



A NOVEL



IN HER
COURT

HEATHER JUSTESEN

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This story is dedicated to the foster kids who lived with us, to their struggles and triumphs despite difficult situations. I still joy in their triumphs, cry for their struggles, and think of them all regularly.



CHAPTER ONE



Red and blue lights flashed in the apartment parking lot as Denise DeWalt pulled in. She watched some officers lead a handcuffed man to a squad car. A police car parked at an angle across the driveway forced her to stop. “What’s going on?” she muttered. She considered backing up, but a red Jeep Cherokee had pulled in behind her and blocked her escape. She had driven up to her complex still feeling the endorphins from two hours of playing basketball, but that high was now disintegrating quickly.

A well-dressed woman led two little girls to a state vehicle. The younger of the two elementary-school-aged girls was crying and clutching a stuffed animal. The older girl adjusted a green backpack over her shoulder. The sight brought back memories so vivid that Denise could hardly breathe.

Her stomach ached as all the muscles in her body tensed up and her lungs fought to draw breath. Unable to move and surrounded by strangers, Denise fought the urge to escape her car. Her hands clamped on the steering wheel, turning her knuckles white as she was swamped with memories that refused to go away.

She relived the terror of not knowing what was going to happen next. Where would she stay when the doctors sent her home? Was she in trouble? In her mind, she heard the commotion of her mother being handcuffed and carted away.

Her stomach rolled, and Denise lowered her window partway, desperate for fresh, cool air. The tepid September breeze barely took the edge off, but she

pulled her chin-length brown hair back from her face and gulped in gratefully, her blue eyes sealed shut as she tried to push the emotions away.

She was surprised when she heard a knock on her window and looked up to see an officer peering through the opening. “Are you okay, ma’am?” She had been too wrapped up in memories to notice the police car in front of her move out of the way.

“Yes, fine. No problem.” *Just falling apart here.*

The young officer looked as though he didn’t believe her. “You don’t look well. Are you sure you don’t need some help?”

She shook her head. “I’m fine, really. I just need some dinner. I live right over there.” Denise motioned in the general direction of her building. When he nodded and stepped back from her car, she slid it into gear and headed for her parking space farther back in the lot. Pulling herself together, she walked to her apartment, knowing she would have nightmares again. It had been years since she experienced such a strong physical reaction to the memories.

With any luck this would be a short episode.

Denise ignored the waiting mailbox tonight, desperate to get inside before anyone else stopped her or noticed the tears now running wild down her face, despite her efforts to wipe them away. The halls were dark and musty like the string of hovels her birth mother had dragged her through, but all similarities ended when she entered her apartment.

The scented oils plugged into electrical outlets infused the air with the smell of strawberries. The walls were off white, the carpet light blue—a color she’d always considered daring for an apartment building, considering what tenets could do to carpets, but a color that always gave her comfort. The kitchen and bathroom floors gleamed. Bright pictures and flowered crafts, mostly supplied by her roommate, dotted the walls.

The apartment was quiet. Her roommate, Lily, was probably stocking shelves at the toy store. Lily hated the graveyard shift, but Denise was grateful to have the place to herself. Just this once. She inserted a thanks for small miracles into the silent prayer she offered for the little girls. A note was taped to her bedroom door.

Denise,

When you get a minute, could you send my cousin a list of companies who hire people with your skills? He's trying to find a job in the area.

Lily

An email address followed. Denise pulled the paper from her door and tossed it onto her laptop, which was sitting on the desk beside the door. She'd worry about it later. She hurried through a shower, collected her dirty clothes, and took them down to the laundry facilities on the first floor.

While the washers did their magic, Denise returned to her apartment, put on some grinding rock music, and emptied her dresser drawers. Her room was in perfect order already, but she managed to spend the next forty-five minutes scrubbing every nook and cranny. She rearranged the drawers and gave the space a white-glove cleaning.

The distraught look on the little girls' faces haunted her through it all, making her heart weep. Denise knew well the confusion and terror of being taken from home. The loss of control, the uncertainty—not knowing if the place she was going to would be better or worse. The emotions pouring through her pushed Denise to keep cleaning. The anxiety attacks hadn't been this bad in years.

