weren’t real. Maybe ugly, but not real.”

“Why did you feel the need to deceive me?”

She released a long breath bellowing out her cheeks.

With his hands folded over each other, he hurried to cover the luring grin behind his lips.

“I didn’t start out to deceive you, it just happened when you came to the apartment. You assumed I wasn’t Jessica.”

“You’re right, not once did I think you and Jessica were the same.”

“Well, now you know.” She raked her gaze over his expression, frowning “You knew. When?”

A wide pressed lip smile aimed her way. “After we had dinner at Rick’s house, Rachael checked you out on social media. Pictures tell all. Besides, I never did see you and Jessica together. It wasn’t that hard to figure out.” He threw up a hand. “Well, not true. Rick and Rachael figured it out before me. I spent too much time being spellbound by you and not caring about whether or not you had a twin.”

He paused for a moment, staring at her. “Why, why the ruse?” He didn’t intend on leaving without knowing why.

“I thought I had to protect my job. I’m not sure if you can understand where I’m coming from. All my life, I’ve never been taken seriously. Blonde haired women are put in a category of being, how can I say this, not too smart. I got tired of constantly proving myself in my job as a geologist. When I applied for the job on your oil rig, I decided to look different. I thought if I didn’t look like me, but more a...ah...a brainiac, I would be taken more seriously, and it proved true. Even the crew members treated me as one of them, and I enjoyed it.”

She paused, reached her hand out to rub Riggs’s back lying beside her.

Trace ran his palm over his mustache and beard. “You’re right. As Jessica, I barely took notice of you, except to respect you in your knowledge as a geologist and the confidence you showed.” He chuckled.

“Something funny?”

He looked over at the twinkling lights on the tree, after a moment his gaze shifted back to her. “If you had walked into the conference room on your first day Dad introduced you as our new mudlogger, I probably wouldn’t have fallen in love with you.”

“What...what do you mean?”

“Even if you’d been yourself with your natural blonde hair and discarded those ugly black rimmed glasses, I still would have kept my distance because you were...well...cold, aloof, standoffish, and all business – intimidating.”

“Intimidating?” Her brows pulled together.

“Jessie, it’s the vibes you give off as Jessica.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You’re all business and no play. The first day I met you as Jessie, not Jessica, you consumed me with your vitality, smile, fun, full of life individual who made me to want to get to know you. You bubble.”

“I bubble.”

He chuckled. “For the first time this past week, I did notice the crew not only treated you with respect, but also treated you as if your one of them. It made me jealous.”

“Why?”

“I’m a boss.” He held her gaze. “Bosses can’t mingle with their employees – not a good idea. Tell me something, Jessie. What did Billy have to say when you walked into the hospital room with your natural hair? I bet he thought you were beautiful.”

Her lips spread into a slight smile. “Billy’s a sweetheart, he loved my new hairdo. Said I looked good as a blonde – natural.”

“He treated you no different than when he thought you were Jessica, right?”

“No. The crew usually call me Jess anyway.”

“See, when you’re at ease and yourself, you’re likeable, and do I dare say, loveable? Be yourself regardless of what others think.”

“My friends said the same.” She shrugged, “I’ll never do it again. I’ll be myself. I should have been upfront with you. For that, I’m sorry, but as far as I’m concerned, we should just put it behind us.”

Her sea blue eyes drilled into his. “Is that the only reason you’re here?”

He took a deep breath, gently placed the wig on the table next to his chair and returned her gaze. "I'm here to tell Jessica, no to come back to work."

Her eyes widened.

"We made a mistake in dismissing you – especially before an investigation."

Her perfectly formed brow lifted. "How did the investigation turn out?"

"The attorneys agreed human error caused the accident..."

"In other words, my fault."

He tilted his head, staring at her. "No, you did your job, reported to Phil, even told James. Even Andy agreed when you wanted to call a work-stop. Now, my father wants to figure out how to prevent another near disaster. He realizes many crew members are afraid to call a work-stop because it cost thousands of dollars when drilling completely stops. If one hesitates because he's afraid he'll lose his job if the issue turns out *not* to be a problem."

She nodded. "It's happens. You need to gather enough crew members to review the issues the moment someone believes there a problem and find a solution. If more than one person is responsible, there's the likelihood a solution can be found."

"Right. Dad's calling a meeting on the rig right after Christmas to get the opinion of all the crew members, including yours."

"If Mr. Brightwell trusts his crew, he should be willing to hear what they have to say when it involves a potential danger hanging in the balance."

"I agree. Dad wants you to return to the oil rig and be a part of this counsel he wants to form."

Trace watched her blonde head give him a negative shake. "As far as me coming back to work, thank you, but I've accepted another position, starting in January with the Petroleum Science Lab."

He combed his fingers through his hair, trying not to show his disappointment. He said, "Congratulations. I'm not surprised. You're a good geologist." He studied her for a moment, looked at Riggs, and scooted to the edge of the chair to stand. He held his ground. "Where does it leave us, Jessie?"

"Nowhere, I suppose."

"Can we start over? Will you go out to dinner with me during the Christmas holidays?"

Again, she shook her head. "I'm going to Atlanta to be with my parents."

This time he did stand. “Did you ever have feelings for me, Jessie?” He detected emotional confusion in her expression.

When she didn’t answer, he quietly said, “Okay, I’ll take my leave.” Strolling to the door, he paused, turned to wait for her to follow, and when she stopped close enough, he stepped to her, reached up and pressed his hand on the back of her neck. Pulling her to him, he kissed her lips. His hard-demanding kiss asked for more. Before she could reply, he turned and walked through the door, paused, looked back, and said, “We’re not done yet.”

Jessie shut the door, backed up, and dropped onto the chair Trace had occupied. Staring at the Christmas lights on the tree, her fingers flew up to touch her lips. “Well Riggs, his kiss won’t be easy to forget and even harder to forget him.” She darted her gaze to Riggs.

Shoving off the chair, she made her way to the coffee pot, poured a cup full of cold coffee and popped it in the microwave to warm. Rubbing her lips, she waited for the beep, before she grabbed the cup and returned to the sofa.

With a loving pat on Riggs’s head, she said, “Do you think I’m passing up a good thing – should we agree to start over. Like Trace suggested.”

Chapter 27

By mid-morning the next day, Jessie headed out of Savannah prepared for a three-hour drive to Atlanta. Tuning to a Christmas music station, she glanced in the rearview mirror at Riggs. His gentle brown eyes took in the world through the side window. “Hey boy, our first Christmas together. You're going to love staying at my parents' place. They have a huge fenced in backyard for you to run and play to your heart's content. Wait and see, and Jenna's girls will pounce on you with hugs and kisses.”

Riggs's large eyes looked up at her and cocked his head. Jessie laughed quietly. “You've been in a car before haven't you. You must have been treated good before you got lost in the middle of the ocean. If you could talk, you'd tell me how you managed to get yourself in such a predicament. Too bad. It'll be a mystery I'll have to ponder over all my life.”

A good four hours later, Jessie sat at her parents' kitchen table enjoying a cup of coffee with them, while she retraced the disaster on the rig, including the accusation, being fired, and a job offer. Riggs sat next to her dad soaking in the attention given him the moment they'd walked through the door.

Her dad stopped rubbing Riggs's head, reached up, and patted her hand. “You're a woman with a sharp mind and know your job. You weren't to blame, and they were wrong to fire you. Now you have a better job, more money, more benefits...and, best of all, you don't have to work out in the middle of the ocean on a dangerous oil rig again.”

“But Dad, I loved working on the rig...”

Riggs moved closer to Jessie, laid his head on her lap, and whined.

“What is it boy. Want to go outside?”

Wagging his tail, he whined.

She scooted her chair away from the table and strolled to the sliding glass door. “You'll love Mom and Dad's backyard. Go run around without a leash.” She stepped out with him and when he looked up at her, she laughed, “Go potty.” He took off, slowly at first, sniffing and found a

place to lift his leg, afterward, he glanced at Jessie, and as if laughing, he ran from one end of the yard to the other.

She heard her dad chuckle, standing behind her. He'd followed her out to watch the dog. "I better get him a ball for Christmas."

A voice hollered from the front door., "Anyone home, Merry Christmas,"

"Come on Jess, Jenna's here." Her dad whistled at Riggs, "Come boy, the rest of your family has arrived." They hurried inside to welcome Jenna, Tim, and the girls.

Hugs and kisses circled around the group. The little girls kneeled on the floor to give Riggs hugs and smother him with kisses. Riggs looked up at Jessie. She giggled. He loved every minute of their attention.

Jenna hurried over to the Christmas tree with her armload of packages to place them underneath. Glancing over at her girls and with a cautious tone, she said, "Enough girls, give him some space before you kill him with your love."

She looked at Jessie. "They couldn't wait to get here to see Riggs. Thanks a bunch, Jess," she paused, put her hand on her hips and tilted her head to the side, "They haven't talked about anything, but Riggs. Now they want a dog."

Jessie loved her family gatherings. Christmas Eve Day was spent talking, laughing, eating, and with the help of Jenna's girls, they made and decorated sugar cookies. They also discussed the Christmas Day schedule and setting the time for the dinner. Her parents had their traditional menu which everyone looked forward to. Dad cooked the prime rib, Mom made the homemade rolls, Jessie made the cheesy potato casserole and Jenna prepared the jello salad.

When bedtime rolled around, all too soon for the excited girls, Jessie helped put them to bed. To settle them down, she picked up a tattered worn book and sat on the bed to read to them. "Your grandparents read from this book to your mom and me when we were your age." She read, "*The Night Before Christmas, by Clement Clarke Moore, 'Twas the Night Before Christmas...*"

When she finished, she kissed them goodnight, and quietly tiptoed from their room and joined the rest of her family in the living room. Tim popped up to pour her a glass of wine while she relaxed in front of the fireplace and the Christmas tree. "Mom, your house is lovely. As always, you've outdone yourself decorating. Did Dad help you this year?"

"He did. He brought the tree and boxes up from downstairs. I did the rest."

All heads turned to stare at their dad. Nonchalantly, he took a sip of wine and winked at his wife. Jenna made a disapproving grunt, and said, “Daaaad.”

After her loving glare at her dad, Jenna looked at her sister. “Jessie, how long do you suppose Riggs swam the ocean before coming upon the rig?”

Jessie yawned, eyed Riggs curling up at her feet. She slowly swung her head from side to side. “God only knows his story. I can tell you, he barely made it. When the guys pulled him up on the platform, he’d stopped breathing.”

