

SCORCHED

Not Broken

a sequel to *It's Just Broken*

by

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I thought truth would set me free. Maybe in some ways it has, but what no one warns you about is with truth comes new agonies. New hurts.

This book is dedicated to the absolute loves of my life: four completely dynamic, authentic, beautifully flawed, and completely mesmerizing women – My Annesleys. I am so honored we could revive each other again. *It's Just Broken* and all its parts is My One Perfect Thing.

BILSON

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“Agony. Inside that house is agony. There’s so much hate, but it’s not the hate that is agony. Hate is simple. The agony is how much I hate her mixed with how much I love her.” Three years since no escape path in accepting Jocelyn was the one who gave me life, and that statement still holds true. I thought truth would set me free. Maybe in some ways it has, but what no one warns you about is with truth comes new agonies. New hurts. Teaching your brain new thought processes. And for me Truth came with a lot of transitions all at once; like my soul mate, Susan, eventually I have a breakdown about too many transitions at once. The breakdown is happening now. Subtle. Smoke consuming me. Not a full blaze fire yet, but I feel embers igniting. No one - not any birth mother, adopted mother, soul mate, husband, My Sadie - not anyone seems to have noticed. Although I’ve noticed. I’ve noticed Jocelyn is about to hit one too. Maybe we’ll both hit a Haddy style breakdown at the same time. That would be poetic. That would be ... Truth.

We entered the house. I no longer enter houses alone. There’s a husband and two babies. Happiness. Things I wanted, but I spent five years in isolation, self-inflicted isolation, but it was still five years of solitude. Five years of habits. Writing whenever I wanted. Writing out the pain. Now there’s not much writing. Ember igniting. It’s not simply a release of pain for me. It’s who I am, and it might be a husband I’ve always loved and children I truly wanted, they’re still taking away from who I am. Somedays I hold onto too much pride that I’m better than my mother, you know the birth mother, because I haven’t abandoned them, but that’s merely a formality. She didn’t abandon me at this age either. She waited until I was three. Took off to Dartmouth. Are my daughters holding their breaths for when they turn three and I force that fate on them too?

Suddenly someone is taking Maddie from me. That’s always happening. Those girls are so loved that immediately when I enter Mom and Susan’s house, I lose whatever daughter I’m holding. Sarah. I make recognition of who took her from me. I make recognition Sarah is cooing in her face. Then kisses and swinging her around. Maddie giggles and giggles. Wild hair flying.

They’ll be fine without me.

I feel the envelop. For a moment all the embers settle. Peace. Love. I wrap myself into her completely. Mom. Love. It’s all she knows. Even more so now since she married the real love of her life, Susan, designed them a house, and everyday walks in the real her. I hold her so tightly.

Christmas Eve Tradition has shifted for Mom. She truly had closure the day she took me to the cemetery to “meet” all of them. She visits them sometimes still. The days she needs to, and Susan goes with her. But her Christmas NEED has dissipated. Her only Christmas need now is our family. The one she waited thirty years for no distinct separations. No torn. In ways she

waited for no husbands. I'm not disrespecting Pop. I think he even knew she'd be the happiest when there was no torn anymore for Haddy. When there was a home she designed for Her Wife.

That's it! I'm just like Mom. I hate being torn. I can't live in it. There Jocelyn is looking at me. Any moment I cling to Mom, she finds compartments in herself where she accepts it, accepts how young she was, the choices she made, but she still resents our relationship. She's torn.

Because you love her more. It was her truth. It was the start of a new torment. *I was sixteen. I thought it was perfect for both of us, and on paper it was. But in my heart, I wanted to be your mom.* And in my heart, I had never felt so validated. So glad. Jocelyn wanted to be my mom.

I pulled away from Mom. I went to Jocelyn. She smiled. She moved like she was going to hug me. I grabbed her outstretched hand and yanked her up the stairs. This wasn't our house. Wasn't one either of us had any claim to ... except it was designed by Our Mom. We knew it by our heart.

Sometimes it was one heart we shared.

Mom's studio. We were so happy she had made sure to design herself a studio. Something she hadn't had for thirty years living in Wallingford. The thirty-year gap to The Real Haddy.

We stared for a moment at a painting she had made of all four of us. Not a four you would think I would mean - the four in the gap. No. Her four daughters. She had innate powers to all of us. Known how Max and Maddie would have aged and molded with ... Us.

This was a new painting – like maybe this morning. Like a new Christmas Eve for Mom.

That would be the best present she could ever have. All four of her daughters. Together.

So we stared. Somewhere in the staring our hands met. And this was easier not looking.

“I need to ask you for something.”

“Anything, Baby Girl. Anything.”

