



The glowing white neon above Mort's Bar pulsed and vibrated and attracted the thirsty masses of Truly, Idaho, like a bug light. But Mort's was more than a beer magnet. More than just a place to drink cold Coors and get into a fight on Friday nights. Mort's had historical significance – kind of like the Alamo. While other establishments came and went in the small town, Mort's had always stayed the same.

Until about a year ago when the new owner had spruced the place up with gallons of Lysol and paint and had instituted a strict no-panty-tossing policy. Before that, women throwing their undies like a ring toss up onto the row of antlers above the bar had been encouraged as a sort of indoor sporting event. Now, if a woman felt the urge to toss, she got tossed out on her bare ass.

Ah, the good old days.

Maddie Jones stood on the sidewalk in front of Mort's and stared up at the sign, completely immune

to the subliminal lure that the light sent out through the impending darkness. An indistinguishable hum of voices and music leached through the cracks in the old building sandwiched between Ace Hardware and the Panda Restaurant.

A couple in jeans and tank tops brushed past Maddie. The door opened and the sound of voices and the unmistakable twang of country music spilled out onto Main Street. The door closed and Maddie remained standing outside. She adjusted the purse strap on her shoulder, then pulled up the zipper on her bulky blue sweater. She hadn't lived in Truly for twenty-nine years, and she'd forgotten how cool it got at night. Even in July.

Her hand lifted toward the old door, then dropped to her side. A surprising rush of apprehension raised the hair on the back of her neck and tilted her stomach. She'd done this dozens of times. So why the apprehension? Why now? she asked herself, even though she knew the answer. Because it was personal this time, and once she opened that door, once she took the first step, there was no going back.

If her friends could see her, standing there as if her feet were set in the concrete, they'd be shocked. She'd interviewed serial killers and cold-blooded murderers, but chatting up nut jobs with antisocial personality disorders was a piece of cake compared to what waited for her inside Mort's. Beyond the NO ONE UNDER 21 sign, her past waited for her, and as she'd learned recently, digging into other people's pasts

was a hell of a lot easier than digging into her own.

‘For God’s sake,’ she muttered and reached for the door. She was a little disgusted with herself for being such a wimp and a weenie, and she squelched her apprehension under the heavy fist of her strong will. Nothing was going to happen that she did not want to happen. She was in control. As always.

The heavy thump of the jukebox and the smell of hops and tobacco assaulted her as she stepped inside. The door shut behind her and she paused to let her eyes adjust to the dim light. Mort’s was just a bar. Like a thousand others she’d been in across the country. Nothing special, not even the array of antlers hanging above the long mahogany bar was anything out of the ordinary.

Maddie didn’t like bars. Especially cowboy bars. The smoke, the music, the steady stream of beer. She didn’t particularly care for cowboys either. As far as she was concerned, a pair of snug Wranglers on a tight cowboy butt couldn’t quite make up for the boots, the buckles, the wads of chew. She liked her men in suits and Italian leather shoes. Not that she’d had a man, or even a date, in about four years.

She studied the crowd as she wove her way to the middle of the long oak bar and the only empty stool. Her gaze took in cowboy hats and trucker caps, a few crew cuts, and a mullet or two. She noticed ponytails, shoulder-length bobs, and some of the worst perms and flipped bangs to ever come out of the eighties. What she didn’t see was the one person she’d come

searching for, although she didn't really expect to see him sitting at one of the tables.

She wedged herself onto the stool between a man in a blue T-shirt and a woman with overprocessed hair. Behind the cash register and bottles of alcohol, a mirror ran the length of the bar while two bartenders pulled beers and blended drinks. Neither was the owner of this fine establishment.

'That little gal was into AC/DC, if you know what I mean,' said the man on her left, and Maddie figured he wasn't talking about *Back in Black* or *Highway to Hell*. The guy in question was about sixty, sported a battered trucker's hat and a beer belly the size of a pony keg. Through the mirror Maddie watched several men down the row nod, paying rapt attention to beer-belly guy.

One of the bartenders set a napkin in front of her and asked what she'd like to drink. He looked to be about nineteen, although she supposed he had to be at least twenty-one. Old enough to pour liquor within the layers of tobacco smoke and knee-deep bullshit.

'Sapphire martini. Extra dry, three olives,' she said, calculating the carbs in the olives. She pulled her purse into her lap and watched the bartender turn and reach for the good gin and vermouth.

'I told that little gal she could keep her girlfriend, so long as she brought her over once in a while,' the guy on her left added.

'Damn right!'

‘That’s what I’m talking about!’

Then again, this was small-town Idaho, where things like liquor laws were sometimes overlooked and some people considered a good bullshit story a form of literature.

Maddie rolled her eyes and bit her lip to keep her comments to herself. She had a habit of saying what she thought. She didn’t necessarily consider it a *bad* habit, but not everyone appreciated it.

Through the mirror, her gaze moved up, then down the bar, searching for the owner, not that she thought she’d see him plopped down on a stool any more than sitting at a table. When she’d called the other bar he owned in town, she’d been told that he would be here tonight, and she figured he was probably in his office examining his books or, if he was like his father, the inner thigh of a barmaid.

‘I pay for everything,’ the woman on Maddie’s opposite side wailed to her friend. ‘I even bought my own birthday card and had J.W. sign it, thinking he’d feel bad and get the hint.’

‘Oh, geez,’ Maddie couldn’t help but mutter and looked at the woman through the mirror. Between bottles of Absolut and Skyy vodka, she could make out big blond hair falling to chubby shoulders and breasts spilling out of a red tank top with rhinestones on it.

