

# The Truth Lies In The Dark

By

Kristin Callender

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To my husband Dale,

Thank you for your love and support. Without it I would have let my self doubt get the best of me. Through the good and bad times each day I am thankful for another chance to live, laugh, and love you.

To Mike, David, Spencer, and Megan,

I hope that while watching my dreams become a reality you always remember that anything is possible with hard work and it is never too late to change your direction in life.

To Maribeth,

Not to sound like a cheesy song but, thank you for being a friend. I can't thank you enough for all of your help and honesty with my writing, not to mention your patience when I ask you to read the same story over and over.

## Chapter 1

Slowly, the thick black smoke silently slipped under the doorway. Steadily it began to pulse out from the thin opening, as if it were being pumped in from the hallway. Without a sound, it crept up the inside of the door and clung to the surrounding walls. The ceiling disappeared behind the ominous blanket as it surged toward the opposite wall, where it swelled out to engulf the entire room.

The wretched odor hit the young girl's nostrils so strongly it woke her from unconsciousness. She sucked in a surprised breath and her lungs were quickly invaded by the fatal fumes. As she began to cough violently, she realized that there was more than just the smoke crushing against her. Something was lying on top of her. It was hard to move, but she managed to shove the heavy mass aside.

The smoke continued to surround her, quickly reaching deep inside to steal her last breaths. Each attempt to cough brought a searing pain to the girl's head. The piercing pain was quickly overpowered by the ever strengthening choke hold the smoke was causing.

Pure instincts seemed to take over and force her to find a way out. Her lungs burned and felt like they were going to pop, as she crawled along the wall. Blinded by the smothering darkness she frantically felt for the window with her hands. Just as her fingers ran into the wood framing something on the floor knocked her off balance. She fell forward, hitting her head on the protruding window sill.

The young girl's lungs were too spent to allow her to scream out the pain she felt. She fought to stay conscious with the last bit of her will, but the throbbing pain and toxic smoke won the battle. As the ever deepening darkness surrounded her, the roar of the fire was getting closer. Somewhere in the distance, as if through a long tunnel, she could almost hear a voice. The girl tried to call out to the voice. She opened her mouth, but her lungs just ached in response. The voice was beginning to fade and she knew that if she didn't yell out she would die, but still no sound escaped her. With a last push of energy she slid her heavy hand up the wall, over the wooden sill, and reached past the coolness of the glass window...as the voice fell away.

The voice grew stronger again, and now she could hear a name being called through the darkness. As she strained to hear the name the voice was drowned out by a terrifying sound of a child screaming in pain.

"Amanda, Wake Up!" Nick shouted as he shook his wife by the shoulders. Slowly she came out of her horrified state, but she could still hear the strange childlike screams. It wasn't until she was completely awake that she realized the sounds were coming from her. It frightened her that she could not recognize her own screams and she began to shake uncontrollably. Her husband quickly pulled her closer to him in a protective embrace.

"Are you alright?" He whispered hoarsely into her neck as he continued to hold her. After getting no response he released her and pulled back to look at her face. He carefully pushed her sweat soaked hair back and began to gently wipe away the steady stream of warm tears with the soft pads of his thumbs. While he caressed her face his eyes searched hers for some sign that she was fully awake from her nightmare. Sometimes it took longer for her to shake the horrible sights that frequently haunted her sleep, especially since her grandmother died.

"Hey...are you alright?" Nick repeated softly.

"I...I'm sorry honey, I'll be fine." Amanda tried to sound stronger than she felt, but her aching throat choked her words. Unconsciously, her hand went to her neck as if to sooth the painful burning she felt. Once the fullness of her green eyes returned Nick knew she was really awake. He slid his hands gently from her face, down the sides of her neck, over her trembling shoulders, and then spread them across her back pulling her into his chest. He held her close and massaged with just enough pressure to help her stop trembling. After some time he felt her body relax against his.

"Does your throat hurt?" Nick's question made Amanda realize that she was still holding her neck.

"Yes, was I screaming for a long time?" The fearful look in her eyes was slowly replaced with the new wave of embarrassment she was feeling.

"Don't feel bad. It's out of your control." His voice was reassuring, but Amanda could see the strain in his eyes.

"I'm feeling more and more out of control lately," she stated hopelessly.

Over the years these nightmares had been reoccurring, but they had both learned to deal with them as well as possible. Now they were getting worse. Undoubtedly the cause was the recent death of Amanda's grandmother. She and her grandfather had raised her since her parents were killed in a plane crash when she was seven years old. Since she never regained her memory of her parents or her life before the crash her grandparents were the only family she has ever known. In fact, they were so loving and protective of Amanda that she had little contact with anyone else until she met Nick. So it was understandable that her grandmother's sudden death in a car accident in January would cause her extreme stress, which in turn caused her nightmares to increase. To make matters worse, since the death her grandfather had been slipping in and out of Alzheimer-like states. He deteriorated so quickly that he needed to be moved from his home to a nursing home closer to Amanda and Nick. Amanda begged him to move in with them, but even in his weakened state of mind her grandfather flatly refused. All of this weighed heavily on her mind.

"You're under a lot of stress. Everything will get better in time." Nick reassured.

"I hope that's true. I don't know how much more I can take... or you." Amanda added, looking worried at her husband. She always worried that someday he would come to his senses and leave her and all of her unexplainable problems behind.

"Don't start with that look again." He tried to act annoyed, but she could see the smile in his tired eyes.

"Hey, you can't say you bargained for all of this when you married me."

"Mandy, I married you because I loved you. Now I not only love you, but I can not imagine a moment without you; good or bad. Of all the things we will question and worry about, my love will never be one of them." Nick leaned in and kissed his wife softly. Her lips felt dry and cool. His eyes lingered on hers in silent reassurance, then he pulled himself out of the bed. She looked up questioningly, but before she could say anything he held a finger to his lips.

"I'm going to get you a drink. Rest your throat." He called over his shoulder as he headed out of the room. Left alone in the darkened room

it was impossible not to think about the nightmare that still vividly trespassed in her mind. For as long as she could remember it has been the same every time. Like a horror movie was stuck on play in her head; except more real. She could feel the pain and the fear of the little girl; smell the smoke, and even feel the intense heat of the fire. It all felt too real and it drained her each time her mind replayed it.