Deep breathing ensued. Until it finally rushed out. “Please don't have another baby.”

Unlike the Jocelyn I always knew, she didn't react immediately. She no longer allowed Impulse to rule her every move or word. She let my words thrash against her. Several times. Like I could see the words whipping her. Bouncing back to me. Then back to beat on her again. The old Jocelyn never would have resonated in a moment. Wouldn't have selected words.

She released my hand. “Don’t move.” I didn’t. Interesting warning she had to give like now I’m the impulsive one among us. I would have been. She moved behind me. Wrapped her arms around me from behind. She was taller than I was as height was never anything I acquired much of, but in ways I fit so perfectly ... here ... in her embrace. She felt so good. I surrendered.

This was the moment she had probably waited forty-nine years for. The moment she got it right outside of the water. It was truly a battle for her. I used to watch her swim and thought if swimming were a language, she’d be able to speak for herself better than Shakespeare, Chaucer, any of them. Swimming was her home, and now she had it again. A new home. That was HERS.

Oddly she was no longer walking in a Pauly shadow either. Her own swim club.

She nuzzled into my neck, this thing she’d always done with me. Only me.

She moved up. Placed the sweetest kisses on my cheek like I think she had always done. Like I could see us on the day I was born. Mom walked out to give her time alone with me. Kisses on my cheek. Then laid me on her. *I couldn’t let you go, Baby Girl. I don’t know if I’ll be any good at this. I’m sorry to both of us for that. But I can’t let you go. I love you already.* Her 15th Birthday. *I already know, no matter how young I am, you’ll be what I love most.*

Thirty-four years in our gap since then. Somehow, she did something I never thought Jocelyn was capable of. The old Jocelyn would never have been capable. But the Jocelyn who was no longer Paul Jr who ruined his empire but Jocelyn Annesley who’d built an empire of her own, well, she seemed damn near invincible at times. Like now. Completely able to bridge our gap.

“Every person gets this one perfect thing in their lives, and no matter how many ways I failed us both, you were mine, Bilson. You were my one perfect thing.” Tears poured from me. She held tighter. Nuzzled into my neck more soothingly. My soothing spot she owned. “I love him, Bilson. I’ve always loved him. Loved him so much I gave you his name, so I could always have him with me. I’m so glad we found our way back to each other. I feel so complete now. But nothing, no Carter, no swim club, no new relationship with Mom, is as treasured to me as My One Perfect Thing.” She raised her head. Kissed my tear-stained cheek. “I would never, as much for my sake as for yours, attempt to replicate that. You only get one, and you’re mine, Baby Girl.”

Silence. The most beautiful silence as words surrounded us. Her words didn’t beat or whip. It truly was the one time she’d gotten it right. Said exactly the right thing the moment she wanted to say it. And even more amazing – she didn’t pressure me to respond. So silence. Love.

Hold. We stayed there holding. And staring at Mom’s four daughters. Seeing ourselves.

After a long time. Eventually the strangest thing that ever happened to me happened.

Jocelyn moved us. To the floor. Rummaged through Mom's sacred space. Found a sketch pad that hadn't been invaded. Well, two pages had, but Jocelyn ripped those out. I briefly noticed a naked Susan on both as Jocelyn was tearing those out and respectfully laying those drawings face down on Mom's desk where there was a half-design. Mom designed two houses then she kept on designing. Jocelyn smiled touching the design. Turned sweetly. Winked at me. Signature sexy Jocelyn wink she'd been perfecting since she was three as Mom had told me. The ways Mom had always been so captivated by Jocelyn. The ways you could always see in the drawings and paintings she did of Jocelyn that that Spunky Thing had always been her One Perfect Thing.

Jocelyn handed me the sketch pad, "Rip me out three pages, would ya?" I started following the command as Jocelyn kept rummaging. Eventually tossed me two charcoal pencils. "Those will have to do. I don't see any pens." I thought she'd come join me, but she kept rummaging. Several minutes until finally, "Yes!" She had moved to where I couldn't see her but had still heard her rummaging through Mom's large studio. She emerged into my sight looking victorious holding a wine bottle. "I knew she'd have one somewhere." We both laughed. As Jocelyn went to her desk to retrieve a corkscrew, I couldn't help but see us when I was six years old (the first time she came home after all their pain crashed in on us for what I would later refer to as The Big Broken – the one Mom finally admitted to Pop – It's Just Broken, Pauly! The one that was too hard for Jocelyn, so she let *Steven* back in. The one she could be destructive together with. *Him*.) Before he became that to me, there was this one perfect Annesley weekend, and I saw her. *Jocelyn handed me her glass. 'One sip.' I stared. They all stared at me. 'I don't think I'm ready.'*

She plopped down beside me. Two very full wine glasses in her hand. We clinked glasses. Smiling. And both took a sip. Big sips. Identical big sips. I was definitely ready now. For her.

