

Second Chances

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Prologue

October

It was a long way from the little town of Coventry to the city, even at the speeds they were traveling. Cassie reclined her seat a bit more and laid her head back with a sigh. The sporty little car wasn't exactly made for stretching out in, but her new position was a little more comfortable. Who knew having a baby would be so exhausting?

She supposed she should have waited until at least the next day before leaving the hospital, but her baby's new mother would be back by then, and Cassie could not bring herself to face Sammie again. It had been hard enough to tell Aggie and Jay she had gone into labor already—as though she had had any choice, and even at that she had certainly waited until the absolutely last possible moment, since she had started feeling twinges at about nine last night and hadn't actually knocked on Aggie's door until six this morning. Like everyone else, they had assumed she had been telling the truth about the date of conception, but Cassie hadn't wanted anyone to know that back in May she had wanted to have a late-term abortion.

Cassie squeezed her eyes tightly shut and willed the tears away. They would all know the truth, now, and she simply could not face them. Aggie had shown her nothing but compassion from the moment Cassie had knocked on her bedroom door early this morning, and that, too, had been more painful than Cassie could have ever anticipated. She had pretended to be sleeping every time Aggie returned to her hospital room after the baby's birth, when the older woman hadn't done any more than hold her hand in support.

A far cry from their interactions during those first few weeks of their acquaintance when Aggie hadn't pulled any punches, not at all reticent about letting Cassie know in no uncertain terms what she thought of her lifestyle and irresponsible behavior. Aggie had been right, of course. Looking back, Cassie could only wonder how any of them had managed to put up with her. Of course, it hadn't been for her sake, she reminded herself; it was her baby they were committed to saving. How could anyone have even dreamed that by saving her unborn child, they had also saved his mother?

Cassie wasn't the same woman she had been back in May. Running away today, well, it had been in part because she couldn't face everyone, but it had been for her baby, too. Sammie would make a terrific mom, and it was only a matter of time before Aggie's nephew, Jay, talked Sam into marrying him, giving her baby boy both a mother and a father. They didn't need her. They couldn't want her.

Then there was the money. The contract she and Sam had signed last spring had guaranteed Cassie ten-thousand dollars upon the birth of her baby. In May, Cassie had seen the cash as a well-deserved windfall. By July she had seen it as a means to turning over a new leaf. But this morning, she had only been able to see it as dirty money. Accepting the ten-thousand meant she would, for all intents and purposes, be selling her baby, and now that he was born, she just couldn't bring herself to do it. Maybe walking away would do nothing to redeem her in the eyes of anyone but herself, but she didn't want that little boy to grow up knowing his own birth mother had taken money for him.

Cassie glanced at her driver and cringed inwardly. Derek didn't know there wasn't any money, and he wouldn't be at all happy to learn she was flat broke. Last May, she had had to talk him into taking her to Coventry for the two meetings with Sam at the Open Arms Crisis Pregnancy Center, because she no longer had her driver's license, thanks to one too many DUIs. She hadn't actually promised him anything, but she had flirted outrageously, knowing full well he'd wanted to get into her pants for months and would likely do almost anything to get there. Cassie had not been interested; as much as she'd always liked sex, she had heard enough stories about Derek's bedroom antics to leave her secretly quite relieved when Aggie insisted on taking her home that very night. Derek had been livid, though he had been placated somewhat when Cassie told him about the promised ten-thousand dollars.

Cassie had used the lure of the ten grand to get Derek to come pick her up today, too, since she couldn't think of anyone else with a car who even knew where she was—which probably said a lot about the quality of her “friends.” She hadn't actually lied to Derek, hadn't even mentioned the money in fact, only that the contract had been fulfilled—which was true, as far as she was concerned, since she had given birth to a healthy baby boy. It had worked. Derek had come to the hospital and had been waiting

for her when she slipped out the side entrance with no one the wiser. He would be furious, though, Cassie knew. She just hoped she could hold him off long enough reach a girlfriend she knew in the city who didn't have a car but would probably be willing to put her up for a few days until she could figure out what she was going to do next.

Traffic was picking up as they entered the city limits, and Cassie wiped her sweaty palms nervously on her jeans.

"So, what hotel do you want to go to?" Derek asked, speaking for the first time since they had pulled out of the hospital parking lot. He took the first exit which was an indirect route to downtown that would take them past "hotel row" where all the luxury hotels were clustered.

"I can't go to a hotel," Cassie told him.

He glanced her way and chuckled.

