

To the One I Never Forgot



Christi Williams

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by
Christi Williams

Hawk Point, Wyoming

There's nothing like sitting around feeling sorry for yourself.

Dusk descended. With only the glow of her laptop's screen for illumination and with nothing that sounded more appealing than looking for clues by stalking people from high school on social media, Gianna propped her chin in her hand and continued to search. She was almost positive after so many fruitless nights that Zack wouldn't have friended any of these people. They hadn't ever liked him, and he had seemed oblivious to them and their exclusive groups. And she certainly didn't care about connecting with any of them.

Zack was the only one she was interested in discovering. He was the first and only one she had ever been interested in. But wasn't it just her luck that the people she really didn't have any fond memories of were so easy to find online? Just a few keystrokes brought up their broadly smiling faces. Minus the braces and acne, it was true, but still not any more attractive than they had ever been although she suspected they were much more likely to invent exciting backgrounds and beautiful wives earning top salaries in their fields. Not to mention perfect little families of two children who had lots of adorable pictures snapped while traipsing along on fabulous vacations.

Her own profile was pretty skimpy. She avoided having a recent picture taken because she still saw the same skinny nobody she had been back then when she looked in the mirror. She owned her own company, but didn't bring up its existence on her personal page. Most of her accomplishments and her education, along with her whereabouts, weren't available for public consumption. In fact, the only people she was connected to on social media had sought her out. She spent her time online looking, not interacting.

The one Gianna tried so hard to find—just to see how he was doing of course, if he was happy, if he had a good life—seemed to have disappeared off the face of the earth.

So far this had been yet one more wasted night. What did it say about her that she would rather stay home and look for Zack than start up again with somebody new? But the truth was she didn't want anybody else. She had never wanted anyone else. She had only ever wanted Zack.

Yet the thought nagged: wasn't it about time to give up? Anyone would tell her she had spent enough time chasing a dream. If her mother knew how Gianna spent her nights, she would try to get her back in therapy. So she didn't confide in her mother. In fact, she hadn't felt close to her mother in years...not since the last time Gianna had seen Zack. Six long years ago.

As she sat in the dark and the silence tapping keys, what the search engine brought up, as if it had been waiting for her to find it at just that moment of loneliness and bittersweet nostalgia, was a new website called *To the One I Never Forgot*. Similar to those sites where you could send an anonymous apology out into the ether for the unkind or downright cruel things you had done to other people and

always felt bad about, this site was a place to post memories of, and explanations to, the one who got away. As much as the apology sites, *To the One I Never Forgot* was not specifically designed to reach the person who had been wronged or left behind. The anonymous confessions were designed merely to ease the guilt of the guilty.

Well, she was that, Gianna thought. Guilty. She had always felt bad about the way she had let Zack slip away without a word. She still couldn't believe he could just disappear. He had to have had a reason, no matter how lame. Maybe if she took the time and wrote it all down, she would feel better about the non-resolution of their abruptly truncated affair. Maybe she could start to forget.

Before she could think better of it, she typed in a user name and a password, and created a profile along with a pretty, free stock picture of fireworks. And then she started typing.

To the one I never forgot,

I remember the first time I saw you. I was fifteen and starting a new school in a new town. I was late because Daddy had just got his new job and we hadn't moved soon enough to register for the school year. I was so nervous I couldn't eat breakfast, but my stomach felt sick as I walked into that classroom filled with people I didn't know. Most turned their heads and stared at me as I clutched my book bag to my stomach while trying to find an empty seat. But when you turned and looked at me, I remember you had the biggest, friendliest smile on your face, as if you had just been waiting for me all your life and were so glad to finally see me. You had on this shirt, some kind of safari shirt, it had five or six pockets, even one on the sleeve. I remember thinking you must be big into science or computers; no one with a hint of fashion sense would be caught dead in a shirt like that. I found a seat and class started. I was still feeling too anxious to really hear much of anything that was said, until my name was called. When I looked up, the whole class had craned their heads around again to look at me. And nobody looked exceptionally friendly. Nobody except, once again, you. Again you had that warm, wonderful smile on your face when you looked at me, and in your smile I found confidence. I knew we were destined to have meaning in each other's lives.

She stopped typing. Maybe that was enough. Maybe she had finally got it out of her system and could settle down to sleep. She signed the post *Brown Eyed Girl*, clicked SEND, logged off and closed the lid on her laptop, plunging the room into darkness.

Zack stared at the screen of his phablet. Almost as big as a tablet computer, it was also a full-featured camera phone. He knew he looked like a geek holding the thing up to his ear to talk, but what the hell, he was a geek so it didn't matter who knew it. The duality of the machine charmed him. It saved him from having to buy a computer, since he was seldom within reach of Wi-Fi to use the Internet. And when he needed a phone, which was even more seldom, he had the phone in the mini tablet, which was another good thing since he was rarely in the area of a cell tower. He supposed he could break down and pay for satellite communications up on the mountain. But there were so few people he needed to communicate with, he thought the expensive service for rural areas a waste of money.