Tim stared down at the dog. “Who got him to breathe again?”

“I did.” Jessie aimed a grateful smile at her mother. “Mom, remember all those times we visited Nana and Papa on the farm? Those summers I spent with Papa helping with the calves birthing. Well, on several occasions he had the opportunity to train me how to resuscitate a few of the lifeless calves, and once his old dog, Bailey, got kicked by a cow and I helped him to start breathing again too.”

Jenna glanced down at the dog. “If you hadn’t been working on the rig, he probably would have died.”

“Lucky boy.” Her dad’s passionate eyes stared down at Riggs sleeping at Jessie’s feet.

She loved her dad’s soft heart for animals.

Jenna gave her a side glance. “Tell me sis, did the good-looking boss, the one interested in Jessie and not Jessica, the one who fired Jessica, is he still in the picture?”

Surprised, Jessie pressed her lips, dropped her gaze to the wine glass in her hand, and in a restrained voice, said, “How did you know about him?”

“Did you forget? Mom and Dad met him at your apartment.”

“Oh, right.” She darted a glance their way. “I forgot.”

“And...” Jenna’s amused expression rested on her face. “Don’t you think I heard an earful from the girls, Kim couldn’t wait to tell me.”

“Oh my gosh.” Jessie slapped the side of her thigh, causing Riggs’s head to jerk up with a worried look. Jessie reached down and gave him a pat. “Sorry, it’s okay boy. Go back to sleep.”

Leaning back, she declared, “I suppose my life’s an open book for everyone to discuss.”

Jenna laughed. “Yep, makes our life a bit more interesting.”

“Jessie, sweetheart,” her mom’s gentle voice intervened, “I know you liked him. Is he out of the picture now...for good?”

She looked at her mom and with regret in her eyes, nodded. "I'm sure he is mom. He came over last night, and after our talk, I won't be seeing him again." She swallowed the last bit of wine, and added, "Especially, since I rejected his offer to come back to work."

Wrinkles formed on her dad's forehead. "You mean to tell me he wanted to give back your job ... after he fired you?"

Again, she nodded. "I might have gone back if I hadn't already accepted the position Mr. Holloway offered me."

Her dad pushed to his feet. "Well, serves him right." Turning his shiny eyes on his wife, he held out his hand, "Come on dear. we best get to bed. Our grandkids will have us up early looking for Santa's presents."

Jessie stood to give them both a hug. "Goodnight, Mom, Dad. Merry Christmas."

"Night kids. Sure is good having our family together this Christmas."

Jessie turned to Jenna and Tim. "I think I'll turn in too. How about you two?"

Tim grabbed Jenna's hand. "Santa calls. You know, stuff from Santa has to be put out before we can get to bed."

"Ah, right. I didn't think about such. Need help?"

Sure.

Squeals and laughter woke Jessie. An uncontrollable whimper escaped her mouth when she rolled over to look at the clock – seven. Too early. Didn't she just barely crawl into bed. Huh, no Riggs. Her dad must have let him out when he got up, giving her a chance to sleep in. Nice.

She listened to the girls' laughter and cries over the load of toys beneath the Christmas tree. Her lips spread in a wide grin. Santa gave abundantly this year. From all their vociferous sounds, the girls were delighted with Santa's gifts.

Crawling out of bed, Jessie hurried down to watch the commotion and excitement of opening presents. She laughed out loud, stepping over toys, wrapping paper, boxes and yet, more to come. When she glanced at Riggs sitting near the kitchen door with a confused expression, Jessie giggled.

"Hey Riggs, you don't know what to make of all this, do you?"

"Aunt Jessie," her niece hollered, "We have a present for Riggs too." Her five-year-old niece hurried to retrieve a Christmas stocking from behind the tree.

Jessie held the stocking up for Riggs, and said, “Come boy, I’ll open your present.” Obeying his master, Riggs made his way to her and wagged his tail the second she pulled out a bone. “Here you go. Chew on this, it’s good for your teeth.” With the bone in his mouth, he hurried to a safe corner where he could gnaw to his heart’s content.

Accepting a Christmas decorated coffee cup of steaming liquid from her dad, Jessie noticed the twinkle in his eyes. He loved Christmas. With a grin, she watched her nieces. The meaning of Christmas – family, children, and love for one another. Her thoughts dashed to Trace and how he would spend the day. His Christmas days sounded lonely.

Chapter 28

By midafternoon, Jessie stood in the kitchen mixing a bowl of shredded potatoes and adding the remaining ingredients to her mother's favorite cheesy potato casserole.

The doorbell rang. She glanced at her mother. "Are we having guests for dinner besides us?"

"Nooo, might be one of the neighbors bringing over cookies or a dish."

Placing the potatoes in the oven, Jessie set the timer, and turned to her mother. "I'll get started on setting the table." Whipping around to head for the dining room, she nearly stumbled over her own feet. Trace's beautiful gray sparkling eyes stared into her face.

Sucking in a deep breath, she pushed the words from her mouth, "What... what, Trace, what are you doing here?"

He smiled, stepped to her, and gave her a peck on the cheek, then he shifted his gaze to Jessie's mother, "Mrs. Tucker, I hope I'm not intruding, but I needed to wish Jessie a Merry Christmas." He turned his confident smiling eyes on her.

Tongue-tied, Jessie demanded her heart to calm down. She heard her mother chuckle.

"Trace," her mother spoke up. "We don't mind at all. It's Christmas and we love having guests. And it's Beth, remember. If you don't have plans, we'd love to have you stay for our Christmas dinner. Walter cooks the best prime rib."

He walked over to Beth and gave her a hug. "Merry Christmas, Beth. I'd love to stay for Christmas dinner."

Jessie's mouth dropped.

"Good," Beth gave him a big hug and said to her daughter. "Jessie, why don't you have Trace help you set the table." She gave Jessie an all-knowing look, and said, "Eight plates, instead of seven." Turning, she continued the task at hand like nothing unusual had occurred and completely ignored her daughter.

Without a word, Jessie led him into the dining room. Once out of her mother's earshot, she glared at him. "Why are you here? And why did you tell Mom you would stay for dinner?"

With a seductive look in his eyes, he moved into her space. "Why would I turn down an invitation to a Christmas dinner by such a sweet woman?"

She demanded her feet to move away from his nearness, close enough she could smell his aftershave. Only problem, her feet were glued to the floor. Then unexpectedly, he circled his arms around her waist, hugging her to his chest, trapping her gaze.

All power drained from her body. Nothing worked, not even her arm muscles were able to push him away.

Powerless, her eyes dropped to his lips, she knew he intended to kiss her. If he didn't, she sure would. Kiss him.

When his deep enticing voice spoke, she jerked her gaze up into his.

“Jessica Tucker. Will you be my Jessie? I'm in love with you.”

Jessie's mouth dropped open. Did he just say he loved her? She couldn't stop her heart skipping over her chest like a runaway train. Her brain said, *holler yes, yes, yes, yes.*

Those gorgeous eyes stared into hers, waiting. Suddenly, she knew how to answer. She wanted him. She never felt like this with any other man, not even David. Throwing her arms around his neck, she planted her lips on his, responding to his question. His hungry kiss filled her with desire for the man she wanted to love for the rest of her life. When she drew back, he didn't release her.

Lifting her hands, she pressed her palms against his bearded jaw and gazed deep into his gray eyes filled with love. “Trace Brightwell, yes, I'm your Jessie.”

“Yay,” echoed voices from the doorway. They both whipped their heads around to find her entire family crowded into the doorway, listening, and watching.

Beth stepped forward and hugged Jessie, and said, “Okay, let's get this dinner going.”

Trace and Jessie finished setting a festive table with her mother's Christmas china and her best silverware and crystal water glasses. When Jenna strolled into the kitchen with homemade rolls and a bowl of horseradish to go with the delicious prime rib her dad had cooked, she gave her a grin and a hip nudge.

Jessie couldn't remember enjoying a Christmas dinner as much as she did this one. Her heart squeezed, bursting with happiness, with the love she had for her family and the man sitting next to her. Trace's eyes mirrored hers in a special connection between them. A connection she wanted to last for a lifetime.

Her dad sat at the head of the table with a huge, contented smile on his lips. Suddenly, he gave Trace a serious puckered brow. “I have a question for you Trace.”

“Yes sir. I’ll try to answer it.”

Jessie grinned hearing Trace’s reply.

“I – we all heard you tell Jessie you were in love with her...” he paused.

“Yes sir. I am.” Trace shifted his gaze to hers and reached over, took her hand to reinforce the love he had for her.

“Okay, young man. From the look on her face, I suspect she’s in love with you too.”

“Dad,” Jessie felt her face heat up, but not before giving him a wide-eyed, warning look.

With his intimidating eyes glued on Trace, he ignored her. “I don’t want you to put pressure on her to return to her old job on your dangerous rig out in the ocean.”

Trace turned his gaze to Jessie. “First, Mr. Tucker – there’s no pressure from me. It’s her decision to return to the oil rig or not. If she keeps her new job, I support her decision.” Trace squeezed her hand. “Besides I’m not sure if I could go two weeks without seeing her.” He chuckled. “The company would spend lots more money flying me back and forth.”

Dragging his gaze back to Jessie’s dad, he said, “I think you know your daughter is her own person, it’s up to her.”

Jessie squeezed his hand drawing his gaze to her.

Beth cleared her throat drawing her husband’s eyes. “Well,” he recognized her warning look, and said, “That clears up an important matter, and for now, I won’t ask any more questions of you. By the way, Trace, it’s Walter.”

“Geez, Trace, you’re getting off easy.” All eyes swung to Tim. “You won’t believe the grilling I received when I first met Jenna.”

“Who’s to say I’m finished...” Walter mumbled, “...time will tell.” Shoving out of his chair, he scurried his gaze around the table. “Everyone to the family room. Kids play with your new toys and adults can have coffee and dessert. What do you say, Beth?”

“Woohoo,” hollered the girls, making a dash for the living room.

“Dad,” Jessie gave her dad an amused glance, “You go on in with Trace, I’ll help mom bring in the coffee and dessert.”

Not arguing with those orders, Walter slapped Trace on the back and led him out of the dining room. “Come on Trace, you get to watch how fun the girls are with their Christmas presents.”

Jessie's bright eyes sparkled watching her dad accept Trace as part of the family. Picking up several plates, she stacked them while beaming with joy. Suddenly, she heard her dad say, "What do you think about kids? Do you want kids?"