‘He didn’t feel bad at all! Just complained that he didn’t like mushy cards like the one I bought.’ She took a drink of something with an umbrella in it. ‘He

wants me to come over when his mother goes out of town next weekend and make him dinner.' She brushed moisture from beneath her eyes and sniffed. 'I'm thinking of telling him no.'

Maddie's brows drew together and a stunned, 'Are you shitting me?' escaped her mouth before she knew she'd uttered a word.

'Excuse me?' the bartender asked as he set the drink in front of her.

She shook her head. 'Nothing.' She reached into her purse and paid for her drink as a song about a Honky Tonk Badonkadonk, whatever the hell that meant, thumped from the glowing neon jukebox and coalesced with the steady hum of conversation.

She pulled back the sleeve of her sweater and reached for her martini. She read the glowing hands of her watch as she raised the glass to her lips. Nine o'clock. The owner was bound to show his face sooner or later. If not tonight, there was always tomorrow. She took a sip and the gin and vermouth warmed a path all the way to her stomach.

She really hoped he'd showed up sooner rather than later. Before she had too many martinis and forgot why she was sitting on a barstool eavesdropping on needy passive-aggressive women and delusional men. Not that listening in on people with lives more pathetic than hers couldn't be highly entertaining at times.

She set the glass back on the bar. Eavesdropping wasn't her first choice. She much preferred the

straightforward approach: digging into people's lives and plumbing their dirty little secrets without distraction. Some people gave up their secrets without protest, eager to tell all. Others forced her to reach deep, rattle them loose or rip them out by the roots. Her work was sometimes messy, always gritty, but she loved writing about serial killers, mass murderers, and your everyday run-of-the-mill psychopaths.

Really, a girl had to excel at something, and Maddie, writing as Madeline Dupree, was one of the best true crime writers in the genre. She wrote blood and gore. About the sick and disturbed, and there were those who thought, her friends among them, that what she wrote warped her personality. She liked to think it added to her charm.

The truth was somewhere in the middle. The things she'd seen and written about did affect her. No matter the barrier she placed between her sanity and the people she interviewed and researched, their sickness sometimes seeped through the cracks, leaving behind a black tacky film that was hard as hell to scrub clean.

Her job made her see the world a little differently than those who'd never sat across from a serial killer while he got off on the retelling of his 'work'. But those same things also made her a strong woman who didn't take crap from anyone. Very little intimidated her, and she didn't have any illusions about mankind. In her head, she knew that most people were decent. That given the choice, they would do the right thing,

but she also knew about the others. The fifteen percent who were only interested in their own selfish and warped pleasure. Out of that fifteen percent, only about two percent were actual serial killers. The other social deviants were just your everyday rapists, murderers, thugs, and corporate executives secretly plundering their employees' 401(k) accounts.

And if there was one thing she knew as certainly as she knew the sun would rise in the east and set in the west, it was that everyone had secrets. She had a few of her own. She just held hers closer to the vest than most people.

She raised the glass to her lips and her gaze was drawn to the end of the bar. A door in the back opened and a man stepped from the lit alley and into the dark hall.

Maddie knew him. Knew him before he walked from the shadows. Before the shadows slid up the wide chest and shoulders of his black T-shirt. Knew him before the light slipped across his chin and nose and shone in his hair as black as the night from which he'd come.

He moved behind the bar, wrapping a red bar apron around his hips and tying the strings above his fly. She'd never met him. Never been in the same room, but she knew he was thirty-five, a year older than herself. She knew he was six-two, one hundred and ninety pounds. For twelve years he'd served in the army, flying helicopters and raining Hellfire missiles. He'd been named after his father, Lochlyn

Michael Hennessy, but he went by Mick. Like his father, he was an obscenely good-looking man. The kind of good-looking that turned heads, stopped hearts, and gave women bad thoughts. Thoughts of hot mouths and hands and tangled clothes. The whisper of warm breath against the arch of a woman's throat and the touch of flesh in the backseat of a car.

Not that Maddie was susceptible to those thoughts.

He had an older sister Meg, and he owned two bars in town, Mort's and Hennessy's. The latter had been in his family longer than he'd been alive. Hennessy's, the bar where Maddie's mother had worked. Where she'd met Loch Hennessy and where she'd died.

As if he felt her gaze, he glanced up from the strings of the apron. He stopped a few feet from Maddie and his eyes met hers. She choked on the gin that refused to go down her throat. From his driver's license, she knew his eyes were blue, but they were more a deep turquoise. Like the Caribbean Sea, and seeing them looking back at her was a shock. She lowered her glass and raised a hand to her mouth.

The last strains of the honky-tonk song died out as he finished tying the strings, and he stepped closer until only a few feet of mahogany separated his gaze from hers. 'You going to live?' His deep voice cut through the noise around them.

She swallowed and coughed one last time. 'I believe so.'

‘Hey, Mick,’ the blonde on the next stool called out.

‘Hey, Darla. How’re things?’

‘Could be better.’

‘Isn’t that always the case?’ he said as he gazed at the woman. ‘Are you planning on behaving yourself?’

‘You know me.’ Darla laughed. ‘I always plan on it. Course, I can always be persuaded to misbehave.’

‘You’re going to keep your underwear on tonight, though. Right?’ he asked with a lift of one dark brow.

‘You never can tell about me.’ She leaned forward. ‘You never know what I might do. Sometimes I’m crazy.’

*Just sometimes?* Buying her own birthday card for her boyfriend to sign suggested a passive/aggressive disorder that bordered on crazy as hell.

