



Retired and on the Rocks

Book 1: Denim Blues Mysteries

Excerpt

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Prologue

7:48 p.m.

“Tell me again why we’re doing this, Den,” Sylvia said into the deep silence pervading the deserted high school parking lot.

Den grinned at her shortened use of his name. His real name was Shamus McHart, but all his life he’d been called Denim by everyone except his father because of the intense color of his eyes. Only Sylvia said “Den” like it was a pronouncement of love.

Darkness had begun to fall. *Won’t be long now*, Den thought, anticipation making him antsy. “I know you’re bored, sugar, but did you forget? Football coach...selling drugs to the kids?” he prompted.

Their hometown, Briar’s Point, had a population of just under a thousand and served as something of a bedroom town to the next city over, Riverbend, with almost a half-million citizens. Briar’s Point, like its fairy tale name, was a town made up of whimsically-named businesses and charming, old-fashioned neighborhoods. Sometimes, those friendly people had a tendency to be a bit...well...nosy. Just as in most small towns, Briar’s Point citizens were constantly in everyone else’s business. The only difference was that here, nobody made any bones about their right to know all.

Briar’s Point and Riverbend had more than their fair share of crime, though the smaller town rarely had anything gruesome happen. Den had, perhaps naively, vowed to personally

clean up Briar's Point back when he was young enough to be in awe of an uncle who'd taught him to believe good overcame evil most of the time.

Sylvia didn't return his grin when she glanced over at him. "Are you sure about this? We don't have any evidence, beyond what the football team captain's ex-girlfriend says. Let's face it, Blue Eyes, she probably wanted to meet you."

What Sylvia claimed wasn't way out in left field. It'd happened before. He and Syl tended to attract a lot of attention because of the glamorous promotional posters they'd put up around town that helped them get a lot of business without needing to go searching for more. When the ex-girlfriend led them into this case, he'd gone after the scent of something not quite right and roped an uncomplaining Sylvia along in the process. Sure, even if they figured out what was going on, they wouldn't get paid, but they were on the right track. He knew it.

"You do realize we have a ton of other cases we're being paid for, don't you?" his partner in crime lectured, not for the first time. "If we don't go after something solid soon, we'll starve."

Her logic fell on deaf ears. There wasn't much Den liked better than mulling a mystery and connecting all the dots until the true picture emerged. Even as a kid, he'd immersed himself in solving neighborhood "crimes," emulating his Uncle Marty, who led a life as a P.I. that Den found fascinating. Unless there was something a kid his age shouldn't see, his uncle took him along for the ride whenever he could, giving Den the benefit of his years of experience and wisdom.

Den ran a seductive finger up the sleeve of Sylvia's silky top. "We'll get to them, sweetheart," he promised. "Let's just see what we see tonight, all right?"

Sylvia sighed. "Okay," she said, but he could tell instantly she wasn't agreeing to his plan with the word. "Let's say we *do* witness something here, Den. What do we do then? Do you have a plan? I mean, drug dealers have a tendency toward fear of getting caught, which makes them dangerous and violent. Maybe I should call Orlando."

Detective Orlando Bateman. She and Bateman had been patrol officers on the Riverbend Police Department. Though she'd quit the force, her former partner would have given her a kidney if she needed it, maybe even if she didn't. He wasn't the only one offering either. There wasn't much Den wouldn't do for her himself.

He shrugged. "Like you said, darlin', we don't have any proof at the moment. When we have it, we'll call your friend." He laid emphasis on the word "friend" before sliding his hand over the edge of her knee. "Everything'll be fine. Trust me. We won't need anything but our communication skills."

Smoothly, she pushed his hand off, and Den grinned again. She knew he didn't approve of carrying weapons, though she still carried one of her own on their little adventures.

About to say something charming—and she'd shoot him down for it, no doubt—he shut up when they heard a vehicle approaching.

"Get down!" Sylvia ordered under her breath. She yanked on his shirt, and he obediently followed her in sliding down under the windows of her Jeep.

His wary gaze locked with Sylvia's across the seat, Den could hear the vehicle approaching, passing...

