

Muttin

It's never too late for love

Unfinished Business of Love, Volume 4



by

B.L. Wilson

MUFFIN,
it's never too late for love

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CHAPTER ONE

Somebody cut a clipping from the obit column and left it on my desk in the stationhouse. I wondered who knew that I knew Bradford Williams, not that I'd ever hidden it. Brad and I grew up together. We were more like brother and sister than we were next-door neighbors. We played the same childhood games, Hide n' Seek, tops, marbles, stickball—later, baseball and then touch football. We went to the same schools—grade school and high school. We fell in love with and had crushes on the same girls, which was more difficult for me than him, since I was a girl.

I comforted him when his love affairs didn't work out. He did the same for me. We were best friends. He was the first person—hell, Brad was the first human I came out to when I figured out I liked girls as much as he did. If Brad wasn't around to listen to me, I used to do plenty of talking to Benny, my parents' cat, and Eric, the green and yellow parakeet.

When I read his obit, I realized how much I missed ole Brad. We drifted apart after we joined the army. We graduated college together, deciding we were ready for the adventure Marine posters advertised. We enlisted together too, but in the army, not the Marines. Brad stayed in to make the army his career. I pretty much hated every minute of my enlistment. If Brad hadn't been there with me, keeping me focused and out of trouble, I'm sure that I would have been one of Clinton's "don't ask and don't tell" casualties.

I looked up from reading the obit, glancing around the ugly institutional green stationhouse walls and grinned. The best thing I ever did was to join the police department. My eyes returned to Brad's obit and I frowned. How come nobody called me from his family to tell me that he'd died? I played with the edges of the article and sighed. Who was left to do that?

My parents were alive and well, living in the same Central Harlem apartment where I was born, when they weren't hanging out in Florida avoiding New York's cold and sometimes snowy winter days. Brad's parents died in a horrible Christmas fire during his, I mean, our second tour in the army. Yeah, Brad had talked me into another tour with the boys in army green. He was in the Middle East in Iran, Iraq, or Afghanistan on one of those "I can't tell you, or I'll have kill you missions." I was stateside and stationed in New Jersey, so he asked me to be there for Muffin, his kid sister.

Muffin was almost nine years younger than Brad and me. Back then, she was suddenly an orphan too. I thought she'd be beside herself with misery and grief, but she wasn't. She had a cadre of teenage female friends, their parents, a maiden Aunt Clara—crazy as hell but there for Muffin and, last but not at least, Allison, also known as Ally, Carter-Brown, her godmother, to help her get through her parents' sudden deaths. I always thought godparents were supposed to be the parents' contemporaries, close in age and general philosophy. If something happened to the

parents, the godparents, or godparent, in this case, could take over the job and finish raising the orphaned child. I frowned. Brad and I were twenty-four, so that made Muffin sixteen years old when her parents died. Allison Carter-Brown was thirty-nine or forty, an easy-on-the-eyes age for most women.

Oh God, I still remember how she was so good to see. I used to have teenage daydreams about that body of hers. Oh my, what I would have loved to have done with her if she gave me a chance. Every Friday night, she'd stop by the house to play cards with Brad's mother and her girlfriends. Brad and I were usually involved in some deeply important teenage bullshit. I'd stop talking or playing video games or whatever I was doing just to watch Allison stroll past us and go into the living room to join the other women.

The woman had a sexy gait; all rolling hips and clicking high heels while her shapely long legs pranced. In my teenage mind, I thought God built her for sex. A few years later, Allison proved I was right. Since I was still in the army, I wasn't out or anything close to declaring my sexual orientation to anyone but Brad and a few trusted military friends in the same predicament as me. Somehow, Allison read the signs or maybe she caught me staring at her attributes once too often. She was still married, attached, or seeing someone when we had our little fling. I can't remember which one was the case.

