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Jude Deveraux

Always

*She must look to the
past to claim a forever love.*

Always

Jude Deveraux

Part One

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Chapter One

[Contents Next](#)

CONNIE AND KAYLA WERE ALMOST THE SAME AGE

and about the same size. Even their coloring was nearly the same. But as alike as they were, they couldn't have been more different. Kayla exuded golden bloneness, while Connie was pale and washed-out looking. Kayla's height was statuesque, whereas Connie seemed to tower over people and slumped to keep from doing so. Kayla was a woman no one could overlook, while Connie was easy to miss.

Connie had been working at Wrightsman's jewelry store for six years; Kayla had been there for three weeks. Connie knew everything there was to know about the cut and clarity of jewels. She could tell you the weight and the color number of a diamond at a glance. She knew the provenance of every jewel in the store, knew what was in the safe and who had owned what and why they'd had to sell it.

Kayla asked customers if they liked "the blue ones or the green ones" better.

But in three weeks Kayla had sold more jewelry than Connie had in the last six months. After the first week, Connie had complained to Mr. Wrightsman.

"She *models* the jewelry. She wears low-cut dresses, hangs a million-dollar necklace around her throat, then leans over so men can look down her front." Connie had not been pleased by Mr. Wrightsman's answer. He'd told her to "join the real world."

It was late on Friday when the man entered the store. After having worked at Wrightsman's for so long, Connie was used to the rich and powerful stepping into the store. Besides the professionally lit showroom where the customers could show off their wealth by buying something Marie Antoinette had once owned, there was an elegant room in the back where they could sit in private and sell what they could no

longer afford.

Connie had met many politicians, movie stars, and jet-setters, but she'd never seen this man before. He was handsome in a masculine way, with heavy black eyebrows, dark eyes, and an aquiline nose set above lips that had a slight, teasing smile, as though he knew something no one else did.

As Connie looked at the man, she felt her knees start to melt. The only other time she'd felt this way was when Sean Connery had walked into the store. This man was wearing a black leather jacket that she was sure had cost thousands; she could almost feel the softness of the leather under her fingertips. His tan trousers had to have been cut to fit him. As he walked toward the door, when she saw that he wore no jewelry, her heart dropped. He was buying for a woman, not himself.

She didn't really think that a man like him would be interested in her, but still, she relished the thought of searching through the vaults for just the right jewel. She prided herself on being a good judge of financial position and this man exuded money.

Naked, dripping from a shower, she thought, this man would have an aura of wealth about him.

As he pushed the glass door open, Connie nearly giggled at her thought of this beautiful man being wet and naked. Catching herself, she looked across the cases filled with sparkling jewels on blue satin to Kayla—and was horrified to see Kayla staring at the man with the same expression that Connie was probably wearing.

Connie wanted to scream, "Oh, no you don't. This one is *mine!*" Men like this one, men who possessed old world manners—and old world money—were her reward for putting up with tourists who wanted to see "where Brad Pitt shopped," and with rude rock stars and ego-tripping two-bit actors who wanted the world to know that they bought their jewels at Wrightsman's.

The man entered the store, removed his sunglasses, then stood for a moment as his eyes adjusted. When they did, he looked at Connie and smiled. Yes, she thought.

Come to me.

But in the next second he turned his head and saw Kayla—and it was to her he walked.

Connie had to duck behind the counter to hide her anger. Before Mr. Wrightsman had hired Connie, he'd dumped a pile of diamonds on a velvet tray, then sat there in silence and looked at her. He didn't tell her what he wanted her to do with them.

Arrange them in order of size? Clarity? Connie had paid her dues at half a dozen retail stores and two wholesale merchants before she'd dared to apply at a prestigious store like Wrightsman's. With no hesitation, she had chosen one diamond out of the pile, one of the smaller ones. She had no loupe so she couldn't judge it for flaws, but for color, the diamond was nearly perfect.

She set the diamond on the side of the tray, then looked at the old man. The tiniest of smiles appeared at a corner of his mouth. "Monday, nine a.m.," he'd said, then looked back at the ledger in front of him, dismissing her.

