
THE BREAKING POINT

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Published by Blushing Books
An Imprint of
ABCD Graphics and Design, Inc.
A Virginia Corporation
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901

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EBook ISBN: 978-1-64563-274-0

Print ISBN: 978-1-64563-288-7

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Cover Art by ABCD Graphics & Design

This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.
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Prologue

It's a strange moment when you suddenly realize you can't take it anymore. *It* at this particular moment for Faith Benedetti was thirteen years of accumulated slights, outright deceptions, insults, and the list went on into infinity. She had tried to forgive, to let them go, but she hadn't forgotten a single one of them. At this moment, they flashed through her mind, like a reel of a film. She could see every frame clearly, yet they were flashing by so fast, she couldn't focus on any specific instance.

Faith stood in silent shock, staring into her open garage. She was looking at the results of all her efforts and work of the past year. Her work had been reduced to a mountain of rubbish. Her entire creative spirit, her very soul, had been trashed. Sculptures that hadn't been fired yet were shattered; framed watercolors were lying under broken glass. Her paintings! Dear God! Wet unfinished pieces lay smeared and ruined. One of her best efforts had a broken frame speared through it. Her work was destroyed, broken! Destroyed! Destroyed!

She felt something break inside her. Something vital had snapped, and she went numb. She couldn't think. She could only

stare at the pile and watch as a part of it tumbled to the concrete floor. A tube of red paint was squashed, and as she watched the crimson red spread across the garage floor. She knew at that moment it symbolized her life's blood. Her spirit broke.

She didn't hear the truck pulling in behind her. Didn't see the look on her husband's face when he stepped behind her.

"My God!" Ales exclaimed. "Honey, I'm so sorry." He tried to wrap his arm around her, but she shrugged from his embrace and away from him.

"I had no idea she'd do something like this," Ales exclaimed.

Faith walked away from his words. They had argued earlier, and he'd ignored her—again. This time it was different. This was the last time. She entered her home through the kitchen door.

Cybil Benedetti, Ales' mother, turned in a wheelchair. She was a scrawny woman, thin, her skin was wrinkled and too darkly tanned. Her insistence at sunning herself every summer had given her complexion the texture of leather. She looked older than her age of sixty-seven. "It's about time you got here to help me!"

Faith ignored her and kept walking. She went to the bedroom she'd shared with Ales for the last seven years. She was vaguely aware of her husband and her mother-in-law's voices raised in anger. She went to her closet and removed a suitcase. She was already packed for a trip she'd canceled less than an hour before. She wheeled the piece of luggage across the room and slung a carryall bag across her shoulder.

Ales was in her way, and she moved around him. She had only one thought running through her mind. Get out! Escape!

Ales raised his hands in a helpless gesture. He was a good-looking man. His Italian ancestry had bestowed him with dark hair, and milk-chocolate-colored eyes. If he stretched a bit, he made the six-foot mark. He ran at least four times a week, although, with his work schedule, it was difficult for him to fit in the time.

He stepped closer to Faith, moved closer as if to hug her, but she dodged him again. “She didn’t know, Faith. It was a mistake. She hired a couple of teenage boys to move your painting materials to the garage. She thought she would be staying in your studio because that’s where she has stayed before. She didn’t mean to damage your work. Where are you going?”

Faith said nothing. She couldn’t think, speak, or breathe. She wheeled her suitcase to her vehicle, opened the back hatch, and shoved it inside.

“Where are you going?” Ales demanded again. “You can’t just walk out!”

Faith raised her eyes to the pile of what was her work, and felt a physical stab of pain. Her efforts, her creativity had been reduced to rubbish. “I’m done,” she whispered in a broken voice. She slammed into her car, floored the gas, and barely missed another vehicle when she pulled into the street.

The tears didn’t start for several miles, but when they came, Faith couldn’t stop them. She swiped at the tears on her face. She dug into the console compartment for tissues, but there weren’t any. Ales used them to clean his sunglasses, but he never thought to replenish them.

Her cell phone began to ring, but she didn’t reach for it. The calls went to voicemail, but it wouldn’t stop. She braked at a stop sign, grabbed her cell, and tried to silence it, but it kept ringing in her hand. Someone honked behind her, and she looked both ways, turning onto the road that would take her to the interstate. The car behind her, the honker in such a big hurry, turned at the next intersection.

The damn phone wouldn’t stop ringing! Faith was sobbing now, and she rolled down the window and threw her phone out with a furious motion. She watched through the rearview mirror as it shattered into pieces. It was somehow symbolic.

