

CHIMERA RECOVERY

(Nano Winner)

By

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Chapter One

Present Day; fall

At first, Father Mark thought someone had dumped a pile of clothing on his porch. That had happened before; some person wouldn't want to walk around the corner to leave them where designated. But, as he and his housekeeper Mr. Porter drew near to the porch, each carrying two bags of groceries, the pile of clothing moved, then stood and showed that it was a human and Father Mark grew concerned.

"What is it, my child?" because this human did appear to be a child, a little girl, but then Mrs. Porter placed her grocery bags on the bottom step, looked up at the girl and suddenly recognized the face of someone who had been in her prayers for a very long time.

"My stars! It's little Lucy! Little Lucy Barnes, all grown up!: She climbed the stairs as quickly as her arthritic knees would allow and hurried over to the girl, threw her arms around her and buried the girl's face in her ample bosom.

"Now, now, Agnes. Don't suffocate the child." Father Mark hurried up the stairs,

pulled her from Mr. Porter's arms and then gave her a big hug himself.

"Now Father! You're no better than I. You'll be squeezing her to death all by yourself." Mrs. Porter was hopping up and down and clapping her hands.

Father Mark took his arms from around her and then took her hands into his own.

"You have grown to be a beautiful young woman. I knew you would. I just knew it."

"Yes, hasn't she just! Oh what a fine day, fine day, to have little Lucy Burnes here on our doorstep." Mrs. Porter took one of Lucy's hands from Father Mark and into both of hers.

"But what are you doing here? And with all that baggage too." Father Mark looked at the small pile near the porch chairs.

"Oh, don't go asking her all these questions, make her nervous. We should be glad she is here with us. We should celebrate!" Mrs. Porter still had not stopped jumping up and down and Lucy's arm was writhing because of it. "I know! I have some coffee cake inside. Just made it this morning. Why don't I get you some, get us all some and we can celebrate?"

"Mrs. Porter, please calm you and give the girl her hand back." Father Mark sounded very stern but neither of the women thought him so. All the same, Mrs. Porter did release Lucy's hand to her. Father Mark did so too, but placed his hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry. We haven't given you a chance to say a word. You are Lucy Burnes, aren't you?"

She smiled and Father Mark and Mrs. Porter returned her smile. "Yes, I'm Lucy but I don't know how little I am. After all, I'm thirty two years old now."

"Thirty two! All that old!" Father Mark chuckled. "And after all these years too."

To what do we owe this visit?"

"Well, I wanted to check in with you since it has been so long since I've been in this neighborhood." She glanced back and forth between the two of them. "But I also have a favor to ask of you. It might be a silly favor, but it's important to me."

"Well, of course we will help you out if we can. Just ask." Father Mark started walking towards the door. "But I insist that you come inside for some of Mrs. Porter's wonderful coffee cake and some hot chocolate. Tell us what's gone on in your life since you were a wee child with us."

"Yes, please do come inside." Mrs. Porter bent down to pick up a bag of groceries. Lucy stepped down the stairs to retrieve the bags Mrs. Porter had left there and followed her and Father Mark inside the house.

Lucy looked around and smiled. "It's just how I remembered it." She put the bags of groceries down and then traced her hand along the highly polished wooden walls. She looked down at the thread worn carpet, the roses in the design still showing if you knew how to look for them. The hallway was lit by a small chandelier and, as she remembered, it wasn't too bright. Father Mark and Mrs. Porter watched her silently as she turned into the first door on the right, the study where they had intended to take her. Yes, she remembered this house.

Father Mark and Mrs. Porter followed her into the room. "Please sit down, my dear, and I will get us all some refreshments." Mrs. Porter felt in her prime now, someone to take care of. Father Mark rarely permits her to do those things she truly wanted to do. "The coffee cake is fresh and I know you like hot chocolate." She stopped at the doorway and looked back at Lucy. "You do still like hot chocolate, don't you?"

Lucy smiled back at her. "Yes, I love it and I haven't had a good cup of hot chocolate since I left here."

"Well, all the more reason then! I'll be right back." She bustled out of the room, chattering away to herself.

Father Mark and Lucy looked at each other and smiled. If it weren't for Mrs. Porter's hen mothering, Lucy probably wouldn't have felt as comfortable as quickly as she did. It very much felt like she had never been gone.

"Well, my dear, I suppose we had better wait until Mrs. Porter gets back before we talk about this favor you want of us, or I'll never hear the end of it. How have you been?"

"I'm ok Father. It's hasn't been easy but I've survived."

"Yes, so I can see. You've grown up to be a beautiful young woman. I suppose you have a husband and half a dozen little babies."

"No, afraid not. I never did marry." She started to twist the strap of the purse she held on her lap and Father Mark realized this was not a comfortable subject for her. Considering her start in life, there was bound to be many uncomfortable subjects. The fact that she had survived her start and sat here, looking lovely and healthy, was a testament to the resiliency of the human spirit. He sat back in his chair and forced himself to relax hoping it would help her to do so too. It did seem to work.

"Father, the happiest times of my life were spent in this house, mostly in this room." She looked around herself and smiled, then rose and walked to a huge book open on a wooded stand. "I was always impressed by this. I figured it was a very holy book."

"Were you surprised to find it was a dictionary?" Father Mark laughed.

"At first I was but then I realized it meant that words were very powerful."

"And you believe that?"

"Absolutely." She sat down again and rested her hands in her lap. "I've learned that it's important to choose your words carefully because they can raise someone up or dash someone down."

Father Mark continued to smile as he nodded. "Yes, my child, you are right. Ah! Here comes Mrs. Porter with her wondrous snacks."

Mrs. Porter walked into the room with a tray which she placed on the table next to Father Mark. On the tray was a carafe, three cups, napkins and a plate with warm coffee cake. "I think coffee cake tastes best when warm. I hope you didn't mind the longer wait."

"No wait is too long when your coffee cake is the goal." Father Mark handed Lucy a piece of cake as Mrs. Porter poured a cup of hot chocolate for each of them, topping each with a dollop of whipping cream. They ate the cake and sipped at the hot chocolate in silence, until Lucy gave a satisfied sigh, and placed her cup on the table next to her.

"This is wonderful. Totally wonderful. I thank you very much."

Mrs. Porter beamed. "It's not often we have one of our favorite students come back to visit."

"Favorite student? I wonder." Lucy was lost in thought for a few seconds and then, with a shake of her head, smiled at them. "I thought I was far too much trouble to be a favorite student."

"Not at all, my child!" Father Mark leaned forward in his chair.

"Don't forget, Father. I was there. I know now I wasn't the cause of the trouble but I was at the center of it."

"My dear!" Mrs. Porter felt like rushing over to Lucy and hugging her again, but a

look from Father Mark stopped her.

Lucy took a deep breath before speaking again. "Tomorrow morning I'm catching a bus to go to Bend. I'm going to be in a drug residential treatment center there."

"I'm so sorry, my child." Father Mark reached out and took her hands in his.

"It's not how it sounds," Lucy spoke up. "I would like to tell you what has happened to be since I was here last and hopefully you will understand why I need to go to residential and why I will be asking a favor."

"Of course, my dear."

"It may take awhile."

"Take all the time you need." Father Mark sat back in his chair. "We both are very good at listening."

Lucy smiled at them both before starting her story.

Chapter Two

Twenty Years Ago, April Seventh

1.

She tried so hard not to care. She had shed far too many tears and they hadn't worked. Nothing had worked. As hard as she could try, she couldn't fix her family. It was terminally broken. She was no longer a child. Twelve years old, she was nearly an adult and she would make sure she would act like one.

The woman walking next to her was a stranger, a woman she had never ever met, walking in sensible shoes and a heavy brown coat despite the mild spring weather. She was clenching Lucy's upper arm as though Lucy would try to run away from her. She wanted to tell the woman that she welcomed leaving, but that woman was probably a mother too who felt sorry for Lucy's mother who stood at the front door of her childhood home, face covered in tears.

Well, it's too late for that, Lucy wanted to tell her. Far too late for that. Why didn't

you do something when I told you what was happening? Why did you at first call me a liar and then when it was clear that I was not lying, tell me that he was your husband and you couldn't go against your husband. But I'm your child. Lucy had told her. You gave birth to me. But I don't know what I would do if he left, Mother had told her. I can't make it alone.

Lucy climbed into the front seat of the car while the childcare worker placed her suitcase in the back and then climbed behind the wheel. Lucy looked again at her mother, trying so hard not to love her, not to want to stay with her and it almost worked. Then she saw her brother there, standing next to Mother, holding onto her apron. Just like Bryan to be tied to mother, Lucy thought, but she still did love her brother and her heart broke that she had to leave him behind. Why couldn't she take him with her? He was only eight years old. Why were they leaving him behind? Because the evidence showed you were the only child involved, they had explained to her but she still didn't believe it.

The woman started the engine of the car and seemed to be just sitting there, maybe so her mother could get a last look at her, but no, the woman wasn't used to driving a stick and she had to figure out how to get the car going. She did get it to move, in lurches at first, and when the car started lurching, Bryan broke away from Mother, and came running after the car. Mother reached for him but missed and then ran after him, calling his name. Bryan was calling for Lucy. Lucy! Lucy! Come back! Don't leave me alone!

And that's what broke Lucy down. That's what made the tears start, made them wet her face and the tissue she had been clutching. The car sped up and turned a corner and Lucy couldn't see them anymore. She couldn't see her brother crying and running after her. She couldn't see her mother crying and running after her brother. She couldn't see the

neighbors, peeking out of their curtains, whispering about them about what a broken family they were.

"Come now, my dear. It's past time for crying. You're out of there." The woman's voice was gruff but caring and Lucy could feel that caring. What she wanted now, what she needed was some understanding but Lucy, in all the wisdom of a twelve year old, knew that understanding wasn't going to be. She looked out the window, stared out, not seeing anything, unaware of where she was going or how long it would take to get there.

It seemed to take a lifetime but soon the woman pulled up and parked at the middle of an ordinary looking street. The woman turned off the motor and turned to Lucy. "Now I know you have had a hard time of it. You lived with a very cruel parent for quite some time now. All parents are not like that. I promise you. We had to find a place for you very quickly and this one might not be ideal, but it is safe. If you ever feel like you are in danger or any kind, give me a call. If it's at night, we have a service that will get me and I'll come right out and help you. You understand?"

Lucy still couldn't look at the woman. She was right. Trusting an adult would be very hard for her and this woman expected her to trust her? Not gonna happen. Lucy knew, deep down in her heart, that she would have to go it on her own. Nothing would ever be given to her. Anything she wanted she would have to get for herself.

"Lucy? Please look at me dear." Lucy didn't want to but the voice was one of those that parents use to force their children to do things. She slowly turned and looked at the woman. She had a kind face. Lucy would have to give her that. But a kind face can be deceiving. "Lucy, I know you don't trust me. You don't have any reason to trust me. All I ask is that you give me a chance. And give this foster mom a chance. She's a good

person. She has taken in so many children, I've lost count. The only reason I didn't want to place you here is because she has quite a few kids here now, not because she isn't a good person. Will you give her a chance?"

Lucy looked at the woman. She didn't even know this woman's name and she expected Lucy to give her a chance? But then, what did Lucy have to lose that she hadn't lost already. She gave the woman a nod.

"Good. I'm giving you my business card. Anytime you need me, please call me. Ok?" She handed Lucy a card. Lucy took it and then nodded again. "You are such a talkative little thing, aren't you." The woman opened her car and got out, then retrieved Lucy's suitcase from the back seat.

"Thank you so much for taking her at the last moment." The woman was yelling at another woman, this one standing at the front door of the house, wiping her hands on an apron, a little boy standing next to her, thumb in mouth, holding onto the apron.

"No problem at all. Amber needs someone her own age to spend time with." This woman, at first appearing like her own mother, was really nothing like her at all. She was smiling and she talked to the little boy in a very patient tone. She also had flour on her face and her apron.

The child care woman bent down to look into Lucy's window. "Come on, dear. You will like Mrs. Hawthorne."

Lucy opened the door and slowly got out and stood by the car, looking at the house. It looked pleasant enough. It had two windows at the top with open curtains and there was a big picture window next to the front door. A couple of kids were peering at her from this window. There was a good size yard, not particularly well groomed due most likely to all

the toys scattered around. A metal linked fence encircled the entire house, or at least as much of the house that Lucy could see. The child care worker woman was standing at the gate, holding it open for her. Lucy walked towards her.

It took all of Lucy's will power to continue to walk forward towards them. She knew she really had little choice but she also knew that there was no guarantee that her life would be any better. Could it get worse? Maybe. This woman seemed nice. She was smiling at her, but Lucy knew better than to trust smiles. She definitely cared for the little boy but for all Lucy knew, that boy might be her own son whom she would prefer over the foster kids.

Once Lucy was at the gate, the little boy came running up to her. "You need a new mom? Huh, you need a new mom?" Lucy froze.

"Brian! Come back here right now! Don't bother the girl." Mrs. Hawthorne rushed up and picked up the boy under one arm, then held him up so she could look into his face. "You know better than that, young man. Show some good manners now." She put him down on his feet and he stood by, mute again.

"I'm sorry, Lucy. Your name is Lucy, isn't it?" Mrs. Hawthorne was acting very nice. "Lucy, little Brian here hasn't had a good start. His mother was a drug addict and he was born addicted. He is always very interested in other kids' mothers. He will settle down once he gets to know you. Ok?"

Lucy nodded but continued to look at the little boy with the name so much like her brother's name. He was nothing like her brother, not really. He was much younger, maybe five, but he was cute. He stared back at her, quiet but still obviously interested.

"Brian, do you want to show Lucy to her room?"

He smiled up at Mrs. Hawthorne and then at Lucy. "Come on!"

He took Lucy's hand and pulled her towards the house and Lucy could hear the two women talking about her. "I think she will be just fine. You said she has a little brother?" And then she was being pulled up a flight of stairs and she couldn't hear them anymore.

2.

Despite being drug along by Brian, Lucy was able to notice her new surroundings. Nothing was fancy here. The furniture was old and so were the decorations on the walls. The staircase was carpeted with the same dark brown carpeting as the room they had traveled through but it was thin, thread worn. Everything was very clean though. Lucy had never seen such a clean house, except maybe Father Mark's house but that was different because children didn't live at Father Mark's house.

Once they got upstairs, Lucy was looking down a hallway with four doors off it, two doors on each side and then one at the end of the hallway. "Wanna see my room? Huh? Do ya?" Brian pulled her to the first door on the right and opened it. "This is my room."

"Our room, you doofas." There was a boy stretched out on the lower bunk on the right of the doorway. "Who is this? Another one?"

Brian still held tightly to Lucy's hand. "Her name is, is, is, what is your name anyway?"

Lucy felt like she was under a microscope as the older boy stared at her. He looked to be younger than she was but older than Brian and he had an angry air about him. "Lucy. My name is Lucy."

"Her name is Lucy." The little boy seemed to enjoy being the bearer of news.

"Yeah, scrunt, I heard you. Lucy, huh. First Lucy we've had here."

"Lucy, this is my bed over here." Brian indicated the top bunk to the left of the door. "And Robert sleeps there," pointing to the bunk under his own. "and that guy there is Jack and he sleeps there and the top is Harold. Robert and Harold are visiting their mommies but they be home for dinner."

"Scrunt, I'm trying to concentrate. Take the new kids outa here." Jack returned to his comic book. Lucy was glad to be leaving this room. Jack made her feel very uncomfortable.

Brian, still holding tight to her hand, led Lucy out of the room and walked across the hall to another door. "This is Mrs. Hawthorne's room. We can't go in there without permission."

"You're right, Brian." An older boy, even older than Lucy, walked up and scooped the boy into his arms, turning him upside down so that Brian's shirt covered up his face. The boy started tickling him, kissed him on his tummy and then turned him upright and placed him on his own shoulders.

"Victor, this is Lucy. She's gonna live with us." Brian's face was bright red and he had a hard time talking because he was still laughing so hard.

:Hi, Lucy. Mom told me you would be coming. Welcome."

Lucy stared at him and then blushed. Looking down, it was all she could do to murmur a thanks.

"I figured this runt would be leading you to your room the long way so I thought I would come rescue you." He grinned at her. "Come on, now. No time to be shy." He led her further down the hallway to the second door on the left. "This is the room you will

share with Amber. She's gone now but should be back tonight." He opened the door and stepped aside.

Lucy looked inside. There were two single beds with a small table between them. Each bed was neatly made with pale pink bedspreads. The bed on the right had a stuffed monkey on it. The bed on the left was undecorated. By the foot of this bed was her suitcase. Lucy noticed a closet, the door slightly open on the wall to the left and two desks on the wall to the right. One desk was littered with papers, pencils and a book while the other was totally clean. There was a dresser against the wall at the foot of the beds, to her left. One side had items scattered on it. The other side was void of anything at all. Lucy told herself that it was easy to tell which was hers.

Victor spoke from behind her. "We men will let you get settled. Come on down when you're finished and we'll introduce you to everyone else."

"And tell you the rules!" Brian still sat on Victor's shoulders.

"Yes, pipsqueak. You can tell her the rules because we have had to remind you of them so often, you're the expert now." Victor carried him away.

Lucy continued to look inside the room. There didn't seem to be any booby traps but you never knew. Soon, she entered and walked over to her bed and sat down. It felt comfortable enough. She bounced on it a little, then stood and picked up her suitcase and put it on the bed. The snap as she opened it startled her a bit but she knew she had to stay on track, so she emptied all the contents and put them away in the bureau. Not that there was much. Just a few pairs of underpants, a couple training bras, some socks, all white, two pairs of jeans, three t-shirts, and a sweater.

She didn't have any dresses to hang in the closet but she went to it anyway and

looked inside. Obviously the girl who slept in the other bed loved being girly. There must have been ten dresses in there, and five pairs of shoes all neatly lined up, the toes pointing out. There were two hats too, on the shelf of the closet. It didn't appear to Lucy that she had much in common with her roommate.

Closing the door, she walked over to her bed and sat down on it. Everything had happened so fast. One day she was living with her parents and her brother and the next she knew, she was living with a bunch of strangers. It was too much. It was overwhelming. Lucy took the pillow from underneath the top edge of the bedspread and, lying down on her side, clasped it to her stomach and fell asleep.

3.

"Hey. Wake up. You'll miss breakfast." Lucy opened her eyes to look into the brown ones of Brian. "You slept through dinner last night. You don't wanna miss breakfast too. She's making pancakes!"

"Brian, I told you not to wake her." Mrs. Hawthorne stood at the door. She smiled at Lucy. "You must have been exhausted. Get up when you feel like it and have some breakfast. You can meet the rest of our family too."

Lucy sat up. Someone must have come into the room when she was sleeping and covered her with the bedspread. She still had her clothes on but her shoes were on the floor by her bed. "I'll come downstairs now. Where's the bathroom?"

Mrs. Hawthorne smiled at her again. She seemed like a good person. Maybe she really was. "The door at the end of the hall. You can't miss it, especially after the boys have used it." She left, Brian in tow.

Lucy stood up and left the room, and walked down to the bathroom. It was messy,

like Mrs. Hawthorne seemed to insinuate, but it wasn't dirty. There was a bathtub with a shower, a large counter with two sinks on it and a large medicine cabinet. There was a rack on the wall above the toilet with towels and washcloths on it and Lucy took one of each and washed up. She returned to her room, changed her clothes and then tiptoed downstairs.

By the time she had reached the bottom of the stairs, she could hear a jumble of voices coming from her right. It sounded like a huge number of people, all talking at the same time. There was laughter too and the sound of a little one singing, probably Brian, she guessed. There was nothing she could do but follow the sounds and meet all these people.

Lucy walked into the largest kitchen she had ever seen. There was a very long table with six kids sitting at it and a baby in a high chair at one end. Mrs. Hawthorne was standing at the stove, flipping pancakes while the children, three on each side of the table, all seemed to be talking at the same time.

Brian saw her first and nearly squealed in discovery. "See. Here she is. I told you she has curly hair!"

Everyone stopped talking and turned and looked at her. Lucy felt like turning and running away, but Victor stood up and stood next to her. "Lucy, I know this seems like an unruly pack of animals but we all are very nice. On the end of the table there is Robert, and his brother Harold is next to him. Sitting next to Harold is Amber, your roommate I guess you would say, and that cute little baby at the end is Amber's son, Michael. Brian and Jack you met and other than our various animals, that's the lot of us."

Brian whispered loudly at Lucy as he took her to her seat, "Amber is a single

mommy."

"Brian! Please!" Amber scolded him but didn't seem to mind it, almost as though she was used to it. "Lucy, I'm glad to meet you. I hope I didn't wake you last night with my snoring."

Lucy shook her head as she took her seat at the head of the table. Mrs. Hawthorne placed a plate of pancakes in front of her. All of a sudden, Lucy was starving. She grasped her fork and dug into the pancakes.

"Nice to see a girl with an appetite." Jack grumbled.

Lucy stopped eating for a moment. Amber slapped his arm. "Don't mind him, Lucy. He's always a grump when he meets a pretty girl." Jack blushed, then leaned over his own plate and began to shovel in the food and Lucy returned to her breakfast.

That night, after lights were out, Lucy and Amber spoke in whispers. "This isn't such a bad place to live. At least Mrs. Hawthorne lets me keep Michael here. They wanted me to put him in foster care but Mrs. Hawthorne said he would be in foster care if I kept him with me since I'm in foster care. And she helps me. She teaches me how to take care of a baby."

"You're too young to have a baby though." In the dark, Lucy was more able to ask those questions that kept pestering her.

"Yeah, I thought so too until I got pregnant."

"What about the baby's father?"

"What about him?"

"I mean, can't he take care of the baby, of Michael?"

"No, he can't. He's in prison."

"Really? What did he do?"

"He molested me and got me pregnant. Look, I don't wanna talk anymore. I gotta get some sleep."

Lucy could hear her turning over and pulling the covers up, and she thought she could hear Amber cry, and she felt bad that she had asked such personal questions. "I'm sorry." She turned over too and tried to get to sleep.

"It's ok. It's not your fault." Amber's voice was so low, Lucy couldn't be sure she heard her right. "It's my father's fault for molesting me."

"I later found out that Amber's father had molested her and her sisters as well but he didn't get them pregnant. All the sisters, four of them in all, were sent to different foster homes because there wasn't one that could handle the pain of the four combined. Mrs. Hawthorne was wonderful though and tried to make sure Amber had regular contact with them. I lost touch with her though because later that year Mrs. Hawthorne got very sick and we all had to be sent to other foster homes. She died about a year and a half later and I went to the funeral. There were so many people there, so many of them that she had taken care of when they needed to go to a foster home, so many that she had helped in other ways. I saw Amber then and her son Joseph and she said the home she had been sent to was nice enough and they let her keep Joseph with her but only because Mrs. Hawthorne had insisted. She was eighteen years old then, an on her own and she said she was happy. I sure hope she was.

I was sent to a foster home on the other side of the city. It wasn't as good as Mrs. Hawthorne's but I was safe.

Chapter Three

Nineteen Years Ago, August Thirty

Newly thirteen years old, Lucy was again sitting in a car, this time belonging to a different child care worker. Her previous one had retired due to the stress of her job. This one wasn't much different. She said all the right things and she gave Lucy her card with her phone number on and urged her to call if anything came up but Lucy knew she wouldn't. She had found out that if something came up that she couldn't handle, then no one could and she would have to let it take its course. She had gotten to know Mrs. Hawthorne, had learned to trust her and nearly to love her, but then she had to leave her and move into another house. Mrs. Hawthorne had promised to try to find a way she could see her brother Bryan, but then she had gotten sick and the promise was forgotten.

Lucy didn't wait for this worker to urge her to get out of the car. Lucy knew that waiting didn't help anything. All it did was make everyone feel so much worse. The worker had lifted Lucy's suitcase from the back seat and Lucy carried her duffel bag. Together, they walked up to the front porch of Lucy's new house where a woman was

waiting for them.

She, just like Mrs. Hawthorne, was standing there with a smile, wiping her hands on an apron. There was no little boy next to her though, and the house didn't have a welcoming look to it. The woman was smiling though, and her smile seemed genuine.

"Hello, Lucy. I'm glad to meet you." The lady leaned over to look into her face which startled Lucy a bit since she was no longer a child, but the lady was so tall, it was probably the easiest way for the woman to see her face. The woman straightened up again and spoke to the child care worker. "She is a tiny thing, isn't she. Are you sure she's thirteen?"

"I had my birthday six days ago." Lucy hated to be talked about in her presence.

"Are you now? Well, I hope you like the school you will be attending. I dare say you will be the smallest in your class." She turned to the child care worker again. "I did as you suggested and talked to a neighbor child to take Lucy under her wing." Then to Lucy, "I think you will like Maria. She's your age and you will be in her class, but she's not nearly as small as you."

"Why don't we see Lucy's room?" The child care worker seemed to sense Lucy's discomfort.

"Why, yes, of course. How stupid of me, keeping you standing out here like this. Come inside. I have your room all fixed up. I hope you will like it."

They went inside the tidy one level house and the woman led them to a small room in the back. She opened the door with a flourish and Lucy stared at what she saw. The room was entirely decorated in pink. The carpet was a deep rose and the curtains nearly matched the carpet. In the middle of the room was a four poster single bed with a

canopy. It was a deep pink and the bedspread was the same color. There was also a desk and chair, both painted pink and a picture on the wall above the desk was of a ballerina, dressed in pink. The walls had been painted a pale pink and there was a lamp on the nightstand with a pink shade on it. The lamp was on and the light coming from it was pink.

The woman pushed between them to enter the room. She rushed to the closet door and opened it to show the interior. There were at least a dozen dresses hanging there and several pairs of shoes on a shoe tree. On the shelf above the dresses were a couple hats. All of the clothing was in shades of pink. All of it, Lucy could tell, was far too big for her.