Moments later, multiple car doors slammed, and Sylvia peeked up an inch to look over him out the passenger's window.

"Who is it?" Den whispered, wishing he'd risen first to see. Not that he minded Sylvia

sprawled so intimately across his chest.

“Coach Ross...and...someone else. A guy. I’ve never seen him.”

The scent of her hair was intoxicating. He tried not to breathe it in so deeply he’d get dizzy. “What else?”

“They’re both holding gym bags. I see money in the one the coach handed over...”

The validation Den felt at these words flared to life in his gut. He’d been right! The high school football coach *was* a drug dealer. And this shark must be the one providing his dope.

“The stranger’s getting back in his car.”

She slid back and grabbed the small notepad and pen she carried everywhere. He watched her write something, recognizing the sequence as a license plate number.

As soon as the car roared past them, out of the parking lot, Den grabbed the ice scraper on the floor below his seat. “Stay here,” he ordered. “Be ready to call your cop.”

With that, Den jumped out of the Jeep and ran as silently as possible in the direction of the coach’s car. The trunk was open, and the coach had lifted his arm to close it.

“Don’t bother,” Den warned, coming up in back of him and shoving the scraper into the small of his back.

The big, burly guy went stock-still and raised his hands in surrender. Den couldn’t help grinning at his own inventiveness. He reached into the trunk with his free hand and unzipped the nylon duffel. Plastic bags of white powder lined the inside.

Den whistled as he stared at the incriminating load. “I don’t think the cops’ll believe this is laundry detergent, Coach...”

A click brought Den’s attention back up to his captive. Coach Ross held a gun, and it was trained on Sylvia standing at the driver’s side of the man’s car. Absolutely stunned, Den couldn’t get his mind to accept what was happening. He’d had it all in hand. *Why didn’t she stay in the vehicle?*

Sylvia was right again. He’d gone into this without a plan, no way to defend either of them because he’d never for one second imagined the coach would pull, let alone *have*, a gun.

“I’m gonna give the two of you one chance to walk away from here and keep your mouth shut,” Coach Ross said, clearly believing himself to be the one in control.

“Too late,” Sylvia answered in a low, deadly voice Den had never heard her use before. He got goose bumps from it. “I already called the cops, you scum. You’ll never sell drugs to kids again.”

Den swallowed his fear at being so defenseless. “Let’s calm down,” he managed. “Turn to me, Coach. I’m the one you want. Leave her out of this. We don’t want anyone to get hurt, do we?”

“You’re crazy if you think I’m gonna stand here when she already called the cops, pretty boy.”

“She’s bluffing,” Den insisted, trying to sound soothing. “Neither of us even have a cell phone on us. But *I* have this.”

With that, he shoved the scraper hard into the coach’s back. “Run, Sylvia,” he ordered. Coach Ross immediately whirled on him with the gun. Den had never felt more exposed—and foolish—in his life. Here he stood with a useless purple, plastic ice scraper in his hand and no way of knowing what to do now. He lifted the tool, realizing only too blatantly that it was no threat at all compared to a deadly handgun aimed level on his heart. At least it wasn’t fixed on Sylvia anymore.

In all the time he'd been running after puzzles that needed solving—on his own and dragging Sylvia along these past five years—nothing bad or dangerous had ever happened to them. She'd worried for nothing.

Reality check: Sylvia could get hurt. He could lose her over this fiasco.

Stupidity, plain and simple. All the times he imagined adventure, danger, he never imagined himself terrified and armed with a harmless ice scraper. He'd had the gall to believe he'd charm the criminal out of violence. Denim McHart didn't need a weapon when he had a killer smile.

The coach's finger squeezed the trigger. Den's shock made him too slow to react, beyond throwing the scraper at the coach's head. Then Sylvia was moving. She brought her foot up and aimed a kick at elbow level. The gun went off. Den had a split second of seeing life happening in slow motion just before pain like he'd never imagined tore through his knee, brutal and shattering. He screamed, his good leg buckling with the injured one.

Sylvia!



