

## Chapter 1

The moonfaced clock ticked softly from its perch above the kitchen door, both silver hands reaching in silent prayer toward the stylized number two. From atop her ladder, Meg Thompson snipped the frayed ends from several old wires that hung from the ceiling. "This is ridiculous, Sky. Did you tell Bob what I said about needing to upgrade the wiring in this place?"

Below her, Sky Hawthorne sat at the linoleum covered kitchen table, flipping through papers and scribbling notes on the bill ledger next to the pile. "I told him three times since we moved in last month. He says his man will get to it."

"Yeah, he said that about the faulty outlet in Drake's room and the dripping faucet in the bathroom, both of which I had to fix because 'his man' never got around to it." Meg shook her head and propped her elbow on the top of the ladder. "You need to get out of this place, Sky. You and Drake deserve better than a dump on the south side."

"If I hadn't been laid off and had to go back to waitressing, we'd still have the old place. It wasn't much, but at least Jerry kept up with the maintenance." Sky placed her pen in the crease of the ledger and turned toward Meg. "This 'dump' is the best we can do for now."

Meg sighed and nodded in understanding. With business slow at the restaurant, Sky hadn't even been able to make much extra in tips over the past few months. Her choices boiled down to either moving here to this dive, or Drake giving up private school and the camps for gifted students he attended during the summer. The tuition had gone up for both in the last year, and Drake would be disappointed if he couldn't go. He had a thirst for knowledge that amazed Meg. Sky sacrificed a great deal to make certain her son had access to opportunities to slake that thirst.

Sky ran both hands through her lustrous sable hair, a magnificent trait inherited from her Navajo father. Meg stared, transfixed, as the amber sunlight glinted off the silken black strands, creating a warm orange glow like a star going nova. Sky captured her hair in a firm grasp with one hand, while removing a rubberband from a jar on the table. The resultant ponytail fell over the top of the orange and red plastic chair and dangled tantalizingly at the small of her back. Meg wanted nothing more at that moment than to take those shining strands in her grasp and pull Sky in for a long kiss. "Things will get better, Sky. I just know it."

"Yeah." Sky sighed and picked up one of the bills from the table. "I hope so. If our renters insurance goes up any more than it has already, Drake and I will be eating a lot more ramen and peanut butter."

Meg watched Sky rub the back of her neck, long fingers kneading her soft, cinnamon-brown skin. Life had been hard on the family. Sky's son had been born with congenital vision disorders that left him functionally blind, save for some varying perception of light. This resulted in severe photosensitivity, but luckily, he experienced little of the involuntary rapid eye movements normally found in such cases. With no one to fault for what had befallen her baby, Sky blamed herself.

The past year was particularly rough for Sky. Meg recalled when the family learned about an experimental surgery in the U.K. that promised a chance of restoring some of Drake's vision. The specialist working with Drake at the time told Sky the technique was unproven and too risky, so he wouldn't recommend it. A few weeks later, the factory where Sky worked announced they were being sold to a German company and were letting all their employees go. After that, Sky couldn't afford the cost of the office visit to get a second opinion, let alone the surgery itself.

"You and Drake could always move into my place." Meg saw Sky's shoulders tense and sighed to herself. She had made the same offer before, and always got the same answer. It frustrated her to watch Sky struggle as she did, and give up so much for her child, when Meg wanted to take care of them both.

"That's generous of you, but I'd rather Drake and I make it on our own." Sky turned and looked up at Meg. "You and your mom have been a tremendous help to us, but I don't want to impose on anyone. It's never a good scene when one does."

"Drake is family, you're family; family looks after each other." The steel ladder shook as Meg climbed down. The familiar guilt at what her brother had done to Sky and Drake simmered in Meg's belly. "After what my brother pulled, it's the least we could do."

"It's not your responsibility," Sky said. "I've told you that before." She rested her hands in her lap but her fingers fidgeted as she spoke. "Things were rough between me and John long before he left."

Meg strode across the kitchen, her work boots thumping across the faded white and blue linoleum. She crouched in front of Sky and enveloped the fidgeting hands within her own. Her brother had always liked to drink and have a good time, but it'd never been a real concern until after Drake was born. Their mom and John used to fight about it all the time. She told him a child was a gift, and that even what appeared to be an imperfection could be a blessing in disguise.

"Drake's a great kid. My brother was too wrapped up in his own sickness to see it. If John wants to go off and disappear without a word, I say, good riddance. You're better off without that mess."

