

## Chapter One

Leigh Cameron walked through The Media Tower's revolving doors. With one whirl, she found herself inside, the warm June breeze replaced by the cold slap of the structure's climate controlled air. Every surface of the impressive glass building sparkled in the early morning sunlight. She strode to the elevator bay, blinking against the play of the sun's rays on the white marble floor.

The phone call she'd received in the wee hours of the night still echoed in her ears. "Your father passed away this morning." She inhaled deeply, willing herself to remain calm. At least it had been Uncle Bruce's familiar voice who'd broken the news and not some anonymous estate lawyer's.

She stepped off on the sixth floor and flashed her ID card at the commissionaire. It was barely eight thirty and already, The New York Star buzzed with activity. She strode through the newsroom, oblivious of the stares burning into her back. At close to six feet in heels and with her mane of copper ringlets, people always gawked - especially men.

She walked into her boss's office and smiled despite herself. The man's little corner of the universe was a shrine to his own accomplishments. "We love Jack Lang" stretched across the entire back wall of the space in big bold letters. The words adorned one of the New York Star's recent promotional posters that had, no doubt, been hung there by Jack himself. The Star's readers loved his daily column. The quote had been lifted from a fan letter.

"Nice poster, Jack."

"Admit it, Cameron. You're jealous." He leaned back from the bluish glow of his computer screen.

Leigh cocked her right eyebrow.

"You're early." He pulled out a chair. "Weren't you covering the Dance Hall Theater's opening gala last night?"

She nodded, and took the seat he offered.

"Everything all right?"

The room became unbearably small and stuffy, and her throat tightened. "My father passed away this morning."

"Ah, jeez. I'm sorry, kiddo. You okay?"

She looked up to find Jack leaning in, concern etched in his brow. The last thing she wanted was anybody's pity. "I'm all right. He wasn't, I mean, we weren't very close."

Jack didn't look convinced.

She ran her hands over her forehead, smoothing away her frown, inch by inch.

"Seriously. The past few hours have been difficult, but I...I'm fine," she added, forcing a brave front.

She was always fine. That was her problem. She'd lost her mother, Vivian, when she was a teenager. This time it was her father, Ben Cameron, and she was a grown woman. Too bad being older didn't lessen the pain any.

Jack sat in the chair next to hers. "Look, I know this is lousy timing, but I have some news that might cheer you up."

"I'm getting a corner office?" Leigh said, intent on keeping their conversation light.

"Nice try. But you might be getting this one. I've submitted your name to replace me when I retire."

"Wow. I'm going to be you?"

"You wish." Jack chuckled and lifted his glasses up onto his forehead. "If you don't majorly mess up in the next few months, you've got a pretty good chance at the job. I'll even throw in the jacket."

"Not the Harris tweed?" she said, a hint of a smile betraying her poker face.

"Yup. The Harris tweed," he said, a twinkle in his eye. "You can do this, Leigh. I know you can."

She leaned back in her chair, the ramifications of Jack's words sinking in.

"I have to admit I had my doubts about you at first. But you've become an excellent reporter. You've got a real talent for making words come alive. Just like your father...did."

Her father. Everyone thought being the great Ben Cameron's kid must have been just wonderful. Truth was her father was so busy being such a great guy to everybody else he'd hardly ever had any time for her at all. She'd given up on their relationship years ago shut him out of her life for good. She wondered if he knew about the promotion, if he were somewhere in heaven with her mother. Or if he were just...gone.

She shook it off, cool and collected again. "Yeah, I'm a real chip off the old block."

"Why the sarcasm?" Jack said, his bushy gray brows drawn taut "You worked your tail off to get where you are. And you're damn good."

It didn't matter how good she got. She'd never live up to her father's legacy. He was a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, and he still found the time to run the country's oldest daily. She was a beat reporter who barely managed to pay her mortgage and keep her plants alive.

"Thanks, Jack. You're sweet." Leigh stood, folded her arms and forced a smile on her lips. "How much do I pay you to say nice things about me?"

"Not enough." Jack smirked and shook his head. "You're something else Cameron."

"Hey. That's 'Editor Cameron' now mister." A light smile played on her lips.

"That sure you'll get the job, huh? Well, I'm still the boss around here until the end of August."

Leigh kowtowed in mock surrender as she got up to leave. "Whatever you say. I'll be back in a couple of days."