In the past six years Connie had brought the old, family-owned store into the twenty-first century. She'd put in a computer system, made a website, had arranged for some discreet publicity, and had twice foiled Mr. Wrightsman's youngest son's plans to abscond with the store's profits.

Her life had been nearly perfect until Mr. Wrightsman had, for some unfathomable reason, hired a woman whose only selling advantage was a lot of hair and a lot of bosom.

Now, surreptitiously, Connie watched the man as he bent over the counter in front of Kayla. When she put what Connie called "the tourist tray" before him, she heard the

man give a low laugh. His voice was silky-smooth and deep, a voice that made

Connie close her eyes for a moment.

And when she did, she dropped the tray of rings in her hand. Never had she dropped a tray before. Cursing Kayla, cursing Mr. Wrightsman for hiring her, Connie got down on her hands and knees and began to pick up the scattered \$20,000 rings. One emerald beauty had bounced under the cabinet so Connie had to bend low to get it—and when she did, she glanced through the glass case just in time to see the man slip a ruby and diamond necklace into his trousers' pocket.

Connie was so taken aback that she sat down on her heels and stared at what she could see of the man through the glass. Surely not, she thought. Slowly, she stood up, then even more slowly, she walked over to where Kayla and the man were standing, keeping her eyes away from him. She mustn't let a pair of sexy eyes distract her.

While Connie had been scurrying to pick up the rings, Kayla had done what she'd been repeatedly told not to do: she'd covered the countertop with merchandise. She'd been told to take one item at a time out so she could keep track of what was where.

It took Connie all of three seconds to see that the case that held the necklace of an empress of Russia was empty, and that the necklace was not in the jumble of jewels lying in a heap. Unaware of what the man had done, Kayla was bent down, pulling three more trays out of the bottom of the case.

Connie raised her eyes to look at the man and when her gaze met his, he smiled in a soft, seductive way that made her want to run to the vault and get out the really good jewels. Maybe he'd like a Fabergé egg or two.

But Connie had morals, and wrong was wrong. The man was beautiful, but he was a thief. With her heart pounding in her throat, she smiled back at him while she reached under the counter, opened the little metal door, and pushed the button of the silent

alarm. In six years, she'd only pushed that button one other time.

Kayla saw Connie push the button and looked at her coworker in disbelief. With her head turned away from the man, Connie gave Kayla a look meant to silence her.

After the button was pushed, there was about five seconds of quiet, then all hell broke loose. Sirens sounded outside and heavy iron bars began to drop down across the front of the store.

For a moment Connie's heart seemed to stop. She locked eyes with the man and she had to fight against screaming at him to run, to try to get away. If he broke a window... if he pushed open a door... but no, the glass had a high-strength plastic in the middle of it and the doors wouldn't open because of the gates.

But Connie's feelings of compassion, her desire to see the man get away, ended when Kayla stood up. "You mean, spiteful bitch," Kayla said. "You couldn't stand that /got him and you didn't."

Flustered, Connie couldn't speak. She hadn't pushed the alarm because she was *jealous*.

"Quiet, little one," the man said to Kayla in his smooth voice, then he picked up her hand and kissed the back of it.

Connie turned away at that and in the next second three policemen were there, and she used her key and a code number to open the gate. "He put a necklace in his pocket," she said, not looking at Kayla.

The police were oddly silent, and when the man held out his hands, they put handcuffs on him and told him his rights. It was almost as if they had been told not to ask questions. And throughout it all, as far as Connie could tell, the man had never lost his smile, and she was puzzled by it. Why had he been so stupid? Why wasn't he protesting? After all, until he'd left the store with the necklace in his pocket, he hadn't

actually committed a crime. Maybe she'd been hasty in pushing the alarm button.

It was when they reached the front door that Connie heard her own thought. The necklace! Grabbing the empty velvet tray, she held it out to the man. "He still has the necklace," she said.

"You know where it is," the man said, so much sex oozing from his voice that Connie could almost see the two of them sitting on a mile of white beach, margarita-tas in hand.

She couldn't help herself as she reached forward to slip her hand inside the man's front pocket to retrieve the necklace. And when she did, he bent his head and kissed her.

