

Horsewoman

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is love more than a one-trick pony?



by

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Unfinished Business of Love, Volume 1

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C H A P T E R O N E

SERGEANT MELANIE BURTON PULLED off the road to study the map Archie Spencer had e-mailed her two days ago. She looked at the landscape on both sides of the road and then back at the map. The countryside was starting to look familiar. If she continued to drive north, she'd hit the junction for Route 27, which led into Route 9. She pushed her sunglasses onto the bridge of her nose and squinted into mid-morning sun.

It'd been ten years since she'd seen Archie's ranch. She frowned and added another thought. And ten years since she'd seen Heather Spencer-Poole. When she knew Heather, her last name was just Spencer. She'd heard Heather was married to somebody in the police department, which explained the hyphenated surname. She wondered if Heather married a street cop or one of those paper pushers who sat at a desk all day counting paperclips and messing with real cops.

Mel flexed her left knee and then rubbed it. She could feel the fresh scar tissue underneath her fingertips. The doctor said she shouldn't sit in one position longer than sixty minutes or the knee would stiffen on her. She glanced at the cane lying in the bucket seat next to her and scowled. *Damn it.* She hated feeling this clumsy. Her hand reached out and grabbed the

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cane off the seat. She used it to balance her weight as she exited the sports car. “Just take your walk and quit bitching!” she muttered.

Ninety minutes later, Mel spotted the ranch on the horizon. As she drove up the wide road leading to the main house, she marveled at how little things had changed. The main house was a large, two-story affair made of red brick and trimmed in white wood. It sat on four acres of expansive, rich, green grass that didn't include the barn, the stables, or the corral behind it, or the pasture.

Add that land and you had another ninety-six acres. She loved the view from the front porch of the main house. She could see the wooded area filled with pine and oak trees that she'd driven through to get to the ranch. The porch wrapped around the front and sides of the main house and made it more than just a front porch. Mel smiled when she saw the vivid riot of colorful flowers surrounding the main house. The old man was still doing his gardening thing.

Mel looked around the front yard as she drove slowly down the driveway. She expected to see Archie and maybe Heather. She frowned. *Well, probably not Heather, since Archie said she only left her room for meals.* She studied the front porch. Nobody was there. If she remembered correctly, the driveway curved around and led to the back lot. The rear parking lot was a semi-circle filled with gravel. She made an easy left turn and headed to the back.

Yep, I can still park in the backyard, she mused as she noted an old pickup truck and several other cars that had seen better days were there. She parked next to the truck and then took out a handkerchief to pat her neck dry. She could have left the ragtop up and the air-conditioning on, but she wanted to feel sun and wind on her face when she drove in the country. She sat in the car and let the hot sun do the work of

burning the kinks out of her neck and back. She was tired from the long drive and almost asleep when she heard somebody calling her name.

Archie grinned when he came out of the barn and saw the sports car. He wondered why Melanie was still in the car. As he drew closer, he realized she was asleep. He debated how to wake Melanie without startling her. He settled for a friendly pat on the shoulder. "Morning, Melanie, glad to see you made it."

Mel's hand automatically reached for her sidearm before she opened her eyes.

Archie applied thumb pressure to the muscle of Melanie's shoulder. It pinched a nerve and her hand dropped to her lap. "Easy, Sarge, it's me, Archie Spencer. I'm the guy who invited you here!"

"Jesus! That hurts, Archie! Turn my shoulder loose before I forget who you are and cap your ugly ass!"

Archie watched Melanie rub some feeling back into her shoulder. "Sorry about that. It's an old habit. You should let me store your gun. I've got a safe place where I keep mine." He looked at Melanie's annoyed face and smiled. "I'm glad you're here, Melanie." He sighed with the memory of what he'd done ten years ago. "I wouldn't blame you if you'd hung up on me."

Mel glanced around the yard. "Where is she?"

Archie nodded in the direction of the second floor. "Up there. She's either watching us right now or too zoned to see straight."

Mel studied Archie for a moment and then nodded at her knee. "Does she know about me?"

Archie sighed. "I told her you'd been shot. I figured I should say something before she heard it on the news or read about you in the papers."

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Mel grimaced as a wave of pain shot through her knee. She gripped the steering wheel until her brown knuckles paled as she waited until the attack was over. “Shit!” She grabbed her knee and tried to massage it.

Archie reached out to comfort her, had second thoughts, and dropped his hand to his side. “Why don’t I show you to your room, Sarge?”

“I’m on medical leave, Sir. You don’t have to be so formal. Call me Melanie or Mel.” She struggled to climb out of the bucket seat.

Archie offered her an elbow. “Allow me, Mel.”

Melanie held on to Archie’s arm and he pulled her upright.

He patted her hand, then looked around. “What do you think of the place?”

Mel swallowed a groan as another wave of pain washed over her. She gripped his forearm hard enough to leave nail marks in his arm. “Shit, that hurt.”

Archie rubbed her hand until she loosened her grip. “Did the doc give you something for the pain?”

Melanie nodded. “Yeah, but it makes me dizzy and all I wanna do is sleep.” She sighed. “That’s all I’ve been doing. I feel like a baby. All I do is shit, piss, and sleep! I’m tired of it. I came out here to build up my knee. I want to get back on active duty, Sir. My physical therapist wants to check out this place. When I described the ranch, she liked me walking everywhere. She said I needed natural exercise like walking to the barn and walking up and down the stairs to the bedrooms. She said I’d need at least three to four months of intense physical exercise if I wanted to pass the department’s medical exam.

“If I can’t go back to the street, I don’t know what I’ll do with myself. Can you picture me behind a desk, Sir?” Melanie

glanced at Archie and frowned. “Christ, why am I telling you all my business?”

Archie hid a smile behind a broad hand. “Let’s get you settled in to one of the bedrooms upstairs. We’ll just take it one day at a time, Mel. One day at a time.” He pretended she hadn’t asked the last question.

They walked to the back door, went inside, and stopped at the staircase.