He had come into town for supplies, autumn rapidly giving way to winter in the high country near South Pass. He owned a snowmobile, so it wasn't like he couldn't escape from his solitude if he really wanted to make the trip, but he didn't like the thought of being caught in an avalanche when winter truly arrived and the snow fell and melted to ice and then more snow fell on top, making conditions extremely treacherous. And anyway, he was a pretty careful guy. He liked the sight of food in his cupboards when he opened the doors, and so if he was a bit obsessive about stocking up, so what? Better safe than sorry.

But staying overnight in a motel so he could keep a longstanding dental appointment the next day wasn't his idea of time well spent. He couldn't sleep with all the coming and going in the parking lot, the vibrations in the walls from televisions turned up too loud, the slamming of room doors and echoes of

strangers' voices. He was especially bothered by the heavy tread of feet on the concrete walkway outside his room. He was grateful that at least he had snagged a room on the second floor and could probably convince his eyes to close as soon as things quieted down and everyone else settled in for the night.

Just a small touch of PTSD, he thought wryly, legacy of his time in the Middle East. He was glad that at least that he was on the second floor and didn't have to contend with the sounds of people walking overhead, which was something guaranteed to cause him a bad night.

Antsy but at the same time bored, idly scrolling the timeline of a social medium he rarely visited under the assumed name he sometimes had trouble recalling when too much time passed between sign ins, he barely noticed an invitation to "like" the page of a website called, of all the cheesy names, *To the One I Never Forgot*. He stopped, scrolled back up, and looked again. Then, curious in spite of himself and his initial reaction to the site's sentimental come-on, he clicked on the page.

"In the words of the immortal P. T. Barnum, there's one born every minute," he murmured to himself. But sucker or not, the next click on a blue URL link took him to the website. He hesitated at the requirements of user name and password. He was suspicious by nature, a trait almost ground into his pores during the war, and he was sure that he would have to cough up more personal information as well as a credit card number if he registered. But what the hell, he could afford it, and he had become skilled at making up a persona to fit any occasion. But to his surprise nothing else was required of him. When his invented login information was accepted, he was free to peruse the profiles of all the sad people pouring their hearts out as they described their long-lost loves.

It felt a tad creepy in a way, sitting in the dark in a rented room, reading all the angst-ridden stories of people looking for forgiveness for messing up and closure for relationships gone awry. He had never dreamed there were so many stories of metaphorical ships passing—or sometimes—colliding in the night, tales of old passions and the seeking of forgiveness and maybe even some hope of renewal. He found that although some were, most of the people doing the confessing weren't actually looking to take up again with lost loves. They seemed to be just trying to get past that place where they thought they had grievously wronged somebody, and years later still didn't have a clue how to go about trying to fix it.

He looked for a while, idly hoping he could soon log off and get to sleep. But the longer he looked, the more stupid he felt, like some kind of voyeur or something. He should get off the Internet and go to bed, whether sleep came or not. He wasn't sure what he thought he was doing wasting time on a website with a name like *To the One I Never Forgot*. He didn't readily admit to himself any longer that there was someone in his own past he had never forgotten, someone who still brought up unwanted and deeply buried pools of sorrow for a sweet connection severed without explanation and a solemn promise broken. He wasn't prepared to admit, even now, how much he missed Gianna.

And then he saw the profile picture of bright fireworks against a black night sky. He paused. Just like the fireworks from that night so long ago. He read the user name: Brown Eyed Girl. He thought, No, it couldn't be. And then he started reading.

It was that damned shirt. As soon as he read the entry and the description of the geek shirt he had once owned, he was sure he knew the author.

Gianna. It had to be.

The next day was a Monday. But a big attraction of owning her own company was she didn't have to go in to the office on Monday morning. Gianna didn't have an office. In fact, with the economic slowdown she had seen her fledgling business start to struggle financially. She was down to consulting with just a few firms, mostly in China where her designs had seen fruition during the boom times, and she did all her work from home.

A normal person would be ecstatic for the unexpected day off and a chance to sleep in, she thought. But she had gone beyond normal a long time ago, and instead she was wide awake at five A.M., tapping the keys on her computer as soon as the coffee in her one-cup system finished brewing. She didn't like to admit that maybe there was still something wrong with her, but as the years passed she was proving absolutely unable to sustain a relationship, becoming more and more resistant to starting up with someone new again, and it was getting harder and harder to deny that it was probably all her fault.

She did try. She tried to please. But she just wasn't very successful at it. She was too different. Take this morning, for instance. All she wanted to do was to check in and see if anyone had commented on her post. How pathetic was that, that the social highlight of her week would be an answer to a paragraph she left on a whim at a website, that could have described anyone's first day of class in a new town. Still, it was what she wanted to do. She had scant hope that Zack would have somehow miraculously seen her post and answered. Yet she had nothing better to do, she couldn't sleep, and so what was the harm in checking? It was nobody's business but her own if she was a loser.

But when she logged on, and checked her post, she saw that overnight it had become someone else's business.

