

A photograph of a tattooed hand holding a child's hand in a hallway. The tattooed hand is on the left, with a large, intricate tattoo of a skull and floral patterns. The child's hand is on the right, smaller and smoother. They are holding hands in a firm grip. The background is a hallway with wooden walls and arched windows, lit with warm, golden light.

INEZ KELLEY

WISHING
FOR *Grace*

A musical staff with five lines and four notes, positioned at the end of the word 'Grace'.

WISHING FOR GRACE/INEZ KELLEY

WISHING FOR GRACE

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The hot glare of the stage lights was familiar, but Caz wasn't center stage. Tonight he stood as witness. His hands felt empty without an instrument. The unfamiliar white doctor's coat was too tight in the shoulders and sweat trickled down his spine. He should have picked a different costume but the urge to needle his older brother had been too great. So Dr. Feelgood stood behind the groom and sweated his ass off.

Caz slipped the wedding band into his brother's hand with a wink. Genuine happiness made him smile. Bastian and Charlie got away with a lot of shit as Dr.Hot and the Honeygot. Who else could talk about anal sex and blowjobs and get paid for it? But WTXT's Summer Kick-off got a real kick in the ass when they sprung this surprise wedding on the guests.

A normal wedding wouldn't do. Nope, they commandeered the costume charity drive. Decked out as a purist priest and a naughty nun, they stood before a Judge with a devil's pitchfork and recited their vows. Caz shook his head. Bastian didn't even look nervous, the bastard.

His brother pulled Charlie in for the kiss and the crowd went nuts. All Caz could think was, 'hurry the hell up so I get off here'. The stage reminded him of too many sessions, too many nights spent lost in the music with his brain swimming in a drug-induced haze. Avoidance of triggers had been the hardest step to make but he'd done it. Ironically, stepping away from performing had made a huge impact on his career. His income had tripled as a songwriter but it was a lonely job, full of solitude and too much introspection.

Finally, the newlyweds left the stage and worked the crowd. Caz slipped out the back door and lit a cigarette. The first breath of nicotine filled his lungs like a tranq. He'd kicked the hard shit and the booze but damned if he could quit the Marlboro Man.

"Hey man, got a light?" A stagehand emerged from the shadows. Caz tossed him the lighter and leaned against the brick wall. "Damned hot in there. A/C is from the seventies. You with the radio station?"

He lobbed the Bic back and Caz caught it one handed. "My brother was the priest."

The old man chuckled. "Ain't that the damnedest shit? Surprise wedding. Guess that's one way to avoid getting four toasters and a drunk mother-in-law dancing a jig."

The summer sun hadn't set yet but had taken on that orangey pink glow signaling its descent. Caz turned his face up, letting the muggy breeze blow the hair from his brow. Getting a haircut this morning was a spur of the moment decision he still wasn't sure was a smart one. He missed the weight on his neck and his head felt too light. He'd forgotten how much his ears stuck out, too. He looked like a damn elf.

The sharp tang of whiskey drifted toward him as the stagehand sipped from a flask. He held the thin metal out in offering. Caz shook his head. "No thanks, I have to get the car."

He sucked the shit out of the cigarette as he strode to Bastian's SUV. His brother would pass a blood clot if he smoked in the vehicle so he tossed it away before climbing in. Keying the engine, he awarded himself a small pat on the back. Other than a momentary reflex, he hadn't been tempted to take a drink. He drove around the building, parked under a fire escape, then blew out a breath. Avoidance, determination and Grace. That's how he survived day to day.

The crush of backstage workers hurrying to wrap things up rang with familiar sounds. He sidestepped wires and cords, swerved around a prop cart and held the curtain for one of the light techs before slipping down the side stairs. The contrast to back stage and center stage always made him blink. It took a lot of hidden ugly to create magic.

The exiting party-goers pressed too close, everyone wanting to wish the newlyweds well. Charlie's mom, Eddy, was giving Bastian the 'don't make me hurt you' hairy eye. Caz sidled up behind him and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Congrats, bro. Now get out of here. I parked out back so you shouldn't have to fight the traffic too bad."

"Tell me you didn't do something juvenile like deck the SUV in balloons and condoms."

He hadn't but now wished he had. Just to fuck with Bastian, he shifted his gaze to the side. "Well..."

"Boo," Bastian snarled.

He hated that nickname. God love his mother, she'd named him Casper and pre-school-aged Bastian had saddled him with the ghostly moniker just days after his birth. At six-one, he still couldn't outgrow the damn thing.

Charlie slipped her hand into Bastian's, her huge eyes sparkling in mischief. They shared a secretive smile then Bastian grabbed his shoulders and spun him around. "Time to face the bully."

A dark-haired woman stood twenty paces away, nearly swallowed by the bustling crowd. She didn't move, just holding the hand of a little girl in a glittery fairy costume. An invisible fist crashed into Caz's gut.

"Maggie?" Her name was the barest whisper.

Maggie was here? If Maggie was here then that meant the little girl...

He couldn't breathe. A quake started in his knees and spread like a bonfire. The tremor engulfed him with a whoosh. His ears roared. His mouth went dry. Despite the hellish heat, a chill popped along his skin. It was like he was going through withdrawal all over again.

"How did you..." His voice cracked. Absolute fear grabbed him by the balls and twisted. For once, no song echoed in his head. The only thing he could hear was a high-pitched scream of shame. He spun away from everything he'd ever dreamed of. He had to escape. "I can't do this. She has a restrai—"

"Yes, you can. That expired a long time ago." Bastian gripped his arm.

I can't. Then the dream will die. Let me have my fantasy. Let me pretend I could have been a good father.

"Talk to Maggie. Meet your daughter. She's a sweetheart, Boo."

That's my daughter. She sees me. What does she see? I can't let her see me walk away. Oh God, help. Help me.

He had to walk over. No journey had ever frightened him more. Drawing a breath was a challenge but he tried. He wiped his mysteriously damp cheeks then scrubbed his palms on his thighs. Turning around took absolute concentration. His legs were wooden, his gut filled with lead but somehow, he moved. The space between them shrank. Maggie's long brown hair caught the winking lights of the mirrored ball hanging overhead. She might have been wearing a costume, he wasn't sure. He concentrated on her face. If he looked down...