When she was younger, her family doctor explained it as her minds way of interpreting the stress and trauma of being the only survivor in the fiery plane crash that claimed her parents. This reasoning seemed to make perfect sense to her grandparents. Because every time Amanda feared there was more to her vivid nightmares, they would disagree and refuse to allow her to pursue any other medical opinions on the matter. She had once gone as far as to make an appointment with a hypnotist behind their backs, but when they found the appointment card in her sock drawer they were devastated. They kept telling her: The past is the past; you can't change it and you can't live in it. Don't look for more pain in your life, focus on your future. But at night she could hear them arguing and crying. Amanda loved and respected their opinions too much to ever want to cause them so much despair again. That was the last attempt she ever made to seek any answers to her gnawing suspicions.

"Hey beautiful," Nick sang out, pulling Amanda from her thoughts. He came closer holding a glass of ice water in one hand and a mug of steaming hot tea in the other. She smiled ruefully up at him.

"Yeah, I must be a sight all right," Amanda rolled her eyes at her husband. If she looked half as bad as she felt, she was far from beautiful. Although, the loving look in her husband's eyes could almost convince her otherwise. She smiled at him as he held out the two drinks. She chose the tea and he set the water down on the table beside her. He walked around the foot of the bed and carefully climbed in beside her so the hot tea would not spill.

They both sat up with their backs against the headboard and talked quietly about nothing of importance. Nick laughed as Amanda told him how the neighbor's hyper dog got loose again and ran up the road with his owner's sock hanging from his mouth, and how he came out yelling obscenities and chasing it with one foot still in its shoe and the other bare. Then Amanda laughed at Nick's stories of all of the day's office mishaps. To anyone looking in, they were very happy and relaxed. They would not easily see that their smiles were forced and thoughts were avoided. For years they had spent hours discussing and dissecting her nightmares,

and never felt anything but more frustrated and defeated by them. Over time they both learned to cope by faking the happiness and normalcy that would, once again be a reality by the morning.

The crisp morning air blew in through the bedroom window and crept into the warm cocoon Amanda had formed around her with her blanket. It was cooler than normal, even for late August in New England. A small breeze came in through the window, lifting the lacy curtain and forcing her out of her comfortable sleep. She started to pull the warm covers tighter around her, but she noticed that Nick was already out of bed. She liked to have coffee with him before he went to work, and she wondered why he had not woken her up by now. Taking a deep breathe she tossed the toasty covers to the foot of the bed, letting the cool morning air assault her senses. She grabbed her thick terry cloth robe from the closet and headed downstairs.

“Good morning, beautiful.” Nick smiled over his coffee. “A little cold today?” he teased. She pulled her robe tighter, and huddled herself into the chair across from her husband. The kitchen was colder than the bedroom. She looked around and saw that Nick had all of the windows open.

“I can’t believe how cold it is. Aren’t you cold?” she questioned her husband while rubbing her hands up and down her arms to help warm her.

“I love it,” he replied as he stood to refill his cup with the fresh coffee that steamed from the pot on the counter. He already had her mug waiting next to the machine. She smiled as he added the cream first, then the coffee. A swirl of heated moisture rose above the mugs as he placed them on the table and slid one in front of his wife. He laughed quietly at her rubbing her hands together over the hot steam like it was a campfire. Getting the hint, he leaned over the table to shut the window closest to her.

“Thank you,” she teased dramatically. She glanced at the digital clock on the coffee machine. “It’s already seven o’clock. Aren’t you going into the office today?”

“No, I’ve got a lot I can do from here.” He said casually as he lifted the morning paper to read. He sounded convincing, but Amanda knew better. He’d been swamped with work ever since they took on a new huge account last summer. They were hired to represent a well known pharmaceutical company named Baron and Bradley that had offices in New York and California; who expected the lawyers to become acquainted with every aspect of their business before their case went to court this winter. The company was being sued by several past employees for discrimination on the job.

Since Nick was chosen to be lead lawyer in the case, he was expected to personally supervise every aspect of the preparations for it. He and the team of other lawyers the firm had chosen to work under him had already done all of the field work in the New York offices and were traveling back and forth to learn more about the California offices. In fact, Nick was in California when Amanda's grandmother was killed in the car accident. She was driving down to stay with Amanda while Nick was away. As soon as he heard, Nick had taken an emergency flight home and had made one excuse after another not to go back since.

Amanda watched her husband read. She hated how helpless she felt. She wished she could be stronger and face her grandmother's death and not feel so crippled by her grandfather's weakening mind. If she could at least be strong enough to pretend it wasn't destroying her, Nick would not be sitting here risking his law career and future partnership. Although, he would and has claimed that he is not risking anything, she knew he would lose everything just to keep her from falling completely apart. She also knew that is why he stayed home today; she just wished she knew what to do about it.

"What are your plans?" Nick questioned from behind the paper.

"I'm going to go to see my grandfather a little later." Nick looked up and studied his wife's face.

"I'll go with you," he stated lazily as if it were Sunday and he had nothing else to do.

"No, you have too much to do. You must be very busy at work," Amanda reminded.

"Don't worry about that. I'm not letting you go alone, especially after yesterday."

"I'll be alright. They said he's going to have a lot of bad days. I'm going to have to face this eventually." But even as she said it she could not begin to understand or face any of it.

"We'll face it together. It's just as painful for me to see him on his bad days." The pain was evident in Nick's eyes.

"I know. I'm sorry. Sometimes I forget how long you have known them and how close you all were."

"Don't be sorry. This has been a tough year for us all, but we'll get through it together." He stood up to pour another cup of coffee. "Do you want another?"

"No, I better do something with myself if we are going." She didn't have to look at him to know he was already showered, dressed, and completely

ready for the day. For as long as they have been married that has been his morning routine. Amanda often teased him that he was too vane to let her see him with morning bed head. He explained it as a bad habit left over from his childhood. A lingering need to be prepared for anything.

"I think you look beautiful just like you are." He smiled teasingly as he stepped closer and kissed her cheek.

"Oh sure, I'd go out like this and people would say there goes Mr. Vane and his rag doll." Smiling, Amanda reached over and messed up her husband's neatly combed hair and sprinted playfully out of the kitchen.