Time seemed to stand still. She could feel his warm thigh under her hand, his chest was touching hers, and his lips were... She closed her eyes and she could almost hear steel drums, feel soft tropical breezes on her skin.

"Okay, let's break this up," one of the cops said. "Lady! Get your hands out of his pants and your face off his."

This brought guffaws of laughter from the two other policemen. Connie pulled the necklace from his pocket and, her eyes never leaving his, spread it on the tray.

Standing by the window, the tray in her hand, Connie watched them lead the man to the waiting police car. She could still feel his kiss on her lips.

"Is that the right one?" she heard Kayla ask. Reluctantly, Connie pulled her eyes away from the man and looked at the necklace on the tray. It was not an exquisite ruby and diamond creation but a cheap concoction of glass and gold-toned pot metal.

When Connie glanced up, she saw that the man was about to enter the police car. "He still has the necklace," she shouted, but the thick glass was almost completely soundproof. She banged on the window to get their attention and when the policemen turned to look, the man took that moment to go into action.

His hands were in cuffs, but standing on one leg, he kicked out to send one policeman

spinning, then whirled to plant a foot in the chest of the second one. The third cop pulled his gun, but the man knocked it with his cuffed hands, sending the gun flying into the street.

In the next second, the man was sprinting down the street with the speed of an Olympic runner, and Connie saw him disappear into an alley a block away.

"If he gets caught, it will be *your* fault," Kayla said as she flung the door open and went outside. For a moment Connie stood alone in the shop, then she thought of what Mr. Wrightsman was going to say when he heard that Connie had allowed the thief to take the necklace. She hadn't even looked at it when she'd taken it from his pocket. She'd been so ensorcelled by his kiss that... that she was going to lose her job.

Dropping the horrid necklace, she ran out the door, reaching into her pocket to push the electronic door lock as she ran. She *had* to get that necklace back!

By the time she got to the alley, the three policemen had recovered and were searching inside the Dumpster and behind the garbage cans. She stood back, watching them, her heart pounding from her run. If the man had run in here, unless he was Spider-Man, there was no escape. There were twenty-foot-tall brick walls and the few windows were painted over, unused for years. All the fire escapes ended two stories above the ground.

Connie's first impulse was to join in the search, but instead, she stood back and looked. Where could a man hide?

She never would have seen him if he hadn't moved. It was almost as though he wanted to be caught.

There was a tiny ledge on one of the buildings and he was lying flat on it, so still that there were two pigeons on his back. She took a moment to figure out how he'd managed to climb up there. He must have leaped from the Dumpster to catch the

bottom of a fire escape, swung upward, crept along the four-inch-wide ledge into the

deep shadows where two buildings intersected, then lain flat out, half-hidden under the broken remnants of an old iron and concrete balcony.

Why had he moved? she wondered. Why had he *purposefully* let her see him?

One of the cops saw Connie looking up and drew his gun. But before the policeman could do whatever he was going to do next, two cars screeched to a halt at the end of the alley and six men in suits and dark glasses jumped out. They flashed badges at the cops and one man said, "FBI. We've been looking for this guy for a long time. He's ours."

Two minutes later, the beautiful man, still handcuffed, was standing on the ground, this time surrounded by FBI agents.

Boldly, Connie stepped forward. "He still has the necklace he stole," she said, not looking into the man's eyes. His eyes—and his lips—had the power to make her forget about everything.

"You'll get it back," one of the FBI agents said brusquely as he led the man away.

Standing at the end of the alley, the three policemen behind her, Connie watched them put the man into the car. He winked at her through the window, then they were gone.

Chapter Two

[Previous Contents Next](#)

TWO FBI AGENTS, ONE ON EACH ARM, SHOVED THE man into Ryerson's office. What a big shot like Ryerson wanted with a lowlife like this guy, they couldn't imagine. They'd run his prints and he had a record longer than the Amazon.

The two agents cuffed the man to a chair that was bolted to the floor, then took their places beside him.

"You may go," Greg Ryerson said.

"He's—" one of the agents began, but Ryerson stopped him with a look.