Jessie froze, but never heard Trace's answer as they strolled too far away, heading for the living room. "Jessie," her mom drew her attention, "Why don't you clear the table while I brew the coffee."

Jessie floated through her task of clearing the table trying to ignore her dad and whatever he had to say to Trace. She'd probably hear about it later from Trace. She hadn't felt so content and happy on a Christmas Day in years. Every time she looked at Trace, he'd give her a special smile, along with a wink. Her unexpected admission of her love for Trace Brightwell made her heart sing, something it hadn't done in over a year, if ever.

Jenna strolled in to help. "I'll rinse the dishes and put them in the dishwasher. Hey, Jessie your phone rang, but I didn't get to it in time."

"Okay, I'll check it once the table's cleared and food put away."

Chapter 29

Not a thirty seconds later, Tim stepped in the kitchen, “Hey Jess,” he said, handing her the phone. “Amy keeps ringing you. You better give her a call back.”

Jessie handed the dishes to Jenna and took her phone from Tim. “Yup, she probably wants to wish me a Merry Christmas.”

“Hi Amy, Merry Christmas.” Instantly her bright face flipped. “What...” panic escaped her lips.

Both Beth and Jenna stopped cleaning dishes when they noticed the fear cross over Jessie’s face.

“When...when...” Jessie covered her mouth. After a long pause, she said, “I’m on my way. I’ll be there as quickly as possible, and...and Amy keep me posted.”

Clicking off the phone, her watery eyes darted from her mother to Jenna. “Mom, I gotta pack. I’ve got to drive back to Savannah.”

“Dear, what is it? What’s happened?”

“Candace...she...she had a baby, but...she nearly didn’t make it, she’s in surgery. Oh, mom it isn’t good...Amy said I should hurry.”

Beth walked over and circled an arm around Jessie, heading her toward the door to the hallway and up the stairs. “Oh, sweetheart. Yes, you go pack.”

“Jessie,” Jenna ran up and put a hand on her shoulder. “I can’t believe this is happening again. How is Candace going to manage losing another baby when she’s already lost two? It’ll devastate her.”

Jessie adamantly shook her head. “No. no,” she wiped away a tear, giving her mom and sister a despaired look. “It’s... it’s Candace. Amy said her blood pressure dropped from bleeding. Mom, she died. They were able to revive her, and now she’s in surgery.”

“Good lord, go get packed.” Jenna shoved her toward the stairs, wiping her own tear from her face.

She stopped short when Trace stepped from the living room. “I’ll have the car waiting for you Jessie.”

She nodded and took off upstairs to grab her overnight bag.

Trace waited at the door for her when she returned. Everyone hugged her and made her promise to call with any news. When she hugged her dad, she said, “Oh Dad, Riggs?”

“Honey,” her dad kissed her cheek. “We’ll take good care of Riggs, don’t you worry.”

Jessie nodded, then felt Trace squeeze her hand to lead her to his car. Once inside, he said, “Buckle up.”

She couldn’t stop thinking about Candace. *Dear God, please don’t let anything happen to Candace. Her baby needs her.*

“Jessie,” Trace’s deeply concerned voice broke her thoughts. “Candace is strong, she’ll be fine, after all she has a baby to raise.”

Jessie glanced at him and with a hopeful, silent nod, heard him ask, “Did she have a boy or girl?”

“A girl. Oh Trace, she has a healthy baby girl, she even has a head of red hair like Candace, she...” Jessie choked, unable to say more. “I forgot to tell them.”

Trace squeezed her hand. “Who, your parents.”

She nodded. It seemed that’s all she could do.

“You can call them after we get to the hospital.”

When he took a sharp left turn down a different road, instead of driving toward the interstate toward Savannah, she glanced over at him. “Where are you going?”

“To the airport. I called Dad, he arranged for us to take the helicopter to Savannah. I figured you’d want to get back as soon as possible. Candace will want you there.”

Tears flooded her eyes. She couldn’t say a word but nodded again when he shot a sympathetic glance her way.

How thoughtful, Trace called his father while waiting for Jessie to pack and without hesitating, his father offered the copter. She squeezed his hand with gratitude.

In no time, Jessie felt the helicopter lift off. She listened to the rotor noise of the helicopter, thankful for Mr. Brightwell’s private services and the pilot for taking time from his Christmas family to fly her to Savannah.

She and Trace arrived at their destination in less than an hour, compared to the three hour drive it would have taken them. It took a little over another hour after landing for Jessie to rush through the hospital doors with Trace at her side.

Chapter 30

The moment the elevator doors slid opened Jessie ran down the hallway to the waiting room. Her eyes landed on Kim and Amy sitting with grim faces.

Candace's husband paced. When he turned to meet her gaze, she ran to him with tears in her eyes, hugging him. Finally, pulling away, she said, "Jake, any news?"

Silently, he shook his head.

"And the baby?"

His bottom lip quivered. "A girl." Tears formed in his eyes, looking directly at her. "Jess, she's tiny, healthy and...and, beautiful." He sniffed, wiped his nose with his handkerchief. "She looks like her mother." He sobbed, took a deep breath, and said, "Candace hasn't seen her yet, she...she...Jess, she died, but they brought back, and...now...now..."

"Oh, Jake." Jessie hugged him again. Whispering in his ear, she said, "She's a strong woman. She's a fighter. She'll come through this, for you and her baby girl."

Jessie tightened her arms around him. "I pray, pray, pray she does," he sobbed in her arms.

When he appeared to control his emotions, she stepped back, and glanced at the girls. Amy jumped up to receive Jessie's arms encircling her. Kim sat, glued to the chair. She reached up to take her hand. Jessie squeezed it, sitting next to her.

Amy strolled to Jake, circled her arm around him and led him to a chair next to Kim.

Jessie reached over Kim and squeezed his hand, then she laid her hand on Kim. Nothing more to do or say, but to wait for what seemed like an eternity.

Jake jerked his head up when someone entered the room. Jessie recognized Candace's parents. Jake hurried to his mother-in-law, reaching out for her when she almost lost her balance, falling into Jake's arms. Their only daughter, in surgery after giving them a healthy granddaughter. Worried expressions plastered their faces. Jessie could tell they both had been crying, praying for good news the moment they walked in, but recognizing the look on Jake's face, all their faces, they knew he didn't have any good news to tell them.

Jessie closed her eyes and prayed.

Trace knew no one noticed him entering with Jessie. He quietly stayed aloof, leaned against a wall absorbed with the people showing love and fear for Candace. He studied Jake, the man's love for his wife clearly showed in his anxious expression. His pale face read of terror— fear for the outcome. The love he felt for his wife said, he'd rather die than lose her.

He didn't know Candace very well, but the few times they had met, he liked her and could see her excitement and love for the baby she carried. Beautiful woman and a nice-looking husband. Their baby had to be beautiful too. What went wrong? Jessie said her blood pressure dropped too low. Bleeding. Surely, she's too young to die, after all, she had a new baby to care for. Women nowadays didn't die from childbirth, did they? Doctors did wonders with patents. Miracle drugs and surgical techniques. Amazing modern medicines and procedures kept women from dying during childbirth. Didn't it? How long had it been since any news broadcasted a woman dying from childbirth? A long, long time. They would save her.

His gaze swung to Jessie. He wanted children. Funny, he didn't realize how much he wanted children until Walter asked him. He did. He wanted Jessie to be his kids' mother. The thought had hit his chest like a sledgehammer. He wanted to marry Jessie. He wanted her to be the mother of his children. He wanted to grow old with her. He wanted a lifetime with her. He wanted her more than anything in the world.

Shifting, he turned his back on the group, took a few steps to the window, and stared down at the parking lot. Rubbing the palm of his hand down his slightly bearded face, he blinked several times to clear the mist from his eyes. Every cell in his body said he loved Jessie in the way Jake loved Candace.

A door opened. Trace twisted around and leaned against the window watching the tall lanky man, whom he'd met when having coffee with Jessie. He couldn't remember his name, only being annoyed with his intrusion.

The man hurried straight to Jake, hugged him, and whispered something in his ear before stepping to the girls. He gave each a hug and a kiss on the cheek, including Jessie. He took a seat next to Jessie with his arm around her. Ah, when Amy called him Kent, he remembered his name. He still didn't know his relationship with Jessie. An old boyfriend?

Jerking back around, he stared out the window. Now wasn't the time to be jealous.

“Mr. Rivers.”

Everyone's head swung around to lay eyes on the surgeon in green scrubs, including Trace. The doctor had an unmistakably sad expression on his face aimed directly at Jake.

"Mr. Rivers," reaching up he pulled off his green cap, glanced down at his hands squeezing it in his palms. His mellowed voice, filled with regret, said, "I'm sorry. We did our best, but...we lost her."

Candace's mother sucked in a loud breath and dropped back in the chair, hollering, "No, no, nooo..."

Stunned, Trace's gaze swung to Jessie. Her mouth scream no, but no sound escaped her lips, instead tears silently flow down her cheeks. Slowly, she stood to walk to Jake while Amy fell against Kent who grabbed hold of her and Kim.

Trace covered his mouth and rubbed his jaws. He hadn't expected Candace to die. A young woman with her life before her...and...a baby girl, now without a mother. He stared at Jake's entire body shaking with grief. His full weight leaned on Jessie. She might have fallen if Kent hadn't rushed to grabbed Jake by the arm.

Trace felt his own legs tremble. Jake's future with a newborn without his wife seemed unfair. His nerves twisted in his gut when he reached up and wiped his wet cheeks. When had he cried last? When his dog died. Very few times had he ever cried. Whirling around he smeared away the tears and blinked several times.

Finally, slowly turning back, he watched Jake and Candace's parents leave to follow the doctor, who led them to their beloved wife and daughter. Trace felt his insides shudder.

Drawing his gaze to Jessie, he found her in her old boyfriend's arms, crying. The others strolled over to them, and they all hugged each other. He wasn't sure what to do, so he stood still, pushed against the window, and watched.

Afterward, they mumbled a few words, and slowly headed to the door. Trace stepped up to Jessie and touched her arm. "Jessie."

She jumped. "Oh, Trace."

"Do you want me to take you home?"

Sadly, shaking her head, she said, "No, I'm going over to Amy's and...ah..."

She seemed loss for words. Understandable. "I'm sorry, Jessie, I'm here if you need me."

Kent put his arm around her shoulder, nodded at him, then led her out the door and down the hallway.

