

CHAPTER ONE

I hadn't seen my father since I was fourteen and he bailed me out of jail for hacking into the school computers to change a few grades. I would have had said the intervening sixteen years had been kind to him if my doormat hadn't been being splattered with his blood. Okay, so there were only a couple of drops of blood on the mat, but still...

"Hi, Jac. Long time, no see. Can I come in?"

I always wondered where I'd gotten my dark sense of humor. Now, I knew.

My head swam with a million questions, the first one being, what was he doing here? I stepped back and swung my arm like a showcase model on *The Price is Right*. I wanted to say something, anything, but my throat had seized, shutting down my ability to speak or breath.

"Thanks," he said, but before he could take a step, I held up my hand.

I forced in a breath and a calmness I didn't feel. "Wait. You've already made a mess of my *Wipe Your Paws* doormat. I happen to like my carpet." I grabbed the dishtowel I'd left on the arm of the my sofa after dinner and shoved it toward his hand pressing on his shoulder. He pressed the towel against one of the slits in his green *Kiss Me – I'm Irish* T-shirt, which now resembled a cheap imitation of a Picasso Christmas tree, streaks and blobs of red on green. He walked through the door, into my house and apparently back into my life.

"So, let's see," I started, trying to sound mature, but the squeaky voice and nervous licking of my lips made me realized I was falling way short. "I haven't seen you in sixteen years, four months, and six days. I guess a gapping gunshot wound warrants a visit to your daughter."

What do I say to this man...my father? How do I treat him? He was a stranger, and yet, not really. Should I hug him? Cuss him? Should I have slammed the door in his face? Why was he here now wanting my help when he hadn't been there when I needed his. The rapid fire questions rolling through my mind had my head spinning and my heart bouncing like a basketball.

I had always known my dad was involved with some of the shadier sides of law enforcement, and as a child I'd envisioned a variety of scenarios where we would meet again, but none of them involved blood. Most revolved around my father throwing himself at my feet begging that I forgive him for not being around. Well, that was one fantasy gone.

"Knife," he grunted, releasing the pressure to check the flow of blood. He glanced around the living room. "Just need a bandage and I'll be gone. You here alone?"

The child in me wanted to wrap my arms around his waist and beg him not to leave. The adult in me wanted to wrap my hands around his neck and squeeze until his eyes bugged out or he begged me to forgive him and let him stay.

I did neither.

"I'm alone. Come on, this way." I led him down the hall to my bathroom. The soles of my house shoes scuffed on the hardwood floors as I walked. The absolute silence behind me had me glancing over my shoulder to make sure he was still there. He was...in stealth mode. Professional training in action.

I pointed to the toilet seat. "Sit."

For once in my life, a man did as I asked. It was a heady experience.

"I don't know exactly what to say, Walt. Been a while? How you been? Killed anyone lately?" Bitchiness oozed through my pores, a teenage, bitchy petulance I had no trouble giving in to even though I'd long since aged beyond fourteen.

"Dad."

"Excuse me?"

"I'm your dad, not Walt."

I gave an exaggerated snort. "Right. So, *Walt*," I began again, "how'd you know where I lived? I don't remember sending you my change of address notice." I paused as I cut the hem of his shirt, then ripped it open to expose the source of the blood. "Oh yeah, I forgot. You're a spook. You can find out anything."

This was hard...seeing this man, my father, pale and bleeding in my bathroom. I fought tears of anger at all the lost years, or maybe they were tears of fear that he would die and I'd never get a chance to know him and, damn it, I did want to know my father.

"That's enough, Jacqueline Olivia Black. I did what I thought was right for you and for your mother."

Wow. The whole name. I straightened my back and squared my shoulders. Even at thirty, parental use of the full name made my insides quiver, but at least that dried up those annoying tears. I slammed my mouth shut. I'd be damned if I'd let him know how I felt.

He dug into his jeans pocket and tossed me a set of keys. "Move my car into your garage, okay? I've got this."

I caught the keys in mid-air and tried to give him an *I'm-an-adult-and-you-can't-tell-me-what-to-do* look, but he frowned at me, so I don't think my message got through. I blew out an exaggerated sigh and headed to do his bidding, which only served to weaken my grown-up attitude.

I was livid at me for letting this man who'd walked out on me get under my skin. But when I saw the Porsche 911 Turbo parked in my driveway, my car gene began to hum. My dream car. I thought seriously about a lap around the block before I hid it in my garage, but I didn't. Parental pressure, even from a long-lost parent, was a bitch.

By the time I got back in the house, Walt was standing bare-chested and bare-footed in my kitchen brewing a pot of coffee. I remembered his hair as being dark, but now, the dark hair was streaked with shots of gray. I was forced to admit it made him look distinguished. Mom, known to local society as Mitzi Rothchild, had always told me he'd been a lady killer. Looking at the three bandages on his left side, I now wondered if Mom had meant ladies loved him or he actually killed ladies.

I dropped into one of the kitchen table chairs. "So, what happened?" I wanted to ask why he was here, at *my* house, drinking *my* coffee, using *my* bandages. He could have gotten a Starbucks on any corner and a bandage at any drugstore. Well, the bloody shirt might have been a problem, but why my house and why now? But I didn't ask. I think I was afraid of what his answers might be.