"Mr. Vane? You're real funny," he called out after her. Then he bent over to fix his hair in the shiny reflection of the toaster. He couldn't help but smile. The phone rang and, before Nick reached the doorway to the hall he heard Amanda answer it. Assuming it was his work, he walked over to her.

"Who? No, I'm sorry. You must have the wrong number. Did you say Dom or Ron, because our neighbor is..." Nick grabbed the receiver out of her hand before she could finish.

"Who the hell is this? Hello?" There was no response. Nick looked angrily at his wife. "Who was it?"

"Jesus, Nick. It was just a wrong number."

"What did they say? Did they give a name?"

"No, it was just some guy looking for someone named Ron, I think. Or maybe he said Dom." Amanda looked at Nick and shook her head. "You really need to relax, Nick. You are too high strung."

"Yeah, maybe you're right. But I have been thinking about changing our number to an unlisted."

"It already is unlisted." She reminded, watching him curiously.

"Yeah, but they say you should change it every so often to be sure. Besides, it will stop all those sales calls you've been complaining about lately."

"I guess. It still seems a little drastic. I mean anyone can dial a wrong number."

"I'll feel better when I am in the city, if I know that you're not getting any strange calls."

"You're the only one acting strange." Amanda teased. "But if it makes you feel better, go for it. The only one I care about is my grandfather and the staff at Hunter Hill. Just make sure we give the new number to them."



## Chapter 2

The morning rush was thinning out, and they arrived at the Hunter Hill Adult Care Community at eleven thirty; just in time to have lunch with Amanda's grandfather. Stanley Morgan sat on the green wicker lawn chair on his private patio. He held a pad of writing paper on his lap and absently rolled a pen in his fingers, while staring off into his thoughts more than any fixed point. The sound of their shoes scuffing against the cement floor startled him. He quickly brushed away a tear that escaped from his moist eyes. Amanda had to hold her own breath to keep from crying. When his wife died he was completely heart broken and very quickly changed from a fun loving proud man into this desperately sad shell. It was clear that without his wife he lost the will to live, and not even the love that she and Nick showered on him could bring it back.

"I'm sorry Papa. Did we startle you?" Amanda forced a friendly smile as she bent over to kiss her grandfather's forehead. Silently she prayed he would remember her today. It was hard enough to see this shrunken hollow version of him, but when he failed to remember anything about the life he had built, and was so proud of, it was unbearable.

"Oh no sweetheart, I was just thinking." He slid a shaky hand over Amanda's on the arm of his chair. "I'm so glad to see you, and you too Nick. How have you both been?" Nick stepped closer to shake hands with the older man.

"We are fine, Papa. How are you feeling?" Amanda rubbed his arm gently while she watched his tired eyes welling up with fresh tears. She could feel the sting of her own, but she continued to fight back the feeling.

"I feel fine. It's nice to see you both. It feels like I haven't seen you for a while. Has it been long?" Stanley questioned, looking a little confused.

Nick and Amanda glanced at each other. Amanda came to visit her grandfather every day, but the past week had been one of the worst since he was moved into the nursing home. He was either despondent or he was asleep. Yesterday, when she arrived, he was so agitated that the nurses had to restrain him so he would not harm himself. He was pacing up and down the corridor outside of his room and crying that he should have been the one that died. When Amanda tried to comfort him he looked right through her and kept on pacing and crying. Finally the nurses said it would be better for them both if she went home. Amanda cried in the parking lot for an hour before she could drive. She knew that the strain of it triggered her nightmare, and Nick knew it too. That's why he stayed home and insisted on coming along today.

"It's good to see you too, Stanley." Nick replied. "I have been stuck in the city a lot on business and Amanda had a little car trouble this week."

"Oh, I hope everything is all right. You weren't in an accident were you?" A touch of panic was visible on the older man's face as he looked from Amanda to Nick.

"No..., no, Papa, nothing like that," Amanda quickly reassured.

"Just a slow leak in one of the tires, so we put it in the shop to get new ones. It was time." Nick calmly explained. He sent a look to Amanda that said it was better to let him believe that they could not make it then have to explain that he could not remember. She agreed, but she did not feel right about lying to her grandfather; even for his own good. She found herself a little irritated at how easily Nick offered these false explanations. It must be the lawyer in him, she concluded, and then laughed to herself that she was stereo typing her own husband.

"Can you both stay for lunch? I think the menu is inside on the table." He started to get up, but Nick offered to get it for him. Amanda pulled a wicker chair over next to her grandfather and sat down.

"So, what are you writing there, Papa?" she asked, pointing at the pad he still held on his lap. He glanced down and quickly closed the writing pad. Amanda was a little surprised by the nervousness she saw in his eyes.

"Actually..., " he paused as if thinking of what to say then continued,

"I was writing a letter to you." He placed the pad and pen on the cement floor beside him, but never looked away from her eyes.

"To me? What is it about? Come on, give me a hint." She lovingly tried to coax it out of him.

"Well...I guess you could say it is an apology," he answered flatly. His serious tone worried Amanda.

"Papa, you have absolutely nothing to apologize to me for."

"No you certainly do not," Nick interrupted, standing in the frame of the open sliding glass door. He casually waved the menu in front of him. "It says they are serving Salmon and glazed vegetables today. Mandy why don't you go down and let the lunch attendants know we will be staying for lunch."

"All right. I'll be right back Papa." She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek. "When I get back I don't want to hear any more talk about apologies. You have given me everything I have ever wanted or needed. I am the one who is sorry that I can not do more for you now." Amanda spoke gently into her grandfather's ear and then quickly got up and disappeared through the sliding glass door where Nick still stood. She was careful not to look at either of them so they would not see the fresh tears already falling down her cheeks.

Nick did not notice. He kept his eyes fixed on the older man. He walked out onto the patio, around the wicker chair, and bent to pick up the pad. The pen slid off and landed with a click on the cement. After quickly scanning the papers inside, he looked up at the man in front of him.

"Stanley...you know you can't do this." Nick tried to speak calmly, but his jaw began to twitch.

"Nick, I'm going to die. She has to know. You don't know how guilty I feel keeping this from her all these years." The older man pleaded with a quivering chin and moist eyes.

"No one knows how you feel more than me, Stanley. But it's not about our feelings and you know that." Nick knelt down on one knee and looked the man in the eyes.