"Hey, we can always stop off at a department store first, if you want to change," he joked. "Of course, once we're in the room, it won't matter what you're wearing—you won't be wearing it very long..."

Cassie swallowed hard. "I can't afford a hotel, Derek. I don't have my credit cards with me." That was also true. Aggie had taken her wallet at the hospital for safe-keeping, though it didn't really matter, since she didn't have any active credit cards anymore anyway.

Derek laughed out loud. "I'm sure they still take cash, Cass!"

Cassie took a deep breath. "I don't have any money, Derek."

Derek glanced at her, frowning. "What, they paid you with a check after all? You told me in May you'd insisted on cash. Crap! Now we have to wait until Monday to get the money."

"There won't be any money on Monday, either," Cassie told him in a soft voice.

"What are you talking about?"

Cassie took another deep breath. "I didn't get a check. I didn't get any money at all."

"You didn't...? You lied to me?"

Cassie didn't see that denying it would help her case any, so she remained silent.

She cringed when he called her a filthy name she hadn't heard in months and felt panic rise when Derek swung the car to the curb with another vicious curse. Terrified by his sudden burst of temper, and realizing all at once the stories about Derek's violent streak had not been exaggerated, Cassie had the door open before they came to a complete stop and jumped out, hoping to somehow hide from him in the darkness. She would never know if she might have succeeded, because a wash of vertigo nearly sent her to her knees on the broken sidewalk. Before she could do more than grasp at the hood of the car to steady herself, he was on her, grabbing her hard and turning her to trap her against the side of the car, effectively cutting off any chance of escape.

"You used me," he growled menacingly. "Now it's my turn."

With that he fastened his mouth on hers in teeth-grinding parody of a kiss. Cassie gagged, struggling futilely against him, but even at full strength, she knew she would have been no match for him.

"I don't give free rides," he told her, his voice dripping with contempt as he pulled the front of her coat apart and ripped open the top of her blouse. "If you don't have the cash, I'll just have to take services in trade."

He's going to rape me, right here in front of God and everybody, she realized with a shocked gasp, though when he transferred his lips and teeth to her throat, she could see there was no "everybody." They were on a dark street. Every store front was either boarded up or locked down tightly, the steel barriers a testament that nobody in their right mind would walk here at night.

Cassie whimpered, begging Derek to stop, but he only tore the front of her blouse the rest of the way down then grabbed onto her breast hard.

Cassie cried out in pain. Her breasts had become increasingly tender over the last few weeks, and she had been lactating all day, leaving her bra and shirt front wet with milk. Derek's response to her cry was to increase the pressure, and she moaned in agony.

Think, Cassie! her mind screamed. While she had still been in the hospital back in July recovering from the assault at the hands of another man, a very nice female police officer had visited her and offered some advice on what to do when attacked by a man. If she could only remember...

Then Cassie did remember, and against all natural instincts, she suddenly stopped fighting and allowed herself go limp, sliding down the side of the car as though her legs had given out. Derek cursed viciously once more, assuming she had fainted. He released her long enough to shift his hold on her, which was all Cassie needed. Without warning, she twisted to the left and rammed her elbow up into his groin, adrenalin fueled by fear adding strength to the blow.

Derek released her completely on a scream as he dropped beside her. Cassie used those precious seconds to scramble to her feet and lurched away. There was a busier, lighted intersection less than a block away, and she hugged the side of the building to steady her passage. She couldn't run, but moved as quickly as she could manage, not daring to look back to see if Derek followed.

When she came to the corner, she turned right and collapsed against the building panting hard and praying for the dizziness to pass. In another moment, she heard Derek's cursing and uneven footfalls, and she staggered on up the street. There were people here, but it wasn't nearly as crowded as she would have liked it to be, and she could see nowhere to hide.

Oh, God, please, she prayed silently.

Then the light changed and two city busses came lumbering through the intersection behind her, pulling to the curb just in front of her. There were enough people disembarking and boarding that she made it to the back door of the trailing bus before it closed. Cassie didn't bother to suppress a sob of relief as she pulled herself up the steps and collapsed into the first empty seat. Almost immediately, the doors closed and the bus pulled out. She dared to look back, then, and saw a red-faced, ranting Derek raise his fist in fury and frustration.

Thank you, God! she prayed, going weak with relief then giving a soft exclamation of elation when at the next cross street, the bus in front of them continued on, but the bus on which she rode turned left. Even if Derek tried to follow her in his car, he'd never know what route to follow.