Two days later

How did my life end up like this? At thirty-two, Den wondered how long he could continue spying on monogamy-deficient husbands and dodging the baseball bats of jealous boyfriends. That last one wasn't always for the job, but, hey, that was another story. He'd been part of a dream team, pursuing mysteries the way his P.I. uncle had. He hadn't regretted anything for a minute. Until Sylvia ended up under the gun.

Because of me. I almost got her killed.

"Let's say we do witness something here, Den. What do we do then? Do you have a plan? I mean, drug dealers have a tendency toward fear of getting caught, which makes them dangerous and violent. Maybe I should call Orlando."

Den cringed at the memory of the moment he could have turned back and let professionals handle the situation. Instead, he'd rushed into danger, inadvertently dragging Sylvia along with him.

And she'd saved them both by being *prepared*—something he'd never even considered in his sheer stupidity and recklessness. His refusal to carry a gun he could have used to protect Sylvia. Now he was lying in a hospital bed, a bullet having torn through his left calf, gone in and out the back, nicking bone and nerves in the process.

The doc hadn't been encouraging about his injury either. He'd limp when he could get out of bed, eventually without crutches. He might limp for the rest of his life. He'd be stuck using a cursed old man's cane. And he had no one to blame for it except himself.

The bullet had rearranged not only his leg, but also did a number on his *head*. He'd learned a lesson the hard way. Never again would he risk Sylvia's life.

What could one man do against the never-ending onslaught of too many bad apples? The dreams of grandeur he'd harbored as a kid with the coolest uncle in the world had shattered with his leg. What could one man do when the woman he felt decidedly protective toward went eye to eye with the barrel of a gun? Talk about perspective lining

itself up in black and white clarity. Considering the life-long bachelorhood he'd taken to his grave, Uncle Marty had never faced the fear of losing the only woman for him.

It was very clear to Den what he had to do now. He swallowed the agony radiating constantly from his leg, a screaming ache resembling the pain he felt at the thought of one tiny little word. His penance. Only one solution that might rectify the damage he'd done and prevent it from ever happening again.

As soon as Sylvia came back—and she would; she'd all but been sleeping at his bedside—he'd set her free. One way or another, he'd tell her what he'd decided.

He was retiring.

Chapter 1

A month later
Thursday, 7:32 a.m.

His face was on her coffee pot.

Sylvia Price jumped in shock, twisting around in her seat at the breakfast nook. Instead of seeing Den behind her, she saw the framed promotional poster they used for their investigative partnership. It'd reflected on the mirrored carafe of her coffeepot when she tipped it toward her cup.

Have mercy! As if she needed another reminder that she hadn't seen him for four unbalancing weeks since he insisted he was retiring from the business.

Giggling at her foolishness, Sylvia pressed her hand to her breast in a useless effort to calm her racing heart. The mirth stuck in her throat. Facing these past weeks that she might never run cases with him again...

She'd convinced herself she was over him, even thought she could handle the whole thing—life, career, all of it—solo. So why couldn't she stop thinking about him and seeing his face everywhere, and not just in their seemingly endless promotional posters up around town?

Sylvia turned her attention back to breakfast. Visualizing the bran muffin as a soft, creamy éclair improved her mood slightly. Until she found herself wondering if Den missed their relationsh...cases...too. Or had he really found his calling in antique restoration same as his father?

Nah, she couldn't see that ever happening. Despite Den's enviable closeness with his family, Den loved guesswork and solving confounding puzzles too much. He wouldn't have more than a passing interest in stripping and sanding what some people might consider junky, stationary pieces of furniture. She'd just bet he felt antsy enough to climb the walls about now. The thought brought an affectionate smile to her lips.

She'd purposely forced herself not to call or see him this month so he'd feel desperate for any excuse to escape his self-inflicted early retirement. Maybe today he'd be ready to concede to the truth.

But, of course, with his big, loving "fam"—Mom and Pop right next door—he probably hadn't yet managed a moment of peace enough to get stir-crazy. His mother would do the whole sympathy-feeding thing. His father would doubtlessly take frequent breaks to visit with him.