She'd never said this to me before, but it didn't feel strange she was the one making me. Sometimes we did that to each other. Like when I made her take Carter back at my wedding.

"Write, Baby Girl. Those dark-haired babies are being spoiled and fattened, I'm sure. Sullivan is hanging out with his brother. Don't think about anyone but you. Write. Write, Baby."

She grabbed one of the charcoal pencils. The three pages she'd asked me to rip out.

And she wrote too. *My mama's a writer too?* I couldn't help but wonder as we sat.

As we wrote. And drank wine. And were surrounded by Mom. And Max and Maddie.

And Celeste. She was definitely real here. You could feel her everywhere. And someone else. Someone I only knew in paintings. She wasn't real to me, but she was to Jocelyn. *Who's that? The smile. That's my CiCi. Mom's mom.* I had been fifteen. Stayed the night with Jocelyn and came out of my room to her on the couch looking at a picture. Someone who looked exactly

like Mom, but so clearly wasn't Mom. I snuggled into Jocelyn who had never been a coffee drinker, but when I visited her, she always went to get me coffee. Jocelyn was always an early riser. Even when I stayed with her, she woke early and got in laps, swam, had herself, then on her way back always stopped at Starbucks for two Venti coffees for me to enjoy. I reached for one on the coffee table – didn't bother with thank you – it would have seemed insulting. It would have been too much at that time to realize there were a lot of things Jocelyn did for me. I hadn't been ready then. Mom, Pop, and Susan were my parents. It was all I held onto, so I couldn't possibly acknowledge all the ways Jocelyn did work to pour out motherly love for me.

Somehow now I could accept it. I could sit with her on a floor. And pour out me.

On every page. I poured out. I drank wine. Until thirty-three pages later – I was me.

And she was still there. Had ended her three pages ages ago. Folded those. Tucked those under her butt. Still sat. Looked at art. Probably had moments she mentally was in a pool. But she never disturbed me at all. She was still. Something Jocelyn had never accomplished. But she had then ... For me. She sat still. I laid my head on her shoulder. "What were you writing?"

"A letter to Max. It's still where I find myself. It always takes three pages, like a symbolism of me, her, and Maddie will always live in me. Like I live for all three of us."

I smiled. "That's so beautiful, Josh. Thank you for letting me be a part of you with them now. I feel like I really know you now. Like they're such a big part of you."

"They always were, and always will be." She kissed my forehead. "They've always known you. Even if you didn't know them. I'm very convinced they sent you to me. Made you for me. Baked you to perfect Annesley perfection inside of me."

I giggled. The Bilson Giggle. Thirty-four years old, but it was still a part of me.

She moved. Put her hand on my face. Made us look at each other. Her dark blue eyes. My piercing blue eyes from my daddy. She kissed my lips. "And what were you writing?"

I had no ability to lie in that moment. "A love/hate letter to you."

"Thank you for your honesty. As amazing as Mom is, I hate her a lot too. Not for the reasons you think. She abandoned me three times. When I was one, the other four hit the terrible twos, and she sent me to The Club with Daddy every day. She emotionally had nothing to give me. Aunt Celeste became my mom then. I'm sure I don't actually remember it, but I've always known the lasting effects of that time weighed on me and Mom. She abandoned me when they all died. There's a logical part in me that can understand how much she was grieving, but there is a reality that I hate her for how she abandoned me then. She abandoned me when she finally surrendered to all the blackness coursing through her. Another time I logically accept but have no ability to accept emotionally. It took me a long time to be able to be honest with her about

how much I hated her instead of causing so many crazy turbulent fights between us. Mom always rose up and fought with me because she always knew me. You and I have never had any fights. I'm not sure I think that's healthy, but I know you take a long time to talk about how you feel, sometimes you never do, you put it into writing. No matter how you need to release it, I always need you to know I will never deny you the right to hate me for how many, many ways I abandoned you."

Those dark blue eyes had never been more honest. Had never given me so much. She had been so honest about emotions she had. Jocelyn shared her emotions ... with me. Jocelyn who didn't do emotions, gave me the deep of her. And affirmed the deep of me.

"It's like you said logically I know you were fifteen, but I still hate it. I hate that Carter left us. I hate that there was an us from the beginning. Because he did leave us. I hate how worthless you felt. I hate I cost you your spot on The Olympic National Team. I hate that you gave me up for adoption, even if it was to Mom so you could always have me too, and I love that you loved me enough to give me to Mom. I hate that you went to Dartmouth instead of Yale. I love that you went to Dartmouth. You truly found yourself again there, and you, Pop, and Mom would have seriously killed each other if you had stayed." She laughed so hard. "I would have been an orphan because you three really would have been dead. Three-way homicide/suicide."