"No you won't." He stood and put his hand on her arm in a fatherly gesture.

"What do you mean, no, I won't?"

"You've got at least a month of accumulated vacation time. I think you should take it."

"Jack, listen, I just need a couple of days to sort things out." She wriggled away eager to escape before welling up.

He shook his head. "God, you're difficult."

"A real chip off the old block, remember?"

He released her, brows knit together. "Consider it an option and give me a call in a couple of days."

She looked at the furrows in his forehead. She wasn't the only stubborn one. She opened her mouth to protest, but he shushed her with the wave of his index finger.

"Take the time off now, before the promotion. You are going to get this promotion, aren't you?"

"You better believe it."

"That's my girl. Now, go home," he added, his tone softening. "Your family needs you."

"My family's been long gone," she said, her throat tightening.

"Go. Take the time to recharge. The job's harder than it looks."

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David Stone jumped out of his Jeep Cherokee and ran for cover. The warm summer rain came down in sheets against the Georgian Colonial's pediment, dripping into the old wine barrels positioned under the stately building's eaves.

Since he'd been promoted to Managing Editor, he left most of the field-reporting to his staff. But with the small paper's limited number of reporters, everyone had to pitch in. He'd always hated doing 'pick-ups' – collecting photos from a bereaved family for their loved one's obituary – but this one was different. Besides, it felt good to be out of the office for a while, especially today.

The rain waned as he ran up the walk to McDonald & Sons law offices. The door squeaked on its hinges as it opened, rattling the door chimes. The foyer was empty. The strident whistle of a kettle echoed through the hall followed by Bruce McDonald's familiar baritone.

"I'll be right out."

David had been twelve years old and the latest addition to Watford Middle School's seventh grade when he'd first met the lawyer. His so-called new friends had dared him to break into the navy blue Cadillac parked at the side of the law office and bring back proof of the act. Little did David know that car belonged to the Ben Cameron, Watford's very own Pulitzer Prize winning novelist and most famous resident.

David had pushed an old metal hanger between the car window's glass and frame. When he'd finally gotten the door open, he'd turned, victorious, only to look directly into the owner's

deep-set eyes. The only thing he'd felt sure of at that moment was that he was heading straight for jail. Just like his old man.

Sure enough, within seconds, the novelist's lawyer, Bruce, had come out of the nearby law offices to join the fray. Bruce thought they should call the police and let the little hoodlum sweat it out in Juvie. But Ben had convinced him not to. Instead he'd taken David to Shopsey's for a milkshake and a man-to-man talk. No one had ever treated him like an adult before. David had been working for The Watford Sun ever since.

Blood rushed to his face and his chest filled with hurt as he remembered getting the unexpected early morning phone call from Ben's dearest and oldest friend. He clenched his jaw and brushed his dripping hair away from his eyes. It wouldn't be long before the whole town knew of Ben's death. But now was not the time to get all choked up about it. He had photos to pick up and an obit to write.

David watched the fifty-something barrister shuffled down the hall, a cup of tea in one hand. "Hey kid. Thanks for dropping by."

The term of endearment brought a smile to his lips. Even though David was now in his early thirties, Bruce McDonald would, no doubt, always see him as a kid.

They shook hands in silence. Sadness hung between them, heavy in the air.

David followed the lawyer through the large foyer flanked on either side by a sweeping open stairway. From the mahogany trim throughout to the Balinese tile floor in the kitchen, each room provided the perfect backdrop for the McDonald's law practice and for Bruce's collection

of old black and white photos. Of the many faces he didn't know or recognize, a few images always caught his attention. Today, it was a picture taken on Ben's wedding day. He stared at the yellowed snapshot. In it Vivian and Ben smiled and waved at the camera from their convertible. They were so young. And now, both gone.

The smell of clam chowder tickled his nostrils pulling him from his thoughts. He followed Bruce to the kitchen. On top of being a lawyer, Bruce was two things: a confirmed bachelor and a great cook.

"Have a seat." Bruce plunked bowl of soup on the table in front of him. "Here. Eat something."

David did as he was told. He smiled and rubbed the itchy stubble on either side of his chin while staring at his dear friend. Bruce's nickname had been 'Old Bruce' for as long as he could remember and today, the name fit. Ben's death had left its mark.

"Looking for a few photos?"