On a nostalgic sigh, Sylvia experienced a pang over how long it'd been since she last saw his family. She pushed away the loneliness threatening to overwhelm her. She'd always envied Den his close clan. He'd quite literally grown up in a Christian version of the Brady Bunch.

And I got stuck with a childhood straight out of Psycho. Only my psycho was Dr. Jekyll in public, Mr. Hyde at home. Nobody had a clue. Nobody but me, God, Orlando, and our previous co-workers know the truth.

A flush of illogical shame flooded her face, and Sylvia sat up straighter in the cushioned alcove of her breakfast nook. She wrapped her hands around her coffee mug, wishing her

tension could melt right into it and disappear. But it only increased when the phone rang. She didn't have a single doubt who it was. *Orlando*. He called most mornings, and he'd already tried today.

Her tension ratcheted up further with each ring until her machine picked it up. Earlier, she'd jumped in the shower so she wouldn't have to listen to his message and turned the volume down to nothing when she came back through in case he called again. She anticipated him trying to get her on her cell phone later. Much as she wanted to avoid him after he'd shocked her right out of her socks last night, she knew she'd hurt him if she continued for long.

She'd met Orlando Bateman when they'd been patrol officer partners in Riverbend. After she retired from the force five years ago, Orlando had interviewed for the detective opening on the Briar's Point police force and gotten the job. He'd not only transferred to Briar's Point, but he'd moved into a house just a few blocks from Sylvia's apartment.

She and Orlando had been friends from the start. He'd told her about the Lord, leading her to Christ at a time in her life when everything had been falling apart. He'd become the brother she never had. The description could only be dubbed insane in light of his surprising confession the previous evening.

Taking a deep, shaky breath, she buried her face in her hands and closed her eyes against the memory of his words.

Something hit her front door with a thump. Sylvia got up snorting in self-disgust at her own inability to function normally this morning. Any woman would be fortunate to hold Orlando's heart. And maybe she *did* need the stability and singular attention Orlando offered. Den had never and surely *could* never give her either of those.

The thought of Den McHart—lover of all things female—settling down with just one woman qualified as nothing short of laughable. She couldn't even trust him enough to tell him about the many secrets she held inside her heart like painful heirlooms. He wouldn't want to know, she'd convinced herself. He especially wouldn't want to hear that he sometimes reminded her of her two-faced father.

Opening her apartment door, she stooped to capture the morning paper in one hand. She had just enough time to read it before she had to head to work. Along with that, she needed to find a place for her mother to live and get the care she required. That would take every bit of her emotional resources. Between Orlando's out-of-the-blue confession and Den's absence, she certainly didn't need any more problems.

She settled back on the cushioned booth and spread the *Riverbend Review* out before her, eagerly flipping back to the gossip section. The headline caught her eye while she poured herself another cup of coffee: "*Bride left at the altar! An eleventh hour jilting!*"

Embarrassing but true, Sylvia had always been fascinated by celebrity and local scandals. Most recently, since the whirlwind engagement was first announced, she'd been following the rags-to-riches story of Naomi Deva, a woman from the wrong side of the tracks who'd recently landed the most eligible bachelor in Briar's Point.

"Briar's Point Mayor Thomas Julian, Junior announced yesterday—just hours after he was to marry confection-extraordinaire Naomi Deva—that the much anticipated wedding has officially been called off," the story read. "The mayor refused to divulge the circumstances that led to such a drastic turn of events, but inside sources reveal that the bride left the church reception hall in a rage after demolishing her own wedding cake..."

Sylvia sat in shock for a few minutes, reading and re-reading the positively glowing

account of local scandal. Oddly enough, she'd felt a kinship with Naomi Deva from the first time she read a "meet new up-and-comers" exposé in a local society magazine. The woman had revealed that she'd come from virtually nothing. An upbringing deplete of a positive father-figure influence. She'd worked hard to elevate herself above humble roots. Sylvia had felt a connection because she intuited from the little information Naomi divulged about her background that the woman felt *she* couldn't leave the past behind her either, despite rising above her previous situation. The past still haunted her, still dogged her heels, whispering of her inescapable sins and weaknesses, implying *she* was to blame.