He jerked open the door of the freezer compartment of refrigerator, the cold air billowing into my warm kitchen. He glanced over his shoulder. When he did, I noticed for the first time that his right eye was swollen and turning a nasty shade of eggplant. "Wow. I didn't notice your eye shadow before now. Is that the latest shade on the runways?"

He picked up a bag of frozen peas, pressed it over his eye socket, and slammed the freezer door. "God, you've still got a smart mouth." He sighed. "The eye wasn't this bad when I came in." He waved the peas. "Hope you don't mind."

I shrugged. Not like I could do anything about it if I did. Having my long-gone father standing in my kitchen, making coffee, and pressing a frozen bag of peas to his blackening eye had a surreal feel. I wondered if I was asleep and this whole bizarre dream was due to a late-night carb overload.

He helped himself to a mug and some milk for his coffee. "You want some?"

I shook my head. "Too late for me. Caffeine and all that."

He nodded and sat at my table. "Sorry to drag you into this. Your house was close and I needed to get off the street."

"You haven't dragged me into anything, at least not yet. I'm assuming no hospital?"

He shook his head.

"Damn it, Walt. And I'm assuming no explanation?"

"It'd be better if I didn't."

My gut was on fire from the acid rolling around inside, slowing eating away the lining. "Don't you think I deserve one? You drop in after no contact for sixteen years just to use my bathroom and you don't think I deserve an explanation?" My voice got louder with each word. "I'm not fourteen anymore."

He shook his head again. "Sorry, Jac. It's ugly and nasty and I wouldn't have involved you at all if I could have avoided it." He placed his hand over mine. "I love you, Jac. Always have, always will. I'd die to protect you, but trust me this time." He gave my hand a little squeeze. "Maybe it'd be better if I left. I'm feeling better and I'm sure I can drive myself now." He swayed when he stood.

My heart shot into a rapid tattoo inside my chest and I wondered if he could see my pulse throbbing in my neck. He was leaving? Not fair.

"Stay the night. I want you to. You look like you need to." It was hard to choke out words. Not because I didn't mean them, I did. Only because I didn't want him to know how much I meant them. "I only have the living room couch. My guest room is my office."

"Thanks, Jac. The couch will be fine." He walked unsteadily to the coffee maker to pour another cup. "I think I might have lost more blood than I thought." He dropped heavily into a chair, clasping the mug between his hands as though it were a life preserver and he were a man in the middle of an ocean. "Your mom tells me that you're doing quite well these days with your computer work." His hands had a slight shake as he lifted the cup of coffee to his mouth.

I wanted answers. Hell, I deserved answers, but I'd lost my will to battle after that first view of his shaking hands. In my mind, my father was a mythical strongman...nothing could dent his amour. Now, I could see the chinks and teenage resentment still festering inside died.

"Computer programming," I corrected, wondering if I were doing the right thing in letting him stay and not insisting he go to an emergency room. "And when did you talk to mom?"

He shrugged and said nothing.

Frankly, I was having trouble carrying on a conversation. All the blood flooding my brain made me dizzy and my thoughts somewhat disjointed. But, he'd asked, so I tried. "I did some computer software programming for a gaming company last month that seemed to really go well. I'm working on some education programs right now."

"I'm proud of you, Jac." The volume of his voice had gotten softer, as though each word was a struggle.

I smiled, insanely pleased by his compliment. "Yeah, I haven't hacked a computer in at least a month or more."

He narrowed his eyes. "Not so easy to get you out of trouble now."

"Kidding, Walt. It's been at least six months."

He smiled. It was his own brand of humor coming back at him.

"I didn't know you and Mitzi still spoke."

He gave a little chuckle. "You call her that to her face?"

"Are you kidding? Only when I want to get under her skin. So, y'all talk?"

He gave another careless shrug. "Sometimes. After all, I had two children with the woman. I like to keep up."

A wave of remorse and sadness swept through me. "You could have called and asked, you know."

"I always thought it was better if I stayed out of your lives. You and Clint have grown into good, responsible adults thanks to your mom. She did a good job and so did Skip. She was good about keeping me up to date on you guys."

Skip Rothchild, Mitzi's second husband. She'd married Skip when I was seven, a year after she and dad divorced. Skip had been a wonder surrogate father and role model for me and

Clint. It was because of him and his software company that I developed such a strong interest in the field.

“Skip’s all right.” I stood, strangely uncomfortable discussing my mother’s husband with him. It felt like I was two-timing both Skip and Walt. “I’ll grab a pillow and a blanket from the linen closet, if you’re sure you’ll be okay there. You could sleep in my bed and I can stay on the couch. It wouldn’t be the first time I slept there.”

“No. I’ll be fine. I appreciate all you’ve done.”

I shrugged. “No problem.”

After he settled on the couch, I went to my office and worked. Seeing my dad, talking to him after so long, I was on an adrenaline high. Mind raising. Blood flowing. Might as well not waste the energy.

At three a.m., I looked in on him in the living room. He was asleep, on his right side. Probably the fresh cuts on his left couldn’t take the pressure.

I set the house alarm and went to bed.