No, he couldn't handle that yet. Maggie's face was safe. He saw it often in his dreams. Her cheeks were a bit rounder and carried a soft blush. Had her eyes always been the shade of dark Columbian coffee? She sent him a fragile smile and his heart rate bottomed out. *Flatline.*

He'd somehow screwed up again and was dying right this minute. Instead of going into that white light people talked about, he was living a very real hallucination. He never wanted to wake up.

Maggie bent to the little girl and he closed his eyes. He wanted to see her so bad but was terrified he'd break down and bawl. His cheeks went numb.

"Hi, Caz."

Song exploded in his chest, melodies and harmonies and snatches of hymns. Every single piece sang her name. Maggie always sounded like fresh summer mornings. How many times had he lain in bed and listened to her singing in the kitchen? It seemed like a lifetime ago and at the same time only yesterday.

Opening his eyes, he drank in her face. "Hey, Maggie."

"You look good."

"Thanks, it's the costume." Her bottom lip had always been fuller than the top, as if she'd been stung by a bee. He loved it, was drawn to it, tried to remember the taste. It was lost to too many endless stretches of drugs and blackouts. He tucked his hands in his armpits to keep his hands steady. "I didn't think... Why are you here?"

"Bastian called me. He said you were clean and have been for a while now." She glanced back at the table but Caz couldn't look there yet. Not yet. The shell-like cup of her ear held his attention. "She's been begging to see you."

"I didn't think she knew about me."

Hurt flashed across Maggie's face. "Grace has always known who her father is."

"How would I know that? I've tried contacting you, sending her stuff. You always responded through attorneys, denying that I'm her father, and sent the gifts back unopened."

"Legally, I had to." Her head shook and her eyes pinched closed. "You promised to stop the drugs so many times but it never happened. I'm sorry, Caz. I had to protect her. Please understa—"

"I do. I wasn't fit to own a goldfish for a long time." *Hey, it only took four months in inpatient detox to figure that one out. I'm a fucking genius.* "I understand why you left. But it's been almost five years. Would a picture or a phone call have hurt? Would listing me as her father on her birth certificate have hurt so damn much?"

Fire flashed in her eyes, the dark coffee turning bright and livid. “Do you remember the last thing you said to me?”

Oh damn. “Not really. I know...I wasn’t nice.”

“Nice? You were so high you could barely stand up. You told me you’d take her away where I’d never find her.”

“I wouldn’t have done it.”

“Really? You had no impulse control at all. You got the munchies and flew to Philadelphia for a cheese steak. No baggage, no considering that you had a show the next day, no telling anyone where you were, you just went.” Her hands flew up, as if pushing the bitter memories away. “Stop. We don’t need to rehash this. What’s done is done.”

“I’m sorry.”

How pathetic. He made a living writing word and music, telling a story, provoking emotions and stirring the soul but the best he could manage for her was, ‘I’m sorry.’ And he was. He was a sorry excuse for a man.

“I’m sorry, too. For all of us.”

How many times had he scripted this meeting in his head? A hundred? A thousand? A million? Why couldn’t he remember one damned thing to say? He straightened his shoulders and lifted his chin.

Fake it. Pretend you’re in control. Pretend you’re not some lame-assed loser. This might be your only chance.

“I won’t lie to you again. It’s hard. Every day I fight it. But I’m going to win. I wa— Please, Maggie, let me be part of her life.”

The scent of lilacs brushed against him as she stepped closer. She nibbled on that glorious lower lip and searched his face. “I want to believe you.”

“You can. This time, you can, I promise.”

A wrinkled drew her brows lower. “We’ll see. How about we start with saying hello?”

Someone ripped the heart from his chest and replaced it with a gong. It banged and reverberated along his bones. It made his whisper shaky. “I’d really like that.”

Her hand slid into his, so soft and strong, so right. It had always felt like it belonged there. She tugged him forward. He followed like a puppy on a string.

Maggie knelt and wrapped her arm around the fairy. “You know who this is?”

A tiara and dark golden curls bobbed with a nod. Caz deliberately didn’t think. If he thought, he’d puke. So he simply kept his eyes trained on a glittery wand topped with a star and squatted down. The front of her dress had little pink stars on it, barely a half shade darker than the rest. Her fingers were gripped tight around the wand and tiny little crystals had rubbed off on her skin. They sparkled in flashing light.

He raised his eyes, unable to bear not knowing any longer.

God, she’s beautiful. She was so little. Her hair escaped her tiara and curled around ears that stuck out a bit, just like his.

Hello, Grace. I’m your father. I’ve loved you since the minute I found out about you. You’re my strength and my soul and I’m so sorry I wasn’t strong enough, that I couldn’t be there for every minute of your life. Please don’t hate me. Let me love you. You don’t have to love me back.

“Hi, Grace.”

She cast her eyes in Maggie’s direction and chewed on her lip, just like her mom did.

“Hi.”

Off to a stellar start.

His lips were dry. The tongue that flicked out was even drier but his eyes were damp.

“You are so beautiful.”

Heaven descended when she raised her chin and looked at him. Her eyes were pale brown with little flecks of green. He saw those same eyes every morning in the mirror. She had Maggie’s mouth and nose, his ears and eyes. She was the best of both of them.

A bashful smile showed a missing bottom tooth. She’d already lost a baby tooth and he hadn’t known. What else had he missed? Irony scratched across his scalp as guilt crashed down. *You missed everything, asshole. Her first breath, her first steps, her first words. You missed it all.*

His hand rose to his chest, to touch her name tattooed there as he always did for strength. Suddenly, it wasn’t enough. Her name in ink no longer held any power for him.

“Grace, can I give you a hug?”

Her fast nod tightened his chest. She put her thin little arms around his neck. Caz bit his tongue so he didn't sob and closed his arms around her, making sure to not bend her wings. His eyes closed. He was finally holding his baby. Strength flooded him like the sweetest high from the hardest drug.