Trace watched her leave with her friends. He felt helpless. How did one console a grieving loved one? Their grief for Candace went deep, deeper than anything he'd ever experienced. Nothing like what Jake would face in the near future. How do you get through something so dramatic?

Trace stood staring at the exit where they all had disappeared. He understood they needed each other right now. They were family. He didn't belong with them – an outsider.

The sudden sound of a phone rang out, drawing his gaze around. An iPhone, left on a chair caught his eye. Strolling over, he picked it up, and recognized Jessie's mother's voice when he answered.

“Beth, this is Trace. Jessie forgot her phone...” Before he could explain, he listened, and said, “No, I'm still at the hospital. Jessie's gone to Amy's house with the others—”

Bett interrupted him, wanting to know about Candace and how the surgery went. When she paused, Trace cleared his throat, and said, “Beth, Beth, I'm sorry. Candace didn't make it through surgery.” He waited for the shock to subside, before he said, “Beth, she died without seeing her healthy baby daughter.” He couldn't wrap his head around what just happened. Things changed in a blink. Good or bad, life went in a flash.

A long silent moment stretched on the other end. Finally, Trace said, “Beth, they've gone over to Amy's house. Can you give me her address, then I'll give Jessie her phone and you can talk to her? I'll make sure she calls you.” After disconnecting, he sat staring at the phone in his hand for a long moment before making his way to the car.

Needing to talk to someone, he called his father to thank him for helping Jessie to get to the hospital. He also told him Jessie's friend didn't make it. But her baby girl's healthy and doing good.

Once punching in Amy's address, Trace followed the GPS, parked outside Amy's house, hesitating. After a few minutes, he got out of the car and walked up to the door. It took three knocks before the door opened. He assumed the man standing before him was Amy's husband. “I'm Trace Brightwell...friend of Jessie's.”

The man held out his hand. “Trace yes, I've heard about you. Come in. I'll get Jessie. She's in the kitchen with Amy.”

Trace waited, looking around the house, a warm, pleasant house – no, a home. He could tell from the worn furniture and toys scattered throughout. The living room lit up with lots of decorations and the large Christmas tree placed a slight smile on his lips.

“Trace.”

His gaze swung to Jessie. Her red eyes were a touch swollen and when she smiled at him her eyes had no light in them.

He stepped forward and hugged her. “I’m so sorry Jessie.” Stepping back, he said, “What can I do?”

She shook her head.

“Jessie,” he dug into his coat pocket. “You left your phone at the hospital.”

“Oh, Trace, thank you.” She took it in her hand without looking at him.

Silence grew. Trace felt awkward. “Well, I’ll let you get back to your friends.” He touched her arm. “Jessie, I am sorry. Call me if I can help in any way.”

Her low soft voice mumbled, “I will.”

He stepped through the door, stopped, and said, “You should call your parents.”

Again, she mumbled, “I will.” She shut the door without giving him a glance.

Trace took off after Jessie shut him out. She didn’t need him. Only her friends.

Driving to his apartment, he entered, turned on the Christmas tree lights and dropped onto the sofa. His thoughts centered on Jake, now a single dad. In one short breath, Jake’s life completely changed.

Why didn’t Jessie want him to comfort her. To be near her. Almost like she didn’t want anything to do with him again. He didn’t understand.

Chapter 31

The next day, Trace called Jessie numerous times, but never got an answer, nor did she return his call. Late in the afternoon, he drove over to her apartment. She never answered the door, nor did he see her jeep parked in its usual place. His buddy came to mind. Rick would listen.

When it came to Jessica Tucker, he couldn't think straight. Talking to Rick might help. This entire thing he felt for Jessie could be nothing more than fascination. Her power over him perplexed him. She drew him in so fast it bewildered him. No woman ever took control of his emotions. When did she? Too late. All kinds of thoughts bombarded his brain, thinking all sorts of negative thoughts. Stop it. Deep down his love for her felt right. He needed to talk it out.

Driving to his friend's house, he found him drinking a beer and watching a basketball game. Rick welcomed him in and returning from the kitchen, he handed him a bottle. "Here, have a beer. Appears you need this. What's going on, you look terrible."

Trace accepted the beer, plopped down on the sofa, and mumbled, "I'm fine. Let's watch the game." Leaning back, he took a long swallow.

In less than ten seconds, he suddenly pushed forward and stared down at the drink in his hands.

Rick muted the television. The room became quiet. Rick demanded, "Come on, Trace, get it off your chest. Talk."

Trace took a long swallow of beer, nearly draining the bottle. Glancing up, he noticed Rick had turned off the television.

Rick sat back, lifted his leg, and rested his ankle on his knee. With a curious expression, he stared at his buddy. "Spill it, what's going on?"

Trace glanced around. "Where's Rachael?"

"She's baby shopping."

Trace stretched his shoulders, took the last swallow of beer, and darted a look at his friend. "I don't think I told you I fired Jessie for causing the explosion, but it wasn't her fault – she did her job. I tried to hire her back, but she'd accepted another position with another company." He ran his fingers through his hair. "How did I let her get to me?" He jerked off the sofa and paced

around the room. “Hell, I don’t chase after women. If they don’t want to date me, I move on. When she told me to get lost, what did I do? Went back to her. She told me to get lost again. Did I? No. Geez, Rick I’m a hopeless case.”

Bellowing his cheeks out, he released a frustrated breath and dropped onto the sofa, turning a miserable look on Rick. “I explained and apologized for firing her. What more does she want from me?”

“You can’t blame her for not returning to her old job. Can you? After all, you made her the scapegoat – how did she take it?”

“Decent. She knew we were all frightened and not thinking straight.”

“Did she ever confess to you about being Jessica?”

He chuckled. “She did. I went to her apartment after she told me to get lost. Well, not in those words. I wanted her to be honest with me. I wanted to know why she said her life was complicated.” Trace shot off the sofa to pace again.

“Rick, I spent Christmas Day with Jessie and her family in Atlanta, told her I loved her. I asked her to be my Jessie.” With a shrug, he said, “She said yes, she would be my Jessie.” He stood still, stared out the window, and said in a quieter voice, “I even flew her back to Savannah when her friend had an emergency. I wanted to be with her. Her friend died. I understood she needed her friends more than me since they were all grieving for a loved one.”

Shoving his hands into his pant pockets, he turned to Rick. “Now, she...she doesn’t want me, because...” his hands flew out of his pockets and up, turning his eyes upward, “...who know why? Maybe, she thinks I’ll die, like her friend.”

Rick didn’t blink.

Trace whipped back around and stared at the neighbor’s house twinkling with outdoor Christmas lights. Jessie would love those colored lights winking at him. Slowly, he turned and sat on the nearest chair.

“Wow, Trace. In the brief time you’ve known her, you confessed you are taken with her, discovered she’s lied—not a twin but in fact Jessica, you blamed her for the explosion, fired her, tried to hire her back, met her parents, and on top of that, her friend died leaving her devastated. It’s a lot to take, in such a short time.”

Trace stared at Rick’s lips spread in a wide smile. “Knowing all that, I’d say you’re in trouble. You’re in love with her. For now, maybe you should give her space for a week or so.”

“Huh, she actually said she wanted *space*.” He walked to the door. “It’s getting late. Thanks for the beer,” and with a grateful grin, said, “And the chat.”

Not in the mood to go to his empty apartment, Trace decided to take a drive. An hour later, he parked along the waterfront and with his hands dug deep in his pant pockets, he walked, letting his mind wonder from one Jessie situation to another, until he finally called himself stupid and insensitive for feeling sorry for himself, because the woman he’s in love with doesn’t necessarily want him around at this point in her life.

Standing still, he watched the river flow along the boardwalk. He muttered, “Great. Simply great. What a narcissistic man you are. Jake’s lost a wife and is now alone and a single parent raising a newborn. Surely, Candace’s parents will help and...and Jessie and her friends. Yeah, Amy, Kim and Jessie will always be there for him.”

At last, he dragged himself to his apartment. Popping the top off a beer bottle, he turned on his Christmas tree lights and clicked on the television to a Christmas music station displaying a bright fireplace screensaver.

A slight knock sounded on his door.

He glanced at his watch. Eleven o’clock. Opening the door, he stared into the blue eyes of the woman he’d been calling all day. He felt his blood pressure spike. “Jessie. Come in.”

She strolled inside while her gaze scanned his apartment, as if she weren’t seeing it. When she brought her gaze around to him, her expression went blank. “Trace...”

“Have a seat, Jessie. Can I get you a drink? Coffee? Wine? Beer? Water?”

She shook her head and made her way over to the sofa. Looking at the bright twinkling light, a weak smile spread her lips. Her sad monotone voice said, “You have a Christmas tree. It’s pretty.”

He took a seat near her but left enough *space* between them. “This is the first Christmas tree I’ve had in years.” He gave her a side glance. “It’s because of you.”

“Me?”

He studied her profile while she scanned the tree. “Yes. I’ve never given much thought to Christmas before. Not until I met you. You made me realize how special the season is.”

Jessie looked down at her hands. “Trace, I know you’ve called me several times today—”

“Try twenty. I’m worried about you.”

“I’m...I’m dealing with Candace’s death. It’s hard.”

“Jessie, I know you and the other girls were close to Candace. I’m sure you all are like sisters.”

Her head lifted showing him her watery eyes.

The grief in her expression filled him with emotions. Swallowing hard, he asked, “How’s Jake doing? And the baby?”

She shrugged. “Jake’s planning the funeral, almost as if he’s in a daze. It’s a good thing Candace’s parents are there, and Jake’s mother flew in from Texas this morning. The service is in two days.”

“Is there something I can do, Jessie, anything?”

She nodded, keeping her eyes on the tree. “I don’t want to hurt you Trace, but you have to stop calling me. Give me space. I feel smothered and I don’t want any attention. What I want is to be left alone.” She shot her gaze up at him. “I don’t want to love you. I don’t want to plan a future with you. If I do, something might happen.”

He drew back, shocked at her words. “Jessie, you don’t mean it.” He reached over to take her hand, but she pulled away.

“I do. Look at Jake. He’s all alone and he hasn’t the slightest idea how to raise a baby without her mother.”

“Jessie, life is unpredictable. We can’t live in a bubble and hope nothing happens to us, otherwise, we’re not living.”

She stood. “I don’t care. It’s not worth planning on something wonderful, then having it slipped out from under you. I can’t take it again.”

Before Trace could stand, Jessie ran for the door.

“Jessie,” his disbelieving tone nearly demanded, “Don’t give up what can be a wonderful relationship—”

“Goodbye Trace.”