After moving her laundry to the dryers, Denise turned to her tiny bathroom. She scrubbed corners of the floor with an old toothbrush and reorganized bathroom drawers. She stretched and rubbed her sore back muscles before bringing her hands around to look at them. Her fingers were long and thin just like the rest of her body, and just as suited to basketball as her well-trained muscles, but now the skin on them was red and irritated from all her scrubbing. She put away the laundry before deciding to give into the exhaustion bullying her. Though she still felt anxious, most of her desperation had drained away, and she figured she might as well try to sleep. She had to work in the morning.



Denise's fingers flew over the keyboard at work a month later as she created software. A system upgrade the previous night had left a tangle of bugs in its wake. She paused to consider the next line she should add and then typed it in. She spent the whole day, including her lunch break, fixing the issue so she could return to the Web page she'd been working on.

It was late afternoon when Joan walked into the room Denise shared with four other programmers. Joan was a dirty-dishwater blonde receptionist who knew the business better than almost anyone.

"What's going on?" Denise looked up from her computer and smiled. She grabbed the remains of her frozen yogurt and scooped out a final spoonful before tossing the Styrofoam bowl in the trash.

"Southwick said to bring these to you." Joan handed Denise a sheaf of papers. Denise opened them and saw they were specs for a new program she was going to write when she finished her current project.

"I told him I wouldn't be ready until Monday. That was before this mess came up." Denise rolled her eyes and flipped through the file a little more. "They're not complete either. Surprise, surprise," she said, glancing over at Jake Cornwall, the twenty-eight-year-old office jokester who sat next to her. He nodded.

"He's been too busy clearing his office to deal with silly details like paperwork," Joan said with a wave of her hand. "He's got interviews for his replacement today. I get the feeling there's one who looks pretty promising. They flew him in from Chicago."

"I hope he's not some newbie out to prove himself. A ladder-climber who's going to go ballistic over every flaw." Denise held back a grimace. Wally Southwick hadn't been a pleasure to work for; still, when he decided to take early retirement, everyone wondered if his replacement would be better or worse. The mention of Chicago nagged at the back of her mind, but she couldn't remember why.

Joan pointed at Jake's Room Defender, a movement-sensitive and remote-controllable machine that shot foam discs at anyone within range. "Don't turn that on today if you value your job," she told Jake. "Southwick will have your head if you make him look bad."

Jake nodded again. As soon as Joan left, though, he leaned over. “Better buckle up, DeWalt. Whoever they hire, he’s bound to be twice as ambitious as Southwick. The young geniuses always are.” His eyes skimmed over her. “Then again, maybe he’ll have a soft spot for you as the only woman in the department.”

Denise grabbed a pen off her desk and tossed it at him, hitting him in the shoulder. “Whatever.” She couldn’t hold back a smile though, coming up with another possibility. “You never know, maybe the person they choose won’t be a guy. Could be a woman, maybe *you’ll* end up in the soft spot.”

Jake grinned. “There’s something I could handle. Too bad the rules outlaw interoffice dating.” He seemed to consider this and then winked at her. “You and me could even go out.”

“Yeah, shorty, like that would happen. Get back to work, Cornball, I’ve got things to do.” He shrugged, and she shook her head. Jake was only a friend, more a brother than anything. She glanced up and caught smirks from a couple of the other guys sitting near them, but she ignored them.



The afternoon was almost over when Denise caught her first look at the promising interviewee. Southwick ushered him into the room like an old friend. The younger man exuded authority and self-confidence from the tip of his well-polished shoes to the mass of brown hair on his head. His body was broad shouldered and powerful looking as well. But it wasn’t until he turned to look around the room that Denise saw his confidence went all the way to the core.

His dark eyes saw right through her, jolting her and stealing her breath. There was something familiar about him. Denise wondered if the lightening bolt of recognition she felt was where his aura of power was coming from. Or was it the other way around? His eyes widened for a moment before he blinked and returned his gaze to Southwick.

Denise could feel her pulse beating a wild tattoo in her veins. She calmed her expression and fought to make her insides comply as well. Maybe he'd attended the University of Utah or had a sibling who did. Or maybe he reminded her of someone she once knew. She clung to those explanations, though none of them accounted for the something more than recognition bouncing around inside her.

When Southwick reached her and Richard Jensen extended his hand, she took it in her own. A strange tingle began at her palm and extended up her arm. She met his brown eyes—eyes that would have seemed too big on any other face. Somehow the strong chin and cheekbones seemed perfectly suited to them. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Denise.” The words flowed like Southern honey from his lips—strange for a guy from Chicago.