"I think she should know. I have always felt that she deserves to know the truth. You and Barbara were the ones who always talked me out of it. Now Barbara's gone. I have to tell her. Nick, don't you understand? When I am gone all of the family she's known will be gone. I don't think she can handle it. Did you ever think there may be other relatives out there? It would be selfish of us to take them from her without her ever knowing about it."

"I think it would be selfish of us to tell her, knowing all of the risks, just to satisfy our own guilty feelings. Believe me I wish I could tell her myself, but it is too dangerous." Nick was fighting the anger and fear that was welling up inside of his chest. "Stanley, I thought you understood this by now. This is not something we want to keep from her; we have to. Her life may depend on it." He spoke very carefully so that the older man could comprehend the seriousness of what he was saying.

"I did understand when she was younger. She needed to be protected from it, but now she's old enough to know. Nick, it's been so long. Do you really believe anyone would care, or even remember anymore?"

"Honestly...I don't know, Stanley, but I can't take that chance. The first thing she would do would be to go back there and try to find answers. I know of at least one person still there that would not appreciate anyone poking around at those old wounds, and would do anything to stop it."

"Nick, what if she remembers? Then what? She'll never forgive us for keeping it from her. I want her to know the truth from me so I can explain it all to her and help her understand. Can't you give me that?" his eyes held the pain he felt as he pleaded to Nick.

"Stanley, I wish it were that easy. Maybe she will remember someday. If that happens I will do everything in my power to make her understand that I was the one who made the choices and then forced them on you and Barbara. She will never see you as anything but the loving grandparents you have always been."

"And what about you? What if she can never forgive you?"

"Then I will spend the rest of my life trying and hoping that she will understand why I kept it from her." Nick stated in a matter of fact lawyer tone, but the wetness in his eyes was a clear sign of the fear he felt.

"And what if she never understands? Can you live with your decision then?"

"No...," Nick fell silent for a moment then continued, "...but she would."

"What would she do?" Amanda teased as she stepped back out into the patio catching only the last bit of the conversation. Both men were startled by her entrance. Stanley wiped away his tears before he turned to smile at her.

"She would love it if I found a table so we could enjoy lunch on the patio today." Nick held one hand behind his back and slightly bent over in a royal bow toward Amanda. He continued walking backward and bowing gracefully until he reached the door, and then turned on his heel and marched away. Once inside the small apartment he pulled the pad

out from behind his back and tossed it toward the garbage can in the corner of the small room.

Amanda laughed and rolled her eyes in fake annoyance at her husband's antics. When she sat back down next to her grandfather, she noticed the writing pad was no longer on the ground beside him. Only the pen remained. She was tempted to ask him where it went, but she decided she would rather enjoy his company. He seemed to be fully aware today and she was not going to risk ruining a good day. God knows there have not been enough of them lately.

The afternoon went by very fast. The three of them enjoyed their lunch out on the patio on a small glass table Nick had found in the main lobby. They reminisced about good times they all shared together. Amanda was relieved and happy to hear her grandfather talk about her grandmother without breaking down. Amanda laughed at Stanley's stories about Nick when he was younger and worked in his store in Nevada. Then it was Nick's turn to laugh when the stories were of Amanda. Amanda couldn't remember the last time she saw her grandfather laugh so hard. She was happy that Nick decided to come along, so that he was able to share such a good day. By the time they left it was 4:00, and the staff was preparing for dinner. They offered to stay and eat with Stanley, but he said he was too tired to visit any longer. They all hugged and said their goodbyes. As Amanda pulled back from hugging her grandfather he held her in front of him by her shoulders.

"Everything your grandmother and I have done was out of love for you. Promise me you will always remember that. No matter what happens I want you to know that we could not have loved you more, even if you were our own." His hands began to shake as he pulled her closer for another hug.

"I know you both loved me. I could never forget that, Papa. I wish I could find a way to show how thankful I am for everything you both have done for me. You were not just my grandparents; you were the only parents I ever knew and my best friends. You promise me that you will never forget that," she whispered as bittersweet tears rolled down her cheeks and disappeared into the fabric on his shoulder.

"One more thing," he said to her as they both turned to leave. Nick shuffled his feet uncomfortably, but stopped when Amanda shot a questioning glance toward him, "I have never seen a man love a woman more than Nick loves you. Hold on to that."

"I know Papa, I will. See you tomorrow." Amanda hooked her arm

around her husband's and looked up at him happily as they walked to the car. Nick couldn't help smiling back into her glowing face. He bent over and kissed her softly on the lips.

Amanda could not stop smiling all the way home. She wrapped her arms around Nick while he tried to unlock the front door of their house, and tickled his ribs so he couldn't turn the key. Surprised by her carefree attitude, he couldn't help being aroused. It felt great to see her so happy. Once he finally got the door opened he slid his arm around her back, scooped her legs up, and carried her across the threshold of their home. Amanda squealed out in laughter.

Smoothly he laid her across the sofa, looked lovingly into her eyes, and just as Amanda thought he would come toward her and kiss her he jumped up and began to tickle her unmercifully. She exploded in loud laughter and thrashed wildly to break away from his tickle hold. She managed to roll out from under her husband and quickly pounced on top of his stomach. She held his hands back against the plush cushion on each side of his head using her feet as she ran her fingers along the sides of his ribcage. Nick laughed out almost painfully against her teasing fingers. In a single movement he used his hands to push her entire body backward so that she was now pinned by his strong, lean legs on the opposite end of the couch. Then he sat up and straddled his legs across her hips and pulled her arms up above her head. One of his hands easily held both of hers while the other was busy searching for all of her exposed ticklish spots.

"All right, you win!" Amanda yelled out over her uncontrollable laughter.

"Say Uncle," Nick chided. Amanda tried to wrestle free one last time, and then sank back into the cushion exhausted.

"Uncle," she whispered hoarsely. She shut her eyes and tried to catch her breath. Nick stopped tickling her, but did not let her go. She watched him suspiciously but happily. He ran his free hand up along her side and she braced for his continued tickling. His hand slid further up and gently brushed the tossed hairs back from her face. He held it in his hand for a moment, then leaned down to kiss her waiting lips.