The door shut.

His knees gave way dropping him onto the sofa, dumbfounded. He knew she took Candace’s death hard, but he didn’t think she’d give up on them. He loved her. Didn’t she know he loved her? He’d take care of her.

He paced, combing his fingers through his hair. Huh, Jake probably said those words to Candace. Now, in two days he’s putting her in the ground.

Trace quietly stepped into the small chapel, took a seat near the back, and searched for Jessie. She hadn't called to let him know about the funeral, but he'd found it online. When he did, he sent flowers. He had to come. Not sure why. To support her, he supposed.

A door opened, he stood with the rest of the people when the pallbearers carried the casket slowly moving down the aisle toward the front of the chapel. The family followed behind. Jessie walked among them. She looked pale. Dark circles under her eyes showed a telltale sign of sleeplessness, along with the heartbreaking expression on her face. Before she slipped out of his view, he didn't miss Kent holding her hand with Amy on the other side of him.

Bowing his head, he stared at his hands, folded tightly. He hadn't been to church for several years. As a boy, his parents used to go to church on Sundays, afterward, they had a family dinner. A tradition he thought he would continue if he had a family. He looked up at the sun shining through the stain-glass windows. Did she attend this church with her friends? Probably.

When a speaker stepped up to the podium, Trace stared down at his hands folded on his lap. The man's kind voice gently flowed over the congregation. "There's a time to be born and a time to die." He paused, as if to let those words sink in. "On Christmas Day we celebrated our Lord and Savior's birth..."

Trace barely heard another word. *A time to be born. A time to die.* It didn't seem fair. How can one celebrate Christmas joyfully over a new birth when the mother was taken? It wouldn't be easy for Jake to rejoice when his heart grieved for the woman he had loved and lost.

Lifting his gaze, he stared at the bright colors in the windows. He breathed in a long breath. God, if you can hear me, please be with Jake and his daughter. Comfort them all, including Jessie. And...and, if you don't mind, help Jessie come to terms with our love for each other and accept death as part of life.

Trace waited a long time inside the church after the family stood and followed the casket out. Minutes later, he raised his head. Not another soul was left in the chapel. He stood, making his mind up, he walked to his car and drove toward the cemetery.

12By the time he parked and climbed out of his car to stroll toward the group, the family had

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settled around the casket. Standing apart from the crowd, he kept his eyes on Jessie. Someone sang a beautiful song – one he'd never heard before. Then the pastor read from the Bible.

Huh, he hadn't thought about death. Never entered his mind of the possibility of dying young. Candace was young. He believed everyone had an allotted time on this planet, whether young or old. Where would his parents bury him? Where would he bury his parents? Geez, he should talk to them.

The moment everyone dispersed, he watched Kent take Jessie's hand to lead her away. She paused and turned her head in his direction. Recognition draped over her sad face before she let Kent guide her to a car.

Heartbroken, Trace shifted his drooping shoulders toward his parked car. Reaching to open the door, he paused, hearing his name.

“Trace.”

Turning, he waited for Walter to stroll up to him. Holding out his hand, Walter clasped his hand with both of his. “Good to see you, Sir. I'm so sorry about Candace.”

“I know. But, Trace, don't give up on Jessie. She's hurting right now. You probably think she doesn't need you, but trust me, she does. When she comes to terms with Candace's death, she'll come around. Give her space. You'll see. She loves you. Before Candace's death, I hadn't seen her that happy in a long time. Give her space. Wait for her.”

“Thank you, Walter. I appreciate your words. I'll give her space for now.”

Trace watched Walter walk back toward a group of people before finally opening the car door. Sitting quietly, he thought about Walter's words. Rick also had said to give her space. Fine. He would.

Pulling out his phone from his coat pocket, he called Jon. “Hey, I know it's getting late, but can you fly me to the rig?” With his eyes on the car Jessie had gotten into, he said, “I'll be there in an hour.”

If she didn't want to be with him, he might as well work through the rest of the week, or two, or three.

Chapter 32

Jessie sat in front of her Christmas tree completely unaware of the bright glimmering lights. It had been a long hard day – exhausting. Immediately after the services, everyone had crowded into Jake’s house with tables loaded with dishes filled with assorted foods. Jessie had stood listening to all the words, words that were appreciated, but didn’t relieve the grief felt from losing a loved one. When time came to leave, she had hugged Jake, promising to stop by later in the week.

Sitting on her sofa, she glanced over at Kent pouring coffee. “I hate funerals,” she said, drawing his head around.

He shrugged and picked up the mugs. “Funerals are part of life. A closure for most people.”

“Still, I hate them.”

“Here you go.” Kent handed her a cup “I made strong coffee and added a shot of brandy, might help numb you.” He took a seat next to Riggs and reached out to give him a pat on the head.

Jessie curled her legs up on the sofa, took a sip, and said, “When I turned ten years old, mom dragged me to my first funeral. My cousin had died unexpectedly from some kind of liver disease. She was only a year younger than me. I remember how cute she looked in the casket. Her long blonde hair draped over her shoulder made her look like an angel. I thought she looked like she was sleeping. But she wasn’t. Her eyes never opened, nor did she speak. Do angels talk to people?”

She sipped her coffee in silence, remembering the same emptiness she had felt at her cousin’s funeral had reappeared when David died, the same feeling for Amy when she learned her husband died, and now Candace. It didn’t seem fair. Too many in her life died too young. Why? When her nana and papa died, she didn’t remember having those feelings. On the contrary, they were eighty-plus years old, and though she missed them, it seemed a natural process after living a long and prosperous life.

Kent reached out his arm to squeeze her shoulder.

She mumbled, “Life isn’t fair. Why do bad people live while good people died too young?”

He didn’t answer.

Jessie sniffled, wiped her nose, and bowed her head. After a moment of silence, she side-glanced Kent. “You should go home. Or go check on Amy. She’s taken Candace’s death hard.”

“You all have. Including me.” He gave her a serious look. “I’ll go, right after I finish my coffee.”

She nodded.

A knock sounded.

“Do you want me to see who it is?” Kent sat his cup down, glancing at her.

“No, I’ll go.” She wasn’t in the mood for visitors, not even sweet, thoughtful Kent. When she opened the door, she felt her heart drop. Disappointed, she stared at the person standing on the other side of the doorway who caught her off guard.

“Trace,” she mumbled, squeezed her eyelids, and dropped her head for a moment before lifting her gaze to him. Rubbing the back of her neck, she watched him shuffle his weight from one foot to the other.

“I didn’t get to speak to you at the funereal, and wanted to make sure you—”

“Jessie...” a voice sounded from inside.

She glanced around. “I’ll be right there, Kent.”

Trace’s gaze swung to the man sitting on her sofa and back to her. “I see,” his tone revealed regret. “Since you’re in good hands, I’ll leave you.” He turned.

“Trace.”

Her voice brought his head around.

“Thanks for checking, but I only want to be left alone right now.”

With a nod, he walked to the elevator, and without a look back, stepped in and let the doors slide close.

Jessie shut her door. Her heart tightened inside her chest. With a clamped jaw, she strolled to the sofa, then gave a pleading look at her friend. “Please, Kent, you’re a sweetheart of a friend and I don’t want to be rude, but I want to be alone now.”

Once Kent left, Jessie crawled into bed with Riggs lying next to her. He licked her cheek. Tears rolled down to meet his tongue. She circled her arms around him and hugged him close, sobbing into his fur, releasing tears she had held back since Candace’s death. She’d had to be brave for Jake, they all were since he had to adjust to a different lifestyle.

Tears flooded until exhaustion took over.

Jessie forced her swollen eyelids open. Riggs's soft whine brought her head to the side to look into his large brown eyes. He stood, wagging his tail with his head on the bed, staring at her. She had fallen asleep. Dragging her gaze up to the clock on the nightstand, her eyes flew open. Sitting up she glanced down at her clothes. The last thing she remembered – crying and hugging Riggs. She must have cried herself to sleep. She'd gone without much sleep for several days. Gussed her body finally said enough.

Riggs whined again.

Jumping out of bed, she grabbed for shoes. "Poor boy, you're probably bursting to pee." In a rush, she hooked his harness and leash, and hurried from her apartment, down the elevator and out the building toward the park. They didn't go far before Riggs stopped to release his bladder.

Jessie sucked in a deep breath of damp morning air. "You woke me before the sun. I don't blame you. I should have walked you before I hit the bed."

For a longtime she walked Riggs around the park, letting him take his time marking as many bushes as he wanted to. "Come on I'll feed you a big breakfast." He stopped to lift his leg one last time on a tree trunk. "Okay now, I didn't see a drop left. You hungry?"

He gave her a small woof and trotted toward the apartment building.

Riggs ate his food and stepped onto his doggie bed, twirled around in a circle before settling in a curl. "You sleep, I'll shower, and think about something productive to do with my day."

Before stepping out of the shower, she turned her face to the spray of water, drenching her puffy eyelids. What to do with her day? Sitting around the apartment all day wasn't a good idea. Shopping. Once dressed for a day out, she stepped to the closet and took out Riggs's harness and leash.

He popped his head up the second he heard her open the closet door.

"Come on Riggs, we're going shopping."

Wagging his tail, he trotted to her side and waited patiently for her to put his gear on.

"I have baby presents to buy. We need to get something for Billy's baby boy and Jake's baby girl." Her brows pulled tight. Reaching in her purse, she called Kim, and when she didn't answer, she called Amy.

“Hi Amy.” When Amy asked how things were going, she said, “Okay, I suppose. It takes time. Amy did Jake name his daughter. I’m...I’m buying a present for her, but...” she paused, not sure what to say.

“Jessie, Kim called me last night. Jake and his parents named her Candace, after her mother.”

“Oh Amy, perfect.” Jessie felt her eyes water. “Do you suppose he’d mind if I dropped by to give her a present?”

“No. I think he’d appreciate it. He does surprisingly good. The baby takes all his energy and keeps his mind focused.”

“I’ll give you a call after I stop by.”

“Why don’t I call Kim and we’ll meet for lunch at our pizza place. We haven’t been there since...”

“I’m in. Let’s plan on it.”

Chapter 33

By noon, Jessie sat across from Kim and Amy at an outside table. Instead of having lunch indoors, they opted to eat on the patio since the sun had warmed up the day, they allowed Riggs to sit by her side.

Kim scooted her chair toward the shady area a little more. “Can you believe it’s seventy degrees?”

