

AMBER HATHAWAY

JANE



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Greg tugged at his tie. The heat of the packed chapel seeped through his suit, and sweat pooled beneath the heavy fabric. A priest stood in front of the closed casket set before the altar, hands spread wide like the wings of a bird readying for flight. The drone of his voice washed over Greg, but the words fell away, meaningless.

Greg's eyes flicked to the oversized portrait of his frat brother Dirk Arnold placed before the casket. Photo Dirk flashed his pearly teeth and cocked an eyebrow slightly. A twinge needled Greg's chest. God, what he wouldn't give to grab a drink with the smug bastard again.

A hand closed around Greg's, and he glanced over at his fiancée, Lillia, who sat next to him in the cramped pew. Her lips had flattened, and her eyebrows pinched inward. The fingers on her free hand slid the delicate, heart-shaped locket back and forth along her necklace chain. A small monarch butterfly tattoo marked her inner wrist.

He twined his fingers with hers. At least Lillia's friend Carla's service had been much less crowded. It seemed like just about everyone who had ever met Dirk had shown up for this. But Lillia was handling the situation like a champ.

Greg's chest tightened. He probably shouldn't have agreed to go for drinks with the guys afterward, knowing how exhausting Lillia would find the service. But he hadn't seen Nate in ages, and he couldn't blow off his brothers after they had all suffered such a shock. Lillia would be fine. She had her anxiety meds and meditation playlists.

The priest concluded the sermon, and the mourners rose from the pews. Greg stepped into the aisle. He glanced at Lillia and offered her a small smile. His shoulder bumped against something, and he turned. A woman dressed from head to toe in black stood beside him. Her

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thick veil obscured her features, but she looked young, and something in her face tugged at a wisp of memory.

"I'm so sorry," he said.

The woman spun away from him and slipped past an elderly couple. He turned to Lillia and shrugged. She tried to smile, but the resulting gesture more closely mimicked a grimace.

"You okay?" he said.

She twisted a section of her lilac-colored tresses. "It's... a lot. But I'll be fine."

"I won't stay out long, an hour, maybe two tops. I'll drop you off at the hotel on my way to the pub. Oh, I hope you don't mind, but I told Nate he could ride with us."

Lillia looked down. "Actually, the hotel isn't far from here. I think I'll walk. I could use some fresh air to clear my head."

Greg's frat brother Nate lingered by the chapel's exit. Greg squeezed Lillia's hand. "I'll see you back at the hotel," he said.

She nodded and gave Nate a quick wave, then disappeared into the crowd. Greg pulled Nate into a hug. "Hey man, it's been a while."

"Too long." Nate clapped a hand on Greg's shoulder, and the two followed the sea of mourners toward the exit. "So, for the bachelor party—"

"No strippers."

"Man, she's got you pussywhipped. You ever gonna pull your balls out of her purse?"

Greg stared at the hardwood floor. "How's the new job?"

"The pay bump's nice ..."

Fifteen minutes later, Greg stood in a corner of a nearby pub with Nate and their fellow brother Bruce. Small groups clustered around

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tables while a few solo patrons had settled at the bar. Raucous laughter spilled from a woman wearing a glittery pink tiara, the shrill sound overpowering the drone of low voices that permeated the space.

“It feels so weird without Dirk,” Nate said.

“I know,” Greg said. He shook his head. “A fucking bear attack. What a way to go.”

“I’ll bet he got wasted and decided to fight the grizzly.” Beer sloshed over the side of Nate’s glass as he mimed Dirk’s fight stance. “You wanna go?”

Greg chuckled. Man, he had missed this.

Bruce peered into his pint glass. “It wasn’t a bear attack.” He looked pointedly at Nate. “The chick from the woods did him in.”

The ambient chatter buzzed in Greg’s ears as he stared at Bruce. A weight filled the pit of Greg’s stomach. Did Bruce mean Jane killed Dirk?

Nate shook his head. “I talked to his brother, and the whole lower half of Dirk’s body was ... gone. What was left was shredded with bear claws and teeth.”