A small moan escaped her as his warm kisses became faster and hungrier. She arched her body in response to his growing arousal pressing against her lower belly. Nick slowly released her arms from where he held them over her head and slid his hands down to the top button on her blouse. One by one he released each pearl shaped button

from its fabric, lightly kissing every inch of skin he exposed from her neck to her stomach. His lips and tongue teased her belly while he removed the blouse from her arms and tossed it to the floor. She moaned again as he slowly made his way back up to her waiting lips.

Amanda eagerly met his warm lips with hers as she ran her hands down his muscular body until she felt the double sewn edge of his cotton shirt. Sliding her fingers under it and hooking the fabric with her thumbs she felt the heat of his skin as she bunched his shirt up toward his arms. He sat up, held his arms out and helped her pull it off. She let it drop to floor beside the sofa as her eyes moved down his beautiful bare chest and came to a seductive stop at the top of his faded blue jeans. She smiled at the throaty moan her husband made as she ran her fingers lightly down the length of his upper body and slipped just the tips of them into the ridge of his pants. She bit her bottom lip as she unfastened his pants and began to peel back the rugged fabric barrier that held him.

Nick could not hold back the building passion he felt any longer. Quickly, but gently he reached down, unfastened Amanda's shorts and moved back on the couch so he could slide them down her legs. Once they fell to floor he pulled off her tennis shoes. Amanda let out a breathy laugh as he tossed them back over his shoulder. One of them caught the cord of the answering machine and sent it crashing to the floor. The sound caused them both to jump up. Laughing, Nick leaned over and placed it back on the side table. Amanda caught a glance at the flashing message light that read 10, over and over.

"Looks like you had a lot of calls today," she said, with a knowing look.

"I'm on another line," he responded with a sexy smile as he removed his pants and slid his naked body slowly against hers. They both forgot everything else and made love to each other, until they both lied breathless and sated on the soft plush cushions of the living room sofa.

Later that night, when Nick went downstairs to his office, Amanda laid in bed smiling. She could not remember the last time she felt so relaxed and happy. It was a great day with her grandfather, and her and Nick's life was finally getting back to normal. Although she was still sad about losing her grandmother she did not feel like a crushing weight was on her chest anymore. Maybe it was hearing her grandfather talk openly about the past, and not look so shattered by all that he lost. Or maybe the love that she and Nick shared finally helped her to break free of her lingering feeling that some looming disaster was about to strike. Amanda did not care what was responsible for this new feeling of elation glowing

within her; she was too relieved to be finally feeling better to question why. It was amazing how one great day seemed to turn her whole outlook around. Even the worried look on Nick's face as he entered the bedroom did not deflate her natural high.

"Why so serious?" she questioned with her head tilted. "Bad news at the office?"

"No, not bad. Today was just a crazy day for everyone." Nick absently ran his hand heavily through his hair. "The new clients, you know the pharmaceutical company we took on?"

"Yes, the big discrimination case with Baron and Bradley."

"Well, they are beginning to panic that we will not be ready for the court date."

"What do you think?"

"I thought we were ready. We have already met with everyone in the New York offices, and had interviewed anyone who knew the former employees that were pressing the charges. When I left California when your grandmother...well you know..." Amanda nodded; which encouraged Nick to continue. "When I left, my team stayed to finish with the meetings and interviews there." Nick paused to collect his thoughts.

"Didn't they finish?" Amanda probed, trying to figure out what he looked so worried about.

"Yes, they did, but the clients feel that there was less time and effort given in California. They were very impressed with our thoroughness in New York and feel that the California offices were not given the same level of attention." Nick rubbed his eyes tiredly. Amanda could see his mind was racing, she assumed that he was trying to find a solution to the problem. Little did she know, he already knew the only possible solution, he just did not know how to tell her.

"You have to go back to California." She stated flatly. It was so obvious to her that it surprised her to see Nick's look of amazement.

"You mean that...I mean you would want me to go?" he stuttered. It was like she had read his mind. Here he was worried about her reaction if he offered to go back to California and she just spits it out casually. He shook his head in silent disbelief.

"Of course I mean it. I know you've put everything on hold to be here with me, but we both have to get back to a normal life again. You can't stay home holding my hand forever." She paused and let out a deep breath before beginning again. "To tell you the truth Nick, I knew you were neglecting your work, but I wanted you near me so badly that I didn't

argue when you stayed home. Now I feel guilty.” Amanda explained her feelings excitedly. She had never felt so empowered and the proud smile on her husband’s face reassured her that she was doing the right thing. What she did not know was that Nick’s smile was for the fire he saw in her eyes, which had been missing for a long time. It was the same fire that made her green eyes dance brilliantly and grabbed his heart the moment he first saw her. And the same fire that made him fall in love with her again and again over the years. He was very pleased to see it return. He bent over her radiant face and kissed her lips hard.

“I needed that time together just as much as you. You should not feel guilty for anything. This is what really matters...,” he gestured with his hand, pointing between them both. “...everything else comes in second.” The shrill sound of the phone ringing startled both of them.

“You better answer that before they all suffer a collective heart attack.” She said as she teasingly rolled her eyes. She could imagine how crazy his firm must be to call again so late in the evening.

“Are you sure you’re ready for me to go?” he asked searching her face for any sign of doubt. Amanda became very serious and she looked her husband directly in the eyes.

“I am positive, now you go answer that phone and tell them Mr. Vane is on the way to save the day.” She could not keep a straight face any longer and broke out into laughter at her husband’s annoyed look. She kissed his cheek and pushed him toward the door.

“I’ll give you Mr. Vane when I get back,” he threatened, but a smile danced on the corners of his mouth.

“Promises...promises...” she laughed, and smacked his butt as he walked away from her.

He laughed and called out as went down the hall, “I don’t know what’s gotten into you, Mrs. Rag Doll.” Amanda laid back and laughed quietly. She didn’t know either but things were certainly changing for the better.



## Chapter 3

The rest of the week passed by relatively uneventful. Amanda went to visit her grandfather everyday. His level of alertness varied from sleeping to vaguely coherent, but thankfully he did not have another really bad day. Although he did not have another really good day either since the afternoon she and Nick had spent with him. Nick and Amanda fell back into their regular routine of coffee early in the mornings together before Nick left to work and late dinners in the evening when he returned. Over the week end they both put on comfortable clothes and worked on the yard together and washed both of their cars. The rest of the time they spent lying around enjoying each others company and playing scrabble. Amanda smiled happily as she pulled herself out of bed early Monday morning. It felt great to look forward to each day again instead of feeling buried by depression.