“Finally?” Denise smoothly withdrew her hand from his grasp, desperate to break a connection that had her hair standing on end. She wondered why her hands weren’t shaking when her insides were doing a tango.

“I’m Lily’s cousin. You’re the one who told me about this company,” he murmured.

“And we’re certainly glad you did. I’m sure Jensen here will do well, though he’ll have quite a job to fill my shoes!” Southwick said, pounding Richard on the back and grinning.

“Oh.” Denise felt stupid the moment the sound left her mouth. No wonder he had seemed vaguely familiar. Lily had shown her his picture after Denise had sent him a list of companies he might want to check into. “Well, welcome to our little family.” Hoping to inject a note of levity, she jerked her thumb toward Jake. “Don’t take the joker here too seriously. And don’t let him anywhere near your soda if you don’t want it tampered with.” She forced a smile and hoped it looked sincere.

Richard glanced over at Jake and smiled, turning his slightly nicer-than-average face into something only a step below breathtaking.

Or maybe she was a bit short of breath after all. His gaze returned to her. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

They were gone before Denise could decide what she thought about Southwick’s replacement. Richard Jensen couldn’t have been more than a few years older than her twenty-six years. She remembered the jolt that had run

through her when their eyes met, but then she pushed it away. She didn't have time for strange fantasies.



As Denise pulled into the apartment parking lot that evening, she told herself she had completely cut Richard Jensen from her thoughts. She ignored the fact she was reminding herself every few minutes that she wasn't thinking about him—that didn't count. She collected the mail from her box and waved at the redhead working in the apartment manager's office as she walked past. The sign out front said there were openings in the complex. With over 350 apartments squeezed together, there were always openings.

The apartment was silent. Lily was probably out with John. Denise made a face at the thought. She pulled out her laptop and checked her personal e-mail—answering a long note from her brother, Gerald—and then visited the online bulletin board for adoptees.

Denise had stumbled across the adult adoptee website several years earlier, coming across a link and deciding to see what it was all about. To her surprise, she had found a few people there who had been through experiences similar to her own. She soon found a support and camaraderie with this group that she had never felt before. None of them knew her real name or what state she lived in, but among these people she felt more herself than anywhere else.

For the past couple of years, she had been using her Internet search skills to help others find family members. What had started as a lark gave her great satisfaction.

It had been a slow day on the bulletin board, with no new requests for help finding family members, but it was almost a relief to have another day off. After twenty minutes, she was typing a note to her brother, Gerald, who attended Utah State University.

She heard the front door open. Lily's laughter and John's low tones trickled in from the living area. It occurred to Denise that she could use a workout, especially if John was going to be over for long.

John was a real estate agent from a well-known family who was already making a name for himself in Utah Valley. On the surface, he seemed like the perfect man for an elementary education major like Lily. He made a good income and seemed nice enough. But the subtle eyebrow raises and fleeting smirks she often caught told her there was far more going on below the surface.

If there was anything she had learned in her years living under her birth mother's thumb, it was how to read people.

By the time Denise changed into workout gear, Lily had dinner started. Lily's long, sable locks were pulled away from her bright, happy face with a large barrette. "Hey, I saw your car in the lot and wondered where you were." Lily put a pan on the stove.

"Hey, Lils, you've got a message." John smiled at Denise and greeted her. He handed Lily the phone, which was blinking to announce the inline voice mail.

Denise never made an issue of her feelings about John, for Lily's sake. It wasn't Lily's fault John didn't seem to like Denise, or that his opinion of her seemed to drop after he heard she had been in foster care. He had been careful never to be less than polite to her, but he had still changed.

Lily dialed into the voice mail and soon let out a squeal. She scrambled for the pen and pencil on the countertop and dialed with a grin. In a moment she invited someone to eat with them. Lily loved to entertain, to cook for a crowd. It didn't surprise Denise that she would invite someone at the last moment, though she doubted John would appreciate it. He seemed to prefer having Lily to himself.

"What was that all about?" John asked, settling himself at one of the bar stools. He snatched some of the cheese Lily was shredding. When Lily slapped playfully at his shoulder, he merely grinned.