Silently, the agents left the room, closing the door behind them.

Greg went to the big window and closed the blinds. He wasn't at a high enough level to rate an outside window, but one wall of his office was glass and looked down over the enormous lobby below. He could close the blinds to slits and secretly observe the comings and goings of everyone—something he'd rather do than watch a bunch of birds in a bunch of trees.

Turning back, Greg looked at the man cuffed to the chair. He'd been roughed up. The corner of his mouth was bleeding and the cut over his eye might need a few stitches. Other than that the man looked good. For a second, memories flashed through Greg's mind: a van rolling down a cliff; a man's body flying through the air; a man in a hospital bed, his face covered in bandages.

"So, Jack," Greg said conversationally, "how are you?"

"Bleeding to death. You want to get these things off of me?"

"Think 111 be safe?"

"You won't be if you leave me tied up for another two minutes."

Smiling, Greg opened a box on his marble-topped desk, withdrew a key, and unlocked the handcuffs. As Jack rubbed his wrists, Greg opened a small closet to reveal a sink with glasses above. He took a cloth from a drawer, wet it with hot water, and handed it to Jack. "Want me to get a doctor?"

Jack raised an eyebrow as he held the cloth to his temple. "I'm still recovering from the last time you got me a doctor."

Again, images flashed across Greg's mind: Jack's smashed face, unrecognizable, as he was wheeled into an operating room. "Yeah, I did a good job that time," Greg said, watching Jack relax and smile. The man sitting in front of him bore no resemblance to the boy he'd grown up with. That boy had inherited his father's big, hooked nose and the protruding brow. But that face had been crushed and rebuilt. Out of necessity, Jack had had an "extreme makeover," and he'd come out looking a great deal better than he'd gone in.

"You know, Greg," Jack said slowly, "if you'd wanted to see me, you could have called. Left a message. We could have had lunch. You really didn't need to do all... this." He waved his hand to indicate his injured face.

"Where's the fun in that? Besides, all your numbers are tapped."

"By you guys."

"*Us* guys. You're one of us, remember?"

"I try to forget." Jack folded the cloth and wiped the blood from his lip. "So what do you want?"

Greg went to the bar and removed a small glass from behind some junk glasses purchased at the local home store. It was Waterford crystal and only Jack drank from it. Bending, Greg removed a bottle of twenty-year-old port from beneath the sink, then poured the glass three quarters full and handed it to Jack. "I need a progress report.

How are you doing? What have you found out? Ready to make any collars?"

Jack didn't answer for a few moments as he sipped his port, seeming to weigh Greg's words. "You never were good at lying," Jack said. "Remember how I always found out the truth when we were kids?" Lifting his head, he looked Greg in the eye.

"What's happened and what do you need me for?"

Nervously, Greg moved behind his desk, putting a barrier between him and Jack.

"Your father was kidnapped about six weeks ago."

"And here I thought it was something important," Jack said lightly. "By the way, now that you have me in here, how do you plan to get me out? Those boys you sent after

me think I have a record going back to when I was nine!"

Greg didn't smile, nor did he answer Jack's question. "I know what your father did to you. I know what he did to my mother after Dad's death. More than anyone else on earth I know what a cold, selfish bastard J. Barrett Hallbrooke is. I lived with it for years, remember?"

Jack sipped his port and studied the glass. "Why do I feel that there's a 'but' in this?"

"There's a big one. But the president wants him. Needs him."

"Needs the Hallbrooke money," Jack said, his jaw rigid. "Good ol' dad can write a check but he can't forgive or—"

"Yeah, yeah, I know all that," Greg said impatiently. "John Barrett Hallbrooke is the coldest bastard on earth. Drop him in a volcano and he'd freeze it. He can't go fishing

because he freezes the water for three miles around the boat. The cook stores the frozen food in his bed. I was there, remember? I helped make up the jokes."

"You forgot the one where he kissed my mother and she froze to death. Not the Midas touch, the ice touch."

"Jack," Greg said in a tone of great patience, "I'm not asking you to forgive the man. I just need for you to find him."