I remember how spectacular my affair was with Allison Carter-Brown, but this wasn't the time or place to go into that, not with a roomful of cops just outside my door. I spotted the pink envelope addressed to Lieutenant Rachel Dickerson underneath a stack of interoffice memos and all the other crap on which I needed to sign off before the end of the day. The return address on the envelope was what made me put down the clipping announcing Brad's death and open the letter. It was from Muffin.

Muffin still had the neat handwriting I admired so much when she was a kid. Her letter asked that I come to his wake or his funeral if I couldn't make it to the wake. She asked me to come earlier if that was possible. She mentioned something about selecting the proper funeral suit. She wondered if Brad should wear either his captain's dress uniform or the plain navy blue suit befitting his recent retirement from the army. She wanted me to stay in Allison's home with her. She mentioned that Allison had been sick two years ago and willed the brownstone she owned to her goddaughter as her only living relative.

I decided to call the cell number she had written in the letter to tell her I couldn't make the wake or the funeral. I didn't want to stay in Allison's home either. There were simply too many bad memories for me to overcome. I closed the dull gray door to my office. I hoped to shut out the sounds of ringing phones and the heavy-fingered cops pounding out criminal searches on computer keyboards as they spoke to witnesses on the phone or in person. Then there was the noise of the typical discussions and comments that accompanied a New York City precinct house open for business on a Friday morning.

"Hello, could I speak to... ah..." Suddenly, I drew a blank. Christ, what was Muffin's real name? What did I do with that letter? How could I not remember Brad's kid sister? She was the annoying ten-year-old who disrupted our dates. She issued a karate chop to one boy's balls, which

I have to admit I didn't mind. The boy was an octopus. His hands were everywhere; on my breasts, my ass, my thighs, and all with the goal of scratching my snatch. My favorite kid-sister disruption happened when Muffin deliberately called Brad's current girlfriend Jamie by his prior girlfriend's name. Since the two girls were best friends, neither one gave Brad chance to explain his two-timing little self or ask for a second chance at a relationship.

I hung up quickly without listening to the speaker at the other end of the line. I didn't give them time to say anything before I hung up. I smacked my head with my palm when I remembered. I knew her name. It was Miranda. I also remember how much she hated the name as a kid. It you wanted to see a little girl's eyes turn an eerie shade of muddy green, just call her Miranda.

Brad and I nicknamed her Muffin when we found her stuffing her face, eating several, no, make that six good-sized bran muffins. We were thirteen and she was almost five. We were supposed to watch her, but we had better things to do than feed a five-year-old her breakfast and keep her company. I grinned at the memory. I never knew a little kid could crap as much as Muffin did with all that bran in her belly.

Our parents grounded Brad and me for the next two weeks for that little adventure. We learned to protect Muffin and look out for her. That was what we did until we entered the army and then we did it long distance, calling her to see how school was going. When we discovered she was dating, we conducted a criminal investigation on her latest boyfriend and his family. Muffin lost more boyfriends because of Brad and me, but we kept her single and virginal until she was ready to marry or give up the cherry.

I dialed the number again. "Hello, could I speak with ... I mean, is Muffin there?"

A woman's dignified voice answered. "I believe you have the wrong number. There's no Muffy here."

I cleared my throat and decided to get official. "This is the New York City Police Department, Lieutenant Dickerson speaking. I'm looking for a Miss Miranda Williams. Is she there?"

"Oh my God, has something else happened? What more could happen? Her brother's dead. Are they after her too? Please tell me she's all right. I don't know if I could take another death in the family."

I frowned. I wasn't expecting this. I just wanted to tell Muffin that I didn't think I could make it to Brad's funeral. "Ma'am, just slow down and take a deep breath. Tell me what happened." *Who was after Brad? I thought he died of natural causes.* "Didn't he have a heart attack or something?"

The woman started to cry on the phone. "No, that's not right," she sobbed. "That's what they wanted us to think."

"Who is 'us'?"

"Randy and me."

I started to ask who Randy was until I realized who she meant. "Is Randy also called Miranda Williams?"

"Yes, that's right."

