

he Price of Forgiveness

Jessica carefully laid the floral arrangement at the base of the large weather-beaten tomb stone. She'd have to remember to get it professionally cleaned. Dusting a stray clump of leaves off the top, she knelt down next to it. "I hope everything is good where you are today. This has been an incredibly hectic week for me. My little bookshop has been busier than ever. We're doing so well in fact, Ellie and I are thinking of expanding. This week her kids have been sick so I've been putting in more hours."

Pushing a stray strand of hair from her face that the wind had blown askew she sighed in frustration. She usually kept her hair cut close to her head, but lately her bangs were getting out of hand. *Note to self, make an appointment with Jacque, first thing Saturday morning.*

"Anyway, Ellie said I should take some time off because it's only fair since she's been in and out of the shop lately, so I have a week off and all this time on my hands. I don't know what to do with myself. Of course now that Mom and Dad know that I'll be vacationing, they both want me to spend time with them, and if I choose one over the other, you just won't imagine the drama that will ensue. To keep my peace of mind though, told them a little black lie. I implied I was going somewhere exotic in the sun, which means I have to go on Ebay and buy some kind of trinket. I'll just tell them that I got it from my trip." Jessica paused to laugh. She knew Jason would laugh too if he were here.

Then her mood suddenly shifted, a melancholy feeling washing through her. "Actually, the reason Ellie let me take this time off was because...well you know. This is the anniversary of when you di—left us. I know it's been ten years, but I miss you so much. I wish it had been me. I wish I wouldn't have argued about something as petty as running a couple errands for Mom and Dad. Mom asked me first and I gave her attitude. It should have been me driving to the store that night. But you didn't complain. Not once. That's just the way you were. You were the good twin—my better half and I don't think I'll ever be whole again. They say the pain is supposed to go away after time, but I still miss you as much now as I did then. Every morning I wake up and wonder how I'll make it through another day without my best friend." Silent tears streamed down her face as she remembered her handsome twin brother whose life had been cut so tragically short at seventeen by a drunk driver.

It took a moment before Jessica composed herself again. She thought that after all this time she'd be able to handle her twin's death better, but she hadn't. It didn't help that shortly after Jason's accident the family fell apart. Her mother turned to alcohol for comfort and her father turned to other women. Almost a year to the date of the incident, they divorced claiming not to stand the other.

Jessica suspected they still cared for each other, but neither knew how to cope with the lose of their only son, the star of the family. Jason was going to go the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill with a full ride on a basketball scholarship. He'd been courted by Dean Smith himself, and her brother couldn't resist the temptation of being coached by a legend in the College Basketball world.

It was too bad someone who'd had a little too much to drink decided to get behind the wheel of a car and not only take a life, but shatter a family. "I'll be twenty seven this year. Can you believe it? Three years to thirty, uh! I feel like an old fart. Mom says I should find a man and start giving her some grandchildren, but I don't think I want to bring children into my world of dysfunction. I mean Mom and Dad claim they can't stand each other, but both of them want me to spy on the other. Isn't that some mess?" Jessica sighed remember how her mother grilled her for information about Dad's latest girlfriend.

"I don't know if I'm cut out for the relationship thing anyway. Dating just doesn't interest me really. I've been so busy with the bookshop I don't have time for much anything. I've only had almost sex once. I call it almost sex because he got that little thing in me once and then it

slipped out. It was so pathetic, I turned over and went to sleep. If that's what sex is like, I'd say it's pretty overrated," she finished on a snort. She busied herself by pulling up weeds from around the plot. Contacting the groundskeeper of this cemetery would have to be another thing she added to her to do list.

"Well, I should probably be leaving, but I will be back tomorrow. I have to run a few errands for the store before I go on my mini vacation. I love you very much." Kissing her hand to the tombstone, she stood up.

The brisk March wind chilled her to the bone. Earlier today it had been in the high sixties, warm enough to go without a coat, but the temperature had changed drastically. Jessica hugged her arms around her thin body, scurrying to her car. "Damn it's cold," she muttered. Ten minutes later she slammed her car door in frustration and kicked hard enough to leave a dent. So what? Her car was a piece of shit anyway. It was time she got a new one. The problem that she was so close to having enough for the down payment on a house that it would have been a shame to dip into her savings to purchase a new car just yet.