Sky bowed her head, her teeth gritted in suppressed anger. "I guess having a blind child was just something his pride couldn't face."

"I don't feel that way, and neither did Mom. We love you and Drake very much." She rubbed her thumbs across the backs of Sky's hands.

"Drake misses his grandmother. He often talks about the sound of her voice and her smell."

Sky looked up. Meg's heart leapt as she looked into the charcoal blue eyes. It was like looking into a hurricane at sea, and she wished for nothing more than for it to sweep her away forever.

With a shake of her head, Sky added, "I wonder if John even knows Peggy passed away last fall."

Meg shrugged. John had never been one to keep up with the front-page news, much less the obituaries. No one knew where he was, so there hadn't been a way to contact him when their mother died.

"I don't know. Maybe." Meg was shocked when her brother walked away from his beautiful wife and his four-year-old son. Now ten years later, she couldn't begin to imagine how far his sickness had buried him. "It doesn't matter. When Mom died, her family was here with her, at least the ones who knew how to act like family."

"I'd better finish up with the bills." Sighing, Sky slid her hands out of Meg's. "Thanks, Meg. I don't know what I'd have done without you through all of this. You've always been my best friend, you know."

Meg blinked in surprise as her hands grew cooler when the warm touch fell away. Her heart stung with regret at the loss of the intimacy they'd just shared. "I know." She stood and watched as Sky turned back to the pile of papers, regret turning to self-reproach at her own cowardice. "I'd better see what I can do with that light." Meg climbed back up the ladder and removed the wire cutter from her toolbelt.

She and Sky had been friends since they were kids. The two girls and John were inseparable, especially after Sky came to live with them following the death of her father. Then adolescence turned to young love, and while Meg's heart filled with love for her friend, Sky gave her heart to John. Maybe that was what made her so cold toward her brother: he'd gotten the treasure Meg wanted more than anything, and then thrown it away. Meg spent years watching Sky flounder through one hopeless relationship after another. In the beginning, each man seemed like a prince, but before long, he turned into a toad. It killed Meg to watch Sky go

through it all. So many times, Meg had thought about telling Sky how she felt about her, but she never admitted the truth; there was too much to lose. The risk was just too great.

Meg had never been very good at taking chances. Skilled working her hands and good at math, she'd gone into maintenance. Carpentry, plumbing, electrical, all these things came easy to her and, as a result, she had regular work all year round. Three years ago she'd had the chance to join a friend in starting up a construction company, but Meg didn't take the offer. There was Drake and Sky to think about, and her mother. If the company didn't do well, it would drain money from her already tight budget. Now her friend had a thriving company in Detroit, and Meg was still stuck in Milwaukee doing the same old work every day. Sometimes she thought the humdrum drone of her day to day might drive her crazy.

Maybe that was really why John left. He'd always been the one to take risks, to climb higher, to jump farther. When there was a challenge to face, he moved forward, Sky bravely at his side, while Meg stood back weighing the chances, calculating the odds.

Meg knew in her heart that her own fear was what kept her and Sky apart: the fear of Sky rejecting her; the fear of seeming foolish; the fear that once she revealed her feelings, everything would change. Fear was a mighty weight; one that dragged down her heart and spirit.

Brushing the flakes of plaster from her short hair with her fingertips, Meg turned her full attention back to the repair task. She capped each of the connected wires and screwed the light plate back into place. "I'll go downstairs and flip the breaker. This should do for now, but..."

"Yeah, I know." Sky chuckled. "I'll talk to Bob again next week when I drop off the rent check."

Meg climbed down and then rested the ladder on its side so she could close it tight. "You know, you could threaten to withhold rent until the electrical is fixed."

Sky shook her head. "I do that and next thing I know the city inspector gets involved and shuts the whole building down for repairs. Then what would Drake and I do?"

"Yeah, okay." Meg lifted the ladder under her arm and Sky stood and moved to the door. "If he doesn't fix it by November, you'll need to have a back-up plan. If the electrical sucks, the heat will likely be iffy, too. Think about my offer."

"I will." Sky opened the door and smiled. "Thanks again, Meg."

"Anytime." Meg's tone never betrayed the true intent behind her words, or the feelings that fueled it. "Anytime at all."

Sky closed the ledger with a snap and leaned back in her chair, reaching her hands toward the ceiling. Her shoulders cracked, one after the other, and she groaned. Twice a month she went through the torture of paying bills. There was something masochistic about watching a bank account dwindle away, bit by bit, check after check. Things had always been tight, but lately she felt as if they were drowning in a sea of debt with no rescue boat in sight.