Melanie’s eyes widened at the flight of stairs facing her.

Archie hid another smile as he watched her eyes take in the staircase. They’d soon find out if her therapist’s brand of natural exercise worked. “Can you climb stairs?”

“I don’t know, Sir. I haven’t tried.”

Archie nodded and patted her hand. “It’s okay, Mel. We’ll do it together. It’s closer going through the back. There’s a lot less steps this way. Grab the rail. Take the stairs one at a time.” He watched Mel pull herself up, using the cane and the railing for balance. “Yes, that’s good, Mel. You’re doing fine.” He followed closely behind her. Several times, he reached out to catch her but dropped his hands when she repositioned her body and continued the tiring journey to the second-floor bedroom.

Mel stopped midway to wipe the sweat from her forehead. “Why did you ask me to come here?”

“I thought you needed a place to stay...and I...” Archie’s voice faded when Mel cut her eyes at him. He shrugged, then swallowed hard. “Okay, okay. I was looking for a way to apologize to you for what I did.”

Mel stopped tugging on the banister to stare at him in disbelief. “Oh gee! Thanks, Sir. It’s only been ten years!” she remarked sarcastically before adding another quip. “It’s a little late in the day for that, don’t you think?”

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Archie held up his hands in surrender. “Okay, Sarge, you got me there. I shoulda done it years ago and I’m sorry.” He debated if he should tell Melanie the real reason he’d asked her to come to the ranch. It only took one look into her angry face and he decided not to say anything. “Why did you say yes?”

Mel stopped to lean heavily on her cane. She pulled out her hanky to wipe her face and then wiped her neck. “Curiosity, I guess. I wanted to see her again, Sir.” *She wanted to see if Heather’s presence could still affect her.*

They made it up the last step and walked slowly into the guestroom at the far end of the hall.

Archie deposited Mel in a large recliner in the bedroom and patted her shoulder. “Sit here, Mel, while I go down and bring up your bags.” When he returned to the guestroom, he found Mel fast asleep in the recliner. He quietly opened the closet to hang up her suit bag and then placed a suitcase and gym bag on the floor. He pulled one of the quilts off the bed and covered her with it. “It’s good to have you here, Melanie Burton.” He sighed at the doorway as he watched her sleeping for a moment. “I’m depending on your help with them.”



HEATHER SPENCER WATCHED as Mel spoke softly to the big horse from the shadows of the barn and got angry all over again. Her father had no right ask the woman to come here after so many years. She didn’t need anybody to help her through this situation. Everyone had hard times. This was just one of hers. She sighed quietly.

Mel was predictable if nothing else. In the ten days, nine hours, and eighteen minutes Mel had been on the ranch, she’d

stopped moping about and feeling depressed long enough to watch Mel get up in the early morning. Mel was an early riser. She'd rise quietly, go into the bathroom to shower, and limp slowly out to the barn just as dawn was appearing in the summer sky. The first week Mel was here, she was going to bed as Mel was coming out of the bathroom. She was too full of self-loathing to care why Melanie Burton was here after all these years.

Once she ran out of sleeping pills, or was it that she was simply curious, Heather decided to find out what was in the barn that attracted Mel. She set her clock to ring twenty minutes before she knew Mel would awaken. She dressed in a hurry and raced out to the barn. She made sure that none of the ranch hands saw her select a good hiding place where she could watch Mel's entry into the barn.

Just like clockwork, Mel limped into the barn at 5:20 a.m. Her leg must hurt today because she was leaning heavily on the lightweight metal cane by the time she entered the barn. Several of the horses snorted when they smelled her arrival. The one horse she headed for ignored her until she stood a foot away from his stall. Dusty's nostrils flared open. He grew excited enough to kick the walls of the cubicle hard, trying to knock them down. The walls vibrated from the force of his hoofs, but they remained standing. They'd seen bigger, stronger horses than him try to collapse them.

Mel spoke softly to Dusty, but he continued to kick at the walls. She kept her voice low and soft. "Easy, Big Boy. Take it easy, Dusty, Honey. Remember me? I'm the one that loves you. I'm not gonna hurt you, Boy. I love you too much to do that."

Heather remembered the timbre of her voice from years ago. It hadn't changed much over the years. Mel's voice always reminded her of a torch singer who'd spent nights in a

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smoke-filled honky-tonk bar. It had a raw quality that made it sound like a soft, throbbing growl. The sound stayed with the listener for hours, especially when she used it to whisper. God, she remembered how it felt to hear the voice in her ear at night. Mel's voice still sent goose bumps up and down her arms.

Today, Mel's voice simply agitated Dusty. He stayed far enough away that he could eye her and close enough that she could feel the vibrations of his powerful kicks to the wall. She couldn't stand to watch Mel talking to Dusty. Dusty was her horse ... so what if the accident damaged him a little? He didn't need anything but time and a little patience to get through this. He was big and strong. He'd make it through this world alone, just as she would. Whatever companionship her father thought she needed, she didn't, and especially not from this woman. He was right to stop them ten years ago.

"What do you think you're doing to my horse?"

Melanie kept an eye on the excited horse as she spoke to Heather. "I thought I'd come out to see what all the fuss was. Your father said Dusty was in an accident. That he wouldn't let anyone ride him." She sighed. "I wanted to see if he remembered me. Do you have a problem with that, Heather?"

"You know I do! Isn't that why you've been sneaking in here early in the morning, so I couldn't see what you're doing?"

Melanie pulled an apple out of her pocket and set it on the top of the stall for the horse, then turned to face her accuser. She studied Heather Spencer's face, particularly her eyes, before she responded. Her face was older—more mature—but still beautiful. But if she continued to drink herself into oblivion, it was going to start showing in more than just her sad eyes.

“Why are you here, Mel? I’m sure the army has plenty of places for you to recuperate. This isn’t one of them,” Heather snapped in a voice filled with displeasure.