‘Just keep your panties on so I don’t have to toss you out on your bare butt again.’

*Again?* Meaning it had happened before? Maddie took a drink and slid her gaze to Darla’s considerable behind squeezed into a pair of Wranglers.

‘I just bet you all would love to see that!’ Darla said with a toss of her hair.

For the second time that night, Maddie choked on her drink.

Mick’s deep chuckle drew Maddie’s attention to the amusement shining through his startling blue eyes. ‘Honey, do you need some water?’ he asked.

She shook her head and cleared her throat.

‘That drink too strong for you?’

‘No. It’s fine.’ She coughed one last time and set her glass on the bar. ‘I just got a horrifying visual.’

The corners of his lips turned up into a knowing smile that made two dents in his tan cheeks. ‘I haven’t seen you in here before. You just passing through?’

She forced the image of Darla’s big bare butt from her head and her mind back on the reason she was in Mort’s. She’d expected to dislike Mick Hennessy on sight. She didn’t. ‘No. I bought a house out on Red Squirrel Road.’

‘Nice area. Are you on the lake?’

‘Yes.’ She wondered if Mick had inherited his father’s charm along with his looks. From what Maddie had been able to gather, Loch Hennessy had charmed women into the sack with little more than a look in their direction. He’d certainly charmed her mother.

‘Are you here for the summer, then?’

‘Yes.’

He tilted his head to one side and studied her face. His gaze slid from her eyes to her mouth and lingered for several heartbeats before he looked back up. ‘What’s your name, brown eyes?’

‘Maddie,’ she answered, holding a breath as she waited for him to connect her with the past. His past.

‘Just Maddie?’

‘Dupree,’ she answered, using her pen name.

Someone down the bar called his name and he glanced away for a moment before returning his

attention to her. He gave her an easy smile. One that brought out those dimples of his and softened his masculine face. He didn't recognize her. 'I'm Mick Hennessy.' The music started once more and he said, 'Welcome to Truly. Maybe I'll see you around.'

She watched him walk away without telling him the reason she was in town and why she was sitting in Mort's. Now wasn't the best time or place, but there was no 'maybe' about it. He didn't know it yet, but Mick Hennessy would be seeing a lot of her. Next time he might not be so welcoming.

The sounds and smells of the bar pressed in on her and she hung her purse over her shoulder. She slid from the stool and wove her way through the dimly lit crowd. At the door, she looked over her shoulder toward the bar and Mick. Beneath the lights above him, he tilted his head back a little and smiled. She paused and her grasp on the handle tightened as he turned and poured a beer from a row of spigots.

While she stood there, the juke playing something about whiskey for men and beer for horses, her gaze took in his dark hair at the back of his neck and his wide shoulders in his black T-shirt. He turned and placed a glass on the bar. As she watched him, he laughed at something, and until that moment Maddie hadn't known what she'd expected of Mick Hennessy, but whatever it had been, this living, breathing man who laughed and smiled hadn't been it.

Through the dark bar and cigarette haze, his gaze landed on her. She could almost feel it reach across

the room and touch her, which she knew was pure illusion. She stood in the darkened entrance and it would be near impossible for him to distinguish her from the crowd. She opened the door and stepped outside into the cool evening air. While she'd been in Mort's, night had descended on Truly like a heavy black curtain. The only relief a few lit business signs and the occasional streetlamp.

Her black Mercedes was parked across the street in front of Tina's Mountain Skivvies and the Rock Hound Art Gallery. She waited for a yellow Hummer to pass before she stepped from the curb and walked from beneath the glow of Mort's neon sign.

A keyless transponder in her purse unlocked the driver's-side door as she approached, and she opened it and slid inside the cool leather interior. Normally, she wasn't materialistic. She didn't care about clothes or shoes. Since no one ever saw her underwear these days, she didn't care if her bra matched her panties and she didn't own expensive jewelry. Before purchasing the Mercedes two months ago, Maddie had put over two hundred thousand miles on her Nissan Sentra. She'd needed a new vehicle and had been looking at a Volvo SUV when she'd turned around and locked eyes on the black S600 sedan. The showroom lights had been shining down on the car like a signal from God, and she could have sworn she heard angels singing hallelujahs like the Mormon Tabernacle Choir. Who was she to ignore a message from the Lord? A few hours after walking into the

dealership, she'd driven the car out of the showroom and into the garage of her home down in Boise.

She pressed the start button on the shifter and hit the lights. The CD in her stereo system filled the Mercedes with Warren Zevon's *Excitable Boy*. She pulled away from the curb and flipped a U in the middle of Main Street. There was something brilliant and disturbing about Warren Zevon's lyrics. A little like looking into the mind of someone who stood at the line between crazy and sane and occasionally pushed one toe over. Toying with the line, testing it, then pulling back just before getting sucked into looneyville. In Maddie's line of work, there weren't many who pulled back in time.

The Mercedes' headlights cut through the inky night as she turned left at the only traffic signal in town. The very first car she'd ever owned had been a Volkswagen Rabbit, so battered the seats had been held together with duct tape. She'd come a long way since then. A long way from the Roundup Trailer Court where she'd lived with her mother, and the cramped little house in Boise where she'd been raised by her great-aunt Martha.

Until the day of her retirement, Martha had worked the front counter at Rexall Drug, and they'd lived off her small paycheck and Maddie's Social Security checks. Money had always been tight, but Martha kept half a dozen cats at any given time. The house had always smelled like Friskies and litter boxes. To this day, Maddie hated cats. Well, maybe

not her good friend Lucy's cat, Mr Snookums. Snookie was cool. For a cat.