"Yeah. The file photo we have of Ben is too stodgy. I want people to remember the Ben Cameron I knew. The big man who was always there to lend a helping hand or share a laugh. I thought of asking Andrea but she was such a mess I decided against it."

Bruce shook his head. "And they say married men live longer."

"What happened?"

"The doctors say his heart just stopped. There was no way we could've seen it coming."  
Bruce put his hand to his own heart. "Andrea was on her way up to bed when she found him.  
Ben had been reading in his study and he dozed off. Just like always. Except this time she  
couldn't wake him up."

David sat silent, his jumbled emotions like lead in the pit of his stomach.

"I always thought I'd be the first to go." Bruce leaned in and put his hand on David's  
shoulder. "I'm sorry."

"Thanks...The paper...I'm not sure I can run it the way he did."

"You'll do fine. We'll all be fine. You, me, Andrea," he paused, "Leigh."

Leigh. David held Bruce's gaze, careful not to let his feelings for his mentor's estranged  
daughter alter his features. "Has anyone called her?"

"I broke the news to her this morning."

"How she's taking it?" This time sarcasm rang through.

A shadow passed over Bruce's face. "We're about to find out."

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Silent tears took streams of mascara down Leigh's face as she wove her way through the  
early morning traffic. Dealing with her father's death was one thing. But did it have to be now?  
And why was she so upset? They'd barely spoken over the past ten years. He certainly hadn't lost

any sleep over her happiness. It was just like him to drop dead without an ounce of warning. Just when she was on the verge of achieving one of her lifelong goals. She slammed on the brakes to avoid driving into a gray minivan with Jersey plates. Sunday driver.

Jack was out of his mind if he actually thought she'd take a month off. What the hell would she do with herself for four weeks? Grieve? No way. She'd take a few days to sort out her father's affairs and leave her family's painful memories behind, once and for all.

Leigh yanked her glasses off and wiped them free of tears for the umpteenth time since she'd set off. She seldom wore the thick horn rimmed frames but she'd been crying so much she couldn't wear her contacts.

Her coworkers had taken her to a beautiful restaurant for her thirtieth birthday a few days before. Until then she hadn't really given her age much thought. She'd spent the last ten years working. She thought she wanted to be a journalist to travel the world. The reality was she barely had the time to see the cities she worked in. The trips she took were press junkets where all her time was taken up with work. She'd spent her twenties working and building her career and hadn't given motherhood or the opposite sex any real attention.

But lately things were changing. She'd been trying not to think of the big three-'o' as an end but rather as the beginning of a new phase in her professional life. One where she would finally be taken seriously. She'd woken up the next day with a headache, feeling no older or wiser than before. Meanwhile, her biological clock – the one she thought was broken – had started making itself heard.

Her boss' last marriage hadn't survived his promotions and ever-increasing workload. In fact, few of the reporters and editors she knew ever managed to juggle successful careers and relationships. Sooner or later, they all had to choose. Especially the women. The way she saw it, women could either get married and raise children or choose to concentrate on their work. None of the women she knew ever managed to have both. Even her mother had given up practicing law after she'd been born.

God, she wished her mother were there. Vivian had been everything she strived to be. She was beautiful, classy and intelligent and brought joy to everyone around her. Their home had been filled with music and laughter and Leigh had felt safe and loved. She imagined herself on her wedding day. In her fantasy nuptials, her mother helped her get ready while her father –

Her father. Her eyes, dried out from crying, burned. "You picked a fine time to die, Dad," she said, her voice breaking. "Who's going to walk me down the aisle?" Now over the initial shock, her sense of loss was beyond tears. She'd always thought there'd be time. That they would patch things up. That he'd tell her why. Why he'd chosen Watford over their home in New York City. Why he'd sent her away. And why he'd given his heart to another woman so soon after her mother's death. But it was too late. He was gone.

"We're never going to be close again." She veered to the right to avoid driving into a car she hadn't noticed. "Never." Her voice trailed off and a new wave of anguish washed over her.

A big furry paw came up from the back seat and dropped on her shoulder. Startled, she nearly drove into the car in front of her. "God Zeus. You scared me half to death." She sighed and wiped under her glasses with a jerk of the hand. Enough with the tears. She'd forgotten all

about her dog. She sniffed loudly and tried to put on a brave face. "Come here buddy." The large German shepherd gave her a suspicious look. He wasn't allowed to sit in the front seat of the Mustang and he knew it. Leigh almost smiled.