Only difference between Naomi and me is I'm afraid to love or let myself be loved, afraid I don't deserve it. Afraid to trust any man not to turn on me—any man but Orlando. Except last night. His words changed everything. I could lose his solid support like I almost lost Den if that bullet had gone any higher.

The timer she set every morning went off. Sylvia rose without hesitation to ease a crocheted shrug over her shirt. Grabbing her purse and the newspaper, she left her apartment.

On the drive to the McHart and Price offices, she reluctantly reminded herself that today couldn't be the day to call Den back in. That and her own cases would have to wait until she made the necessary arrangements for her mother's care. To scrape enough together for her monthly rent, she'd been working odd cases lately and using the life insurance money she'd promised herself she'd never touch but found she had no choice when it came to the astronomical cost of her mother's round-the-clock care.

She let herself in, once again sensing the darkness and chill that'd been there since the first day she came into work knowing Den wouldn't be striding leisurely through the door sometime in the next half hour. Absolutely nothing had changed in their office, yet everything felt radically different.

They'd worked every case together since she convinced Den to hire her. They worked together effortlessly. So much so that she'd caught herself countless times these past weeks turning around to bounce a germ of an idea off him, only to find herself alone.

She couldn't even claim it was only professional angst plaguing her. After all, she'd solved quite a few cases since Den's early retirement. She was more than capable of succeeding without him. Yet she went home each night feeling empty and dejected regardless of how rewarding the day had been.

In five years, she hadn't left work for the day without a few minutes of byplay with Den that always left her smiling and...yup, she deemed *content* the perfect word. Stupid really, considering the three times she'd broken up with him.

Why had she broken up with him? she wondered now. *Oh yeah.* Because she couldn't take seeing him spread his considerable, *umhm, charm,* around to every available female in a hundred-mile radius.

When Sylvia bent to tuck her purse into a front desk drawer, the bell on the front door tinkled, signaling company. For a second, she could barely believe who she saw coming through the glass door as though stepping right out of the society papers of the newspaper.

Naomi Deva, bride left at the altar.

"You're the private detectives, right?" the blonde woman said as if Den stood beside Sylvia instead of portrayed in the framed advertisement on the wall behind the desk. Naomi glanced around the still dark office.

Sylvia immediately noted her disheveled appearance. While the woman had natural

beauty that make-up brought out to a positive glow, she'd gone easy with it this morning—enough only to make a failing attempt at covering her red eyes and face.

Stepping around the desk, Sylvia went to meet her. "Hi. I'm Sylvia Price. I wouldn't have expected you to venture out today, Miss Deva."

Naomi grimaced as if Sylvia's understanding tone grated on already frayed nerves. "So you already know who I am. I shouldn't be surprised. I came early, probably too early, but I wanted to escape all the publicity. They follow me everywhere, now since, since..." The Cinderella-turned-princess swallowed with difficulty, taking another uncertain glance around the room before meeting Sylvia's curious gaze. "I need your services."

Sylvia tried not to show her surprise. "You need a private detective?"

Naomi handed her a business card. Sylvia glanced down at it to see Orlando's name. "Look, I went to the police about this. They did what they could, which was next to nothing. I was told you might be able to help me. Is it possible? I need someone *today*."

Sylvia suddenly realized that whatever brought Naomi Deva here this morning, it would be an absolutely perfect excuse for her to call Den.

"The engagement ring Thomas gave me is missing," Naomi told her. "The police searched, of course, but they couldn't find it."

"So Detective Bateman sent you here?"

"I'm offering a reward. He said you might be able to help me."

Is that why Orlando called this morning? To warn me about Naomi Deva's visit? She was going to find out. "Could you excuse me for just a moment?" Sylvia asked.

Naomi nodded, and Sylvia darted into her office down the hall from the front area. Closing the door behind her, she worked her cell phone out of her belt holder. She dialed his home phone.

"Sylvia," he said without preface, apparently seeing her number on his Caller ID. "Is she there?"

"Naomi Deva, the mayor's jilted bride, you mean?" Sylvia said in a hushed voice. "Yes, she's here."