To Brown Eyed Girl from Desert Rat,

I remember that shirt, it was a color somewhere between brown and olive. I thought it was pretty rad, but I remember you laughed at me whenever I wore it, even though you tried not to. And I remember you, too, from the very first time saw you. The way the light from outside framed your strawberry blond hair with a blazing circle of gold as you stood before the window. The way you clutched that book bag for dear life, your pretty long-fingered hands with the clean, shiny nails gone all white knuckled in terror. When you finally found an empty seat, you looked so relieved—until the teacher called your name and thrust you right back into the spotlight. I think I loved you then, from that moment when I first set eyes on you. You had a model's build, tall and slender and willowy, with such a long neck. And those pouty lips. What thoughts they inspired in a randy teenager. I think neither of us was prepared for the kinds of feelings we brought out in each other. We were way too young. Your mom was totally against us, and so you had to slip out even to study with me. I wanted you, though. Always. It wasn't long before I was burning for you. But you were afraid of the intensity of our feelings, I understand that now. I tried to wait for you to grow up. I shouldn't have tried to force you to a maturity you didn't possess.

Gianna found herself gnawing a knuckle. She couldn't believe it. She had lured him out of hiding. At last. She was sure of it. Nobody but Zack could have written that answer. Nobody but Zack would have understood.

So she had actually found him again. What were the odds against him visiting this new website on the very night she posted? Astronomical. Zack would know, oddball math freak that he probably still was, but the chances of finding him with that one post were vanishingly miniscule, she was sure.

So it must be fate that she finally found him, she told herself. It was destiny that she run across him again, at just the moment when she needed him so much. And he openly admitted that he had loved her all those years ago. A barely detectable handhold for her to cling to, but definitely visible for all the world to read, not just her.

She started typing frantically, afraid if she wasted a single moment more, his answer and maybe even he himself would vanish back into the guts of some anonymous server farm, never to be rediscovered.

To the one I never forgot,

I remember rides home from school on your motorbike. I remember sitting in the stands during football games with baked potatoes in our pockets to keep our hands warm. I remember doing homework together and watching movies in your basement. I remember spring dance, the blue dress I wore, and the look on your face when it first hit you that I had a pretty nice shape. I remember your mom's sugar

cookies, and you almost breaking your leg when you agreed to go horseback riding when I dared you, and then you ended up falling off. I remember picnics, and holding hands, and our first kiss. But what I remember best is loving you.

Brown Eyed Girl

She wanted to write more, but she made herself stop. She told herself she only wanted an explanation and then she would be content. She would see if Zack answered again. Before she said too much, before she tried to explain too much, too soon. Her minimal profile had been on social media sites for a long time, she used her real name and an old photo that he would recognize, and so she was easy to find. If Zack had wanted to contact her, he could have done so at any time over the years. But he hadn't.

She thought it was still possible she could make things infinitely worse than they already were. If it sounded like she was placing blame, she was afraid she could drive him so far away he would never come back. And then she would never know what had happened to them.

Zack was eating an early breakfast when he checked the phablet to see if Gianna had written any more. She had. Not much, but she had hit the highlights of high school, writing about a few memories that they shared.

Was she being extra careful, or did she truly only remember the teen romance novel stuff: football games and sugar cookies, dances and baked potato hand warmers.

How far would she go with this if he pushed her past high school? How far did he want to go down memory lane with its dangerous ruts and narrow escapes from falling off steep cliffs? He had planned to be back at the cabin in the mountains by dark tonight, where he would once more soon be cut off from the rest of the world by worsening weather. And then he would be alone. The way he liked it, he told himself, tugging thoughtfully at his lower lip.

He could just get up, pay his bill, and head out of town, leaving Gianna hanging. As she had left him hanging all those years ago. There would be a sort of karmic fairness in that, just turning and walking away from Gianna. A younger Zack might even have felt justified in paying her measure for measure.

But time and circumstances had conspired to replace that starry-eyed little nerd with a hard, lean ex-soldier who mostly preferred solitude and his own company. A man who didn't spend much time contemplating the feelings of himself or others. There was no point in looking inside. Or in looking back.

So what was he doing, playing Internet games with an old girlfriend? Was he bored? Was he lonely? Was he *out of his mind*?

Maybe...he was getting better. He didn't like to think about it too much, the fact that he had been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress and would likely have symptoms for the rest of his life. He had been advised that shutting himself off from society for months at a time was probably the wrong thing to do. That choosing no company but his own, and day after day of toil underground without even the healing rays of the sun, was a mistake. The doctor didn't come out and say he thought it was like being buried alive, but Zack got the distinct idea that's what he meant.

But, hell, maybe it wasn't a mistake. Maybe he had stumbled, all unknowing, into an unconventional treatment for his condition. A treatment that worked for him. After all, what had always been good for others had rarely been good for Zack. He had been different, was different, would probably always be different.

The only one who had ever begun to understand him, who really seemed to get what he was about, was Gianna. At least he thought that was the case until without a word she had turned her back on him.