"It's okay, just this once, c'mon." She reached over and gave old faithful an encouraging pat. Talking felt good. Even if it was to the dog.

He wagged his tail and jumped to the front passenger seat.

Traffic on the freeways leaving the city was starting to flow. Most of the morning commuters were headed in the opposite direction and rush hour was almost over. She smirked. Well, rush hour never really ended in New York City but at least they weren't at a standstill. She looked at the winding stretch of cars dotting the concrete road ahead. She would have kicked herself if she could have. Crying had given her a nasty headache and made her late. It would take her at least an hour to clear the city and four more to get to the small New England town her father had called home. Zeus yawned then straightened as another car pulled up next to them, a little white dog yapping at the window. Leigh smiled at her guardian whose big strong tail waved back and forth. Thump-thump, thump-thump, she heard, as it hit the right passenger window in rhythm with the thumping in her head.

Leigh rubbed her brow to calm the nagging throb. Then out of habit, she twirled a stray curl between her thumb and index finger while she waited for the traffic to move. Outside, the familiar edgy sounds of rush hour grew louder and light rain speckled the car windows. She shivered despite the warm summer breeze. The air clung to her skin, heavy and damp, and dark ominous clouds gathered in the sky above Manhattan. It would be one hell of a drive.

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Hours later, she drove over the Watford Ridge and saw the Atlantic sparkling in the distance. The low afternoon sun peaked through the clouds giving the ocean's surface a golden hue – the perfect backdrop for the quaint New England town. Gabled roofs nestled in the hills dotted the landscape and followed the windy road down the valley to the water. To her right, the Watford Penitentiary's ominous form loomed, the old fortress reminding the town's dwellers and tourists alike of its gritty underbelly.

Leigh pulled into a gas station just outside Old Watford. Blue and white awning, decorative old fashion pumps, gold lettering – there was no mistaking it. Bob's Gas Bar hadn't changed a bit. And yet, everything felt completely different. The once deserted little outpost now neighbored another shop, Café Whim, painted in the same blue and white. Outside an animated group of locals sipped coffee and ate pastries. The warm summer rain had stopped and the afternoon sun peeked through the clouds as the sky cleared. Zeus, sensing the trip was over, jumped up and tried to climb onto her lap.

"Down, boy."

He licked her face with his big pink tongue and barked.

"Stop it," she said, laughing for the first time in days.

A skinny teenager wearing a baggy t-shirt and jeans came up to the black sports car and stopped a safe distance from the dog. "Fill'er up for you Miss?"

"Yes, please. I'm sorry. He's harmless. Really."

Needing no more encouragement, the dog jumped out the window and ran across the lot to a stretch of trees at the end of the road.

"Zeus!" Leigh hopped out of the Mustang to rescue the canine's new friend from a vigorous tongue bath.

Zeus' new friend didn't need rescuing. Within seconds, he'd completely won over the large German shepherd and was rubbing its belly. She watched from behind the pumps, emboldened by the fact that he hadn't noticed her. Her glance traveled from the big, well-tanned hands stroking the dog, up a pair of worn blue jeans and white T-shirt to a shock of coarse black hair. His jet-black locks reminded her of another man's - well he'd been barely more than a boy really. A wild, skinny, dark-haired teenager called David.

The stranger stood and scanned the compound. He was probably trying to figure out where the dog had suddenly come from. Impulse made Leigh hide behind a rack of windshield washer fluid. Any trace of make-up she'd put on that morning was long gone, washed away by the day's intermittent crying jags. And besides looking horrible and feeling even worse, she was in no mood for small talk. Even with a beautiful stranger.

She peaked at him between the rows of plastic containers on the display. She could only see a part of his face but it didn't matter. She could tell he was one hell of a looker. This man couldn't be David. He was big, salt of the earth big, and well over six feet.

"Miss?"

She turned to find the gas attendant giving her a funny look.

"Is everything okay?"

"I, uh, fine. I was just looking for my dog."

The kid glanced down at her feet, looking even more puzzled.

She followed his gaze and found herself staring at Zeus. The dog barked and jumped up, all tail and tongue. If Zeus was back that meant –

"Could you keep an eye on him for a second?"