Faith kept driving, although she didn’t know where she was going. She didn’t care where she went, but she had to go some-

where. The road would lead her somewhere. They lived six miles from the downtown area of Cumberland, a small city in western Maryland. She had never minded the drive to town. Living there gave them the benefits of small-town living, yet they were centrally located only hours to the surrounding states of Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Virginia, and Washington, D.C. She drove a short distance to Frostburg University every day as an art teacher.

Gradually, Faith began to calm down, but she felt strangely hollow inside. She kept seeing her work, tossed aside like trash. Destroyed! She'd have to call the James Gallery and tell them she wouldn't be able to fulfill her commitment. She would never get a better opportunity; never be offered a chance to show her talents again. Her work was gone. Her mind kept screaming. Destroyed! Destroyed!

She turned onto Frederick Street to connect with interstate 68 west. She was the second in line approaching the stoplight, and it turned green. The car in front of her cleared the intersection. She didn't see the white convertible that ran the red light to the left of her. Faith felt the sudden impact, screamed as the metal of her vehicle twisted around her. Her head hit the window, and everything went black.

ALESSANDRO BENEDETTI, Ales to everyone, had never seen such a disheartened look of shock on his wife's face. His Faith was animated, so happy all the time. She was the glass half-full, as opposed to half-empty kind of a person. She'd left, and she hadn't looked back. The only time he'd seen that look of sadness and despair on her face before was when her parents had died.

He turned and looked at the mess in the garage. His wife's easels were tossed helter-skelter in that pile. The leg of one of them had skewed a portrait through the face. He pressed the

garage door remote, wincing as the door caught on the leg of an easel, and the pile shifted again. The safety mechanism caused the door to rise. It was probably closing the door that had caused the contents of Faith's studio to tumble together in the first place.

Whatever had caused the damage, she wasn't going to forgive it. She'd said, *'I'm done,'* and although Ales wasn't exactly sure of the meaning of those two words, he wasn't stupid. It definitely referred to his mother. He was afraid it was also aimed at him, and their marriage.

He went inside the house, already dialing his wife's phone, but she wasn't answering, and his calls went straight to voicemail.

"Where is Faith?" Cybil Benedetti demanded as she pushed the wheelchair through the doorway from what had been a family room and had been converted into an art studio. "It's just like her to take off when someone needs her!"

"That's not true, and I don't know where she went," Ales said. "Why are you here? I told you to wait for me at the hospital."

"I couldn't wait around for you all day!" Cybil screeched. "You should have come when I called! I had to take a taxi, and when I got here, my room hadn't been set-up!"

"We weren't going to house you in the studio," Ales said, his voice even with no hint of the anger he wanted to release. "We were going to let you stay in my office. We had a Murphy bed built into the new cabinetry in there."

"I stay in the studio," Cybil exclaimed. "That's where I have always stayed! Where is Faith?"

"I don't know," Ales said. "Do you have any idea what you've done, Mother?"

"I asked those nice boys to clear Faith's junk from the room, and I paid them. What's wrong with that?" Cybil demanded.

"They destroyed Faith's work, and I think you have destroyed my marriage," Ales said.

"Don't be silly," Cybil said, dismissively. "Faith paints. She

wastes all her time painting or doing that artsy-fartsy stuff when she should be taking care of her family. This is your fault, Alessandro. You should never have let her go to work at that college. Now she thinks she's better than everyone."

Ales walked past her, repeatedly hitting redial on his phone, and still not getting an answer. He went into his office, closed the door, and called his sister Jillian.

"Hello," was Jill's bright answer.

"I need you," Ales said.

"What's wrong?" she asked, recognizing her brother's voice.

"Mom called this morning and told me she was in the emergency room, and about to be released."

"What's wrong with her this time?" Jill asked.

"She broke a toe," Ales said. "I talked to the doctor, and she said it was a minor injury."

"Nothing with Mom is minor," Jill said.

"Tell me about it," Ales said. "The doctor said it wasn't a bad break, and all she needed was an air-cast—that she would be fine in a couple of weeks. Mom insisted on renting a wheelchair from the pharmacy in the hospital. She was released, and she called me to pick her up. I was in the middle of a meeting with a client, and when I got there, she had already left. She took a cab to the house, let herself in and..."

"And what?"

"She paid a couple of teenage boys that were walking by the house to move all of Faith's artwork from her studio to the garage."

"No!"

"Yes, and worse than that, it was stacked or piled, or maybe it was thrown in there, I don't know. Nearly everything Faith has been working on in preparation for her show has been damaged or destroyed."

"Has she seen it?"

"Yeah," Ales said.

“Give me ten minutes to find my boys, and I’ll be over,” Jillian promised.

Ales kept dialing Faith’s phone.

“Alessandro!” Cybil’s voice was screechy and demanding.