"My cousin's in town. He'll be up in a minute. I'm sure you'll love him."

The doorbell rang seconds after Lily finished the thought. Seeing that Lily's hands were full, Denise answered the door.

Standing on her doorstep was Richard Jensen.

CHAPTER TWO



“What are you doing here?” The words were out of Denise’s mouth before she could stop them. The punch of surprise from seeing him was no weaker this time than it had been earlier in the day.

Richard didn’t have a chance to react before Lily barreled toward him. Denise cleared out of the way, grateful for a moment to collect herself. “Richy, it’s so good to see you. Come in, come in.” Lily hugged him, grabbed his hand, and dragged him inside, shutting the door behind him. “Why didn’t you let me know you were going to be here?”

The incredible smile Denise had seen earlier spread across his face. “I only found out a few days ago. I barely had time to get your number and address from your mom.”

Lily introduced the two men and turned to Denise. “And this is my roommate, Denise.”

“We’ve met,” Denise said as she grabbed a cold water bottle from the refrigerator and took a swallow. She needed a moment to counteract the effects of his smile and the surprise of her racing heart. “I have to get to the gym. It was good to see you again.” She wasn’t very enthusiastic, but she figured no one would find it odd.

Discomfort filled her at having him see her in her slim sweats and old college T-shirt. She seldom dressed up for work, and that day she had only worn jeans and a simple red top, but now that she had her hair pulled back in two stubby dog ears and was kicking around in her ratty sneakers, she was

uncomfortable. She felt homely and completely out of the league of someone as shined up as he was.

Not that she was interested anyway.

The fact that she was nearly six feet tall and as thin as barbed wire didn't help her self-image. She'd been told some men found her at least mildly attractive. When she looked in the mirror, however, she still saw that painfully thin, frightened nine-year-old with eyes that were too large for her face.

"You know each other? How?" Lily looked between the two of them. Denise hoped her expression was as bland as Richard's.

"You know my boss is moving on? Your cousin's taking over." Denise inched closer to the front door.

Lily turned back to her cousin, her excitement nearly palpable. "You're moving here? Do you need to find a place to live? Have you found an apartment? I can help you look if you like."

"I already found one." Richard lifted the sheaf of papers in his hand. "No one answered when I called earlier, but I was hoping you'd be home by the time I got here, so I decided to drop by. I stopped at the office on the way in and the manager showed me 208. The painting and repairs will be done by the time I get back to town."

"You mean 208 of this building?" The man would live four doors down from her. Denise wasn't sure what to make of that.

Richard turned, his eyes assessing her. "It fits my needs, and as you know, it's close to work. My flight leaves in the morning, so I don't have much time to look. Why waste time driving around when this one will do?"

"Very pragmatic of you." As a rule, Denise tried to keep her business and personal lives separate. She joked with the guys at work and sometimes met them to play a game of hoops, but that's where it ended. With his relationship to Lily, and the way her heart seemed to flip into overdrive whenever he was around, she would have to be extra careful to keep her distance.

She refused to consider it might already be too late.

"I don't believe I've ever heard anyone use that word in real life before." He looked pleased, curious.

"Well, now you have." She didn't know what else to say. Denise turned to smile at Lily instead. "I gotta go. Cliff will be waiting for me," she lied before

ducking out the door.



At the gym, Denise suckered some new guy into a game of basketball and beat the pants off him during the two hours of their play. Even after a hot shower, she was still anxious when she returned to her apartment, which was now empty. She decided to tackle the kitchen and started by cleaning out the fridge, then moving to the cupboard doors.

She was scrubbing the floor with a heavy brush when Lily returned, Richard in tow. Denise called out a hello in return to Lily's greeting, but otherwise ignored them. Her back ached, her hands were sore, and her head pounded when she did a final rinse on the floor. But she was finally starting to feel ready to settle down for the night. She rinsed the bucket out in the sink, before rinsing and sanitizing the sink. When she turned, she found Richard leaning against the counter on one hip, watching her.

"Looks like they're in full retreat," he said. His face was unreadable.

"What?"

"All those dirt particles that had considered settling in your apartment. They wouldn't dare come within fifty feet of here now." He glanced around and then looked back at her. "If you're as focused on your programming as you are on your cleaning, I'm going to like working with you."