She laughed harder. "So true, but you wouldn't have been an orphan. You were Susan's."

I smiled. My soul mate. That was true. I had always belonged to her. Another mother.

"You don't hate that anymore?"

"I'll always hate how much you belong to Mom and Susan, and that I only own tiny shreds of you. But I'll always, always accept that is my responsibility. Not yours, Baby."

"I always hated how it seemed you made our relationship my responsibility. I always had to come to you."

"I know I did that to you. I can recognize how broken I was. I can apologize. I can never erase it, completely fix it. I can only do what I have done. Build a swim club in your town and come to you over and over. Even times you've told me to go away. I did, but I always came back."

"I love that. I do. I love no matter how much in the past three years I've pushed away, you always come back. I think I really needed that, Josh. That you wouldn't abandon me again."

"I know, Baby. I haven't always done a good job of it, but I have always known you."

I smiled. I admitted. "I do know that. You always wanted me to marry Sullivan."

She smiled. "Yeah. He's your lobster."

“Are you getting married to yours? I know he asked you. He asked me to help him pick out a ring. But I haven’t heard you mention it.” Then I worried I ruined it. He hadn’t asked yet.

“He did ask, Bilson. And you did a wonderful job on that ring. But you did a wonderful job on that ring. I knew it as soon as I saw it. I knew it was your ring.” She pulled out something hidden in her shirt. Her locket from Mom now with a longer chain and a ring beside it. “So, it stays close to my heart, but not on my finger. It’s my Bilson ring. Not my Carter ring. I told him no. It’s too soon, Bilson. Yes, he’s been here for three years not expecting anything in return, but in all honesty, we just got back together at your wedding, what a beautiful way for us to reunite, at our daughter’s wedding, but it’s too soon, Bilson. He wants to make it permanent. He wants to erase when he left me, but like your broken portions are a part of you and Sullivan, my many many years of loneliness are a part of me. I don’t know if marriage is a goal of mine anymore, and not for you, for Carter, for how much I always loved Mom and Dad’s marriage will I ever apologize for that. The only goal for me right now is to let Josie play in her big, nice swim club Mom designed for me, let the businesswoman Jocelyn run that club successfully, and love on you. That’s all I need in life. Even if you can’t love me back. I still need to love on you.”

“You don’t need Carter?”

She took a deep breath. Moved back to the wall so she wasn’t looking at his eyes anymore. Released her truth. “No. I don’t need him. I did for a long time, but I don’t anymore. I love him. I’m glad he’s here. A swim club was his dream too. I’m glad we get to do this together, but I don’t need him, Baby. If he left today, I’d be a little upset, but I’d still be me. Still Josie/Jocelyn.”

I smiled like I recognized, she hadn’t needed to be a twin, she had two sides living in her.

And so I gave us both a gift, but true to Bilson not until after we sat in silence awhile. “I love you, Mama.”

She kissed my forehead then said, “Oh, God, I really needed that.”

We wrapped each other completely, and Jocelyn started bawling. Uncontrollably. She didn’t make a move to control it, and I loved that, because she had always worked so hard to control her emotions. I felt so validated in that I was the one area she allowed herself so much lack of control. She broke. She broke down completely. “Bilson, I’ve always needed to hear you say that to me,” finally released when she was able to speak. “I love you so much, Baby.”

I did something with her I had only done with Mom. I moved to her lap. But I didn’t lay my head on her shoulder like I normally did with Mom. I wanted to look at My Mama. I wiped the tears from her face. I put my hands on her face. Held her so affectionately in my love.

She let me. She was so beautiful. I leaned in. A little scared she'd push me away. But she didn't. Her lips met mine. Our lips held. I closed my eyes. I felt her lips press harder. I caught myself before I let my lips part. I knew I wanted to really kiss her, but I also knew that was a weird in me I wasn't completely ready to succumb to. The Oedipus living in me. The incest that seemed to define our family. As much as Mom was an Annesley, she was first a Mangum.

We were the descendants. I saw it all over Jocelyn. I made her reveal it to me. "He wasn't your first kiss, was he?" I had always thought that, but I thought it was Max.

Now surrounded by all this art, I saw parts of Josie emerge. Parts she'd never admitted.