She drove for a mile around the east side of the lake before turning into her driveway lined with thick towering pines and pulling to stop in front of the two-story home she'd bought a few months ago. She didn't know how long she'd keep the house. One year. Three. Five. She'd bought rather than leased for the investment. Property around Truly was hot, and when or if she sold the place, she stood to make a nice profit.

Maddie cut the Mercedes' headlights and the darkness pressed in on her. She ignored the apprehension in her chest as she got out of the car and walked up the steps and onto the wraparound porch lit up with numerous sixty-watt bulbs. She wasn't afraid of anything. Certainly not the dark, but she knew bad things did happen to women who weren't as aware and as cautious as Maddie. Women who didn't have a small arsenal of safety devices in their shoulder bags. Things like a Taser and Mace, a personal alarm, and brass knuckles, just to name a few. A girl could never be too careful, especially at night in a town where it was difficult to see your hand in front of your face. In a town set smack-dab in the middle of dense forest where wildlife rustled from trees and underbrush. Where rodents with beady little eyes waited for a girl to go to bed before ransacking the pantry. Maddie had never had to use any of her personal safety devices, but lately she'd been wondering if she was a good

enough shot to zap a marauding mouse with her Taser.

Lights burned from within the house as Maddie unlocked the forest-green door, stepped inside, and flipped the deadbolt behind her. Nothing scurried from the corners as she tossed her purse on a red velvet chair by the door. A large fireplace dominated the middle of the big living room and divided it into what was meant to be the dining room but what Maddie used as her office.

On a coffee table in front of the velvet sofa sat Maddie's research files and an old five-by-seven photograph in a silver frame. She reached for the picture and looked into the face of her mother, at her blond hair, blue eyes, and big smile. It had been taken a few months before Alice Jones had died. A photo of a happy twenty-four-year-old, so vibrant and alive, and like the yellowed photograph in the expensive frame, most of Maddie's memories had faded too. She recalled bits of this and snatches of that. She had a faint memory of watching her mother put on makeup and brush her hair before leaving for work. She recalled her old blue Samsonite suitcase and moving from place to place. Through the watery prism of twenty-nine years, she had a very faint memory of the last time her mother had packed up their Chevy Maverick and the two-hour drive north to Truly. Moving into their trailer house and orange shag carpet.

The clearest memory Maddie had of her mother

was the scent of her skin. She'd smelled like almond lotion. But mostly she recalled the morning her great-aunt had arrived at the Roundup Trailer Court to tell her that her mother was dead.

Maddie set the photo back on the table and moved across the hardwood floor into the kitchen. She grabbed a Diet Coke out of the refrigerator and unscrewed the cap. Martha had always said that Alice was flighty. Flitting like a butterfly from place to place, from man to man, searching for somewhere to belong and looking for love. Finding both for a time before moving on to the next place or newest man.

Maddie drank from the bottle, then replaced the cap. She was nothing like her mother. She knew her place in the world. She was comfortable with who she was, and she certainly didn't need a man to love her. In fact, she'd never been in love. Not the romantic kind that her good friend Clare wrote about for a living. And not the foolish, mad-for-the-man kind that had ruled and ultimately taken her mother's life.

No, Maddie had no interest in a man's *love*. His body was a different matter, and she did want an occasional boyfriend. A man to come over several times a week to have sex. He didn't have to be a great conversationalist. Hell, he didn't even have to take her to dinner. Her ideal man would just take her to bed, then leave. But there were two problems with finding her ideal man. First, any man who just wanted sex from a woman was most likely a jerk. Second, it was difficult to find a willing man who was good in

bed rather than who just thought he was good. The chore of sorting through men to find what she wanted had become such a hassle, she'd given up four years ago.

She hooked the top of the Coke bottle between two fingers and moved from the kitchen. Her flip-flops slapped the bottoms of her feet as she walked through the living room and passed the fireplace to her office. Her laptop sat on an L-shaped desk shoved up against the wall and she flipped on the lamp clamped to the hutch of her desk. Two sixty-watt bulbs lit up a stack of diaries, her laptop, and her 'Taking Names and Kicking Ass' sticky notes. Altogether there were ten diaries in various shapes and colors. Red. Blue. Pink. Two of the diaries had locks, while one of the others was nothing more than a yellow spiral notebook with the word 'Diary' written in black marker. All of them had belonged to her mother.

Maddie tapped the Diet Coke bottle against her thigh as she gazed at the top white book. She hadn't known they'd even existed until her great-aunt Martha's death a few months ago. She didn't believe Martha had purposely kept the diaries from her. More than likely she'd intended to give them to Maddie someday but had completely forgotten. Alice hadn't been the only flighty female on the Jones family tree.

As Martha's only living relative, it had been up to Maddie to settle her affairs, see to her funeral, and clean out her house. She'd managed to find homes for

her aunt's cats and had planned to donate most everything else to Goodwill. In one of the last cartons she'd sorted through, she'd come across old shoes, outdated purses, and a battered boot box. She'd almost tossed the battered box without lifting the top. A part of her almost wished that she had. Wished she'd spared herself the pain of staring down into the box and feeling her heart shoved into her throat. As a child she'd longed for a connection with her mother. Some little something that she could have and hold. She'd dreamed of having something she could take out from time to time that tied her to the woman who'd given her life. She'd spent her childhood longing for something . . . something that had been a few feet away in the top of a closet the whole time. Waiting for her in a Tony Lama box.