Jessie giggled. “I love it.” She lifted her head up to feel the sun’s heat spread across her face. “I love the weather warm and hot. I’ll take the nineties.”

“Yuck,” Kim wrinkled up her nose. “I enjoy our average sixty-to-sixty-four-degree weather better.”

“I’m good with any of it.” Amy glanced at them both before resting her eyes on the menu again. “Remember, my family lived in Wyoming. You guys have no idea how horrendous a freezing winter can be. So, let’s move on to another subject.”

Placing the menu on the table next to her plate, she narrowed her eyes at Jessie. “What’s going on Jess?”

With lifted brows, Jessie said, “What are you talking about?”

“I’m sure you were aware Trace showed up at the cemetery. You avoided him. Didn’t you?”

Jessie shrugged.

“Come on.” Kim gave her a smirk, “Out with it. What’s going on? Are you letting Trace think you’re still dating Kent?”

“No, I’m not. Besides, I never said we were dating.”

Amy set her coke down. “Why on earth would Trace think you were dating my brother?”

Jessie jerked up a shoulder. “I supposed I let him think it when he showed up at my apartment once, and again at the coffeeshop.”

“Explain, why.” Her brow shot up.

“Trace, at the time still thought I had a twin. You know. I didn’t want things to get complicated if he...if he intended to see more of me. Anyway, it’s all behind me now.”

Kim shoved her elbow on the table, rested her chin in the palm of her hand, and stared at Jessie.

Jessie looked at her, shifted her gaze to Amy, and forcefully said, “Nothing’s going on.”

“No, no. Not true.” Kim handed the menu to the waitress. After they ordered, she faced her friend. “Tell us what’ve you done?”

“What makes you think I’ve done anything?”

“What exactly did you say to Trace? What happened?” Kim demanded.

Both women gave her a hard look, daring her to deny it.

“Okay, okay, I admit I said something to discourage him. Maybe I should have thought it over, but I didn’t. I told him I couldn’t do this...this...thing we have going on. A relationship isn’t something I want in my life now.” She skirted her gaze away from them, picked up her beer and took a swallow.

She stared at the glass she placed on the table, and in a muffled voice said, “He showed up at my parents’ house on Christmas Day.”

“Wow. Huh, brave guy.” Kim sat back with a slice of pizza in her hand. “What did your parents think of him.”

“Oh, I think he won them over the week of Amy’s Christmas party – remember, he dropped by my place.”

“Right, you mention he stopped by, but you forgot to tell us your parents had met him.”

“Yeah, surprised me too. They liked him, even Dad. Mom thinks he’s adorable and Jenna thinks he hot.”

“Why,” Amy wide eyes aimed at her. “Trace *is* a likable guy. What’s there *not* to like about him Jessie?”

She breathed in a long breath, held it for a second, and slowly released it. “It’s complicated.”

“What’s complicated?” Kim questioned.

“He... he said he’s in love with me.”

“Whaaaa.” Kim straightened, scooted closer to the table, with a tell all look.

Amy’s chair legs scraped moving over next to her. “Jessie that’s great. It’s not complicated. You’re in love with him.”

Jessie’s head drew back. “Why would you say such?”

“Well, aren’t you?” Kim asked.

“I... I’m not sure. Anyway, I told him...I...I told him to leave me alone, give me space. I told him not to come around again. We weren’t meant to be.”

“Amy reached over and covered her hand. Jessie does all this have to do with Candace dying. Or the love and loss you had with David? It shouldn’t mean you’ll never love again.”

Jessie rubbed her palms down her face. They didn’t know. It wasn’t her love for David, but her guilt of not loving him and causing his death.

“Jessie.”

“Guys, I understand what you’re telling me, but I, I don’t know how...I’m...what if I give Trace my heart and lose him? What if it doesn’t work out? What if I’m left alone with a child? Look what’s happened with Jake. What if–”

“Whoa, Jessie.” Amy took a deep breath, glanced at Kim, before striking back at Jessie.

“You can’t live your life on what ifs? Jessie, we weren’t promise the perfect life. There’s up and downs in everyone’s life. But if you choose not to love someone because you’re afraid you’ll lose him, well, you’re not really living. You’re missing out on a genuinely happy life.”

Kim leaned forward. “Amy’s right sweetheart. It’s your choice. You can live a lonely miserable life without living and loving. Or enjoy what life is all about by loving and being loved.”

She reached over and placed her arm around Amy, and with a slight squeeze, she said, “Amy’s an example. Her husband died in Afghanistan, never walking through her doors again, or meeting his baby boy.”

Jessie met Amy’s sad pressed lips with a slight nod.

Amy reached across the table and covered her hand. “Jessie. I’ll always love my Marine hunk, I’m thankful he gave me my son who reminds me of him every day. But I found love with Darin, and I have two more wonderful kids. Life’s unpredictable and amazing at the same time. Don’t let it pass you up by being too afraid to live it.”

“I’m afraid it’s too late.”

“Sweetie,” Kim gently covered Amy’s hand on top of Jessie’s. “If it’s meant to be – it’s never too late.”

“Besides...” Amy sat back and picked up her Coke, “...you’re never supposed to say never?”

They giggled.

“I appreciate what you’ve said, girls and I promise, I’ll think about it.”

“Let's change the subject,” Kim suggested. “Jessie, how did Jake seem when you took the baby a present.”

Jessie lifted her elbows on the table and clasped her hands together. “Sad. Yet, on a happier note, baby Candie put a constant smile on his face.”

“Candie?” Amy grinned.

“Yep, Jake decided Candace’s name seemed too long for such a tiny one. I think it fits. It’s cute and she’s adorable.”

“Who does she favor now? At first, I thought she looked like Candace with all her fuzzy red hair, but baby’s change so much in such a short time.” Kim shoved the pizza into her mouth, waiting for a reply.

“Hmm,” Jessie thought for a moment. “Candie. She’s herself, Candie, a sweet morsel.” Jessie giggled.

Amy slapped the palm of her hand on the table. “Hey, I have an idea, the next time we decide to have pizza night, we should call Jake and have him bring her to meet with us.”

“Great idea,” Kim nodded,

Jessie shot her thumb up as she took a big bite of pizza and swallowed.

“Jessie, which one of the babies’ the cutest? Candie or what's Billy's baby's name?”

“Not a fair question, Kim. All babies are cute. Besides, one’s a girl and the other’s a boy.” Jessie took a sip of her drink. “I’m not sure what Billy and his wife named him. When I went over to the apartment no one answered the door. I’ll try again when I leave here. Changing the subject – again. What's everyone doing for New Years?”

“Easy,” Kim spoke up first, “I’ll be putting the twins to bed early and try to stay awake until the midnight with hubby.”

“Ditto.” Amy responded. “Once those three are in dreamland, I’ll have to fight to stay awake past ten o'clock.”

Kim and Amy cocked their heads at Jessie. Pooching out her lips, she rocked her head back and forth, and said, “I’m probably right there with you two. I’ll have a glass of wine and try to keep my eyes open for the entire evening.”

Amy grabbed her hand, “Promise us something, think about Trace and be honest about your feelings toward him. How would David feel if you spent the rest of your life without loving another being. He’d want you to move on. Enjoy life.”

Glancing down at her half-eaten pizza, she mumbled, “I promise. I’ll think about it.”

By late afternoon, Jessie found herself sitting in front of the Christmas tree thinking. After a delightful visit with Billy and holding his adorable baby boy, Jessie came away wondering if her future held a baby in her life. She wanted a family. Didn't she? Trace would make a great father, she noticed it the way he played with her nieces. What would their kids look like? Beautiful. Oh. My. Gosh.

Suddenly, she found herself comparing the only two men who had ever pulled on her heartstrings. Trace and David.

David hadn't talked about having kids until after they had planned their wedding. She had asked, a little late. It had shocked her when he admitted he didn't want any kids. They'd get in their way. He had plans, and he wanted her to be at his beck and call. His career had to be number one in their married life.

Coming from a dysfunctional family life, David's mother had been a dutiful housewife and a closet drug addict. While his dad was a wealthy workaholic and a drunk. His dad had abused him verbally and didn't hesitate to show disapproval by a slap or two. If they both hadn't died by his fourteenth birthday, he would've been a runaway. He lived with a nurturing schoolteacher who took him under his wings and helped him move forward into a successful life. Hence, he had no intentions of bringing a child into a world he didn't trust.

By the time, the tall, good-looking, charming David Horton III met Jessie, he'd become a successful lawyer and soon to be a partner in an affluent firm. He swept her off her feet and during her last year in school, getting her degree in geology, he encouraged her to continue her schooling and even suggested she work toward her PhD. Determined to have the best life and leave his miserable home life behind, he loved his career and wanted a wife to stay home and bow to his every need.

A year or more later, after their engagement announcement, Jessie recalled the two things she looked forward to in life. She wanted a career in geology and children. The first one had already presented itself at her doorstep – an offshore job with Brightwell Drilling Company. She wanted it. When she tried to speak to David about her dreams and working as a geologist on the oil rig, he wouldn't listen.

They would never be on the same page, only his. As far as he was concerned, it didn't matter what she thought or wanted, all nonsense – all in her head. His wife had to be available to travel with him and attend company parties. The more she tried to get him to understand her, the more her doubts grew about marrying him.

The blow out happened two days before the wedding. The thought of not following through with her dreams because the man she'd thought she had fallen in love with ordered her to take a different path. He wanted a trophy on his arm to parade among all the important people in *his* career. The most important person in his life happened to be Him.

The night she told him she couldn't marry him, he stormed out telling her to get her head on straight. There would be a wedding. He wouldn't allow her to embarrass him by calling the wedding off. Too many powerful people in his circle were invited. He left her place in anger, telling her to get her act together. She would be his dutiful wife as planned.

An hour later, her life completely changed. David had been killed in a tragic accident. Less than two miles from her house, he died instantly in a head-on collision by a drunk driver. A little ironic considering he spent much of his childhood with a drunk dad.

She'd lived with the guilt of turning him away, causing his death. If he'd been in the right frame of mind, he might have avoided the accident. If she hadn't sent him off with the terrible news of wanting to cancel their wedding, he might never have left her apartment in anger.

Listening to the soothing Christmas music, she closed her eyes, thinking maybe she'd carried the guilt long enough. Her parents, her friends, they all said it wasn't her fault. Were they right? If he'd lived and they were married. Would she have been happy? No. A divorce would have been out of the question. Embarrassing. She would have lived a miserable life without children or a career.