"Oh dear." The woman had taken one of the dresses out of the closet and held it out. It was obvious she, too, had realized that the clothes wouldn't fit. "I thought you had said she was a teenager. Looks like we will have to go shopping." She hung up the dress again and turned to them with a large smile on her face. "We will have so much fun. You will see."

The child care worker evidently felt the same way as Lucy, though she didn't say a word to her about it. She did speak to the woman however. "Why don't I get Lucy settled here while you do whatever you need to do. Ok?"

"Oh! Of course! You will want to say good bye in private! Please excuse me!" And she hurried out of the room and closed the door behind her.

The child care worker walked over to the bed and started to sit down but stopped. "I'm afraid I'll die from all the sweetness of it."

Lucy couldn't help but laugh. "It's awful pink, isn't it." She sat down on the chair

by the desk.

The worker gingerly sat on the bed. "Now, I know this isn't the perfect placement for you. Mrs. Albuquerque doesn't have much experience with children. Her husband died a couple years ago before they had children but she says she has always wanted to have them. She's a new foster mother. You're her first placement. I know she can be a bit overwhelming but she has a good heart.

"So, I'm a guinea pig, huh."

"Oh, Lucy, don't be that way. You'll be fine. And I will try to find a better place for you, but for now, this is the best. And remember, if you need me, just call me. You know the procedure."

And yes, Lucy did know the procedure. This was the beginning of her second year in foster care. She had hoped Mrs. Hawthorne would adopt her but she never did. Amber told her one night that she had overheard Mrs. Hawthorne talking to her child care worker about adoption but Lucy's mother refused to sign away her rights. That meant, so Amber told her, that Lucy would never be adopted.

Lucy lived with Mrs. Albuquerque for her final year of grade school. Slowly Lucy was able to get rid of some of the pink in her room and soon Mrs. Albuquerque was given another child to care for, a girl a few years younger than Lucy. Little Amy was newly in foster care and terrified. Lucy willingly shared her bedroom with the ten year old girl, and taught her some survival skills. By the time summer arrived, the two of them were nearly as close as sisters, which made their separation all the more difficult.

2.

It was the same child care worker that brought Lucy to Mrs. Albuquerque's home

that took her out of it. She told Lucy that she had found a more appropriate placing, but Lucy didn't believe her, especially after hearing the whispering between her and Mrs. Albuquerque. She hadn't heard everything but she did hear enough to know that her foster mother didn't want to let her leave. "I can keep her as safe as anyone." Lucy heard her say, and "do you really think it's best that she be taken away from what is familiar to her yet again?" Lucy had become to trust her foster mother enough to tell her how difficult it had been to leave Mrs. Hawthorne's home. "I'm sorry, but we really have no choice." And so, Lucy moved, this time to a suburban home, far from what she had been familiar with.

Again, the child care worker pulled up to a house and parked. This house was very different than the others. It was a two level house, like Mrs. Hawthorne's had been but that's where the similarities ended. This house wasn't as pleasant as the others. There were shutters in the upstairs windows, that made the house look like it had secrets, and not good secrets either. There was a wooden fence around the house, very tall and forbidding. The house was painted white, same color as the fence and both looked like they had just been painted. The yard, what of it Lucy could see, was perfect, well groomed lawn, flower beds without a weed to be seen. This house didn't look like a child had ever lived there.

This time, there was no woman waiting for them at the door. The child care worker now carried two suitcases and Lucy her backpack and a purse and they walked together up the walk to the door. The worker placed the suitcases on the porch and rang the door bell. They could hear it echo in the house. They waited and when no one answered the bell, they looked at each other in dismay. The worker pushed the door bell again. This time they hear footsteps and the door was open.

"Well, excuse me. I didn't hear the bell. Come in. Come in." This woman was dressed in what Lucy learned later, was silk, in shades of brown. Her hair was perfect in its simplicity and Lucy knew she went to a hairdresser regularly. She wore heels and had a pearl necklace around her neck. She led them into the house and shut the door behind them.

Lucy looked around at the spotless room. There wasn't a speck of dust to be seen anywhere. The room was decorated entirely in white and didn't look as though anyone lived there. The woman led them into the kitchen, a huge room, again spotless, and sat them down at the kitchen table. Lucy was afraid to touch anything.

"You told me she was a pleasant young woman. Looks like you're right." She smiled at Lucy. "I'm Elaine Marshall. Hope you will like it here."

Lucy wasn't sure what to say. This woman, so perfect, more perfect than she herself could ever be, seemed to be expecting something but Lucy didn't know what. The child care worker leaned forward and whispered something in her ear. Lucy looked up at her. "Thank you Mrs. Marshall. I'm sure I will love it here."

"Oh please don't call me Mrs. Marshall. That sounds so formal. My name is Elaine."

"I don't know." Lucy was so confused. Call an adult by her first name?

The child care worker seemed to understand Lucy's discomfort. "I think it will take some time before Lucy is comfortable with that but I'm sure she will try."

Mrs. Marshall, (Elaine) seemed to accept that explanation. After giving Lucy a snack (tea cakes, she called them, and lemonade), they walked the child care worker to the door and then Mrs. Marshall showed her to her bedroom.

At least this room wasn't pink, but it wasn't as comfortable as her bedroom in Mrs. Hawthorne's house. Obviously she was sharing it with someone, but it was hard to tell that anyone lived in the room at all. Both beds were made, pale cream bedspreads on both, not a wrinkle on either of them. There were two identical dressers with doilies on top but nothing else, nothing personal. The carpet was plush and beige, the same color as the curtains. There was a small lamp on each night stand with matching shades.

Mrs. Marshall helped her to put away her belongings and Lucy realized early on that nothing of a personal nature was allowed out where people could see them. Her rag doll that Mrs. Hawthorne had given her, and her pink teddy bear that Mrs. Albuquerque had given her, were placed in the bottom drawer of her dresser. Most of her clothes were placed in the dresser, shirts in the top shelf, slacks in the second one and underwear in the bottom one. Her jeans were left in her suitcase which was slipped out of sight under the bed. Mrs. Marshall told her they would go shopping soon for better clothes since young ladies didn't wear jeans. Lucy's few dresses were hung on white plastic hangers in the closet. Lucy's roommate's dresses were also hanging in the closet, also on white plastic hangers and Lucy realized that, again, she was smaller than her roommate.

It took Lucy some time to get used to the environment in this house but Mrs. Marshall (call me Elaine) was very patient with her. The evening of her first day there, Lucy met Hannah Marshall. It took a bit longer to win over Hannah who did not like sharing her bedroom with a "motherless child." Hannah was much older, sixteen, and let Lucy know this from the beginning, but over time, Lucy was able to win her over.

Late the next summer, when Lucy was being moved again to a new foster home, Hannah gave her a big hug and whispered in her ear, "You are my sister now, my little

sister, and I will love you until the day we die." Lucy had realized by this time that Hannah was prone to be very dramatic, but she knew that Hannah meant what she said and she felt comforted.

Chapter Four

Present Day

Lucy looked at her listeners. Despite the lateness of the day, they both were listening very closely to her words.

"That must have been terrible for you, to have to go from home to home like that." Mrs. Porter shifted in her seat and then stood and picked up the tray that had on it their snack items. "Let me put these away and then we can continue to talk." She bustled out of the room.

Father Mark looked at Lucy and they both laughed. "Has she changed much since you were a little girl?"

"No, Father, not at all. And it's very comforting that something hasn't changed."

"I think we had better do as she says or we both will suffer from her wrath."

Lucy smiled at him again, and sat back in her chair. Yes, her decision to come here

had been the right one.

Soon, Mrs. Porter returned and sat down. "So, Lucy, why did you have to change foster homes so often?"

"My father. I was finally told that he was so angry that I had 'disrupted the family' as he called it by turning him in, that he was threatening me."

"Oh my stars! He didn't!"

"Yes, I'm afraid he did."

"Your own father!"

"I remember that." Father Mark leaned forward and placed a hand on Mrs. Porter's knee to silence her. "I remember having to go to court about this, testify as to your condition when you came to us."

"Yes, that was the first time he was taken to court." Lucy could feel herself tense up at the memory. "I had to be there too. It was probably the hardest thing I ever had to do."

"You poor, poor child. You were so little too." Mrs. Porter had brushed off Father Mark's hand and was now shaking her head at the news.

"Yes, I was just twelve, but I felt so much younger there. I had to sit in that witness chair, mother in the audience crying loud enough I could here her and my father sitting with his attorney, glaring at me. I had my own attorney there and a child care worker and they both told me that I should just look at them, not at my father, but I couldn't. He would shout things at me, slam his fist on the table, things like that. And Mother sobbing in the audience. It seemed forever until they took him out of the court room. Even then, telling them what he had done to me was really really hard."

Lucy fell silent, looking within herself, remembering. Father Mark and Mrs. Porter understood enough not to interrupt her. Finally, she seemed to shake herself out of her reverie and return to her story.

"The second time I had to go to court about this, I was fourteen years old. I had already been in three foster families. I hadn't seen my mother during this time and I didn't really want to, but I also hadn't seen my brother and I worried about him. I had received a couple of letters from him, sent to me through my child care worker, but they weren't nearly enough. Before the hearing began, I waited in a room at the court house and soon someone brought Brian in. At first he wouldn't come close to me and avoided looking at me, but I talked and talked to him and finally, he did say something. He said that our father said I was the reason our family was torn apart. I almost cried when I heard that but then Brian told me he hadn't believed our father and he gave me a book, a diary he had kept since I left. He said it was a present from him. We had such a good visit then. He was ten years old and so much bigger than when I had seen him last. We promised to keep in touch and we both have tried to keep that promise, but it has been so hard."

"How is your brother, Lucy?" Father Mark's voice was very soft.

"Brian is ok, I guess. As good as he can be considering he's in Oregon State Prison." Lucy's voice was tight.

"Is he? Oh my! I didn't know that." Mrs. Porter shot Father Mark a look. Why hadn't he told her? "What happened?"

"He got involved with drugs, I'm afraid. Had multiple arrests and lots of jail time until they got fed up and threw him into prison." Lucy gave herself a little shake. "But he is doing so much better now. Has gotten treatment while in prison and he should get out

soon, in a couple of years. I'm proud of him."

"And you should be." Father Mark smiled at her. "Was that your first meeting with him, when you went to court the second time?"

"Yes, it was, but we did manage to stay in touch if not actually see each other very often."

"What happened at court?"

Lucy settled back in her chair. This was not an easy story to tell and Lucy had to prepare herself to tell it. "I have such a hard time thinking of him as my father so I hope you will permit me to call him by name. Harold had been sentenced for several years for what he had done to me. All during that time, he had sent me letters, nasty letters, foul, saying things no father should say and no child should read. Of course, I had heard it all before' he had been a foul mouthed father all along. All these letters were sent to my foster home, which ever one I was living in at the time. They had moved me every year because he always seemed to be able to find me. I don't know how he managed it and Children's Services stated they didn't know either, but he always found me.

"I guess no one at the prison really knew he was doing this because before long he was given work release. He had to stay in Salem in a halfway house, of course, and they found him a job there. I hear he behaved himself for a few months, was the model prisoner. Went to work and did a good job, returned to the halfway house every night. He followed all the rules, was never late back to the halfway house. I say some reports where they said that he had obviously been rehabilitated and they were thinking of releasing him. He could travel anywhere in the State but would be on parole and would have to keep in touch with his parole officer.

"Well, I guess he got overconfident, because shortly before he was to appear in front of the parole board, he skipped out after work one day, stole a car and drove up here to Portland. I didn't know all of this until later, until I had to testify, but he had just found out where I was living and he was coming to "teach me a lesson." What I did know was that I was wakened in the middle of the night by gun shots and shouts. Herbert had stolen a gun after stealing the car, showed up at the foster house and was trying to get inside to get me. My foster father had been told that Harold had escaped and was expected he was on his way up here, so when Harold knocked on the door at three a.m., he didn't let him in. He called the police who were out of sight, hoping to capture him. Soon, I heard sirens. When Harold heard them, he broke into the house through the back door. He was shouting for me, but my foster parents were so brave and they hid me. I can remember shaking so hard, I was afraid Harold would hear me. He did hold them hostage but that didn't last long and the police got inside the house and captured him. Most my foster parents and I had to go to the trial and testify against him. He was found guilty, of course, and received a very long sentence. This time they sent him to a prison in New Jersey. I've not heard from him since."

"What a harrowing experience for you, my dear." Mrs. Porter's eyes were wide with astonishment. "How did you ever survive it?"

"I guess I had the strength within me, maybe because I had been having to deal with a crazy abusive father all my life. When I testified the second time, I looked him right in the eye when I told about what had happened, including receiving the letters from him. He glared back, but it didn't stop me."

"Lucy, do you need to take a break? You've been talking for such a long time

now." Father Mark silenced Mrs. Porter with a look.

Lucy stood and stretched. "I'm sorry. I'm keeping you awake. I shouldn't have come here."

"No, no, don't worry about us. We have worried about you for such a long time. And if we can be of help to you, we really would like to." Father Mark stood and stepped over to her. "Please, just take a break if you need and then continue with your story."

"I'm fine. I'm ready to continue if you are ready to listen." She sat down and faced them again. This part of her story wasn't nearly so difficult to remember. She had gotten over one of the difficult parts.

"School was hard because every year I had to attend a different high school, necessary to keep Harold from finding me. I hated always being the new girl, but there was nothing I could do about it. Every year I was the new girl, an outsider, and I didn't know how to fit in. Everything I tried, failed so soon, I stopped trying and just settled for being the new girl without friends.

"Then I discovered, or the school counselor discovered, that I had a talent. I was very good at typing, keyboarding as the kids call it these days. I was able to learn the keyboard far faster than the other students and I rarely made mistakes. For awhile I intentionally made mistakes hoping I would fit in, but that didn't work well because I was inconsistent with my mistakes and the instructor would call me on it, sometimes in front of the entire class. I hated that and would blush terribly, so I stopped that tactic.

"I wish I could say I was a great student, but I wasn't. I really tried. I wanted to be accepted for my brains if no one would accept me as a friend. At least I could be one of those brainy kids that people admired and talked about in whispers. Yes, they were also

outcasts but at least they were outcasts in a group. I was a single outcast. I belonged nowhere. But, I didn't have the brains to be a great student, no matter how hard I tried. I did get decent grades, mostly Cs with the occasional B and always an A only in typing. I would spend the entire weekend before a test studying, sometimes so much my foster parents would do whatever they could to take me away from my studies. They didn't want me to fail. They really were terrific, but they could see that I was studying far too much. Sometimes I would be so tired taking a test that I couldn't even remember the part of the subject that I had known the day before.

So, I stopped studying. I went from one extreme, studying for hours every day of the week, to the other extreme, not studying at all. I figured, it didn't make a difference whether or not I studied. I got the same grades and no one cared. But, my foster mother did care and so did the school counselor. They pretty much ganged up on me and told me that while my future may not lie as an intellectual, I was not stupid and I really should do my best. I listened to them and I again studied but not nearly so much. And it worked because I began to earn more Bs than Cs and I even earned an A in English, just once, but I was so proud of that grade.

"By the time I was a junior in high school, we were required to have most of our assignments typed. Many of the teachers even counted off for typing errors. I think that sometimes I received a better grade than I probably should because the paper looked so good. The students figured this out rather quickly and all of a sudden, I became popular. At first I didn't realize what was going on. After class one of the girls would come up to me and ask me if I wanted to go to lunch with her. Of course, I did. I thought I was finally making it, finally becoming popular. We would be joined by several of her friends and I

would be introduced around, and they would appear to accept me. The girl would talk about her boyfriend and even ask me for advice. as if I understood anything about boys. I hadn't dated at all. After all, the boys didn't have a chance to get to know me until the end of the school year and the next year I wouldn't be there anymore. Anyway, the talk would move on to the class and how difficult the teacher was and how unfair it was that the assignment had to be typed, and how hard it was to produce a good, error free paper.

"About then, the girl would say something about how lucky I was to be so good at typing because that made school so easy for me and that it wasn't really fair that she didn't have that skill too. This was usually enough for me to offer to type it for her. Will you really? Oh, you're just wonderful! Here it is. Can you check for punctuation too? Maybe you could type a draft for me a few days before the due date so I can check it and rewrite if necessary. And of course I would type it, give her something that looked pretty good and she would read it and decide to add something here or take out something there. And she would give it back to me with these changes, sometimes the night before the due date. And I had my own paper to write and several other papers her friends had asked me to type for them. Quite often I was up late the night before the papers were due, just typing them.

"It didn't take long for me to realize what was going on. After the assignment was turned in, they no longer asked me to lunch, no longer talked to me at all until the next assignment was due, but I didn't know what to do. I didn't know how to tell them that I would no longer type their papers because they were taking advantage of me, so I continued to type their papers and bask in the light of their popularity whenever a paper was due.

"Then, I realized that boys were noticing me. I was so excited and hoped that one

of them might even ask me out."

Chapter Five

Sixteen Years Ago

At least this is something I can understand. Lucy was enjoying her literature class. They were reading "Of Mice and Men" and she found the story both fascinating and very sad. She didn't raise her hand to volunteer an answer to the teacher's question. Lucy never did that, but if the teacher called on her, she had an answer ready. If only all her classes were like this. Spanish was probably the worst. Just as soon as she felt she had a handle on a particular lesson, the next one would change everything she thought she knew.

Lucy sat back in her chair. She had put her pen down because she didn't need to make any notes and sometimes her hand just seemed to doodle on its own. Lucy hated to find doodling on her notes when she was studying. Not that the teacher would notice what she was doing since she sat in the back of the room behind a couple of the football players. They pretty much shielded her from whatever was going on in the front. It also gave her the opportunity to zone out if she wanted, but this time, she concentrated on what the

teacher said about the book and the other students' comments.

So, at first she didn't notice when someone slipped a note on her desk. Part of the reason might have been that she had never been passed a note before, not for herself at any rate. It wasn't until the boy in front of her nudged her desk with his that she noticed and picked it up.

"Lana, could I talk to you after class?" It didn't matter that he got her name wrong. What mattered was that it was signed by Bobby, the quarterback of their football team, easily the most popular guy at school. Not only was he cute, and very talented athletically, he also was very nice, rather shy, and Lucy, being shy herself, could understand that. She looked to her right where Bobby was waiting and, smiling at him, nodded. Both of them blushed and looked away.

That was enough for Lucy to lose concentration on the discussion. Bobby had asked her to meet him after class. He must like her. Maybe he wanted to ask her out. That would show those self-absorbed cheerleaders who liked to tease her. That would show all of them, those kids who thought they were too good to give her the time of day. And actually, it would make her feel so much more confident. Lucy began to plan what she would wear when they went out. Something very nice because she knew they would go somewhere that was popular enough she would be seen with him.

Finally, the bell rang and Lucy, startled, fumbled with her books, dropped a notebook and then her pens. Finally, when she had everything together, she slung her bag over her shoulder and left the room. Bobby was waiting for her impatiently, shifting his weight from foot to foot. As soon as he saw her come out of the room, he hurried her along towards his next class, which, however, was in the opposite direction as her own.

"Thanks Lana for talking with me."

"Lucy."

"Huh?"

"Lucy. My name is Lucy."

"Huh? I thought they said your name was Lana. I'm sorry."

"That's ok. No problem. It was an honest mistake."

"Well, yeah, I guess. Listen." He stopped at the door of his next class and Lucy, who had had to nearly run to keep up with him, slid to a stop.

"Yes?"

"Listen, I got a favor to ask you."

"Ok." She could feel her face get warmer and she knew she was blushing.

"Listen, you know I'm on the football team."

"Yeah." Of course she knew. Everyone knew him.

"Well, I am having trouble with my grades. They are slipping a bit."

What's this about his grades? Isn't he asking her out? Why would he even think to talk to her about grades. Hers were nothing spectacular.

"and my girlfriend Sophie suggested I talk to you about typing my paper for me. I know it's a lot to ask but it would help me get a better grade on it. And if you could check the spelling and punctuation too, and make sure the sentence structure is ok. I would really appreciate it and maybe I won't be benched for the big game on Saturday." He looked at her with hopeful eyes.

Lucy felt crushed. It was her own fault. She should have remembered that he was dating the lead cheerleader. They were almost always together. And even if he wasn't

dating Sophie, what makes Lucy think that someone like him would ever want to date her?

"Lucy?"

She looked up at him. At least he got her name right this time. "Yeah, I'll type it for you."

He gave her one of his famous grins and handed her a fistful of papers. "Here it is. Listen, I really appreciate this. You're a life saver."

Lucy took the mess of papers into her hand and pushed them into her book bag. "Ok, yeah." She turned and started back down the hallway as the bell rang. Damn! Now she was late to her class, and would have to walk inside the room, in the middle of things and cause a stir. All because she was a patsy for Bobby and Sophie and their friends.

Later that day, Lucy escaped to the cafeteria for lunch. Normally it was an uncomfortable situation for her because she had no friends to eat lunch with and so she felt conspicuous. Today, however, she was deep in thought and didn't notice anyone around her. She was eating her bologna sandwich, one of her favorites, but she wasn't really tasting it. She instead was plotting how she would get revenge on Bobby and his friends. She created several creative ideas in her head and should have felt proud of herself for being so creative when normally she didn't think she was, but at this point, she was thinking only of hurting those who had hurt her.

Eventually though, she realized that there was no way she could do any of the plots she had in mind. She was far too shy and too weak to do any of it and they were far too strong to fall prey to any of her ideas.

Finished with her sandwich, she put the wax paper in her lunch bag and then reached inside for the apple she had packed. She began to take small bites out of it, first

eating off the skin and then the meat of the fruit. Resigned to her fate as Bobby's school paper typist and editor, she reached inside for the papers he had given her.

What a mess. It was not cohesive in any way. There were torn pieces of paper with a few sentences scribbled on it and numbers and arrows everywhere. Part of it was written on the back of the flyer that announced the homecoming dance. Lucy looked at it, read the information for a bit and then turned it over to see what Bobby had written. She continued to berate herself for falling for his trick. He probably knew she would have liked going to homecoming with him and used that flyer to hurt her. Tears began to leak out of her eyes but she wiped them away angrily. She would not let them see her hurt. She may be less powerful than they were, but she still had control over how she appeared to others. At least a little bit. She would not let them see her cry.

Lucy spread the papers on the table and tried to make sense of them. She wasn't even sure what the topic of the paper was supposed to be, or what class it was for. She read each and every piece of paper he had given her. Well, it seemed like it was for his Lit class, the same class she was in. Still, there was stuff about American History. The book had nothing to do with American History. Lucy then tried to sort the pages into piles that might make at least a little sense. This tactic seemed to work a little, but when she was done, she had three different piles. One pile had rough statements about the book they were reading and seemed to be on the theme the teacher had assigned to them. The second pile was about American History, about Little Big Horn. Lucy had studied that in the past so, she was at least a little familiar with it. The third pile was a puzzle. It made no sense to her at all. It didn't belong in the Lit pile or in the History pile but each page didn't seem to be related with any of the other pages in the pile.

Lucy clipped the pages of each of the three piles together and tried to make them as tidy as possible. She gathered up her lunch remnants, threw them in the trash and then started to leave the cafeteria for the library. The next thing she knew, Sophie was standing in front of her.

"Lana, it's real nice of you to type Bobby's papers for him."

"Lucy."

"Huh?"

"My name is Lucy."

"I told you her name wasn't Lana." Bobby stepped up next to Sophie and draped his arm around her shoulder.

"Yeah, well, whatever. It's real nice of you to do this for Bobby. I would do it but I'm real busy these days what with cheerleading practice and all."

"Yeah, ok." Lucy looked at the papers in her hand and she wanted so badly to shove them into her smirking face, but she didn't. "I do have a question about this though. You said you wanted me to type a paper but there seems to be at least three different topics here. What am I supposed to type?"

"Oh, you're so silly!" Sophie giggled and pulled Bobby's arm tighter around her.

"Let me see that." Bobby reached over and took the papers from Lucy's hand.

"Yeah, I think you got it right. This part is the Lit paper, this is for the History paper and this is for sociology."

"But, it's not real organized and I don't know anything about sociology."

"Look, if you don't want to help Bobby out, just admit it. You don't have to go making excuses." Sophie stood with one hand on her hip. "Of course, if he can't play the

homecoming game, it would be your fault."

"Sophie! No it wouldn't!" Bobby looked at her in alarm.

"Sure it would. She promised to type your papers and now she's changing her mind."

"No, it's not that. I just don't know what to type. I can't make any sense of it since I never took that class." Lucy could feel the heat return to her face and the tears were not far behind her eyes.

"Well, you're smart. You can figure it out. Bobby, give her your sociology book." Sophie slid the book out of the pile he carried under one arm and handed it to Lucy. "Here you go. Now you won't have any trouble."

Lucy grasped the book and stared at Sophie and Bobby. This couldn't be happening. She had thought typing one paper was bad. Now she had to type three of them and practically write them herself, and learn a new subject just to finish his paper.

Sophie pulled on Bobby's arm. "Come on. We better hurry. The gang is expecting us out by the football field."

As Sophie hurried Bobby away, he turned and smiled at Lucy. "Thank you so much, Linda. I really appreciate your help."

Linda. He had called her Linda. For a brief moment, he had known her name, but she was so unimportant to him, that that knowledge hadn't lasted. Lucy continued to walk out of the cafeteria, head held down, fully aware of the looks and whispers of the other kids. They seemed to know that Bobby had taken advantage of her and enjoyed it. They knew she was a push over. They knew she was a unimportant little grind who only had value when she could provide a service. Lucy had never felt so alone, so isolated.

Chapter Six

Present Day

"What horrid little brats!" Mrs. Porter was obviously very shocked at Lucy's story.

"Didn't you have someone you could talk to about this?"

"No, I couldn't think of anyone who could help me."

"How about a teacher? or your foster mother or father?"