The box had contained the diaries, her mother's obituary, and newspaper articles about her death. It had also held a satin bag filled with jewelry. Cheap stuff, mostly. A Foxy Lady necklace, several turquoise rings, a pair of silver hoop earrings, and a tiny pink band from St. Luke's Hospital with the words 'Baby Jones' printed on it.

Standing in her old bedroom that day, unable to breathe as her chest imploded, she'd felt like a kid again. Scared and alone. Afraid to reach out and make the connection, but at the same time excited to finally have something tangible that had belonged to a mother she hardly remembered.

Maddie set her Coke on the top of her desk and

spun her office chair around. That day, she'd taken the boot box home and placed the silk bag in her jewelry box. Then she'd sat down and read the diaries. She'd read every word, devouring them in one day. The diaries had started on her mother's twelfth birthday. Some of them had been bigger and taken her mother longer to fill. Through them she'd gotten to know Alice Jones.

She'd gotten to know her as a child of twelve who'd longed to grow up and be an actress like Anne Francis. A teen who longed to find true love on *The Dating Game*, and a woman who looked for love in all the wrong places.

Maddie had found something to connect her to her mother, but the more she'd read, the more she'd felt at loose ends. She'd gotten her childhood wish and she'd never felt so alone.



Mick Hennessy slipped a rubber band about a stack of cash and set it next to a pile of credit card and debit receipts. The sound of the electric coin sorter sitting on his desk filled the small office in the back of Mort's. Everyone but Mick had gone home for the evening and he was just balancing the tills before he headed that way himself.

Owning and running bars was in Mick's blood. Mick's great-grandfather had made and sold cheap grain alcohol during Prohibition and opened Hennessy's two months after the Eighteenth Amendment was repealed and the spigots once again flowed in the United States. The bar had been in his family ever since.

Mick didn't particularly care for belligerent drunks, but he did like the flexible hours that came with being his own boss. He didn't have to take orders or answer to anyone, and when he walked into one of his bars, he had a feeling of possession that he'd never felt with anything else in his life. His bars

were loud and raucous and chaotic, but it was a chaos he controlled.

More than the hours and feeling of possession, Mick liked making money. During the summer months, he made tons of money from tourists and from the people who lived in Boise but owned cabins on the lake in Truly.

The coin sorter stopped and Mick slid stacks of coins into paper sleeves. An image of a dark-haired, red-lipped woman entered his head. He wasn't surprise that he'd noticed Maddie Dupree within seconds of stepping behind the bar. It only would have surprised him if he hadn't noticed her. With her beautiful smooth skin and seductive brown eyes, she was just the sort of woman who drew his attention. That small mole at the corner of her full lips had reminded him just how long it had been since he'd kissed a mouth like hers and worked his way south. Down her chin and the arch of her throat to all the soft places and sweet parts.

Since his move back to Truly two years ago, his sex life had suffered more than he liked. Which sucked. Truly was a small town where people went to church on Sundays and married young. They tended to stay married and if not, looked to remarry real quick. Mick never messed with married women or women with marriage on their minds. Never even thought twice about it.

Not that there weren't plenty of unmarried women in Truly. Owning two bars in town, he came in contact

with a lot of available women. A good share of them let him know they were interested in more than his cocktail list. Some of them he'd known all of his life. They knew the stories and gossip and thought they knew him too. They didn't, or they would know he preferred to spend time with women who didn't know him or the past. Who didn't know the sordid details of his parents' lives.

Mick shoved the money and receipts into deposit bags and zipped them closed. The clock on the wall above his desk read 2:05. Travis's latest school photograph sat on a polished oak desk; a sprinkling of brown freckles scattered across the boy's cheeks and nose. Mick's nephew was seven going on fourteen and had too much Hennessy in him for his own good. The innocent smile didn't fool Mick one bit. Travis had his ancestors' dark hair and blue eyes and wild ways. If left unchecked, he'd inherit their fondness for fighting, booze, and women. Any one of those traits by themselves wasn't necessarily bad in moderation, but generations of Hennessys had never cared squat about moderation, and the combination had sometimes proved lethal.

He moved across the office and set the money on the top shelf of the safe, next to the printout of that night's transactions. He swung the heavy door shut, pushed down the steel handle, and spun the combination lock. The tick-tick of the lock filled the silence of the small office in the back of Mort's.

Travis was giving Meg hell, that was for sure, and

Mick's sister had little understanding of boys. She just didn't get why boys threw rocks, made weapons out of everything they touched, and punched each other for no apparent reason. It was up to Mick to be the buffer in Travis's life and to help Meg raise him. To give the boy someone to talk to and to teach him how to be a good man. Not that Mick was an expert or a shining example of what made a good man. But he did have first-hand knowledge and some experience in what made an asshole.

He grabbed a set of keys off the desktop and headed out of the office. The heels of his boots thudded against the hardwood floor, sounding inordinately loud in the empty bar.

When he was a kid, no one had been around for him to talk to or teach him how to be a man. He'd been raised by his grandmother and sister, and he'd had to learn for himself. Most often than not, he learned the hard way. He didn't want the same for Travis.

Mick flipped the light switches off and headed out the back door. The cold morning air brushed his face and neck as he stuck a key in the deadbolt and locked it behind him. Right out of high school he'd left Truly to attend Boise State down in the capital city. But after three years of aimless pursuits and a rotten attitude, he'd enlisted in the army. At the time, seeing the world from the inside of a tank had sounded like a real smart plan.