Bruce sank onto one of the bar stools. “I know a bear ate him, but ... Dirk called me the night he died, said the chick from the woods had been stalking him. He’d told the police, but they didn’t take him seriously. He was gonna head to his dad’s camp for a few days to try and lose her. But that bitch must’ve followed him.”

“Or he ran into a grizzly,” Nate said.

Bruce shook his head. “It was her.”

Greg scratched beneath the cuff of his shirt. Bruce’s theory seemed like a stretch, but saying so wouldn’t help. “You could be right.”

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“Come on, Greg,” Nate said. “Just admit it. You don’t believe this bullshit either.”

Bruce slammed his glass down against the bar. Amber liquid spilled onto the counter, and several heads turned in his direction. “Bullshit?” Bruce said. “You think I made this up?”

Nate smirked. “Nah man, I think you’ve had too much nose candy.”

Bruce’s eyes narrowed. “Fuck you.” He hopped off his stool and marched toward the exit.

“Wait!” Greg and Nate called out.

Bruce raised his middle finger above his head and then pushed through the exit. The heavy wood door slammed shut behind him.



Greg bolted up in bed. Fragments of the night in the woods clung to his head. He clasped a hand to his chest. His breaths came in heavy and shallow, and his heart pounded against his palm. What a dream.

An image of Jane’s outstretched hand lingered in his mind. He hadn’t known her name, but calling her the girl he abandoned in the woods, while accurate, felt wrong. Like being left for dead by a drunk and terrified first-year frat brother had become her defining feature. So he had nicknamed her Jane, short for Jane Doe.

A shriek split the night. He started, and Lillia shot up beside him.

“Stay here,” he said. “I’ll check things out.”

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More screams rolled along the air. Greg leaped out of bed. The stiff carpet scraped his soles as he rushed into the hall. His eyes blinked against the brilliance from overhead. Dull pain thrummed in his sinuses, and malaise swirled through his gut. He lifted a hand in front of his face. Christ, he only had three beers.

Bedheaded figures peeked into the hall and exchanged glances with one another. A door flew open, and a naked man barreled into the corridor. Blood streamed from his crotch, tracing a crimson trail through the beige carpet. He clutched his severed penis in one hand.

Gasps erupted from the crowd, and a high-pitched voice shrieked. Greg's stomach dropped. "Bruce?" he said.

Bruce staggered forward. His bloodshot eyes stretched so wide, they looked ready to pop from his skull, and sweat glistened on his skin. He latched onto the front of Greg's T-shirt with a bloody hand. Frantic words spilled from his lips. "She did it, the chick who killed Dirk."

Greg pulled himself from Bruce's grasp and placed a hand on Bruce's shoulder. "Hold tight one sec. I'm gonna check things out, grab you something to stop the bleeding." He turned to the nearest spectator, a woman with curlers in her hair. "Call 911."

The woman nodded and ducked back into her room. Greg marched toward Bruce's open door.

"Don't go in there!" Bruce shouted. "She'll kill you."

Greg swallowed as he peered through the entrance. Jane would have to be pretty gutsy to attack him with so many people in close proximity. Then again, a person who would slice off someone's dick in a packed hotel might not be too worried about discretion.

The stench of vomit mixed with something heavy and coppery spilled across the threshold. Light from the hallway traced the con-

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tours of Bruce's room, which mirrored Greg and Lillia's room's layout. A bed leaned against one wall, and a TV was mounted to the opposite wall. Faint moans drifted from the o-faced woman on screen. A dresser with a large vanity mirror stood against the wall facing the door. A swish of black flashed across the reflective surface and then disappeared.

Greg whirled around. The space behind him stood empty.

He flipped the light switch, and his stomach lurched. A razor blade lay on the rumpled bed in a crimson pool alongside a zip-seal bag of white powder. Bruce wouldn't have cut off his own dick while tripping, would he?

Bruce's suitcase lay open near the foot of the bed amidst a jumble of pizza boxes and beer cans. Greg reached for a T-shirt dangling over the edge of the suitcase. That should take care of the bleeding.

A scream punctured the air. Greg straightened up and charged into the hallway. Bruce raced past the gaping onlookers.