"No, I didn't feel like I could trust them. You must remember that by this time, I had been shuffled around for years, a new foster home, a new school each year. I didn't feel like I could make friends. They wouldn't understand what I had been through with an abusive father. I learned early not to let them know I was a foster kid because then I was too different from them, and they would make up all kinds of stories as to why I was in foster care. A couple of times early on, I went to the same school as my foster parent's own child and that could be troublesome too. One was really nice and did become a friend but the others used my situation to improve their popularity. It was hard making friends because I knew I would be in a different school the next year in an entirely different part of

town. And I wasn't permitted to keep in touch with any of them because Children's Services were afraid my father would find me."

"Oh dear, you really did have it tough, didn't you., I had no idea." Mrs. Porter was shaking her head and tears came to her eyes. "I'm so sorry, my dear. I wish I could have done something for you."

Lucy smiled at her. Actually, you did, Mrs. Porter, you and Father Mark. When things got really tough, I would think of you two, especially the last week or so I was still in the parish, and I felt better. And I wrote you so many letters."

"You did?" Father Mark leaned toward her. "We didn't receive any."

"Well, I didn't mail them, but I kept them all." Lucy reached into her bag and retrieved a parcel of envelopes, a rubber band holding them together. She handed it to Father Mark.

"Oh my." He took the rubber band off and it seemed to disintegrate in his hands. He picked one envelope at random and removed the paper inside. It was from a pencil tablet and childish handwriting filled three pages. He didn't read it, but folded the pages again and slipped them back into the envelope and handed them back to Lucy.

"No, I want you to have them." Lucy held one hand up to stop him. "That is, if you want to. They really belong to you."

Father Mark hesitated and then handed them to Mrs. Porter. She, too, chose one envelope at random and pulled out its contents. This time there was only one sheet but it was typed. She read a few lines aloud. "'I'm doing my best here. Really I am. And I remember what you said about it not being my fault and to hold my head up and I want to believe you and I do believe you but it's so hard.'" Hands shaking, she refolded the sheet

of paper and returned it to its envelope and placed the pile of them on the table next to her.

"My girl. My precious, precious girl." Mrs. Porter's voice was shaky. "You don't know how much this means to me, to us, to receive this gift from you."

Father Mark broke in. "Not a week went by that we didn't talk about you, wonder about you. We tried to find out how you were doing but no one would tell us a thing. And now we know why."

"But you have grown to be such a lovely young lady, so poised. How was your life after high school?" Mrs. Porter was trying very hard to compose herself. "Wait, first, did you type all three of Bobby's papers?"

Lucy smiled. "Yes, I did, but it didn't do him much good anyway. He hadn't given me enough information for any of the papers and they each were far too short. The teachers told him that although they looked great, they were too general and too short. He was nice to me about it though. Sophie started to yell at me because he didn't receive passing grades on them but he stopped her and admitted that he hadn't written much so I couldn't type much."

"Sounds like he may have become an admirable young man." Father Mark always tried to find the good in a person.

"Actually, he became an attorney but was disbarred after about ten years due to incompetence. Sophie divorced him then and took their three kids and moved to the East Coast."

"Serves him right." Mrs. Porter grumbled. Father Mark and Lucy both laughed and then Lucy continued with her story.

"Of course I attended a different school the next year, my senior year and I

graduated in the middle of my class. I wasn't one of the best students but neither was I one of the poor students. I was ordinary. I don't remember any of the teachers at that school, not the students. I was smart enough not to let them know about my typing abilities so none of them asked me to type their papers. I had completed enough credits in my first three high schools, that my senior year was actually pretty easy. I went to school half a day and eventually got a job for the rest of the day. I tried a few jobs before I found one that suited me. I discovered that I was not suited for waitress work or even fast food restaurant work. I was far too shy, and because of that, my confidence level was low and I couldn't remember orders. I also couldn't handle it when someone complained and in waitress work, there are always complaints, no matter how good of service you give them.

"I then tried taking care of children. I didn't babysat per se, but instead I worked in a child care center that was associated with the school. There were enough girls who had babies, that they opened this child care center so the young mothers could continue their education. I loved working with the babies and the toddlers too. I loved it when they started talking and we could play games. I loved rocking the babies asleep. While I didn't love changing their dirty diapers, I didn't mind it either. My supervisor liked it when I worked there because she didn't have to worry about the dirty work. If it had to do with a baby, I would do it.

"But the mothers, I couldn't deal with. So many of them were neglectful of their babies, maybe not in a legal sense but they seemed to take their babies for granted and didn't spend time with them down on the floor, face to face. And when the babies responded better to me than to them, they became very angry. Some of them demanded

that I not be allowed to take care of their children. My supervisor defended me and told them that as long as they brought their babies to the center, they would have to deal with who she chose to take care of them. She told them that I was the best care giver she had seen and she wasn't about to get rid of me because of their jealousy.

"That made me feel good, but I still had to deal with these girls in school. They were my fellow students and they began to make my life very uncomfortable. After a few months, I quit that job and went to the school counselor for help in finding another one.

"The counselor was obviously a bit discouraged about me and my work problems, so she decided to put me through a battery of tests. By the time I was finished with them, I felt like my brain had turned to mush. It took her several hours to score the tests and then another day or so to interpret them. What she finally came up with was clerical work. It appeared that I had superior typing skills."

Lucy reached for her cup, but it was empty. Mrs. Porter immediately jumped to her feet. "You need more hot chocolate? Let me get you some."

"Actually, I would prefer a nice cold glass of water." Lucy handed her mug to Mrs. Porter who hurried out of the room. Lucy laid her head against the back of the chair and closed her eyes.

"You're tired, my dear. Maybe you can continue another day." Father Mark touched her lightly on the arm. She opened her eyes and looked into his concerned ones.

"No, Father. I'm fine. I really need to finish my story so you will understand why I need a favor of you."

Mrs. Porter hurried into the room with a pitcher of water and a glass for Lucy. She poured some water into it and handed the glass to Lucy, placing the pitcher within Lucy's

reach.

"The school counselor found me a job as a file clerk. I did know my ABCs so that was a pretty easy job for me. It was also in the evening when very few other people were there so that suited me. Still, after graduation, that job wasn't available anymore because it was designed for a high school student. The school counselor was very kind. She had a friend who was in management in an insurance company and she got me an interview with her friend."

"So, you aced the interview and became an insurance agent?" Mrs. Porter had an expectant look on her face.

"Actually, no. I did terribly in the interview and the woman didn't want to give me a job but the school counselor talked her into giving me a chance, so she did. My job was to type all the forms and reports the agents needed done. I was one of many typist in a typing pool, so I was no longer special because of my typing skills, but I was good at what I did and they kept me on. I had no problems with my supervisors. They knew they could depend on me and sometimes the agents would request that I be given their work to type. All the same, it was lonely work, especially when my coworkers in the typing pool saw that I was highly skilled at typing and always did my best with the work given to me. It was like high school all over again. Seemed like they hadn't matured at all."

Chapter Seven

Thirteen Years Ago

Lucy sat at her desk in a back corner of the room, earphones on, keys flashing on the keyboard. Lucy didn't really need the earphones to do her work since what she needed to type was in front of her, but she liked to listen to music so she couldn't hear the voices of her co-workers. They were in the far corner of the room now, chattering away, while Lucy worked. She didn't care so much that they socialized so much. She just didn't want to hear them. All the same, the music wasn't enough to entirely block out their voices but it did help. It appeared that they were presently talking about their love lives.

"Harry is just so tall, he makes me feel like a child." Penni was filing her long, scarlet nails and the sound drove Lucy crazy. At least the music covered up that sound.

"So, you're his little girl, are you?" Bambi had just applied a coat of bright pink polish to her nails and was waving her hands in the air and blowing on the nails to dry them.

"That's what he calls me. He likes it when I wear a school girl's costume."

"Oh, that's so sexy." Daisy was leaning against Bambi's desk, admiring her long legs that stretched out from her very short skirt.

"And kind of naughty too, don't you think. Candi was flipping through a glossy magazine.

"That's why I love it so much." Penni laughed. "Can you imagine little miss perfect doing something like that?"

They all looked over at Lucy, her hands flashing across the keyboard, humming softly to the music from her headphones.

"I bet she's never ever had sex, at least with a man." Crystal had a particularly strong dislike for Lucy, though she never could articulate why. "Hey, Miss Prissy! How's your sex life?"

"Crystal! Stop!" Candi reached over and tugged on her arm.

"Why should I?"

"Because you'll make me laugh so hard, I'll pee my pants."

"Look y'all. I have something to tell you." Candi put down her magazine and leaned forward to get their attention. It would have worked better had there been men in the room because her blouse was so low cut and tight, that it left little to the imagination.

The others turned their attention back to Candi. "I was wondering when you would tell us. You've been pretty distracted all day long." Penni put her nail file in a desk drawer and looked at her friend. "Come out with it."

Candi, paused for a moment, all the better to get as much attention on her as she could. "I think Ken is going to propose to me tonight."

"No!" The others squealed in delight.

"I must say, it's about time. How long have you been living with him?"

"Well, officially for two years but when I was in high school, I used to sneak out almost every night and go to his apartment. We would have wild, hot sex and then he would bring me home and I would climb through my bedroom window and be in bed just in time for mother to wake me for school. I was so tired my senior year, I'm surprised I graduated from high school."

"Why do you think he's going to propose?" Bambi was now trying to dry her bright pink nails.

"Well, he told me to dress up tonight and he's going to take me to some place special. He even said he was going to rent a limo for the occasion."

"Sounds like a proposal to me too. How exciting. I haven't been to a wedding in months." Daisy yawned and then pushed herself off of the desk and walked over to her own and retrieved her purse. "I need to smoke. Anyone want to join me?"

"Sure, and then it's time for lunch." Crystal grabbed her own purse and the five of them left the room.

As soon as they were gone, Lucy turned off her tape player and took off her ear phones. She stood and stretched. She had been sitting for four hours without a break and her back felt a bit stiff. She walked to the window and looked out. She could see her five coworkers gathered by the bus shelter in front of the building, two of them smoking cigarettes. One of them, Crystal probably, looked up and saw her there, pointed her out to the others and they all looked up at her and laughed. Lucy told herself that it didn't matter. When they were out of the room, it was much easier for her to get her work done. Their

voices were very distracting.

Lucy returned to her desk, turned on her typewriter, and reached for the next document that needed to be completed. It was an easy one, didn't require much thought, and Lucy placed the correct form into the typewriter and began to fill it out. Just as she was finished and was placing it in her out box, the door opened and her supervisor entered.

"Lucy. So glad you're here. I have a rush assignment." The woman hurried over to Lucy's desk and handed her a folder. "There is a very important meeting tomorrow morning at seven thirty a.m. I need to have this report typed, photocopied, collated and in folders before then. Please make fifteen copies. Oh, and here are the names of those who will be at the meeting. I want each person to have a personalized copy of this report, the person's name and position on the cover of the report. Think you can do this for me?"

Lucy smiled at her, though the woman didn't seem to notice. "Sure. No problem."

"Oh, did you get those forms from corporate done yet?"

"No, not quite but they are nearly finished."

"Good. Please give them to my secretary as soon as they are done." And the woman hurried out of the room.

Lucy opened the folder and looked at the report. Most of it was in someone's poor handwriting and some were cut and paste of other documents, but it was clear enough that Lucy knew she would have no trouble reading what she had to type. It was, however nearly seventy five pages long including charts and graphs. A big, complicated report. Well, nothing she hadn't done before. She would just have to work through lunch and possibly into the evening. But she didn't have anything else to do that evening. Her coworkers were right about one thing. She didn't have much of a social life.

Lucy opened her desk drawer and retrieved a sandwich. She still loved bologna sandwiches, as long as she could remember and she had done especially well in making this one. It had cheese on it and crisp lettuce. She ate her sandwich while looking over the assignment to make sure she understood everything. She knew that if she had any questions, she would have to ask them soon because her supervisor always left around four o'clock and wouldn't be available after that.

After finishing her sandwich, she opened a bottle of water and sipped some and then placed it out of the way. Before she could start this new project, she had to finish the first one. She could hear the others returning, so she put on her ear phones and turned on her music. By the time, they entered the room, she was fast at work as though she had never stopped.

"Look at her, the drone." Crystal stood by her own desk looking at Lucy. "She works so hard she puts us all to shame."

"Yeah, I know what you mean." Penni spoke up. "It's not that we don't work. We just have lives outside of here."

"You're right. She types so fast, she makes it seem like we don't do any work at all." Daisy suddenly felt grumpy. She was remembering her last performance review. The supervisor hadn't compared her to Lucy, at least not by name, but she had said that Daisy's output was not nearly what was expected of their typists. She was told she had to improve or face transfer to a less appealing department, maybe mailroom.

"So, what can we do about it? It's not like we can go to the boss and say the little shit types too fast." Crystal sat behind her desk and slapped her hand on her pile of work to be done.

"There is one thing we can do." Bambi picked up some of the paperwork in her in box and walked over to Lucy. She slammed the work on Lucy's desk, and smiled when Lucy jumped. "Since you're so good at what you do, why not help us out. Please put it in my out box when you're done."

Lucy looked at her in astonishment but Bambi just walked back to her own desk, placed a sheet of paper in her typewriter and began to type.

The others looked at Bambi with their mouths open. Bambi was amazing, so bold. One by one, the other women did the same. When their supervisor came in the room an hour later, all of them were busy at work.

And so it continued, year after year. Each of Lucy's coworkers eventually married and Lucy put money into a kitty to get her a wedding gift. Then they started getting pregnant and Lucy contributed to baby shower gifts. Soon, they began to be transferred to other departments or quit work altogether.

One day, Lucy heard that her supervisor, Angela Pipgarten, was being promoted and Lucy expected to get her position. When Ms. Pipgarten called Lucy into her office, Lucy was positive she would be getting a promotion and she was all smiles as she entered the office and sat down.

"Ah Lucy, there you are. Please sit down." Ms. Pipgarten was busy moving papers around. Her glasses had slipped down near the end of her nose and she looked at Lucy over the top of them. "I'm sorry but I'm just so busy, I can't give you the time you deserve. So much pressure, this new position, so much pressure."

"Yes ma'am." Lucy sat up straight in her chair. "How can I help you?"

"Ah Lucy, a team member through and through." She took her glasses off and

rubbed her eyes, placing the glasses on the desk in front of her. Without her glasses, she seemed much younger, much less poised. "There is something I'm going to ask of you. The typing pool has changed much since you first started working with us about thirteen years ago. And with every change, you have been a team player and you have done everything asked of you. I was a bit concerned when we computerized, but you didn't falter, not once."

She picked up her glasses and polished the lenses with a tissue, then put the glasses back on. "Because of the shake up of management, there are so many changes now, that I must depend on you even more than usual. No one in your department has been there as long as you have and therefore none of them knows as much about the work as you do. That's why I called you in here, to make a request of you."

Here it comes, thought Lucy. She's going to be offering me the promotion. I just know it.

"Lucy, I've hired a young man to run your department. He's fresh out of college and frankly knows very little about the insurance business. However, he does know quite a bit about business in general and I think that, over time, he will do a terrific job for us. Still, since he doesn't know about how we do things, I've asked him to meet with you so you can show him the ropes. The team player that you are, I'm sure that I can count on you to help out."

Lucy heard very little of what Ms. Pipgarten said after the words "I've hired a young man to run your department." She wasn't getting the promotion. She had worked her butt off, stayed later than anyone else, sometimes not leaving until the cleaning crew came on. She had completed more paperwork than at least three of her peers combined.

She had been patient, had been a team player as Ms. Pipgarten had said. She had earned the promotion. She had worked hard for it. But not only was she not getting it, but she had to train the "young man" who was getting it.

Lucy didn't remember what she said to Ms. Pipgarten before leaving the office. All she knew is that she had agreed to remain a team player and train her supervisor. She returned to her desk, pulled out the forms that needed to be processed and began to hit the keys of her keyboard. She had a lot of work to finish before she could leave for home.

Chapter Eight

Two years ago, Winter

1.

It was well after dark by the time Lucy had finished her work and forwarded it on to its proper destination. As often happened, she was the last to leave. All the managers and supervisors and her coworkers had already left. She slipped into her warm winter coat, tied her neck scarf around her neck pulled her hat down over her ears and slipped on knit gloves. She may not be the most stylish woman but she wouldn't be cold. Slinging her bag over her shoulder, she left the office, locking the door behind her and walked to the elevator.

Considering it was after eight thirty p.m., the elevator was quite slow in coming. Lucy was losing her patience, something she didn't usually do, but it had been a very long day and she wanted to get home. Finally, it came and she got on and pushed the button

for the first floor. The elevator was much faster now that she was on it, and it stopped and the doors opened. Lucy stepped outside and then stopped and looked around herself in confusion as the elevator doors closed and she could hear the whirring as it rose to a different floor.

Where was she? Looked as though she had gotten off at the wrong floor. Yes, she had done this before but not late at night. Everything seemed a bit spooky, especially the hum she could hear in the distance. It seemed like the hum of voices but that couldn't be. At this time of night, businesses had closed. The only people who should be in the building were the cleaning people and they didn't get together and chat.

Lucy tried to still her nerves. She was curious too, though, and wanted to find the source of the humming. She was only on the second floor. Walking the stairs would seem to be a good thing to do and they were in the direction of the humming.

Very carefully and slowly, Lucy started walking in the direction of the stairs and the hum. She was right about the direction of the hum, because the further she walked the more definitely she became that it was voices. She reached the stairs and put her hand on the door knob but hesitated. The source of the voices was just a few doors down that hall. She could see the door was open and light had spilled out lighting up that part of the hallway, making the place she stood seem to be even more shadowy.

The door she was holding onto opened abruptly, and she was pushed aside. "Oh, sorry there." An older man moved past her and hurried down the hall and entered that room.

Lucy's curiosity got the best of her. She slowly approached the opened door. From what she could remember, this office had belonged to some clinic, but she wasn't sure

what kind of clinic it was. Would they be open so late? And if the clinic was open late, wouldn't it be more quiet, with patients waiting for their appointments instead of chatting to each other? It sounded like a party of some sort.

Finally, Lucy reached the door and looked inside. It wasn't a party but it was a meeting of some kind. Lucy could see rows of people sitting in uncomfortable looking folding chairs facing a man at a podium. On the wall behind the speaker was a sign that read, "Narcotics Anonymous. Addicts Helping Each Other."

To one side, Lucy could see a long table with a coffee urn on it and several plates of pastries. To the other side was another table, this one with literature displayed. Most of the people were sitting in the chairs but some of them were standing, walking around, and speaking softly to others. Every once in a while, someone would get up from a chair and walk to the back to get more coffee or something to eat.

Lucy looked up at the speaker. He was dressed in jeans, work boots and a blue work shirt. He looked lean and healthy and he appeared to be very enthusiastic about his topic. The audience responded well to him too. Quite often someone would shout a comment or a question and the speaker didn't seem to mind being interrupted. He good naturally responded to each of them.

Lucy then turned her attention to the audience. There were mostly men there but there were also a good number of women there. Some of them were dressed very casually, but many were nicely dressed. She even thought she saw someone she knew, an attorney who had hired her through her company to transcribe some notes while he tried to hire a secretary. No, it couldn't be him. He's an attorney. Attorneys don't have drug problems. In fact, Lucy saw only a few people who looked like drug addicts. They looked

grimy and a little shaky, but there weren't many of them.

Lucy then noticed a man was walking towards her, probably to tell her that she didn't belong here. Hurriedly, she readjusted her bag on her shoulder, pulled her hat down over her ears again and turned to leave.

"Excuse me, ma'am." The man was faster than she was and stopped her before she had gone more than a couple steps.

"I'm sorry. I was just a little curious. Didn't mean to interrupt anything. I'm leaving now." She turned again and hurried to the stairs.

"You don't have to leave." He called after her. "These meetings are for everyone."

She waved one hand at him, then opened the door to the stairs and left.

2.

Lucy had a hard time getting that meeting out of her mind. She was very distracted at work, but no one really noticed since she still got her work done. Narcotics Anonymous. She knew it existed, but she had no idea what it was like. Lucy couldn't really understand an addict. Yes, her father had been an alcoholic and actually died because of his alcoholism; he got into a drunken brawl and didn't survive his injuries. Drugs, though. Why would someone become an addict? Lucy had never paid much attention to any kind of drugs. If she had a headache, she would take something for it and when she had one of her rare colds, she would take over the counter pills, but to become addicted? Why?

That day, the day after she had discovered the meeting, she went down to the second floor, but the office was closed. There was a sign outside, however, that told her

what she needed to know. The Narcotics Anonymous meetings were on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday. Doors opened at eight p.m. and the meeting actually started at eight thirty.

On Thursday, Lucy worked late again. She actually had a hard time finding enough work to do to explain her lateness but she really didn't need to worry since no one paid much attention to her anyway. About eight fifteen, she took the elevator down to the second floor, and walked down to that office.

The door was open as it had been on Tuesday, and there were people milling around. Lucy tried to appear as confident as she could but she was still a bit nervous. What if they wouldn't let her stay there? She walked over to the table where a young woman was setting out some pamphlets and a few books. She smiled at Lucy. "Welcome. Help yourself." She then hurried away.

Lucy scanned the table and then chose a pamphlet. It was about the history of Narcotics Anonymous and also told a brief version of the history of Alcoholics Anonymous. Another, larger, pamphlet had a list of all the meetings throughout the city. A third pamphlet consisted of people's stories of how Narcotics Anonymous had saved their lives. Lucy read this one through to the end. It seemed that anyone in any walk of life could be a drug addict. She still didn't understand how it happened though.

As she finished reading the pamphlet and was returning it to the pile on the table, she heard a voice behind her. "You can keep that, you know."

Lucy startled and spun around. Next to her, holding out a cup of coffee to her was the man who had spoken to her the other evening. Lucy automatically took the cup of coffee and sipped some. It was horrible and she grimaced.

The man laughed. "Yeah, it's pretty bad, isn't it."

Lucy nodded.

"Is this your first time here? I mean, I saw you standing outside the door last time but you didn't come inside."

Lucy finally found her voice. He had remembered her! "Yes, this is my first time."

"I know it can seem pretty overwhelming, but we all mean well."

"I've never been to any meeting like this before. There's so many people here. All addicts?"

"Yep, some of them further in their recovery than others, but all of us are addicts."

"You're an addict?" It didn't seem possible. He was a good looking man, tall and slender with wide shoulders and his face was clear and wore a welcoming smile.

"Yep, sure am. Cocaine. I've been clean and sober for almost three years now, actually two years, ten months, three weeks and five days."

"Wow. You know exactly."

"It was an important day for me. It's the day I took my life back again." He was now very serious and Lucy began to be a little uncomfortable.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

"No, it's perfectly ok. In fact, it's expected. By telling our stories, we help ourselves stay in recovery." He smiled at her. "You're really new at this, aren't you,"

"It shows, huh."

"Yeah, but that's ok too. People here are in all stages of recovery. In fact, some aren't even in recovery yet. But still the intent is there and if you keep trying, keep coming back, it will work for you too."

"I find all this a little overwhelming." She found him a bit overwhelming too but for some reason, she found him easy to talk to.

He held his hand out to her. "I'm sorry. I forgot. My name is Andy."

She took his hand and shook it. He had a strong grasp but not too strong. "I'm Lucy."

"Nice to meet you, Lucy. Why don't we sit down and listen to this speaker. He's one of our better speakers and he's celebrating his fourteenth birthday."

"Fourteenth? He sure looks older than that." She followed Andy to a seat to one side.

Andy smiled at her. "Fourteen years since he last used."

"Wow. That's great."

3.

The next day, Lucy arrived at work a little early and, after fixing a pot of coffee and pouring herself a cup, she went immediately to her desk. Andy had given her a book to read about Narcotics Anonymous (or NA as they called it) and she wanted to finish reading it. She had gone to sleep reading it, continued to read it while on the bus and now had just a little more until finished. By the time her co-workers had started to file in, the book was tucked back into her bag and she was busy typing.

It was not unusual for Lucy to come into work early before the others. They were used to seeing her hard at work when they came in. What was unusual was her lack of focus. Lucy's out box didn't fill as quickly as usual and her in box was full longer than usual. Whenever one of the would come up to talk to her or ask her a question (the young male supervisor was long gone and Lucy was now the lead in the department though not

the supervisor and everyone came to her with questions), she had to ask them to repeat the question and even then the answer might be something completely wrong.

People began to whisper about her. She was legend anyway since she had been there so long, but this? Maybe she's sick? Maybe she's lost her mind. Maybe she's in love. This last whisper was thrown out. Lucy was not the type to fall in love. Most people thought she was sick and maybe had received some bad news. Had she received a diagnosis of cancer? None of them considered her a friend. She was far too private to be a friend to any of them. Still, they did care for her and they worried.

One of them, a tall skinny girl named Patsy, what chosen to approach her and find out what was wrong. She tiptoed up to Lucy's desk and stood there, waiting to be noticed. However, today, Lucy wasn't noticing anything. Patsy looked back at the others for encouragement. "Go on! Go on!" They waved their hands at her. "Ask her!"

"Um, Lucy?" Nothing. "Lucy?" Still nothing. Patsy looked back at them again but they urged her to continue. "Lucy."

Finally she looked up at Patsy. "Yes. What is it?"

"We were wondering, I mean I was wondering, we, huh, um, Lucy, are you ok?"

"Ok, yes of course I'm ok. Why do you ask?"

"Well, you seem pretty distracted."

"I'm working on a big project now and have to concentrate. That's all."

"Well, there's something else worrying us."

Lucy looked behind Patsy to see half a dozen others watching and waiting. "I see."

Patsy was becoming more and more nervous. "We wouldn't have thought much about it except for one thing."

"What's that?" Lucy had returned to her work and was only half listening to Patsy.

"Well, you put salt into your coffee and stirred it with your pencil."

"I did?" Lucy stopped what she was doing and picked up her coffee mug. A pencil was in it. She took a sip. Damn! It was salty! She smiled at Patsy who visibly relaxed. "I guess I am more distracted than usual. Thanks for noticing." She put her coffee cup near the far corner of her desk so she would remember to take it with her when she took her lunch break.

Chapter Nine

Two Years Ago

1.