“What?” he demanded angrily.

“I need help!” she squawked.

“In what?”

“I need to lie down! You haven’t brought a bed into my room yet!”

“It’s not your room, Mother,” Ales said. “It’s Faith’s studio. Why do you think you need assistance? You broke a toe. You can move around on a broken toe!”

“Well, excuse me for wanting a little assistance from my son,” Cybil snarled. “I’m in a wheelchair!”

“Because you wanted to be in it, and rented it,” Ales said. “It’s a minor fine-line fracture. The hospital issued an air-cast because that was all you needed. It will hurt for about a week, and it’s just a matter of staying off of it until it heals. A wheelchair wasn’t necessary.”

“I’m the one in pain!” Cybil exclaimed. “I’m your mother, and you should be caring for me!”

“I should be caring for my wife too, but she’s gone because of what you’ve done!”

“She’ll be back,” Cybil said dismissively. “That girl knows when she’s got it good.”

There was a knock on the front door. Ales rushed over, hoping it would be his wife. It wasn’t, and he let his sister in.

“I sent the boys to the backyard to kick their soccer ball around,” Jill said. She rushed past her mother, went straight to the studio, and looked around. Then she ran through the kitchen, through the small mudroom, and opened the door to the garage, turning on the interior lights.

Jill returned to the kitchen with a stunned look on her face.

“Faith saw that?” she asked again, although she already knew the answer.

Ales nodded. “She saw it, said *‘I’m done,’* took the suitcase she’d already packed to go to that class she’s supposed to take in Arlington, and drove off. She’s not answering her phone.”

Jill looked at her mother. “You are not staying here!”

“I’ll stay where I damn well please,” Cybil exclaimed.

“Ales go look for Faith,” Jill ordered. “I’m going to take Mother home. If she needs assistance, she can call a nursing service. It’s a broken toe, not a coronary! I’ll come back and start sifting through this mess and see if there’s anything that can be saved.”

Ales nodded as his sister started pushing the wheelchair toward the door.

“Stop it!” Cybil screamed. “I don’t want to go home! I’m going to need help!”

“Enough Mother,” Jill said bluntly. “You’re a hypochondriac, and I’m sick of it! We’re all sick of it!”

“How can you treat me like this?” Cybil demanded.

“It’s easy,” Jill said. “I’m treating you like you’ve treated your kids all our lives. The only thing that has ever mattered to you was what you wanted! I learned from the best!”

Ales shoved his phone into his pocket. Faith wasn’t answering. She’d been upset when he’d called her from work. She had interrupted a class to take his call because they had an agreement not to call unless it was an emergency. Otherwise, they were to send messages, even if that message was to call as soon as they were free. Faith did not consider his mother and her problems an emergency.

Faith had been insistent that his mother was not coming to their house. She didn’t have the time or the patience to play nurse and be at the beck and call of his demanding mother. “Not this time!” she had said bluntly.

Cybil Benedetti, his mother, was a demanding woman. After

the last time his mother had stayed with them, Faith had stated emphatically that she was not moving out of her studio to accommodate his mother again. Enough was enough, and it was time for another member of his family to take a turn. They didn't have a spare bedroom, and his mother had a perfectly good home of her own.

Faith's art show wouldn't happen now, thanks to his difficult mother. Cybil never understood any perspective other than her own. It was her way or no way. After a lifetime of her unwillingness to get professional help, all three of her adult children were at their wits end in trying to deal with her.

Ales had no idea where Faith would have gone. Her best friends were his sisters Jill and Carrie. If his wife had called either of them, they would have called him. He called his younger sister Carrie, but she hadn't heard from his wife. Carrie had heard from Jill, and she didn't sound very friendly toward her older brother.

Faith had a lot of friends and colleagues at the university. Their circle of friends included many of them whom she saw outside of work hours, although, like him, her free time was limited. They would get together a couple of times a year, usually in the summer months, for backyard barbecues or during the holidays for parties. He knew their names, but he didn't have their numbers on his phone. He called Faith's university office phone and left a message.

He didn't know which direction to go. Would his wife return to work, or had she decided to go southeast and attend the seven-day accelerated sculpture class? Only twenty students would be accepted in the class by a world-renowned sculptor. She'd been thrilled to be one.

They'd argued over her being gone the week before her summer class was to start. The summer vacation had barely begun when their son, Ricco, had gone to a baseball camp. Faith had signed up for the master's class in sculpture. The university

had approved of her taking the course; it was a credit to her skills to have been offered a place in the class.

Ales glanced in his rear-view mirror when he heard a siren behind him. He pulled over as soon as it was safe and lowered his window.