Amy had said he would want her to love again. A resentful chuckle escaped her throat. Huh, she shook her head. Knowing David, the way she did, Amy's wrong. David's selfishness would want her to live alone for the rest of her life.

Glancing down at Riggs, she mumbled, "If I could talk to David right now, do you suppose he'd wish me well?" Again, she shook her head. Riggs looked up at her. "You're right, it's sad but I don't think so."

Riggs rested his head next to her. "Okay, I answered my own question."

"What about Trace?"

His head shot up when he heard the name.

She tilted her head sideways to look in his brown eyes. “Guilt made me push him away. I do love Trace. Oh my, I love him. I’m in love with him.” Those three words sent her heart singing, releasing dancing butterflies in her stomach.

“Riggs, my love for him is different from the love I felt for David. Besides, I’m not sure I genuinely loved David. Trace makes me feel good about myself. David didn’t. Trace makes me feel safe and happy inside. David didn’t. Trace makes me feel proud I’m a geologist. He said I’m smart and beautiful. When I think about it, David never lifted me up. He criticized me on everything. I couldn’t dress the way I wanted to. I had to dress according to his demands. Why had it taken so long to recognize his control? Easy. Looks and charm swept me off my feet. Yet even though he said he loved me, I never seemed to be enough for him.”

Scratching Riggs’s head, she mumbled, “I’m sorry he died, but I know I would never have shown up for the wedding. I’m a stronger person than to let someone control me in such a manner.”

A tiny woof escape Riggs’s throat.

Her phone rang. Her heartbeat accelerated, until she recognized her mom’s number.

“Hi mom, what’s up?”

She had the sweetest mother and father. They worried about her. “Mom, it’s hard for all of us. We’ll miss Candace, but we have wonderful memories.”

She listened to encouraging words and when her mother asked about Trace, she admitted, “Mom, I do love him, but I think I’ve been afraid of loving and losing, like Jake, Amy and her first husband...and David.”

“Honey, if you shut your feelings off and not experience sadness, you will never experience true joy.”

“You’re right, Mom. Kim’s right. Amy’s right. Even Candace told me not to pass up a good thing. I’d be crazy not to admit I’m in love with Trace.” She looked down at her dog, staring up at her as if understanding every word. “Thanks Mom, I know what I have to do.”

She hung up, jumped to her feet, and said to Riggs, “I have to see Trace – start the New Year with him.” Hurrying, she grabbed her phone and rang Trace’s number. Seconds later, no answer, she left a message. She’ll wait awhile and try again.

Chapter 34

The next morning Jessie woke up, made coffee, and waited until eight o'clock to make a call to Trace. She waited, listening, but the ring continued until she finally left another message. Later, she tried again. No answer. When she tried again, she received a message saying the mailbox was full.

She whirled in a circle, throwing up her hands. "Why aren't you answering? Why don't you call me back?" Setting on a barstool, she shoved her elbow on the counter and rested her chin in the palm of her hand. Why didn't he return her call last night?

"Oh my gosh, Riggs. He's avoiding me."

An hour or so later, she tried to leave Trace another message, but he hadn't emptied his mailbox.

Several minutes later, her heartbeat jump-started when her phone rang. Glancing at the unknown number, she answered.

"Hi Jess, Billy here."

"Billy, I didn't recognize the number."

"Yep, my wife's phone. I wanted to tell you about the board meeting at eleven this morning," he paused, releasing a short chuckle, "You know, in case you changed your mind about coming back to work on the rig."

"Thank you, Billy. I'll think about it." After they spoke more pleasantries, she disconnected, glanced at the clock, and decided to go to the office. Maybe she'd be able to talk to Trace there. He usually didn't miss a board meeting.

Arriving early Jessie stood staring out the large windows extending the length of the wall. The sound of the opening elevator drew her gaze. She nodded to the board members who stared at her and her blonde hair. She sent them a warm smile as they made their way across the entryway to the conference room doors. Self-consciously, she touched her short hair. Sucking in a short breath and quickly releasing it, her gaze shifted to the elevator. If he didn't show up what next?

Again, the elevator dinged. She searched the well-dressed corporate men stepping out. No Trace. Her gaze met Mr. Brightwell. His quick scan over her hairdo and the interesting light in his eyes didn't falter when he strolled toward her.

"Miss Tucker, it's good to see you."

"Mr. Brightwell," she welcomed his smile and accepted the hand he extended.

Again, his gaze took in her hair. "I hope you've come to our board meeting to inform me you're coming back to work for us."

"I'm sorry Mr. Brightwell, I'm...I loved working on the oil rig, and I enjoyed everybody I worked with, but I'm committed to a new job."

"Yes, Trace said Petroleum Science Lab hired you." Eyes of regret met hers. "I must say, our loss. Ms. Tucker, I apologize for jumping to a conclusion and firing you without a thorough investigation first. According to my son and many of the crew members, you were one of the best geologists we've had. I should have listened to them." He slid his head to the side. "Is there something I can do for you if you're not here about returning to the rig?"

She glanced down at his bright red tie, so appropriate for the season. Shifting her gaze up to his, she said. "I'm...ah...how do I say this? Mr. Brightwell, I don't know if you're aware Trace and I had been dating."

He gave her a slight smile with a dip of his head.

She shifted her gaze beyond him to the elevator. "Is Trace attending the meeting this morning?" She returned her gaze to his. "I mean...well, I...I've tried to call him. He doesn't answer his phone, do you know when or how I can get ahold of him? It's...it's important."

Mr. Brightwell's brow lifted, "I hope you don't intend to break my son's heart, again."

Jessie's head drew back. How much did Trace tell him about her?

"Miss. Tucker--"

"Oh, please, its Jessie."

His teasing smile glanced up at her hair again. "You prefer Jessie instead of Jessica?"

Wow, Trace told them everything. "All my friends and family call me Jessie."

"Jessie," he emphasized her name in a soft voice. "I'm aware Trace is in love with you, after all you're the reason he missed our Christmas party. He's upset, or rather downhearted on how you sent him away. Is the reason you want to get in touch with him a good reason or is it going to hurt him again?"

She cleared her throat, straightened her shoulders, and looked him directly in the eyes. Somewhat awkwardly, she said, "I had to deal with the death of my friend, and it--"

"I know..." he interrupted, "...and I'm sorry for your loss. I know your friend Candace will leave a memory in your heart forever. I've been there, Jessie, and it hurts, but I suggest you not *push* those who love you away."

Jessie stared at the man. Wow, she didn't realize Trace and his dad had such a close relationship. She did push Trace away knowing he loved her.

Jessie took a deep breath and reminded herself to be decisive and direct. "Mr. Brightwell, I don't want to push him away anymore, I--"

"Trace is on the oil rig working, he gave several men the time off to be with their families during the holiday. He won't be home till after the New Year. And you can't call him on his phone. He left it at home. You'd have to call the rig phone."

Suddenly, he reached out and pressed his hand against her arm. "Jessie, I think I have a solution. Wait here," he said, and strolled over facing the windows. With his phone to his ear, Jessie heard him speak, but couldn't make out his words. She waited.

Hanging up, he strolled toward her with a bright smile. "My dear, if you're serious about my son, Jon will text you in the morning. If you go to the airport, he'll fly you out to the rig. He can't tonight, it'll be too late since he's with his family in Atlanta and can't get here until tomorrow morning."

Jessie's eyes widened. "Mr. Bright--"

"Please, I think you should call me Thomas."

"Ah...Thomas, are you sure? I don't want you to go out of your way or Jon because it's New Year's Eve."

"I'm sure. Now I have a meeting to attend." He took a stride toward the conference room, paused, and glanced back at her. "I have one more request. If you're going to meet my son with sad news, don't get on my helicopter. Promise, it's all I ask."

Squeezing her hands together, she nodded at him. "I promise, it isn't bad, and I don't think it's sad news. Mr. Bri...Thomas, I'm in love with you son."

Jessie woke early on New Year's Day, ready to drive to the airport. After spending the evening with Amy and Kim, she left early and crawled into bed by eleven o'clock. Surprisingly,

she had fallen asleep the moment her head hit the pillow, waking early. With Riggs staying at Amy's, she didn't have to hurry and dress to walk him. She missed him.

She packed an overnight bag.

Apprehensively, she unpacked the overnight bag.

What if he wants her to stay or Jon takes off or I'll have to wait for the helicopter the next day.

She packed again.

What if I've rejected Trace too many times? He might tell me it's over for good. He might have realized he didn't really love me.

She unpacked.

Pouring a cup of coffee, she sat at the bar, waiting, tapping her foot against the chair leg.

A glance at the wall clock, drew a disappointing glare. She looked at her phone. No text from Jon. Still too early. Of course, he had to drive from Atlanta, what did she expect? Geez, to get here by now, he'd had to have gotten up in the wee hours. Seven o'clock, it might be noon before he drove in. He probably stayed up late last night to see the New Year arrive – unlike her.

Releasing a deep sigh, she poured another cup of coffee, strolled around her apartment with Trace on her mind. What if he rejected her the way she had rejected him? She wouldn't blame him. It shocked her to learn he'd been so open with his father. They knew all about her. Well, not all, or did they? They knew Trace had feelings for her, and evidently, they approved. She hadn't thought about how he felt when she told him she wanted him to leave, give her space. She could be an emotional mess at times. Even now, she couldn't sit still.

Grabbing her phone, she called Amy. "Hi, did I wake you?"

Amy laughed. "Are you kidding. With three kids and a dog, our house is filled with noise – can you hear them?"

Jessie listened. She laughed, "What are they doing. I can hear Riggs barking."

"They're playing, Riggs's chasing them around the house. Your dog's loving it, not to mention the kids."

"Amy, I hope it's not too much for you."

"Not at all. Kid noise is what parents get use to when you have more than two. Jess, no text yet?"

"No. I'll let you know when I take off."

“Try not to be a nervous wreck. Good luck.”

Jessie hung up, looked at the walk clock. Her phone rang out. She jumped. Grabbing it, she answered, hearing Jon’s voice, she listened, and said, “Thank you Jon, I’m on my way.”

Within twenty minutes, she parked and hurried to the office where she found Jon logging in the books for the flight to the oil rig. He shot a glance at her, then at once took a double take.

“Jess, what have you done with your hair, and where’s your glasses?”

Crinkling up her nose at him, she jerked up a shoulder and touched her short blonde do.

He whistled, and said, “Wow. It fits, Jess. You look great with blonde hair.”