God? That deal we made back in rehab? That I'd keep fighting if you let me hold her for just one minute? Done. You can take me now.

She smelled like grape bubble gum and her costume rustled like leaves. Against his cheek, her hair was soft and warm. In an act of bravery, he pressed a light kiss to her head. He never wanted to let go but let her move away when she wanted. A curious look drew her mouth crooked as she stared at his face.

What do you see, Grace? Do you see you in me? Do you see a loser who wasn't there? Do you see every mistake I ever made that kept me from you? Can you see that I love you?

"Are you better?"

He frowned. "Better?"

"Mommy said you were sick, that's why I couldn't see you."

Caz swallowed the shame. His gaze darted to Maggie, to the silent tears trickling over her cheeks. Even after everything he'd done, she'd protected him. *Thank you, Maggie, for not making her hate me.* "Yeah, I was sick for a long time. But I'm okay now."

"What happened to your hair?"

"My hair? I cut it."

Grace twitched her nose. "But my pictures have long hair. I don't have one of you with short hair."

"Pictures?" Surprise heightened his tone.

"I gave Gracie a couple of old pictures of us." Maggie wouldn't meet his eyes. "She has them in a frame beside her bed."

A soft throat clearing behind him sounded. Eddy, in her nurse's costume, waited a few feet away. Tenderness softened the lines around her eyes and bowed her mouth. She hefted a disposable camera. Caz realized she had to have known that Bastian planned to pull this miracle out of his medical bag.

"Let's get a picture. Say cheese, everyone."

The flash blinded him before he could even think about smiling. She took several and he thought he smiled for a few. He was too numbed by happiness to absorb much because Grace took his hand and squeezed.

“I’ll drop these at Wal-mart in the morning and then you’ll have a new picture for your frame, right, Gracie?” His daughter’s cheeks apple-round with a smile. Eddy turned to Maggie with cautious questioning eyes. “The crowd’s about gone. Do you want me take Grace home with me?”

“No.” Grace’s pink glitter-painted nails dug into his skin.

Maggie brushed the hair from her eyes and avoided looking at him. “We’re staying with Eddy for a few days. I wasn’t sure how... It’s almost her bedtime but...” She shrugged. “I guess a little while longer wouldn’t hurt.”

There weren’t many people left in the ballroom. The work lights came on, splashing down with too harsh white light. They couldn’t stay here but he couldn’t let them go yet, either one of them. His mouth moved but nothing came out.

Where could they go? His place? Somehow he didn’t think Maggie would be on board for that idea yet. It wasn’t that late, maybe eight-thirty or nine. Where? A bar? Hell no. His child did not belong in a fucking bar. Where did a father take his daughter to on a Saturday night?

“How about ice cream?” The words popped out of nowhere. His dad used to sneak him and Bastian out for banana splits. They talk guy talk, sports and girls, sex and life, over whipped cream and fudge sauce. They’d tell his mother they’d been at the park then wink at each other in secret. The clandestine trips had always made the ice cream sweeter. “Izzy’s is still open. I used to go there all the time as a kid.”

“That much sugar this close to bedtime?”

He started to protest but clamped his mouth shut. Sugar. Bedtime. Right. A real parent would have known better than to make that mistake. Great, he’d been a real father for five minutes and already fucked up.

An indulgent look softened on Maggie’s face. “Well, I guess we can make an allowance this time.”

The playful note in her voice made Grace’s grin wider and his shoulders slump in relief. Maggie’s skirt swished as she gathered her handbag. She had to have raided Eddy’s closet for

that costume. The swirly skirt was red and matched the scarf tied in her hair. The gypsy blouse bared her shoulders and the huge gold hoops in her ears drew his eyes to her neck. She used to love it when he'd kiss that sweet spot below her ear. If he did it right, it would lead to other kisses lower down, deeper ones, wetter ones, hotter ones.

He shook his head to erase the memory. Damn, he sucked at this Dad shit. Men should not lust over their ex-lovers while holding their daughter's hand. How sick was that? Maggie didn't seem to notice he'd gone all testosterone-happy while her back was turned. For that, he was grateful. She helped Grace slide a red Hello Kitty plastic purse over her shoulder then held out her hand. Grace frowned, looked at her wand, his hand then her mother's. She didn't have enough hands to go around.

"Why don't you let me carry the wand?" he said.

The glittery stick was rough, like sandpaper, and he probably looked like six-times an idiot for sporting a fairy baton but he didn't care. One hand in his, the other in Maggie's, Grace skipped from the ballroom to the parking lot.

He discovered another way he was lacking as a parent. He had no idea what a booster seat was or that Grace still needed one. Hell, his Audi didn't even have a backseat. Out of simple convenience, he swapped keys with Eddy. Her whooping laugh peeled into the air. She cha-cha-cha'ed and slid into his sports car. She snapped a sassy salute then, gunning the motor and spinning the wheels, left them standing beside her Ford Focus.

Maggie buckled Grace in the back, handed her the wand, then opened the passenger door. Caz caught her elbow before she got in. He let his voice drop so Grace couldn't hear. "She's perfect. You've done a great job with her."

Her eyes closed. "She's not perfect but thank you. I needed to hear that."

Maybe he'd fantasized too many times but something, memory or audacity or possibly stupidity, raised his hand. He touched her gold earring then drew one finger along her jaw. Maggie turned away. "Let's go get ice cream."

He stepped back. He had no right to touch her any more. Just seeing Grace, meeting her, getting to know her for this little while had to be enough. There was no guarantee Maggie would allow anything else. Maggie closed the door and he walked around the vehicle, steadying his nerves and reigning in his dreams.

He wasn't listed as Grace's father on the birth certificate. *Unknown* filled that spot. Until Maggie changed it, he had no legal rights. She could do the very thing he'd once threatened, take Grace away and he'd never see her again. He couldn't screw this up. It was ice cream, for fuck's sake. He should be able to manage that without blowing it, right?