So did he really want to dredge all that up again? A hard rock miner going exploring inside his own psyche. Hard telling what he might dig up.

But maybe the reason she had dropped him without telling him why was sitting waiting to be discovered. Maybe she would tell him now why she had ditched him without even the requisite Dear John email. Maybe, if he prodded her hard enough, she would tell him. Gianna had always been pretty easy for him to manipulate. She had always done what he wanted when he pressed her—because she loved him, he thought with a sharp twinge of guilt.

Yet if he wanted a quick answer so he could make an equally quick escape back to his mountain lair, like it or not he would have to tweak her a bit.

To Brown Eyed Girl from Desert Rat,

I remember those innocent high school days, too. But I also remember the summer after high school, the summer we left innocence behind. I remember stealing a bottle of your mom's wine with a name we couldn't pronounce, and heading for our favorite spot at the river. I remember the moon was up, reflecting in your wide eyes. I remember tasting pinot grigio with your kisses, and undoing your blouse one slow button at a time. We were both virgins—how long ago was that, when we were innocent and just beginning to explore our sexuality? I admit I shouldn't have rushed you into that kind of relationship. Your mom didn't even let you date. You were younger than your years. Vulnerable. And I knew that. But I had just a few precious months left, and I wanted you so bad. I shouldn't have hurried you. I should have waited. I realize that now.

He stopped. Would she answer? He would have been willing to bet that she wouldn't. She had always shied away from the truth, maybe not even admitting to herself, let alone her gargoyle of a mother, that their relationship had gone beyond loving friendship. He remembered how she looked, naked in the moonlight. He remembered her sweet taste, and the flowery smell of her hair, and the feel of her long, smooth legs sliding along his hips as he sank into her warmth. He remembered his fumbling inexperience that first time, and how they had quickly learned each other's bodies over the next few months, what pleased...and beyond mere pleasure, what made them catch their breath in an ecstasy of desire.

He remembered that she wouldn't talk about it. Ever. As if speaking of what they did together every chance they got to be alone would make it real.

He pinched the bridge of his nose. What was the use? It was way too late for him and Gianna. They were different people now, she surely as much changed as he, with the passage of time...and the long silence of the distance between them.

Gianna's breath caught. Desert Rat's latest reply was so personal. Definitely meant for her alone. And so revealingly suggestive, although he stayed within the site's PG rated guidelines.

But it was clear that she wasn't the only one who remembered what it had been like between them. Two gawky teenagers who fit so well together, the outsiders in any group, whose virtuous beginning as friends had blossomed that fateful summer into heated sensuality. She could recall the feel of his hands on her, the way he fit inside her, the smell of their lovemaking. She had given everything she had to Zack. And since he found it so easy to walk away from her without a backward glance, she wondered if what Zack had felt for her back then was truly love—or just whether constantly being thrown together on the fringes of any social activity caused him to turn to her as some sort of consolation prize.

Well, here he was. In the flesh, so to speak, after all the intervening years. If she really wanted to get at the truth, all she could do was ask. Maybe he would even answer.

To the one I never forgot,

I remember there were those who considered us an oddity, the weird couple. A joke. But what I felt for you had little to do with our outsider status. I didn't love you just because we were on the fringes together looking in.

I couldn't understand how the other girls weren't as crazy for you as I was. You were beautiful to me. Your eyes were always warm when you looked at me. You always had a smile for me, your fingers always searched mine out, your arm going easily around my shoulder. Ready for hugs. Ready for kisses. Ready to prop me up when I was feeling at my lowest.

It's true I lost my way that summer, and for a long time I didn't know how to get back. Daddy died and then you were leaving, and I didn't know what I was going to do without you. But nothing that happened between us involves any blame on your part. I meant to make love with you. I meant it with all my heart. What I gave to you I gave freely. I loved you. How could I have let you go without sharing that love with you?

Brown Eyed Girl

She stopped typing, hesitated, and then clicked SEND. She felt constrained by the fact that anyone who stumbled across this exchange could read what she was writing and judge her for being so weak. Already her and Zack's conversation was one of the highest rated on the site; she had to wade through a long string of comments to find his answers. They had hundreds of readers, which was ironic considering how unpopular they had once been, separately and together. She had so much to tell him, and so many questions she wanted to ask, but it didn't feel right to lay herself bare for the world to examine. Yet unless she revealed to the world what had truly happened that summer, how could she expect him to keep reading long enough to understand?

Here was her chance, the opportunity she had yearned for to finally set things right with him. In the end if he walked away from her again, at least she had had her say. She wouldn't have to hold her feelings inside anymore, waiting for the day they finally ended up flowing over her and drowning her in a river of burning sorrow.

She could let it all out, and hope that Zack would follow her lead and let it all out along with her. After all, no one besides the two of them knew who Brown Eyed Girl and Desert Rat were in real life. It didn't make any difference to anyone but the two of them if they aired long buried secrets online.