Melanie cleared her throat. She’d expected this conversation to take place ten days ago, but Heather had been too drugged to recognize her. At least, that was what the old man claimed when he called to ask for her help. She wondered how much truth he’d told her this time.

“I’m still with the police department, Heather,” she responded quietly. “I never took the job with the army. I wanted to stay close to home.” *And you*, she wanted to add but decided against it when she got the withering look from narrowed hazel eyes.

“I knew it was something like that.”

“So you kept up with my career?”

Heather snorted. “Why would I do a dumb thing like that? After you left me, I was so happy, I celebrated!”

Melanie sighed. “You know I didn’t leave because I wanted to, Heather. Your father....”

Heather drew closer until she was a foot away from Mel. “Don’t you dare blame him, Melanie! Admit the truth as I have. You wanted the department more than you wanted me and you know it!”

Melanie shrugged tired shoulders. “Have it your way, Heather! It was a long time ago. People change.”

Heather frowned as she eyed Melanie from her head to her toes. “Except for the cane, you haven’t changed much. I’m asking you again: why are you here, Mel?”

Melanie decided it might be better not to tell Heather how worried Archie was about her. She lied. She remembered how desperate he sounded on the phone. He started the conversation by saying that he wouldn’t blame her if she hung

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up on him for the way he'd treated her. He said he'd tried everything before he called her.

Former chief of police Archibald Spencer was a proud man...a very proud man. Men like him didn't ask people for help easily. They either demanded it or ordered it. "I needed a place to..." She pointed to her leg with her cane. "My doctor said I could use a place that would exercise my knee. I thought about this place. I called your father and he seemed delighted with the idea."

"I knew it!" Heather exploded. "Whatever he's planning, tell him no, Mel."

Melanie frowned. "What makes you think his plans concern you?"

"Archie is trying to run my life."

"And you let him, Heather." Melanie sighed. "It sounds like nothing much has changed with you either. If you don't like it, why don't you move? Find a place and move off the ranch."

Heather moved closer until she stood inches away from Melanie's face. "How could you say that to me?"

Heather's eyes narrowed but not before Melanie saw something akin to pain in them.

Melanie wondered what Archie didn't tell her about his daughter's situation. It seemed Archie was up to his old tricks again. He told her what he thought she needed to know and nothing more. She saw the pain in Heather's eyes. She wanted to know what caused it.

Heather's mind was in turmoil but not so much that it blocked out her ability to read facial expressions. She realized that Mel didn't know about Jason or Irene. Keeping secrets was her father's way of holding power. "Archie shoulda asked me before he invited you here, Mel."

“Would you have said yes, Heather?” Mel suddenly wanted to know everything that caused Heather pain over the years. She wanted to hold Heather and tell her everything would be all right. She wanted to tell her funny jokes and hear her laugh again. She loved Heather’s laugh. Her hearty, from-the-gut laughter was such a contrast to the dignified persona she showed to the public. So was her behavior in the middle of a passionate encounter. She was a wild woman in bed ... screaming loud enough to wake the dead when she climaxed. *Christ!* Why was she thinking about something that happened ten years ago?

Heather stood with hands on her hips. “I think you know the answer, Melanie.”

“No, you tell me. I want hear it from you, Sweetness.”

Heather’s eyes widened. She swallowed hard and then dropped her hands to her side. She stepped over and leaned her arms on the railing that surrounded Dusty’s stall. She smiled wistfully at the golden horse, remembering something good. “Nobody’s called me that since ... you did.”

Taking her cue from the sudden change in Heather’s behavior, Melanie moved closer until they were touching elbows. They stared at Dusty together. “I’m glad. I’d hate to think somebody else used my pet name for you.” *This won’t be as difficult as Archie claimed it would be.* She eyed Heather.

Heather shook her head to rid it of the memory of Mel’s low voice and the image of the last time they made love. “Damn it, Mel! Go home. Do your recuperating somewhere else. I don’t need you here. Dusty doesn’t need you either, so stay away from both of us.” She slammed a hand on the railing to emphasize her point.

The noise startled Dusty into action. The big horse kicked the walls hard and vibrated the railing.

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In the confusion, Melanie lost her balance. She had to grab her cane with one hand and the wall with the other to keep from falling. She groaned as she stepped down on her bum knee for balance and fell. When she looked up again, Heather was running out of the barn at top speed.

“Hey! Heather, wait a minute.” Melanie struggled to stand upright. There was no way she could keep up with Heather’s pace. She looked back at Dusty. “It looks like it’s just you and me, Boy. Take it easy, Honey. It’s gonna be all right. She didn’t mean to scare you, Dusty.” She pulled out another apple and signaled him to come to her. “Come on, Boy. Come get it. Come on. I know you want it. I can see it in your eyes.”

Dusty whinnied loudly and then snorted as his hoofs pawed at the ground.

Melanie sensed he could smell the apples, but his fear of humans was stronger than his need for a treat. She sighed. “Okay, Boy. It’s okay, Honey. Take your time. You’ll come to me when you’re ready. You take the apples when I leave.” She bent down to pick up the first apple from the ground. She set the apples on the stall railing. “Here you go, Boy.” She limped out of the barn slowly. She hid in the shadows outside the doorway to see if the big chestnut-colored horse would take the apples.

Dusty whinnied once, then trotted over to capture an apple between huge teeth and munched on it.

Melanie grinned at the gesture. She turned and limped back to the main house. “At least your taste for something sweet hasn’t changed. I wish I could say the same thing about your mistress, but I don’t know what her tastes are, Dusty.” She stopped several times to rub her knee and then flex it. The scar running across her knee was sensitive to clothing rubbing against it. She could hardly wait to change into shorts so she could sit in the hot tub and let the hot salt water wash her

troubles away. She frowned. She'd better get something in her stomach before Cammie had her sweating and straining worse than the ranch hands shoveling manure in the barn.