"So who's me? I mean, who are you, Ma'am?"

“I’m Allison Carter-Brown.”

I frowned. “I thought that you ... died. I mean, Muffin wrote me a letter. It said you were sick two years ago. How you left the house to her. I assumed that meant you’d passed away.”

The woman sniffed into a handkerchief or tissue. “Who is this?” she asked, then waited a few seconds, probably running my introduction over in her mind. “Oh my God, is that you, Rachel?”

I tried to clear the lump in my throat unsuccessfully several times before I spoke. “Hullo, Ally. How are you?”

She exhaled loudly into the phone. “I know we didn’t part on the best of terms.”

“I thought I was in love with you,” I murmured quietly.

“Yes, I know. And I thought you were too young to know anything about love.”

“I wonder if we were wrong or right.”

“Why don’t you come over and see?”

“Excuse me?”

“I just invited you to come to my place and see me.” When she noticed the extended silence on my part, Allison added, “Didn’t you introduce yourself as a police sergeant?”

I rubbed my chin and shoved a hand in my pocket. “No, I did not. I’m a lieutenant.”

Allison laughed suddenly.

I loved the sound of her laugh. It reminded me of a deep, throaty growl—like a hungry lioness eating something that she enjoys. “You still have the sexiest laugh I ever heard from a woman. What’s so funny?”

“I’ll bet you a dinner you just shoved a hand in your pocket after you scratched your chin.”

I yanked my hand out of my pocket and sent coins scattering across the floor. How could she know my habits that well? It’d been years, almost fifteen since I’d seen her. “No, I didn’t.” I leaned down to pick several and grunted as I reached one farther away.

“What on earth are you doing?”

I cleared my throat. “Some coins fell out of my pocket when I pulled my hand out after my chin started itching.”

Allison giggled. “I always liked how you could laugh at yourself, Rae. I think I missed that most of all when I kicked you out.” She sighed. “Lord knows I spent plenty of time and money trying to find that self-effacing humor in other lovers.”

“You sound good. How’s your health these days?”

“As I said before, Rae, come see me ... please. I’d love to know how you’ve done so far. If you’re a lieutenant with the NYPD, you must be doing something right.”

“Bradford is dead, isn’t he?” I asked softly, not expecting an answer. “I’m sorry we lost touch with each other, Ally. Between his special missions he couldn’t talk about and my cases I didn’t want to talk about, we had little to say. After his folks died in the fire and Muffin moved in with you, then you and I...” My voice faded and I paused. I didn’t know how to relay such personal thoughts. “Well, I guess I didn’t want to know about Brad or the kid since they reminded me of you—of us and our time together.”

“Sweet, sweet Rae ... you were so kind to Randy when she needed it.”

“Randy, huh?”

“Sorry, that’s what I call her. Nobody called her Muffin but you and Brad. He’s gone. We haven’t seen you in years. Please, Rae, come see us today if you can. I still live in the same place. You remember how to get here, don’t you?”

I rubbed my chin and then played with the coins in my left pocket before I spoke. “I remember. You’re not so easy to forget. Lord knows I tried.”

“So does that mean you’ll come and share dinner with us tonight?”

I turned to stare at the stack of papers strewn all over my desk after I’d pulled out Miranda’s pink envelope from the bottom. I didn’t have anything pressing, but I wondered if seeing Allison after all these years was a wise thing to do. Shit, I’d been wondering about her for years. I had the opportunity to see her without having to make up a dumb-ass excuse. Before I could stop to think, my mouth asked, “Do you still like chocolate ice cream with vanilla-flavored women? Or was it vanilla-flavored ice cream on chocolate women that you liked?”

Allison issued a hearty laugh and I joined her.

“You just bring the dessert and we’ll see.”

“Okay, I’ll bring the ice cream.”

“Don’t forget the chocolate syrup, whipped cream, and the nuts. I’ll make us baked chicken, dressing, vegetables—string beans and potatoes. Do you still like cranberry sauce with orange slices?”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Good, I’ll make some. Better bring your appetite, Rae. As I recall, you had a big one for food and other things.”