Zack sat back against the booth, studying what Gianna had written. There was something off about her posts. He didn't understand how she could still be professing her love for him when she had been the one to dump him like last week's stinking garbage. He felt the waitress eyeing him again, giving him the fisheye for having lingered so long over breakfast. She probably wanted to clear his booth, wipe the table, and collect her tip. It was time for him to go. If he wanted to say anything more to Gianna before his dental appointment, he'd better get to typing. But he didn't know if he wanted to say more. He didn't know if he wanted to pursue this at all. It was ancient history, done and gone, water under the proverbial bridge.

Ah, shit! he thought, as despite himself his fingers started typing.

To Brown Eyed Girl from Desert Rat,

To my way of thinking you were never odd. You were the best thing that ever happened to me. I felt so lucky when you walked into my life. Nobody before had ever really understood me. You were like my other half, like we were meant for each other.

You knew I had enlisted. We agreed that it was probably the only way I could pay for college, which you said was important to you. I thought I was doing what you wanted. You said you would wait. I had no inkling that when I left it would be the end for us.

As the days passed and I didn't hear anything from you, I thought you had decided we had made a mistake. I knew your mom was happy to see me go, and for all I knew, maybe you had decided that you were glad too.

He willed himself to stop. Enough. Enough already with dredging up the past. As he had learned the hard way, continuing to pick the scabs off old wounds only ensured that they would never heal. He had scars instead of scabs, because he refused to let the past influence the present. He clicked SEND with an air of finality, swallowed the last of his cold coffee, reached into his back pocket for his wallet, threw some bills on the table and left the restaurant.

Gianna read and then re-read Desert Rat's last comment. She was shocked at the idea that he thought she was the one who had inexplicably discarded him. He was obviously still angry and hurt. Had they both been mistaken about the other's motives for letting go? Would it have been so easy to correct if she had just contacted him instead of letting the hurt silence stretch out for months...and then years? Was it possible? Could two so allegedly intelligent people have been so blindly stupid?

She wondered if there was any hope of fixing this situation after all this time, or if she should just let the past remain truly past.

She heard a noise in her quiet apartment, and suddenly realized she wasn't the only one awake now. Before receiving her usual morning kiss, before taking up again the comforting routine of the life she led, she would try one more time.

*To the one I never forgot,
I don't understand. I am still waiting.
Can we meet?
Brown Eyed Girl*

She hadn't asked if he were in a relationship. She had just assumed he wouldn't be. Which was naïve at best. Why wouldn't he be married, or at least seeing someone? Up until a few days ago, she herself had been entangled in yet another dead end affair that concluded by going nowhere. She was the one who apparently couldn't bond with an adult member of the opposite sex. She had no reason to suspect Zack couldn't sustain a loving relationship. So why wouldn't he have someone special after all this time?

She went through the motions of her day while she waited, nervously checking for an answer whenever she had a spare moment. By late afternoon she had about given up. She felt extremely let down and recognized she was teetering on the edge of the chasm of depression. All she had to show for a day and a night of renewed hope were a sour stomach and some startlingly rude comments concerning her request to take Brown Eyed Girl and Desert Rat offline, as if people who had been tagging along for the exchange thought they were somehow owed the final outcome. But historically there had already been too much interference in what happened between herself and Zack. She owed an explanation only to him, and maybe he owed her one as well.

As she chewed her lip, suddenly an answer popped up on the screen.

*To Brown Eyed Girl from Desert Rat,
I've been asking myself all day if it would change anything if we met now. But the truth is, I've been waiting too.*

Where are you?

Her heart clenched in her chest. He was wavering. As if he would change his mind if she didn't answer immediately, Gianna typed fast, feeling she couldn't make her fingers fly over the keyboard swiftly enough.

*To the one I never forgot,
I'm still near the place where the rockets went off.
Brown Eyed Girl
The answer appeared instantaneously.
To Brown Eyed Girl from Desert Rat,*

Meet me.

Zack paced along the riverbank. A lot had changed since he had been here last, in just a few months more houses and streets and the detritus of development crept ever closer to what had been a wonderful and wild place. Here he and Gianna had first made love, well hidden from prying eyes by a thick screen of willows. Now the banks were trampled and a boardwalk path, mowed grass, and a ragged line of sickly looking saplings followed the contours of the water. Here they had watched the annual fireworks show before setting off some better internal ones for each other as they shed their clothes and joined young bodies to become one.

They had both shown so much promise, individually and together. What they lacked in social skills they made up for with whip-crack intelligence. It was odd that their relationship had come apart so rapidly, and even more strange that they were both apparently still tied to this little town of Hawk Point where they had first met and which had been so discouraging for them. They had been held back by society and held apart by Gianna's wealthy mother's disapproval of the boy who wasn't good enough for her daughter, yet still back then he had thought they would somehow have a future together. If only things had been different. If only Gianna had waited. Maybe now he could finally find out the truth of what happened to cancel that outcome.

He heard a car approaching, and then, suddenly, before he had fully prepared himself to see her again, there she was. She climbed out of the driver's side of the vehicle, the long legs that he still dreamed about unfolding as she stood to her full height. A little boy who didn't look very much like her, with his dark hair and olive skin, scrambled out the other side and headed across the grass toward the water.