Grace chattered, telling him about her friends at preschool, her cat *Zombie* and the flight to Virginia. He drove and sucked in every word, every silly little phrase. He wanted to be able to recall every single second of this night. He couldn't help but add details to the memory. Things like the streetlight catching in Maggie's hair or the way the seatbelt pulled the wispy blouse across her breasts. The smell of lilacs was subtle, a teasing finger along his skin. She never wore perfume but had a secret passion for scented lotions. She always carried a few small bottles in her purse. Or she had a long time ago.

Izzy's had the same plastic covered menus on the tables as he remembered. His stomach churned and he doubted he'd be able to keep anything down but he ordered a banana split out of habit. Maggie ordered only coffee. Grace hemmed and hawed, changing her mind four times before finally picking a strawberry sundae with pink sprinkles.

"Pink," Maggie teased, sending him a fast smile. "If they made pink Brussel sprouts, she'd eat them."

Grace curled her lip. "Ick."

"I don't like brussel sprouts, either," Caz offered.

"Nobody likes them." Grace grimaced. "They taste like elephant feet."

"And how do you know what elephant feet taste like?" Maggie laughed. The sound washed over him like a spring rain. God, he missed that. Her laugh wasn't dainty and light. It had always burst out, full-bodied and rich. He hadn't heard it much toward the end of their relationship.

"I brought you a present," Grace said.

"A present?" He looked from her to Maggie. She was his present. He couldn't imagine wanting anything else. If he'd known Grace was here, he'd have brought her flowers or a gift. He wanted to give her everything—a doll, a game, a pony, a computer, a Lamborghini, anything to show her he loved her.

Caz fought back a sigh at the truth. Maggie would stop him. She'd always had a better sense for what was the right thing to do. After all, she'd left his sorry druggie ass, hadn't she?

"Pictures." The little album Grace pulled from her plastic purse was cheap, something you could pick up anywhere for a couple bucks but to him it was priceless. She flipped open the cover and held it out to him. "It's me when I was a baby."

It held twelve pictures, snapshots that spanned nearly five years. A pink dress with a funny looking garter-thing on her bald head. A shocked look holding a bubble wand. A wild-haired Christmas morning where she hugged a stuffed pig. The plastic book warmed to his skin and he fought a crazy urge to press the stupid thing to his chest. It was glimpse into her life. A life he desperately wished he'd shared.

The server saved him from making a damned fool of himself by bringing their ice cream at that minute. He tucked the book inside the coat pocket and forced his hand to pick up his spoon. Childish conversation didn't die as they ate their ice cream. Grace slurped as she talked, barely taking a breath. Caz never tasted a bite, chewing by rote and watching every move she made. She was left-handed, he realized, and wondered where that had come from.

He blinked and looked closer. Nestled in her right ear was a hearing aid. He'd missed that. She turned her head and he saw a matching device in her left ear. The whipped cream and bananas balled in his belly. His daughter had a hearing problem.

She'd only weighed two pounds when she was born nearly three months early. They wouldn't let him in the NICU, wouldn't let him see his baby. Truthfully, he barely remembered that night. Just that he was pissed they had barred him and called security.

He wasn't sure what made him think that night would be any different. Maggie had left him months prior, claiming he was too strung out to be around a child. He'd hated her for that. He'd followed her from work once when he was so blind drunk and high he didn't know what he was doing. The ice cream curdled in his mouth remembering some of the ugly, nasty names he'd called her while beating on her door. She'd called the police.

He shoved the oblong dish aside, unable to stomach any more. Maggie had been right. He wasn't safe. But he'd been an addict long before that night. Was he the reason Grace needed hearing aids? Had his drug use made his daughter deaf? Had his blood been so poisoned that it

caused her prematurity? Leaning on the table, he covered his mouth with his palm to stop the scream. Was this his fault, too?

In the nearly five years he'd been clean, he'd never wanted a drink so badly. Sweat broke along his temples. His tongue grew thick. Cravings were rare now but they still came swift and strong. He shoved his chair back, intent on walking it off, on pacing the parking lot until he was under control when Grace looked up.

Identical brown eyes locked with his and the craving vanished. He wouldn't walk out on her. Ever. Feigning a stretch, he shrugged out of the white coat and draped it behind him.

A cold little finger landed on his forearm, her skin pale against the rainbow of his tattoo sleeve. "Wow, you have lots of colors on your skin."

They help hide marks I never want you to see. "They're called tattoos."

"I know. Mommy has one."

He caught Maggie's eye and they shared a small smile. She had more than one tattoo but hers were smaller, discreet and hidden. Her hand moved to her chest, tugging the blouse higher. He knew that just beneath that sloping neckline was a music staff with three notes. He had a matching one on his left biceps.

Grace studied his ink, tracing a flame with her finger. He held perfectly still, just feeling her reach out to him in her own way. That he didn't flinch when she pulled away amazed him.

Izzy's was a family place and a cup sat between the salt and pepper. It held broken crayons and half-sized skinny markers. Grace's eyes lit up. "Want me to draw you a picture?"

"Okay." He smiled. He didn't care if she spit on a napkin, if she wanted to give him something, he was going to cherish it. Maggie flipped her paper placemat over and slid it across the table. He saw her glance up at the clock and winced. His time was almost up.

"What's your favorite color?"

"You pick. I like them all." If his voice was a bit hollow, Grace didn't seem to notice.

With her bottom lip tucked under her front teeth, she turned her paper to the side, shielding it. "Don't peek!"

"I won't," he promised, then angled his seat farther, giving her privacy. He wanted to be surprised. What surprised him was Maggie covering his hand with hers. That touch, that

deliberate, simple move lifted his head. His eyes locked with ones so deep brown they looked liquid. Her lips raised the slightest bit along the side.

What was that look? That softening along her cheeks that dug under his ribs and massaged his heart. Her fingertip slid up his wrist to his forearm, caressing a tiny butterfly in purple and blue. It was a girly design, a feminine art piece no bigger than a quarter that blended with the flames, skulls, thorny roses and chains, but she saw it. It hadn't been there when she lay in his arms.