A red Dodge Ram was parked next to the

Dumpster and he climbed inside. He'd certainly seen the world. Sometimes more of it than he cared to remember, but not from the inside of a tank. Instead he'd viewed it from thousands of feet in the air within the cockpits of Apache helicopters. He'd flown birds for the U.S. government before getting out and moving back to Truly. The army had given him more than a kick-ass career and a chance to live a good life. It had taught him how to be a man in a way that living in a house of women had not. When to stand up and when to shut the hell up. When to fight and when to walk away. What mattered and what wasn't worth his time.

Mick started the truck and waited a few moments for the vehicle to warm up. He owned two bars, and he figured it was a very good thing that he'd learned to deal with belligerent drunks and assorted dipshits in a way that didn't require throwing fists and cracking heads. Otherwise, he'd get little else done. He'd be in one fight after another, walking around with a black eye and busted lip like he had growing up. Back then he hadn't known how to handle the dipshits of the world. Back then he'd been forced to live with the scandal his parents had created. He'd had to live with the whispers when he walked into a room. The sideways glances at church or the Valley Grocery Store. The taunts from other children at school or, worse, the birthday parties he and Meg had not been invited to. Back then, he'd handled every slight with his fists. Meg had retreated within herself.

Mick flipped on the headlights and shoved the truck into reverse. The Ram's taillights lit up the alley as he looked over his shoulder and backed out of the parking space. In a larger town, the salacious lives of Loch and Rose Hennessy would have been forgotten within a few weeks. Front-page news for a day or two, then eclipsed by something more shocking. Something bigger to talk about over morning coffee. But in a town the size of Truly, where the juiciest scandal usually involved such nefarious deeds as a stolen bicycle or Sid Grimes poaching out of season, the sordidness of Loch and Rose Hennessy had kept the town talking for years. Speculating and rehashing every tragic detail had become a favorite pastime. Right up there with holiday parades, the ice-sculpting contest, and raising money for the town's various causes. But unlike decorating floats and instituting after-school just-say-no-to-drugs programs, what everyone seemed to forget, or perhaps didn't care about, was that within the wreckage that Rose and Loch had created, there had been two innocent children just trying to live it all down.

He shoved the truck into drive and rolled out of the alley and onto a dimly lit street. A lot of his childhood memories were old and faded and thankfully forgotten. Others were so crystal clear he could recall every detail. Like the night he and Meg had been woken up by a county sheriff, told to grab a few things, and taken to their grandmother Loraine's house. He remembered sitting in the back of the

squad car in his T-shirt, underwear, and sneakers, holding his a Tonka truck, while Meg sat next to him, crying as if their world had just ended. And it had. He remembered all the squawk and adrenaline-laced voices on the police radio, and he remembered something about someone checking up on the other little girl.

Leaving the few city lights behind, Mick drove through the pitch-darkness for two miles before turning onto his dirt street. He drove past the house where he and Meg had been raised after the death of their parents. His grandmother Loraine Hennessy had been affectionate and loving in her own way. She'd made sure he and Meg had things like winter boots and gloves and were always filled with comfort food. But she'd completely neglected what they'd really needed. The most normal life possible.

She'd refused to sell the old farmhouse where he and Meg had lived with their parents. For years it sat abandoned on the outskirts of town, becoming a haven for mice and a constant reminder of the family that had once lived there. A person couldn't enter town without seeing it. Without seeing the overgrown weeds, the peeling white paint, and the sagging clothesline.

And Monday through Friday, for nine months out of every year, Mick and Meg had been forced to pass it on their way to school. While the other children on the bus chatted about the latest episode of *The Dukes Of Hazzard* or checked out the contents of their lunch

boxes, he and Meg turned their heads away from the window. Their stomachs got heavy and they held their breath, praying to God no one noticed their old house. God hadn't always answered and the bus would fill with the latest gossip the kids had overheard about their parents.

The bus trip to school had been a daily hell. A routine torture – until a cold October night in 1986 when the farmhouse erupted in a huge orange fireball and burned completely to the ground. Arson had been determined as the cause of the fire, and there'd been a big investigation. Almost everyone in town had been questioned, but the person responsible for dousing the place with kerosene had never been caught. Everyone in town thought they knew who'd done it, but no one had known for sure.

After Loraine's death three years ago, Mick sold the property to the Allegrezza boys and he'd thought about selling the family bar too, but in the end he decided to move back and run the place. Meg needed him. Travis needed him, and to his surprise, when he'd returned to Truly, no one really talked about the scandal anymore. Whispers no longer followed him, or if they did, he no longer heard them.

He slowed the truck and made another left, turning into his long driveway and heading up a hill seated at the base of Shaw Mountain. He'd bought the two-story house shortly after he'd moved back to Truly. It had a great view of the town and the rugged mountains surrounding the lake. He parked in the

garage next to his twenty-one-foot ski boat and entered the house through the laundry room. The light in his office was on and he turned it off as he passed. He moved through the dark living room and took the stairs two at a time.

For the most part, Mick didn't really think of the past that had been such a focus in his childhood. Truly didn't talk about it anymore, which was ironic as hell, because he just didn't give a shit what people said and thought about him these days. He walked into his bedroom at the far end of the hall and moved through the moonlight pouring through the open slats of his wooden blinds. Shadow and muted strips of light touched his face and chest as he reached for his back pocket. He tossed his wallet on his dresser, then grabbed two fistfuls of his T-shirt and pulled it over his head. But just because he didn't give a shit about the past, didn't mean that Meg was over it. She had her good days and bad days. Since the death of their grandmother, her bad days were getting worse, and that was just no way for Travis to live.