"If he's been gone six weeks, he's probably dead." Jack finished his port and set the glass on a table in front of the window, then stood up and looked through the blinds, his back to Greg.

"He's still alive. He's confined, but not being tortured. The people holding him want something other than money."

"Couldn't be any of my relatives then," Jack said, turning back to Greg. "Look, I'd really like to help you on this but I can't. This project I'm on is nearly completed. If you hadn't dragged me out to play jewel thief I would be a lot closer to the end. Did they tell you that I got chased into an alley by some cops? I had to hide facedown on a filthy ledge with a bunch of pigeons on my back. If I hadn't shown them where I was they would have given up. Which reminds me." Jack reached into his pocket, withdrew a ruby and diamond necklace, and put it on Greg's desk. "That girl you planted? Cute but not much upstairs."

Greg glared at Jack. "You're avoiding me."

"Should I take the elevator or the stairs to get out of here?"

"You do know, don't you, that all I have to do is push a button and you'll be locked up? There are only three people in the bureau who know you're working for us, and I'm the only one who knows what you look like now."

Even though Greg had put on his most threatening scowl, Jack just smiled at him.

"Pistols at dawn?"

Deflated, Greg sat down in his chair, put his face in his hands for a moment, then looked back up at Jack. "This case is driving us crazy! It's top secret and every day it's getting harder to keep it a secret. Your father—"

"Mr. Hallbrooke."

"Yeah, okay. Iceberg Man. Whatever. He was a joke to us as kids, but he's not a joke

to a whole lot of people. He practically supports half a dozen charities by himself.

And stop looking at me like that! His money helps a lot of people." Greg grabbed a piece of paper off his desk. "This is a letter from the White House. Signed by the president. It's an official command for us to get off our butts and find J. Barrett Hallbrooke the third and get him back at his checkbook."

Grimacing, Jack looked away for a moment, then back at Greg. "Okay, so tell me what you know—not that I'm interested, mind you, but maybe I can tell you which of my relatives has him."

Greg moved to the front of the desk. "We've checked out Gus and Theo and that man she married. Clean, as far as we can tell. We have them bugged and under surveillance. We put a maid in there and they're on camera all day long."

"They're in the house?"

"Sure. They were contacted by us and—"

"Back up. Why you? Who got the ransom note?"

"I have no idea who was told your father was missing and how he or she was told. No one's told me a ransom has been asked for. The only civilians who know about your father's disappearance are his siblings," Greg said.

"And let me guess. The minute you told them they started crying and begged to be allowed to be as near as possible to their beloved brother."

Greg chuckled. "Exactly." Pausing, he shook his head in memory. "Remember what we used to do to them? How we used to lie to them?"

"I remember the time you called Aunt Theo, crying, and said you thought Mr. Hallbrooke had had a heart attack."

"You put me up to it!"

"Yeah, but you did it."

Greg laughed. "They got there at, what was it? Three a.m.?"

Jack smiled. "Theo was already crying into her handkerchief, and Uncle Gus had enough luggage to stay forever." He looked at Greg. "What I remember most is how mad your father was."

Greg shifted on his seat. "I still remember that paddling he gave me."

"And wanted to give me." Jack looked at the window blind, then said softly, "You know, I was jealous of you for that paddling. My father..." He trailed off.

"Said nothing," Greg said. "He stood at the top of the stairs and told his siblings he was not dying so they could go home. Even though it was the wee hours, he didn't invite them to spend the night."

"And even though he knew I'd done it, he said nothing to me. Not a word. It was the worst punishment I ever had."

Greg gave a melodramatic sigh. "Okay, poor you. Poor little rich boy unloved by his daddy. You got him back, though, didn't you? Drugs, women, a hell-raiser without equal. And now they all think the heir apparent is dead and that the billions are going to go to Gus and Theo and those two criminal-minded kids of hers. No more charities. No more dumping millions into shelters for battered women and abused children. No more paying the salaries of people to find runaway teens. No more—"

"Get off your soap box," Jack snapped. "What's happened since he disappeared?"