Greg sprinted after him. "Come back here, man." If only Dirk was here. He had known how to deal with Bruce's bad trips. Not that anything like this had happened before.

Bruce shoved through the door to the stairwell. His palm left bloody smears along the surface's pale paint.

"Bruce! Hold up!"

The stairwell door swung shut. Greg pushed it open and rushed through. His feet halted on the top step. A crimson trail led to Bruce, who had reached the middle of the staircase. Bruce's blood-slicked hand slipped against the banister. He made a startled sound and pitched forward. His penis tumbled from his other hand.

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His body smacked against the concrete stairs, and he plunged down headfirst. Greg's mouth tumbled open, but the words tangled in his vocal cords. He hurried down the steps. Bile burned the back of his throat as he passed the bloody phallus.

Bruce thudded against the landing and skidded to a stop. He lay on his back with his glassy eyes open, neck bent at an angle. Greg's heart dropped. He crouched beside the body. His fingers scrabbled across Bruce's throat. No pulse.

"Oh god!" a voice said.

Greg spun around. A small crowd had gathered along the upper landing. The figures whispered amongst themselves, their voices blending with the distant cry of sirens. Lillia stood in the middle of the staircase, her hand pressed to the base of her throat. Her wide eyes met Greg's. "Is he ..?"

Greg nodded. Tears nipped at the edges of his eyes, and he swiped at them with his thumbs. If only he had stayed with Bruce, maybe Bruce would still be alive.

Lillia tiptoed down the stairs, and Greg turned back toward Bruce. Greg's spine stiffened. The woman with the black veil stooped over Bruce's body. The heavy netting still obscured her features, but she had a light complexion and brown hair. Cold, hard dread lodged in the pit of Greg's stomach. That had to be Jane.

Greg's throat had become so parched, he could barely force out the words. "What have you done?"

A hand closed around Greg's. Lillia stood beside him, her face pale and drawn. "I'm so sorry," she said.

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Greg looked back at the woman, but before he could say anything more, the figure faded and dispersed, fragments of her form curling toward the heavens like wisps of smoke.



The police interrogation dragged on for ages. The officers spoke with each witness individually, and Lillia was still in questioning when Greg was finally released. He texted her to let her know where he was headed and then hurried up to Nate's room. If Jane's ghost was targeting the four brothers, Greg needed to warn Nate.

His fist hammered on Nate's door. A middle-aged man in the room next door poked his head out and glared at Greg, but Greg was too fixated on Nate's room to notice. What if Jane had already gotten to Nate?

Nate answered the door in his boxers, his wavy hair ruffled. He rubbed his eyes as he ushered Greg inside. "What's going on?" Nate said through a yawn. "You look like shit. Did you and Lillia have a fight or something?"

"No, it's... Bruce is dead."

Nate blinked rapidly as his jaw slackened. He sank to the floor, and Greg settled beside him. Nate wetted his lips with his tongue. "What happened?"

Greg recounted the events. Nate listened stoically until Greg described the woman in black vanishing like smoke.

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“You’re telling me a ghost cut off Bruce’s dick?”

Greg stared at his lap. “I know how it sounds, but you’ve gotta believe me.”

Nate shook his head. “Look, you said Bruce was high as a kite. And you’ve been drinking—”

“No more than you, and beer doesn’t make you see ghosts.”

“It’s basic psychology. You’ve been drinking, you’re under a lot of stress, both of which can mess with your head. You’re already on edge because of the shit Bruce said. Of course you’re gonna see a ghost.”

Greg scowled. Nate had taken one intro psych class in college and acted like that made him an expert on the human condition. “I know what I saw.”

Nate rose from the floor and paced. “I’m sure you saw something, but the human brain is wired to find faces wherever we look. Hell, I thought I saw a woman at the foot of my bed right before you showed up ...”

Greg’s blood iced over. Nate continued to speak, but Greg tuned out the words. Jane had already visited Nate. Where had she gone? Was she lying in wait?

Greg gripped his head. “We have to figure out what Jane wants before she strikes again.”

Nate’s face scrunched. “Jane?”

“The woman we left in the woods.”

“You weren’t... Oh, right.”