She'd had her 1993 Mazda 626 for over ten years now, and only lately had it been giving her a bunch of issues. It was well over a hundred thousand miles, but it still had some life in it. Or so she hoped.

Opening the hood, she looked at the engine to see what was wrong with it. She'd just changed the spark plugs last week. The battery was less than a year old so why the hell wouldn't it start. "Shoot," she muttered.

"Can I be of some assistance to you?" a deep voice asked from behind her.

Hearing someone speak out of the blue startled her so much she banged her head against the hood of her car. "Son of a bitch!" she cried out grabbing her head. Whirling around to glare at the cause of her pain, she was prepared to issue a tongue lashing, but stopped short, breath catching in her throat. Oh dear lord. If it wasn't Brad Pitt standing in front of her he had a twin brother.

This man looked Hollywood fine. No, he was wanna-thank-his-mama fine with a head full of curly blond locks, deep cobalt blue eyes, a dimple in his chin and a square jaw that saved him from being pretty. She wasn't a small woman standing five feet ten, but this man had her by at least a good five inches. Broad shouldered and lean hipped, he looked as though he'd stepped out of the silver screen.

Were men this perfect supposed to exist? Well of course they did, they were all either taken or gay. He wasn't the first white guys she'd ever been attracted to, but he was certainly the first one who made her stare at him like the idiot she was she looked like at the moment. "Uh..." was all she could think of for lack of anything better to say.

He smiled at her, revealing even white teeth. "Are you okay? It looks like you banged your head pretty good there."

Now why did he have to go ruin it and say something dumb like that, she thought to herself? It was enough to snap her out of the trance he held her in.

"Well, if you hadn't snuck up on me, I wouldn't have hit my head thank you very much."

"I sincerely apologize then. I couldn't help but notice that you were having some issues with your car. I'm no expert myself, but I know a little bit about cars. When you were trying to start your car it sounded like the alternator."

She groaned. "That sounds expensive."

"The alternator? Not really. That's the best case scenario."

"What's the worse case scenario?"

"Your engine could be flooded and in that case, you may need serious work done on this car. What year is it?"

"1993."

“Hmm. Maybe getting it fixed would be moot at this point. It’s kind of old.”

Jessica’s eyes narrowed looking him over from head to toe. She was no fashion expert, but his black Ralph Lauren crew neck top, Tommy Hilfiger Khakis and Kenneth Cole shoes told her this man could probably afford a new car if he wanted to on a whim. “Look Donald Trump, not everyone can afford a new car at the drop of the hat,” she huffed, turning back to look at her engine again in frustration. Why did the cute ones have to be jerks?

“I really meant no offense and if you found my comment out of line, I apologize. I guess I always say the wrong thing around pretty ladies.”

That comment got her attention. Raising an eyebrow, she couldn’t help but smile at him.

“Great comeback Cassanova, but empty compliments won’t fix my car.”

Another heart stopping smile split his handsome face. “What makes you think it was an empty compliment?”

Her jaw nearly dropped before she caught herself. Jessica knew without conceit that men found her attractive, but was she attractive enough for this man? Usually guys like him dated women who looked like models, had big boobs and names like Bambi or Buffy. She certainly didn’t fit that mold. The best thing to do was get away from him before she said anything foolish. “If you’ll excuse me, I have to call a tow truck,” she said as dismissively as possible. Digging through her purse to look for her cell phone, she hoped he’d get the hint and leave. Where the hell was her damn phone? The battery had been low last night so she’d put in on the charger and then—damn! Did she forget to unplug it? Could her luck get any worse?

“Problems?” tall, blond and sexy asked.

Her head short up and she saw that he was grinning as if this amused him. “If you’re going to laugh at me, you can just go away buddy.”

A look of contrition crossed his face. “I’m sorry. I’m not laughing at you, I just can’t help it. I just can’t get over...well, I think you have gorgeous eyes.”