Denise wasn't sure whether to take that as a compliment or not. She knew she'd been giving into her obsessive-compulsive tendencies. But they would pass in a day or two. She promised herself they would pass. The silence lengthened while sounds of Lily moving around her bedroom floated out to them.

"You don't like me," Richard said after a long moment.

You make me nervous. I never allow a guy to make me nervous, no matter how good-looking he is. "I don't know you, Mr. Jensen."

His eyebrows lifted. "That's what puzzles me. Most people like me until they get to know me, at least. And let's drop the Mr. Jensen nonsense. Call me

Rich.”

Lily came out with a photo album in her hands. “I knew I would find them here.” Her eyes shifted between them, and her eyebrows lifted slightly. She continued, setting the book on the countertop. “Aren’t you tired yet?” she asked Denise. “I thought you’d be sleeping when we got back, what with that marathon workout you must have had.”

Denise forced a smile. “Just getting the weekend cleaning out of the way early. I’m bushed. Good night.” She flicked her gaze in Richard’s direction to include him, but didn’t make eye contact. She hoped the night’s family togetherness wasn’t a hint of things to come.



Her night was dreamless, and she slept twelve hours, but Denise woke feeling as groggy as ever. A note on the kitchen counter said her mother had called, and with a sigh, Denise picked up the phone and called back.

“I was starting to wonder if you were avoiding me,” her mother said when she realized who was calling.

“Sorry, it’s been a crazy week, and I crashed early last night. What’s going on?” Denise pulled out milk, cereal, dishes, and a banana while she talked.

“Busy, busy, you know me. The adoption fair is next weekend, and I wondered if you could help.”

“Mom.” The word came out as a whine. “You know how I feel about that.”

“I hoped maybe you’d gotten past things enough to help out this year.” The disappointment was evident in her mother’s voice. Denise would rather be slugged than deal with that kind of disappointment. She considered the guilt it brought on as akin to emotional blackmail, and Jennette DeWalt could compete with a Jewish mother in that department.

“I’d love to help you. I stuffed envelopes for you last month, and I’ll help set up, but I can’t help at the fair. You know that.” Unable to think about the adoption fair without her stomach twisting in knots, Denise only volunteered to help with the parts that didn’t involve the children. When people started

arriving, she'd duck out until they were gone—it made it easier to pretend the event wasn't connected to adoptions or foster care. Dealing one-on-one with these kids made it difficult for her to distance herself from her own memories of these activities.

The network of adoption organizations her mother had gotten involved with when Denise was in her teens held a bi-annual adoption fair, one in the spring and one in the fall, to help kids find families. Denise was all for kids getting out of the foster-care cycle and into solid homes like the DeWalts gave her. The first time she helped, however, it had taken only one glance at two children to send her into a spin of nightmares that lasted a full week—not that Jennette had ever known.

“You never have enough help setting up and tearing down. I'll be happy to help out then.”

There was a short pause on the other end of the line, and when Jennette spoke again there was only a trace of disappointment in her voice. “I appreciate the help.” Then she moved on to talk about her niece's upcoming wedding.

Fifteen minutes later, Denise stood in a hot shower until the tension in her shoulders and back loosened up. It seemed tension was a constant companion lately.



Despite several rain showers over the next week, the weather was perfect for the adoption fair Saturday—sunny and hot for late September. As she pulled down a beanbag toss booth in a downtown park, Denise couldn't help but envy the fun the kids must have had, focusing on happy faces instead of the purpose for the event.

Hearing a child ask about the clown board sitting next to her, Denise turned to look at a woman with two small children out for a walk in the park. “Hello. Do you like clowns?” Denise asked the little boy.

“Yes. And I like parties,” the boy said. Denise figured he must be three or four.

She smiled and the woman asked, "What's this all about?"

Denise explained the purpose of the activity. Most people smiled and acted delighted when they heard about these events. This woman pursed her lips instead.

"My nephews were removed from my sister's house because of drugs when I was in high school. None of us know where they ended up. Do you think they were adopted, or would they still be bouncing around the system? I always wonder about them." The woman's blue eyes grew sad, and she shook her head, as if to clear it.

Denise clenched her hand around the bolts she had just removed from the game. "How old were they? Why didn't they go to family?" What she wanted to ask was why the woman was telling a complete stranger about all of this.

"The boys were real young. Two and four. My father was gone, my mother was really sick. I was only allowed to stay at home because I was about to graduate from high school."