Even to herself. Until now. "It was Aunt Celeste. I was ten. It was so amazing. I asked her to be my first kiss. I needed it to be someone who I trusted with all of me, and someone who knew what they were doing. She told me no at first which now I know more than I should about her. Now I know why it was such a conflict for her. She worked so hard to make sure that never happened to Mom or the five of us. But eventually she decided I came to her, and what she always wanted for Mom was for it to be beautiful. She wanted that for me too, and it was."

I smiled so big. The ways I had gotten to know Celeste, I loved she had made it beautiful for My Mama. For Her Sexy Mermaid. "Anything after that?"

She laughed. "No. It was a onetime thing. I never asked her again. Like even at ten years old I knew something that beautiful could never be replicated."

"Your one perfect kiss," I said with a big smile.

She laughed. Gave me a pop kiss. "I had more than one perfect ones of those in my life."

And that I smiled at too. "I was ten too."

"Yeah? Was Sadie any good?" The wink. She'd always known.

I hit her playfully. Then laid my head on her shoulder. Then admitted into her neck, "Yes, it was perfect." I smiled. "Well, ten-year-old perfect. We've had perfecter since then."

Jocelyn laughed. "Is that a word?"

"It is now."

"Okay." She waited a minute. "Do you two still ...?"

"Sometimes. Sometimes in the past three years of everyone knowing, we've needed us more than ever. The truth is good in some ways, but it was only ours for so long, Jocelyn."

"I understand that, Baby. There's nothing wrong with how you two need each other."

“As much as I love being with Sullivan, I need Sadie so much sometimes. I ache for her sometimes, and she says she feels the same about me. Neither of us want to end our marriages.”

“The Millanneseey Saga, huh?”

I couldn't help but laugh. “I've never thought about it before, but it does seem like history repeating itself.”

“You're not torn between me and Mom. The three of us exist together now. Say it.”

“I'm torn between Sullivan and Sadie. I'm torn between this life I'm supposed to want. Peaceful, suburban, wonderful husband and daughters. And the times I want to run away. I want to pour out savagely on Sadie and then drink wine and us write together. I'm so torn.”

“I think Aunt Celeste always felt that way. Torn between Annesleys and Mangums.”

“Did she ever get any relief?”

“We had these perfect nine months before Grandpa and CiCi died that I believe she did.”

I seriously could see Celeste. Closed my eyes and saw her smile as Roger came home.

“Sometimes I really know her, Jocelyn.”

“I'm not surprised that she was your guardian angel. Ask her to help you right now.”

“I'm asking you.”

A big smile took over her entire being. “After the New Year, you and Sadie take a weekend together somewhere. Anywhere. Tell me where. I'll make it happen. I'll be happy to make it a gift, so it doesn't seem weird. I'll buy you two a girls' weekend package. And a few times a year you find a way you two sneak off together. It's how Mom and Susan made it without killing any of us. I resented it some, but the biggest part of me was very happy for them.”

“You've always been talented at buying me vacations.”

She laughed, “Yeah, glad I did something right. I'll keep doing it and keep your secret.”

“It will mean a lot to Sadie. She hates you so much.”

“She has very valid reasons for hating me. I'll always understand those. She's hated me since she was nine when she figured it out about me and her dad.” Even Jocelyn never said his name. It had been something that happened. That his was a name no one could speak aloud.

That weekend I had thought was a perfect Annesley weekend, had cemented a hardcore change in Sadie. She ripped Sullivan out of Steven's arms and dragged him to Mom's car. And Sadie was never again the same. Like how intertwined our families were cursed her right then.

She'd always been protective of Susan, but something in her shifted then. I would later wonder had she accepted her fate with him right then and knew one day it would come calling.

She hated him, but only with me, did she sometimes admit, she missed him.

I knew – all too well – that feeling of missing Steven. And knew Jocelyn knew it too.

Sadie and I did what we did. We had him murdered. We made choices. Now we lie in the bed we made. Sometimes, briefly, when Sullivan is at work and my girls are asleep ... Well, we ...

"We've been up here for hours. You need to go to your Christmas Eve Tradition."

"I want to stay here."

"Sadie already hates me. Don't give that Wild Thing more ammo to shoot at me."

I laughed. "I'm worried about being around both of them at the same time."

"Don't worry. You'll go down the stairs, and you guys will all be little kids again. That's the magic of Christmas."

"This isn't that house."

"Doesn't matter. Mom and Susan brought all the love here. I promise, Baby Girl." She kissed my cheek. "And I promise I'll still be here after you eat all of Susan's food. We can sleep here tonight, Baby. I'll go get supplies and make us a nice pallet while you're downstairs."

I picked my head up. I looked at her. I fell in love. I pressed my lips to hers. She met me. Then yanked me down to her side and took control and rushed impulsively tons of kisses.

I giggled like a little girl. "Oh, that Bilson Giggle. It's the sweetest sound on earth."