This guy was definitely a charmer. He probably said stuff like this to all the ladies, although she did get a lot of compliments on her eyes. Someone had likened them to Bette Davis while another claimed she had eyes like Diana Ross. They were large and she’d been blessed with thick long lashes so she supposed they were her best feature.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” he said, then held out his hand to her. “My name is Simon by the way and you are?”

“Jessica. Pleased to meet you.” When she took his hand an electric spark shot through her body making her jump. Snatching her hand back, she quickly dropped it.

His smile widened deepening the gorgeous dimple in his chin. “You felt it too didn’t you?”

“I plead the fifth. Look, I really need to do something about my car. I hate to ask, but do you have a phone on you that I can use? It seems I’ve left mine at home.”

“How about I call the tow truck for you? I have a cousin who owns a service in town.”

“And I bet this cousin charges an arm and a leg,” she snorted derisively. She knew he was too good to be true. Simon was probably just trying to drum up business for his cousin’s company.

“No. I’ll make sure you get the family discount. I’ll give him a call now.” Producing a small phone from his pockets, he punched the numbers with long diligent fingers. He had nice hands. Everything about him was nice. “Hey Pete, this is Simon. I need a huge favor man, could you bring your tow truck to the Merriman Park Cemetary?” There was a brief pause as he listened to whatever it was his cousin was saying.

“No, the Benz is fine. It’s not for me. It’s for a friend of mine. Her car won’t start.” Another pause and then a chuckle. “You know it man. The car is parked at the front entrance, a black Mazda 626. Thanks a lot and it’s much appreciated.” Flipping the phone closed, he slipped it back into his pocket. “There, it’s all taken care of. My cousin should be here in a half hour. In

the meantime it's getting kind of chilly out here and you're not wearing a jacket. If you'd like, you can sit in my car and I'll turn the heater on."

"I appreciate your calling the tow truck service for me, but I think I should be waiting by my car for him to get here." Something about him just screamed too good to be true. Dare she trust him on such short acquaintance?

"I won't bite, I promise...that is unless you want me too," he grinned wolfishly at her. Damn if he didn't make her heart flip. "Come on, Pete will notice my vehicle if he doesn't see you. Besides, I told him the make and model of your car so he'll figure it out. Come on, you can trust me. I have great references. My mother seems to like me."

Jessica laughed at this. Simon was truly a hottie extraordinaire. What was the harm in sitting with him for a little bit? It was still light outside and she had run track in high school so he'd have a hell of a time chasing her if he tried anything funny. Maybe the problem wasn't whether she could trust him; it was if she could trust herself. "Okay. But no funny stuff."

"Damn, there goes all my plans up in flames."

She chuckled allowing him to lead her to a cream colored Mercedes SUV. She figured he was well off when she first saw him just by the way he dressed, but this only confirmed it. "Nice car."

He shrugged. "It's a means of transportation."

"I would say its much more than that. It beats the hell out of my little lemon."

A smile briefly touched his lips as he unlocked the door car door for her. "It's a means of getting from point A to point B." She got the distinct impression that he was uncomfortable talking about his vehicle. It was weird it to find a man who wasn't crazy over cars.

She slid onto the soft cream leather seat, imagining what it would be like to own a vehicle like this. Maybe in thirty years, she thought with a shake of her head.

Simon got in next to her and turned the car engine on before turning on the heat. "If you need some added warmth, flip the button on the side to your right to heat the seat up."

"I don't think I've ever been in a car with heated seats before."

"Well, there's a first time for everything."

Unable to resist the temptation of flipping the switch, she wiggled her bottom as against her seat when the heat surged up. "Nice." When she turned to him, he had a thoughtful faraway expression on his face. "Are you okay Simon?"

"What? Oh, yes, I'm fine thanks."

"You just seemed to have a lot on your mind."

"I generally do around this time a year."

"Why is that? Never mind, it's none of my business."

"I don't mind talking about it if you want to know."

"No, that's okay. I don't really know you like that to ask such intrusive questions."

"But surely that could change, because I'd certainly like to get to know you better."