"Be careful," she called after the boy, in the voice Zack's heart still remembered. "Stay well away from the river!"

"I will," the boy yelled back over his shoulder, already stooping for a rock to throw in the sluggish current.

Well, it would have been too much to expect that Gianna would remain completely as he remembered her. No more a girl, she was all woman now: apparently a mother. Maybe she had a husband waiting at home for dinner. Maybe she had other children besides this one young boy, who although he didn't much resemble his mother, yet looked familiar to Zack.

Gianna peeled her gaze from the boy and pushed her hair back from her eyes. She gave Zack a tentative smile as she checked him out thoroughly, eyes scanning his torso and down his legs and then slowly back up. "Hello, Zack," she said with a smile. "You look good. You've filled out."

Despite his intentions, he felt himself heating at her perusal of his body. "The same back at you, Gianna," he mumbled, thinking she might not take it so well if he returned the favor of ogling her.

"Well..." she said, after an awkward pause.

"Well," he echoed. "We seem to owe each other some kind of explanation. Would you like to go first?"

She eyed a bench bolted to a concrete pad near the wooden walkway. "Could we sit, so neither of us has the sun in our eyes?"

They moved to sit side by side, and he had to admit it was better not to have to stand and stare at each other.

"I had a...breakdown that summer," she said quietly, without preamble. "I couldn't handle what was happening with Daddy, and then with you. I know you'll find it hard to believe in this age of instant communication across all kinds of devices, but I was prevented from contacting you. Mother took away

my phone and my laptop, and locked me in my room. And as you know, I didn't have close friends to check on me. There was no one to help me get a message to you."

He looked out over the water. With anyone else, he would have had trouble believing this lame explanation. But since it was Gianna, who had always seemed fragile to him, and knowing her mother and how she had never liked him, he had to accept that she was telling him the truth.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't know."

"Nobody said anything to you? I assumed people knew. That someone would tell you that I had...cracked up." She glanced sideways at him.

"Nobody said a word to me," he assured her, and hoped she would give him the benefit of the doubt and believe the truth when she heard it. "Maybe they thought I didn't want to hear anything about you since it looked like we broke up."

She looked out over the water instead of in his direction. "When I didn't start to get better right away," she said softly, "Mother had me put away for a few months."

"Put away? In an institution?"

"Yes. A very nice, very expensive hospital for people who couldn't handle it when things went wrong in their lives."

"Gianna, I had no idea. Why didn't you try to contact me, to tell me any of this, when you got out?"

"When I got home, and could finally check my phone, I saw there hadn't been even one message or call from you. I realized Mother could have erased them, but when none arrived from then on I just thought you didn't want to hear from me."

He swallowed painfully. "I did write to you. When there was no answer, I thought you didn't want to hear from *me*," he said, realizing her mother must have destroyed his letters before Gianna could see them. He rubbed his eyes. "We were so young. And, it turns out, so incredibly short sighted. Have you been all right since then?"

"I still have episodes of depression, but nothing like that. And, anyway, it wasn't all bad. By the time the doctors discovered I was carrying Zachary," she smiled in the little boy's direction, "it was too late for Mother to do anything about it. When I got better I moved out of her house and into an apartment, over her strenuous objections. It was hard going to school and caring for a small child, but I stuck it out and borrowed as much as I could until I got my trust fund from Daddy. It was important to me, so I did get my degree: I'm an architect. With Daddy's money and Zachary being so young, now I don't have to work if I don't want to. But I will want to. Zachary is growing up, so the day when I want to build up my business again is coming very soon."

He didn't say anything for a while. He heard everything she said, but had focused in with laser-like intensity on only one thing. Rubbing his chin, his eyes following her gaze toward the boy, he asked, "Zachary?"

"Your son." She turned to him and smiled. "I've been anxious to tell you about him. Would you like to meet him?"

"Wow. Wait," he said, his heart suddenly lurching along and stumbling in his chest, making it hard for him to breathe. "Give me just a minute to absorb what you're telling me."

Why hadn't he guessed? Of course the kid looked hauntingly familiar to him. Zachary was the image of Zack himself at that age.

"Of course. I don't mean to rush you." She waited, and he thought how utterly selfish he must sound. She had given him more than five years already to prepare to accept her shocking news. The first of those years he had spent just trying to stay alive in the desert of the Middle East, and then the time since he had returned home he had been so selfishly absorbed with his own raw needs. It had been his choice to remain hidden from discovery, his conscious decision to never try to touch base with her again. He had

gotten out of the Army and burrowed into his mine shaft like a wounded animal. He couldn't blame Gianna for not finding him before, when he had done everything he could not to be found.

"I'll give you the short version. Here's the thing: I have PTSD," he finally said. "I took a few classes in the military, but I never finished college. I live alone in a cabin in the hills. I work a gold claim. I put what I make in the gold mine into the stock market. I'm sick, but I'm rich."