I smiled. She stopped her rush of kisses, looked at me. "I love you, Mama."

"Oh, I had been wrong. That is the sweetest sound on earth. I love you."

We moved. Untangled. Stood. "Get out of here," as she slapped my ass.

"Thank you," I said as I was at the door. I got The Wink.

JOCELYN

Mom came in. We smiled. “Aren’t you supposed to be sleeping with Susan?” I teased.

“My bed is too crowded with dark haired women right now.”

“I would have thought that was your dream come true.” I sent the wink.

Mom laughed. “Nope, one dark haired woman is enough for me, but she loves when the girls sleep over. She’s in Grandma heaven.”

“And you’re not?”

“I’m in Woman heaven, for a minute, but you know, you and Bilson are my true loves.” She looked around to see how we had disturbed her sacred space. Even true loves had limits.

“Has CiCi been in here?”

Mom swung around. Glared at me. Battle rose in our eyes, but she surrendered so quickly.

“I was 73 when I built this house. She was 73 when she died. Even I can’t deny her anymore. She seems to love it here. She paints. We paint together. Sometimes Celeste joins us.”

“And Kat?”

“I haven’t felt her.” She stared at me. Her Mangum rose up. “And I haven’t asked.”

“Got it. Does Susan know?”

“Yes, Jocelyn. We’ve never kept secrets. Did you mention it to Bilson?”

“No, Mom. She doesn’t know CiCi. I don’t put those things on her.”

We stared a long time. “Is Bilson okay?”

I couldn’t speak it aloud. Tears came to my eyes as I shook my head and gave an answer.

Mom bridged the distance between us immediately. She wrapped me in her arms. “Why doesn’t it really exist for us, Mom? Happiness. It doesn’t really exist for us.”

She was Pure Haddy that I loved with all of me. “It does in our way, Jocelyn. We define happiness differently than most people. We define it by working through. Without some working through, we don’t know how to exist. We don’t understand peace. It’s not a terrible thing. It’s another thing that unifies us.”

“What are you working through now?”

“I don’t know. I guess that’s why my doppelganger has taken over my sacred space.”

I laughed at her. “You don’t miss him, do you?”

She took a deep breath. He was still my father no matter how old I got. Somewhere she decided I was more now than Paul Jr. I am her friend now. I am the one who understands her. In the oddest ways since Dad had died, I had become her ... Roger, not her Paul replacement. Roger.

“Those last ten years it was clearly me and Susan, but he was still there, getting a hard-on every time he looked at me.”

“Who wouldn’t? I get girl hard-ons looking at you.”

She busted out laughing, “Still My Spunky Josie.”

“Yeah, she busts out at the oddest times.”

Mom pulled away. We sat where me and Bilson had been. She laid her head in my lap. I stroked her hair. No matter how old she got, she was still Haddy, and we were still married. I reached for my wine glass. I had saved one big sip. I poured it in my mouth then leaned down to hers. Gave her the wine. Like for a moment we were in the quad at Columbia. Making love.

There she was. Hard Core Bitch smiling at me. “No. To answer your question. I don’t miss him. I love all that Susan and I have now. One house that is truly ours. My own studio. Designing again. And I love that he isn’t something I have to worry about anymore.”

I remembered her saying something similar when we moved to Wallingford. Fifty-three years of her life had been, wonderful, yes, but also fifty-three years she had to worry about him.

I really understood then. As dysfunctional as her home had been growing up, it wasn’t as dysfunctional as being with Dad. No Mangum laid complete claim on any other Mangum.

They were all in their weird crazy way, dependently independent. Something Dad had never let her be. He had wanted to possess her. I remembered the way she looked when she said that in therapy one day. A day she, me, and Bilson had gone together. I looked shocked. Bilson didn’t at all. It was then, I realized since she was 12, Bilson understood possession.

“Susan never wants to possess you.”

Mom smiled, “Well, yes, she does, but in all the right ways so it doesn’t feel like possession. She truly lets me be me. And I let her be her.” Then she brought her hand to my face. “He asked for your hand. He came to me before he asked you, but you haven’t ...”

“I said no.”

“I knew you would. I almost begged him not to ask you, but he has to walk this road.”

“I guess he does. Is he still here?”

“No. He went home. He said he knew this was your night with Bilson.”

“He’s not like Dad.”

“I know, Jocelyn. I know it isn’t about possession why you said no.”

“Bilson is becoming mine now. She tells me things. She hates me, but even that she’ll tell me. I’m finally getting it right. She has to be my only focus right now. I can love him, but I can’t work on me and him right now. And as much as you don’t think I deserve to be her mom, I really don’t think he deserves to be her dad. It’s different. Tell me you know it is different.”