No one else on the bus seemed to notice her drama. Cassie glanced around nervously, but everyone seemed to be pretty much ignoring everyone else. Never having

ridden a city bus before, she attempted to emulate the other riders' indifference, but she was fascinated by how smoothly everything seemed to work. Every couple of blocks as the driver announced the upcoming cross street and notable landmarks; someone would stand and pull the yellow cable, alerting the driver, who would then stop. It had started to rain, the drops weaving odd patterns as they tracked down the window beside her, and she could hear the swish of tires on wet pavement clearly every time the doors opened.

Cassie had no idea where she was—this was certainly a part of the city she had never been in before, and the street names were completely unfamiliar to her—but for the moment she was safe enough. She wasn't sure of how long she would manage to stay awake, however, and fantasized about curling up in a ball and simply staying on the bus for the rest of the night. Then after a few more stops, the majority of passengers began to gather their belongings as though getting ready to disembark.

"Next stop Bethalto Street," came the droning voice of the bus driver. "Last stop in the free zone. Bethalto Street; last stop in the free zone."

Cassie quickly rose to get in line at the back door. She didn't have any money on her for a bus fare, whatever that might be, and with everything, including her watch, left behind, she couldn't even pawn something for enough cash to make a phone call, even if she had someone to call.

It was completely dark by the time she stepped off the bus, though the earlier rain shower had tapered off to a light sprinkle. She pulled her collar up to ward off the cold breeze that had come up. With no destination in mind, but feeling a little bit better thanks to her time sitting down on the bus, Cassie headed for the street they had just crossed and turned right because the light had turned green. She was exhausted and the places on her body Derek had manhandled were starting to ache along with the residual aches from this morning's labor. Had she really given birth only that morning?

Cassie kept moving, because she was afraid to stop, but after another block, she saw the first sign of night life. She wrapped her arm around a light pole, leaning heavily while she paused to squint at the hand-painted sign in a lighted window across the street.

Bethalto Street Mission
Free Lunch & Dinner Served Daily

Everyone Welcome!

Cassie felt her stomach growl and realized she hadn't eaten since dinner last night. No wonder she was so light-headed and weak. Still, did they really mean "free?"

"That 'everyone' does include you, missy," a soft, deep voice said from behind her.

Cassie spun so quickly, she would have gone down if the speaker hadn't caught her arm to steady her. She looked up—and up, for the man was unusually tall—and could just make out the features of a face darker than the surrounding night. He looked skinny, even in his bulky coat, but the hand that steadied her was strong. Her first instinct had been to pull away, but the half smile he wore was mirrored in his twinkling eyes, and the wrinkles on his face and gray, closely-cropped hair, suggested he was probably old enough to be her grandfather and not likely to be a threat.

"Didn't mean to spook ya," he told her, using his other hand to steady her. "I just figured you looked like you could use a hot meal, and I can vouch for the chef." He nodded towards the mission across the street. "Ms. Gail's the best."

Cassie let out a short breath. "You figured right," she said, deciding instinctively to trust this man, which took her by surprise.

"Then may I have the honor of your company for dinner, mademoiselle?" the man asked, offering his arm with a courtly gesture entirely incongruous with his scruffy appearance.

Cassie smiled for the first time in hours, and took his arm. "You may, kind sir."

The man chuckled as he tucked her arm in his and turned to lead her across the street. He seemed to know how unsteady she was, and walked slowly, keeping one eye on her and one on the traffic.

"Igor's the name," he told her, when they were safely across the street. He caught Cassie's expression and laughed warmly. "Yeah, I don't know why my mamma picked it, but she liked it for some confounded reason."

"I like it, too," Cassie told him. "It suits you."

"And what suits you?" he asked casually.

"Ca..." Cassie hesitated then quickly recovered. "I'm Cathy."

“Well, Ms. Cathy,” Igor said, pretending to ignore her hesitation as he opened the door for her, “welcome to the Bethalto Street Mission.”

Gail Fenton came out of the kitchen with a basket of fresh rolls to replenish the nearly empty one on the serving table. She checked the levels of beef stew the volunteers were ladling out, and nodded with satisfaction. There should be plenty to finish up the evening.

“It looks like Igor has found another one,” her husband murmured from behind her.

Gail looked up then followed his gaze across the room. At only five-foot-two, Gail didn’t have the bird’s-eye view of her husband, who topped her by more than a foot, but it was easy enough to pick out Igor’s familiar tall figure, and she shifted to get a better look at the young woman sitting next to him.