This time Lucy didn't bother making an excuse for herself for attending the meeting. She knew they didn't expect any excuses and accepted her just as she presented herself. She walked into the meeting, poured herself a cup of coffee and doctored it heavily with cream and sugar, picked up a sugar cookie and looked around. Many of the people looked familiar. Several of them smiled at her and greeted her. She smiled back and wandered in the back of the room, looking for Andy. Maybe he wasn't coming tonight. Maybe he was too busy. Oh well. She couldn't expect him to be at her beck and call.

People were beginning to go to seats and settle in for the speaker and Lucy followed suit. She noticed one of the members staring at her but thought nothing of it

since she was still new. In fact, he started walking towards her. The smile on his face made her feel uncomfortable but she couldn't figure out why. She sat down in the back of the meeting and turned to face the front of the room. Suddenly, Andy was sitting next to her.

"Sorry. Was kept after work."

"Were you bad?"

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"Like kids in school being kept after because they misbehaved."

Andy snorted. "No, I guess I was being too good, brown nosing the boss." Lucy smiled back at him. "Actually I can't even do that since I am the boss. I own the company."

"Really. I'm impressed."

"As you should be. We are the best construction company in the city. If you don't believe me, then just ask me."

Lucy snickered behind her hand. The meeting had begun and she didn't want to be disruptive. Leaning closer to Andy she whispered, "Who is that man?"

"Which man?"

"The one standing in the back of the room. With the red shirt on."

"Oh him. That's Al. He's been coming to these meetings for a very long time. He's bad news."

"How so?"

"Tell you what. I'll take you out to lunch one of these days and we'll talk all about him. Is it a date?"

Lucy was shocked. A date? Was it a date? He asked if it was a date. Should she? Could she? She looked at Andy from the corner of her eye. He was paying attention to the speaker, sipping his bad cup of coffee. Did he mean what he said? She turned her attention back to the speaker. He was telling his story and Lucy found herself fascinated by it. He had had such a horrible life, far worse than hers and yet, here he was, happy and successful. It was inspiring.

Soon, the lecture ended and people began to rise from their seats and put their chairs away. Andy took Lucy's chair from her and they walked over to the cart where people were stacking them. "You didn't answer my question."

"Your question?"

"About lunch. Look, I know you're very busy and probably don't have time for lunch, but it would be good for you to take time for yourself. Besides, I plan to be in the area bidding on a job. How about it? Meet me for lunch?"

Lucy looked at him and smiled. Yes, he did mean it. He was asking her for a date, a lunch date. "Yes, I would love to."

"Good." He picked up her bag and handed it to her. "For now, why don't we go get a good cup of coffee." He led the way outside.

"I don't know if I can handle a good cup of coffee." She was very nervous. This was the first time they had been together outside of the meeting.

"Oh really. Is your coffee at work as bad as the stuff at the meetings?"

"Not nearly but close. I usually make the coffee."

"How did you get stuck with that job"

"I'm usually the first one there and if I want a cup of coffee, I have to make it."

"Now, be honest with me."

"Honest with you? I've been honest with you." Lucy had a pang of discomfort.

"Ok, then admit you can make a great cup of coffee."

"Yeah, you're right." Lucy relaxed a bit. "I make a wonderful cup of coffee, grind the beans myself, choose the beans myself, one at a time."

"Ok now, you've gone too far." Andy was laughing as he opened the door for her to enter the coffee shop. "This place not only has good coffee but it also has great pastries." He led her to a table and then went to the counter and ordered coffee and coffee cake for them both.

2.

Lucy was again having trouble concentrating at work. It had gotten so bad that her coworkers talked about her at every chance they got. Every time they asked her a question and got it answered, they checked it with someone else. Sometimes her answers were right and sometimes they were wrong. They had never known her to be wrong before, not about work.

Today was even more unsettling for them. Today, at five minutes to twelve, she got up from her desk, picked up her purse and put on her jacket and she left. Never before had any of them known her to leave the building during lunch. In fact, she rarely left her desk for lunch. A couple of them even ran to the window and watched her come out of the front door and saunter down the block. She sauntered, actually sauntered.

Lucy could feel the change in herself. Now she had something else to be interested in, or maybe someone. No, it wasn't all Andy, though she was very flattered at the attention he insisted on giving her. It was also the other people in the meeting, the NA

meeting. They were all so accepting. They always accepted her as she presented herself to them.

She arrived at the Fast food restaurant and walked in. Andy was already there, waiting for her.

"This coffee is pretty lame here, so I might suggest something else."

Lucy smiled at him. "I've experienced their coffee before but then I don't come here for their coffee. It's their fries that I love.

"Fries, huh. You're a fries woman are you."

"Yep. I love my fries."

They walked up to the counter and ordered their meals. Lucy started to pay for her meal but Andy stopped her. "I told you I was buying." So she stepped back and followed him to a table, laden with their food.

"So, how did your meeting go?" Lucy dipped her fries into catsup and put them, one at a time, into her mouth.

"It went fine. I don't know yet if I got the contract. I'll find out in a couple of days, but they seemed impressed. Say, do you always eat your fries like that?"

"Like what? What do you mean?" She paused in mid fry.

"Like that, so carefully, so daintily."

"Me? Dainty? Oh, my, you have a good sense of humor."

"But I'm right. Each fry dipped just so into the catsup, then placed, just so, into your mouth."

"Are you complaining about the way I eat fries?"

"Absolutely not. I'm just fascinated."

She tossed the fry down on the try. "Great. Now you're staring at me while I eat. I can't eat at all then."

"Oh come on, girl. I may not know you well, but I do know you well enough to know you won't let anything, and I mean anything, keep you from your fries"

He was right. Grinning at him, Lucy picked up the fry and ate it and all the rest of her meal too. She was having so much fun. She had already decided to take each day as it came. She knew that she could not have a long term relationship with this man. No man would accept her in that way, but she was having fun now and she intended to continue to have fun.

She was late back to work that day, a full half an hour late. She walked straight to her desk and sat down and started to work. The others stared at her.

"What do you think is going on?"

"I don't know. This is so weird."

"You know, it's almost as though she's in love."

"Lucy Burnes in love? Come on now. That's like a statue falling in love."

"Yeah, you're right. Still, can you hear that? She's humming."

"So she is. What's that song she's humming? It sounds familiar."

"I think it's from a musical, Carousel maybe."

"You got to be kidding. I would have bet she only listened to classical music."

"I think I'm right. It is from Carousel."

"Who woulda known it."

Chapter Ten

Present Day

"Andy sounds like a very nice man. Is he your sweetheart? When can we meet him?" Mrs. Porter was a diehard fan of true love. Although she had been a widow ever since Lucy could remember, Mrs. Porter spoke very enthusiastically about her dead husband, the love of her life.

Lucy couldn't help but smile at Mrs. Porter. "I had hoped he would be but things did change."

"Yes, change does happen, doesn't it." Mrs. Porter sat back in her chair.

"I must say, I do think it's time for more of your fine hot chocolate." Father Mark. He picked up the tray and handed it to her.

"Oh, yes. You're right. And I'll see if I can find some of those yummy chocolate chip cookies too." She hurried out of the room.

Father Mark turned to Lucy. "I hope you understand Mrs. Porter's nosiness. She really does mean well."

Lucy smiled at him. "Yes, I do understand her. All these years that I've been gone, when times got rough, I would remember you and Mrs. Porter and I felt better. I know both of you care very much about me."

Father Mark relaxed a bit in his chair. "She can be so curious sometimes but it's only because she has a big heart and cares so deeply about people. I'm glad you understand."

"I remember one time when I felt like I couldn't go home. I must have been about six years old." Lucy's eyes unfocused as she remembered. "You were gone, visiting someone in the hospital, I think. Mrs. Porter took me inside this house. It was the first time I had been in here. And she asked me to help her bake chocolate chip cookies for you. She said that she couldn't bake them without my help. When you got home, you came bounding into the kitchen, exclaiming about the smell of those cookies. Then you tasted one and asked Mrs. Porter what she did differently with them because usually her cookies are dry and not this tasty at all. She told you that I helped and that I had the touch. We ate lots of them, with her hot chocolate and then you took me home. Father was very angry that I had been gone and that I had come to you. You told me to take some of the cookies to my brother and you talked to Father in the kitchen. He didn't punish me that night and I knew it was because of you and Mrs. Porter."

"I remember that time well." Father Mark was looking at her closely. "I told him that I would be checking you for any kind of marks that he hurt you and that I would turn him into the police if I saw anything."

Mrs. Porter came rushing into the room with the tray again laden. "When you were younger, you never could get enough of my chocolate chip cookies." She lay the tray down on the table again and poured them each a cup of hot chocolate.

"We were just talking about that, Mrs. Porter." Father Mark passed Lucy a couple of chocolate chip cookies and then accepted the cup from Mrs. Porter. "Lucy was just telling me about the time she helped you back chocolate chip cookies for me."

"Ah, yes. They did taste ever so much better when you helped me."

Lucy smiled at here. "Even then, as young as I was, I knew that those cookies were just as good as other chocolate chip cookies you had baked."

"Oh, no, my dear. You put in so many things into those cookies. You were such an earnest child and wanted to do everything just right. Those cookies were filled with love."

Lucy chuckled a bit. "If you say so. I have always loved your cookies." She started nibbling on one, then took a big bite.

"You had said you wanted to be a baker when you grew up. I know you were only a little tyke then, but did you? I mean I know you said you work in an insurance company, but did you do much baking?"

"No, not really. I mean not until recently. I started bringing cookies to the meetings. The ones from the store were pretty bad."

"I bet Andy liked that."

"Yes, Andy and all the rest of the members. My cookies were gone in minutes. I barely got them on the table. I did go so far as to sneak Andy a dozen every so often."

"So, sounds like you were coming out of your shell." Father Mark reached for

another cookie.

"Yea, I did change quite a bit during this time. They noticed at work first, as I've said. I didn't stay so distracted for long, but I did start taking my lunch and breaks and sometimes chatted with others during that time. I also began to leave work on time, at least most of the time, and I stopped taking responsibility for the work of others. I started refusing to do anyone's work and I no longer let the blame for their mistakes to fall on me.

"Away from work, I changed too. One day I went to an art show, on the spur of the moment. I had so much fun walking around and looking at the different pieces of art. I remember once someone made a comment about a painting and I disagreed with her comment and I told her that and why. We had a nice discussion about it and she came to agree with me. Before I was going to the NA meetings, that wouldn't have happened. I actually made some friends this way, not just at the art museum but other places too. I joined a reading group that met twice a month at the library. And I joined a health club and started working out twice a week."

"My! You really did get busy, didn't you."

Lucy smiled. "Yes, I did and I was beginning to enjoy my life."

"But, it sounds like it didn't last. Am I right, my dear?" Father Mark was so astute. There wasn't much that Lucy could hide from him. Not that she wanted to. When she came to ask her favor, she had promised herself that she would tell him her entire story.

"No, it didn't last but I have to say that some of the changes were very good and will be lasting. Some of them, I've lost, but that is because of my own behavior so I can blame no one else."

"Tell me please." Mrs. Porter was sitting forward in her seat. "What happened to

that nice young man, Andy?"

"Yes, that's the next part of my story." Lucy settled back in her chair and continued.

Chapter Eleven

Eighteen Months Ago

Carrying a couple dozen homemade chocolate chip cookies, Lucy entered the room and walked over to the refreshment table. She couldn't do much about the coffee, but she did know how to bake good cookies. Immediately people began to congregate at the table and Lucy was nearly pushed aside as they tried to get at least one of her cookies.

"Looks like your good friend Andy will be out of luck." Lucy turned quickly to see who it was that was talking to her.

"Hi Al. Are you worried?" Lucy had never spoken with him before but had heard quite a bit about him from several of the group members including Andy.

"Worried about him? Nah. I don't want you to get into trouble though. Andy can have a pretty bad temper at times."

"I've never seen him lose his temper." Lucy stepped back further from the table.

People were beginning to complain good naturedly that they didn't get enough of her cookies.

"Oh, you will. You sure will."

"How do you know?"

"Everyone here has seen his temper. You just have to know the right people to ask." He was leading her towards the chairs, but not to her customary area. She usually sat on the left in the back. She was now being led to the right and half way up.

"The right people? If he has such a bad temper, why wouldn't everyone confirm it?"

"Maybe because some are afraid of him. Afraid he will retaliate." He sat down and motioned her to join him.

"Now come on! No one could ever be afraid of Andy. He's such a sweet man."

"Yeah, he's sweet all right. Until he gets what he wants from you."

"So, you think he's being nice to me because he wants my chocolate chip cookies?"

Lucy was having fun debating with Al.

"Don't laugh. He would starve if it wasn't for his women feeding him." Al continued to look serious about what he was telling her.

"Al, he didn't even know I could bake chocolate chip cookies when I first met him. And he was as nice as can be then."

"Ah, you're so young and so naive." Al shook his head slowly. "It's the young ones who suffer the most."

Lucy stopped having fun. "Are you serious? You're not kidding about Andy, are you?"

"Absolutely not."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I just don't want you to be hurt like he's hurt so many others."

"Al, why are you so angry at Andy? What did he do to you?"

Al turned to face her and took her hands. "Look, darlin'. You're a young woman, very sweet. You deserve the best. Andy is just not the best."

Lucy tried to pull her hands from his but Al held on tightly. "And who is the best then?"

"You're looking at him, darlin'" He grinned at Lucy, showing his broken, discolored teeth.

Lucy recoiled and managed to pull her hands free and she scooted a few inches away from him, but the chair on the other side of her kept her closer to Al than she wanted. She wanted to be nice to him but didn't know how without being aggressive. Aggression did not suit her. "The speaker has started. Let's listen."

"Yeah, right." He turned to face the front.

Immediately, Lucy felt his hand on her knee. She tried to move her knee away but his hand followed. Reaching down, she grasped his hand to move it but he just grasped her hand and place it in his lap. This was not going the way she wanted it to go. She didn't know how to stop him without hurting his feelings. She tried and tried to tug her hand away but the harder she tried, the harder he held onto her hand. She looked at him out of the corner of her eye and he seemed to be grinning. The sight of his teeth made her cringe again and she managed to pull her hand free.

"Come on, baby. Be nice." Al leaned towards her and grumbled out of the side of

his mouth in a loud whisper. His breath was horrible and Lucy felt sick to her stomach.

Suddenly, Al grunted and jerked back in his seat. "Hands off, buddy." Lucy looked up and was grateful to see Andy. Al shook his head and leaned away from Lucy as Andy sat down in the empty chair to her right. Lucy leaned towards him to say something but Andy was ignoring her and appeared to be concentrating on the speaker.

"Now what's going on?" Lucy could feel the tension between the two men. She knew they didn't like each other but didn't really know why. She felt like she was in the middle of a war. It was not a comfortable place to be.

Lucy then realized that Al was leaning against her. She looked at him and he appeared not to notice but instead was paying close attention to the talk. As little as she knew Al, she did know that he didn't really care about the speaker. "Al, please don't" She whispered to him.

He looked at her, his eyes open wide in mock surprise. "What?" He whispered back.

"You're crowding me."

"Oh, sorry. Didn't mean to intrude on you. After all, you are the friend of the almighty Andy."

"Al, please stop."

"Ok. Ok." He sat up straighter.

"Will you two stop your chatting?" Lucy startled at Andy's voice.

"But Andy -"

"Quiet, please. I want to hear this."

"Sorry." She sat back in her chair, stunned. Was Al right? Did Andy have a

dangerous temper? Was he mad at her? Why would he be mad at her? What did she do to make him so mad? It didn't make any sense at all. Lucy did not like being seated between the two men.

In fact, she had a strong urge to get up and move. She picked up her purse and stood, facing Andy. "Excuse me."

Andy looked up at her,, then moved his knees so she could pass by. Al stood also, but Andy moved his knees again so he couldn't pass by. Al sat down with a grunt, and watched Lucy as she sat down in her accustomed seat across the room. About that time, the speaker finished speaking and the audience began to stand and talk among themselves. Lucy stood also and moved towards the door. Time for her to leave, maybe even time for her to stop coming to the meetings. She did not need this kind of high drama. All the same, Lucy was a bit pleased that two men were arguing about her. This had never happened to her before. She walked out the door and headed for the stairs.

"Some reason you're in such a hurry?" Lucy nearly couldn't recognize Andy's voice, it was so gruff.

"Just want to get home." Reaching the bottom of the stairs, she opened the door to the outside and stepped outside.

"What's the hurry? No time to stop for coffee?" Andy was walking next to her, matching her stride.

Lucy stopped and turned to him. "You didn't seem in the mood for coffee."

"Whatever gave you that idea?"

"I don't know. Maybe you not talking to me, ignoring me to listen to a speech you have heard a million times. I kind of got the idea you weren't in the mood." She started

walking again. Andy still walked with her but was silent. They arrived at her bus stop and she turned to him again. "So, will I see you later maybe at the next meeting?" She could see her bus coming and reached into her purse for her bus pass.

Andy touched her arm and she looked up at him. "I'm sorry. I saw you sitting with him and I got really pissed off."

"At me? Why?"

"Not really at you. Well, partly at you. I had assumed you were smarter than to listen to his lines."

"What's the harm in listening? I listen to anyone who wants to talk to me."

"Yes, I know. You're so kind to everyone. But not everyone is good."

"I know that. I'm not a child, Andy." Lucy's bus passed them and she returned her bus pass to her purse.

"No, you're not but you aren't as worldly as you would like to believe."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Lucy had never even considered that she could be angry at Andy, but now she was.

"It means you are a kind, innocent young woman. You're like carrion to vultures like Al."

"It's not as though I was going to marry the guy, or even move in with him."

"I certainly hope not. It would put a damper on our friendship and fast."

Lucy could hear the lightness in Andy's voice but she wasn't ready to concede to him quite yet. "Does having a friendship with you mean I can't be friends with other men? Are you that demanding? I really do know how to choose my own friends, Andy."

"Aww, come on, Lucy. Give me a chance."

"A chance for what?"

"A chance to apologize for going too far. Please?"

Lucy looked up at him. He looked like a little boy, giving her his sad puppy dog look. She wanted so badly to not give in to him but she couldn't help it. "Andy, you are incorrigible"

"But I'm also endearing, right?" He continued to please.

Lucy laughed at him. "Ok. I give you one chance. Only one."

"Then let's go get some good coffee so I can apologize in style."

They walked down to the coffee shop on the next block. While Lucy choose a table, Andy got a cup of coffee for each of them. At first they both were silent, enjoying their coffee as well as each other. A few minutes later, Lucy spoke up first.

"Ok. I'm waiting."

"Oh, are you? Waiting for what?"

"For the apology."

"The apology? You're not really going to make me go through it, are you?"

"Of course. I'm waiting." She looked up at him expectantly.

"Damn. I thought my charm would get me out of this."

"I guess you're not as charming as you think you are."

"Yes, I am." He looked over at her and grinned.

"Ok. Guess I need to go find Al. He will give me what I want."

Andy's face became instantly serious. "Not funny." He was silent a moment while Lucy waited and watched him. He finally looked at her. "Ok, I'm sorry I was such a cad. But I did it for all the right reasons."

"What reasons?"

"AI is not a good person. If you give him half a chance, he will take full advantage of you."

"Andy I believe there is good in everyone."

"Yes, I know you believe that and I used to believe it too. Maybe there is a kernel of goodness in AI but it is buried so deeply that it may not ever come out."

"What are you talking about? AI's a bit aggressive but he isn't evil."

Andy looked up at her, deep into her eyes. "You really do believe that, don't you, that there a person cannot be evil."

"No, I do know that some people are evil. My father was evil and it took all I could do to keep him out of my life. But he was unusual. Most people are not like my father. And I don't think AI is like my father. He may have some bad habits and he certainly isn't well polished in social situations, but evil? I don't think so."

"Ok, I concede to you on that point. Maybe AI isn't evil but AI has given over his self control."

"Given over his self control? How in the world has he done that and to whom?"

This conversation was getting more and more strange for Lucy.

"Not who but what." Andy tried to take a sip of his coffee but found the cup empty. He walked up to the counter and got a refill for both of them. He sat back down in his chair and sipped the coffee.

"Finish what you were saying, Andy. What has control of AI's self control?"

"Has AI ever said to you why he attends the meetings?"

"No. You don't let him get that close to me."

"Yeah, you're right. Sorry." He took a sip of his coffee but wasn't really tasting it. "Al is a meth addict. He comes to the meetings because the treatment center he goes to forces him to. If he doesn't keep coming to the meetings, he could go to jail."

"If he is in treatment, isn't that a good sign? Doesn't that mean he wants to change, that he wants to be clean?"

"For some people, that would be true. But this is a special program. It's a part of drug court and so he has to answer to a judge too, not just to his counselor. If he doesn't do what he's supposed to do, he may go to jail."

"Jail? Why would a treatment center make him go to jail? Sounds counterproductive." This didn't make much sense to Lucy.

"Actually, from what I've seen, it works well. Addicts get good treatment plus a push from the legal system. If they finish treatment successfully, they get their drug charge removed from their record. It's as if it never happened."

"Sounds complicated. You say Al is one of these people?"

"Yeah, he was arrested in a meth lab, highly under the influence of meth. There were other people there too, of course, and one of them told me that Al was at the center of this production, that the meth lab was his, but they were too afraid of him to say anything about that. He had a good lawyer who convinced the courts that he deserved to be offered drug court."

"How is it that you know all this?"

"Part of it is public record. When they busted the meth lab, it was on TV and in the papers. Was a huge story a couple years ago."

"I don't remember it."

"You might want to ask Al about it. He keeps clippings from the newspaper in his wallet." He then looked at her and smiled. "Then again, don't ask him. But if you don't believe me, then go to the library and look at the past issues. In fact, if you put his name in the newspaper search engine, you will get lots of hits."

"It's not that I don't believe you but maybe you're making this sound worse than it is? I mean, it's obvious you two don't like each other."

"Yeah, we don't like each other, but I'm not exaggerating." He looked down at the table, deep in his memories.

"What happened?"

Andy looked up at her. His smile was very sad. "There was a young woman who came to our meetings. Very sweet, very young. She was barely nineteen years old. I really believe she wanted to be clean. Her drug was cocaine and when she came to us, it had been a couple weeks since she had used. She was very proud of her clean time.

"At that time, Al hadn't been attending meetings very long and I hadn't paid him much attention. He just seemed to be like some of our other members who attended only because someone had forced him to attend.

"Al is like a blood hound. He could smell the fear in her, the strong desire to be clean and the difficult time she was having with cravings. He moved in on her quite quickly. It was only her third meeting or so when they became very close. Some of the others were alarmed and spoke to me about it but I was like you then. I thought he should be given a chance. Maybe he really did want to help her. I can remember how some of these people were pretty exasperated with me.

"Then, one meeting, she didn't show up. The meeting after that, she was gone too.

When she missed her third consecutive meeting, even I became concerned. Al had missed the meetings too but no one was really concerned about that. He showed up the next time and Jack, you know who Jack is, right?"

Lucy nodded.

"Jack walked right up to him, got in his face. They were so close together, their chests were touching. Jack started yelling at him and Al was yelling right back. A few of us rushed up to them and tried to stop it before they came to blows. We managed to get them apart but each was trying to get away and were throwing threats back and forth.

"I finally began to listen to what Jack was saying. He was accusing Al of killing her, of letting her die. I asked him who and he looked at me with the saddest look on his face and said Judy had died. Everyone got quiet. Al could see that others were becoming angry at him so he took off. 'I can see nobody here cares about the truth' he said or something like that.'

"When he was gone, we asked Jack about what had happened. He said that Al had gotten Judy involved with meth, had told her that it would help her get off the cocaine. The poor thing believed him. Or maybe she liked the attention he was giving her. I don't know. Jack said he had been visiting his mother in the hospital. She had just had gall bladder surgery.

"As he was leaving, he saw someone he recognized. It was Judy's sister, Clara. She was in tears. He walked up to talk to her and she said Judy had died of a drug overdose. She said Judy had called her, said Al had given her some meth and when she started having trouble, he left. He said he didn't need anymore trouble than he already had. Judy had just enough strength to call her sister. By the time the ambulance got her to

the hospital, she was dead.

"It was a somber group that night. We talked about Judy and what had happened to her. There was talk about not letting Al come back to our meetings. After all, there are meetings all over the city, but someone pointed out that our meetings were supposed to be open to everyone. We agreed that we couldn't ethically keep him from the meetings but we could monitor what he did at them and we could let him know that we knew what he did and wouldn't let it happen to another girl.

"He did come back to the next meeting and I asked him why he had let Judy die. He told me that he had nothing to do with it. He said that she willingly put the drugs in her mouth. He said she was just another one of those clingy girls who wasn't about to amount to much of anything. And he said there were more like her out there. I couldn't help myself. I slugged him. He fell down like a tree." Andy gave a tiny, tired smile. "Since then, he and I have not been friendly."

"That's horrible. I can see why you might not trust him. How long ago was this?"

"Almost a year."

"And he's still in treatment? He's not in jail?"

"He's spent a few days in jail but yeah, he's still in treatment."

"Well, if he's still in treatment, maybe they know more about him than you do. I mean, maybe he has changed. You don't really know how Judy's death affected him."

Andy looked up at her and shook his head. "You are the ultimate optimist, aren't you."

"Maybe so, but doesn't everyone deserve a chance?"

Andy sat back in his chair and gave a deep sigh. "Yeah, but at some point the

chances have to stop and a person has to be responsible. Al has approached other girls like he did Judy but we have been able to convince them that he's no good. And then I saw today how he was treating you and how you were letting him."

"Letting him? What do you mean letting him?"

"Well, you really weren't fighting him too strongly."

"Just because I didn't hit him and knock him down like a tree doesn't mean I let him do anything." Lucy couldn't believe what he was saying to her.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm just upset." Andy wiped his hand down his face, then looked at her again. "I'm truly sorry. I said that wrong. I meant that it was obvious to me that he was taking advantage of you, that he was working to make you his next victim."