Jessie felt her face heat up. “Thanks Jon. Happy New Year.”

The corner of his eyes crinkled. “You too.” Slipping on his jacket, he said, “Does this flight mean you’re back to working on the rig?”

“Sorry no, it’s ... it’s personal. I need to talk to Trace. Jessie didn’t miss the curious glint in his eyes when she called Mr. Brightwell by his first name.

“Personal, huh? One day you’ll have to tell me all about this ‘personal visit’ with my boss.”

She giggled, “I will, I promise.”

“I heard about the investigation. Sorry about your dismissal, it wasn’t fair.”

“Thanks, but it worked out. I have a job with the Petroleum Science Lab, starting this week.”

“Good for you. I have to say, I’ll miss taking you out to the rig.”

He didn’t ask any further questions when they boarded the helicopter and lifted off. Jessie took the time to think about what she would say to Trace when she laid eyes on him. The most important three words, *I love you*. His father said she had hurt him. What if she’d hurt him badly enough, he’d ask her to get back on the helicopter and leave? What if he didn’t want her love now. How many times did she tell him to leave her alone? What if – stop it. What if, what if, what if, there were a thousand what ifs.

Chapter 35

By the time the oil rig appeared in the horizon, growing larger, frayed nerves sent her heart pounding in her ears. Wringing her hands, she searched the platform and felt a slight jolt when Jon landed the helicopter. Jessie hurried to jump out without waiting for Jon to circle around to open the door for her.

She met his curious expression and shot him a grateful smile. “Jon, do you mind waiting a few minutes before returning to the mainland?”

“No problem, there’s two roughnecks due to fly out. I’ll be in the galley having coffee.”

“Thanks Jon.” Slowly, she scanned the platform filled with roughnecks moving as a team, working the drills in sync with the machines. drilling deep into the ocean bed. No sign of Trace. She figured she had to start somewhere, and the main office seemed the place.

“Hey Jessie,” hollered a familiar voice halting her steps.

Jeff waved his hands, the second she turned in his direction to hurry over. Once near, he threw his arms around her and gave her a hug. “Good to see you. We’ve missed you.”

She laughed out, “You too. I’ve missed all of you.”

“Billy told us you had a new hairdo. Wow, it looks great. Are you back to work? Please say yes.”

“No, sorry,” she wrinkled up her nose at him.

“Ah, shucks, too bad. We were all hoping you’d come back.”

“I’m here to see Trace...ah, Mr. Brightwell. But it’s so good to see you, Jeff. Happy New Year.”

“Happy New Years to you Jess.”

When she turned to head for the office, he stopped her and hollered above the drill, “Hey, Mr. Brightwell’s working the drill over there...” his jutting his chin in the opposite direction.

She reached out and squeezed his arm, gave him a big grin, and hurried toward the area where she’d find Trace. Once her gaze landed on him, she slowed, aware of her heart racing with each step she took toward him.

He stepped back from the pipe drilling down into the ocean and glanced up. Their eyes connected. She recognized the shock in his expression, but he quickly covered his reaction. He

didn't move. Bracing herself to keep from running into his arms which hadn't welcomed her, she slowed her steps.

Jessie continued to move toward him, looking directly in his eyes. Before she could say a word, his sharp voice lifted above the drilling machines, demanding, "What are you doing here?"

His leaden gray eyes dug deep into hers, dark with suspicion, along with his stiff stance.

Jessie took in a short breath through her nose, smelling the rig's oily scent. "Can we talk?"

Jeff stepped up and patted Trace on the shoulder. "I got this Mr. Brightwell." Not waiting for a reply Jeff shoved his gloves on and turned to the drill.

Jessie stood aware of his blank expression, hoping he read the love in hers. Her brain scrambled for words to tell him she loved him. Unable to read what he thought, she began to think he wasn't going to talk to her.

Suddenly, he took her by the elbow and pulled her away from the drilling noise toward the door leading into the hall toward what used to be her lab.

Releasing her, he twisted around and stared out at the ocean. Without a glance her way, he asked again, "Why are you here Jessie?"

Geez, she pressed her back against the wall. He wasn't going to make this easy. She stood silently watching when he jerked the hard hat off his head, yanked off his gloves, then ran his fingers through his hair, releasing the flat curls. A strand drooped down on his forehead. Jessie squeezed her hands together to keep from reaching up and moving his hair aside.

He waited for her answer.

Turning her gaze out toward the massive body of water, she cleared her throat. Slowly, breathing in a long breath, a whiff of oil touched her senses. She'd forgotten the oil rig smells mixed with the salty ocean air. She missed it. Feeling Trace's eyes on her, she slowly shifted to the side to face him. "I'm sorry, Trace...I tried calling you, but your dad said you left--"

"You talked to Dad?" His piercing eyes drilled into hers. "Why?"

"I did. He arranged for Jon to fly me here. I have to tell you...ah...explain things."

She scanned his face, set hard, with cold gray stones glued to hers, waiting to hear what she had to say. "Trace, I sent you away because...because...it scared me to admit I loved you."

His head drew back. "Are you admitting it now?"

"I am."

Not blinking, his gaze bore into hers. His brows raised over his softened expression. “And...” his stiff voice didn’t match the look in his eyes, “...what exactly are you admitting to *Jessica*?” he used her formal name.

She had to convince him. She pressed her lips together, cocked her head to the side and studied him for a moment before saying, “Trace Brightwell, I love you. I *am* in love with you.”

Shifting his body to face the ocean again. He asked, “Why does loving me frighten you?”

Jessie stared down at her left-hand remembering David's diamond ring she had worn. “Do you recall when I said you didn’t know Jessica? I spoke of her fiancé dying in a car accident.”

He slowly gave her a nod.

“For a long time, I blamed myself. If I hadn't tried to call off the wedding that night, he might be alive today.”

Trace rubbed the back of his neck. Finally, looking at her, he said, “I can’t pretend to completely understand, but I am sorry, Jessie. It had to have been heartbreaking for you.”

Slowly, she nodded, glancing down at her hand. She rubbed her ring finger.

“Jessie,” he reached over and took her hand. “You can't take the blame. The accident might have happened even if you hadn’t called off the wedding. We have no control when our time’s up.”

“You’re right.” Jessie squeezed his hand and slowly withdrew from his soft grip. Turning her gaze out at the horizon where the ocean met the sky, she took in a breath of salt air.

She felt him studying her closely.

“There’s something else, isn’t there. Is it Kent?”

“What?” His question confused her.

“Kent. He seemed to be the one you want. Even at the funeral he took care of you.”

This time her voice had a hint of amusement. “Kent’s more of a brother to me. He’s Amy’s brother. We’ve never been an item. I’ve known him since Amy babysat him when we were in high school.”

His serious gaze touched her. “None of this explains why you’re afraid to love me?”

Jessie closed her eyelids. When she opened them, she felt moisture blur her vision. “Before David died, Amy lost her husband in Iraq. We were all devastated, and Amy’s grief hit all of us hard. She had a small baby boy, without his dad.”

She darted a sad watery eye at Trace. “Now, Candace died leaving a tiny newborn without a mother. It seems those I love the most – die.”

“Jessie. Jessie, Jessie.” Trace’s arm covered her shoulder drawing her into an embrace. His tender understanding tone released a flood of sobs against his chest. Circling her arms around his middle, Jessie held on to him, soaking in his strength.

Finally, pulling away, she wiped the palm of her hand over her wet cheeks. “Trace, so many loved ones have died. It frightens me because to love you means to lose you.”

“I love you, Jessie. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I’d love to grow old with you by my side, but if fate deals us a shorter length of time and one of us departs this planet early, I’d never ever regret the time spent with you.”

She sniffled. “Amy and Kim said the same. Amy reminded me of her two other beautiful children, if she hadn’t taken the risk to love again, she never would have had them. And, if Candace hadn’t had her beautiful baby girl, Jake would be alone.”

Jessie lifted her hand and touched his smudged cheek, “Trace, I want to live. I want to love. I love you.”

Gentle warm and demanding lips pressed against hers. Throwing her arms around his neck Jessie responded, releasing the love she couldn’t hold back any longer.

Trace locked his arms around her middle and pulled back to look her in the eyes, Jessie’s heart hammered against her chest recognizing the possessive look. Now, she knew he still loved her.

“Trace, I’d rather spend a brief time with you if it’s the only option. My desire is to spend years with you, loving you.”

Trace picked her up and swung her around. He whispered in her ear, putting her down, “I have a feeling our life together will be decades of loving each other.”

The shine in his eyes matched her happiness.

A loud whistle drew their gaze to the group of crew members standing near, grinning.

When Tracy and Jessie laughed, they all clapped and someone hollered, “When’s the wedding?”

THE END

If you would like to try Jessie's Carrot Cake, which is Judy Baker's favorite dessert she bakes for her Christmas family dinner. She will share the recipe with you. Please let her know if you like the cake.

Carrot Cake Recipe

2 cups of sugar

1 ¼ cups of vegetables oil

4 eggs

2 ½ cups of cake flour

2 ¼ teaspoons of soda

2 teaspoons cinnamon

3 cups finely shredded carrots (do not use pre-shredded carrots, too dry)

½ cup of walnuts (I use black walnuts)

Combine sugar, oil, and eggs, one at a time. Beat well after each addition. Stir in carrots.

Add nuts. Sift together flour, soda, and cinnamon. Stir in mixture.

Turn into 3 greased and floured 9-inch pans.

Bake 350° 30-35 minutes

Frosting for Jessie's Carrot Cake

1 8oz package of cream cheese – softened

¼ cup butter – softened

1 lb. box confection sugar

2 teaspoon lemon juice

2 teaspoon vanilla

Blend cream cheese and butter until smooth. Add sugar, gradually mixing.

Stir in lemon juice and vanilla. Makes enough to frost 3 9-inch round layers. If frosting seems soft, refrigerate.

About the Author

Judy Baker writes her Christmas contemporary romances as Anna Sugg. Some of her Christmas novels are filled with mystery, secrets, murder, and always sweet love. You will always find a dog character in her stories. Her Christmas series will warm your heart. Her writing is considered sensuous on the side of PG, nothing graphic.

Judy now lives in Arizona with her husband and he furry boys: Stanley, a Lakeland terrier and Charlie, an Airedale. When not writing, she enjoys golfing, stargazing through one of her many telescopes, drinking coffee, sometimes iced tea, outside on the patio while plotting her next story. <https://www.judybakerauthor.com>

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Anna Sugg

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