“Sir,” the officer said, leaning over and speaking through the lowered window. “You are driving and using a hand-held device. It’s against the law in Maryland.”

“I know the law,” Ales said honestly. “I’m usually the one complaining about people ignoring it. I’m...”

“Are you all right, sir?”

“No, actually, I’m not,” Ales admitted. “I’m sorry. It isn’t anything you can help me with. I’m looking for my wife. She was upset, and I don’t know where she would have gone. I’ve been leaving phone messages, but she’s not responding.”

“We all have domestic issues at one time or another, sir,” the officer said. “You still can’t break the law.”

“I’m not arguing, or making excuses,” Ales said, handing over his license, registration, and proof of insurance cards.

“Keep your hands on the steering wheel in plain sight, sir, I’ll be right back.”

Ales watched as the officer returned to his vehicle, and he closed his eyes.

“Sir?”

“That didn’t take long,” Ales said, surprised.

“Sir, what kind of car was your wife driving?”

“Oh, God!”

“Calm down, sir. I’m just checking,” the officer said.

“A Subaru Outback, a two-tone blue, and gray,” Ales said.

“Do you know the tag number?” the officer asked.

“Yes, it’s a vanity plate, Art is Lov, and there are three hand-prints below the rear window, in silver paint—mine, hers and our son’s when he was three.” Ales’ voice broke. “Please don’t tell me she’s been in an accident.”

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“I don’t know anything yet, sir,” the officer said, although he knew there had been an accident with a fatality downtown. He hadn’t been on the scene, so he didn’t know the details. He did know that traffic was at a standstill, and was being diverted from the intersection. “Stay calm, sir, I’ll be right back.”

Ales watched through his rearview mirror, as the police officer was speaking to someone in his vehicle. Then another police vehicle pulled in front of him, with two officers in it. The three officers converged at his door, and his hands began to shake.

“Mr. Benedetti,” the first officer said.

“What? What has happened?” Ales demanded.

“I am sorry to inform you, sir, but there has been an accident involving a car that fits the description and the vanity plate of your wife’s car.”

“Is Faith alive? Is my wife alive?” Ales demanded.

“Yes, sir, as far as we know,” one of the officers said. “There was an accident at the intersection of Frederick Street and Queen City Drive. The driver in the Subaru was taken to Western Hospital. Could anyone else have been driving the vehicle?”

“No, I have to go,” Ales exclaimed.

“Yes, sir,” one of the newly arrived officers said. “Mr. Benedetti, we don’t want you driving upset. My partner and I have already signed off-duty, sir. If you wouldn’t mind, my partner will drive your truck to the hospital parking lot, and I’ll give him an escort so we can get you there quickly and safely.”

“Okay, thank you,” Ales said, beginning to feel himself go numb with fear. He turned to the officer who had pulled him over. “What about the ticket?”

“I’ll let it pass this time,” the police officer said. “Just remember the law, and good luck!”

Chapter 1

Ales held Faith's hand. His forehead was lying against the mattress of her hospital bed. He jerked alert when he felt someone touch him.

"Has she awakened yet?" Jill whispered.

"Sort of, but she wasn't making sense," Ales whispered. "She has a concussion, but the doctors are saying all the scans show no imminent danger, whatever that means. She's been in scanning machines most of the afternoon. The nurses and doctors have been checking on her every half-hour or so. They can see the monitor readings at the central stations."

"She'll be okay," Jill said. "You should get some rest, yourself. It's after midnight."

He shook his head, tears welling in his eyes again. "I'm not leaving her."

"All right, I'll see if I can find a machine that serves a half-decent cup of coffee," Jill said, hugging him. "If not, I'll send Mack out to get some. I'll stay here with you."

When asked, Jill said she'd hired an armed guard to keep their mother from coming to the hospital, although later she

admitted to hiring a home nurse. She had told the nurse to keep her client at home.

Cybil was not accepting any responsibility for what she'd done, and when she'd been told about the accident, she'd said she was coming to the hospital. Mack, Jill's husband, was generally blunter than his wife. He rarely tolerated any nonsense from his mother-in-law. He warned Cybil if she went to the hospital, she might be thrown out of a fifth-floor window.

The hours went by incredibly slowly, with no changes. Sometimes Jill was in the room; other times it was Mack, but they never left Ales by himself. Carrie, his younger sister by five years, was at home with her children and Jill's, impatiently waiting for updates, although nothing changed. Her husband, John, swung by the hospital on the way to his night shift at the fire department and dropped off a basket of sandwiches and thermoses of hot coffee."

It was daylight when Jill came in again. "Have you called the office yet?" she asked.