Camilla Thompson was heartless when it came to pushing her to the limit of her body's endurance. Just when she thought she couldn't lift her leg one more time or perform a revised squat thrust, Cammie challenged her in that smart-ass way of hers. She'd do ten more. She pulled a hanky out of her pocket to the wipe at the sweat forming on the back of her neck as she looked up at the sun. It was going to be another hot one today. Cammie might give her a break and let her swim laps rather than working out with the weights today.

Melanie grinned at the thought. *Oh, sure she would, when pigs flew and Hell had an ice-skating rink.* She might bump into Archie when she got something to eat this morning since Archie was an early riser too. She could grill him about Heather's situation. She didn't expect him to tell her much, but it was worth a try.

She stopped to speak with one of the ranch hands. "Mornin', Felix. How ya doing today?"

"Ah, Mel. I'm fine. It is a lovely day, no?"

Melanie nodded. "Yes, it's gonna be hot today. Ah, *poco frio.*"

Felix frowned at her Spanish. "No, no, Senorita, that wrong. You say a little cold when you mean very hot ... *mucho caliente.*"

Melanie shrugged. "*Mucho caliente?*"

Felix nodded. "*Si.* Your Spanish, it get better, like my English. It better too?"

"*Si, Felix. Gracias.*"

"Thank you, Mel."

Melanie could feel eyes on her. She looked up in time to see the curtains close quickly in the second-floor window.

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So Heather was curious enough to spy on her today. That was better than sitting in her room and drinking her troubles away. Mel pretended that she hadn't seen the curtains close and continued on the path to the main house. She made it to the porch before she collapsed on the top step and leaned her back against the banister post.

"Whew! It sure seems like the path down to the barn is longer today. Right, Nicky?" Melanie picked up the large orange cat sunning himself on the porch steps. He opened sleepy blue eyes to stare at her and meow. He must have been getting old since he allowed her to stroke the top of his head without protest. He settled under her hand and started to purr loudly. If she stayed in this position too long, she'd wind up joining him to take a nap. The walk out to the barn made her tired this morning, or maybe it was her meeting with Heather.

"Old memories are tiring, aren't they, Nicky?" Melanie asked, closing her eyes to rest them for a moment. She was almost asleep when her nose caught the familiar scent of vanilla.

Heather kicked the sole of her boot. "If you're that tired, go take a nap on the glider. You can't sit here and sleep. It looks tacky. Besides, you're blocking the passageway."

Melanie frowned and opened her eyes. She found herself looking into angry hazel depths until their owner grimaced.

Heather kicked her foot again as she stood over her. "Didn't you hear me, Mel? I said get up and go find another spot!"

Mel groaned and used the cane to help her stand unsteadily. "I heard you the first time, Heather. There's no need to get violent. I'm moving. It just takes me a little longer to get my leg in gear." She leaned down to rub her knee.

"Do you need help?"

Melanie started to say, “No, I can manage,” and then thought better of it. “Yeah, I could use a shoulder to lean on. Are you up for the job, Sweetness?” she asked quietly.

Heather issued an impatient sigh as she glanced down at her former lover. “Christ! You didn’t act hurt in the barn, Mel.” She moved a step below Mel to support her at the waist. “Put your arm across my shoulder and lean into me. I’ll help you into the house or the porch glider. Which do you want?”

Melanie inhaled deeply as she leaned into Heather for support. “You smell good. What’s that scent you’re wearing?”

“I suggest you stop sniffing me like a dog with his favorite bone and watch where you’re going, Mel.”

Mel groaned when her knee bumped against the small outdoor table. “Shit! You walked me into the damned table on purpose. Are you trying to make me a permanent cripple, woman?”

Heather felt Mel’s back muscles tighten in response to the painful accident. “Oh hush, Mel! Just sit down and let me look at the damage.”

Mel sat down slowly and gingerly stretched out her knee. “Why should I? You’re not a nurse anymore.”

“How would you know that?”

“I’m still a cop, Heather. I have access to several databases.”

“Humph! I wonder what my father would think of an officer who uses police databases for her personal business.” Heather watched Mel’s dark eyes narrow. The vein at her temple throbbed visibly. That was what happened when Melanie suppressed an explosion of anger or passion. “Either roll your pants leg up or unzip and I’ll pull them down!”

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me, Mel! Up or down, it’s your choice.” Heather stared at Mel’s jeans. Her glance took in the snug fit.

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She decided it would be easier to pull her pants down to see the knee. She leaned over and unzipped Mel's jeans without permission.

Melanie decided to ignore the throbbing in her knee and go for a joke to ease the tension she was feeling. It was hard to ignore Heather's hands on her body. "If you wanted to see me naked, Sweetness, all you had to do was ask."

"Ha, ha, Mel! That's really funny coming from the woman who deserted me the last time we met! Shift your hips so I can pull off your jeans." Heather gently eased Mel's pants down to her ankles. It was clear which leg was injured. Scars crisscrossed her leg and there was a visible difference in the size of her thighs. The injured one was smaller. The muscles looked weak from non-use. But whoever did the operation was a master surgeon. The bullet tore through Mel's thigh and knee and left behind damage that a surgeon repaired through several surgeries. The red-brown scar tissue on her knee was raised and lumpy, but at least Mel was mobile. She could see where Mel's knee had made contact with the table. The area was discolored and swollen or was that from something else? "Did you fall on your knee recently, Mel?"

Melanie shrugged. "Yeah, so what? I'm a little clumsy with the cane."

"Lie back against the couch, Mel. I want to examine your injury." Heather probed the area around the knee as she watched Melanie's face. "Does this hurt?" She watched Melanie bite her lip and then close her eyes from the pain.

"A little," she managed to gasp as she felt Heather fingers probe the swollen area. Her knee was on fire almost as bad as when Youngblood shot her.

"How about this?"

Melanie groaned and then tried to push Heather's hands away. "Are you trying to torture me, Heather? Yes, that shit hurts! Quit pressing on it, okay?"

"You are such a big baby. It's just a small bruise." She didn't say anything to Mel just yet. She'd monitor Mel's movements for the next couple of days to make sure she hadn't done real damage to the knee.