Amanda heard Nick's voice coming from his office as she tiredly walked through the hall and to the kitchen. She tightened her robe around her as the cool morning air blew in the windows. Her mug sat empty on the counter beside the coffee maker. She poured her coffee and then the cream. She sleepily watched the thick, white band of cream swirl heavily on the top of the coffee. Smiling, she opened the drawer beneath the counter, removed a spoon, and listened to the clinking sounds it made inside of the mug as she stirred the cream into the steaming liquid.

"Should have poured the cream first." Nick stated as he entered the kitchen, shaking his head at her.

"I know, I was just thinking that." She shot her 'you think you know everything' smile at him. She noticed he already had his suit on and his briefcase in his hand. "Are you leaving early today?"

"Yeah, remember I told you about this last week? We have to spend this whole week going over all of the notes that were taken in California after I left. I don't want to run into any problems or surprises when I get there next week." He bent to kiss her quickly and then refilled his coffee to take with him.

"Oh yeah... I remember." She did remember, but she couldn't believe how quickly time was passing. It seemed like it was just yesterday that he told his firm that he would go back to California.

"You're not having second thoughts about this trip, are you? Because it's not too late for me to send someone else." Nick looked instantly worried.

"No, I'm not. I'm fine. I was just thinking how fast time passes. You go and don't worry about me." She felt as confidence as she sounded. Nick bent and kissed her again, this time on the lips. Amanda smiled, amazed with how happy and alive he seemed over the past several days.

"I love you, Mandy. Oh...I left you something on the hall table by the phone." He gave her a sneaky grin and headed out to work.

Amanda rubbed her eyes and had to look twice at the blurred red numbers blazing from the clock on the coffee maker. It was only 6:00 in the morning. No wonder she felt so tired. She yawned loudly as she dragged herself to the front hall to see what mystery Nick had left her. A wide smile spread across her lips as soon as she saw the large vase overflowing with fresh flowers. When she stepped closer she could see the colorful arrangement was a small grouping of delicate pale pink and red baby roses surrounded by what looked like hundreds of wildflowers in more sizes and vibrant colors than she had ever seen. They all rested in a large heart shaped, hand blown, glass vase. On the table, resting up against the base of the vase was a small card that simply said 'Mandy'. Inside, in Nick's handwriting it said:

*Mandy,*

*These flowers are how I see you.*

*A delicate heart surrounded by everything wild and beautiful.*

*I love you more than words can say, and even more everyday.*

*Love Always,*

*Nick*

Amanda's hands began to tremble as the words in front of her blurred beneath her moistened eyes. Her salty tears slid down her face until she could taste them on her smiling lips.

"Pretty good, huh?"

"OH MY GOD!" she jumped and dropped the card to the floor. "Nick!" she screamed angrily as she spun around to find him standing in the hall behind her. He had never left; he just cut through the living room and waited by the back door to the kitchen until she went into the hall, then followed her.

"I'm sorry..." he half laughed and half pleaded. "I wanted to see your face when you seen them, not scare you." He wrapped his arms around her and held her so she could not pull away from him. "So... do you like them?"

"Of course...I love them. Look at them they're beautiful, Nick." She exclaimed happily, already forgetting how he had scared her. He bent over and picked up the card she had dropped and placed it back in her hands.

"I really do mean what I wrote. I love you Mandy." He looked in her eyes for a moment and smiled. "Now I really do have to go." He bent to kiss her again, but stopped when the phone rang.

"You go, I'll tell them you already left," she offered. He kissed her quickly and headed for the door as Amanda answered the phone. The tone in her voice made him turn at the front door. He questioned her with his eyes, but her shocked look alarmed him.

"Oh no...no...oh my god, no..." her voice trailed off and she fainted heavily to the floor, knocking the table over on her way down. Nick ran toward her, but could not stop the vase full of flowers from crashing down into a shattered mess around her.

"Amanda...Amanda...answer me," Nick pleaded as he gently shook his wife. He picked up the phone receiver that fell beside her open hand.

"Who the hell is this?" He angrily accused into the phone.

"I'm so sorry sir. I am... I mean this is Hunter Hill Adult Care Community. I'm sorry... I didn't say anything...I just told her she had to come right down. She must have heard it in my voice...Is she OK?" Nick's anger melted immediately when he heard the small scared voice rambling on the other end of the phone. He also knew why his wife had reacted the way she did.

"I'm so sorry. It's just that..." the young voice continued.

"Mr. Morgan passed away," he stated more than questioned.

“Yes...this morning. But I didn’t tell her that. I would never over the phone. I can’t tell you how sorry I am. I only said she had to come down to speak with the doctors.” The young woman was obviously crying now and couldn’t stop apologizing and explaining. It never occurred to her that calling at six o’clock in the morning might tip them off that something was wrong.

“It’s alright. You did the right thing. We’ll be there as soon as possible. Thank you for calling.” Nick was too worried about his wife to stay on the phone. She was beginning to come to and immediately began crying uncontrollably, while the jagged pieces of glass mixed with water soaked stems loomed dangerously close. He felt bad hanging up on the girl, but he had to pick Amanda up before she moved and cut herself.

The following week went by in a blur. Amanda felt like she was walking around under water every day and drowning in her nightmares each night. She mindlessly followed Nick’s lead in all of the endless funeral preparations. At the wake, many of her grandparents’ friends and neighbors attended. Amanda never saw anyone but the lifeless shell of a man that resembled her grandfather. She smiled politely, but felt empty as she looked at the sea of people that hugged her. Everyone extended their sympathies and well wishes to her and Nick. At least that’s what she imagined they were saying. All of the voices and sounds mingled together and created a constant hum that deepened the numbness she felt.

Her thoughts kept going back to the phone call and then sitting in the administration office with the numerous nurses and doctors who had cared for him. She barely remembered what was said. She couldn’t even recall who it was that explained that he had died of a heart attack, while he slept. She just kept replaying the words in her mind as she stared at the rich mahogany casket in front of her. ‘He died peacefully in his bed, holding a picture of his wife to his chest.’ They had given that same picture to her; she held it now against her own chest.