She laughed, the sound ringing out across the water, causing the little boy to turn and look at them. It was a healing sound, one that started to breach the cold distance between the two adults. "Oh, Zack. We are a pair, aren't we? Mother would be proud of you," she said with a giggle.

"She would, wouldn't she? Having money was always pretty important to her."

"So if you live in the mountains now, 'Desert Rat' comes from the war?"

He nodded. "It seemed appropriate. I'm not sure if there are any mountain rats."

"I don't know either. Pikas, I think. Well, it sounds as if neither of us is much stronger emotionally than we ever were, but at least we have money," she said. She didn't sound as if that made any more difference to her than it ever had. "Tell me: are you happy, Zack?"

"I'm not sure, Gianna. I don't know if I'm capable of being happy. I know I haven't really thought about happiness since...well, since I went away. What about you? Are you happy?"

"Zachary definitely makes me happy, but I'm still...I don't know, I feel half-finished or something. I'm a mother, but not a complete woman. Does that make sense? I haven't been right, not really, since you left."

He reached for her hand, clasped her fingers. "So what now?"

She curled her hand in his. "What do you want to do, Zack?"

"We have unfinished business between us. I'm thinking I would like to try to get back to where we were, but I don't know if that's possible now. Is there anyone else in your life?"

She shook her head. "I could never make it work with anyone else. It was just always wrong. Never right."

"Sounds familiar. Listen, I could try to find a place in town. See how it goes. I'm not real comfortable around people anymore. Or...you and Zachary could maybe come home with me."

"Zachary's in kindergarten. We couldn't live in the mountains except for summers. But you could come live with us. See how it goes."

"I have nightmares," he said. "I'm not the easiest guy to live with. I have moods, and sometimes I wake up screaming."

"Zachary should know his own father. I'll do my best to deal with your issues. Will you return the favor?"

He thought of living in town, of the ton of supplies he would have to store in order to spend the winter at her place. They wouldn't go hungry, that was for sure, even if they never got out of bed for the whole season.

"I promise I will try my hardest to be a regular guy." He leaned to kiss her. Memories of other times and other kisses flooded him. She was like—and yet not like—the Gianna he remembered. In some ways she was very familiar, and in others she was a stranger. She probably felt the same way about him. They each had big, complicated emotional problems. Yet they were still more alike than anyone else was like them, as if they really had been made for each other. As her lips parted under his persistent assault, he felt like he had a puddle of hot oil inside and someone was cranking up the wick. But before he could actually burst into flames, she ended the kiss and drew away. He turned his head in the same direction her face was pointed, to see the sturdy little figure at water's edge, gazing at the sight of Mommy kissing a stranger.

"Poor kid," he murmured. "Does he have any idea?"

“I haven’t said anything to him about you yet. But he’ll be all right. He’s a pretty tough little boy.” She held tightly to Zack’s hand and he clutched her fingers back as if holding tightly to life itself, while she raised her voice to call: “Zachary, honey, come over here. There’s somebody special that you need to meet.”

Zack was glad Gianna wasn’t the kind of mother to push her child into something he wasn’t ready for. After dinner, after she got the boy ready for bed, there had been no request for a bedtime story from Zack or even a hug. He would be granted time to grow into the role of father to his child.

He was glad, too, that she wasn’t the kind to keep the TV on endlessly. He had become used to silence, and could barely tolerate the constant electronic noise most people seemed to crave. It didn’t take long for Gianna to return from tucking in Zachary. When the boy was finally asleep and she came to sit beside Zack on the couch, it was as if no time at all had passed and they had regressed to a younger version of themselves.

He reached for her. “Is it too soon to take up where we left off?”

“Oh, Zack, it’s been too long,” she answered, already undoing the buttons of her blouse and then working on those of his shirt as he kissed her. Their lips met, and she tilted her head and opened her mouth to his questing tongue. When he could force his lips from hers, they were both panting for breath. Her blouse lay open and he trailed kisses down her neck to the valley between her breasts.

“Sweet, sweet Gianna,” he breathed against her skin, making her shiver. “I’ve been a selfish ass. I am so sorry.”

Her fingers twined in his hair. “Please don’t apologize. We both made mistakes. In a way we are the immature people we were, but we’re also totally grown-up and new. We just need to start over.”

He tugged with his lips at the lace over one breast. “I like the new you,” he whispered. “As much as I liked the other one. She was a pretty girl but you are beautiful. Womanly. Sexy. You smell good.”

“And you’re much more handsome,” she whispered back. “Hot. A hunk even. I love the feel of you beneath my hands, so hard and manly. Wait, that didn’t sound right. Your chest is so hard and manly.”

He laughed quietly so as not to wake the little boy, cupping her breasts with his hands. “I know what you meant, but we’ll get to the other hard, manly parts in due time. Would you like to continue this reunion out here on the couch, or in your bed?”

“In our bed,” she corrected. “Everything I am, everything I have, I give to you. I just hope it’s enough.”

They stood, slowly making their way to the bedroom, stopping for more kisses and to shed various articles of clothing piece by piece along the way.