Without waiting for an answer she resumed her post behind the display just in time to watch the handsome stranger hop into his red Jeep Cherokee and drive off.

\* \* \*

After a frustrating drive through town, David sat at his desk, his body heavy with grief. In what seemed like a waking nightmare he watched the staff's afternoon rituals through the glass wall that separated management from personnel.

On his computer screen, and on the page his words would stand as a testament of his love and respect for Ben. The obituary.

As with most significant Americans, the Associated Press had prepared Ben Cameron's obituary long before his death. The AP Biographical Service knew it would mark Cameron's passing thusly: "Benjamin Cameron, regarded by many as the foremost American man of letters of his era, was an intellectual man for all seasons. Author, journalist, critic and teacher, he was sometimes referred to as the American throwback to Samuel Johnson..." David stared at those

carefully crafted words sure that whoever had written them had never met the great man. And so he wrote:

Ben Cameron was to me much more than the sum of his accomplishments. With news of his sudden death at the age of 58 on Thursday, all of my memories have come crashing back - the day he offered me my first job when I was just a boy, the way he shook my hand that day, his contagious booming laugh and the sense of humor he carried with him always.

In a world that has forgotten the grace to be found in literary pursuits, Ben was an inspiration. He gave many a man and woman a chance at making their dreams come true. He loved the written word and taught me to love and cherish it as well. He was, above and beyond everything else, a writer. For thirty years Cameron wrote about and commented on the world and the people around him.

During the years I spent by his side, as a student, friend and colleague, Ben was at once teacher, father figure and role model.

David stopped, his throat tight. He looked up and swallowed. There they all were, going through the motions. The paper would go to print at eleven p.m. today like it did every day. And yet it didn't feel like every other day. Today, a great man had passed, and David had to somehow do him justice with twenty inches of print.

He got up knocking files off his paper-cluttered desk. He was sure no one had dared go into Ben's office since they'd heard the news. He knew he'd have to be the first to cross that threshold. Deep down he hoped spending a few moments alone in his mentor's office might somehow alleviate his sense of loss.

He ignored the stares of his co-workers and marched on, careful to appear caught up in his thoughts. From the corner of his eyes he saw the rest of his team walking around rudderless, trying to look busy. They all waited for his words of wisdom. That was his job now, to console and comfort them. Instead, he'd spent the morning driving around. He couldn't face them. Not yet. Their stares bored into him as he tried to cross the room unnoticed.

He reached Ben's office. The door let out a gentle creak when he pushed it open. The waterfront room was strangely quiet and warm. The comforting smells of old leather and pipe tobacco still clung to the air. He wondered how long the odors would linger. Around him Ben's books, documents and photos stood still, as if waiting for the man to return. David ambled on, humbled by Ben's legacy. He sat in his dear friend's high back leather chair and closed his eyes for a moment.

When he opened them, a gangly fourteen-year-old Leigh stared at him from an old family portrait. She stood, unsmiling, between Ben and his second wife Andrea. He still couldn't understand why she'd been so sullen. Her father was Ben Cameron, the Ben Cameron for Pete's sake. And quite possibly the most generous soul he'd ever met. He shook his head. She'd left Watford, her father and everything he stood for, as soon as she'd been old enough. Ben never spoke of it, but David knew he'd been heartbroken.

He examined the photo again. She'd be a good fifteen years older now. Seeing her after all those years promised to be interesting, at best.

The anger he'd been holding in all day swelled in his chest. He turned and walked out, taking himself straight to The Sun's darkroom at the back of the building. He had to get away from all those inquiring eyes.

"Geoff," David said, poking his head into the darkroom. "I know you're in here."

They didn't use the chemical lab much anymore but David, who'd made most of the major decisions in the last few years, had decided to keep it anyway. It reminded him of the days he'd first started working at the paper.

In the past couple of years The Sun's the photographers had switched to digital cameras. It allowed them to shoot hundreds of photos, download them to their laptops and e-mail the best ones straight to the newsroom. Still, David knew Geoffrey Williams, the paper's photo editor, liked to hide in that part of the building when he was upset about something.

David spotted the back of a paisley shirt no straight man could pull off and Geoffrey's mop of longish curly blond hair peeking from behind the neg cabinet. "There you are. Can you run pull up a few good generic shots for the Sunday parenting column? And I need you to go over and shoot the ..."