If it hadn't been for the state funded programs available to them because of Drake's disability, they never would have been able to afford his doctor bills or school equipment. Books in Braille were expensive enough when you had a son who was a voracious reader, but with Drake going to a school for the gifted, each of his textbooks had to be specially printed.

A year ago, Drake had insisted he wanted a dog like their neighbor Telisha's. Sky applied to accredited training schools all over the country, but most insisted Drake was too young for one of their guide dogs. She gathered letters from his teachers and school, reports from therapists and doctors, and after a long battle, Drake's application was finally accepted by a school in New Jersey.

Their friends and family had pitched in so they could pay Drake's fees, which covered his room and board for the month he stayed at the guide dog school and the travel fare from Milwaukee to Morristown and back. Sky didn't like taking charity, didn't like feeling that she owed a debt to anyone, but she swallowed her pride for Drake's sake.

From the day Jewel entered their lives, she had been a treasure. The freedom her son gained from having Jewel as his guide, and knowing Drake was never alone, brought Sky peace of mind. Vet bills and food for a seventy-pound Labrador were not easy on the budget, but even with the extra financial burden, Jewel was worth her weight in gold.

For his birthday next January, Sky wanted to give Drake a Braille printer and a computer. She had saved all year for the cash and had even looked into financing to get it. That, too, had fallen prey to the reality of their new situation and the limitations their reduced circumstances placed on any further plans. She wanted to make Drake's life easier, to give her son everything he needed, but...

Sky sighed and gathered up the bills. Throwing on her coat, she checked her pocket for the keys and locked the front door on her way out. One more batch of bills paid to fend off the creditors, and a large hole burned in an already thin bank account. Just proof that no matter how tough things got, somehow she and Drake got by. Some months it was close, and lately she almost always came home tired, but they survived.

She walked across the sidewalk to the mailbox, the packet of filled envelopes held tightly in her hand. Things were starting to get desperate, and she wasn't sure what more she could do. One more surprise, and the narrow ledge on which their lives precariously perched might just tumble out from under her little family.

"Mrs. Hawthorne?"

Sky looked back toward the apartment building and saw a man in a sharply pressed suit standing on the top step. Everything about him, from the serious look on his face to the well-shined shoes, said his was not a social call.

"It's Ms., actually; I never took my husband's last name." She opened the door of the mailbox and slid the letters inside. Her heart raced. A lawyer? It had to be. She took a deep breath and turned to the man. "Can I help you, sir?"

The man walked down the cracked cement steps and crossed the sidewalk to her. "My name is Michael Kessing, Ms. Hawthorne, and I'm here to discuss an official matter with you." He held out his card and she took it. "Is there somewhere we can talk? Over coffee perhaps?"

Sky eyed the card suspiciously. "Any reason why we can't just talk right here?"

"Ms. Hawthorne, it's been a long drive from Columbia County. I'd like to sit down and relax while we discuss this matter." He pulled a leather wallet from the inside pocket of his coat and flipped it open to reveal his driver's license. "I understand your caution, and I commend it, but what we have to discuss could take a while."

She scanned the driver's license carefully and matched it with the name on the business card in her hand. Sky checked her watch. It was three o'clock; Drake would be home on the bus in an hour and a half. "Can you tell me what this is about, Mr. Kessing?"

"Ms. Hawthorne, it will take a long time to give you the details of what I've been sent to discuss with you." Mr. Kessing walked back to the steps and picked up the briefcase that he'd set there. "Suffice it to say, it would be quite advantageous for your family if you agree to this meeting."

Sky chewed the inside of her cheek in thought. The last thing her family needed was more trouble. Panic welled inside her until she was sure she would choke on it. Best to get this over with so she could plan how to attack the new problem.

Sky motioned with a nod down the street. The cool fall air made her arms and hands tingle and she rubbed her fingers together to warm them. "There's a diner across from the casino on Clyborn. I'll have to call someone to meet my son when he gets home from school and also let them know where I am."

"Understandable." Mr. Kessing nodded at her arms, which were covered in goosebumps. "You may want to get a jacket while you're at it. I'll meet you at the diner in fifteen minutes. Is that sufficient time?"

"Give me twenty; that should be fine."

Mr. Kessing's hard-soled shoes clicked on the street as he crossed to the other side, apparently heading for the silver Acura RSX parked at the corner. Sky took several calming breaths and turned back toward the apartment building.

The tiny ledge her family perched upon was getting even shakier, and there was nothing to grab on to if they fell.

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