They'd been happy then, his drug use still in what he called the recreational stages. He'd had far fewer tattoos as well. Playing keyboard with Toxicity left him with a lot of free daytime, free time he'd spent with her. They'd stolen away somewhere in Nowhere, Oregon, to a hiking trail. It had been nothing more than an excuse to get naked on a picnic blanket, to splash in a stream and make love under a blue sky.

But the sky turned stormy and they'd run for tree cover. Her hushed breath had warmed his ear as she pointed. Nestled safe and dry under a leaf, a little butterfly waited out the cloudburst with them. A little blue and purple butterfly no bigger than a quarter.

It was the moment he first told her he loved her and she'd repeated it. He'd lost that but captured the memory in ink forever. He remembered and so did she. Slowly, he turned his wrist until his hand cradled hers. Maggie didn't pull away.

“All done.”

Grace shattered the spell. Maggie jerked her hand from his, hiding it under the table as if it were contaminated. He wanted to scream in futility. Instead, he looked at a placemat holding a big yellow blob with eyes.

“It's Zombie.” Why was she drawing the undead? He blinked, then remembered her cat. Zombie. Who named an animal that? He must have asked because Grace giggled. “It's from Scooby Doo. There were zombies and they made this *grooooooan* sound. Zombie makes that when she watches the birds outside. She wants to eat their brains but Mommy says she'll throw them up so we have to keep her inside.”

Caz chuckled. His kid had a sense of humor. “It's great. Can I keep it?”

Her tiara slipped as she nodded. She grabbed a marker and labeled the cat picture. The paper scooted across the table toward him. Everything went blurry. His throat burned. She'd

chosen Barbie-pink and the doubled letters were backward, but his heart clenched as if they'd been engraved in gold.

He blinked to clear the tears away. The letters didn't disappear. They sprawled across the page proudly. One lopsided heart rounded out the words.

She'd written *Daddy*.

Small fingers touched his cheek. "Are you crying?"

"No." He wasn't. His eyes were just watering a little, that's all. "I just... I wasn't sure if you'd want to call me Daddy."

Grace smiled. "But you are my daddy. Mommy plays me your songs every night and says they're your music kisses. I wished on all my birthday candles for you to get better. Now you are."

Falling from a cliff could not have the same impact those words did. Air lodged in his throat as he gaped first at Maggie then at Grace. "You wished for me?"

"Duh." A scolding look lowered her fair eyebrows. "Wishes are only for people you love so I gave mine to you."

Inspiration struck and Caz dug in the coat pocket. "I have a wish right here. I want to give it to you."

Her eyes went wide. "Why? It's not my birthday and I'm not sick."

He'd been waiting her entire life for this minute. His hand didn't even shake as he stroked her cheek with his thumb. "Because I love you, Grace."

"You do?" Her lip quivered. "For real?"

"I swear, cross my heart. In fact, I have your name across my chest."

"Can I see it?"

He'd strip bare-assed naked if he had to but looked to Maggie for permission. A concerned slant furrowed her brow but she nodded. "Quick peek, okay? We're in public."

He shifted his chair, hiding as much as possible and rolled the loose scrub shirt to his neck. Grace's touch was like the brush of a kitten's whiskers—light, fleeting and it sent shivers through him. She traced each letter and named them one by one. He wished he'd gotten her entire name so that she hadn't run out after only five letters and stopped touching him.

"Why did you put my name there and not on your arm?"

Caz lowered his shirt and reached for her hand. “Because my heart is in my chest and I wanted to keep you close to my heart forever.”

Her chin dipped until she was looking at his knee. The feel of her hand in his, the bird-like bones and soft skin, was something too precious to absorb. His arms ached to cradle her close. Would she pull away if he tried to hug her again?

“Can I have my wish now?”

“Sure.” Shoving disappointment back, he flicked the cigarette lighter until a flame appeared. “Make a wish, Grace, anything you want and I’ll...and Daddy will make it happen.”

She went to her tiptoes and leaned over the table. Her eyes pinched tight. Maybe wishes were only good for one breath because her words came out all jumbled together.

“I wish Daddy would never get sick again and he could come to my birthday parties and go to the playground and buy me Barbies and tuck me in at night and sing me my special song.”

Her exhale blew over his burning finger and the fire flickered out. Caz smiled. “You know what happens when you make a wish and blow out the flame?”

“It’s Gracie’s bedtime.”

Maggie’s voice was faceful of cold water. Somehow, he’d screwed up. He could hear it in her tone. Grace whined but Maggie held firm. It was time to leave. The scrape of her chair ratcheted across him, obliterating the warm fuzzy feeling he’d wanted to drown in just a minute ago.

“Bathroom,” Maggie said.

Grace scowled. “I don’t have to pee.”

“You will in five minutes. Come on, let’s go.”

“No.”

“Grace Mackenzie, now.”

Those words left no room for argument. The pink sparkly skirt flounced as Grace stomped her foot. “You’re mean!”

Maggie’s lips went tight. She gripped Grace’s hand and took her into the ladies’ room. Caz watched the door swing shut and felt like the dream he’d almost held was slipping through his fingers. Unease festered as he paid the bill. His borrowed scrubs had no pockets so he folded

the Zombie picture into quarters and tucked into the white coat beside the album. He couldn't stomach the thought of putting the coat back on, of hiding that butterfly now. He needed to see it.

The parking lot buzzed with insects swarming the lights. He lit a cigarette and drew a deep inhale, stealing what courage he could from nicotine. She'd said he could show Grace the tattoo. Why had she clammed up tighter than a snare drum after that? Was it the wish? He wanted every single thing Grace had chanted. But only Maggie had the power to let them come true.

He pulled the album out and lost himself in her photos. Sure, he was biased, but his kid was gorgeous. He tried memorizing each expression and wondered what she was thinking when the camera had clicked. He pitched the cigarette aside and tucked the book away as they exited the ice cream parlor. Grace's little face was pinched into a frown and Maggie's jaw thrust so sharply it could cut glass. Yeah, he'd definitely screwed up something.

Grace jerked her hand from Maggie's and stopped in the middle of the parking lot. "I'm tired. I can't walk all the way to the car. My feet hurt and I have a tummy ache."