He urged her back on the bed in her room, spreading her legs and looking his fill before kissing every inch of her and then guiding himself into her remembered warmth. He clasped both of her hands, raising them over her head as her legs wrapped around him with the slide of silky skin, just like he remembered. “I love you,” he said. “Only you, Gianna. Always you.”

“And I love you.” The dim light from the living room reflected in her eyes. “My Zack. My only one. The one I could never forget.”

Zack opened his eyes the next morning to sun streaming in the window. For a moment, he couldn’t remember where he was. His eyes scanned the pale pink walls, the sheer curtains tied back at the sides of the window, the raised white blind with a fringe on the bottom. A female’s bedroom, for sure. And then he remembered, he had spent the night with Gianna, an all grown up Gianna who had learned a thing or two about heated, satisfying sex while he had been away.

So she hadn't been a nun, but he hadn't been anything resembling a monk either. And so they would accept the people they were now, and go on from here.

He wondered what time it was. He never slept late. But he never slept as well as he had last night, spooned with Gianna's ass up against his semi-hard cock all night, without a hint of the night terrors that sometimes kept him awake.

He could smell coffee, probably the scent that had awakened him by wafting into his nose from the kitchen, and either pancakes or waffles cooking. He could hear Gianna talking, but nobody answered, so he assumed she was on the phone. He rolled his head to the side on the crisp pillowcase and prepared to slide his legs out of bed.

His eyes widened. Good thing he hadn't just popped naked out of bed, since Zachary was standing in the open doorway, watching him. Still dressed in his super hero pajamas, the boy had a plastic truck clutched in one hand.

"Good morning," Zack said, sitting up with the sheets tucked around him. The little boy just looked at him without answering.

"Sure smells good in here. Your mom making breakfast?"

Zachary nodded. "I'm going to Grandma's after we eat," he said.

"You like to spend time at Grandma's?" Zack asked.

The boy nodded. "She lets me watch movies on TV and we go shopping, and out to lunch sometimes." There was a brief pause. "My mom said you're my dad."

The segue in the conversation caught Zack off guard. He hesitated, wondering how far he should go since he didn't know how far Gianna had pursued the subject with Zachary. "Did your mom say that to Grandma, or to you?" he hedged.

"To Grandma. Then I could hear Grandma's voice getting real loud, so I guess she didn't like hearing that you're my dad."

"Well, it's the truth. I am your dad. Don't worry, Grandma will get used to the idea eventually. But how do you feel about it? About me being your dad?" Zack held his breath, waiting for the boy's answer. He had missed so much of Zachary's life already. He could accept Gianna's mother's poor opinion of him; she had never liked him so it didn't hurt his feelings to find out she hadn't changed her mind in the intervening years. But if the child couldn't accept him as his father, it could make for a tense situation, living with Gianna and Zachary.

The boy tilted his head, dark eyes never leaving Zack's face. "Do you play baseball?" he asked.

"I do, a bit. I'm not very good at it, but I know how to play. I know a little more about basketball, but I'm not very good at that either. I'm good at electronics, though. I can program a computer," Zack offered.

The boy shrugged, unimpressed by Zack's technical skills. "I'm in Tee Ball already, so I don't need to learn that. But I would like a basketball hoop."

Great. His kid was into sports, his own least accomplished area. Zack said, "We will get a basketball hoop, and then you and I can practice whenever you want."

"Okay," the boy said, at the same time his mother called out, "Zachary, it's time to get dressed now."

Gianna came to stand in the doorway behind their son.

"If you want breakfast, you better get dressed too," the dark-eyed boy advised Zack.

"Good idea," Zack said. Gianna placed her hands on Zachary's shoulders and then smiled at Zack as she turned the boy toward his own room.

Then she just stood looking at Zack, a musing smile curving her lips as she gazed at him, caught in a shaft of sunlight in her bed.

“What?” he whispered. He knew his body was just okay. He stayed in decent shape in the mine, but he would never win any prizes in the pecs and abs department. He just hoped he wasn’t too big a disappointment when seen in all his naked glory in the daylight.

“I’m just looking at you, enjoying the sight of you. I still can’t believe you’re really here.”

“Zachary heard you tell his grandma that I’m his dad,” he said in a low voice.

“I figured as much. But I had to let her know you were here before she came to pick him up. She’s still a little...unpredictable sometimes.”

He hesitated, unsure how far to go with this, or even if he had a right to approach the subject. “I think it’s good that they have a relationship. That you allow them have one, in spite of everything.”

“There’s no question that my mother does love Zachary. And she’s good to him. I’m still not too sure whether she really loves me, but I guess at this point that’s neither here nor there.”

“I love you. That’s what counts; that we love each other,” Zack said. “I think we’re going to be all right. I’ll be here for you and for our son from here on out, Gianna.”

Tears shimmered in her eyes as she nodded. “Let’s eat. We’ll start out slow, doing all the normal little things other families do, and work our way up to the big ones.”

“Sounds like a plan,” he said as he rose to get dressed, hurrying to join his newly discovered family for a breakfast that smelled nothing short of heavenly.