Nick, as always, was her rock. He held her firmly and led her closer to the casket when it was time to say their last good byes. Amanda knelt on the leather step that ran along side of the casket. She closed her eyes and silently prayed that her grandparents were together again. She pictured them standing in a doorway with their arms slung around each other waving to her, just like they had always done whenever she left the house as a child. She did not even feel the steady stream of tears that ran down her face. Slowly she opened her eyes and looked for a moment at the lifeless body in front of her. So different from the loud and boisterous

man she had known and loved. She watched his still chest and almost expected to see it rise with a fresh breath. His eyes rested shut and his lips looked as if he might smile. Amanda had to admit, despite looking a little bloated, he really looked peaceful.

Looking down at the picture of her grandmother, she unconsciously sighed. She carefully slid the framed picture into the silk lined coffin and rested it against her grandfather's chest. Then she pulled a small picture of her and Nick out of her jacket pocket and placed it under his folded hands. She could feel Nick's arm trembling against hers. She glanced over to see him kneeling with his hands in prayer and his head tucked beneath them. Behind his hands she could see that he was silently crying. This was the first thing to penetrate into her solitude in the past week.

Suddenly, Amanda realized that she had to pull herself together, if not for her own sake then for her husband's. All at once her senses began to awaken as the faces and dull murmur of voices around her seemed to explode into her consciousness. Her head reeled and her heart fell into her stomach with a wretched hollow pain at the instant realization of all that she had lost. It was as if seeing Nick's pain had allowed her own feelings to emerge from under the thick blanket of desperation she had been hiding under.

"Let's go home," she whispered as she slid her arm around his back.

Nick nodded in response, but did not look her in the eyes. They both stood and politely excused themselves to the few guests that remained.

The next morning, Amanda felt a little clearer. Seeing Nick's pain at the wake the night before had lifted the fog that seemed to be over her, and allowed her to finally feel her own pain she had been smothering. She listened to the sound of the shower running in the bathroom that was attached to their bedroom. On the door Nick had hung his black suit and her long, black, hand knitted sweater dress. It never ceased to amaze her how caring and thoughtful her husband could be. Even though he was also deeply hurt by the loss he was still willing to take care of every detail for her until she was able to cope with her own feelings. He had done the same for her when her grandmother had died. She had been so devastated that she could barely function. He did all the cleaning and cooking and refused to let her go anywhere alone. He had even started going grocery shopping with her on the weekends; a task that he once adamantly refused to do. And now he was doing it again. Taking care of everything for her while putting his own feelings and life on hold. Amanda laid in bed, listening to her husband in the shower and vowed to herself that no matter

how bad she felt she was not going to allow Nick to do that again. She owed him that much.

Amanda held up well through the funeral. She clung to Nick's arm and did her best to share the grief and responsibility of thanking all of the visitors for their concern. Nick kept a careful eye on her all day, and was surprised by her apparent strength. Amanda also kept an eye on Nick. She worried about how tired and sad he looked. She promised herself that once they got through today she would make a real effort to become the strong headed, equal partner that Nick had married. She did not want to become an emotional weight around his neck. She knew that no matter how much he said he loved her, he would eventually begin to resent this weakness that had taken her over. She took a deep breath to fight back the tears that strained at her eyes.

The morning after the funeral Amanda set out to keep her promise. She woke up before Nick, took a shower, and headed downstairs to make him coffee for a change. While the rich smell of the freshly brewing coffee filled the kitchen, she quietly cleaned up the dishes left out from the night before. They had invited everyone who attended the funeral to their home for coffee and desserts. Nick called the Italian bakery that was close to their house and had them deliver a huge assortment of cakes, pies, and cannoli. There were a lot left over since most of the people that came to the funeral were elderly friends of her grandparents and were not up to extending their day after the funeral. A few of Nick's co workers and his secretary came and some of the neighbors that they had become friendly with over the years also came. Amanda looked over the leftovers in the refrigerator, and chose a chocolate dipped cannoli to eat with her coffee. She heard a noise and looked up to see Nick peering down at her over the refrigerator door. She smiled at him around the richly sweet pastry like a child caught in the cookie jar.

"What are you doing up so early?" he laughed as he reached over the top of the door to help himself to a bite of her cannoli.

"Hey, get your own," she snapped the pastry out of his hand before he could bring it to his mouth.

"Wow, you're pretty fast this morning." He said, taken back by her quickness. He walked around the door and picked a pastry of his own. When he sat at the table a piping hot mug of coffee was waiting in front of him. He watched her carefully, still not sure how she was going to handle it once the reality of her grandfather's death set in.

"How do you feel?" he wondered out loud.

"I'm ok...I miss him...but I feel pretty good." She smiled across the table. Nick searched her eyes for a trace of doubt, but was surprised that he could not see any. She was a little surprised herself that she really did feel pretty good. Sad...but good.

"What are we doing today?" Nick asked, noticing that she was already showered and dressed.

"Well..." she began, "You are going to work and I'm going to the store." She held her breath and waited for her husband's reaction. She hoped she would not have to argue with him, but she was prepared to.

"What? Mandy...I am not leaving you alone." He was completely floored by her calmness. He had been preparing for a rough few months at least. It had taken a full month for her to wake up from her walking trance when her grandmother died, and then three more months for her to stop crying in her sleep almost every night. Not to mention the hellish nightmares that increased and haunted both of them. He had even canceled his plans to go to California, although he hadn't told her yet. From the day she answered the phone call and had fainted in the hall he had been bracing for the storm that would surely follow.

"Nick, I am telling you the truth. I am going to be fine. I am not going to let you fall any further behind at work. You already lost last week." She tried to keep her voice steady to convince him. Inside she desperately wanted him to stay with her, but kept reminding herself of the promise she made. She took a deep breath and looked her husband directly in the eyes.

"Mandy, how many times do I have to tell you? This is what matters; not work, not anything else." His voice held steady and his eyes were piercing into hers.

"No Nick, you're wrong. We have made my sadness more important than anything. You used to be so excited about your cases. You would come home so full of life and tell me how each one was going. You worked so hard to become the youngest senior partner at your firm, and you're finally the lead lawyer on a case that can actually make that happen. Now you say it doesn't matter?" Amanda pleaded. She swallowed hard against the rising lump in her throat. This was no time for tears, she told herself.