"She needs help finding that engagement ring. Tyler and I looked everywhere. Besides, I thought some extra cash might come in handy for you. She's offering a pretty big reward to whoever finds it."

Silence between them quickly became uncomfortable. Sylvia clenched her teeth.

Argh, I should have known something was different between us lately. The second Orlando assumed Den was out of the picture for the time being because of his retirement, he moved in for the kill. If I'd been thinking straight, I would have figured it out because he's not only called me every single day, not unusual, but he's asked to see me every day, too. Yet I never had a clue.

Okay, so she'd avoided the niggling sense of it, but she'd refused to put that particular puzzle together. She knew Orlando loved her, knew he'd never really shown any interest in dating and finding his Miss Right, even when they were partners on the Riverbend police force. Maybe she even knew the reason for his disinterest in dating stemmed from his feelings for her. But it was just easier to believe his attachment matched hers for him—brother and sister in the Lord.

Why did he have to say he's in love with me? Sylvia groaned inwardly. *Why did he have to propose marriage? Doesn't he know you don't go from friends to the altar without a single date in-between?* How in the world would they ever go back to the safe place she preferred

before he popped that life-changing question?

Quickly wrapping up the call with thanks and an unspecific “Talk to you later,” Sylvia replaced her phone. She’d have to call Den. He couldn’t refuse this one.

She didn’t have a single doubt Den’s confidence had been shaken when he decided to retire. That bullet he’d taken made him face his own mortality. Never mind that it’d also done a number on her own unrecognized fear. She could lose him. She suspected that maybe for the first time he’d admitted to himself they’d chosen a dangerous profession.

Regardless of Den’s unspoken reasons, sleuthing couldn’t be exorcised from his blood. As soon as someone laid out a carefully-chosen, intriguing puzzle before him, he’d be hooked again. He’d accept what she knew to be fact—he was in this business for good. He’d still be investigating on his deathbed.

Nevertheless, she’d have to pull back slightly from this one so he could regain his confidence. She’d be with him, as usual, so he wouldn’t get suspicious, but she’d let him do most of the work. If she helped him too much, he might falter and go back to his ridiculous retirement.

Yet she couldn’t convince even herself that this was all business. She missed the husky rumble of Den’s voice vibrating in her chest during his nearly-every-minute flirtations with her. She missed listening to him reason out the facts of a case. She missed the way he frequently seemed to need to touch her, caressing her arm, her face or lacing his fingers through her own. Ugh, she even missed the sight of his purposeful stubble, just overgrown enough to be appealing beyond imagination.

I miss his beautiful denim blue eyes, sparkling with tenderness only for me—an illusion, to be sure—but I don’t know how much longer I can go on without him unblinkingly occupying my personal space like he wants the two of us to breathe the same air.

Maybe I need that, too.

Oh yes, this was the perfect plan. Come tomorrow, Den would be ready to return for good and she’d have her equilibrium back where it belonged.

Probably easier said than done.



8:03 a.m.

Whatever possessed me to think restoring antiques might be my retirement calling?

Den McHart gave the circa 1800’s table a kick, then followed it with a whack from his cane. He’d been trying to finish the stupid thing for too long. First repairing then stripping it, just as his father had done with antiques when Den was young. Only now could he concede what he’d been ignoring for the past month. He was bored out of his skull. Thanks to beating the table in disgust, his injured leg hurt again, too.

He’d done a lot of soul-searching of late. That, he assumed, was a prerequisite after being in a dangerous situation. A situation that thoroughly convinced him he could die. That shocking revelation had made him wonder if he’d subconsciously believed himself to be invincible. Maybe he had. But that wasn’t what filled him with almost constant self-disgust.

Predictably, the thought of what he'd nearly lost called forth now the same image Den saw in his mind's eye from a hospital bed. Five foot nine inches of willowy, lethal to the heart, body and soul Sylvia Price. A honey with sultry dark eyes, deep enough to drown a man, hot enough to scorch him beyond recognition. Full, coral lips. Peach-soft skin with an all-over glow, that begged to be stroked and revered. Thick, silky chestnut hair falling halfway down her back.