“Jocelyn, you most definitely deserve to be her mom. You never completely left. Even when I wouldn’t let you see her for those three years, you wrote her letters. You found ways. And you’ve been so stable for her in the past three years. And, yes, so has he, but there’s ...”

“Thirty-one other years he wasn’t here at all.”

“Yeah,” as she sat up. As she pulled me in her arms. As I let her.

As we remained. CiCi and Celeste with us. We could feel them. Sitting on each side.

Until the door opened, and they vanished. Mom had fallen asleep on me, but she stirred as Bilson joined us. Barely opened her eyes. “Can I stay please? Your daughters took over my bed.” Bilson was drunk, but she smiled. A sign of yes to Mom who fell back asleep.

I smiled at my daughter. She’d had too much wine. “Come sleep it off.”

She nodded. Sank beside me. I gave her my hand that I could free from Mom.

“Sadie said to tell you thank you, and countryside of Vermont.”

“Got it. I’ll make a big production of it tomorrow. Sweet dreams, Baby Girl.”

“Sweet dreams, Mama.” Like reflex she looked to see if Mom heard. I had a feeling she had, she was Haddy Annesley after all, but she would never let me or Bilson know she had.

And that also was Haddy Annesley.

And there I was awake with my two sleeping beauties on me. Like times I had slept with Max and Maddie, and I loved watching them sleep. But life hadn’t held one complication then.

I looked at Bilson. Sent up a silent prayer that I was doing the right thing letting her and Sadie escape. Like Aunt Celeste had allowed tiny indulgences so my impulses didn’t consume

me in one fell swoop. God wasn't who I prayed to. *Don't let it happen, Aunt Celeste. The three-year-old curse on us. Don't let her run out on them like CiCi did to you and Mom, like I did to her. Guide me how to help her. She's going to be a better mom than me. Please, Aunt Celeste.*

Silence. Deafening Silence.

HADDY

Christmas Day

I opened my eyes to identical eyes. She was so much her father that I loved anytime I got to revel in that she was mine too. I mean Pauly and I had a very similar eye color, but still her eyes and hair, she was mine.

She smiled at me. So affectionately. Kissed me. I smiled. Laid my head on her more.

“Merry Christmas, My Love.”

I felt her entire being glow. “Merry Christmas, Mom.”

Bilson made a sound like we were annoying her. We both smiled at her. She nuzzled into Jocelyn more. Her mama. I had always ran away on Christmas Eve. I had never been so blessed to see them together on Christmas morning. And I had to admit, even in my tinge of jealousy, it was one of the most beautiful moments of my life. As much as I loved moments Josie was mine, I had to acknowledge Jocelyn had to even more so love moments Bilson was hers. Today she was, Hers.

Jocelyn wrapped her closer to her. Pulled the blanket tighter. Kissed her cheek.

Bilson smiled. Let her kiss her lips. “Merry Christmas, Baby Girl.”

“Merry Christmas,” she managed to mumble then paused. Then stumbled over, “Josh.”

I was intruding. I knew, but I didn't want to leave. Last Christmas had been way too much for me. All the loud, fun Millers. It had been way too overwhelming. Like Jocelyn was reading my mind she said, “You going to have breakfast with Susan?”

“Too much Miller down there. I want to stay here with my babies. Please.”

“You can stay with us,” Bilson said. Then moved into my lap. Leaving her legs on Jocelyn as Jocelyn in her way held us both. I wrapped Bilson as tight as I could.

“Thank you. Are you going to have breakfast? You never miss Susan's breakfast.”

“I won't today either; I have special powers to Susan.” As we heard a knock on the door.

Then. My heart standing outside of my body as I looked at her. Those blue eyes. She still mesmerized me as much as the day we met. As much as the New Year's she brought me a sketch pad and her glorious naked body and gave me a reason to want to live again. Gave me art again.

She was carrying a tray. Two coffee cups. Juice for Jocelyn. One big plate. Loaded.

“See?” Bilson gloated as me and Jocelyn laughed.

“I thought you blondes might be hungry.” Susan put the tray down. Kissed us all.

“Susan?” She spun around that Jocelyn had called her as she was leaving. “Do you want to join us?” Susan smiled. Came back over. Sat by Jocelyn. Their road had been paved with so many broken pieces, but now they truly were friends, and even more like Susan was her stepmother.

“All of my wedding cake cookies are gone.”

“All? Get off me!” I yelled at Bilson. She laughed. Wasn’t scared at all. Didn’t move.

“Not all. I left one,” as she sat up a little on me and reached for her coffee and mine.

Susan had been holding a bag that she gave to Jocelyn. “Paul made me promise to give you this every Christmas.”