"I'm no one's victim. I learned about victimization a very long time ago."

"Yes, I know. Sorry. Sorry. I'm saying this all wrong." He slumped in his chair and looked at her beseechingly. "Please understand I only mean the best for you."

"Andy, I don't need another father. My first one was quite enough. More than enough. You don't have to be my watch dog. I really can take care of myself."

"Yes, I know you believe that. And in most cases, yes you can take care of yourself. But this guy is not an ordinary problem. He is a predator. He looks for weakness in others and he takes advantage of that."

"And he had found weakness in me?" She was shaking her head. "One time you say I'm a kind person who shouldn't change and the next thing, I hear that I'm weak."

"It isn't a weakness for the most part, but a predator like Al can make it into a weakness. And he knows how to take advantage of that."

"A predator, is he? Andy, he's just a man. He may not have many social skills,

but I have to believe that ultimately he is a human with a heart."

"Oh, Lucy. What am I going to do with you?"

"And why do you have to do anything with me? I'm no project."

"No, my dear, you certainly are not a project. Honey, I don't know anything about your drug use. We've never talked about it. I know you're not in formal treatment or you would have told me and, frankly, you don't speak like someone who's been in treatment. What do you know about denial?"

"Denial? You're saying I'm in denial? Just because I don't agree with you doesn't mean I'm in denial."

"Honey, if you weren't in denial, you would be able to see Al for what he really is." He was leaning forward towards her. "Lucy, I want you to do me a favor. I want you to stay away from Al. If he approaches you, I want you to walk away from him. Find me. Find someone else to talk to. Just don't talk to him."

"Andy, I can't do that. That would be rude. He hasn't done anything to me to deserve such rudeness." Lucy picked up her purse and placed it in front of her. "Look, Andy, I know you think you need to do this. I know you only want what's best for me, but I can handle myself. Really, I can." She slipped on her coat and stood up to leave.

Andy stayed seated for a moment and then stood slowly. "I know you're a big girl who's been taking care of herself for a long time. I also know you don't understand what a predator Al is. He will consume you if you give him half a chance.

"I know you don't want to hear this, but you are in denial and it won't help you become clean and sober and move into recovery. Lucy, I think you need more treatment. You need formal treatment. I think you should come to all of our NA meetings, but I don't

think they are enough. Please think seriously about what I've said tonight. Look deep within yourself about your drug use and how it's affecting you. If you do go into treatment, I will be there to support you all I can. But, if you don't get more treatment, I'm afraid there's no way I can help."

Lucy turned and walked out of the coffee shop without another word. She climbed on the first bus that arrived and was in such deep thought that she didn't see Andy standing on the sidewalk, watching her leave.

Chapter Twelve

Present Day

Lucy sat back in her chair, eyes closed, exhausted. She hadn't realized how difficult it would be to tell her story to Father Mark and Mrs. Porter. They remembered her as a sweet, hurt little girl. She didn't want them to think poorly of her but she also wanted them to know the truth.

"My dear." She could feel a hand on her knee and opened her eyes. Mrs. Porter was kneeling down in front of her. "If this is too much for you, you don't have to tell us."

She smiled at the woman. "Thank you. It is hard but I really do want you both to understand."

"Only if you want to, Lucy. We will care for you no matter what." Father Mark helped Mrs. Porter to her feet.

"Thank you, Father. I really appreciate that." Lucy squirmed in her seat, and then

sat up straight again. "I am ready to begin again if you both are ready to listen." They both nodded at her. Taking a deep breath, she continued.

"I was really shocked at what Andy told me. I wasn't an addict. I have never taken a drug in my life except for those prescribed for me and then I followed the directions carefully. I didn't even talk over the counter medications unless I was in quite a bit of discomfort.

"Still, Andy didn't know this. He didn't know that I started attending the meetings because I was lonely. He would have told me where else I could go to make friends. He didn't know that I kept coming to the meetings because I had few friends away from these meetings. I started attending them at first out of curiosity. I could have been truthful early on and told them I just wanted to find out what they were about and they would have accepted me, but I didn't know that, so I said nothing.

"Worst of all was lying to Andy. He really did want only the best for me. He had become the closest thing to a best friend I had ever had. But I had been dishonest with him from the beginning. I knew I could have told him early on about the truth, but I had decided to wait and the longer I waited, the more I went to the meetings and didn't tell the truth, the harder it became to be truthful. It got to the point that I started believing my own story. It took Andy telling me that I was in denial and that I needed formal treatment before I came to remember my story was fiction."

Mrs. Porter had refilled her water glass with more ice cold water and handed it to her. Lucy smiled a thanks to her and took a deep drink of it. She placed the glass back on the tray and then started again with her story.

"I couldn't come clean with him. The only choice as I saw it was to start drug

treatment. I didn't know how to start something like this, so I pulled out the phone book and checked the yellow pages. I found less than a full page of drug treatment centers, so I called each and every one, asked them about their treatment, how much it cost and how I could enter. I wanted outpatient treatment so I could still work and keep my apartment. Besides, since I didn't really have a drug problem, so I figured outpatient would be good enough.

"What I found out was very discouraging. Even the least expensive treatment center was far too expensive for me. Treatment would involve meeting with a counselor (average eighty five dollars per session), groups twice a week (forty five dollars a session), random urinalyses once a week (thirty five dollars each, and observed! Someone would watch me pee?). There was no way I could afford all this.

"I then thought about my insurance from work. I had very rarely used it. I was so healthy, I didn't have to see the doctor except maybe for my yearly check ups. I got up my nerve and I called my insurance company and asked them about coverage for drug treatment. I didn't want anyone at work to know about this. I didn't need for them to believe that I needed drug treatment. I was looked down upon anyway. I didn't need to add to the fuel.

"I really didn't need to try. They covered very little and that was only if I was an inpatient. I knew I didn't need that. I didn't even need outpatient, but I couldn't tell the insurance company that. If it's one thing I know, it's insurance.

"I was stymied for a bit there. I was so upset, depressed. I stopped going to the NA meetings. I became reclusive again at work. At the end of the work day, I would go straight home and watch TV with my cat. That poor creature became my only friend. He

was so patient with me, curled up on my lap even when he clearly didn't want to. He would take a break to get a bite to eat and then he would come right back. He even started sleeping with me. My weekends were torture for me because I didn't have anything to do. At least during the week I could busy myself at work.

"I even began to use my home computer and surf the internet. I went into all kinds of chat rooms and put on a different personality in each. I was pretty popular with many of the men in these rooms and I enjoyed it. I found myself chatting online for hours every day, getting to bed late. I made dates to meet many of these men but I didn't keep even one date. I got yelled at for that but I didn't care. And all during this time, my cat stayed close to me, didn't waver in his devotion to me.

"This lasted for about three weeks. One day when I had left my office to run an errand for one of the bosses, I was stopped by one of the group members. She was very kind to me. She said I was missed at the meetings, even by those who didn't know my name. I think it was my chocolate chip cookies that they really missed. At any rate, she was very kind and she told me that Andy was very upset and insisted that he was the cause of me not going to the meetings anymore. I didn't tell her that, in a way, he was right. Andy had, as they say, called me on my shit, and I couldn't handle it. Yes, he was wrong about some of what he said but that was due to me not being honest with him. I thanked her for her concern and I walked on.

"That was bad enough, but a few days later I saw someone I hadn't wanted to see for a variety of reasons. I was on the bus and he didn't see me, but I looked out the window and I saw Al. He was talking to some woman. She had her back against this dirty, ugly building, and he was leaning towards her, one hand on the building next to her

head and the other hand in his pocket. The bus had to stop there, and as I watched, he pulled his hand out of his pocket and handed something to the woman. She snatched it out of his hand and then turned her back to him and slipped into the alley. He looked around and I could see his face. He looked worse than the last time I had seen him. Even from across the street, I could see the sores on his face. What startled me the most, however was the sneer on his face. I realized then that he was everything that Andy had said he was.

"I felt horrible. It seemed like everything Andy had told me was correct. I wasn't sure what to do. I couldn't go tell him I was sorry for doubting him. He still believed I was an addict who wasn't getting treatment. I was so sorry for having lied to him but there was nothing I could do but continue to lie. I now saw how one lie, not meant to hurt anyone, could grow up much bigger than it should.

"That's when I made my next huge mistake. I decided I needed to find Al to see how he got into treatment. Maybe if I got involved in drug court, all my problems would be solved. I could fake an addiction and then they could cure me. Andy didn't ever need to be told it was all a lie."

Chapter Thirteen

Eighteen Months Ago

1.

Lucy knew what she wanted to do, but she didn't quite know how to do it. She wanted to find Al, but in a public place. And she didn't want anyone from the meeting to know about this meeting. She figured that Al would brag about meeting with her, but those at the meeting didn't believe most of what he said, so they probably wouldn't believe him. She did want to be careful though.

Then she remembered where she had seen Al. It was on her bus route and it wasn't very close to the meeting place. There was a coffee shop across the street from where Al had been and Lucy decided that would be a comfortable place for her to wait for him to show up. The next day, she left work early and rode the bus to that coffee shop.

It wasn't the best coffee in the world. In fact, it reminded her of the coffee at the

meetings. And the bagel she got was a little stale and they didn't have any cream cheese so she had to settle for margarine. She had a book with her to use as a shield against any curious people. Many of them in this coffee shop had laptops with them and were pecking away on them. Lucy figured she would blend in well.

At one point, Lucy became interested in her book and forgot to pay attention to outside her window and she feared he may have come and go again, but she decided to wait a few more minutes. That was a good decision. She had danced down at her book but then heard a voice.

"So, what's the lady doing here? Got mad at the wonder boy and ready to try a real man?" Al sat down across the table from her.

"Hi Al."

"Hi yourself. You looking for me?"

"You flatter yourself. Why would I be looking for you?"

"Can't say but why else would you be lowering yourself to come here, far from where you live and work, unless it was to meet someone? And who else do you know here but me?" He picked up her coffee cup and drained it. "I seen you on the bus the other day."

"What day was that?" She pushed her bagel towards him. He might as well take it too.

"Aww, you know. You was looking at me out the window but you were pretending you didn't. I was talking to the pretty Lorraine, helped her out some." He tossed what was left of the bagel into his mouth. "That's why you're here, ain't it. You need some help from good ole Al."

"Yeah, you're right but not in the way you think." She stared at him. He looked far worse than when she had seen him last. He had sores all over his face and arms and he kept picking at them. He was jittery too, twitching, moving his hands and feet as though he couldn't control them. This was the Al that Andy had talked about.

"So what is it then?" He didn't seem to care that she was staring at him, or maybe he wasn't noticing.

"I heard you are in drug court."

"Yeah, what of it?"

"How?"

"How? Got caught with drugs."

"But how did you get drug court? Not everyone caught with drugs gets it."

"Yeah, I guess but I got a good lawyer."

"If someone wanted to do drug court, what do they do?"

"Now who would want drug court? Terrible inconvenience. Terrible."

"Never mind who. Just tell me what they would do."

He stared across the table at her. "I got it. You want to be in drug court. Now, why is that? You think it will get you in tight with the man? You think Andy will love you more?"

"My reasons are none of your business. If you don't want to tell me, then don't." She stood up and prepared to leave.

Al reached out and grasped her wrist. "Not so quick, honey. I didn't say I wouldn't help you." He pulled her down to her chair again. Lucy pulled her wrist from his grasp, wincing at the pain. "Tell you what. I will tell you where the cops are, where they look for

druggies. And I will give you a little gift so you can present a good image to the cops.

And I won't ask you for much. What do ya say?"

"I say no thanks." She stood again and prepared to leave. "I can get the information I want without any strings attached.

"Oh, can you. Where?"

"I know people. I'm not about to succumb to veiled threats from you."

"Settle down sweetheart. I'm gonna help you. Just fooling with you a bit. Can't blame a guy for having some fun, can you?" He nodded at her chair and she sat down. He stared at her a minute, then reached into his pocket and pulled something from his pocket and slid it across the table towards her.

"What is that?"

"My gift to you. Come on. I can't just leave it on the table. You want it or not?" She reached over and covered it with her hand and his went on top of hers. "You sure you won't be giving me some gratitude?"

She pulled her hand away, the small package in it. She slipped it in her pocket.

"Al, thank you very much." She stood and picked up her purse. "You're a real prince, Al." Then she turned her back, and walked leisurely out of the coffee shop.

2.

Lucy had never felt so frightened in her life. She was beginning to doubt the wisdom of the decision she had made. This really wouldn't work. Someone would kill her before her plan had a chance to work. She had driven there in her car so she would have a quick getaway. She was sitting in her car now, looking around uneasily, trying to see any danger before it saw her.

Then there was a tapping on her window and her head shot around to see the kind face of a policeman. "You ok, ma'am?"

"Yes. I'm fine." Her heartbeat started to slow.

"Please step out of the car, ma'am." She opened the door and stepped out.

"Is something wrong, officer?"

"Well, I'm not sure of that ma'am. It's not usual that we find someone like you here. Can I ask why you are here?"

"Just waiting for a friend, officer."

"Do I have your permission to search your vehicle, ma'am?"

"Yes, of course." Lucy watched nervously as he searched her car, looking into the glove box, under the seats. He even slipped his hand in the crease between the back and the seats. When was he going to search her? The cocaine was in her pocket.

"Thank you ma'am. You should get going now. Doesn't look like your friend is coming here and it's not a safe place for you."

"Thank you officer." She pulled her hand out of her pocket, making sure the packet came out with it. As she reached over to shake his hand, he looked down at the ground.

"Now, what is this?" He picked it up and looked more closely at it. "Looks as though I was too quick. Is this what your friend brought you?"

"I'm sorry, officer. I don't know what got into me."

Lucy didn't get home until the early hours of the morning. At the police station, they kept her in a holding cell for a couple hours. She was questioned a few times, each time by another police officer. Only one was uniformed. One was a woman. They each asked who had given her the drugs. They had tested it and found that it was of a very poor

quality, but it was cocaine. She made up a person she had claimed gave her the cocaine. She described Al but changed his height and weight and gave him more hair.

The police obviously didn't believe her. They told her they knew all the dealers in the city and this one wasn't someone they knew. Lucy didn't really believe them since Portland is a large city with people moving in and out, moving up and down the west coast. When she told the police officer that, he turned and left the room without a comment.

She was so tired, she could hardly handle it. She was ready to tell them the truth but she figured they wouldn't believe the truth either. It was a strange story. How many people want to fake an addiction. Usually it's addicts who deny their addiction. Finally though, they let her go but not after taking her picture holding a sign with a number on it, just like in the movies.

The police officer who had arrested her in the first place, stopped her while she was leaving the police station. "Look, I know you didn't do anything wrong. I know you have never taken cocaine in your life. You have some reason to do this and I can't imagine what that reason might be. I also know you're a good person who may have made the worst mistake in your life for some reason I can't comprehend. I'm giving you the name and number of an attorney I know. Call him in the morning. See if he can help you. And, please take care of yourself. Change the route you're taking in you life before it's too late."

He placed a business card in her hand, then turned and left. Lucy was startled. She glanced at the card but didn't really read it. She had to remember to keep the court date in three days. She had to make an excuse at work so she could get the time off, but that should be easy. She rarely asked for time off. They might have questions but she could find answers. She was very good now of finding answers to just about any question.

The next day, she called the attorney and made an appointment. The police officer had told him that Lucy might call, and he was ready. His office happened to be in a building only two blocks from her office, so, she took an early lunch and met with him.

He wasn't what she had expected. She loved to watch law shows on TV and figured he either would be very nicely dressed and had an extremely fancy office, or he was rather sloppy with a messy office. He was neither. Mr. Henry Alabaster, attorney at law, had a small but tidy office. The waiting area tiny, just big enough for two sofas against two of the walls on the left as she entered the room, a table that they shared and a few modest prints on the wall. Across from the door into the waiting area was another door which she correctly assumed was to his inner office.

Her entry must have sounded some signal in his office or he had good hearing or, most likely, he figured she would be on time and just happened to check the room when she walked in. He was young. He wore a grey suit though at the moment he didn't have the jacket on. He wore a dark green tie which was loosened at his throat. His glasses had been pushed to the top of his head and because of them, some of his hair stood up. He had a pen in one hand and another behind his left ear. Mr. Alabaster was a pleasant looking man who encouraged people to trust him just by his casual good looks. Lucy trusted him immediately.

"Good afternoon. I assume you're Lucy Burnes."

"Yes sir, I am." She took the hand he extended and shook it. He had a nice grip, not too hard and not too soft.

"Come on in and we'll talk." He led her into his office and shut the door behind her. "Now, Bob Plummer told me a bit about your story but I want to hear it from you."

"Bob Plummer?"

"Yes, the gentleman who put you under arrest."

"Oh him. I never did notice his name."

"Bob is a good judge of character. If he sent you to me, then there must be a reason."

"Sounds like you know him well."

"Well, I suppose so. I've only known him for the past thirty years." He smiled at the confused look she gave him. "We grew up together, same softball team, learned how to swim at the same pool, graduated from the same high school, that kind of thing."

"So, when you say he is a good judge of character, you really know him well. And trust him too, I suppose."

"I would trust him with my life. Actually, I have trusted him with my life, but that's a story for a different time. Why don't you tell me your story."

He listened very carefully to the story Lucy had perfected over the last two days, filling every hole she could discover. "Yes, he's right that I was there to be caught but I had a good reason for it. I know I need treatment, but I really can't afford it. My insurance won't pay a penny unless I'm in residential treatment and then will pay only for thirty days. But I don't think I need residential treatment and I don't want to wait to get treatment until my problem is that big. I want to get help now before I need residential."

"I was talking to someone at a bus stop and he told me about drug court. He said he had been arrested for possession and because he didn't have much of a record, he was offered drug court. He said once he completes it, the drug felony will be removed from his record. It will be as if he was never arrested. That sounded pretty good to me. Not that I

really care about my record. What I want, what I really need is treatment that I can afford. This man told me that the treatment center that treats drug court people has reasonable rates, actually a lump sum instead of charging for each activity. He said that they are reasonable about people paying off the cost. I thought that sounded like the kind of treatment center I needed, so I drove to a spot I knew the police checked on regularly and I waited."

"I see." He hadn't taken a single note. Did he not believe her? "And where did you get the cocaine?"

She hesitated. She really wasn't sure how to explain where it came from. Every excuse she came up with sounded cheesy to her, and not believable.

"You know Lucy, that what you tell me won't go anywhere else. I can't divulge a word you say without your permission."

"Yes, I know. Well, the cocaine was mine. I've had it for awhile so I don't really remember where it came from."

"I see." Now he was chewing on the end of his pen. He scratched a few things on the yellow pad, and then dropped his pen on the tablet and sat back in his chair. "I think you are exactly the kind of client drug court works well with. I'll do what I can to get it offered to you. I really don't think you will need me long term. I think you should sign up with the public defender. I'm much more expensive than he is. That's for the future, however. First thing is, we get you offered drug court. I believe you told me when you called that your court date is in three days. Do I remember right?"

"Yes sir."

"Ok. Please be on time. The judge really hates it when someone is late and I can't

really blame him. He sees so many people come through his court on a daily basis, I don't see how it does it. In the meantime, I will make a few calls and see what I can do. How does that sound?"

"Sounds great. Thank you so much."

"No problem. Would you mind if I gave you a little bit of advice though."

"Sure. I'd welcome it."

"Well, I would work on polishing that story of yours. It really doesn't sound plausible."

Lucy next saw him three days later when she went to court. She was offered drug court and accepted it. She never saw Mr. Alabaster again but got to know the public defender quite well.

Chapter Fourteen

Present Day

Lucy stopped and looked at her listeners. They hadn't said a word or made a sound of any kind as she had told them this part of her story. They both stared at her now, hardly even blinking. She reached for her glass of water and took a long drink. As she set down her glass, they seemed to wake up.

"You poor child." Mrs. Porter shook her head. "What you've had to go through."

"Some interesting decisions." Father Mark leaned close to her again and patted her knee. "I do understand your reasoning though. How did it work out?"

"At first it worked out well." Lucy settled back in her chair and her eyes again took on that far away look as she continued with her story. "I was offered drug court and of course I accepted it. My schedule became pretty complicated at first which put a strain on work. I went to court on a Monday, early afternoon. The next day, Tuesday, I had to be at

the counseling center at eight thirty a.m. for an intake appointment. There I was assigned a counselor. They also scheduled me for a physical with their naturopaths for the next day. The latest appointment I could get was at four thirty which again conflicted with work. They also gave me an assessment appointment on Thursday. I was able to schedule that one for six o'clock. I got off work at five thirty so if I hurried I would just make that appointment. I was put into a group that met from six o'clock to seven o'clock on Monday and Thursday and acupuncture on Tuesday at four thirty. I would meet with my counselor the next week. I had asked for a female counselor and they were willing to give me one.

"That week was crazy at work. They assumed I had a lot of doctors' appointments and since I had rarely taken time off to go to such appointments, rumors started racing through the place, rumors like I had been diagnosed with cancer. Some people had even chosen what kind of cancer. It was pretty strange. Another rumor said I was looking for a new job even though most people there knew it was entirely out of character for me to do that. My favorite rumor was that I had fallen for one of the top executives and we were having an affair. If they would have checked out that story, they would have discovered the top executives were in corporate headquarters in Miami Florida." Lucy had relaxed a bit as she recounted these memories and Father Mark and Mrs. Porter did also.

"I think it was the acupuncture that made me most nervous. That someone was going to stick me with needles was pretty frightening. I've never been one who willingly had shots. I am terrified of needles, always have been. I knew that I had to go through with it though because it was part of treatment.

"The acupuncturist was wonderful. She described the way it was done and how it worked. She talked me into trying the needles once, promising that if they really hurt or

caused me any discomfort, then she wouldn't make me take the needles again.

"I took her at her word and let her use the needles. I was amazed. First, there were so small, so fine, that I hardly knew they were there, unless I moved the wrong way. She asked me what I needed help with, if my drug cravings were high. I was honest and told her I had no cravings so she suggested I might be too tense and that I might want help with my stress.

"She sure was right about that. My stress level was huge. She had me lay back in the recliner, put my feet up and close my eyes. The next thing I knew, she was waking me up and it was forty five minutes later. I felt more relaxed than I could ever remember. It was wonderful."

Lucy smiled at them. "Whatever else I got from going into treatment, at least I learned the value of acupuncture. I'll never go a week without it again."

:"The physical wasn't as bad as I had expected either. I had to wait, of course. I mean, doctors are doctors, right? They didn't make me wait too terribly long. When my name was called, I was very surprised that I would be examined by two female students. They explained that they were from a Naturopathic College nearby and all of them had to take a rotation through this clinic. I would have worried except their work was supervised by a licensed Naturopath plus they were very kind and gentle and they seemed to know what they were doing. I passed the physical with ease. As I've said, I'm a very healthy person.

"By far the most difficult part of treatment has been giving UAs. I've had to give urine samples at the doctor's office for my yearly exam but this was different. I had to be watched, observed by a female UA Technician. Oh, she was nice but I had such a hard

time giving that UA. And I had to give one at least once a week. People told me it would get easier but it really didn't. In the middle of my year there, the female technician was promoted so they hired a new one. That meant I had to try to get used to peeing in front of a different person."

"My goodness! How intrusive!" Mrs. Porter seemed to be wincing. "How could they force you to do that?"

"I asked them that. They told me that a UA is the only objective data they have to tell how well a client is doing in treatment. Besides, when I was in for orientation, I signed a contract to participate fully in treatment and that involved giving random UAs. I understood fully but I still didn't like it."

"But they were nice about you having to do them?" Mrs. Porter was still appalled that Lucy's privacy was interfered with.

"No, they were very nice and understanding too when it was so difficult at first. I can see their point. One thing that I've learned is that drug addicts lie. It's a part of the disease. For all they knew, I was an addict so I was prone to lying so they needed the UA to keep me honest about my drug use."

"Ok, but it still bothers me." Mrs. Porter sat back in her chair, her arms crossed over her chest, showing her disapproval.

"Mrs. Porter, you are so sweet." Lucy smiled at her, charmed again at how much the woman truly loved her. "I think though that if you worked in a drug rehab even for a few months, you would not be so disapproving of them. They really did respect me. I was treated well."

"Well, ok. If you say so. What else did you have to do?"

"Groups were interesting. The treatment consists of three levels. In level one, I had to go to two groups a week, an hour each. These groups were usually pretty big, maybe up to fifteen or so, sometimes larger. There were both men and women in these groups and the group leader has specific topics that had to be discussed. Sometimes one of the group members had an issue that he or she really needed to be discussed but the group leader would make sure that the day's lesson was covered too. I had a bit of trouble participating at first because I wasn't an addict, but over time I realized that I was being taught some valuable lessons about life in general. Once I finished that level, I went to a group again twice a week but an hour and a half each and only with women. The issues in these groups were more personal and were designed to help me figure out how my past has affected my present. It was hard work. I had to look at things I really didn't want to look at, like my relationship with my father, but I learned so much about myself."

"Sounds like a good situation to be in." Father Mark had a satisfied smile on his place. "For this reason alone, I'm glad you went to this treatment center."

"Yes, Father. Me too. Andy really wasn't sure what to think about it all, but I put that up to me having less time to spend with him. The NA meetings we attended were on Tuesdays and Thursdays but after I entered treatment, I could only go to them once a week. And I began making new friends. The women in my level two group were wonderful and I made some good friends with some of them. I don't know if those relationships will handle finding out I wasn't telling the truth about my so-called addiction, but even if they don't survive, I still had them for friends for a time. My counselor was wonderful too. She encouraged me to find other activities I enjoyed. She said that she wanted me to find some clean and sober activities to fill up the time I had previous filled with drugging. I didn't

have the drugging, but I was used to spending so much time alone in my apartment, so this was very good for me. I actually started jogging. I take a run before work at least two mornings a week. I joined a gym and I swim a couple times a week too and I'm actually learning to play tennis. I've met people who share these interests and so my circle of friends has grown tremendously."