"It doesn't hurt so small."

Heather studied her face again. "Since when did you get a medical degree, Mel? I'll bring you an ice pack. You have to stay off your feet too. You'll be fine in a day or two."

Mel frowned. "That doesn't work me. I've got physical therapy today."

"I'm sure the woman would let you slide for a day or two, Mel."

Mel's eyes widened. How did she know her physical therapist was a woman?

"Humph! If that's what she really does."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"I've seen how she looks at you, Mel. She'd love to eat you up with a spoon and a dollop of whipped cream on top. I've seen the extra touches she gives you in the whirlpool. Those massages that happen after you're finished with your exercises are outrageous. When I was a practicing nurse, I never took the chances she does with you." Heather frowned at Melanie. "Don't you dare try to deny it either." She stared at Melanie, waiting for her to disagree.

Didn't Archie say Heather was drunk out of her mind? If she were that drunk, how would she know what we were doing? "We ... I thought you were sleeping."

"Who could sleep with all that sexual activity going on?"

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“What sexual activity? That’s all in your imagination, woman!” Mel used her cane to help balance her rise from the couch.

Heather giggled.

“What’s so funny?”

Heather pointed to pants still around her ankles and grinned. “You might wanna pull them up, Mel. I don’t think the police department is liberal enough to want its officers to parade around nearly naked. Although, as you said, things change. Maybe the department has more liberal standards today.” She turned to head into the kitchen.

“Hey! Where are you going? You pulled my pants down, Heather, so how about helping me pull them back up?”

Heather scowled. “Oh, quit whining and sit back down, Mel. You look ridiculous with the darn things around your ankles. Put your leg back up on the couch. I’ll be back in a minute. I’m just going for some ice. Or you can just stand there if you don’t mind Felix and his crew getting a good look at your backside in those panties.”

Mel looked over her shoulder and caught Felix giving his friend a shove in the side. They were rattling away in Spanish and grinning at her.

Heather giggled and answered him in Spanish.

Meanwhile, Mel grabbed the summer quilt from the couch to cover her lower torso. “Shit! Why didn’t you tell me they could see me?”

“I figured you didn’t mind letting everybody see your ass, especially after the public massages you and your therapist seem to favor.”

“But I’m ... we’re not. I mean, I didn’t do anything with Cammie.” Mel heard a car drive up and sat down in a hurry. She tried to cover up, but the blanket became entangled in her pants. “Goddamn it!” she exclaimed, tugging at the quilt.

“Who the hell is that?” She watched as a boy of about nine skipped out of the car ahead of Archie. He continued to skip until he saw Heather and then he raced over to greet her.

Heather smiled and ran down the steps to greet the boy.

They embraced.

Heather hugged the boy, then kissed his forehead, which he promptly wiped off with the back of his hand.

“Aw, Mom! I already told you that I’m too old for kissing.”

“You said I could kiss you when nobody was watching.” Heather opened her arms and spread them wide. “There’s nobody but you, me, and Archie, Jason.”

“So who’s that staring at me from the porch, Mom?” Jason looked beyond Heather’s back and spotted a fast-looking, low-slung sports car. He quickly forgot the stranger staring at him from the porch. “Oh wow! Whose car is that, Mom? It’s way cool! Can I go look at it? I promise not to touch anything.” He literally danced on his toes as he waited for her answer.

Heather frowned. She’d forgotten that her son was due home from the camp today. Christ, Mel wasn’t supposed to see him ever! Yet here she was sitting on the porch, studying him from a few feet away. She didn’t need to turn around to know that Mel’s mind was analyzing the situation. She could feel her silent questions pressing against her back.

Mel finally managed to kick off her jeans. She untangled the twisted blanket. She’d crouched over to hide her near nudity and then tied the blanket around her waist. She felt the ground with a toe until she found her jeans. *Shit!* She’d never get the chance to pull the damn things back on. The one day she decided not to wear her customary boxers under her jeans, the entire world was walking through her dressing room!

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“Ask Sergeant Burton if it’s all right to look at her car.” Heather nodded in Mel’s direction and mouthed, “Are you dressed yet?”

Mel shrugged. “Sort of,” she replied.

“She’s a cop just like Irene was, right, Mommy?” Jason spoke with admiration in his voice. He wiggled on one foot, then jumped to the other. He pranced in front of his mother while he waited for her answer.

“Boy, stand still! You’re giving me a headache with all that movement. Come help me with your bags.”

Jason stopped twitching and turned to eye his grandfather. “Yes, Sir,” he replied solemnly. He took the large duffle bag and dragged it up the walkway.

“Boy! Pick that bag up before you bust the stitches dragging it across the ground like that!”

“Yes, Sir.” Jason stopped dragging the bag to lift it with both hands. “I just wanna hurry up so I can see the car, Grandpa.”

Archie glanced at Melanie from his position in the driveway. “I don’t think Sergeant Burton is going anywhere, today. Are you, Melanie?”

Melanie cleared her throat. “No, Sir. I hadn’t planned on doing anything but physical therapy today. Sir, would you mind if I didn’t stand? My knee collapsed out there in the barn. Your daughter was kind enough to look at my knee. I haven’t had the opportunity to....”

“Let me finish my examination, Daddy,” Heather interrupted to add her two cents. There was no point in announcing to the world that she’d removed Mel’s pants. Her father might misinterpret her actions. “You guys go in through the front door. Jason, leave the duffle bag on the walkway. You can get it later. Daddy, just leave the bags. I’ll get Felix to

bring them up later. I made pancakes, Jason. I left some for you and your grandfather. Why don't you go eat?"

Archie grinned and strode over to kiss his daughter's forehead. "It's nice to see you up and about, Heather. It wouldn't have anything to do with our houseguest, would it?"

Heather accepted her father's kiss. She muttered softly so that only he heard, "Don't push it, Daddy! We'll talk about this later, away from little pitchers with big ears and sergeants with curious minds."