“And you always managed to keep up with me and then some.”

“I may have slowed down a bit, but I’m not dead yet. A good-looking woman still turns my head.”

“What about men, Ally? Do they still . . .” I cleared the fog from my throat to ask, “I mean, are you still interested in men too?”

“No, I’ve . . . no, not the way you mean.”

“I see.”

Allison sighed. “You spoiled me for men. None of them could do what you did for me, Rae.”

“That’s nice to hear nearly fifteen years later when it doesn’t matter.”

“Just bring the ice cream, Rae, and a big appetite. Make it around six, if that’s good for you.”

“You were good for me once upon a time, Ally.”

“See you at six, Rachel Dickerson,” Allison remarked, ignoring my little dig, and then added, “Don’t be late.”

I hung up with a smile. What was I grinning like an idiot about? I still had to buy ice cream, nuts, and syrup, then wait for my workday to end. I glanced down at my outfit. Was I dressed all right to meet the woman, the love of my life, fifteen years after she’d sent me packing? I could change, but I liked what I wore today. Tweed and I got along just fine. . . the gray tweed jacket with the darker gray patches on the sleeves that matched my slacks proved my point. I loved the feel of

silk against my skin. That was why I wore white silk underwear underneath my blue oxford-cloth, button-down tailored shirt and dark gray slacks. Oxblood red shoes—loafers—completed my outfit.

Usually, I wore black shoes, but Pamela, the PAA who clerked for me, had been bugging me about adding a little color to my wardrobe. The dark burgundy shoes were my attempt to add a little color. With my milk chocolate complexion, dark brown dreads, and brown eyes, I figured I had enough color going on without half trying.

CHAPTER TWO

I stood up from my desk to stretch my stiff leg when I heard a knock on my door.

“Come.”

Pamela walked in with a smile that grew wider as she looked me up and down from my feet to my hair. “Mornin’, Rachel. I love your shoes today. I told you that you should wear more bright colors. You look nice.” She placed my favorite mug filled with coffee on my ancient wooden desk with the creaking drawers that stuck open or swelled shut on humid summer days. “Here, I just made a fresh pot.”

I grabbed the mug, held it up to my nose, and inhaled. “Ah, that’s great. My favorite—hazelnut. You are phenomenal today, Pam.”

“Hey, watch the compliments. I might hit you up for a raise.”

“You’d deserve it for keeping the file room straight, my calendar organized, taking great messages I can read, and dealing with anybody who comes near me when I want to kill ‘em. I couldn’t live without you, Pam.”

Pamela flicked her shoulder-length, golden-brown relaxed hair with a hand, smoothed down her dress, and then winked when my eyes followed the journey of her hands just as she knew I would. “Yeah, I’ve been telling you that for years, Rachel.”

“Well, I guess I could cap Melvin or bring him up on some bogus charges that’d put him under the jail for the next twenty years. Then I’d have you all to myself.” I grinned at Pamela.

Pamela and I played the same game all the time. I complimented her. She preened for me. We talked trash as though she wasn’t straight and happily married to Melvin the detective, and I was still looking for the one.

Pamela wrinkled her nose. “Humph, your aim isn’t that good anymore, Rachel. You need more practice on the firing range if you want to kill him. He can dance around bullets like you wouldn’t believe. Speaking of shooting, aren’t you due for a qualifier soon?”

“Nah, I have another two months to go.” I heard a knock on the doorframe and looked around Pamela’s figure. “What are you grinning at, Charlie?”

Detective Third Grade Charlie Haskell was one of the best detectives in my burglary squad. He had a nose for thieves and the ability to anticipate a scumbag’s next move. He also used to be my old partner when we worked vice years ago. He loved the streets and never wanted more than a gold shield.