"You do seem happy." Mrs. Porter looked closely into Lucy's eyes.

"Yes, I am. It would be so much better if I hadn't lied to get to this place, but I'm not about to discount any of it."

"So, what did Andy think of all this? You said he might have felt a bit jealous, but he still was your friend, wasn't he?" Mrs. Porter was an incurable romantic.

"Yes, we remained friends but the friendship did change."

Chapter Fifteen

Sixteen Months Ago

"Here's to you." Andy lifted his glass of sparkling cider towards Lucy. "To the woman who had done so much in such a short time to improve her life."

Lucy raised her glass and tapped Andy's with it.

"I'm so proud of you." He took a sip and then smiled at her. Moving to level two so quickly. When you want something, you go out and get it, don't you."

"Oh, thank you, Andy. This celebration means so much to me. I'm not used to people even noticing my accomplishments much less celebrating them with me."

"Well, you deserve it." He put down the glass then picked up his fork and knife and cut into his steak.

Lucy paused a moment and then started eating her chicken. Hesitating first, she decided she did want to turn to a more serious question. "Andy, why do I get the feeling

that you're not entirely happy about me starting treatment? Isn't that what you wanted me to do?"

"Oh, Sweetheart! I didn't want you to think I don't want you in treatment. I believed and I still believe that it's the best thing for you now. Still, I wish it was a different treatment center than the one Al goes to."

"Why does that make a difference?"

"Well, I can't seem to get it out of my head that you may be spending too much time with him, at the same treatment center and all."

Lucy put down her fork and knife and, elbows on the table, leaned closer to him. "Just because we are at the same treatment center doesn't mean I see him at all. In the last two months, I've seen him twice and both times just in passing. Why are you so concerned about me seeing him anyway?"

"Because he is bad news. Like I've told you before, he doesn't follow a program at all. I sometimes wonder about that treatment center, why they let him get away with it. If he can play the system so easily, maybe it's not a good system."

"The last time I saw him, he complained about the judge, said he had given him some time in jail, a week I think, to, and this is close to a quote, to decide once and for all whether he wanted the privilege of treatment." Lucy sat back and picked up her fork again.

"Well, it's about time. I've been wondering about that judge too, that he let Al get away with so much." Andy also returned to his meal.

"I've told you several times that you are welcome to come to court on any of my court days. Maybe you should so you can see what happens."

"Yeah, I know, and I really do intend on going but something always seems to come up."

Lucy looked at him with a sneaky smile on her face. "I think someone once told me that if something is important enough, a person will find a way to do it."

"Now, that's not fair, throwing my words into my face. And you're having so much fun doing it too." He picked up a pea from his plate and threw it at her.

"Andy, this is a fine dining restaurant. It says so at the front. That means there will be no food fights in here."

"Oh, you are such trouble now that you are finding yourself. Actually, I never knew that you were lost? Were you lost?"

"Now there you go throwing my words in my face. I should leave, right now. Maybe I will." She stood up from the table.

"Don't you dare!" Andy reached out and grasped her wrist. "You sit down right now. I won't have you missing dessert."

"Yes sir!" She sat down again, ate the rest of her vegetables and then pushed her plate to one side. "Truthfully, Andy. I do get the feeling that there are other reasons you don't like me to be in the treatment center."

"I don't know how you came to that conclusion." He wouldn't look her in the eye and continued to push food around on his plate.

"Maybe because you are usually grouchy when I show up at the NA meetings, and you complained that I had to get up so early in the morning to do my run. And you complained that I spend too much time with the girls, whoever they might be."

"Well, " He still couldn't seem to meet her gaze. "I guess I don't like, I mean it's

not fair, or, well, dammit! You don't seem to have much time for me anymore!"

"Not much time for you?"

"Yes! Here I welcome you to the group, I help you get used to it, I champion you, and start the step work with you and then you go and start spending time with other people and that takes time away from me. Damn! I sound like an adolescent."

Lucy reached out and touched his hand, held it until he looked up at her. "Don't you know that you are my hero?"

He pulled his hand away with a "Pshaw!" and busied himself pushing the food around his plate again.

"I mean it. If it wasn't for you, my life would still be the drab, boring, depressing, nothingness that it was for years. Then, one day, I stumbled into that meeting and met you and my life has changed one eighty degrees. Andy, you're my best friend."

"Some best friend." Lucy could tell by the sound of his voice that he was feeling better. "You dump me for a gaggle of girls."

"You stop that! I have not dumped you at all. And what is a gaggle of girls? Are you calling us geese?"

He looked up at her. "Well, if the idiom fits-

"You are such a brat." She threw a piece of bread at him. "If you're not careful, I am going to dump you for a new best friend, one who is more responsive to my needs."

"Yeah, right. I already know how you feel about me, best friend." He did seem more relaxed which pleased Lucy. She had been honest with him about how important he was to her. "But, I still am concerned about you spending time with Al. He has been saying some things."

"What has he been saying?"

"That he is the one who got you into treatment. That he sold you some quality coke so you could be caught and that he told you where you could go so that the police would pick you up."

"He said all that?"

"Yeah, and not just once."

"How does everyone respond to this?"

"About how you would expect. They tell him they don't want to hear it, that they know you better than that."

"And he keeps repeating these comments?"

"Has told the same story several times. Say, there's no truth to what he says, is there?"

"Actually, there is a bit of truth, but only a bit." She tried to speak calmly so Andy wouldn't over react to what she was telling him. "I did ask him about drug court, but that was after I had gotten picked up by the cops."

"So, the rest of what he said is a lie?"

"Now, what do you think?" She kept looking at him with a steady gaze though her palms were beginning to sweat.

Andy looked at her for a long moment, then relaxed. "Ok. If anyone asks, I can tell them the truth."

Lucy slowly let out her breath and settled back in her chair.

"Do tell me something though."

"Yes Andy?"

"When is your next court date?"

She smiled at him. "Next week, Thursday at one o'clock sharp."

"I will be there. You can count on me."

Chapter Sixteen

Sixteen Months Ago

Lucy, as was her norm, showed up outside the courtroom early for her court session. For a reason she couldn't fathom, she was nervous. She had been coming to court for months now and the judge was very good to her. He always said that she was a model client and he praised her recovery from addiction. Of course, whenever he said that she had a twinge of guilt since she had lied about her drug use, but still, he never gave her any trouble.

Soon the doors opened and she filed in with a large number of other clients as well as some people she didn't know. She chose a seat in the back, near the window and pulled out her paperback. Before she could get to it, however, someone sat heavily into the chair next to her. "Bet you thought I wouldn't show."

"Ah, Andy. That's right. You did say you would be here. I had forgotten." And

she relaxed again.

"Yeah, right." He grinned at her. "Now, tell me a bit of what to expect."

"Ok, soon the judge will come out of his chambers and we all have to stand, even you. And then he will tell us to sit down. Then that man over there," she nodded towards a tall, slender man to the right of the bench, "will call out our names one at a time and we have to go stand at that podium. The judge, the district attorney, the public defender and the court liaison each have a copy of the report the counselor wrote on each person. They will look at the UA record, the attendance and the counselor's comments and recommendations and will make a decision based on those. Once they are done with one person, they go immediately to the next. It all goes really, really fast, unless, of course, someone has been really, really bad and then they spend more time with that person."

"Really really bad like you?"

"No, even worse than me."

"Since your name is near the front of the alphabet, will you go soon?"

"Maybe, but sometimes they start at the end of the alphabet. First they will deal with those who have gotten jail and those with private attorneys." They both stood as the judge entered. "Now look at that." She whispered to him. "Look who is in that lovely orange jump suit and in chains. Our friend, Al."

Both of them paid close attention to the proceedings. It was quite obvious that the judge was not happy with Al.

"Mr. Worden, what have you learned during your five days jail?" He looked very powerful sitting up in the raised chair behind all the polished wood. The black robes and the angry look on his face went far to show his displeasure.

"Yeah, I learned that drugs aren't good and will ruin my life if I'm not careful."

"Are those your words, Mr. Worden or are you trying to say what I think you want me to hear?"

"Oh no. I really mean it."

"As much as you meant it the last time you had jail time."

"No Judge. This time I really really mean it. I'll be good Judge. Really I will."

"And what does it mean to be good?"

"Um, hm, I guess I will go to my groups and not miss any UAs and I'll meet with my PC too."

"You don't sound too sure of yourself."

"No, Judge. I mean it."

"How long have you been in treatment now? Just about two years. Is that right? Am I reading this right?"

"Yeah. I guess."

"Mr. Worden." The Judge closed the folder, crossed his arms over his chest and leaned towards Al. "It appears that you may not be serious about your recovery and that makes me sad. Your counselor has worked very hard to help you, maybe harder than you worked to help yourself. I have been very lenient, again, maybe too lenient. I have just about lost my patience with you. I will give you one more chance, but this is it. You are on last chance. Any screw ups, any screw ups at all, and you're out of here. You do know what that means, don't you?"

"Yeah."

"It means at least another ten days in jail, quite likely more, the felony stays, you

get a probation officer who will be far less patient than your counselor has been and you enter treatment somewhere else. I can assure you that the counselor will also not be as lenient as the counselor who is currently working with you. Do you understand, Mr. Worden?"

"Yeah."

"I certainly hope so. Any comments from the court team?"

The district attorney spoke up. "I think you have done a fine job speaking up for all of us. I do request a short set over."

"Agreed. A one week set over. That means next Thursday, the twenty second. Is that clear, Mr. Worden?"

"Yeah."

"Then I suggest you change your clothes and hurry to the treatment center for your group."

"Who's next, Mr. Patterson?" Just as Lucy had explained, the judge went through each case rather quickly except for a couple like Al. Lucy was called second.

"Ms. Barnes. How are you?"

"Very well, Judge.

"Your records here confirm that. Clean UAs, great attendance. Your counselor has nothing but good to say about you. Just for the record, what is your clean date?"

" March Third, sir."

"Nice, very nice. What do you say, Mr. Patterson? Is Ms. Barnes still on your quick list?"

"Absolutely, Judge. Six week set over is recommended."

"So ordered. See you in six weeks, Ms. Barnes."

"Thank you, Judge." And Lucy stepped away from the podium and returned to her seat next to Andy.

"That's impressive." Andy whispered in her ear.

"Thanks. It really isn't very hard."

"Yeah, right. Tell that to our friend Al."

They remained for the rest of the court proceedings because Andy was very interested in what he was seeing. Lucy had taken a break to leave the court room and call in to work to arrange to take the rest of the day off. Afterwards, she and Andy went to a nearby coffee shop to talk.

"Well, do you understand the program better?" Lucy was celebrating with a large eggnog latte.

"Actually, yes I do. I'm glad you pushed me into coming today."

"Pushed you, huh. Right."

"In all seriousness, I am glad I went, in part because Al was there. That doesn't match the story he tells at the meetings about how he is keeping them in the dark about his drug use."

"Yeah, these people are pretty smart. They may have given him too many chances like the Judge said but they know he isn't doing what he should."

"Why is it he doesn't seem to miss an NA meeting but you do? Isn't his schedule like yours?"

"In part, yes. I mean, he has to go to groups and all but his groups must be scheduled differently than mine. We've never been in the same group. And now that I'm

in Level 2, we can't be in the same group since mine is all women."

"Good. I still don't like you having much contact with him."

"Oh! Is Andy jealous?" Lucy couldn't help teasing him.

"Yeah, I'm super jealous of a low class, bad ass, tweeker idiot with delusions of greatness."

Lucy laughed. "I thought so." She fell silent a moment, then, hesitantly, "Look Andy, you can come to one of my sessions with my counselor if you want."

"Really? I thought they were private."

"Yes, they are but if I invite you and you sign a confidentiality agreement, you can come into my session with me."

"Everyone can do that?"

"Yes, everyone has the opportunity to bring in a support person into a session."

"And why me?"

"Because, Andy, you are my best friend and it's important to me that you know what is going on in my life." She was blushing now, and furious at herself for doing so.

"Well, I would love it. In fact, I'm touched that you would choose me."

"Just let me know when you can, and I'll tell my counselor. She said that she likes to have the significant other at a session."

"Am I a significant other?"

She blushed even more. "Well, not really, I guess, but you are my best friend, so you fit the bill better than anyone else." She was busy stirring her latte, staring at the table, the walls, her latte, anything but at Andy's face.

He reached over and gently lifted her chin so her eyes met his. "I am truly honored

you consider me your best friend. And it seems like you are the closest I have to a significant other. So you can stop that blushing right now."

Lucy's eyes began to water. "Oh Andy! You don't know how hard it was for me to say that. I practiced all last night, even lost sleep over it."

"You practiced? With whom?"

"Myself. In the mirror. While fixing my dinner, in my dreams. Even while taking my shower this morning."

"Wish I had been there."

"Andy! You're so bad."

"Oh yeah? Who was having the dreams?"

"I didn't say I had dreams about you. I said I dreamed that I was practicing saying this stuff to you."

"And I wasn't in the dream?"

"Well, yeah, you were."

"And what was my response in the dream?"

She got a crafty look on her face. "You rushed me away to a villa in France, then to Rome for holiday and you bought me a yacht and a gorgeous sports car."

"Did I really? So it worked in your dream?"

"Obviously better than it's worked in real life since you haven't offered to take me anywhere."

"Now, that's just plain wrong. I just haven't had a chance yet."

"Oh yeah? Where are you going to take me?"

"To the movies?"

"Is that your best offer?"

"Not good enough for you?"

"Really doesn't compare well to Rome."

"Ok, I got it. How about paintball?"

"Now that is a winner. I've never played paintball before but all the working out I've done, I bet I can bet you easily."

"Oh! The lady challenges me."

"Scared?"

"Absolutely not. You're on, young lady."

Chapter Seventeen

Fourteen Months Ago

1.

Lucy waited nervously outside the building where her treatment center was housed. Andy had finally found the time to attend a session with her but it was almost time and he wasn't here yet. He had promised though, and he always kept his promises. Still, Lucy paced back and forth. One of her friends from group stopped her and asked her about her nervousness but before she could answer, there was a tap on her shoulder and she looked up to see Andy there.

"Sorry I'm a bit late, Sweetie." and he kissed her cheek. Lucy did the one thing she had promised herself never to do. She blushed. The women waiting outside the building with her (most were having last minute cigarettes) immediately noticed her discomfort.

"Hey, Lucy. Is this your sweetie? Huh, Lucy? Is this your guy? Come on, Lucy,

Introduce us. I want to meet the man you're always talking about." The comments didn't stop even after she pulled him inside the building and to the elevators.

"You didn't want to introduce me? You ashamed of me or something?"

"Shut up."

"What? You say that to your sweetie, your guy, the man you're always talking about?"

"You love this, don't you?"

"Love what?"

"Embarrassing me."

"If I remember the event right, and I think I do since it happened a mere minute ago, they were the ones making the comments, not me. And I have to assume that they made the comments because they know about me. They know I'm your sweetie, your guy, the man you're always talking about."

"Yeah, they did start it but you didn't have to continue it, did you?"

"Of course I did." The elevator doors opened and they stepped out. There were only a few people around, but Andy could tell that most of the action was through the large set of doors because of the rumble of voices he heard coming from them. Lucy walked right up to the doors but Andy held her back a moment.

"I want to make one thing perfectly clear." He looked down at her, so serious that she turned her face from him. "Don't do that. Don't turn away." She hesitated a moment and then looked up at him. "Ok. We've known each other for awhile now, about a year. And we have had fun. We have had our serious times, of course, but there have been fun times too. You have become a very important person to me and I hope I've become

important to you. I know we are friends. Hell, we are best friends." He looked away from her, turned away from her, and then looked back. "I'm making this harder than I had intended. You see, I have practiced what I'm trying to say to you. I practiced in the mirror and while shaving and I even practiced in the shower, but it's not going the way I imagined it."

Another long pause and for some reason, Lucy was no longer nervous. She waited patiently, even though her appointment time with her counselor was quickly approaching. Finally, Andy spoke again.

"Lucy, I guess what I'm trying to tell you is that I think I am your significant other or you are mine. I guess we are each other's significant other. Hell, I guess you are more to me than my best friend. You are the most important person in the world to me. I love you."

Lucy realized that this speech was very difficult for him and she appreciated that fact especially considering she had prepared a difficult speech for him. Still, this was a chance she might never get again. She would show him what it felt like. She smiled sweetly at him, then moved towards the door. "Come on, we're almost late for our meeting." Without another word, Andy followed her inside.

2.

They waited only a few minutes before Marian called Lucy's name and led them to her office. Lucy kept a cheerful though non-revealing look on her face. She glanced at Andy a few times and caught him once looking a bit peeved then he avoided looking her in the face. They entered Marian's office and sat down.

"Andy, it's so nice to meet you at last. Lucy has told me so much about you."

"Please don't stroke his ego too much Marian. It's hard for him to get his head through the doorway now as it is."

"Oh. Am I missing something here?" Marian looked back and forth between the two of them.

"No, not at all." Andy still wouldn't look at Lucy. "A man just pours out his heart to a woman and gets shot down for his efforts."

"Lucy, what have you done to the poor man?"

"Me? What have I done? How about what has he done, just a few minutes ago, outside this building in full view of my friends?"

"So, that's how it is, is it?" The crafty look returned to Andy's face. He turned to Marian. "What she has done, what this innocent appearing young woman has done, is stolen my heart and won't give it back to me."

"Oh Lucy, you are such a calculating woman." Marian laughed. "I guess you should have placed a warning out there about you to warn any and all men who may be susceptible to your charms. Too late now, it seems. Ultimately though, Lucy is my client so I can't offer you couples' counseling. So, let's talk about Lucy's recovery and how you, Andy, can be a positive part of that."

Lucy reached over and took Andy's hand and held it throughout the session.

"So, Andy, as I understand it, you've known Lucy since before she entered treatment. How much of a difference do you see in her now?"

"A huge change. The first time I ever saw her, she ran from me. She doesn't run from me anymore."

"Yes, I can see that."

"And she has a sense of humor now. She's demonstrated that too."

"So, I'm right Lucy, that you have made some important changes in your life."

"Yes, in all seriousness, I'm not much like the Lucy who started treatment. Even at work, they've noticed and some of them have invented stories to explain the changes."

"Does anyone at work know about you being in treatment?"

"Other than my manager, no, but I don't see why they should know."

"Are you afraid you might lose your job?"

"No, it's not that. I'm just not close to anyone there. None of the people who are important to me work with me. I really have no friends there."

"I see. Andy, what's your take on this?"

"I agree with Lucy. We met through NA and many of her friends are in NA but she's gotten involved elsewhere too. From what I've heard about her employer, she doesn't have friends there and really doesn't need to."

"Andy, what do you see as your role in Lucy's recovery?"

:"My role? I guess as moral support. As a person she can come talk to me about anything. I know from personal experience what it's like to have a drug take over your life. I've been in recovery now for almost four years and proud of it. I would like to think that Lucy can come talk to be about anything."

"How far would you go to help her through this time?"

"About as far as I can." A light seemed to go off in his head. "Ahh! You're talking about codependency, aren't you."

"Yes, in part."

"Marian, I will do as much as I can to help Lucy but I do realize it's her recovery

and that I can't do it for her. Like I said before, I hope she realizes she can come to me with anything and I'll help out but she has to do the hard work."

"Good. Now what do you think I need to know about Lucy if I'm to give her the right treatment?"

"Seriously, my biggest concern anymore is that she still takes things far too seriously, despite the evidence to the contrary that you've seen today. I'm a bit concerned that she tries to be too perfect."

"Come on now, Andy. How can I be too perfect?"

Andy turned to look at her. "Sweetheart, none of us are perfect. And if you decide you have to be, then when you make a mistake, it would crush you."

"Andy is right, Lucy. I've been concerned about that too. Look at your records." She handed her two sheets of paper. Then, to Andy, "These are her UA results and her attendance." She explained how to read each form.

Then she turned again to Lucy. "How many positive UAs do you see?"

"None, of course."

"And how many misses in your attendance?"

"Again, none, of course."

"What do you think would happen if you missed one?"

"I bet the right answer is, nothing would happen, that the world wouldn't end. Right?"

"Lucy, I'm serious. This concerns me and it appears this concerns Andy too."

"Oh, come on. What's the big deal? So I try to do my best. What's wrong with that?" Lucy still held Andy's hand but she was clearly agitated.

"Tell me please what happens when you make a mistake?"

"A mistake? Nothing. It's no big deal."

Andy moved closer to her. "When was the last time you made a mistake?"

"I'm sure I made one the other day. At work."

"What was the mistake?"

"I don't know. Didn't put my finished reports in the right place."

"And what happened?"

"I put it in the right place."

"So, no one yelled at you or criticized you?"

"No. Look, why are you two harping on this anyway?"

"I'm sorry, Lucy." Marian sat back in her chair, leaning one elbow on her desk. "I guess it may seem like you're being attacked."

"Yes, it does."

"My concern, and I think Andy agrees with this, is that you fear making a mistake, a real mistake, because you believe that it would be horrible if you did, that you would view it as awful in the extreme, that you would think that you're a failure with no redeeming qualities and your world would end. Tell me if you disagree, Andy."

"No, you're doing fine."

Lucy had calmed enough that she could tell that both Andy and Marian were very serious. "Ok, let's say you're right. Why should I take a chance? If I don't make those mistakes, then the world can't end."

"The problem here is twofold. One, you are going to make one of those mistakes and when you do, you will punish yourself all out of proportion to the 'crime' so to speak.

And two, if you do manage not to make a mistake, what part of life are you missing? In order for you to have this mistake-free life, there is so much life you have to avoid. You will miss so much if you don't take some chances. Do you understand?"

"I think so."

"Lucy, you are already taking some of those chances. Andy told us just a few minutes ago how much you have changed since he met you. I want you to recognize that these changes have come about because you took some calculated chances and you have grown so much because of this. I want you to congratulate yourself, to honor yourself because you gave yourself permission to make mistakes. And I don't want you to be so afraid of making mistakes that you don't continue to grow." She sat back again. "I kind of get the feeling that there will be more decisions you will have to make in the next few months and more chances to make mistakes and to prove to yourself that you not only can survive them but that you can flourish in spite of them. Ok?"

"Yeah, but I do have a question. Does this mean I have your permission to miss a group or two? Or maybe a UA or two?"

"Don't push it, young lady. You still have to accept the results of poor decisions"

Chapter Eighteen

Present Day

"I knew it! He's your sweetie, isn't he? Andy is your sweetie." Mrs. Porter loved nothing more than a good love story.

"Hush now, let her tell it her way." Father Mark waved his hand at Mrs. Porter and she settled down with a huff.

"Yes, he was my sweetie." Lucy smiled at Mrs. Porter. "We began to spend even more time together. A few times he picked me up at work which fed into the rumors very nicely.

"Treatment continued on well. I continued to make a point of missing nothing, not a UA or a group or a meeting with my counselor, Marian. I think it frustrated her.

"One day, Andy showed up unexpectedly at my job. Oh, the tongues were wagging! He told me he wanted to talk in private, so we stepped into an office. He told

me that he had been given a trip by the owner of a company that Andy had done a job for. The man was so pleased with Andy's work that he wanted to fly Andy and me to his private summer home in Hawaii..

"I figured that my employer wouldn't have a problem with it even giving the short notice and I was right. In all the years I worked there, I rarely took a vacation. What really concerned me was treatment. I called Marian and for a change, she actually answered the phone. I told her about the trip and she said that I could go and any treatment I missed would be excused!

"I was so excited I could hardly contain myself. I jumped up and down and then threw my arms around Andy's neck and screamed for joy. Of course some of my coworkers were watching through the office window and because they couldn't hear what was going on, made some assumptions. I guess one person had even planned our wedding down to the number of attendants and the colors. No, Mrs. Porter, we didn't get married and we are not engaged now."

Mrs. Porter was clearly disappointed as she leaned back in her chair.

"Hawaii is absolutely beautiful. The house faced the ocean and had a private beach. There was a small town near by where we took snorkeling lessons. There were horses too, housed on the property, so we could go horseback riding on the beach. There were luaus too, with Hawaiian dancing to the light of a bonfire. It was the most amazing place and the most amazing time I have ever known. Oh, Mrs. Porter! The flowers! Never before had I seen such glorious flowers! The scents were intoxicating.

"And then we had to go home. I was tired because we had slept very little, but I was happy. I dozed on the plane, resting my head on Andy's shoulder, feeling happy

and loved. I was ready to go home and resume my life. And why not? I had just spent five days in paradise with a man I loved and who loved me. I was so healthy, my skin glowed. I was more relaxed than I could ever remember. My life was going great. And then it all changed, all because of poor decisions I had made.

Chapter Nineteen

Three Months Ago

1.

Lucy settled comfortably in her accustomed chair in Marian's office. She still had the residues of her Hawaiian tan.

"Now, don't you look happy and relaxed." Marian smiled at her.

"And why shouldn't I be. My life is going so well."

"It's so nice to see you like this. You're quite different than the Lucy I met a little over a year ago."

"Thanks." Lucy smiled at her. "I can't believe I was ever that person."

"So, I have a feeling you will like what I have to tell you." Lucy waited expectantly. "I think you're ready to leave us. I want you to graduate next month."

Lucy suddenly felt cold. Graduate? How could she graduate? She isn't ready. She

still needs treatment. This is where her friends are. How could she leave them? What would she do without them?

"Lucy? Lucy? Wake up. I can't tell if this is good news to you or bad news."

Marian looked a bit confused.

"I'm sorry but you did shock me." Lucy tried to calm herself down, tried to smile at Marian, but wasn't very successful.

"I'm surprised. You know how well you have been doing. I thought you had expected this was coming."

"Yeah, I guess I never believed it would happen."

"Why is that? You were told that there would be an end to it. You have been there when other clients have graduated. I've even heard you tell others that you would be graduating soon."

"I know, I know, but I still didn't think it would happen so soon."

"This is supposed to be good news but I have a feeling you don't take it that way."

"It's not that. Yes, it's good news, I suppose, but I don't think I'm ready. It hasn't been that long since I started."