"Yes, Ma'am." Archie saluted Heather and then hugged her. He winked at Mel behind his daughter's back as though she was his co-conspirator. "See ya later, Sarge."

"Yes, Sir." Melanie breathed a sigh of relief. She could take the hot-ass blanket off and slip into her jeans. She was untying the blanket when Heather smacked her hands away.

"What do you think you're doing, Mel?"

"I'm removing the blanket."

"No, leave it on. Lie back and put your head against the arm of the sofa, Mel. That knee needs ice and elevation. It's gonna get ice today and tomorrow if it kills me."

Mel sighed heavily. "What did I sign up for when I agreed to come ... here? Oh shit, I said too much!"

Heather stared at her with a funny expression on her face. "I thought you said you called my father and not the other way around." She studied Melanie with her arms folded over her chest. Her left foot was tapping the ground at a mile a minute.

Melanie felt like she was in the principal's office, in trouble for fighting again.

"Well, don't sit there staring over my head. Look at me and say something, Melanie Burton!"

Melanie studied Heather's annoyed face and did the first thing that came to mind. She wiggled her eyebrows, then winked at her. "Okay, I give up. You caught me. I was just

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calculating how fast I'd need to be to jump over your head and go somewhere to hide. I figure I'd need to take the kid with me because he probably knows the best places to hide in this joint. I used to know one, but it's been a long time. I don't know if it's still there."

Heather's lips twitched.

Melanie watched the beginning of tiny smile appear on Heather's face. *So, the tigress hasn't lost her sense of humor.* That was good because she could ask the question bugging her since the boy leaped out of Archie's old truck. "What's the boy's name, Heather?"

Heather played with her hands and didn't look up. "Jason."

Melanie's eyes widened at the news. "Hey! That was my father's name."

Hazel eyes captured Mel in their gaze for a moment before Heather nodded. "Yes, I know."

"What's his middle name?" Mel held up a hand across her lips for silence as she stared steadily into Heather's guilty face. "No wait, don't tell me, Heather. It's Archibald. Jason Archibald Spencer. He's the kid we were supposed to have together. Isn't he? He's what...eight or nine, right?"

Heather nodded. "Jason is ten and half."

Melanie did a quick calculation in her head. "That means you were pregnant when we broke up, weren't you? The artificial insemination finally worked, uh?" Melanie watched Heather nod a second time and exploded. "Son of a bitch ... son of a goddamn-bitch, you shoulda told me! You knew I'd have come back for the baby's sake, Heather." She refused Heather's offered hand as she struggled to move forward on the couch and then snatched her cane to brace her body. She waved Heather away and rose unsteadily.

"Leave me alone! I got it covered! I'm fine, goddammit!"

Melanie bit into her lower lip, drawing a little blood in her effort to keep from crying out from the pain as she forced her rebuilt knee to carry half of her weight. She was dragging her leg by the time she struggled up the stairs under her own steam, sweating heavily when she reached the bedroom. She collapsed on the bed, then fell into an exhausted sleep shortly after her struggle to remove the blanket encasing her waist like a boa constrictor was unsuccessful. She missed seeing a teary-eyed Heather standing in the doorway.

Heather wiped at her eyes as she studied the woman sleeping in her guestroom with regret. She should have told Mel about Jason. But how could she? Melanie had made a choice and it wasn't to stay with her. Humph, she didn't deserve to know about Jason or anything else! She stared at Mel again. She looked uncomfortable with the summer quilt twisted around her legs and waist. If she was careful, she could remove the blanket without disturbing Mel. She decided to roll Mel onto her side, then sharply tugged, and the quilt slid away easily.

She eased Mel onto her back without awakening her, noting the familiar enticing feel of her skin when she touched her. She made sure that Mel was sleeping soundly before she stroked her cheek. Her hand had a mind of its own and it moved down to caress the skin across Mel's belly until it grew taut, then trembled under her gentle exploration. She came to her senses when she realized it wasn't fair to take advantage of Melanie like this. She dropped curious hands to her sides and sighed. Guilt made her confess to something that she'd never tell Melanie while she was awake.

"I'm sorry for not telling you about Jason, Melly. I didn't want you to come back because I was pregnant. I wanted you to come back because you loved me. My father said he told you about me. He claimed you told him we'd never work as a

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couple because you were busy dedicating your life to the department. You told him you wouldn't have time for Jason or me. You said being a cop was what you were meant to be. You claimed you'd found yourself as a cop. Archie said it was your calling as much as the priesthood was for some people."

Heather whispered, staring wistfully at Melanie as she slept. "I didn't want to interfere with your life, so I found a good woman ... Irene ... only she's dead, Mel. My good, sweet Irene is dead. She loved me so much. But she knew I didn't love her the same way. Oh God, this is too hard for me! I can't do this." She fled from the room.

Melanie opened an eye to peek around the room, then sat up when she was certain Heather was gone. "Shit! How long did Archie think he could keep this shit from me? Jason shoulda been *our* kid!" She struggled to slide her wounded leg into a pair of baggy shorts.

She ran a hand through her dreadlocks. "I was crazy to come here!" She shook her head grimly. "I'm absolutely, positively insane!" She'd already answered her own question. "Ten years is a long time to keep a secret," she muttered, punching the pillows behind her head. She'd believed Archie when he told her that Heather didn't want to see her again. That was her mistake. He said Heather needed somebody other than a rookie cop, then he added the crowning touch. He said that he was glad his daughter had started dating men. The way he said it so casually, as though he was saying, "Have a nice day," made her think it was true.

She frowned. Damn, the old bastard was a good liar. After what Heather had just said, she had plenty of questions for the old man to answer. Why did he want her to come here to recuperate? Heather was right. She could have stayed in the city and kept the rehabilitation schedule with the clinic. Why was Archie so insistent that she come here? Heather didn't

want her here. The kid didn't know who she was, so what was the point of this charade? She didn't need Archibald Spencer to tell her there were only two things she had ever regretted in her life.