Jocelyn smiled so big and retrieved her Montecristo #2. She smelled it. She let him in.

“Your Best Friend. Thank you, Susan.”

This came out at the oddest of moments. I hadn’t missed him. I was happy with our life. She was happy with our life, but she did miss him ... Achingly. Which I understood. He’d never wanted to possess her. He was Her Best Friend. I had ached for mine often too. Roger.

I could almost see him in the corner. We were splashing each other with Champaign. He turned for a moment and gave me, the me now, that Roger smile.

Then Susan looking at me had demanded my attention. I was transparent. She had learned to live with my ghosts. I honestly thought sometimes she was a part of them too. I thought she and Celeste had conversations. Sometimes, I could see that last day, the pacts me, Celeste, and Roger made. How they wanted me to be with Susan. How we were all going to confront Pauly that night. How I was about to be free, except figuring out details about my three daughters with him, but I was about to be free of him. Then. My Whole World Broke. Shattered.

It was trying to take me again. So immediately I looked into my safe landing. Those mesmerizing eyes as she smiled and mouthed to me, “I love you. You’re Mine, All Mine Now.”

And I was back. I was Haddy again. God, I hoped I gave her the same fortitude.

I wanted to take her right then. So ... “Um, Baby, I still need help wrapping a few ...”

She jumped up, “Um ... yeah, I was going to help you wrap ...” She moved Bilson off me so quickly. Jerked me up and pulled me across the hall to our bedroom I had designed. For US. She slammed the door. Locked the door. Grandchildren all over the place right now. Then

she threw me against the door. Devoured me. Then grabbed me so forcefully tossing me on OUR BED. A bed that was truly ours. We had bought together when this house was ready for ... Haddy and Susan. Everything in this house was new. We kept keepsakes from our children. Books we loved. All that went without saying. But every dish and every piece of furniture marked it completely. Haddy and Susan ... Finally, finally, finally. No husbands.

Or so I believed. There were some days in therapy with all we'd dealt with in the past three years that I thought they would both live for fucking ever. It was a process. A part of me accepted that. A part of me wanted to scream anytime I heard either of their names. And yes, even Pauly's. We became a new Pauly and Haddy, but I wanted to be free. Had wanted it before my world shattered, but that happened. I wanted to take Susan sometimes and run the fuck away.

She'd been a warrior for Bilson and Sadie during this time. She never thought of running away. She wanted to dive right in and help them in every way. I did too. Except ...

Sometimes I was Haddy. I wanted Susan all to myself. And Susan, well, she finally had granddaughters. So, she wanted to spend almost every waking moment at Bilson and Sullivan's.

It wasn't until the past three years that I had realized we had been a family for 30 years, but we hadn't. There had always been distinctions. Always a home I could runaway to when the loud Millers got to me a little bit, but now I no longer had that. But right now, she ran with me.

I rolled her. I took control. "Haddy," she protested.

"Shut up!" I yelled. "You're mine."

I ripped her clothes off. She spread her legs. I slid my hand in as she wrapped those legs around me. As I laid on her and devoured her as I thrust into My Love, and we moved together.

I could rummage through the memories of days with daughters. Days with my parents. Days of wedded bliss. Even making love to Celeste, but none of it, none of it was THIS.

My entirety poured into Susan. Until she screamed and writhed beneath me. Until all of her poured out too, and she breathed so hard. "Damn, Merry Christmas to me. I've never had that on Christmas before." She said it without saying it. That I hadn't just left Pauly and the girls on Christmas; I left her too. One request when we married.

Haddy? Yes, Baby. I really ... I love you, but I really need something. She was My Love. After all we'd given, I couldn't imagine she was hesitant to ever request anything of me. Until I heard what it was. Please when we marry, please don't leave me on Christmas anymore.

Something really odd spoke. She'd hated him, but he had always been there for her on Christmas. Helped her with getting everything ready for the kids coming in. Helped her with the tree. Let her have that week that was her house even when she'd been living with me for years.

Yeah. Competition with her dead husband rose in me, and I'm not ashamed to admit it ... to you, but I wouldn't admit it to Susan. *Of course, Baby. Christmas will be ours now.*

It was ours now. Plus. My girls. Her kids. Spouses. Grandchildren. You'd think I would be in love with this. I had loved Big Annesley Christmases. But ... I had loved Big Annesley Christmases, and I still missed those desperately. My Daughters. My Sister. My Roger.

I gave Susan her simple request that turned out to not be so simple. As I had experienced last year with her, physically, but mentally I was in Lake Placid. Maybe this sexual time with My Woman would help me to be here mentally too this Christmas ... Maybe.