"Lucy, it's been thirteen months. You could have graduated last month but you were in Hawaii during that graduation."

"But I don't think I'm ready. Really, I'm not."

"Lucy, look at this." Marian handed her sheets of paper on which were her attendance and UA results. "You have done everything we have asked you. It doesn't appear as though you have been using any drugs. I've looked through your chart. You have completed all your assignments. You know about the addiction process as well as

relapse dynamics. You have made some huge changes. I don't think there is anything else we can teach you."

"Sure there is. I don't know how well I can do without coming here. I mean, what if I can't handle my cravings? What if someone approached me and offered me some drugs? I don't know that I could handle it without being in treatment here."

"Lucy, how have you handled cravings for the past year? You must have done well since your UAs have all been clean. And what have you done about other people having drugs around you? From what I've seen, you've handled it very well."

"Because I knew I would have to come here and answer to you."

Marian leaned forward and touched Lucy's hand. "Lucy, you know you have to leave here sooner or later. And you know you have access to aftercare. You have smoothly moved from level to level and now you're at the top level, level three, which is supposed to help ease you out of treatment and into the real world." She leaned back again in her chair and looked closely at Lucy. "What's going on?"

"Going on? I don't know what you mean." She couldn't meet Marian's eyes.

"Lucy, I think I know you pretty well. You have created a very good support system. You have gained some very good skills. You are ready to leave treatment and I think you know that. You should have been expecting that I bring up this issue. In fact, I'm surprised that you haven't brought it up. What's going on that you are so surprised about this?"

Lucy was looking down at the floor, shaking her head, her hair shielding her face from Marian's view. "I don't know. I just don't know. I don't feel like leaving now is the right thing to do. I don't feel ready."

"What will it take for you to feel ready?"

"I don't know." She covered her face with her hands. She finally sat up and looked at Marian with a tear stained face. "I feel like, like, like I might be in danger so something. Like if I leave, my life will go back to the way it was before and I don't think I could handle that."

Marian took her hands and looked Lucy in the eyes. "There is absolutely no way your life will return to the way it was before. You have made far too many changes, real life changes, and your life will never be the same. In addition, you now know how to make decisions, how to solve problems. You didn't have those skills before."

Lucy broke away from Marian's touch, and turned her gaze towards the window. "Yeah, I know I have those skills now, but are they enough? It took me so long to learn how to do those things that most people just seem to know. How do I know if I make a good decision if I don't have you to help me with it?"

"Any time you need me, I will be here. But I know that when you have to make those decisions without input from me, you will do just fine. I haven't helped you much on the last few of your decisions. You did all the talking and all the deciding."

"No, I can't do it alone. I just can't." Again, she covered her face with her hands."

Marian watched Lucy in silence. She knew that Lucy was ready to graduate, but how was she going to convince Lucy of that? "Tell you what. I still believe you are ready to graduate, but it looks as though you need a bit of time to get used to the idea. I will give you another month. You will not graduate next month, but you will graduate the month after. That will give you about seven weeks to get used to the idea, test out your skills and come to the realization that you will be ready for graduation."

Lucy's hands fell off her face and she looked downward in silence for a moment or two, then looked up at Marian. "Really? You won't make me leave?"

"No, I won't make you leave. Don't forget that you still get some aftercare whenever you want. It's not as though you can never come back. And then there's the alumni association. They can really use your participation."

"Yeah, maybe, but it's still not the same."

"No, and it shouldn't be. Treatment is supposed to help you, not become a crutch for you, and if you don't graduate soon, it will be a crutch. It might be now."

"Ok, I get it. I have to leave. But not now, right? Not now."

"Right, Lucy, not now. But you will graduate in two months."

"Ok. I got it. Two months."

2.

Lucy felt as though she had gotten a reprieve but at the same time felt this unwelcome future was too quickly approaching. She had to do something and she had to do it quickly. Who could she talk to about this problem? She certainly couldn't talk to Marian since Marian was part of the problem. She couldn't talk to Andy. He wouldn't understand. He didn't grow up the way she had. He couldn't understand what it was like to be abused by her father so much that she had to leave the family. He didn't have a father who had threatened his life.

Lucy looked up and for a moment couldn't recognize the neighborhood she was in. Then she realized she was in front of a coffee shop, not one that she recognized, but at this point, she didn't really care. Coffee is coffee, isn't it?

She entered the coffee shop and ordered a house coffee and carried it to the most

secluded table she could see and sat with her back to the window. She sipped her coffee and realized there is good coffee and there is bad coffee and this was bad coffee. She doctored it as well as she could with cream and sugar and even then it was barely drinkable.

Well, considering her mood, the coffee was appropriate. So, what is she to do? She was glad that Marian gave her an additional month, but still, the day would come when she would have to graduate and she wanted to put that off as long as she could. She needed someone to talk this over with but she couldn't think of a single person who would be suitable, who would listen to her fully and not be judgmental. Who did she know that wouldn't tell her that she had no choice but to graduate? Who did she know who would give her the right advice, who would know what would work?

Such difficult questions. Lucy pulled out her journal. This book was probably her best choice now to figure out an answer. She had never kept a journal before entering treatment but now found it very helpful. She tried to write in it daily but was satisfied when she wrote several times a week. No one else had ever read her journal and if she could help it, no one ever would. She rooted around in her purse and couldn't find her favorite pen but did find one that would do. She opened her journal to a clean page, dated it and then tried to prepare her mind for writing. Nothing would come. She tried first stating the problem: "I don't want to graduate from treatment." Now what? Why did she not want to graduate? Try listing the reasons: "Number One. I'm not ready." Ok, why did she feel she wasn't ready? No answer would come to her. All she could think of was Marian's statements about how ready she was. Lucy closed her journal and placed it and the pen back in her purse.

Well, that didn't work well. How could Marian say that she had good problem solving skills when she couldn't solve this problem? Even another cup of coffee didn't help at all. Lucy even found herself biting her nails which she hadn't done in years. She was at a stalemate.

Disgusted with herself, she decided that drinking bad coffee wasn't helping, so she left the coffee shop. Now, where was she? She was still lost. How nice. Lost and confused. Confused and lost. Lucy figured if she walked back the way she had come, she might find a place she would recognize.

It was a good plan, maybe not the best, but she finally did begin to recognize the area. This was where she had Seen Al, so many months ago. Right over there was the place where he had sold that woman some cocaine. Lucy had not thought about Al in a very long time. He had been kicked out of the program and the last Lucy had heard, he was in jail and for longer than the ten days he had thought he would be given. Well, this must be the night for bad news. She did not want to think about Al. She wanted nothing to do with Al, even in her thoughts. The only good to come from remembering him was that she knew where the bus stop was. She walked across the street and prepared to sit and wait but the next she knew, the bus was pulling up. Was this a sign? Was her day turning?

No, the day still stunk. When she finally got home, there was a note on her apartment door. The manager had to go inside because the apartment above her had told him that their bath tub had overflowed and they hadn't caught it for a couple hours. The manager was concerned about how it might have affected her apartment so he decided not to give her the twenty four hour notice of entry and had gone in. Muttering to herself, she placed the key into the lock but it wasn't necessary. The manager hadn't locked her

apartment when he had left it.

She entered, and locked the door, and then looked around. The manager had turned on lights, most likely to light his way to the bathroom, but he hadn't turned them off again. Why did he need so many lights anyway? His apartment had exactly the same floor plan as hers, so he should have been able to find the bathroom in the dark. Even if he couldn't find it that way, one light should have been enough, not four.

Lucy walked down to her bathroom and slowly opened the door. Again, the door should have been left open because that's where her cat's litter box was and Lucy wasn't sure how long he had been kept away from it. If that cat had ruined anything of hers, she would insist that the manager would pay for it. Once the door was fully open, she forgot all about the litter box problem. Her bathroom looked ruined. There were stains funning down all the walls. Even her bath tub was filthy. The sink had standing water in it. Her bath rugs were soaked and the floor was still flooded. Why did the manager feel he had to come in at all if not to take care of the mess? And now it was so much worse because all that dirty water had stayed where it was not wanted and ruined everything. She even found her tooth brush floating in the dirty sink water.

Shaking her head in disbelief, Lucy walked to her bedroom to change clothes. She had no choice here. She had to clean up that mess tonight, despite her bad mood. Tomorrow she would have to go to work and he would need to use the bathroom to get ready for work. She picked up some clothes from the floor that she had gone jogging in the other day and put them on, then grabbed some cleaning rags and cleansers and reentered the bathroom.

More than an hour later, the bathroom was clean again. She had a huge load of

wash to do, but that could wait until the next day. She decided a shower could wait until morning too, especially after walking into her bedroom and seeing her comfortable bed, but no, she liked her bedding too much to subject it to her foul body. She went back in the bathroom and turned on the shower with as hot as she could stand it, and she soaped herself up as much as she could, using up at least a quarter of her shower gel. She washed her hair twice and used extra conditioner. By the time she left the bathroom, she felt so much better, she began to think she might be able to solve her problem after all.

Back into her bedroom, she was climbing into bed when she realized she had neither seen nor heard her kitty. She went back into the living room, turning on only one light in the process and began to call her cat, but no answer. Again and again she called. Finally, if she listened hard enough, she thought she could hear him answer but only very quietly. Where was he? She searched and searched. She heard him clearest when she was in the living room, but there was nothing in that room that he could have gotten stuck in.

Lucy was getting more and more upset. He was her baby and her baby was in trouble. Then she heard a thumping on the glass patio door. She waked over there, pulled the curtains aside, and there he was, out on the patio. How did he get out there? He was an indoor cat, had always been. She was very careful to make sure that he was inside when she left home. She reached to unlock the door but needn't have troubled to; the door was unlocked. She pulled the door open and the cat leaped into her arms. Poor kitty must have been very scared since he had never done that before. As she comforted him and reached to shut the door, something caught her eye so she turned on the patio light. There, outside, dumped on the ground, was one of her towels, stained and soaked. That bastard manager had tried to clean up the bathroom, had ruined one of her best towels and had just thrown it

outside and left. Such a good ending to a horrible day. At least she hoped the day was ending. She locked the patio door, closed the curtains, and checked every lock and every light in the apartment, all with the cat in her arms. She returned to her bedroom, placed him on the foot of her bed, got between the sheets and tried to get to sleep.

Chapter Twenty

Three Months Ago

It took such a hard time for her to fall asleep. Any sound, no matter how small, made her jump. She did finally fall asleep though and was plagued by nightmares. She saw herself under the influence of many different drugs. She saw herself lying, filthy, in a ditch, with several needles sticking out from her arms. She saw Andy, tall and angry at her, telling her he had made such a horrible mistake ever believing anything she had said and he wanted nothing more to do with him. Her father was in the dream also, sitting in a throne, a satisfied look on his face, shouting how terrible she was, how she was worthless and a waste of blood and bones. He said she deserved everything she got. Sitting on her father's left was Al who cackled whenever her father made a proclamation. She finally work up. All her bedding was twisted tightly around her body, making it very difficult for her to get out of bed. She and he bedding were soaking wet.

Lucy staggered into the bathroom, and washed her face, then looked into her own face in the mirror. What was the meaning of the dreams? Were they real? What should she do now? Lucy walked out into the living room and turned on the television. It was only five o'clock in the morning and there wasn't much of interest on TV this time of day. She finally settled on a half hour paid program. It didn't really matter anyway since she didn't want to watch anything. The noise itself was what she was seeking. She kept her gaze inward, trying to figure out what to do and how to handle what she had already done.

At eight in the morning, Lucy called in to work and told them she would not be coming in. She turned off her phone and then returned to the sofa. Lucy did nothing that week. She missed two group sessions in treatment as well as a UA. She did not go to her NA meeting. She did not keep her date with Andy. Anyone who tried to call her got her voice mail.

After a week of this, Andy became very concerned and called the police to ask them to do a welfare check. He was there when they pounded on her door but got no answer. They went to the apartment manager and got a key to her apartment. When they opened the door and let themselves in, they saw Lucy still sitting on the sofa, meowing cat by her side, staring into space as the television droned on.

Andy went into her bedroom and changed the bedding, and then gently pulled her to her feet and led her into her bedroom. He laid her down on her bed, covered her with blankets and quietly shut her door. He fed her hungry cat and then stretched out on her sofa.

Lucy woke to the sound of rain on her bedroom window. Eyes closed, she slowly stretched, reaching both her hands and her feet as far as she could. Her cat was lying near

her face, purring loudly. Slowly, she sat up and opened her eyes. Lucy felt extremely well, healthy and happy. She stripped off her clothes, tossed them into the hamper and walked into her bathroom. Showering in hot water and fragrant gel, she toweled off and returned into her bedroom. Lucy dressed in a t-shirt and jeans; she didn't need to dress up for where she was going.

As Lucy walked down the hallway towards the living room, she could hear snoring. She stopped by the sofa and smiled down to sleeping Andy. He was so sweet to be concerned about her, but where she was going, she didn't want him there. She sat down and wrote him a note.

Dear Andy, I'm sorry to be such a bother to you. Really, I am fine. I have to go out and get some errands done. Please help yourself to coffee and breakfast, and I'll be back soon. Love, Lucy.

She closed and locked her front door quietly and walked to her car. She had decided that she needed the flexibility that her car would give her. She really didn't know where the coffee shop was since she had only seen it when on the bus, so she followed the bus route until she found it. Not that she was going to have any of their horrible coffee. She pulled into a parking spot and turned off the engine. It was chilly outside and she was glad she had thought to get her thermos filled with good coffee. She poured herself a cup and waited.

Her luck must have been changing, because as she finished the last of the coffee in the thermos, she saw Al. It had been such a long time since she had seen him. When he was kicked out of treatment, he had been given far more than the ten days jail that he had expected, and once he was no longer required to go to NA meetings, he had stopped

attending. It must have been months since she had seen him and she really hadn't missed him at all. Still, she needed him now. She tried to prepare herself and could feel tension flooding her body. She stepped out of her car and faced him.

"Well, well, well. Ain't it the princess. I can't imagine why you be in this part of town." His sneer made her feel very uncomfortable.

"I need a favor from you, that's all."

"A favor? A favor, huh. What in the world could you want from me?"

"Can we go inside?" She nodded towards the coffee shop.

"Not in your car, huh. Don't trust Al enough to sit in a car with him."

"Please. I'll even buy you some coffee."

"Coffee is the bribe, huh. Such a big spender." But he led the way into the coffee shop and started to sit at a table by the window, but Lucy indicated the one she had sat at the previous week, the one that was out of view of the window. "I take cream and sugar in my coffee. And how about one of those brownies while you're at it." He heavily dropped onto one of the chairs.

Lucy brought over two mugs of coffee, a plate with a brownie on it balanced on one of the mugs. She would have a hard enough time just drinking the coffee and did not trust the bakery items. She sat down with her back to the door.

Al ate the brownie in two large bites and then gulped some of the coffee. Lucy watched him silently, her hands wrapped around the mug. "So, what does the lady want from Al?"

"I need you to get something for me."

"Something that Andy can't give you? I'm honored."

"I need you to keep it secret though. Are you willing to do that?"

"Are you giving me conditions here?"

"No, but it's important to me that no one find out what I'm asking you to do."

"You think that you be so perfect that I would jump at the chance to help you out?"

"Al, please. If you don't want to help me, just say so. I'm in no mood to play games with you. And I want no questions about why I'm asking you for this."

"Just what is this you want from me? Sounds important."

"It is to me."

Al looked more closely at Lucy, and tried to look directly into her eyes but she avoided his gaze. "You sure you want this? You don't look so sure."

She looked up at him. "Yes, I'm sure. Very sure."

"Come on. Tell me or not. I'm not sitting around. You're not the most interesting conversation, you know."

Lucy took a deep breath. "You told me once you knew how to cheat on UAs, that you could get urine to substitute."

"You want me to help you cheat on a UA?"

"No, I mean, yes, well, kinda."

"You're not telling me that the perfect little Lucy has been using and needs Al's help to give a clean UA."

"No, I'm not telling you that. "

"I'm confused. What do you want from me then?"

"I'm not using, haven't used. What I want is some dirty urine, not clean."

Al sat back in his chair. "You are one crazy bitch. Why would you want dirty

urine?"

"I have my reasons and you don't need to know them."

"What you trying to do to me? You working for the cops? If I help you, am I going to be rushed by cops?"

"No, of course not. I stay away from the police as much as possible. This will not reflect on you one bit. Of course, I don't want you to tell anyone about this."

"Like anyone would believe me." He grumbled a bit, trying to figure out any way he could get into trouble doing this. "How much you willing to pay?"

"How much are you going to charge me? I'm not rich, you know."

Al remained silent a moment, staring at her. What was going on with her? He had hated her from the moment he had seen her, especially when he noticed that Andy liked her. Did he hate her enough to turn down her request? Who did he hate more, Lucy or Andy? What would Andy think if he saw the two of them sitting down to coffee now? And if Andy ever found out he had helped Lucy? That man would be pissed. Beyond pissed. And there wasn't a thing he could do about it either.

His mind made up, he looked up at Lucy and grinned. "I think a twenty would do it."

Chapter Twenty One

Present Day

Lucy paused. She had known it would be difficult telling her story but she hadn't realized just how difficult. She had changed so much since she had seen Father Mark and Mrs. Porter had seen her last, but this part of the story really hurt to tell. She wanted them to see her as a good person. They had seen her as a victim and then as a survivor. How would they see her now?

"My dear, what were you thinking?" Mrs. Porter touched her knee.

"I guess I really wasn't thinking." There were tears in her eyes. "At least I wasn't thinking clearly."

"Well, mistakes do happen." Father Mark threw Mrs. Porter a look. "At least you take responsibility for this decision. Right?"

"Yes, I have. It doesn't make me feel better though. I really messed up my life

with this one horrible decision. Al give me a small container with urine in it the next day and I gave him a crisp Twenty dollar bill. The very next day, I had to give a UA. I was very nervous but figured I'd get away with it because I had never given the UA tech a bit of trouble and hoped that because of that, she wouldn't be looking as closely. I was wrong.

"The UA tech easily caught me. I felt horrible. She looked at me and said 'Anyone but you, Lucy.' She had no choice but to turn me in but she felt so bad about it. She told me over and over that she had no choice. She was so afraid that I would get kicked out of the program, and that would put me in the same position as Al. The tech was also concerned because I had missed my UA the week before. She asked me what had been going on that I was missing out on treatment, messing up with treatment when I had a good year of perfect treatment activity. She was right to be concerned.

"I had to wait a couple weeks before meeting with my counselor, but I did manage to talk to her in the hallways, nothing in confidence, but I could tell that she was very upset with me and concerned too. It seemed that her lecture about me not trying to be perfect had come true. Because I wanted to be perfect, I fell and I fell hard. Finally, I met with my counselor."

Chapter Twenty Two

Two Months Ago

1.

Lucy entered Marian's office and sat down in her chair. Marian shut her office door, sat down next to her desk. She flipped through Lucy's chart, picked up a few sheets of paper off her desk and read through them. She tossed them onto her desk and then looked at Lucy.

"Want to tell me what happened?"

"I'm sorry. Really, I am." Tears came to her eyes.

"Yes, I can see that. But what are you sorry for? Trying to substitute urine or getting caught at it?"

"I guess I deserve that, but I didn't see any way out."

"Any way out of what? You were giving clean UAs. And now I find that you have

been substituting urine all this time."

"No! Not all this time! Only this once. This was the only time I did that and I did have a good reason. I thought I needed to give a dirty UA but I didn't want to use anything."

Marian looked very confused. "Come again?"

Lucy swallowed and tried to relax enough that she could tell Marian her entire story. "You see, I never have taken any drugs, except for what the doctor prescribed. I faked a drug problem so I could get into treatment."

"You wanted to get into drug treatment even though you didn't give a drug problem?"

"Yes. I had found the NA meeting by accident and they were so nice, I started attending meetings."

"You attended NA meetings even though you didn't have an addiction?"

"Yes, I was so lonely before I found that meeting. And they were so nice to me and accepted me without question. But then Andy thought -"

"Please don't put the blame on Andy."

"No, I wasn't going to but Andy felt that Al had too big an influence on me and said I was in denial and needed formal treatment. I checked and couldn't afford it. Even my insurance paying for part wasn't enough. I heard how Al was in drug court and he told me how cheap it was, so I asked him for some cocaine and he told me where to go where a police officer was likely to show up."

"So you admit to having cocaine on you."

"Yes, I guessed it was cocaine but I never tried it so I wasn't sure."

"You know, this doesn't make much sense."

"Yes, I do know that."

"And what does this have to do with you trying to substitute urine a couple weeks ago?"

"I found out that I love treatment. I have met such great people while in treatment and have friends now. I never had friends before. When you told me that I would be graduating soon, I guess I freaked out. I wanted to stay in treatment, at least a little longer. I couldn't think of another solution. I looked up Al and asked him if I could buy some dirty urine. It really grossed me out but, like I said, I couldn't think of another way out."

"You do realize, don't you, that your story is very implausible."

"Yes, I know it's a strange story, but it's true. I wouldn't lie to you."

"It seems that you have been lying to me for over a year now. Which should I believe? That you are an addict in treatment who has been substituting her urine or that you never had a drug problem but lied to me to get into treatment and tried to fake a positive UA?"

"Marian, I know you shouldn't trust me on this, but I'm telling the truth. I haven't cheated on all my UAs. I really haven't."

"Lucy, I'm afraid there is no way to prove which is the truth. Cheating on your UA could be enough to get you kicked out of treatment. You know what that will lead to?"

"I think so."

"It would lead to at least ten days of jail, a felony on your record and treatment elsewhere."

"But, I didn't do anything wrong, at least I didn't intend to. I don't have a drug

problem. Really, I don't."

"Lucy, you were told all this a long time ago. You shouldn't be surprised. You did know what could happen if you were caught trying to substitute urine. I told you myself."

"Yes, but -"

"Lucy, I have to take this to my supervisor. We will decide then what should be done. Please schedule an appointment to meet with me in a few days."

2.

Lucy went into work that day, preparing what to say to her supervisor about her absence from work. Before she could say much of anything, she was told that her manager wanted to see her as soon as she came in. Nervous and shaking a bit, Lucy went to the fourteenth floor, into the office and up to the secretary's desk. She just looked at her and motioned her towards the manager's door.

Lucy knocked lightly and entered the door. The man was on the phone but motioned her to a chair. He ended his conversation quickly, hung up the phone and turned to her.

"I am very disappointed in the report I just received from your counselor at the treatment center. When I agreed to cooperate with your treatment, I expected that you would do everything they asked of you. I expected that you would be truthful and honest. I thought that you of all people would do what she was expected to do. I must say again that I'm very disappointed in you."

Lucy tried hard not to tear up. It would do no good to show weakness to her manager. "I'm sorry sir."

"I should think so. I'm amazed you would do such a thing."

"Yes, sir."

"I just want you to realize that if you want to keep your job, you will have to complete your treatment successfully."

"Yes sir."

3.

In a matter of days, Lucy found herself in Marian's office again. As the time before, Marian was very serious and avoided small talk.

"We have made a couple of decisions. If you follow them, we will not terminate you from treatment."

"Ok, Marian."

"There is no way either of us can believe that you came into treatment without a drug problem. It's beyond comprehension why someone would do that. That means you have needed treatment but have not been entirely honest with us during that treatment. Due to your behavior, it is evident that you meet criteria for a higher level of care. In other words, we believe you need residential treatment."

"Residential? But I don't -"

"Lucy, listen carefully to me. We cannot give you the treatment here that you need. Residential is appropriate. If you want to complete treatment, get the felony off your record, you will need to be cooperative with residential treatment. Your employer has agreed to give you the time off you need. You don't have to accept this decision but if you do not go into residential treatment, you will be terminated from this program and I know you know what that means."

"This seems so extreme."

"Not at all. I think it's exactly what you need." Her face softened and she leaned towards Lucy. "I really do think that you have made some tremendous changes. You have learned so much. But it obviously isn't enough. You need more. Once you're done with residential treatment, you will return here and if you're successful, you will graduate a couple months later."

Lucy couldn't help but feel trapped.

Chapter Twenty Three

Six Weeks Ago

Lucy was more than a little nervous as she waited for Andy to arrive. She hadn't seen him for several weeks now, though they had talked on the phone. He had sounded confused on the phone but willing to do what he needed to do to help her through this time. Lucy really hoped he would, but he didn't know the full truth yet. Lucy had to tell him everything.

Soon, Andy walked into the coffee shop and sat down in front of her. For a moment, he just looks at her, then gives her a small smile. "I've missed you."

"I've missed you too." She reached out and took his hand.

"What is going on? I've been worrying."

"Yes, I know you have and I'm sorry." She closed her eyes a moment and then opened them and looked at her again. "I am in trouble at the treatment center. They are

talking about terminating me from treatment."

"Why would they do that?"

"Andy, I have something to tell you. You will not like what I'm going to say and you probably won't understand it but I want you to listen to the end of my story. Please?"

Andy nodded.

"Andy, I've never had a drug problem. I faked it. That first time I stepped into the NA meeting was fully an accident. I had worked late and the elevator happened to stop on two and got out before I realized it wasn't the ground floor and then I decided to take the stairs and I saw the open door and the voices and I went to check. I was petty surprised at what I found there. The next time I went there, I had planned it. I found everyone, especially you, very welcoming and kind. I didn't have many friends then. I didn't have any friends then, so it all was so new to me. And it felt good too, being accepted as I was, or as I appeared to be.

"You were right to suspect that I had very little knowledge of addiction. I didn't realize what kind of person Al was. I have to say, I liked the attention he gave me and I liked that you two seemed to fight over me. That had never happened before. When you told me that I was in denial, I really didn't know what you mean, but when you said I needed formal treatment, I was very worried. I was afraid if I didn't get treatment, you wouldn't like me anymore. I really didn't want to lose your friendship. I think I was in love with you by that time.