Nick was shocked by Amanda's words and conviction. They had not fought or even disagreed in so long, he had forgotten how head strong she could be. "I don't know what to say..." he began slowly. "I know I was driven before by my fierce motivation to succeed at my firm. But I am being honest with you Mandy. I really don't care about that now. I only care about

you and us. I don't know..." he paused thoughtfully, "maybe I'll want that again in the future, but right now all I want is to be here with you."

"You will not get a chance like this again, Nick, and you know it." If you don't get back there and do your job you could lose everything and have to start all over again. I won't let you do that." Hearing herself say it made Amanda see more clearly what he was risking and it helped her to remain strong.

"The funeral was only yesterday. Let's take some time to think about everything before we make any decisions," he offered. Nick still feared that his wife's expectations were premature. He wasn't convinced that she had even dealt with her feelings yet, and he wasn't going to leave her alone until he was positive she had. He had too much love invested in her to lose her to an emotional breakdown, like he almost did eight months before.

"I know you think I'm jumping the gun, Nick. But I'm serious. I'm not saying I'll never be sad about losing my grandparents, but I won't let that sadness take over our lives ever again." She stood her ground staring into her husband's eyes.

"So what do you want me to do? You expect me to throw myself into my work again and leave you here all alone? We just buried your grandfather yesterday, for Christ's sake, Amanda." He felt guilty throwing it in her face so coldly, but he had to be sure she wasn't faking this new strength. He had to be sure she wasn't hiding her pain for his benefit. A small part of him knew he had to get back to work, more out of obligation to his co-workers than for himself.

Everyone had been more than understanding and sympathetic when he explained his reasons for stepping down as lead lawyer in the Baron and Bradley case, but the disappointment was evident on their faces. The least he could do was offer to take care of the smaller cases that came up while everyone else finished preparing for the big one. But he was not going anywhere until he was sure his wife was ready. He thought that would take a few months, and told his firm he would try to be back by the end of October. He sat at the table shaking his head in disbelief at the change of events in front of him now.

"I am fully aware of when we buried him," she stated flatly. Tears welled up in her eyes and she pretended to look out the window so Nick would not see them. She was a little hurt and surprised by his bluntness, but she understood what he was doing.

"I'm sorry Mandy; I don't want to hurt you. It's just too soon...for both of us." Nick apologized. He reached across the table and protectively

covered her hands with his. "I have already told my firm that I need some time off. Why don't we take that time and go away somewhere?" He tugged gently at her hands to bring her eyes from the window. When she did look back he was startled to see a touch of anger in her eyes.

"What do you mean? How much time did you take off, Nick?" Amanda felt her heart sink into her stomach. This is exactly what she was afraid of. If he took time off now he would have to remove himself from the Baron and Bradley case and that would almost insure his not making senior partner. No matter what personal crisis was upon them. She had to find a way to convince him that he was making a mistake. She pulled her hands out from under his, got up from the table and took a deep breath as a million thoughts raced through her mind.

Nick watched her standing there with an obvious look of confusion. When her grandmother died he watched his wife fall into a deep depression and then when her grandfather became sick right after he worried that she would never be the same again. Then recently she had begun to return to her old self; looking and acting stronger. Then when her grandfather died he was sure she would crash headlong into another long depression. But here she stood, appearing stronger than ever. It just didn't make sense.

"Nick?" she repeated, interrupting his thoughts. "Did you pull yourself from the case?"

"Yes," he replied. "It's for the best Amanda. It would not be fair to the clients or my firm to stay on if I could not give the case one hundred percent."

"I won't let you do this. You have to go back to work or I'll never be able to forgive myself." Her voice quivered with a mixture of pleading and demand.

"Amanda there's absolutely no way I would go to California now and leave you here. I don't care what you say." Nick fought to keep the anger and frustration that was building inside of him out of his voice as he spoke.

Amanda was beginning to realize that they were not getting anywhere with their arguments. She had to think of another way to convince her husband that he needed to return to work.

"Alright, just forget about California for now. Why don't you just go back to your office today and we will take it from there. One day at a time, ok?" she smiled, feeling pleased with her idea. He studied her face for a few moments, quietly contemplating what she had said.

“Even if I did agree to go back to the office, I am definitely not going to change my mind about California,” he warned.

“Alright, alright, but you will go back to the office today?” she asked hopefully.

“No, not today. But if you’re honestly alright with it I’ll go back tomorrow,” he compromised hesitantly. Amanda smiled confidently at her husband. She had won the first battle and got him to agree to return to work. Once she could convince him that she would be fine at home alone, she would work on getting him to consider joining the Baron and Bradley case again.

Now all she had to do was convince herself that it was true. When Nick left the kitchen to call his office about his tentative return, Amanda rubbed a shaky hand over her stomach to try and sooth the churning panic feeling that was growing. She quickly went upstairs to their bedroom before the tears that burned in her eyes could escape and crumble the wall of confidence that she had built.

The following morning Nick entered the kitchen to find Amanda once again showered and dressed and making the morning coffee. She made idle conversation while he read the paper and drank his coffee. He offered one last time to stay home, but finally kissed her cautiously before leaving. As the front door closed Amanda felt hot tears start falling steadily down her cheeks. She dropped her head into her folded arms on the table and sobbed uncontrollably, for what seemed like hours. She released all of the pain and sadness she had been concealing from her husband. She cried for her grandparents and the aching hole their deaths had left in her chest, and she cried for herself and how desperately she wished Nick was there to console her. Even through her endless tears she knew deep down that she did the right thing by sending him back to work, and that thought alone kept her from completely falling apart.

The next week and a half went by the same way. Every morning Amanda woke up early, got dressed, made coffee and smiled cheerfully at her husband as he headed out to work. Then each day after he left, she would crawl back into bed and cry for hours. At first she was worried that she was falling hopelessly into another depression. But as the days went by, and the confidence built in her husband’s eyes, she began to feel better. Soon she stopped going back to her bed and found that she only cried when she looked at old pictures, or when certain memories entered her mind. It was very empowering to realize that she was dealing with her own sadness without her husband hovering protectively over her.

And she couldn't deny how great it felt to have him coming home at night talking about his work again instead of being constantly worried about her. As she began to feel stronger, she started to notice that he never discussed her grandparents with her. She worried if he had taken enough time to grieve, or if she had pushed him back to work too soon. Eventually she decided that he was grieving in his own way just as she had been. She would wait and let him talk about his feelings when he was ready.