Moonlight and shadow spilled across the green quilt and solid oak posts of Mick's bed. He dropped the shirt by his feet, then walked across the room. Sometimes he felt that moving back to Truly had been a mistake. It felt as if he were standing in one place, unable to move forward, and he didn't know why he felt that way. He'd bought a new bar and was thinking of starting a helicopter service with his friend Steve. He had money and success and he belonged in Truly

with his family. The only family he had. The only family he was ever likely to have, but sometimes . . . sometimes he couldn't shake the feeling that he was standing in one place. As if maybe he was waiting for something.

The mattress dipped as he sat on the edge and pulled off his boots and socks. Meg thought all he needed was to meet a nice woman to make him a good wife, but he just couldn't see himself married. Not now. He'd had a few good relationships in his life. Good right up until the moment that they weren't. None had lasted more than a year or two. Partly because he'd been gone so much. Mostly because he didn't want to buy a ring and walk down the aisle.

He stood and stripped to his underwear. Meg thought he was afraid of marriage because their parents' had been so bad, but that wasn't true. The truth was that he didn't remember his parents all that much. Just a few watery memories of family picnics at the lake and his parents cuddling on the sofa. His mother crying at the kitchen table and an old heavy telephone thrown through the television screen.

No, the problem wasn't the memories of his parents' fucked-up relationship. He'd just never loved one woman enough to want to spend the rest of his life with her. Which he didn't consider a problem at all.

He pulled back the quilt and lay between the cool sheets. For the second time that night, he thought about Maddie Dupree, and he laughed into the

darkness. She'd been a smart-ass, but he'd never held that against a woman. In fact, he liked a woman who could stand up to a man. Who gave as good as she got and didn't need a man to take care of her. Who wasn't needy or weepy or crazy as hell. Whose moods didn't swing like a pendulum.

Mick turned on his side and glanced at the clock on his nightstand. He'd set his alarm for ten A.M. and was ready for a full seven hours of uninterrupted shut-eye. Unfortunately, he didn't get it.

The next morning, the ringing of the telephone brought him out of a deep sleep. He opened his eyes and squinted against the morning sun pouring across his bed. He glanced at the caller ID and reached for the cordless receiver.

'You better be spurting blood,' he said and pushed the covers down his naked chest. 'I told you not to call before ten unless it's an emergency.'

'Mom's at work and I need some fireworks,' his nephew informed him.

'At eight-thirty in the morning?' He sat up and ran his fingers through one side of his hair. 'Is your sitter there with you?'

'Yeah. Tomorrow's the Fourth of July and I don't got no fireworks.'

'You just realized this?' There was more to the story. With Travis, there was always more to the story. 'Why didn't your mom get you your fireworks?' There was a long pause and Mick added, 'You might as well tell me the truth because I'm going to ask Meg.'

‘She said I have a potty mouth.’

Mick stood and his feet sank into thick beige carpeting as he walked across the room toward a dresser. He was almost afraid to ask. ‘Why?’

‘Well . . . she made meatloaf again. She knows I hate meatloaf.’

He didn’t blame the kid there. The Hennessy women were notorious for their shitty meatloaf. He opened the second dresser drawer and prompted, ‘And?’

‘I said it tasted like shit. I said you thought so too.’

Mick paused in the act of pulling out a white T-shirt and glanced into his reflection above the dresser. ‘Did you use the real *s*-word?’

‘Uh-huh, and she said I can’t have fireworks, but you say the *s*-word all the dang time.’

That was true. He hung the shirt over one shoulder and leaned forward to look into his bloodshot eyes. ‘We talked about words I can say and words you can say.’

‘I know, but it just slipped out.’

‘You need to watch what slips out of your mouth.’

Travis sighed. ‘I know. I said I was sorry, even though I’m not really. Just like you said I should say to girls. Even the stupid ones. Even when I’m right and they’re wrong.’

That wasn’t quite what he’d said. ‘You didn’t tell Meg I said that, though.’ He pulled a pair of Levi’s out of the dresser and added, ‘Right?’

‘Right.’

He couldn't countermand his sister, but at the same time, a boy shouldn't be punished for speaking the truth. 'I can't buy you fireworks if your mom says no, but we'll see if we can't work something out.'

An hour later, Mick shoved a bag of fireworks behind the driver's seat of his truck. He'd bought a small variety pack as well as a few sparklers and snakes from the Safe and Sane stand in the parking lot of Handy Man Hardware. He hadn't bought them for Travis. He'd bought them to take to Louie Allegrezza's Fourth of July barbeque. If anyone asked, that was the story, but he doubted anyone would believe him. Like all other residents of the pyrotechnically obsessed town, he had a big box of illegals just waiting to be shot over the lake. Adults didn't buy Safe and Sanes unless they had kids. Legal fireworks were kind of like training wheels.

Travis and Louie's son Pete Allegrezza were buddies, and days ago, Meg had agreed that Travis could go to the barbeque with Mick if he stayed out of trouble. The barbeque was tomorrow, and Mick figured Travis should be able to control his behavior for one more day. Mick shut the door to his truck, and he and Travis headed across the parking lot toward the hardware store. 'If you behave yourself, maybe you can hold a sparkler.'

'Man,' Travis whined. 'Sparklers are for little kids.'

'With your track record, you'll be lucky if you're not in bed before dark.' Sunlight shone in his

nephew's short black hair and across the shoulders of his red Spider-Man T-shirt. 'You're having a hard time controlling yourself lately.' He opened the door and waved to the owner standing behind the counter. 'Meg's still pretty mad at us both, but I have a plan.' For several months, Meg had complained about a leaky pipe beneath her kitchen sink. If he and Travis fixed her S trap so that she didn't have to keep emptying a pan of water, maybe she'd be in a more forgiving mood. But with Meg, a person never knew. She wasn't always the most forgiving person.