Caz grimaced. It was after ten now and maybe the ice cream had been too late a snack. "I can carry her."

"She's testing us," Maggie spat from tight lips. "She doesn't want to go to bed and thinks you'll let her stay up."

Uh-oh, power struggle. Caz was smart enough to not pick Grace over Maggie in disciplinary measures but if her feet were hurting and she was tired... He had to tread very, very lightly right now. He hunkered down in front of his daughter.

"Grace, Mommy makes the rules. We both have to listen to her, okay?"

Those tiny eyebrows knotted harder. Damn, she had his temper. If she had his stubbornness then her teen years were going to be a bitch. He wanted to be there for every argument, every tantrum, every boundary test she could throw. Who would teach her to drive? Who would play the bad guy when horny teenaged boys came sniffing around? Who would walk her down the aisle one day?

Grace crossed her arms. "I don't want to go to bed. I'm not sleepy. I don't want to close my eyes or you'll go away."

He'd hit six foot at age seventeen but that statement made him feel ten feet tall. He started to promise he'd never go away but realized he couldn't. He looked up at Maggie, trying to beg with just his eyes. "Maybe I can see you tomorrow."

Maggie's shoulders lost their stiffness. "All right...after we talk."

Talk. What a four-letter word. Just like *hurt* and *pain* and *loss* and *fear*.

Grace held up her arms. "Carry me, Daddy?"

He could have lifted the Empire State building at that minute. Maggie took his white coat and he picked up a bundle of frothy, glittery pink. Grace hugged his neck until he couldn't breathe. Who needed air? He had his daughter. Why hadn't he parked farther away? Like in Kansas?

He put her in booster and dropped a kiss on her cheek. She gave him one back and his heart soared. Maggie buckled her in then caught his eye across the car top. Her whisper was too low to penetrate the closed car window, insulating her from Grace's little ears.

"Take the long way, get lost, go to Eddy's by way of Timbuktu, I don't care. She'll fall asleep then we can... Just drive, Caz."

He drove. He skirted the hospital, drove passed the airport, circled around the Historic District. In the rear view mirror, he saw Grace's head start to bob. Every time she'd drop off, she wake herself and talk a little more. Maggie turned the radio on. Something about the music was a cue for Grace to be quiet and in less than two songs, she was asleep. Head tilted at an awkward angle, her tiara had fallen into her lap and her mouth hung open.

"She's out," he whispered.

"Don't talk." Maggie hugged the doctor's coat to her stomach and looked out the window. "Give it a little while."

There were less lights and traffic the further along Route 50 he traveled. Cityscape faded to suburbia then slipped into small town ruralness. Highway reduced to two lanes of mountainous curves. Music filled the car, covering the heavy silence in the front seat. In this area, he had to watch close for deer. It gave him something to think about other than the fact that his daughter was asleep behind him and the love of his life was beside him. It felt like she was fifty thousand miles away.

He checked the gas gauge with a quick look. Still good but he'd better not go too much further without—

“Can you find someplace to pull over? Someplace where we can park and get out but still keep an eye on her.”

“Okay.” One word but it was like a warning bell. Every muscle in his body tensed, geared up for a fight. It took another two miles but he pulled into a scenic overlook that was worthless in the dark. He'd always thought those few scattered picnic tables along a roadside were sad little places. Who'd want to stop that close to traffic and look at a mountain?

God, he wished he could see the mountain now. It'd give him something to focus on besides the acid roiling in his gut. Some kind of night animal cheeped as he shut the motor off, the radio dying with a click. Maggie cracked her window, popped her seatbelt and got out. Caz had to gather the strength to move. Stiffening his mouth, he climbed from the car. Is this what soldiers felt like before battle? At least they had some kind of weapon. He had nothing but excuses. Piss poor ones, at that.

With only a sliver of a moon for light, Maggie's hair looked like ebony. She dropped the coat on the bench, then climbed up and sat on the top of a splintered picnic table, tucking the skirt beneath her knees. He thought about sitting beside her but couldn't. He had to move. He paced but for only a few steps then stopped, feeling like an idiot. Maggie hadn't budged.

Might as well jump in with both feet. “So how do we start this without lawyers?”

Maggie had never backed down from a fight. She nailed him with a stern look and came out swinging. “How clean are you?”

“One hundred percent.”

“Alcohol?”

“No, nothing. No booze, no weed, no dust, nothing, I swear.”

“I've heard it all before. Give me one reason to believe you now.”

She had heard it. He'd lied to her face so many times. This time he had no lies to give. The truth flew from his mouth now like an unstoppable wind. “You want me to piss in a cup? Give you some blood? If that's what I takes; I'll do it. You have all the power here, Maggie. I'll jump through any hoop you give me. Just let me see her, please.”

She looked away, turning her face into the moon's glow. "I want to trust you but I don't know how anymore. She wants to know everything and I don't know what to tell her half the time. I don't want to lie. She thinks I'm mean because I kept you away. She doesn't understand..."

"I know. It wasn't fair and it's my fault." He rubbed his neck, missing his long hair as the wind blew too damp across his skin. "You covered for me again, told her I was sick. You could've told her I... You could've made her hate me but you didn't. Thank you."

"You were sick, Caz." Her eyes rounded, that wounded doe look that always made his chest ache. "You're not a bad person. I just don't like you when you're high. She's the best thing I've ever done and I couldn't—I can't—let anything hurt her."

"I'd never hurt her!"

"You hurt me."

His chin snapped up like an invisible uppercut clocked him. "I never touched you...did I?"

There were so many nights he had absolutely no memory of. Dread turned his belly liquid. *Oh my God, did I hit her?* He didn't think he had but...

"Not like that." She sniffed and rubbed her nose. "Every promise you broke, every dream you forgot about, every lie you told, they all hurt. I know it was the drugs but you... You took them. I begged you to stop, to slow down. Nothing worked. Not even me getting pregnant mattered."

"You mattered, Maggie. You were the only thing holding me together. You left and I spiraled. Hit the concrete and left a smear. I don't think I was sober from the minute you walked out until..."