“I’d say she hasn’t been on the street very long, though,” Gail surmised.

“What makes you say that?” As pastor of the Bethalto Street Mission, Jim Fenton had a passion for the people he served. Since it was Saturday night, he wore his clerical collar, but his shirt sleeves were rolled up as usual as he pitched in wherever needed during the dinner rush.

“Look at her hair,” Gail admonished him. “That color and those highlights didn’t come out of a box, and it may need to be washed, but it’s still full of body.” The hair of most women who came into the mission for free meals showed the damage of malnutrition, cheap hair products, and inexpensive cuts. This woman obviously hadn’t dealt with any of those things—yet.

“You think she’s just here on a lark then?” Jim asked, somewhat surprised. He knew his wife was extraordinarily compassionate by nature, which was one of the things that had attracted him to her in the first place

“Uh, uh,” Gail countered. “Those bruises are real enough.”

Jim looked closer and saw what Gail did: While the woman held her coat closed in front, the collar didn’t hide the bruises forming on her neck and face.

“Newly fallen on hard times, then.”

Gail shook her head. “Not just fallen but pushed—hard—and recently, too. I’ll bet she hasn’t been on the streets even a day.”

Without another word, Gail came out from behind the serving table and in a seemingly casual, meandering path, made her way to Igor’s table, stopping now and then to lay a companionable hand on a shoulder, murmur a word of encouragement, or laugh at a child’s new joke. As she approached Igor’s table, the strange woman did something that endeared her to Gail even more than her obvious desperate situation. Mrs. Esposito and her children were sitting with them, and while the mother of four was focused on something Igor was saying, the other woman surreptitiously exchanged her half-full bowl of stew for the oldest Esposito boy’s empty one. Little Joey flashed her a grin as he dug in, and the woman winked at him. Gail melted.

“Hi, Igor,” she said, laying a hand on his shoulder. “Don’t get up,” she added with an affectionate pat, when he started to do so.

“Hi, yourself, Ms. Gail. Ms. Gail, I want to you meet Ms. Cathy. Ms. Cathy, this here is Ms. Gail. She’s Pastor’s wife and the best cook in the city.”

“The best cook in the whole world,” one of the Esposito boys chimed in.

Everyone laughed except Cassie, who eyed the newcomer warily. She was a tiny, sprite of a woman, her bright red curls barely topping Igor, though he remained seated. Faint crows’ feet at the corners of her eyes gave evidence that she might be older than she looked, but her complexion was fair and clear with a smattering of freckles, and she wore little makeup. It was her piercing green eyes that made Cassie so uncomfortable, though. They were knowing eyes, eyes that saw right through a person to her darkest secrets. Maybe Cassie could fake it with the rest of them—Igor was a man, after all, and Mrs. Esposito had four kids to keep track of—but she wouldn’t be able to fool this woman for a moment.

“I have to go,” Cassie murmured, starting to rise.

“What do ya mean, go?” Igor asked, clearly troubled by her announcement.

“But we haven’t even had dessert, yet,” Joey Esposito piped up. “It’s punkin cake tonight!”

“I’m sorry,” Cassie murmured, sending a brief smile towards the boy, a fearful glance at Gail, “but I have to go.”

She stood then, too fast, of course, and blackness threatened. It was only Igor’s quick response that kept her from hitting the floor hard.

“Easy,” Gail’s soft voice filtered through the darkness. “You’re okay, Cathy. We have you.”

Cassie fought off the darkness, desperate to get on her feet and get out of there.

“What happened?” a strange voice, another man, asked.

“She just stood up too fast, that’s all,” Gail assured everyone. Let’s get her upstairs.”

“Maybe we should take her to the hospital rather than upstairs,” the strange man said.

“No!” Cassie cried, knowing what they would learn about her at a hospital and not wanting anyone to figure out who she was.

“It’s okay, Cathy,” Gail assured her. “This is my husband, Jim. He’ll just take you up to our apartment, so you can rest awhile.”

Cassie tried to argue, but in another moment, she was lifted effortlessly by a very large man. He held her gently against his broad chest, while excited voices surrounded them.

“Everything is all right folks,” he assured the crowd. “The lady just stood up too quickly.”

His warm tenor voice was authoritative and even Cassie felt somewhat reassured by it. Then they were out of the bright lights of the dining room and in a dim hallway. The man carried her up the stairs with no more effort than if she had been a child. Quicker, lighter footsteps led the way then a couple of doors were opened and closed.