Geoffrey looked up at David, his eyes puffy and red. "I can't."

"C'mon man, get a hold of yourself," David said, his tone softening a little.

"Don't tell me you're not upset. You were the closest thing he had to a son."

"I don't have time to be upset. Somebody's got to run the paper while you all feel sorry for yourselves."

"David, don't be like that," Geoffrey looked David straight in the eyes. "It's me you're talking to. You don't have to play the tough guy with me, all right? I know you're hurting. We all are."

\* \* \*

Leigh pulled up in front of the three-story Federal mansion that had housed The Watford Sun since its inception. She'd taken the Princess Street exit out of habit and ended up at the family paper rather than at the manor. She took a deep breath and began reacquainting herself with her past. Gabled roof, floor to ceiling double hung windows on either side of the entrance, stone lintels, intersecting tracery - the place look exactly as it had when she'd gone almost ten years before. Although it did seem smaller than it had back then.

She looked at the dog in the seat next to her. "You, stay. I'll be right back."

The dog licked her hand and curled up into a ball on the front seat.

She walked into The Sun's font lobby. The receptionist's desk still sat by the front door unchanged. For a fleeting moment she thought she smelled her father's cologne clinging to the air. But Ben Cameron would never walk through those doors again and today the front desk sat empty.

A tall blond man carrying a camera with a very large lens walked out into the lobby.

"Leigh? Is that you?" He stopped dead in his tracks. "Oh my God, honey."

"Geoffrey," Leigh said, looking into his big watery blue eyes. She kissed him on the cheek, and pulled him in for a hug. "It's so good to see you," she added, resting her head on his shoulder.

"You look amazing." The photographer pulled back framing an imaginary shot with his hands.

"Thanks." She forced a smile. "I sure as hell don't feel amazing."

"Honey, I'm so sorry," he said, his voice breaking.

"I know," Leigh whispered as the lump in her throat swelled up again. "Me too."

He pulled her into his arms again and held her close. The throbbing in her head lessened as she rested it on the shoulder of the one person in Watford she had missed after she had stopped spending summers there.

His crisp blue shirt smelled of fabric softener and expensive cologne. He'd been wearing that same sweet fragrance since they were teenagers. Back then, they'd been inseparable. How could she have let that camaraderie slip? They stood in a silent hug in the lobby while people walked in and out of the building.

"Honey, we are going to be the talk of the town," Geoffrey whispered into her ear.

"Everybody's going to think I've finally found a woman I like."

"Sure you don't want any of this?" she said, squeezing him tight.

He swept her up in a big bear hug then released her and grabbed her by the hand. "I still can't believe how sexy you've become," he said motioning to her new, curvaceous physique, "You're all woman, now."

Leigh's face grew hot from the compliment. She smirked. "Sure. That's the first thing that comes to my mind when I'm trying to squeeze my butt into a pair of jeans."

Geoffrey grinned. "C'mon. Let's get out of here."

"I thought you'd never ask."

Geoffrey took her to the side of the building where, judging by all the cigarette butts, The Sun's smokers hung out. Leigh leaned against the outside wall while he lit a cigarette.

"Have you been back to the house yet?" he asked, blowing out a big puff of smoke.

"No. I just rolled into town." She turned toward her parked car. As if on cue, Zeus wagged his tail and pressed his nose against the car's passenger side window.

Geoffrey smiled and took another drag of his cigarette. "I had you pegged more as a cat person."

She coughed and frowned at him in mock disapproval. "And I had you pegged as a health nut."

"This? I'm quitting. Don't change the subject. What are you doing here when you could be at Bunny Woods having a hot shower?"

Leigh smirked at Geoffrey's reference to their childhood nickname for Oak Hill Manor. "I couldn't decide which would be worse, coming here or going home first. So, I picked the lesser of two evils."

"Wow, that makes me feel special."

Leigh gave him a light punch in the arm. "You know what I mean."

He feigned being mortally wounded. "Have you spoken to Andrea?" he said, serious again.

Guilt reared itself, jagged and annoying. She really hadn't given her stepmother's feelings much thought. "No. I don't think I could deal with all the tears right now." Truth was she didn't think she could deal with Andrea.

Geoffrey took one last drag then flicked his cigarette into the street with a fancy flourish.

"Is David around?"

"Oh, I don't think you want to go near David, today. It's just a matter of time before he explodes."