The noise when he snapped his lips shut was audible. She knew about his overdose but he didn't have to drag all his dirty laundry into the open. Only Bastian knew the truth. His friends all thought the overdose was an accident, a too-stoned-to-think screw up. Allowing that lie had actually helped his recovery. Pity sucked hard enough without everyone thinking you were off your rocker as well.

"It wasn't an accident, was it?"

His eyes slammed closed. *Total humiliation: complete.* He should have known she'd figure it out. Maggie had a way of always knowing his secrets.

"No, it wasn't an accident. I wanted out. If there's such a thing as rock bottom, I didn't hit it, I crawled under it."

A fragile smile rounded her cheeks. "But you lived through it and crawled right back out."

Hidden under that hushed breath was pride. It had been so long since he'd heard that coming from her that he sucked in a breath.

"Yeah, I did. And I'm glad. Clean's hard but it's good. It's just empty...without you."

Tugging the scarf from her hair, she ran her fingers through the waves. Her nervous habit. The familiar action was strangely soothing to him.

"I gave you a choice. You picked the drugs over me."

He shook his head. "I didn't choose. The addiction did."

"It always did." That whisper sliced deeper than any razor ever made. "Gracie matters more than anything to me. I can't let her go through waiting for you to show up and you forgetting her because you're drunk. Or her watching you turn into a skeleton because food isn't as important as the next hit. Or her trying to love you just a little bit more, to be just a little bit better so that you choose her over the high. I won't let her hurt for you like I did."

A soft sob shook her shoulders. Maggie was crying, for him. If he hadn't felt enough like shit before, he sure as hell did now. He'd made her cry enough.

"I never meant to hurt anyone." He had to know. His stomach clenched in dread but he had to know. "Is it my fault? Her hearing? Did I do that to her?"

The fringes on the scarf end held her attention, stretching the minute until he thought his skin would split from tension. She looked up and the faint moonlight caught tear tracks lining her cheeks.

"No, that's my fault. I did it to her." Her chin wobbled as she looked away. "She was fine. My blood pressure wasn't. It was deliver her or lose her. But she was too little. Her lungs weren't working. One of the drugs they used had a possible side effect of hearing loss. They told me about it, gave me the choice. What else could I have done?"

“Nothing. You did what you had to.” Wasn’t the weight of guilt supposed to lift off him now? Why did his chest still feel so heavy? Because he’d let her down. He hadn’t been there to help her, wouldn’t have been able to even had he been there. “How bad is it? She talks fine.”

“Forty percent in one ear, sixty in the other. We found out early and the hearing aids work. She hears well with them.”

Music was such a part of his life, he couldn’t imagine not hearing it. That was one recurring panic during detox. That he’d gone deaf. He’d scream just to make sure his ears worked.

“Can it be fixed?”

“No. But there’s no reason to think it’ll get any worse either.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

Maggie stared, but said nothing. She climbed from the table and walked over, peeking in the car. “She’s out for good. It’s been a long day. We only flew in this morning.”

He waited until she turned, needing to see her face before he asked. “Why? What did Bastian say that changed your mind?”

Tiny lines creased from the corners of her eyes. She put her hand over her mouth, as if whatever she was going to say stung. “He said he was your brother and I got scared. I thought he was going to tell me you were dead.”

He had died twice, technically, but the ER doctors brought him back. It had taken a long time to forgive them for that. Bitterness flooded his mouth. His sobriety hadn’t changed her mind, his possible death had. Wonderful. Just great.

He jerked the cigarette pack from the coat pocket and spun away, facing the dark mountains he knew were there but couldn’t see. An invisible vastness stretched around him, making him feel small, alone. The cellophane crackled in his hand as he tapped one stick loose. He lit it, sucking in smoke to keep angry words from flying out. But the smoke was too thin to hold back five years of loneliness and heartache.

“I am dead. You took everything. Even knowing why you did it, it still hurts. I used to need you, the drugs and the music. You left. The crystal was killing me. All I have left is the music.”

Song titles rushed his minds, memories of pouring out his recovery washing back with a burn. His best material always came with the highest emotional price. It also earned him the most money, the most awards. He'd trade them all to erase the past.

"I couldn't tell her I love her any other way, so I did it with music. It's all I had left."

"That's why I played them for her. I can hear you in those words, no matter who's singing them. I knew when you were writing about her. *Wishing for Grace* is her favorite."

"*Delicate Time*, that was for her, too. *Tarnished* was for you. *Blood Power*, her. *Aching for the Alchemy*, you. *Empty*, you. *Severed Heart*, you."

"*Butterfly Rain*," she murmured. "I listen and I can almost taste the rain that day."

He couldn't turn around. The darkness held him in its grasp. "I loved you, Maggie. I still do."

"You don't know me. Not the me I am now. I'm not a post-college band groupie anymore. I'm a music teacher and a mother and a pretty bad but determined gardener."

He ground the butt into the dirt and walked to her, leaning both hands on the car top, framing her in his arms but not touching her. "Then let me get to know the new you. Let me be part of your life, of Grace's life."

Hope warred with indecision, wishes with caution, in her eyes. She searched his face as if some secret lurked there. "Hearts are fragile. You broke mine. I can't let you break hers."

He kissed her. Maybe he should have gone slow, started with a peck or a soft brush. He couldn't. Too many things welled up, pushed him passed common sense. His tongue licked over her bottom lip, the bottom lip that filled too many sweet and erotic dreams, then stole into her mouth. A sob whimpered from her but her hands buried in his hair and tugged him closer.

Beneath his ribcage, in the deepest, darkest regions of his soul, a song rang out in a perfectly held key. The pure voice gathered power until it raced through his blood, warming corners of his heart he hadn't known were cold. He whispered her name, so many unspoken pleas and promises in just one word.

She pulled away, pressing her forehead to his. Her quick, light breath misted over his lips and he tasted her fear. "This isn't about us. It's about our daughter."

"Is there someone else?"

"I can't answer that."

So there was someone. He never assumed she'd become a nun but the thought of her in someone else's arms sank sharp teeth into his soul. He stepped back. "Do you love him?"