Greg ran a hand through his hair. What if she never told anyone what had happened? A lot of people felt like they had to stay quiet about these sorts of things. And now she couldn’t speak for herself even if she wanted to, so she was silencing the people who made her

suffer. But maybe he could give her back her voice. “Maybe if we told the truth about what happened that night—”

“What’s there to tell?” Nate snapped. Greg’s head jerked up, and Nate softened his tone. “There’s no ghost, but even if there was, Bruce and Dirk are dead, and we didn’t lay a hand on her.”

As if that absolved them. Nate had followed Dirk and Bruce as they dragged a semi-conscious woman into the woods. It didn’t take a genius to figure out what the three of them intended, hence why Greg had stepped in to stop them. Then, when Jane fell and hit her head after Dirk punched her, only Greg stayed behind to see if she was okay, and as soon as the police sirens sounded, he too fled. He and Nate had still contributed to her suffering, and while they didn’t deserve to die, they needed to own up to what they had done.

“I’m gonna grab my laptop,” Greg said.

Nate pointed a finger at Greg. “You write anything about me, and I’ll sue you for defamation.”

Greg stared at his friend. Nate couldn’t be serious. A squeaky clean image wouldn’t do him any good if he was dead.

Nate walked to the nightstand to one side of his bed and pulled a gun from the drawer. Greg’s eyebrows leaped toward his hairline. “What are you doing with that?”

Nate flicked off the safety. “I’m handling things like a man. If there is some chick, and I mean an actual living person, who’s going around picking us off, I’ll be ready for her.”

Greg swallowed. “I’ll, uh, be back in a few.”

He ducked out of the room and hurried into the elevator. He bounced in place as the car crept toward the second floor. He needed

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to finish this and fast, before Jane got to them or Nate did something reckless.

The elevator dinged and juddered to a stop. Greg shoved through the gap forming between the doors and rushed into his hotel room. His suitcase lay to one side of the bed. He yanked it open, tossing his clothes to the floor as he dug for his laptop.

Lillia stepped out of the bathroom. She dabbed her blotchy face with a towel. "What are you doing?"

"I've gotta tell her story before she gets us," Greg said.

"Whose story? You're not making sense."

Greg grabbed his laptop and raced into the corridor. He could explain once he had finished, but every moment he wasted gave Jane another opportunity to strike. Lillia sprinted after him. "Greg, wait!"

He stopped before the elevator and pushed the "up" arrow again and again. "Come on!"

Something settled upon his upper arm, and he jumped. Lillia's hand fell back to her side. "Sorry, I didn't mean ..."

The elevator dinged, and the doors slid open. Greg charged inside, nearly bumping into the man in the rumpled suit. Lillia followed close on Greg's heels. Greg hit the button for the fifth floor and then jabbed the "door close" button.

"Got somewhere to be?" the man in the suit slurred. He giggled as though he had told the most hilarious joke.

Lillia murmured an apology to the man for the near collision. Greg massaged his temples as the floor number on the elevator's display screen gradually shifted from two to three to four. *Hurry up.*

Another ding, and the elevator jolted to a standstill. Seconds stretched on for eons until finally, the doors shuddered and slid apart.

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A gunshot split the air. Greg's heart rate spiked. He raced into the corridor. Somewhere down the hall, a baby wailed, and low voices drifted from the nearby rooms.

He brought his fist down on Nate's door. The door swung open. Greg frowned. The locking mechanism must have malfunctioned.

He edged across the threshold. "Nate?"

Greg's stomach lurched. Nate lay on the bed with his eyes closed, his pistol nestled alongside his hip. Crimson stained the front of his boxers and pooled on the pale sheets beneath him.

Greg set down his laptop at the foot of the mattress. He swallowed as he moved along the side of the bed. He touched Nate's wrist. A pulse raced beneath Greg's fingertips, and he let out a breath. "He's just unconscious."

Lillia brushed past Greg and grabbed the bedside phone. She pressed some buttons and raised the receiver to her ear. "There's been an accident ..."

A hand latched onto Greg's wrist, and he whirled toward the bed. Nate's eyes skittered across Greg's face as he spoke. "She was here."

Greg swallowed. "She did this to you?"