The soles of Travis's sneakers scuffed alongside Mick's boots as they walked to the plumbing section. The store was quiet except for a couple looking at garden hoses and Mrs Vaughn, his first-grade teacher, rooting through a bin of assorted drawer handles. He was always amazed to see Laverne Vaughn still alive and walking around. She had to be older than dirt.

While Mick grabbed a PVC pipe and plastic washers, his nephew picked up a caulking gun and aimed it at a bird feeder at the end of the aisle as if it were a .45 Magnum.

'We don't need that,' Mick told him as he reached for some plumber's tape.

Travis popped off a few rounds, then tossed the gun back onto the shelf. 'I'm gonna go look at the deer,' he said and disappeared around the corner of the aisle. Handy Man's had a big selection of plastic animals that people could display in their yards. Although why you would want to do that when the

real thing was likely to roam through was beyond Mick.

He stuck the pipe beneath one arm and went in search of his nephew, who didn't usually go looking for trouble, but like most seven-year-old boys seemed to find it anyway. He moved through the store, glanced down each crammed row, and paused next to a display of mops.

A smile of pure male appreciation curved the corners of his mouth. Maddie Dupree stood in the middle of aisle six, a neon-yellow box in her hands. Her brown hair was in one of those claws and looked like someone had stuck a dark feather duster on the back of her head. His gaze moved down her smooth profile, past her throat and shoulder, and stopped dead on her black T-shirt. Last night, he hadn't been able to get a good look at her. Today, the fluorescent lighting of Handy Man Hardware lit her up like a walking, talking, breathing centerfold. Like an old-school playmate before eating disorders and silicone. Desire stirred in the pit of his stomach. He didn't even know her well enough to be feeling a thing. Didn't know if she was married or single, had a man in her life and ten kids waiting at home. Apparently it didn't matter, because she drew him down the aisle like a magnet.

'Looks like you got problems with some mice,' he said.

'What?' Her head snapped up and her gaze flew to his like he'd caught her doing something she

shouldn't. 'Christ almighty.' Her lips parted and she sucked in a breath, drawing his attention to the mole at the corner of her mouth. 'You startled me.'

'Sorry,' he said, but he really wasn't. She looked good all wide-eyed and breathy and a little off balance. He glanced up and pointed with the PVC to the box in her hand. 'Mice troubles?'

'One actually ran across my foot this morning while I was making coffee.' She crinkled her nose. 'It slid under the pantry door and disappeared. It's probably in there right now feasting on my granola bars.'

'Don't worry.' Mick laughed. 'He probably won't eat much.'

'I don't want him to eat anything at all. Except maybe some poison.' She turned her attention back to the box in her hand. Fine dark hair clung to the side of her neck and Mick thought he smelled strawberries.

At the far end of the aisle, Travis turned the corner and stopped in his tracks. His mouth got a little slack as he stared at Maddie. Mick knew the feeling.

'It says here that odor problems can occur if rodents expire in inaccessible areas. I really don't want to have to search for stinking mice.' She looked up at him out of the corners of her eyes. 'I wonder if there isn't something better I could use.'

'I wouldn't recommend the tape.' He pointed to a box of glue boards. 'Mice get stuck on it and squeak a lot.' There it was again. Strawberries, and he

wondered if Handy's had some scented feeders for hummingbirds. 'You could use traps,' he suggested.

'Really? Aren't traps kind of . . . violent?'

'They can snap a mouse in half,' Travis said as he came to stand beside Mick. He rocked back on his heels and grinned. 'Sometimes their head pops off when they go for the cheese.'

'Good Lord, kid.' Maddie's brows drew together as she lowered her gaze to Travis. 'That's gruesome.'

'Uh-huh.'

Mick stuck the pipe under his arm and placed his free hand on top of Travis's head. 'This gruesome guy is my nephew, Travis Hennessy. Travis, say hello to Maddie Dupree.'

Maddie stuck out her palm and shook Travis's hand. 'It's a pleasure to meet you, Travis.'

'Yeah. You too.'

'And thanks for telling me about the traps,' she continued and released him. 'I'll keep them in mind if I decide on decapitation.'

Travis's smile grew to show off his missing front tooth. 'Last year I killed tons of mice,' he boasted, employing his special brand of seven-year-old charm. 'Call me.'

Mick glanced down at his nephew and wasn't sure, but he thought Travis was puffing up his skinny chest. 'The best way to get rid of mice,' he said, saving Travis from embarrassing himself further, 'is to get a cat.'

Maddie shook her head and her brown eyes looked into his, all warm and soft and liquid. 'Cats

and I don't get along,' His gaze slid to her mouth and he again wondered how long it had been since he'd kissed a mouth that good. 'I'd rather have severed heads in my kitchen or hidden carcasses stinking up the place.'

She was talking about severed heads and stinking carcasses and he was getting turned on. Right there in Handy Man Hardware, like he was sixteen again and couldn't control himself. He'd been with a lot of beautiful women and wasn't a kid. He'd saved Travis from embarrassing himself, but who was going to save him?

'We've got some plumbing to do.' He held up the sealant and took a step back. 'Good luck with those mice.'

'See you boys around.'

'Yeah,' Travis said and followed him to the check-out counter. 'She was nice,' he whispered. 'I like the color of her hair.'

Mick chuckled and set the PVC next to the register. The kid was only seven, but he was a Hennessy.