"Nothing!" Greg said, throwing up his hands. His frustration obvious, he went to the bar, filled two glasses with ice, and poured them full of ginger ale. When they were kids they thought ginger ale was alcoholic and that they were pulling a fast one over on Greg's mother—Hallbrooke's cook—when they drank it. They'd spent many afternoons believing they were drunk from consuming great quantities of ginger ale.

They stopped on the day they heard Greg's mother and three housemaids howling with

laughter over what the boys had thought was a secret. By the time they were exposed, they'd developed a lifelong love of the beverage.

Taking his drink, Jack said, "I'm confused. You say you've heard nothing else but you also said you knew he was still alive. In fact, didn't I hear you say... what was it? He is 'confined but not being tortured.' How do you know that if you haven't heard from the kidnappers?"

"Have I ever told you that I've always admired your memory? It's almost photographic, isn't it? Remember how Mom used to ask you to help her remember which cookbook a certain recipe was in?"

Jack didn't reply, just leaned back in his chair, sipped his drink, and looked hard at Greg.

After a moment, red began to creep up the back of Greg's neck. "A psssh... ick," he said at last, his mouth on the rim of the glass.

"A what?" Jack asked, then his eyes widened. He set his glass down on the coffee table. "I'm outta here."

Greg put himself between Jack and the door. "You try to leave and—"

"And what?" Jack challenged, his eyes showing anger.

"I'll call my mother and tell her that you faked your death and that you're still alive."

Jack's face drained of color and he sat back down. "No," he whispered. "Your mother..."

"She cried hard at your funeral, you know. If I had died she wouldn't have cried harder."

"She'll kill me," Jack whispered.

"Oh yeah," Greg said cheerfully. "And me. She won't be like your dad and be silent. She'll make your life a living hell. You'll go back underground and—"

"Couldn't. Your mom would put my picture on CNN and tell the world what a rotten thing I did."

"True. And all that plastic surgery would be wasted. Everyone would know that John Barrett Hallbrooke the fourth is alive and well—and rich. You would be the one to have to deal with the charities and your aunt and uncle. And the twins, of course."

"Ah, yes, my young cousins. How are they, by the way?"

"Same as always. Self-centered and bone lazy. The boy, Holcombe, complains if his sheets are wrinkled, and the girl, Chrissy, talks of rebellion and 'the people,' but she makes no effort to get a job."

Jack looked away. When the opportunity had presented itself for him to die, so to speak, he'd eagerly taken it. His face had been reconstructed and a new identity had been given to him by the FBI. He'd never once regretted what he'd done. Greg and his parents, his father's cook and chauffeur, had been his only family.

Taking a deep breath, Jack looked back at Greg. Only his blood relatives had the power to make him feel this bad. "Okay, out with it. What and how?"

Greg leaned back against his chair. "A psychic." He held up his hand to stop Jack's laughter. "You don't have to tell me what you think of psychics. It's what all of America thinks of them. But this one is different. This one is..." He looked away.

"Was that a shudder?" Jack laughed, smirking. "What'd she do? Read your mind? Did she tell you that she knows you've been unfaithful to your wife and now you're scared she's going to tell Sue?"

Greg's voice lowered. "She made me unbutton my shirt and show her where I fell on that iron spike when we were kids. You know that that place has always bothered me. Then she held a little glass ball up to the scar and..." He paused a moment. "When she took the ball away, I could move my shoulder more freely than I've been able to since

it happened when I was eight. She said the muscle had attached to the bone and she'd freed it."

Jack ran his hand over his eyes. "Lord! A psychic *and* a faith healer."

Greg looked harder at Jack. "You didn't listen to me. I said she *made* me take off my shirt."

"Gunpoint?"

"With her mind."

"Right, Greg," Jack said. "She sent you a thought and you obeyed it."

"Exactly."

"I'm supposed to believe that someone exists on this earth who can do this?"

"Her husband's family has a lot of money so they're able to protect her. At least they're able to keep what she can do out of the press. We know because she helps us on cases."

Jack shook his head. "You've been in here too long. Or maybe you've seen *Men In Black* too often. Gregory, this is the real world, not some teen series on FOX. No Buffy, no kid talking to God. Real. Get it?"

