

## Prologue

Brenna Lanigan pulled up to the curb just outside the entrance to Pacific Heights High School. At just after seven in the morning, she was not the only parent delivering her sons to the new semester.

"What time tonight?" she asked as she stretched her right arm over the space between the front two seats and looked squarely at Thomas, next to her in the front passenger seat. At age seventeen, his body was beginning to chisel and thicken in the chest. James, a little rounder and softer at fifteen, was pulling his book bag together in the back seat. Both were turning away from her already, their doors open.

She grabbed Thomas' shoulder before he could get out of reach. He didn't look back as he answered, "No need. I've got orientation with FIRE. I'll catch the city bus when it's over."

She released his shoulder. "James?" she directed to where he stood outside the vehicle.

"I've got stuff planned with friends," he answered.

"Will I see either of you for dinner?" she asked. Thomas paused, and without turning back to look at her, he shook his head. She glanced at James and saw that he was looking at her, though she couldn't interpret his dour expression.

"I'm making Chicago deep dish," she offered. "All the toppings you like."

James shrugged. "Sorry, Mom. I won't be in 'til curfew."

"Thomas?"

"That's a big meal. We having company?" Thomas hazarded a glance toward her. His eyebrows drew together briefly, betraying his anxiety, before he assumed a bland expression.

Brenna had been thinking of inviting her new lover, Cassidy Hyland, and her son Ryan. She missed the blonde woman terribly. The last time they had all been together, Cassidy had come over for New Year's Eve. Thomas and James had gone off to the Palisades neighborhood park, reluctantly taking Ryan with them. At the time, it had been wonderful, giving Cassidy and Brenna time alone together. But any ground she thought had been gained in her sons' adjustment to her new relationship was short lived. Up before dawn most days, both boys stayed away all day for the remainder of their school break.

Any time Cassidy's name came up, Thomas and James acted as if they didn't hear a word Brenna said, and the last time she'd tried to talk to them about it, she'd ending up getting upset. The school driveway was no place for a scene, so Brenna reluctantly said, "It'll be just the three of us."

After a moment Thomas said, "I should be home by six."

"Thank you. James?"

Something near the building caught his eye, and his response was hurried. "I'll reheat. Catch you later."

He slammed the back door, and she watched as he ran to catch up with someone. She decided his objective was a girl, despite the black leather jacket that hid most of her upper body. The jeans were just a little too snug on shapely legs to belong to a young adult male.

She turned to see Thomas walking away more sedately, but no less intent than James on some point in the flow of students entering the front entrance of the school building.

A horn honked behind her, and Brenna reluctantly turned her attention to guiding the SUV away from the curb and into the flow of traffic exiting the school grounds. Safely in the flow of vehicles on her way back to her Pacific Palisades neighborhood, she turned her thoughts to the continuing problem of what to do with her sons' clearly expressed discontent with her new relationship.

Stopping at the grocer's with a short list of items, she wandered aimlessly, the dawdling giving her time to think. It had been a week since New Year's. It would be another week before she returned to work on the Pinnacle Pictures lot where she portrayed Commander Susan Jakes on the science fiction series *Time Trails*. She had already cleaned her home top to bottom — refreshing drawer liners and shelf paper, cleaning out the refrigerator, and running the self-cleaning cycle on the oven which had been used heavily during the holiday season just past.

Unless she went against their not so subtly expressed wishes, this cold shoulder from Thomas and James would mean another week without seeing Cassidy.

Brenna hadn't given a second thought to going weeks without seeing either her first husband, Tom, or her second, Kevin. She had attributed that to their mutual understanding of conflicting schedules, or knowing their responsibilities had been as busy and demanding as hers.

She knew now that didn't actually account for her diffidence to being apart from her spouses. Her new relationship made her feel so different, and not just because of the obvious difference that her lover was a woman. She called Cassidy nearly every night, just to hear the sound of her voice, to share a thought or two, or find out about her day.

Brenna was forty-one, with anything but a sheltered history of lovemaking — from a series of affairs to two marriages — but for the first time she understood the physical craving that went with truly being in love, a craving beyond physical pleasure to emotional completion. She didn't understand how she could have ever settled for anything less, except perhaps because she had never known there was supposed to be anything more.

In the aisle that held magazines in addition to groceries, she studied the industry periodicals and her attention was snared by a cover with two semi-nude women kissing in a lovers' clinch. Curiosity piqued, she studied others nearby and then picked up the first. Picking up a travel magazine showcasing the Oregon portion of the Rocky Mountains for weekend getaways, she wondered how Cassidy might react to another invitation to go camping. *Or, Brenna thought, maybe we can do something a little more indulgent, a little more romantic, just the two of us.* Her face flushed at the thought.

In the checkout line, Brenna found herself looking at the other patrons. Did she ever respond to another woman with the same quickened heartbeat, the same catch in her breath, the same visceral, mind-stuttering desire that she did whenever she looked at or even thought about Cassidy Hyland?

Watching the brunette ahead of her in line interacting with the cashier, how her hands moved from her wallet to her purse, Brenna listened to her voice — a quick patter...no easiness to it. The woman was close to her own age, laugh lines not quite defined at the corners of her eyes. Brenna assessed her emotions and found nothing beyond polite awareness, similar to when she had first met Rachelle Cheron when they were both reading for the *Time Trails* roles. Abruptly the woman turned to look at her and Brenna ducked her gaze to the tabloid rack.

The man monitoring self-checkout came to bag her groceries as she stepped up to pay the cashier. Brenna let him help, taking some time to consider her reaction to him as well.

He appeared older, probably having taken the job to supplement a retirement income. He chatted about the local news, his voice pleasant but unremarkable. When he

offered to push her cart outside, she met his eyes and noted they were a vague brown. She smiled politely and declined. "Thank you, I can manage."

The interaction apparently dazzled him, because he smiled wider. He reached for the cart again, but she shook her head. "I've got it."

"Come see us again," he said after a moment, and she detected the hopefulness in his voice.

After placing her groceries in her trunk, Brenna climbed into the driver's seat and started the engine. She brushed the central console, surprised at the strength of her memory of Cassidy's hand caressing hers as it had rested there.

Once home, she unpacked the few groceries and put them away. Standing at her desk, she glanced through the mail and saw a reminder that the Satellite Awards were in two weeks, and she sighed at the reminder that she had not yet bought a gown for the occasion. That made her wonder whether Cassidy would like to go shopping with her. Just the chance to see her lover again propelled Brenna back to her car and she sped north toward Cassidy's home in Altadena.

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