"I went to Al and got some drugs from him. I really didn't know what it was he gave me, but I was told later it was cocaine. I never did cocaine. I went to a place that Al told me that police officers were usually around and made sure I got caught by a police

officer. I wanted to be offered drug court because I couldn't afford treatment otherwise.

"Well, I was offered drug court and accepted it. At first it was very confusing with so many different things I had to do. Soon it settled down, though and I got used to it. I began to love it. I didn't ever want to leave treatment. I had friends there. I was learning so many things there. I was complimented a lot. Growing up with the father I had, this was very unusual and it felt so very good.

Then Marian told me that I was doing so well, it was time to talk about graduation and she made me agree to graduation in two months. I freaked out. I totally lost it. Shortly after this session, you found me in my apartment in pretty bad shape. I had been trying to figure out a way out of what I saw was a pretty bad situation. I had been living a lie and I didn't want to be found out. The only choice as I could see it was to play my role a bit better. I decided I needed to give a positive UA but I wasn't willing to actually take a drug. I had been drug free all my life and didn't really want to change that now.

"I remembered where I had seen Al and I waited there until he showed up. He didn't understand what it was I was trying to do and at first I didn't think he would help me, but for some reason he did help. He got me some dirty urine and I tried to substitute it for my own urine, but I got caught.

"Marian was upset as I knew she would be and she didn't believe what I had told her about faking an addiction. She could have had me terminated then and there but she talked to her supervisor and they decided that I needed residential treatment. I tried to tell her that it wasn't necessary but she told me I had a choice between residential treatment or termination from the program. She had sent a report to my manager at work and he, too, said that I had to finish residential treatment if I wanted to keep my job.

"So, I'm going to be entering residential treatment within a month, as soon as a bed can be found. It's not too far from here but I will have no contact with anyone outside of the treatment center for at least the first few weeks. After that black out period, I can have visitors." She fell silent and looked up at Andy. She had been looking at the table top during her speech and had concentrated so hard on what she was saying that she didn't notice when he had pulled his hands away.

"I don't know what to say." He looked directly at her.

"Can you say that you understand why I did this stuff?"

"No, I can't understand what you did. I trusted you."

"Yes, I know you did. You have been wonderful to me and I love you for it. I only hope you can forgive me for deceiving you and give me another chance."

"I don't know. I just don't know." He looked off into the distance and was silent. Lucy waited patiently. Finally, he looked up to her. "Honesty has been very important to me ever since I became clean and sober. I told myself then that I would surround myself with other honest people and that way, I wouldn't have to worry about deceit.

"Then I met you and found what I thought was a like minded person. You were such an honest person and the honesty of others was important to you also. You always told me the truth, or so I thought. We had similar interests and you challenged my beliefs in such a refreshing way. I felt like each of us made the other person more alive, more human.

"And now I find it was a fake, you were a fake. Nothing you showed me was real. You used those people in NA and you used me for your own good. You did not think about how your actions affected the lives of others. You not only owe me an apology but

you owe everyone at the NA meeting both an explanation and an apology."

He stood up. "I don't know what to say. I have to think about all of this." He turned and left as Lucy watched him through her tear.

Chapter Twenty Four

Five Weeks Ago

1.

Lucy first tried sitting in her usual spot, but she was far too restless to stay there. Usually she felt very comfortable at her NA meeting, but not this time. Had Al talked to any of her friends here? Had Andy? No one would probably believe Al but Andy they would believe. Would Andy tell them? What exactly would Andy say to them? Would Andy really do that to her? She loved Andy and she trusted him, but he was very upset with her now and with reason. So, where was he?

Lucy paced back and forth at the back of the room. She had forgotten to bake any cookies and she got some good natured teasing about it and she tried to be pleasant, but it was hard when she had so much on her mind.

The speaker had stepped up to the podium and was asking for people to sit down

and Lucy had taken her usual seat, when she turned and saw Andy enter the room. He stopped and looked directly at her. He was still angry. She could tell. She could also see pain underneath and realized that she had hurt him far more than she thought possible. Andy walked to the other side of the audience and sat down.

As the meeting was breaking up, Lucy and Andy just kept their seats. Other members looked at them but did not approach either of them. Finally, they were the only ones left in the room. Lucy stood first and put away her chair. She then walked over to Andy who had stood.

"Are you going to talk to me?" Lucy tried very hard to be calm but it was hard.

"I'm not sure what there is to say."

"Please Andy. Just give me a chance. Please talk to me."

Andy nodded and started walking to the doorway and Lucy followed. Maybe she had a chance with him after all. Maybe she could make him understand.

2.

They walked a block to their usual coffee shop. Andy bought a cup of coffee for each of them and they sat down at their usual table by the window. Andy just stared out the window for a long moment and Lucy watched him, trying to be patient.

"You know I love you." She couldn't wait any longer.

"I know you say you do."

"Andy, I do love you. I haven't lied about that."

"Lucy, words are easy. Actions are different."

"But I didn't do anything to you. I didn't -"

"Lying is something, Lucy. You behaved as though your lies were truth, but they

weren't, were they."

"But Andy -"

"Lucy, did I ever tell you about my son?"

"You have a son?"

"I know I did tell you about my wife, Charlotte."

"Yes. You divorced her a few years ago."

Andy again stared out the window of the coffee shop. "We married shortly after she graduated from high school. She said she wanted to go to college, so I worked hard to earn enough money to pay for that. I was working long hours then, and her program meant lots of study and papers and so forth.

"She was a junior in college when she told me she was pregnant. I was so excited. I had always wanted to be a father. She had told me when we first became engaged that she didn't want kids until she was done with school, but here she was, pregnant. She seemed to be happy even though it meant she had to slow down on her classes. She was still attending classes but not as many.

"The baby was born on time in November and I was there for the birth.. He was absolutely gorgeous. I fell in love as soon as I saw him. I was a doting father. He never had a babysitter because I was always there. I cut down my work schedule enough to be there when Charlotte had classes. I worked nights when I knew she would be home to take care of him. I bought him and Charlotte everything I could think of that they would need.

"Then, when he was three, he got sick and we had to take him to the emergency room. I thought I was going to lose him, he was so sick, but whatever was wrong, the

doctors were able to take care of it. In the process though, he needed blood. They told me he had type B blood."

"But you have type A."

"Yes and so does Charlotte."

"That means -"

"Exactly. I was not his father. I didn't know what to say at first. He was my son in all important ways but genetically. Once we got home, I asked Charlotte about it. She said that she had had an affair, a short lived one, with a graduate student at school. She didn't apologize to me for it. She seemed nearly proud of herself, proud that she had kept the affair a secret for so long, especially since it was still going on. I asked her why and she answered 'because I could.' I didn't understand what she meant and I still don't understand.

"We talked about this in several forms throughout the next two weeks. I know she was becoming frustrated, but I really did want to understand. I loved her and I loved the baby. At one point, she shouted at me that this was not the first time she had cheated on me. She had cheated since we had first started dating. She had chosen to marry me because she thought that I would make the best living for her and that she would be able to keep the truth from me. "That was enough. I told her I couldn't live this way anymore and I left."

"She told me who the father was, or at least who she thought the father was. She was so arrogant about it all. She didn't regret what she did, she regretted that she had been caught and she told me she wouldn't be quitting sleeping with other men. I think she thought that I was so much in love with her and the baby, that I would put up with

anything.

She was wrong. There was no way I could live like that. I told her so, told her that I had to have a divorce, I couldn't give her what she wanted and she definitely wouldn't give me what I wanted. I told her I would pay child support, that I still loved our son. She reminded me that he wasn't 'our' son and she was going to make sure I never saw him again. She would go to court to change the father name on the birth certificate and do whatever else she had to do to keep me out of his life.

"It was about the darkest day of my life. All this time I had thought my life was one way and then, suddenly, it all fell down around my ankles and I discovered it was a chimera all that time. I told myself that I would be very careful whenever a woman came along who could become as important as she had been. I would not trust easily and I would make sure, very sure, that she was worthy of trust and only then would I allow myself to fall in love."

Andy clenched his fist and then relaxed his hand. And with that one motion, Lucy could see that this man had a temper, that when he became angry, he would frighten her. But, she told herself, that didn't matter. He mattered and Andy being in her life mattered. The temper she could handle, the anger, she wouldn't give him any reason to show it.

"I'm sorry, Andy. That was a terrible thing for her to do." She reached forward for his hand but he pulled his hands out of her reach.

"Don't you understand what I did by believing you? Do you have any idea why I told you about Charlotte and the baby? Do you think that I was just in the mood to tell stories? Come on out with it. Why did I tell you about this story?" His intense gaze made her feel as though she would burst into flames.

"Well, to let me know that you've been hurt before."

"Is that it? Is that all you learned?"

"Well, I guess that you were hurt by a woman?"

"Lord, I guess you don't get it." He got up from the table and walked to the door, then back to the table, to the counter and then back to the table, to the table and stared outside a moment his fists on his hips, then back to the table and sat down. "I don't think you deserve this but I will give you an explanation all the same. I told you about Charlotte and the baby, named Sam Jr., by the way, to let you know how important truth is to me. She lied to me, she used me and it felt like my life had imploded. Then, I meet you and I learn to trust you. Then, what do you do to me? You lie. You lie to me about some pretty important, pretty basic things. You found something that was important to me and you used that information so you could get me to trust you and then you lied to me. My life is no longer what it had seemed and I feel lost."

He slapped away the hand she reached out to him. "Don't touch me. Don't you dare touch me. You are like a snake and I don't like snakes." He stood up.

"Andy. Please wait." She stood up too and called out to him.

He turned at the door and faced her. "Why should I wait? What will you do next?"

"Andy, please, I love you."

"Love me? You love me? Pretty words but I don't know that I can trust them. I know that I can't trust you."

"Please, won't you give me another chance? Please?"

"I don't know. I just don't know. I have to think about it."

"Andy, I'm going into residential treatment. I should leave for it in a week or so."

After the black out period, will you come to visit me?"

"Why should I?"

"Maybe by then you will have realized that you can trust me. Maybe by that time, I can prove myself to you." Her eyes began to leak tears. "Andy, I love you. I've never loved another man and I have plenty of reasons not to trust men. I know I did wrong. I made so many bad decisions but everything was so overpowering, I didn't really know the best way to handle things. I'm learning now, really I am. Please give me another chance. Please."

He stood there and looked at her. She didn't seem to be play acting now. He knew that many women did use tears to get what they want, but Lucy wasn't one of them. At least he didn't think she was. He didn't know her anymore. Was she power tripping? She had told him some of her history and it was pretty bad. She didn't grow up like many women had, being taught how to manipulate men. She had been a sad, lonely little girl with very little real life experience. He needed to trust his instincts but, at the moment, he felt like he really couldn't. Maybe time was what he needed, time to think it all over, time to figure out what she had presented to him was real and what was a lie. Did she deserve this, deserve to have him think about everything through, giving her another chance or should he just call it all off? Did it matter if she deserved it? What did he want for himself. Time to be a little selfish. What did he deserve?"

Andy looked again at Lucy. She was still standing there, so very patient, cheeks tearstained but tears were no longer falling. She looked like she was ready to take whatever he had to give her. She seemed ready to resign to whatever fate gave her.

"I don't know if I can do that, Lucy. Go ahead and go into residential and we can

talk when you get out. Don't make any assumptions here." He raised a hand to keep her from running to him. "I make no promises, except I will talk to you when you get out of residential."

He turned and left the coffee shop. Lucy went to the window and watched him get into his car and drive away. He didn't look at her at all as he drove off. Lucy did not feel very hopeful about a future with Andy, but then, maybe she didn't deserve one. Time would tell.

3.

Lucy sat back down in disbelief. What was he doing? He loves her. She knows he loves her. Why don't her give her another chance. After all, she isn't Charlotte. She would never do what Charlotte did. Besides, after her horrible childhood, he should be more understanding. He knew how she had grown up, how she had bounced from foster home to foster home because her father had threatened her life. He knew all this. Why was he being so hard on her?

Lucy continued to fight back her tears. Yes, he was gone but she still wouldn't give him the satisfaction of making her cry. She slipped on her coat, picked up her bag and left the coffee shop.

Walking down the street, she paid no attention to her surroundings. Several people had to jump out of her way to avoid being knocked down. Some of them were less than happy at the trouble she put them up to and shot her dirty looks, which she did not notice. One of them became verbal and called her names she would have been shocked if she had heard. Lucy had no idea where she was going but had a strong need for movement. She walked fast, long strides on legs that were not used to it.

Then, someone did catch her attention and brought her out of her reverie "Hey, sweet thing. Where are you going so fast?"

Lucy looked down at the hand on her arm and then to the face that belonged to the arm. She looked up at Al and glared at him. He quickly removed his hand, but that didn't stop his tongue.

"You look like you're ready to kill someone>"

"Leave me alone, Al. I have no patience for you."

"No patience for Al? After all I've done for you." He continued to leer at her and moved in a little closer but did not touch her.

"All you've done for me? Al, you have done nothing but cause me trouble."

"Caused you trouble? Haven't I given you everything, and I repeat everything that you asked me. And I am willing to do more. Just ask good ole Al."

"I don't want anything more from you. Just leave me alone." She started to walk again.

"Now, why are you in such a mad mood? Who could have made cute, sweet, charming Lucy so angry? Al is smart if nothing else. I'm sure I can figure it out." He walked along side Lucy. "Ahh! I know. She must have had a fight with the hunk better known as Andy. Am I right? Lucy, am I right? Did you just have a fight with Andy?"

Lucy stopped abruptly and turned to Al. "I don't want to hear another word from you. Please leave me alone." She turned away from him again.

"Aw, come on Lucy. I'm just teasing a little. What happened? Tell Al all about it. What's wrong?"

"Leave me alone."

"Didn't it work? Wasn't the pee I gave you dirty enough for you?"

"I have no idea if it was clean or dirty. I didn't have a chance to use it."

"And why not?"

"Because they caught me trying to substitute it, that's why." She sank down onto a bus bench. "I couldn't do it, ok? I fumbled and they found out what I was doing."

"That's not so bad. It's not as though you were cheating with every UA."

"But they take it that way. They said that if I cheated on this one, or tried to cheat on it, then I must have cheated on all or at least most of the other ones. They threatened to terminate me from the program."

"That's not so bad either. You get some jail time and go back into treatment."

"And the felony. Don't forget about the felony."

"That's not so bad either. Don't tell me you've never been caught by the police either?"

"Never. And I don't have a drug problem either. I faked one."

"Good Lord, woman! Why would you do something like that?" He sat down next to her.

Lucy moved further away from him. Why was she telling him all this? It didn't make sense to her. She loathed Al.

"That's my business. You don't need to know that." She stood up again and continued walking, almost power walking.

"And I bet good boy Andy was not happy about all this, was he."

"If you must know, no he wasn't."

"Not very encouraging. He must have been really pissed."

"Well, he had every reason to be pissed."

"But I thought you two were friends. In fact, I had expected to get a wedding invitation from you two."

"Shut up."

"Come on, little Lucy. I'm trying to be understanding here."

She stopped and turned to him. "Andy has every right to be angry at me. After all, I lied to him, not once but several times. You can't expect him to be ok with it. You would have been upset if you were in his place."

"On the contrary, I would have tried to understand. After all, a woman like you in my life would be extraordinary. I certainly wouldn't want to let you get away." Al had not expected Lucy to stop so abruptly and had to skid to a stop. He reached over to touch her arm again and tried to put on a very understanding look on his face.

Lucy pulled her arm out of his grasp and snarled at him. "I said, don't touch me. And don't talk to me about Andy. You don't know me and you don't know him. Now just leave me alone!" She saw a bus coming and climbed the stairs, sitting on the far side so that she couldn't see Al and he couldn't see her.

"You bitch! Who are you to think you are better than me? You're nothing but a hooker! A hooker! Do you hear me? Goddamn bitch hooker!"

The doors finally closed and Lucy couldn't hear anymore of his diatribe. "I think he is a bit upset with you."

Lucy turned to look at the person sharing her seat, a small, bent, elderly woman who reached out with a palsied hand and patted her arm. Lucy couldn't help but smile at her.

"Yes, I do think he is a bit angry at me."

"Don't let it bother you. I don't think he is worth your time."

"Yes, I agree. I won't even think about him anymore."

"Good girl." The hand moved away from her arm. Lucy closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the head rest. What a perfect way to end her day.

4.

Lucy had no idea where she was going, where the bus was going. She had gotten on the first bus that came along to avoid talking to or listening to Al. Now, she had little choice but to stay on the bus until it came to the end of the line and turned around. She was the only rider on the bus when the driver pulled up and stopped. "I have a thirty five minute lay over here."

Lucy startled and then looked up at him. "Oh. Ok. Can I stay on the bus?"

"Sure. Where is it you want to go anyway."

"Just back to town."

"You lost?"

"In a way, but not like you mean. I got on to avoid someone. I just need to go back to town again."

"There is probably another bus that is leaving sooner than mine."

Lucy stood and walked up the aisle to the front of the bus and got off. "Ok. Thanks."

She walked around the transit center at first just trying to kill time and not wanting to talk to anyone else. Soon, however, she began to notice the cold and found a bus that would take her back to the main part of town. She sat in the front this time, hoping it

would keep her aware of where she was and it worked.

The bus arrived down town, she got off the bus and then looked around herself. She knew this neighborhood. Very well, in fact. Across the street from when she stood was the building where her employer was and where her NA meeting met. She looked at her watch. The NA meeting should be getting started soon. She entered the building and took the stairs up to the second floor and, without thinking about what she was doing so she wouldn't chicken out, she entered the room and walked up to the person who would be leading the meeting.

"Roy, I know this is short notice, but could I address the members?"

"Lucy, you can run the meeting if you want to. You haven't taken a turn yet."

"No, I don't think that is a good idea, not after everyone has heard what I have to say."

"Ok. Whatever you need." Roy then called the meeting in order and then announced that Lucy had something to say. She walked up to the podium and, holding on to it very tightly, started talking.

"Hello everyone. I have something I must tell you." She paused and looked down a moment and then looked out at the audience. She could see Al in the back, leaning against the wall, smirking at her. She could not see Andy anywhere. "I have to tell you that I have been dishonest with you all. I first stumbled onto this meeting when I had worked late. I didn't even know there was such a thing as Narcotics Anonymous. And why should I? I don't use narcotics. When I first came here, by accident, I was a lonely, frightened little girl. What I found here were some pretty friendly, accepting people. I wanted to fit in. I wanted that so badly that I wasn't really thinking. I decided at one point

that I needed to prove my worthiness by going into treatment and I placed myself in a situation where a police officer would find me with drugs on me. I was offered drug court and I accepted. It was exactly what I wanted.

"I enjoyed treatment too, once I got over the scary start of it. In fact, I enjoyed it so much that I didn't want to graduate from the program. So, I decided that I needed a dirty UA so they would keep me there. I didn't want to do any drugs. I was scared to use drugs because I had seen what drug addicts had gone through and I didn't want to experience that or cause my body to have any problems. And I didn't really want to become addicted. I managed to get some dirty urine, or at least I was told it was dirty, but I couldn't do it right. I wanted to substitute the dirty urine for my own, but I was clumsy and the UA Tech discovered what I was doing and reported me to my counselor.

"She was so angry at me and with reason. She ultimately gave me two choices: go into residential treatment or be terminated from the program. I fought this. Why go into residential when I didn't really have a drug problem? But she told me that since I was trying to cheat on my UA this time, which meant they had to figure I had cheated on the rest of them too. I told her I would go into residential and I will. I will be leaving within the next few weeks to a site in Eastern Oregon.

"I truly regret what I did. I have lied to so many people, so many people who are very important to me. I regret lying to all of you. You accepted me at face value and I abused your trust of me. I know I don't belong here. I don't belong here because I don't have a drug problem but most of all, I don't belong here because I lied to all of you.

"This will be the last time I will come to this meeting. I wanted to apologize to everyone and to thank all of you for everything you have done for me and given to me.

You, all of you, are class acts. You deserve better than what I gave you, what I am able to give you." She stepped away from the podium and left the room, without looking at any of the audience. She walked to the door of the stairway but paused and rested against the wall there, eyes closed as they teared up. She did not want to leave. She loved her friends at the meeting but she was not a good friend to them. She finally opened the door and walked down the stairs. And as the door closed behind her, she could hear voices start up in the NA meeting and realized no one had said a word until then.

Chapter Twenty Five

Present Day

1.

The room had been very quiet as Lucy told the end of her story. At one point, it had appeared that Mrs. Porter had fallen asleep but she was fully awake now. Both she and Father Mark looked at Lucy with such sadness in their eyes that she was beginning to regret telling them her story. Then Father Mark shifted in his seat so that he could be closer to Lucy. He touched her hand.

"My dear, that is such a sad story. You have gone through so much in your short life, much more than anyone should have to go through. Whatever you need from us, we will give you."

Mrs. Porter nodded in agreement. "But what about Andy? Has he forgiven you yet?"

Lucy teared up as she prepared to answer. "No, he hasn't forgiven me and I don't know if he ever will. I called him a couple times, to see how he was, to tell him when I will be leaving for residential treatment, but he never picked up the phone or returned my messages. I wrote him a couple letters too, but he sent them back unopened. I even went online and sent him an e-mail but he deleted it without reading it." She was fully in tears now.

"I don't know what to do about this. I love Andy. I really do and I think he loves me. But I did some totally terrible things to him. I realize now how important honesty is to him and why, but I don't know how I can tell him and if he won't answer my messages, I don't know how I can tell him."

"Be patient, my dear." Mrs. Porter spoke up. "Sometimes men can be kind of hard headed, but if he really loves you, he will come to see it your way. He will realize that the love he feels for you and the love you feel for him is quite enough for him to forgive you."

"I hope you're right. I truly hope so. I feel like he's my entire family. I lost my family once when I went into foster care. I don't want to lose my family again."

"My child, he is not your entire family, nor should he be." Father Mark looked stern but loving also. "You need more people in your live who can sustain you, who can show you that you are loved and worthy of that loving. Hopefully you can find that kind of love and acceptance in residential."

Mrs. Porter spoke up again. "What about your job? Will they hold it for you?"

Lucy smiled a little. "Yes, they will hold it for me and my insurance will pay for the residential treatment. I do feel guilty about that because they are paying for something that I really don't need. I plan to find some way to pay them back for this. Still, I don't

plan to stay with my employer long. I don't find that they are what I want for a career, despite all the years I have been there. I want to do something to give back to the community. I just don't know what that is yet."

"You will figure it out." Mrs. Porter smiled at her as Father Mark nodded in agreement. "There are all sorts of ways to figure out what you really want to do. I bet you can even explore this while in treatment."

"I'm planning on that." Lucy squirmed in her seat a little. How to ask the favor? Part of it was easy but she wasn't sure of the second part. Father Mark seemed to be reading her mind.

"Now, what is it you want to ask of us?"

"Well, two things really. Would you please watch over my cat for me while I'm gone? I can't take her with me and I really have no one else to ask."

"Of course we will! Absolutely!"

She remembered that especially Mrs. Porter loved cats. Father Mark was less favorably inclined towards cats but he was an animal lover and advocate.

"I think there is something else you want to ask us though."

"Well," she hesitated. "I have no family, as I said before, and the information I got from the residential treatment center said that there is a family component to treatment that includes family group and other such activities. I was hoping you would take the place of my family. No one else has known me as long or as much."

"Of course we will." Father Mark didn't hesitate. "We would be honored to be your family." He smiled. "Though I bet it will raise eye brows for you to have a priest as a part of your family."

"Maybe so." Lucy smiled back at him. "I can tell them that Father is my brother, or uncle."

"Oh my dear! I almost forgot to tell you." Mrs. Porter was bouncing up and down in her seat, clapping her hands in excitement. "We heard from your brother."

"You heard from Bryan?"

"Yes, just a couple weeks ago. He said he hadn't seen you or heard from you in a very long time, wanted to get in contact with you but didn't know how. We had to tell him we hadn't heard from you either but promised to give you his address and phone number if we ever saw you."

"Where is he? How is he?"

"He's a fine young man. He's married and has three children, all girls. He teaches at the community college." Mrs. Porter rose and rushed to the desk, rustled around in the papers a moment and then found what she was looking for and hurried back to Lucy.

"Here. He left these for you."

Lucy reached out for the papers. The first one had his address and phone number written in a very nice script. The second was a short letter, signed, love, Bryan. The third was a family picture, he and what Lucy assumed was his wife, surrounded by three very sweet looking girls. She turned it over and saw his handwriting on the back: "Dad and Mom (Evelyn), Judith (five years old), Annie (six years old) and Lucy (seven years old). Lucy's vision began to be clouded by the tears she shed. He had named his first born daughter after her.

"Thank you." She held the items close to her chest. "This helps so much. She then placed them carefully into her purse and stood. "I need to get going. My bus will

pick me up a couple blocks away from here."

Father Mark and Mrs. Porter stood also and followed Lucy to the front door.

Father Mark opened the door for her. "You take care of yourself, my dear."

"Yes, I certainly will." She gave him a hug and then turned to Mrs. Porter. "Thank you so much for everything." She gave Mrs. Porter a hug and then turned to the small pile of luggage on the porch.

"Here is my kitty." She lifted up the car carrier and handed it to Mrs. Porter. "His name is Sonny and he's a dear. Has helped me through so much." She then handed a large bag back to Father Mark. "Here's food for him and a little box and bag of litter. Just let me know if you run out and I'll send you money for more."

"Don't you worry about that, Lucy. We can handle some cat food or litter. He is such a dear. He's inside there, purring. I thought cats didn't like being confined."

"He's special." Lucy gave a weak smile. "Thank you again." She turned, picked up her bag and walked down the stairs and the walk to the sidewalk and then to the corner. Father Mark and Mrs. Porter watched her until she was out of sight.

"I sure hope we see her again." Mrs. Porter seemed to have her doubts.

"She will. I know it." Father Mark turned and walked into the house followed by Mrs. Porter.

"It will all work out. I just know it well." The door closed softly behind them. And as it did, the sun began to rise in bright shades of red.