Greg was unperturbed. "She comes in about once a week and goes over pictures and objects. She feels them, and tells us what she sees. She's solved hundreds of cases.

Over and over she's proven that she can control things with her mind. Truthfully, people here think she can do a great deal more than she lets us know about. Last year she and Lincoln Aimes—"

"The actor?" Jack asked.

"Yeah, the actor. He was at some resort with her and the place burned down."

"Couldn't she have willed the fire to stop?"

Greg ignored the snide remark. "Nobody died but the guy who started the fire kept

yelling that he'd killed Aimes. He said that after Aimes was dead, zombies had carried him away—and brought him back to life."

"He in a psych ward now?"

"Dead. Heart attack soon after his trial. When he was given only four years for arson, he started laughing and saying he got away with murder. He also said he'd 'get the kid' after he got out. Two days later he dropped dead in his cell."

"A crazy man."

"Yeah, but two other women at that spa also said they saw Lincoln Aimes being carried away by 'zombies.'"

"Mass hysteria. Do you have a point to this? Or are you going to tell me that this psychic used her little crystal ball and raised some pretty boy actor from the dead?"

When Greg didn't reply, Jack snorted. "I used to think the FBI used science. So where are the rooms full of aliens? How about the people who've been on spaceships?"

"Laugh all you want but I know what she did to my shoulder."

"Okay, I'll bite. Why you? If she can cure people, why isn't she in cancer wards curing little kids?"

"She is. She does. But she has to be discreet or she'll cause riots. The president knows of her, and her powers are being used in ways that are kept from the public."

"Why do I feel as though I'm watching the Sci-Fi channel?"

Greg waited for his friend to stop his sarcasm.

"Okay," Jack said after a while, "let's just pretend this is true. A psychic told you that my father is alive and well somewhere, and the president of the United States wants him found. Why doesn't this psychic just tell you where he is?"

"She doesn't know. She says there's something blocking her from finding him."

"You mean like a truck? Or is it a mountain?"

"Would you cut out the attitude? If your father dies, then all that money goes to your aunt and uncle and her two selfish kids. What do you think they'll do with it? Give it away to help others as your father does?"

"Okay, okay," Jack said. "Point taken. I see why you want to find Iceberg Dad, and I see that you're using any method you can to find him. What I don't see is what /have to do with it."

"She, the psychic... you see, she really only deals with the top guys in the FBI."

"Not down to your level?"

"No. Not down here. But she asked for me. She said there was someone in the bureau who knew someone who could find your father. I'm sure she knows you're his son and she must know you're deep undercover, but she admitted nothing. She picked me out of a book of photos and I met her alone. She told me to contact the man I know, and that you'd be able to find Hallbrooke."

"I see," Jack said slowly. "And, let me guess, I find myself on the journey."

"You know," Greg said slowly, "I've never wanted to punch you as much as I do right now."

"That left hook of yours could mess up some very expensive plastic surgery."

Greg's eyes glittered. "I can tell that all you're going to do is make jokes, so just go.

I'll see that you're escorted out." He began straightening papers on his desk.

"You were always able to get to me, weren't you?" Jack said softly. "As kids you used my who-cares attitude to get me to do whatever you were afraid to do."

"Which is why I'm now safely behind a desk and you're on the streets. We've always made a perfect team."

Jack dabbed at the cut on his eye. "I take it that your psychic is to be here today and that's why I was brought in."

"She—" When the phone on his desk rang, Greg picked it up, listened, then hung up.

"She's here now, just arriving."

"Get out the incense and the crystal balls."

Ignoring him, Greg went to the blinds and looked down at the lobby. "There she is."

Jack looked but he saw no one who he thought could be Greg's so-called psychic.

There were half a dozen female agents, all of them looking as though they were trying to solve some earth-shattering case—which they probably were—but no one who looked like a clairvoyant.

Greg nodded toward a woman at the counter. When she turned as she pinned her visitor's badge, Jack looked at her. She was small and curvy, with short strawberry-blond hair. From where he was standing she looked to be a knockout. For a moment he thought that it might be rewarding, so to speak, to work with her.