"I left a message on Tyrell's phone," Ales said of his partner in Benedetti/Monroe Design. "He'll call as soon as he gets the message."

"I'm going to rescue Carrie for a few hours. I'm sure the kids slept last night, but she didn't because she was calling me almost every hour on the hour. If Faith wakes, call me. She will pull through this!"

A half-hour later, Carrie tiptoed through the door of the ICU room, looking around furtively. "I slipped by the nurses' station. Am I allowed to come in?" she whispered.

Ales smiled at his younger sister. Carrie was his timid sister, and never one to break a rule.

"As long as there aren't more than two people in the room, they're okay with family staying with her. I gave them a list of everyone that was allowed to visit."

Carrie hugged her brother, but her chin started to tremble. “When is she going to wake up?”

Ales hugged his sister. “The doctors say it could be hours, or it could be days.”

“Have you called Ricco yet?”

“I don’t know what to tell him. He’s at camp, and...”

“We’ll go get him as soon as John gets off his shift,” Carrie said, checking her watch because she knew her husband’s schedule. “Ricco needs to be here.”

Ales nodded. “I still don’t know what to tell him.”

“That Faith is going to be okay,” Carrie said firmly. “She’s going to survive this, and be as good as new! Don’t call Ricco at the camp, we’ll tell him when we get there. There’s no reason to scare him any more than necessary.”

“No.” The word was a raspy whisper.

Ales and Carrie rushed to the side of the bed.

Faith’s eyelids were squeezed tightly together. “Don’t tell him,” she gasped, and then she slumped into the pillows. Her forehead was bandaged because she had seven stitches high on her forehead, into her hairline. Her pixy cut blonde hair was matted, although the nurses had sponged off the blood. Her face was swelling and darkening with bruises. She had a cut in her lip that had required several stitches.

Ales took a deep breath. His beautiful, delicate wife was almost unrecognizable. He was so used to her natural beauty that it had become an everyday thing to him. He closed his eyes and vowed to God not to ever let his love for his wife become complacent again. Never! His beautiful Faith. She was a warrior woman in some instances, in others shy and unassuming. She’d been his blonde, blue-eyed beauty from the moment he’d first laid eyes on her. He’d known instantly that she was going to be his, for the rest of his life. He just had to do whatever it took to get her to agree with him.

Recovery was slow, and luckily, Faith didn’t remember the

worst of it. Several days went by. The horrible pain in her head began to lessen, and every day after, it hurt a little less. The nurses, her husband, and various in-laws, all repeatedly said she'd been lucky. She didn't feel lucky.

The police had come to talk to her when she was moved from the intensive care unit and into a sterile white and gray hospital room. Except for the two days she'd spent in the hospital when her son had been born, Faith had never had to stay in a hospital.

When the police entered her hospital room, the looks on their faces had terrified her. She hadn't seen herself in a mirror, and from the looks on their faces, she knew she was disfigured.

She tried to get out of bed, demanding to see the damage. Ales stopped her, but the commotion brought a nurse into the room. She asked the policemen, and Ales to step into the hallway. The nurse calmly explained to Faith that her injuries were superficial. They would heal, and there shouldn't be any lasting damage. She produced a hand mirror, and Faith gasped when she saw her reflection.

Both of her eyes were blackened and swollen. The stitches high on her forehead and into her hairline looked ragged and nasty. Every part of her face was swollen, bruised and terrifying.

A constant monolog by the nurse kept her calm. She explained the bruising and swelling would go away, and the stitches would be removed. The scarring would be minimal. When her hair grew back, the scar wouldn't be visible.

The nurse told Faith, she might have to wear bangs for a few months, but every woman needed to change her hairstyle occasionally. She assured Faith that the facial bruising would be gone in a week or two. Facial bruises healed much quicker than most areas of the body.

Faith pulled her hospital gown loose and saw that her chest was various shades of dark blue, green and purple. She'd already seen the bruises on her arms and legs.

"Most of this was done by the airbag," the nurse explained.

“It saved your life, but it deploys at approximately 100 miles per hour. It does leave a lot of damage behind. It did its job, keeping you from going through the windshield.”

When Faith had calmed down, the police officers were asked to return, and they apologized for scaring her. They asked questions and explained the witness reports, and the charges against the other driver, a Ms. Tanya Adelson, age twenty-five. The speed camera had registered the convertible at thirty miles over the speed limit, in addition to running the red light. Ms. Adelson had been brought into the emergency room but had soon afterward been Medevac'd to a trauma center in Baltimore. The officers had no knowledge of her condition. The passenger in her vehicle had not been wearing a seatbelt. He had been ejected from the convertible on impact and pronounced dead on the scene.