Maggie wrapped her arms around her waist and looked away. "He's a friend...but he'd like to be more."

"What do you want?"

She swiped her hands across her cheeks. The deep breath she drew was armor and he saw her shields snap back into places as clearly as if they were made of steel and not just iron-will. Her tongue skated across her bottom lip.

"You visit in Atlanta and Gracie doesn't leave the city unless I say it's okay. Day visits at first. If those go okay, then maybe...maybe we can talk about some overnights or weekends. She starts kindergarten in September so you have to work around her schooling. No bars, no parties, no groupies. And if I get even half an idea that you're not completely clean, everything stops. I'll let her blame me and think I'm the biggest bitch of a mother on the planet but she'll be safe. This is it, Caz. There is no second chance. Not with my baby."

"She's mine, too. I want to help out. You wouldn't take my money before."

"It would've been a legal admission you're her father. I couldn't give you that power when—" The look she blazed at him turned her eyes livid. "I'll name you, legally, but you have to sign papers giving me full custody. I'm willing to revisit that in...two years, provided you're still straight and sober. Is that enough?"

It was everything.

"Yes." Whatever was cheeping down the mountainside cheeped louder. It was the only sound except both of their ragged breaths. He was afraid to move. He might wake up and discover this was dream. "Thank you."

"Don't let me down, Caz. Don't let her down."

"I won't. Not in this, not with her."

For hours, days, years, they stared. Unspoken words flowed like a river. She begged him to be strong. He pleaded for her to trust him. She promised to try. So did he.

A sardonic curl to her mouth accompanied her soft laugh. "She has your stubbornness."

"Not a bad thing." He shrugged. "Could be worse. She could've gotten your veggie passion."

Her mouth popped open. “Vegetables are good for her. Wouldn’t hurt you to eat something green every once in a while.”

“I like guacamole. That’s green.”

“We’ve had this discussion.” Memory turned to a sparkle in her eyes. “Guacamole doesn’t count. Neither does mint chocolate chip ice cream.”

“What about M&Ms? I eat the green ones.”

Maggie rolled her eyes. “You’re going to let her eat stuff like Pop-tarts, aren’t you?”

“Only the pink kind, promise. I’ll save the Cookie Dough ones for me.”

“You’re as bad as she is.” She looked over her shoulder, into the backseat, and sighed. “We’d better get her back to Eddy’s and into bed.”

“Tomorrow? Can I bring her present?”

“No Pop-tarts but yes.” Moonlight splashed across her face as she looked up into the sky.

“No puppies unless they’re the type I can throw in the washing machine, okay?”

He chuckled, the tension cracking and letting relief settle. “How about Scooby Doo? A stuffed one?”

“She’d like that.”

They got back in the car, Maggie angling over the seat. She fiddled with the seatbelt across Grace’s chest, tilted her head to a more comfortable position and stroked her hair. He offered Bastian’s coat and she tucked it around Grace’s legs.

Caz waited until she turned back before whispering. “You’re a good mom.”

The wide smile she gave him was worth more than gold. “Thanks. You’ll be a good dad. Wait and see.”

“I won’t mess up, Maggie.”

“Oh, you’re going to screw up.” Her low laugh softened the blow. “You’re going to have no clue what to do and be faced with situations and questions that don’t have easy answers. It’s called being a parent. Just stay straight and you’ll do fine.”

He started the car, the motor cutting into the quiet with a muffled purr. Gravel spat from the tires as he pulled onto blacktop. The radio seemed too loud so he clicked it off, cracking his window and letting the cool mountain air blow across his skin.

They stayed quiet, mindful of Grace in the back but it was nice talking with her again. Things were less intense, less tension filled and Maggie just talked, telling him about her life in Atlanta. Her voice was a hymn, washing over him with sweet glory. She asked about long ago friends and he filled in what he could. Many he had walked from for self-preservation.

A cat popped her head up alongside the road. He slowed, waiting for her to dart across his high beams but she ran back into the night. It gave him a minute to formulate his words, find a rhythm that fit the burning need coursing through him. Then Maggie mentioned her friend and jealousy gnawed on his stomach.

He suffered through the bites until Eddy's house came into view. He pulled beside his sports car and sat, unable to let go of the steering wheel. "When do you fly out?"

"Tuesday morning."

"Can I take you to the airport?" She nodded. "Will your friend be picking you up?"

"Caz, don't. He's just a friend." Maggie cracked her door and the dome light intruded, harsh and bright. "Would you like to carry Gracie up to bed?"

He wanted more than that. Maybe having a taste of a dream was a dangerous thing. It made him crave more. The addict in him understood this and bellowed to be fed. It wasn't drugs or liquor this time. It was Maggie. Maggie and Grace. His family.

He met her on the passenger side but made no move to pick up the sleeping little girl from the back seat. Instead, he pressed her mother against the door and lowered his mouth. If she'd pulled away or turned her head, maybe he would have been able to let go. But her arms crept around his neck and her lips parted beneath his. That was it. He was hooked.

Later, he'd wonder how long they stood there, kissing like teenagers. But for the moment, he just got lost in her taste, in the feel of her kiss, in the warmth of her arms. He wanted more.

"Forget your friend. I can't take the bad stuff away but I swear I'll never hurt you like that again. Give me another chance, Maggie. For us."

She laid her cheek on his chest. He could feel her fear, trembling along her muscles as if she was freezing cold. He wrapped his arms tighter and waited, prayed, pleaded. She said nothing. The sky was ink black with a million stars shining down. He picked one, closed his eyes and wished.

Maggie raised her head and let one hand slip from his shoulder, sliding down his arm. Her fingers stopped on his left biceps, on the music staff with three notes. They'd gotten the tattoos together, a silly secret connection when romance seemed like enough to live on.

Three notes, three words they'd shared. *I. Love. You.*

A shyness played around her lips and her finger tapped on the staff. "Let's play it by ear, okay?"

Sweet heat rang through his blood. Playing by ear was his special talent. Before he could smile, Maggie rose on her toes and kissed him. It was gentle, soft and teasing. It was a beginning.