Den's mouth went dry at the picture he'd conjured in his head. It used to make him chuckle at how often she walked away from him. Now it stopped him dead. *Funny how one beautiful woman can make the heart of a deprived dude like yours truly ache.*

Wouldn't hurt to call her now, he told himself—advocating precisely what he'd been fighting these past weeks. He limped out of the workshop he spent years putting together in anticipation of following in his father's footsteps once he retired. At the moment, he'd be happy to never return to it again.

As a kid, he'd watched his old man begin the restoration process on many honking-ugly pieces. Each time, his dad claimed he experienced some inspirational epiphany over the piece. Den had seen him finish that same piece into something glorious—and valuable. But Den never had the fortitude to stick around for the in-between work. Maybe if he had, he wouldn't have considered it his end-of-life calling.

He'd never expected to retire so early. Like his uncle, he expected to be solving cases until his health forbade it. After weeks of frustration, he could say without wavering that the old man could keep the antique restoration business. He had to find something else to amuse himself.

And maybe he was just as ready to hang up his not-so-prized bachelorhood. No denying that the idea of sweet Sylvia coming home to him every night had more appeal than ever for him.

Lord, here I am again, asking the same thing I do every time we're together. Inspire Sylvia to forgive me for almost getting her killed, to miss me and pick up the phone today to tell me she can't take another day apart. And let me be the one she needs to heal her of whatever's hurt her so deep she's in hiding. Teach me not to take everything so personal. Yeah, I won't deny I do that all the time. You and I both know walking away only seems easier in the heat of the moment. I can't be away from her for long. That's a fact. I know it through and through...

Den heard the front screen door squeak and then slam. As he made his way to the kitchen, his father appeared at the other doorway into the room.

"How's it going?" his dad asked, his arms covered in sawdust.

Den's parents lived next door. In the past month, they'd been dropping by several times a day—his mother to smother and clean, the old man with any excuse to take a break. Though he enjoyed his mother's irresistible brand of culinary hovering, he'd particularly needed the latter his father brought him. Anything to escape his own antique "baby." His father used to say a project required frequent rest. About all Den could see of that mentality was that *he* needed a rest—from the boredom.

Den shook his head. Once again, the same knowing grin his parents and older siblings had shared since he retired lit his old man's distinguished face. They knew as well as he did that he was one stripping away from pushing the antique table out the window. No stretch for anyone to figure out what really ailed him. He missed Sylvia and he missed his work. The past five years with her had seemed infinitely sweeter than ever before.

His dad got a soda from the fridge, offered it to Den, then took one out for himself.

“Sylvia call yet, Shamus?” he asked—raising the issue that’d been weighing on Den’s mind for too many days.

Sylvia had popped into his room at the hospital every hour on the hour after he got shot—rarely leaving his side. Since he announced his plan to give up sleuthing, she’d become scarcer than a comet. She hadn’t called even once.

Den shook his head, focusing on anything but the old man’s all-knowing gaze.

“No law that says *you* can’t call *her*.”

They both leaned across the wide island at the center of the kitchen. Den took three gulps for every one sentence he spoke out loud. He didn’t want to admit he’d spent nearly every minute since his self-enforced confinement thinking about his sweet Sylvia, praying to be rescued by her and her alone. Rescued from this misery. What right did he have to want that, though, when he’d put her life in danger so recklessly? But he couldn’t stop praying for it anyway.

“She’s probably glad to be rid of me.”

“You didn’t make that drug dealer pull a gun on the two of you, you know,” his pop insisted, far too intuitively. “And it doesn’t make you less of a detective, or a man, that you weren’t armed at the time.”

“Syl was,” Den muttered.

“She used to be a cop, son. Of course she’s comfortable carrying a piece.”

The words didn’t sound natural from a man who had no greater love for weapons than Den. He felt his father’s gaze in the silence that followed.

The fact was, Sylvia had saved them both.

“You should just be happy that you exposed a crime and helped the police put a kiddie drug dealer and his supplier behind bars, son. Your mother and I were proud of the both of you.”