One was not staying with Heather. Her second regret was the day Youngblood shot her. Oh sure, she had the tiny regrets such as "Why didn't I take this street to get to work or buy that suit instead of this one?" She was like any other human being and that was okay. If you were alive, you had regrets. What she was thinking about were major ones, the kind that stayed with you until the day you died. She couldn't do a damn thing to change either one. She remembered the day each one occurred like it was yesterday. She covered a yawn with the back of her hand.

"I'm tired...too tired to think about this right now," she muttered, burrowing down against the pillows as her eyes drifted closed.



AN HOUR AFTER HEATHER dried her tears, she returned to the doorway to watch Melanie sleep. She carried an ice pack and several pillows with her. She hesitated at the door, reluctant to wake the woman occupying the bed. As a former nurse, she decided Melanie's injury was more important than her personal feelings and walked over to the bed. She touched Melanie's shoulder gingerly. "This is going to feel a little cold," she explained, pulling the sheets back and lifting Melanie's injured leg onto the pillows. She placed the ice pack on Melanie's knee and watched her forehead furrow in sleep.

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Drowsy, dark eyes opened in painful confusion. “What are you doing here?” Melanie tried to shift away from the ice pack, but Heather shadowed her movements with it.

“Hold still, Mel. Let me put the pack on your knee.”

Melanie flinched when the cold pack made contact with her knee and closed her eyes. “Ooo, that’s too cold.”

Heather sat down on the bed to make holding the pack against Mel’s knee easier. She needed to say something to erase what she was starting to feel for Melanie Burton. She had Jason to consider. She couldn’t afford to play with fire a second time. “I know it hurts. We want the swelling to go down or you won’t be able to use your leg in the whirlpool with your therapist.”

Mel’s eyes popped open to glare at Heather. “You sound jealous, Heather.”

Heather sighed. “I don’t know what you mean. I don’t care what you ...do!”

Mel sat up quickly. She interrupted Heather to shove the ice pack away from her knee. “Oh shit! I forgot Cammie!” She held her hand up to the sunlight streaming in from the curtained window to read a non-existent wristwatch. “What time is it? I’ve got an appointment to keep.” She tried to swing her legs over the side of the bed, then stopped suddenly. She froze in place when the pain hit her full force. “Oh shit, it hurts!” She grabbed her knee, rocking back and forth with her eyes closed to ease the pain. She tried to lift it off the mattress with two hands. “Ooo, that hurts worse.”

Heather wanted to shove Mel onto the bed and sit on her until she stopped struggling to get up. “Good! That serves you right! Maybe now you’ll stop trying to stand on a bum knee.”

Mel sank back against the pillows and glared at her nurse. “Your bedside manner seriously sucks. You could use a few lessons in tact, Heather.”

“If it’d make you stay in bed and off that leg, I’d gladly take them.”

Mel frowned at Heather as she studied her face. “Why the sudden change in mood? I don’t get ... it.” Her eyes narrowed with suspicion. “You did something to Cammie, didn’t you? Okay, what did you do, Heather? You didn’t kick her ass, did you?”

Heather chuckled at the thought of a knockdown, drag-out battle with a therapist. “I have to set an example for Jay. I can’t go around kicking some bimbo’s ass every time she looks at me funny. Your therapist called to check on you an hour ago. When I told her what happened, she agreed with me that you should rest your knee for a few days. She said you could afford to miss a few days.

“She also said that you’re stubborn when it comes to setting limits on your body. I’m supposed to watch you and make sure you don’t try to do too much too soon. She suggested that I convince you to allow me to massage the muscles around your knee after you sit in the whirlpool for thirty minutes.”

Mel deliberately relaxed her posture and put her hands behind her head. She never thought she and Heather could sit in the same bedroom, shooting the breeze like two friends. “See, I told you? Cammie and I aren’t doing anything. It’s all about physical therapy.”

“Yeah, sure it is, Mel. Humph! Your therapist had the nerve to ask me for a date. She said she’d seen me watching you guys in the pool.” Heather sighed. “She went on to describe in some detail a lurid sexual dream she had about me. Mel, is she really a qualified therapist? She sounded a little crazy to me.”

“That’s just Cammie’s way of testing her limits. She’s trying to see how far she can go with you. You could do worse

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than Cammie. And she's on a list of approved therapists my insurance company sent me, so she must be okay." Melanie smiled at Heather. "I like this."

"What?"

"I like that we can talk, Heather. I didn't think that I'd ever want to be around you again."

"I didn't think that I'd ever see you again either, Melly," Heather remarked quietly.

Melanie smiled. "It's been a while since anybody but my family called me Melly."

"Mommy, are you up there?" Jason yelled from the bottom of the stairs.

Heather sighed and stood up when she heard her son's voice. "Keep the pack on your knee, Mel. It'll reduce the swelling. Yes, Jason, I'm with Sergeant Burton."

"But it's too cold!"

Heather sucked her teeth. "You're acting like such a baby, Mel."

"Mommy, I wanna go look at her car, but Granddad says I gotta ask her. Can I come up to ask her?"

"Send him up, Heather."

Heather sighed, then glanced at Melanie. She studied her casual posture. "Are you sure? Jason can always come back when you're feeling better."

Mel shook her head in disagreement. "Nah, I want to meet him, Heather, if that's okay with you."

Heather smoothed her hands down the front of her apron. She was reluctant to do it. She and Mel needed to talk about things before Jason entered the picture.

Mel noted Heather's hesitancy. "I promise not to say anything to embarrass you."

"He doesn't know anything about us, Melly," Heather remarked softly. "Please ... don't tell him."

“I’m not sure I’d know what to say about us anyway. Your secret’s safe with me.” Melanie looked down at her T-shirt and shorts. “How do I look? I mean, nothing’s hanging out, is it?”

Heather stared at her for a full minute without commenting. “You look good, Mel. You always looked good to me,” she added, continuing to stare at Melanie.