Nate's gaze shifted to the entrance. "She just slid through the door like it wasn't even there. How the fuck did she do that?"

How did ghosts do anything? How did they even exist? None of it made sense. "I don't know, but I'm gonna stop her, okay? She won't hurt either of us again. Just hang in there."

Greg patted Nate's shoulder and then grabbed his laptop and settled onto the floor. He opened a blank word document. Lillia's voice washed over him, but he concentrated on the computer screen. He had to get it all down before Jane came back to finish Nate off.

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Greg huddled on the hotel bed. His shaking fingers flew across the keyboard. Maybe he should have ridden with Nate to the hospital. Then again, what good would that have done? He couldn't fight Jane off if she returned. Telling the truth seemed like their only potential defense, and Greg could more easily write from his hotel room than he could from the back of an ambulance or inside a crowded emergency room.

The door clicked. Greg's heart hurtled into his throat, and his eyes whipped to the side. Lillia stood in the entrance to their hotel room. Bags drooped beneath her eyes, and the corners of her mouth sagged.

"The police are ready for you," she said. "They want you down in the conference room ASAP."

Greg focused on his laptop. "Later. I have to finish Jane's story."

"That's what this is about? You think Jane is killing your friends?"

"Her unfinished business has to have something to do with the night in the woods. She probably never got the chance to tell her story, right? Especially—"

"Why would she want *you* to tell her story? I mean, no offense because I know you mean well, but you kind of made the whole thing about you. It's all about your guilt, your grief. Jane's just a background character in her own story."

Greg stared at the words on his laptop screen. *Her wide eyes met mine, and I knew I had to save her from what the others had in store for her. I knew I would regret it for the rest of my life if I didn't step in.* His stomach tightened. Shit, Lillia was right.

"Okay, I can fix it," he said. He couldn't get inside Jane's head, but—

"Greg, stop," Lillia said. Her volume ratcheted up. "Will you just stop and listen for once?"

Greg looked up, and Lillia sank onto the edge of the mattress. Exhaustion mired her words. "The girl you left in the woods – Jane – she's very much alive, and she hasn't killed anyone. I know this because I'm her."

His world halted for an instant and then whirled back to life. The hotel's air conditioning system rumbled in his head like a diesel engine. He tried superimposing Jane's battered face over Lillia's, but Jane's face was too dark, too faded. He couldn't get a handle on it.

"You're Jane?" he said.

Lillia nodded. She tapped on her phone screen for a moment and then handed him the device. "From my old account. I stopped using it after that night."

His heart froze. The screen showed Jane with her long, brown hair, tiny silver crop top, low rise shorts, and an enormous grin plastered to her face. Lillia's grin.

His stomach churned as he looked from the phone to Lillia. He had been part of one of the worst moments of her life without realizing it, and he had failed her.

"I'm so sorry," he said. "If I could undo it, I would."

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She squeezed his knee. "I know. I see how it eats at you. I've wanted to tell you I was Jane for a long time so you could know that Jane has forgiven you, but I couldn't stand the thought that you might choose Nate and the others, my attackers, over me."

He frowned. "Lillia, I would never."

"Are you sure?" Lillia's expression darkened. "You knew what they had done to Jane, and still, you chose them again and again. It was always, 'It's not about them. It's about brotherhood. Nate's not so bad. He's not like the others.' If Jane wasn't enough, why would I be?"

Nausea churned Greg's stomach. Lillia wasn't just a random woman like he had assumed Jane was. Even so, he had repeatedly dismissed Lillia's pleas to reduce contact with his brothers with the rationalization that she didn't understand what it was like to be part of a fraternity. No wonder she hadn't trusted him with the truth.

Greg slid off the bed and ducked into the bathroom. He splashed water on his face. The chill stung his skin, but it did nothing to dull the ache that consumed his chest. For years, Jane had been right under his nose. He had failed her not just that one night, but every single time he chose to hang out with his brothers, knowing Lillia's discomfort. How would he ever make it up to her?

He lifted his head, and his heart missed a beat. The woman in black hovered in the mirror behind his shoulder. His legs weakened, and he gripped the counter to stay upright. She raised her veil, and his eyes bulged.