Denise imagined the confusion the two boys must have gone through, being removed at that age. She had been nine, old enough to understand the concept of why she wasn't living with her mom anymore. She forced a smile. "At that age, I'm sure there was no problem placing them in an adoptive home. They're probably happy and well-cared for. It's too bad some of the kids who were here today weren't in a more settled home at those ages." Denise could feel the sting of tears behind her eyes, but she pushed them back as she tried to distance herself from the conversation. She did not cry in front of strangers.

She very seldom cried at all.

The woman shifted the baby from one hip to the other and looked more closely at Denise. "How are you connected to this group?"

"Default. I was one of these kids once. My adoptive mom asked me to help out, so here I am." Denise wished the woman would move along so she could finish up. She needed a pickup game of basketball right now. She could feel the tension growing in her back.

Setting the baby on the ground, the woman dug into the diaper bag she was carrying, and handed each of the children a cracker. Her eyes, however, barely left Denise. "How old were you?"

"Nine."

“Did you ever get back in contact with your family?”

Denise could feel the implied criticism in the words, but she wasn't going to cower to a stranger. “No. I don't know that I had any family besides my birth mother, and I'm not interested in seeing her again.”

“I would love to see my nephews again. Don't you wonder about cousins, aunts, and uncles?”

With a tight smile Denise excused herself, saying she needed some other tools to finish her job. When she returned a few minutes later, she was thankful to find the woman gone.

When she got home that night, Denise defrosted the freezer and scrubbed the furthest corners of the refrigerator before starting on the oven.

CHAPTER THREE



Denise walked into the kitchen for breakfast on Sunday, dressed and otherwise ready, but faltered for a moment when she saw Richard leaning over a bowl of cereal at the kitchen counter. “What are you doing here?” She wished the words back as soon as they were spoken. It appeared she didn’t know any other way to greet him. “I mean, welcome back. I hope your trip was smooth.”

He turned and his eyes flitted over her, taking in the simple blue dress that showed off her calves. A smile of appreciation teased the corners of his mouth by the time his eyes returned to hers. “I moved into my apartment last night. Lily said I could eat here today since I didn’t have time to go shopping.” He had been wearing casual office clothes when she saw him the first time, but today he was dressed for church in a navy blue suit, a white shirt, and a subdued blue tie.

She thought he looked better in his suit, much better, and that hint of a smile teased heat into her cheeks. She dismissed the subject from her mind, not needing the distraction. Instead, she rounded the counter and pulled out dishes for her own breakfast. Several seconds passed in silence before she decided manners required her to carry on some conversation. And he was her boss, so it wouldn’t hurt to be civil. Much. “How was your trip out here? Did you get everything settled in Chicago?”

“Yes, the movers beat me here by an hour and were all unloaded. The drive was long, but uneventful. Lily said you helped your mom with some fair thing yesterday. How did it go?” He scraped the end of the cereal from his bowl onto his spoon.

Realizing she hadn't thought about it since she entered the room, Denise wished he hadn't asked. "Fine, great. You ready to start work tomorrow?"

He shrugged. "I guess we'll have to wait and see."

Lily walked in and redirected the conversation, much to Denise's relief. She soon escaped back to her room with her breakfast.



Though Denise interacted with Richard as little as possible without coming across as rude, she was very aware of his presence in the room at church. Despite her resolve to focus on class, she found herself unable to keep from glancing in his direction several times, catching his eyes on her more than once. The memory of the jolt of recognition she felt when they first saw each other still lingered, regardless of her attempts to excuse it as her imagination.

Lily went to Richard's apartment after church, and Denise pattered around her apartment most of the afternoon. She had been invited to her parents' for dinner, and she knew she would see her sister Paige and maybe Paige's boyfriend, Cliff, as well. Needing something to do with herself until then, and something to keep her mind occupied, she pulled out a cookbook and made some snickerdoodles.

Denise was just pulling the first tray of cookies from the oven when Lily and Richard came back into the apartment, laughing. "We thought we were so tough, jumping from all of three feet up," Lily said.

"Kids always think they're so tough," Richard agreed. He sniffed the air. "Whatever's cooking smells great."

Denise slid the new tray of cookies into the oven and set the timer. "Give them a few minutes to cool, Richard, and you can have some."