Melanie returned her steady gaze. “You’re making me feel uncomfortable again with your cat eyes, Sweetness. I wish we could do....”

“Mommy, can I come inside? I’m tired of waiting in the hallway.” Jason peeked at Melanie through the half-closed door.

Mel grinned at him and then waved him into the room. “Come on in, Kid, and join the party.”

Jason shyly entered the room. His eyes widened when he saw her leg propped up on two pillows. Her scars were visible in the bright afternoon sunlight. “Wow! What happened to your knee? Those look like scars from bullets.”

“And what would you know about bullets wounds, Jason Archibald Spencer-Poole?”

Jason sighed. Whenever his mother called him by his full name, he’d usually done something wrong. She was fussin’ at him again. “I saw it on the Discovery Channel once.” He studied Melanie’s knee again. “My grandpa says you’re a cop just like my other mother, Irene, only she’s dead. He said you got shot in the leg real bad so you can’t walk so good. Grandpa called it a golden goose wound.” He frowned. “Mommy, what’s a golden goose wound?”

Heather scowled. She’d have to talk with her father about his inappropriate remarks around his grandson. “I’m not sure, Sweetie. Maybe we could ask your granddad at dinner.”

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Melanie frowned. *The kid was in her business a little too much. Archie had a big mouth.* “Your grandfather meant I could retire at a young age because of my leg, Kid.”

“Oh.” Jason mulled over what Melanie told him and then his face brightened. “Can I see your car?”

“Yeah, if you hand me those keys over there on the dresser, we can get started.” Melanie watched Jason pick up the keys, then walk back to her. He stood quietly staring at her, waiting patiently. She found it distracting to look up into wide, hazel eyes the same color as his mother’s in a face shaped like hers. “Did anybody ever tell you how much you resemble your mother, Kid?”

Jason nodded. “Yes, all the time, Sergeant Burton.”

“Okay, Kid. Listen up because I don’t like to repeat myself more than once a day.”

Jason grinned at the familiar phrase. “Hey! You sound just like Grandpa.”

Melanie shrugged. “It’s an old cop saying. Anyway, listen up, Kid.” She held up three keys on a ring with a rubberized remote. “This key fits the trunk and the doors. This one fits the glove compartment. This funny-looking one fits the lock on the steering wheel. Don’t worry about it, though. I took the lock off and left it in the trunk. This is my remote. Press here, a light blinks twice and the doors open. This button locks the doors. You can hear the doors lock and unlock. This opens the trunk. You got all that?”

“Yes, Ma’am.”

Heather watched the interaction between Melanie and her son with interest. Mel treated Jason with respect but accepted that he was still a child.

“So show me what you got, Kid.” Melanie tossed Jason her keys.

“Okay.” He showed her the keys. “This key opens your steering wheel lock, but you said don’t worry about it ‘cause you got it in the trunk. This key opens the doors and the trunk. This one opens the glove box. Right?”

Melanie yawned. “Yeah, Kid, so far, so good. Go on and tell me about my remote.”

Jason grinned at her compliment. “This button right here locks all the locks and this one unlocks everything. This one pops the trunk.”

“That’s good, Kid. You can look at my car but don’t try to drive it anywhere. Okay?”

Jason giggled as he eyed Melanie. “I’m not old enough to drive, Sergeant Burton. Besides, my mom would kill me if I did.”

“That’s what a good mother should do.” Melanie shook her head, trying to stay awake. “Sorry, I can’t show you myself.” She yawned again. “Whew! I’m sleepy. Just put the keys back when you’re done. I’ll take you ... for a ... ride.” She closed her eyes.

Jason thought Mel died. He’d never seen a person die before, but he imagined that it looked just like that. “Mommy, is she all right? She’s not ... dead, is she?”

Heather pulled Jason into her chest in a tight embrace. They stood looking at Melanie for a few moments as she rubbed his back. “Oh no, Honey. She’s fine. See? Her chest is moving up and down. That means she’s breathing, Jason.” She stroked his head. “The sergeant is just tired. She had a hard morning.”

“Mommy, is Sergeant Burton gonna die? Grandpa said she almost died on the way to the hospital. He said some guy shot her two times, once in the knee an’ another time under her flak jacket. He said they missed the bullet under her vest an’ she almost bled to death.”

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“There’s no such word as ‘bleeded,’ Jason. The correct word is ‘bled.’ Humph! Your grandfather seems to have plenty of time for gossip.”

Jason pulled away from her embrace to look at her. “Mommy, can I go look at her car now?”

Heather sighed. “Yes, you may.”

“All right!” Jason shouted and pumped his fist in the air.

“Jason, tone it down before you wake our guest.” Heather glanced at Melanie and found her still sleeping peacefully.

“Can I tell Sammy to come over so he can see it too?”

Heather nearly groaned aloud. She loved Samuel Watson, but his mother, Renee, was annoying. She didn’t know how to keep her hands to herself. She was straight as an arrow, but she was curious as hell about lesbians. Renee took every opportunity to bump into her, brush against her, and otherwise feel her up. She found tight spaces useful to press against her, especially if it was dark. Her son, Sammy, on the other hand, was a nice, shy kid. He and Jason were best buds from the first time they met in grade school. “Okay, you can call Sammy. Tell your grandfather that I said he has to go with you guys to supervise things.”

Jason’s shoulders slumped. He wanted to see the car without his grandfather. His grandfather had a way of spoiling things with his rules and regulations. “Yes, Ma’am. Do you think she’ll keep her promise about giving me a ride, Mommy?”

Heather nodded, then gave her son’s backside a playful smack. “Go on, Jason. Call Sammy before dinnertime. If he wants to stay for dinner, he’s welcome.”

She smiled at her son’s rapid exit down the stairs. It sounded like he was taking the stairs two or three at a time. She started to scold him but decided not to do it. Instead, she moved over to the bed. “I can’t believe that you’re here!” she

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whispered, leaning down to take Mel's pulse as she slept. "I used to have such plans for us. Now, I just need you gone."