I moved up the career ladder. He didn’t, but it didn’t bother him either. As I said, he loved the street. He was a lean six-footer with dark, almost black curly hair, innocent blue eyes, and an olive complexion. With his hair in a ponytail, his beautiful eyes, and his polite manners, he attracted

women in droves

“I love the shoes, Rae, but you’re still boring as hell. You need more color and somebody to share it with.”

Pamela snorted. “Humph, I just offered my services. All she has to do is get rid of Melvin for me.”

Charlie hooted at Pamela’s words. “Oh, Woman, please, stop the bull! You know you can’t live without Melvin. If he gets the sniffles, you want the week off to stay home and take care of him.”

I grinned at both of them. “Okay, people, either get out and go to work or tell me something I want to hear. What’s on my calendar today, Pam?” I pointed to the stack of new messages on my desk. “Hey, what’s this? When did you put these here?”

“While you were busy sniffing and sipping your coffee.”

“I’ll leave you two to discuss things. See you all later, Ladies.”

We watched Charlie stroll out of the office.

“Honey, if I were ten years younger and single, I’d ask that man out.” Pam sat down in one of the plastic chairs scattered around my office and then reached over to sort through the messages.

“I’m telling Melvin what you said.”

Pamela sighed as she looked up from the messages in her hand and caught my eye. “Oh, go ahead. He needs the competition, Rachel.”

“Is he ignoring you again, Pam?”

“He can’t help it. It’s one of those cases that he can’t talk about.”

“Want me to talk to his commander about some time off?”

Pamela shrugged. “When you and Charlie were working on a hot case, would you like it if your woman interfered because you stopped being affectionate?”

I nodded in recognition, then rubbed my neck. “Yeah, I see what you mean. I’ll stay out of it, except to say that when he’s done, take whatever time you need, Pam. He’ll need some down time and a good woman to spend it with. In case you didn’t know it, that’s you.”

“Humph, Melvin knows he has me, Rachel. I’m not going anywhere. He’s not going anywhere either. You’re the one who needs a good woman, not Melvin.” She stopped speaking to watch me play with the edges of the pink letter and then slip it into the matching envelope. “The pink one was on the bottom of the stack I brought in here last night. I figured you’d work your way down through the stack to read it. Looks like I was wrong.”

That was Pam’s indirect signal for me to open up and talk or at least tell her about the letter’s contents. “It’s from...” I frowned and looked at the newspaper clipping announcing Brad’s death. I ran a light fingertip over his obit. “Muffin; that’s what Brad and I used to call his kid sister Miranda. She wants me to help with his funeral. When I called the number she mentioned in the letter...” I paused, searching for right words to describe Allison Carter-Brown. I sighed. “My— an old friend answered the phone. Muffin is staying with her.”

“Are you going to help?”

I pushed away from the desk in my wheelie chair to extend my right knee back and forth, then

I massaged it. "I thought I might stop by to see what's going with her, I mean, with them."

"I see." Pamela nodded and went back to sorting through my messages and putting them in order.

I scooted back to the desk and picked up the pink envelope. I was surprised at Pam. What happened to the perpetually curious woman I'd known for the last seven years? The same woman who was always trying to set me up with a variety of lesbians she or Melvin just happened to know were single. The funny thing was, I usually went on those dates. I didn't want anybody to think I was a hermit or a creep.

Nothing happened, I mean, besides the occasional sex. I never found anybody who could hold my interest for more than a month or two. That wasn't true, was it? Allison held my attention for the last fifteen years. I think that was why I kept going on those blind dates. I prayed there was another woman out there who could capture my interest. I wanted another woman who could play hide n' seek in my head, then keep me searching for her. I sighed, remembering things about Allison Carter-Brown.

"Hey? Rachel? Yo?" Pamela snapped her fingers in front of my nose.

"Huh? What's going on?" I frowned at the interruption. "What's that?"

"I said, are you looking forward to seeing her? How long has it been for you and her?"

"How long has what been? Who is the 'her' in this picture?" Charlie asked, standing in the doorway with his partner, Jay, directly behind him.