An open and nearly empty bottle of Jack Daniels had been discovered in the car. Ms. Adelson had been cognitive enough to agree to take a chemical alcohol test in the emergency room. She was three times over the legal alcohol limit and charged with Felony DUI.

Tanya Adelson had already been convicted of manslaughter-by-vehicle. This was her fifth DUI charge, her second with manslaughter. She was supposed to surrender herself to the courts the following Tuesday for a six-year jail sentence. With a second trial pending, she would most likely be spending a good portion of her life behind bars. The vehicle she had been driving was registered to a stepbrother. He had reported the car stolen two days before the accident.

Faith had mixed feelings about Ms. Adelson. She was angry that the young woman could be so irresponsible, but she was also annoyed that the courts had released her on her own recognizance, and allowed her to hurt others. A vehicular manslaughter charge, attached to a DUI charge was not a minor offense. The young woman had ruined her life, in addition to

causing the deaths of two people. She had to be held responsible for her actions and the consequences of those actions. Faith did feel sorry for Ms. Adelson's family and those of her victims.

Faith had no memory of the crash or of being transported to the hospital. She didn't remember what happened in the emergency room or the days following. She was still going for daily scans, but she was being assured that she was healing. She had a single broken rib, an assortment of hideous bruises, and a cast on her left foot from a minor break. Every muscle in her entire body hurt, from head to toe. She was eventually allowed to stand on her feet and go to the bathroom on her own, but she refused to look in a mirror again.

When the various doctors and nurses came into the room, all family members were asked to leave, except for Ales. She had visitors, but she didn't want anyone seeing her, and Ales was designated to act as her guard to stop people from coming into her room. She accepted flowers and Ales made the phone calls to thank everyone for their concern. Faith couldn't speak to anyone because her speech was slurred because of the stitches in her lip. Ales' family members were the only people allowed in her room.

Her husband had gone against her wishes and retrieved their son, Ricco, from baseball camp. Once she was transferred into a regular hospital room, he was allowed to visit. At eight, he'd been frightened by her appearance, but thought her cast was *awesome*. He'd been the first to sign it. She did appreciate seeing her son, and Ales had assured her, that Ricco had been given a sanitized version of the accident, so he wouldn't be frightened. He was staying with Jill and Carrie's families as they lived nearby in the same neighborhood.

Ales was coming and going, and he tried to talk to her, but Faith closed her eyes and feigned sleep when he was in the room, which was often. She didn't want to hear apologies. She didn't want to listen to excuses. She didn't want to be told to be reason-

able, and she didn't want anyone telling her what she was going to do after she left the hospital.

The first week went by quickly, and Faith slept through most of it. She suspected it was because of the pills she was being given regularly. At least when she was asleep, she wasn't aware of the pain, or of her own thoughts.

It was at the end of her second week of hospitalization when Faith was told she could go home.

"I don't see any reason you can't be released today," Dr. Mason said after he examined Faith. "I'll get the paperwork signed, and you should be released by noon. Don't forget to make an appointment to see me in my office, and if anything changes, call immediately. I wouldn't advise being alone for the first couple of weeks."

"Thank you," Faith said. She lay against the propped pillows in the hospital bed and closed her eyes. Then she sat up and maneuvered herself from the bed carefully. She limped over to a storage closet and tried to pull her battered suitcase from it. Someone from the police department had dropped it off when they'd brought her into the emergency room. The hard casing was cracked, but the wheels still worked. They hadn't brought her shoulder bag, and she wondered what happened to it, and her purse.

"Here, let me help you with that," a young woman who was on the cleaning staff said, hurrying into her room.

"Thank you," Faith said.

"Do you need a nurse?"

"No, I just need to get my suitcase opened," Faith said, and the woman lifted the case onto a rolling bedside table and opened it for her. A few moments later, a nurse's aide appeared, and she assisted Faith in getting dressed.

“GOOD NEWS!” Ales exclaimed, coming into Faith’s room with Jill on his heels. They were both smiling. They found her sitting on one of the stiff hospital plastic chairs already dressed in a loose zipped sweatshirt and sweatpants. He was smiling. “I see they’ve already told you. You can come home!”

“No,” Faith said.

Ales looked concerned. “What do you mean, no?”

“I’m not going there,” Faith said, trying to sound firm. “I want you to take me to Hancock. I’m going to stay at my parents’ house.”

“You can’t, Faith. You need someone to take care of you. I’m taking you home.”

“I will not go there,” Faith repeated. “I told you, Ales, I am through. I can’t take any more. I’ve been with you for thirteen years, and the last five have been crap because you have stopped listening to me. I refuse to believe this is what my life was intended to be.”