"It's Rich," he corrected her. "Do you do a lot of baking?" Rich slid a cookie off the tray with a spatula and passed it from hand to hand to keep it from burning him.

Denise shook her head. "No, *Rich*, I'm usually too busy. You could have waited a minute for that, you know." She pulled a small plate from the

cupboard and set on the counter in front of him.

His grin made her heart stutter. "I like 'em hot." But he set the cookie on the plate.

She turned back to the sink and swallowed to clear her throat. "You'll burn your mouth, but I guess that's your problem."

Lily laughed and pulled out three glasses for milk. "You always were the most impatient boy I ever met."

"I don't know what you're talking about. I'm a paragon of virtues." Rich acted offended, but his expression quickly melted into a smile.

Lily laughed again, and then scooted a couple cookies onto another plate. She and Rich retreated to the sofa to eat. "Come join us, Denise."

"I need to get to my parents' home for dinner, but thanks."

Lily took a phone call from John while Denise rolled the last batch of cookies in cinnamon.

"It must be hard to be the only female in the department," Rich said from behind Denise, causing her to jump a little.

Denise shrugged. It wasn't as though the guys made her life rough. She was more put off by Rich's sudden topic of conversation. "Not so bad. I can beat most of them at basketball as well as hold my own at work, so I earned their respect early on. I get along fine with everyone."

"That's good to hear." He leaned against the counter and pilfered another of her cookies. "Any office politics I ought to be aware of?"

Denise considered that, thinking about the various personalities in the office. "I don't know much of the gossip. Be careful with Murphy," she said, referring to the boss of the local office. "I'm not in the loop much, but you might want to watch out for a few weeks to figure that out. Joan is the office manager. She's the sweetest person who ever lived and knows the office better than anyone. If you get her in your corner, she'll make your life easier. If there's anything non-programming that you need to know in the office, she has the answers."

"Thanks, I appreciate the heads-up."

"Sure." Denise pulled out the second tray of cookies and put in the last one. "Your family lives in California, don't they?"

“Yeah, but they moved there when I was in college. I grew up in Louisiana, outside Baton Rouge.”

Denise nodded. That explained the lazy Southern accent. “Lily never mentioned that.” She set the kitchen timer. “Then again, we don’t really talk much about her extended family.”

“John’s coming over soon. I wish you were staying for dinner,” Lily said to Denise as she hung up the phone a moment later.

“Thanks, but I can’t.”

A few minutes later, Denise grabbed the plate of cookies and her wallet and hurried on her way. She soon found herself wandering around the temple grounds in Provo, killing time before dinner. She needed time to clear her mind if she was going to push away the questions of her past. She couldn’t go there, not now, not ever again.

Early that morning, she had woken from another nightmare, sweating, breathing heavily, and practically having a panic attack. She had groaned when the clock told her it was nearly time to get up. Denise wanted to blame the nightmare on the nosy woman from the day before and firmly place the responsibility on all people who think it’s okay to pry. She knew, though, that she hadn’t finished her latest episode from seeing the kids taken away by the case worker weeks earlier.

Don’t you wonder?

The words echoed again in her head as she rounded a corner of the temple grounds, and Denise worried they would never leave.

Pushing the question away again, she tried to find something else to think about. Something that didn’t include Rich. Her mind landed on Paige, her sister. Denise smiled. She and Paige had shared a love-irritate relationship for many years. They cared about each other, but they didn’t really understand each other.

Paige was the pretty one, the one with all the dates. The one who rarely kept a relationship going for more than a few weeks at most. Until Cliff. Denise pushed a strand of hair the wind had caught away from her face and turned the corner around the temple so she would be facing the wind.

It took no more than a glance at the temple to remind Denise she’d never been inside. She would have to enjoy the spirit of the place from the grounds

instead. Feeling the peace she always garnered from the temple grounds seep into her, she checked her watch and saw she wouldn't arrive at her parent's home too early if she went now.

She didn't have to wonder why she left her apartment so early; she had made a conscious decision not to spend any more time than necessary with Rich. Her instincts said getting too close to Rich would be easy but dangerous. Part of her called out that there was something special about him; she should get to know him. Another part of her screamed out to stay away before he could hurt her. She chose the second option.

He was her boss after all.

She glanced at her watch, noticed the time, and then picked up speed, returning to her car.

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