Detective Julius Lewis, a brown-skinned man with dark intelligent eyes and a closely cropped 'fro, was an inch taller than Charlie and thirty pounds heavier. He wore designer suits that fit his solid frame just right. He favored navy blue, charcoal gray, or brown suits, white shirts with expensive, colorful but tasteful silk ties. Julius sounded too formal, so everybody called him Jay.

I stopped playing with the pink envelope to look up. My glance took in Pamela's raised eyebrows, Charlie's frown, and Jay's wide, dark eyes. I focused on Charlie's face, wondering about the frown before I spoke. "Brad's sister asked me to help her arrange his funeral. I thought I might drop by to see her tonight after work." I didn't like the way Charlie was staring at me as though he knew there was more to the story than I was saying.

Jay pushed his way around Charlie to step inside my office. "I heard Mr. Williams was like a brother to you, Lieutenant Dickerson. I'm sorry for your loss. If there's anything you need, just ask. Charlie and I are running down some leads on that school burglary. It looks like an inside job, either the janitor or his helper. We should be closing the case real soon, LT."

I nodded, noticing that Charlie was still staring at me with a funny look. "Thanks for the heads up, Jay. Pam, give me the messages in priority order. Did anything jump out at you?"

"Yeah, the first two robbery calls." Pam held one note in her hand. "This mugging sounds pretty bad, Rachel. The victim was a senior citizen. Patrol said he might die. EMS took him to Harlem Hospital. The second one, two armed gunmen pistol-whipped a bodega owner and his helper at closing. Patrol said the owner takes numbers as a sideline. The owner says he had couple thousand in the safe. Word on the street says more like ten to twelve thousand." Pamela spread the first three messages across my desk.

I frowned. "Hey, Pam, you said two, but I see three notes here."

Pam pointed to the third message. "This one might turn into something. The building's owner tried to collect rent. The tenant had repair complaints, so he wouldn't pay rent. The building's owner waited until the tenant left and then changed the locks. Tenant couldn't get his stuff, so he threatened to bomb the building. Patrol said the tenant is wacky and talks to himself all the time. His neighbors said he was always making noise while he built stuff late at night. He has no visitors—no girlfriends, no pets ... nobody. They think he could live up to his threat about bombing the place."

Pam sorted through the remaining stack of messages. "The rest are typical complaints like loud parties, a couple of apartment break-ins, dogs barking too loud. A pack of wild dogs running around the neighborhood scaring kids and their parents. A domestic situation; family members are fighting each other and making threats. Two tenants wanting their building owner arrested for housing complaints. One woman, a motorist, is trying to file an insurance claim eighteen months after the 'accident' occurred. She wants our advice on how to do it. Here's the general information calls."

"Thanks, Pam. Okay, who's up?" I pulled out the call sheet and ran a finger down my list of detectives. There was Eddie Stevens and his partner Fran Thompson. I spotted Norman Griffin, who liked the name Griff, and his partner, Curtis York. I looked up to see Charlie studying me. "Jay, do me a favor. Give Eddie and Fran the mugging victim. Griff and Curtis get the bodega owner. If it looks like something organized crime might be interested in, keep them informed."

"Sure, LT, that's not a problem. I guess we get the Unabomber case, huh?"

"Yeah, you do." I watched Jay and Pam leave my office. "Charlie, stay a minute. Let's talk."

Charlie nodded. "I was hoping you'd ask, Rae."

"What's going on with you? Why the funny look this morning?"

"I could ask you the same question, but I think I already know the answer." Charlie studied me and sighed softly. "I remember once when we were partners in vice. I don't remember which case we closed, but I remember getting drunk to celebrate. We talked about the people in our lives, the ones that had the most influence.

"I remember you mentioned a woman, an older woman. I think she was your first. I remember because I'd never heard you talk like that about anybody before or since. You had a look in your eyes back then just you like did a little while ago. It can't be Muffin. She'd be too young to be your mystery older woman. I figured that's who you're meeting tonight." He raised a questioning eyebrow.