“Honey, I..”

“I don’t want to hear it,” Faith said in a monotone voice. “I’ve heard all the excuses before, over and over again. This time, I’m not listening. I don’t believe you. I’m going to Hancock. If you don’t drive me there, I’ll call a car service.”

“You can’t stay there by yourself.”

“You can’t stop me!” Faith said through gritted teeth. “I’m going to Hancock, and I’m going to live in peace.”

“Faith!”

“I’m done, Ales, and I refuse to accept any more,” she said. “If you won’t take me, I’ll find my own way. I’m not going to deal with you overriding my concerns and my opinions, and I will not deal with your mother anymore. I won’t!

“Sweetheart!”

She ignored his interruptions “I want you to keep Ricco for a little while, or send him back to baseball camp. At least until I’m capable of taking care of him. It’s a good thing my left foot is in

a cast, and not my right, so I'll still be able to drive and get around. It will probably be another couple of weeks until the insurance companies will settle. Until then, they will have to provide me with a rental car."

"Faith, you're not thinking straight," Ales said. "You haven't been cleared for driving."

She shook her head and winced at the movement. "I know enough people in Hancock that I'll be able to get around! You made your choice when you told Cybil she could come to our house after I had already said no. I didn't agree to this, Alessandro. I didn't."

"She didn't realize what those teenagers were doing," Ales protested.

"When you took me to that house, you said it was *our* home," Faith said in a voice that was devoid of all emotion. "It has never been *my* home. You picked it, and you made the decision to buy it. This time you have to live with the consequences of your actions."

She got to her feet unsteadily. "Jill, may I borrow your phone? I'm afraid mine is in a million pieces."

"I'll take you to Hancock," Jill said gently. "We'll go see if the paperwork has been completed to release you."

Faith nodded and sat wearily on the plastic chair and closed her eyes.

Jill bugged her eyes out at her brother, and she jerked her head, indicating he was to follow her into the corridor.

"She can't..." Ales started, but he was interrupted.

"She going to Hancock and you can't stop her," Jill whispered in the hallway. She rolled her eyes to the ceiling. "With Mom's help, you really screwed up this time, big brother! You know how much Faith's work means to her, and you overrode her objections. You told our mother she could stay at your house. Have you gone totally stupid?"

"You may not have helped destroy Faith's art, but you

allowed our mother in the house, and she did destroy it. That puts you on the top of Faith's shit list, and I don't blame her! Mom didn't need to go anywhere to recuperate! All she wanted was someone to wait on her hand and foot, and someone she could constantly bitch at and about!"

"I can't let her go to Hancock by herself! She can't drive, and the doctor said she should have someone with her. She can't be left alone!"

"Well, she's made it clear, she doesn't want you there!" Jill exclaimed angrily. "I'll go with her. You and Ricco can bunk over at my house and help Mack with my boys. My neighbor Louise, or Carrie, can keep an eye on them during the day.

"Maybe, Faith will calm down and see things clearer in a few days. What she needs right now is space and time to clear her thoughts. I'll go with her, and I'll do what I can, but Ales, you are in it deep this time. There's a reason Mack won't allow our mother in our home, and why I supported him when he made that decision. My husband, marriage and children were more important to me than dealing with our neurotic mother who doesn't give a damn about anyone but herself! We've all tried to help Mom, but she'd wreck all our lives if we let her!"

"I'M GOING to walk to Winchester's and see what kind of pie they have today," Jill said, from the sunroom doorway. Faith was sitting in a wicker settee. "If nothing else, all this heavy-duty hiking might take off a few pounds. Everything in this town is straight up or straight down. It's a wonder we don't get nosebleeds just from the constant change in altitudes!"

"You don't need to lose a few pounds," Faith said, setting her sketchpad aside. "You also don't have to leave the house to check in with Ales. I know you've been calling him."

Jill sat beside her sister-in-law. "He's worried, honey. No, I

take that back. He's scared shitless. It's been a week, Faith. He needs to see you."

"Most of the headaches have stopped, and I'm feeling better. It's nothing that the extra strength Tylenol they prescribed can't fix. I've been talking to Ricco every day. He knows I'm okay, and I think I can take care of myself now. You should go home," Faith said stubbornly.

"What about the rest?" Jill asked gently. "What about Alessandro and your marriage?"

Faith shook her head and got to her feet slowly. "It's too broken to fix," she said, barely audible.

"SHE'S NOT IMPROVING," Jill said to everyone at the table. This meeting at Winchester's Café had been planned. The Benedetti sisters and their spouses were sitting around the two small tables that had been shoved together. All the adults were there except the person they were discussing. "It's been two weeks, and she's despondent."