Leigh was instantly annoyed. Poor David. It had always been all about David. She ought to be thankful her father had found in him the son he'd never had. She couldn't fill those shoes. And as much as she'd tried, she'd never been daddy's little girl either. She hadn't been anybody's little girl in a very long time. Not since her mother died.

"Don't worry about David. I'll deal."

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Leigh strode into the newsroom. Eyes lifted, and the room seemed to freeze. But this time was different. They weren't staring because of her stature. They stared because today, after more than a ten-year absence, the prodigal daughter had finally returned home. She stopped and looked around the open concept office they called the Bull Pen. Offices still surrounded the perimeter of the room, and save for a fresh coat of paint and new computers, everything was exactly the way she remembered it. Right down to the musty smell of old newspapers.

"Leigh, I'm so sorry."

Leigh found herself staring at James Dann, The Sun's grizzled long-standing crime reporter. He had taken a hold of her hand. She looked at him in a daze, mumbling her thanks. As if on cue, the other staffers followed. There was Susan Bergman and Jen Godfrey then Billy and Carl whose last names she couldn't remember. Before long, all the old faces pressed around her. They looked and sounded the same, only in a softer, crumpled sort of way. In a daze, awash in a sea of voices, Leigh shook hands and whispered words of thanks.

"He was a great man," one voice said.

"He'll be sorely missed," another added.

"He's in a better place," said another.

"She looks just like her mother did," someone whispered.

"Did you know her mother?"

"That's enough," Leigh said, wanting it all to stop. Then realizing she'd said that out loud, she added, "I...I'm sorry. Could you give me a moment?"

James ushered everyone away. "Of course Leigh, make yourself at home," he said, handing her a glass of water. She took a sip and handed it back. The door to her father's office was ajar.

It had always been her favorite room at the paper because of its magnificent view of the water. Leigh tiptoed in, half expecting Ben Cameron to be sitting behind his desk. The afternoon sun streamed in through the Palladian window lending everything a golden glow.

"Your father passed away this morning," Old Bruce's voice still echoed in her head. He had said something about "arrangements" and "affairs" as well, but none of it had really registered. Bruce McDonald, her father's oldest friend, had looked after his legal affairs for years.

Leigh inched her way over to the window, where Ben Cameron had made so many decisions while looking out onto the harbor. "Hi Dad," she murmured to the empty space. Around her the room remained silent.

She'd always thought they'd eventually patch things up. That she'd be his little girl again. "Hi Dad," she repeated, louder this time, the memory of the early morning phone call still sticking to the pit of her stomach. The room around her got blurry and spun on itself. Leigh reached for the window frame and leaned her throbbing forehead against the cool pane of the center sash.

"He loved this room," whispered a gruff voice behind her.

Leigh spun around, her eyes shiny with unshed tears. Blue jeans, white t-shirt, big well-tanned hands and coarse black hair. It was the guy from the gas station. Then it dawned on her. David. "Hello, David."

"Leigh. Glad you could make it – " David paused, his eyes dark pools of turmoil, hands at his side.

What was that supposed to mean? Biting her lip, she looked down. "I came as soon as I heard."

David stepped closer, silent.

She struggled to keep her cool and held his burning gaze. The tough Native American kid with long hair was long gone and now he was all man. His full black locks were cut short and he had the appearance of one who commanded instant respect.

"I'm sorry for your loss."

Her heart pounded in her throat. "Me too."

He leaned one hand behind her on the wall. "I must admit I wasn't sure you'd show. Don't you have people to take care of Daddy's estate?"

"People?" She paused, shocked. "I don't have people. In fact, now that my father is dead, I don't have anyone." Raw hurt knotted her throat.

"Me neither."

Clenching her teeth, she bit back a retort. The silence between them stretched like a taut elastic, ready to snap at the least bit of added pressure.

Silently, she counted backwards from ten. When she spoke again, her voice was soft, almost tender. "He loved you like a son."

She watched the play of emotions on his face. Surprise mixed with disbelief as the hardness in his eyes gave way to a warmer emotion.

"And I can't, for the life of me, imagine why," Leigh added.

A muscle twitched in his right temple and his nostrils flared with fury. Then, visibly struggling to regain composure, he left the room.

Leigh remained alone in her father's office. Then, as the weight of the day's events sank in, she crumbled into his big leather chair.