A reedy murmur slipped past his lips. "Carla?"

Less than a month ago, Carla had died by suicide. In the note her sister had uploaded to social media, Carla had explained that she had fought so hard for so long, but she was tired. *Tired of the inescapable*

nightmares and panic attacks. Tired of shuffling from one dead-end job to the next while the men who ruined my life bought houses and climbed the corporate ladder and hit other milestones I could only dream of. The sort of milestones Dirk, Bruce, and Nate had achieved in spades.

Greg swallowed as he met Carla's steely gray eyes in the mirror. "I had no idea. I swear."

Carla's scowl deepened, and she glided closer to him. He spun to face her and held up a hand. "Okay, I didn't know they hurt you, but I knew about Jane, and I didn't do anything. But I can change."

Darkness enveloped the bathroom, and Greg yelped. A chill as frigid as the breath of Maine winter seeped through his limbs and into his bones. His teeth clicked together as tremors wracked his body.

"Greg?" Lillia's voice said. It sounded thin and distant, like a whisper on the wind.

Greg tried to call out, but his vocal cords had frozen. He pleaded with Carla in his head. *Just give me one more chance. I'll do better, I swear.*

The light came on. Icy tendrils snaked across the mirror glass to form letters: ALL JANES MATTER.

A pang jabbed Greg's core as Lillia's words from one of their previous arguments surfaced in his head: *It shouldn't matter if you don't know her. She shouldn't have to be your girlfriend, sister, or mother for you to care. Jane still deserved to be treated with respect and dignity.* Lillia and Carla were right. If only he had listened sooner.

Soft taps sounded against the bathroom door. "Babe?" Lillia's voice called. "Everything okay in there?"

The letters melted. Carla's image wavered and then disappeared. Greg pushed the door open. Lillia waited beyond the threshold, and

he took her hand. He had fucked up a hundred different ways, but maybe he could still make things right.

One year later

Greg and Lillia knelt before Carla's headstone. A monarch butterfly flitted past the grave marker. Lillia sniffed as she laid the small bouquet at the base of the stone. "I wish Carla was here."

Greg ran a hand along Lillia's back. "I'm sure she's watching over you, and I know she must be so proud of you."

Not long after Lillia revealed to Greg that she was Jane, Lillia had decided to share her story publicly. She submitted it to a small, local paper, and several major news outlets picked it up. Lillia hadn't named names, but when the piece started gaining traction, Carla's sister had decided to shame the wicked.

The backlash had been swift. Some people were outraged at Carla's sister and Lillia for "tarnishing" the reputations of the deceased, who couldn't defend themselves, and Nate, who had a "promising future." Greg's former frat had denounced the publications as vicious lies. Nate had threatened to sue Lillia and Carla's sister for defamation if they didn't retract their statements and called Lillia's character into question at every opportunity.

Greg had lost friends and severed ties with his former fraternity. He had watched Lillia's mental health decline as the harassment escalated. But as more survivors came forward with their own stories about Dirk, Bruce, and Nate, eventually, the tides turned. The fraternity recanted its previous statements and Nate ended his smear campaign

and vanished from social media. Life wasn't perfect, but things were looking up.

A chill worked its way down Greg's spine, and he glanced over his shoulder. Carla stood amongst a cluster of trees along the cemetery's gate. She had ditched the veil, and her skin seemed to have lost some of its pallor. She flashed him a grin, and he forced himself to mimic her expression. It was still a little jarring when he spotted her, but he was slowly getting used to it.

"What are you looking at, babe?" Lillia said.

He shook his head. Greg hadn't met Carla until after she died, but he got the sense that the spectral manifestation wasn't the same person she had been in life. She was colder, more vengeful than the woman Lillia had described. Lillia didn't need to know what had become of her friend.

"I was just thinking about Carla," he said. "Maybe we should have a tribute to her at the wedding."

Lillia smiled and nuzzled his nose. "You are so thoughtful. How did I get so lucky?"

Lillia had Carla to thank for that, for bringing the truth to light. Greg glanced back at the trees, but Carla had vanished. But she would be back. She always came back.