I nodded. "Yeah, it is. When I called Muffin, she answered the phone. I guess Muffin is still living with her."

"Do you think it's a good idea to see her again after all these years? It might stir up some shit, Rae."

I shrugged and avoided his gaze. "Hard to say what's right or wrong in this case. It's just something I have to do."

Charlie smiled at me. "Do you want company? I'm sure my boss would give me a few hours

personal leave to help a friend if she needed it. My boss is cool that way with her people.”

“She sounds like a good woman to know.”

“Yeah, she is. I hope she isn’t getting into something over her head tonight.”

“She’s not. She knows how to handle the situation. If it turns sour, she’ll call for backup.”

Charlie grinned. “Enough said.”

“Enough said.”

I watched Charlie walk out of my office. I wished I were as confident of my ability to extricate myself from a sticky situation that involved my nearly invisible personal life as I pretended. I didn’t have much time to think about it since my captain, Otis Quincy, called two minutes later with bad news.

“Good morning, Lieutenant.”

“Good morning Captain Quincy. How are you today, Sir?”

Quincy cleared his throat twice. I knew he was about to drop some bad news on me. That was one of his tells. So was rubbing the bridge of his nose, then pinching his nostrils together. If I played poker with him like some of the other lieutenants did, I’d clean out his pockets every Friday night and go on an all-day shopping spree Saturday morning. “I’m fine, Lieutenant. Thanks for asking. I understand your precinct got a call early this morning about a guy and bomb threat.”

“Yes, Sir, we did. I put my best guys on it.”

“Well, I want you to go easy on the guy. Conduct your investigation as you normally would. Call me once you find out anything.” Captain Quincy sighed. “My wife’s nephew isn’t the most stable person I know, but I don’t see him as capable of blowing up anything. He likes to tinker with everything, pulling stuff apart to see how it works. Sometimes, he even remembers to put it back together!” He lowered his voice.

“His parents died years ago. He’s an only child—thank God. He lived with us for a time until he got worse. We found a halfway house. I think they call it supportive living. He stayed there for a while. They taught him how to live on his own. That was about five, no, seven years ago. He’s been in his own apartment ever since. He gets a disability check to cover his rent. We check on him every couple of months. We send him an allowance for clothes and incidentals. Lieutenant ...uh ... Rachel, what I told you stays with the investigating officers and you until you hear different from me. Got it?”

“Yes, Sir. How often do you want me to notify you?”

“When there’s a problem, Rachel, then you call me. If he wasn’t my wife’s fucking nephew, I could give a shit! I can’t tell you how many nights that little bastard kept us up with his shit when he was a kid. Christ, that’s why I didn’t want children, but I got suckered into taking care of one anyway.” He sighed and lowered his voice to speak in a normal level. “Talk to you later. Oh, before I forget, my wife and I want to express our condolences about your friend. Let me know where to send flowers.”

“Yes, Sir, I’ll do that. Thank you,” I remarked without realizing for several seconds that he’d already hung up. Christ, I’d only been at work two hours and already had my captain on my ass about a brand new case. My best friend died. Last, but certainly not least, my first love wanted to

see me tonight after fifteen years of separation. My day was full. God help anybody who added to that list today.

By five thirty, somehow I managed finish a third of the paperwork I had on my desk. I couldn't complete a few odds and ends, including the report on the captain's unabombing nephew. I decided to call the captain and tell him exactly that. I reached for the phone, then thought about his order to "call me when there's a problem." He didn't say, "Call me when you have nothing to report," did he?

Okay, so that was one less call I made before I left for the day feeling like I'd moved a tiny pebble one hundredth of an inch in my battle against the mountain of paperwork still sitting on my desk. I exited the parking lot across from the stationhouse, knowing I still had to buy ice cream, nuts, and syrup, dessert for a woman I hadn't seen in nearly fifteen years. That was crazy, but the real question in my mind was *Am I crazy for doing it?*