"She won't talk to me," Ales said. "I call every day, what am I supposed to do?"

"Maybe she needs counseling," John said.

"I suggested that," Jill said. "I also got my head chewed off. She said very clearly that she's not the one who needs a psychiatrist. Faith said she needs time to heal. She's not talking about her cuts and bruises."

"I don't mean to be unsupportive, but this situation isn't affecting only your family, Ales. We have boys at home who need their mother," Mack said. "We need some normalcy back in our lives and in our homes. Jill was practically living at the hospital, and now she's been here with Faith for weeks."

Ales nodded his head. "I agree, and this shouldn't be your problem. It's mine, and I have to deal with it."

“Any brilliant ideas?” Carrie asked.

“Not yet,” Ales said, sounding depressed himself.

Ales parked his truck on the driveway. He hadn’t parked inside the garage since the *incident*, which was what they all referred to what had happened to Faith’s artwork. Ricco had asked why his mother’s artwork was gone from her studio, and he’d tried to explain as best he could. More than anything, his son wanted to be with his mother.

“Dad!” Ricco exclaimed, jumping up from the coffee table where he’d been drawing a picture. Like his mother, their son was already proving to be a talent.

“Thanks, Mrs. Broschart,” Ales said to his retired neighbor who was babysitting for the evening.

“How is Faith?” his neighbor inquired.

Ales looked to his son. “Desperately wanting to see her son,” he said with a smile.

“I talk to Mom every day,” Ricco informed Mrs. Broschart. “She said she misses me!”

“I’ll bet she does,” Mrs. Broschart said. “If you need me, Ales, I’m a phone call away.”

“Thank you,” Ales said, walking the woman to the door, and keeping an eye on her until she’d entered her yard.

When their neighbor was gone, Ales sat beside his son. “What are you drawing?”

“Grandma’s house,” Ricco said. He studied his drawing. “Did I miss anything?”

Ales took the drawing and inspected it. “I don’t think so, but you can compare it to the painting your mother did, it’s still hanging in her studio.”

“I don’t want to go in there. Mom’s not there and most of her stuff is gone,” Ricco said sadly, looking at his drawing. “It’s not good yet. Not like Mom’s paintings, or even your drawings of the houses you build. Mom says I’ll get better as I get older.”

“You will, but this drawing is terrific,” Ales said. “I’m very

proud of your talent. I don't think I drew this well when I was your age. Why did you draw the house in Hancock?"

"Because it's her favorite," Ricco said. "We don't visit there very much since Grandma and Grandpa died, but it's still her favorite place. Mom said it's because that's where she was raised with so much love. When that lady who sells houses came around and asked Mom if she wanted to sell it, she said no. She told the lady that even if she didn't live there, it neutered her spirit and her creativity to know it had been in her family for a hundred and fifty years. That's a really long time. That's fifteen decades because a decade is ten years."

Ales smiled as he looked over the surprisingly detailed drawing of the 1869 Victorian house with all the ornamental designs of its day. "I agree it's a very long time. I think what Mom said was it *nurtures* her spirit and creativity. She needs that right now more than ever. Neutered means taking an animal to a veterinarian and having it operated on so it can't have babies."

"Is Mom happy living there by herself? Doesn't she miss us?"

"I think she does," Ales said. "I know we miss her. She does love that big old house. You know what's missing from your drawing?"

"What?" Ricco asked, frowning, and searching his drawing for details. "I tried to remember everything."

"It's missing us, with Mom," Ales said. "Why don't you draw us into your drawing? I'm going to clear the way for us to join Mom."

"Really?"

"Yeah, I know she'll be okay with you coming. She might send me packing. When you're finished, start gathering together whatever you want to take with you."

Ricco turned to his father. "Did you have a terrible fight with Mom or something?"

Ales nodded. "Yes, it's a grown-up thing between us. It doesn't mean we stopped loving each other or you. Okay?"

“Yeah, but you’re not allowed to get a divorce,” Ricco said.

“What do you know about divorce?”

“I know it’s when the dad goes away,” Ricco said fearfully. “There are a lot of kids in my class, at camp too. They don’t have dads that live with them anymore. I know kids that have dads that never come to visit them, ever. Marcy has a dad, but she doesn’t have a mother. That’s because her mother died in a car accident. Mom’s not hurt so bad that she’s going to die, is she?”

“No, your mother is getting stronger every day, and I’m not going away,” Ales said, hugging his son. “No matter what happens, I will always be your dad, and I will be there for you! Now, finish the drawing because Mom is going to love it, and start deciding what you want to take with you.”

“How long are we going to be there?”

“As long as we need to be there. We need Mom as much as she needs us.”