He watched her walk toward the grand staircase that many agents preferred over the elevator. As she walked, she lifted her hand to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear in a gesture he'd seen before.

"I know her!" Jack said. "Or at least I've seen her before." As he tried to remember, he glanced at Greg and saw that his face was red all the way to his ears, and his mouth was so tightly closed his lips were gone.

Uh-oh, Jack thought as he looked back at the woman. Was she someone he had had an affair with? There were years of his life that were little more than a blur. After he'd run away from his father he'd spent years in a drug-induced haze. In the four years since he'd been sober he'd met many people he'd once known but now didn't remember.

"It was Houston, wasn't it?" Jack said. "I met her in Houston and we..." Trailing off, he kept watching the woman and thinking that that wasn't right. Had he ever been to

bed with a psychic? Some woman who said she could read minds? Tell fortunes? Or, as Greg said, make people take off their clothes?

Jack watched the woman reach the head of the stairs and turn toward them. When she

did, newspaper headlines flashed across his mind. "The Hillbilly Honey Suspected of

Murder," he saw.

Jack dropped the blind. "Is there a back way out of here?"

"I'd like for you to stay and meet her," Greg said firmly.

Jack shot him a look. "You want me to stay and meet the Hillbilly Honey? She killed her husband for his money. And her sister-in-law."

"She didn't. We have proof that she didn't. She was—"

Jack snorted. "She wasn't there? Right, of course she wasn't. Greg, I expected more of you. Just because she wasn't there doesn't mean she didn't kill them. Look at the facts:

Poor white trash marries into a rich family and a year later the rich husband dies."

"She's spent years searching for them." Greg took a deep breath. "She's not what the public thinks she is, and she hasn't done what they think she has."

Jack looked at Greg sharply. "You're afraid of her, aren't you?"

"She's done some things," he said quietly. "I've not seen her do anything except, well, heal my shoulder, but I've read the reports. There's a possibility that she can freeze people in place."

"Then she sticks a rock on them and heals them. A great party gag. Look, Greg, I'll help find my father but I'm not working with a so-called psychic. You let her feel all the photos she wants and I'll even listen to what you tell me she's said, but I want nothing to do with the little gold digger."

There was a light knock on the door. "She's here, so sit down and behave yourself or I swear I'll call my mother."

Throwing up his hands in defeat, Jack took a seat as Greg opened the door. Right away he saw why Greg and this woman's husband, and maybe the entire FBI, were taken in by her. She looked much younger than she probably was, and she had an air about her that made her seem innocent and vulnerable.

Silently, he watched as Greg made chitchat about the beautiful spring weather. She glanced at Jack and Greg made a cursory introduction. Jack didn't get up, just nodded in acknowledgment, and she looked away.

Jack watched them as Greg poured her a glass of ginger ale. The Hillbilly Honey, Jack thought. There wasn't much in life he hated more than a gold digger. He had sympathy for drug addicts and even some murderers, but for people like his relatives and everyone who'd sucked up to him when they'd learned he was rich, he had no sympathy.

Wonder how she did it, he thought as he watched her and Greg sit down. She was across from the two men, and as Jack looked at her expensive clothes, he wondered what she'd done to get into the exclusive Montgomery family. In his father's wealthy set, the Montgomerys were known to keep to themselves. They were often referred to as "the clan."

But somehow, this woman had used her curvy little bottom to worm her way into the Montgomery clan. Then she'd killed her husband. And her sister-in-law. Had the sister been an accident? Or had the woman been on to her?

Jack looked at the "honey" as she chatted with Greg and smiled. It was a plane wreck, wasn't it? Wonder what she did? Fuel line? A few gauges tampered with? Had she done it herself or paid someone? No, she probably did it herself. Women from her class knew how to use screwdrivers and wrenches.

So what's she done with all the money? he wondered. Men? Or did she like women?

She probably had a father who beat her as a kid so she'd probably turned to women.

Sociopath, he thought. Cares about no one or nothing. Her hard-knocks life had made her incapable of love.

"Excuse me," he heard the little honey say.

Still smiling, feeling as though he'd seen through this charlatan, he watched her stand

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