Den felt his father’s gaze in the silence that followed. Much as he felt similar pride in how he and Sylvia had solved the mystery, all he could think about was his lack of preparedness. Why hadn’t he ever considering chasing bad guys could be dangerous? If it wasn’t for Sylvia’s ready-for-anything approach to life, they could both be dead. Oh yeah, he felt like less a man for not having any moves beyond questionable charm—and a flimsy ice scraper—to protect the woman he loved.

Out of nowhere, his dad burst out with the liturgy that usually came from Den’s mother. “Oh, for Pete’s sake, son, marry the girl and be done with it! You should have done that five years ago. Thirty-two is plenty long enough to be a fun-loving bachelor. All your brothers and sisters are hitched and enjoying the families God gave them.”

Den’s parents had married right out of high school and proceeded to produce two daughters and five sons—Den being the youngest—in under ten years. The Lord had blessed them with love, laughter and a steady commitment to Christ keeping them all grounded.

“I enjoy having my pick of the ladies,” Den said on a shrug, though the life of a bachelor had never been his preference, and he suspected his old man knew he wasn’t as girl-crazy as he made himself out to be. After he met Sylvia, he’d wanted one thing—a lifetime, love sentence with her.

“So did I. But I also had the sense to know your mother wouldn’t wait around forever while I took my own sweet time enjoying the single life. What is Sylvia now? Pretty close to your age, isn’t she? Oh, that darlin’s not gonna wait for you much longer, son. I suspect she

would've been persuaded to say 'Yes' the first time around, before you broke her fragile little heart."

Sylvia, fragile? That Den couldn't imagine. She was nothing less than tough as nails. Never mind that she looked delicate as a wood sprite. Their on-and-off times together, there'd never been an official break-up. She'd simply push him away when he started asking too many questions and tell him to back off. That was how he found out she'd decided they were off again. Her decision had very little to do with his charm, he suspected. The heart of the matter came down to her unwillingness to give him the intimacy of knowing everything there was to know about her. Not that her hard-kept secrets ever stopped him from trying to woo her back into his arms. Optimistically, he believed she'd someday give him all the mysterious parts of herself she fiercely held away.

"Well, you do what you've gotta do, Shamus my boy—but, while you do it, you call that sweet thing and invite her to Sunday dinner. You may not miss her, but your family certainly does."

Den was most certainly the one with the worst case of missing her. He'd suspected from the first time his parents, siblings and their seemingly uncountable offspring had met Sylvia, they'd all been waiting by the phone to RSVP the wedding invitation. Love at first sight all the way around between Sylvia and his family.

His father finished his soda. "Well, back to my new baby. You invite Sylvia now, you hear? Or your mother may take things into her own interfering hands."

That dire warning would have kicked Den in the pants if he were in a coma. But first he needed something to dull the pain in his leg. As he reached for a bottle of ibuprofen, the phone jangled. He didn't allow the first one to finish before he put it to his ear. "Syl?"

"Hmm, you've traded deduction for ESP now, lover boy?" her throaty voice purred across the wire.

"Maybe I have, since I don't have Caller ID. It's good to hear your voice, sweetness." Now he wanted her to tell him her thoughts had been in the same place as his—on forgiveness followed by a blessed reunion of hearts and souls.

She paused—the iron soldier he'd been fighting to get her to cast aside apparently still hard at work. "You, too, Den," she murmured.

Sylvia had called him Den since day one, and he loved the way she wrapped the pet name in pure satin every time she said it. He heard the longing in her voice, or at least tried to convince himself he did.

"Are you up to driving?" she asked, suddenly all no-nonsense.

His left leg had been the one to take the injury, so he could drive. Of late, he hadn't enjoyed the getting in and out of his sporty ride much—a present to himself after he solved his first case. "I could handle it. Why?"

"I'd like to see you, of course. How fast can you get here?"

Ah sweetness, you know just how to make my day, Den thought, *and I thank the good Lord for it.*

"Give me twenty minutes, darlin'."

Her "Hurry" made him forget he wasn't whole enough to do anything fast any more. Then again, with the possibility of redemption and love on the line, he might find the strength after all.