“Just put her on top of the spread for now,” Gail directed.

Cassie felt the smooth, firm surface of a bed, and a soft pillow was placed under her head.

“Do you need any help?” the man asked.

“No, I have her. You’d better go back down and reassure everybody.”

Cassie heard the man leave then felt Gail loosen her collar and run gentle fingers over the bruises on her neck. Then she was gone, and Cassie heard water running. In another moment, a cool, damp cloth was placed on her brow and those gentle fingers brushed over her hair.

“You’re going to be all right, Cathy,” Gail told her softly.

Cassie shook her head as she felt panic building.

“I have to go,” she mumbled.

“You don’t need to go anywhere. It’s okay, Cathy.”

“No, no! Please! I have to go!” Cassie struggled futilely against Gail’s surprisingly strong hands.

“Where, Cathy?” Gail asked her sternly. “Just tell me where the hell you’re going to go.”

Cassie opened her eyes to see Gail’s fierce gaze then closed them again tightly, a sob escaping before she could stop it.

Gail threw off the damp cloth and pulled Cassie into her arms. “It’s okay, Cathy,” she murmured, stroking her hair as she slowly rocked her. “Everything is going to be okay. You’re safe here. I promise. And you can stay as long as you need to.”

Cassie struggled to control herself even as she clung to her new benefactress, realizing at last that she really didn’t have a choice. Gail was right. Where the hell could she go? The only people in the world who cared anything about her were back in Coventry, and she couldn’t go back there. Her parents? Ha! Forget it. Her friends? What friends? She was alone in the world, with nowhere to go, and this kind stranger was offering her refuge. *Time to stop being stupid, Cassie.*

She took a deep, shuddering breath, released Gail, and lay back on the bed.

“I’m sorry,” she managed to croak.

“Whatever for?” Gail asked lightly, though her troubled eyes told Cathy the other woman probably had her own nightmares. “Everyone’s entitled to a bit of mild hysteria once in a while.”

Cassie sighed, thankful someone seemed to really understand.

“Just don’t make a habit out of it, okay?” Gail admonished her, brushing a tangled curl back from her face. “It’s bad for business.”

“I’ll do my best. Thanks.”

Gail smiled and squeezed her hand. After another moment of studying Cassie’s pale face she said, “So, do you think you’re up to taking a bath? I could wash your hair for you.”

Cassie felt her spirits rise, the prospect of being clean again a real energizer. “I’d certainly like to try.”

Gail grinned. “Stay put for a minute, then, while I fill up the tub.” She gave Cassie’s arm a slight squeeze and headed for the bathroom.

Cassie closed her eyes and took stock. She hurt everywhere. Sore in a big way from the birth of her child, she could feel the bruises Derek had left on her, too. Obviously, Gail had already seen some of the evidence, but if she washed her hair in the bath, she would see a whole lot more. And what if she asked about...?

No. Don’t go there. Gail probably wouldn’t ask. She’d wonder and speculate, but something told Cassie she probably wouldn’t ask. And maybe, someday, Cassie would feel comfortable enough to tell this kind woman everything. She hoped so, because if there was one thing she needed in her life, it was a friend she could tell everything to.

An hour later, Gail left Cathy drifting off to sleep and wandered into the living room. Jim was lounging on the couch, his feet propped up on the coffee table, a book in his hand.

“Is she okay?”

Gail didn’t answer but crossed to crawl into his lap. Straddling his legs, she kissed him then wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders and held on tightly. Setting his book aside, Jim embraced his wife, knowing she would talk when she was ready.

“Did you notice that she’s wearing maternity clothes?” Gail asked after a long moment.

“She’s pregnant?” Jim asked, thinking that would explain her nearly fainting.

Gail sat back and shook her head. “No. But she’s given birth, very recently, I’d say.”

“Did she tell you that?” he asked softly, reaching up to caress her cheek lightly.

Gail shook her head. “I put her clothes in the wash. Her bra and blouse were soaked with milk.”

Jim sighed and pulled Gail back into his arms. They had been married for six years and both had wanted children badly, though they had never been able to conceive. Neither believed in playing God, so going to a fertility clinic was out, and they had long accepted that they would have to settle for the dozens of children who came into the mission every week. It was, however, still difficult for both of them to deal with women who had abandoned their children, or worse, those who had aborted them.

“What about her bruises?” Jim asked after a moment.

Gail visibly shuddered and sat back again. “Someone at least attempted to rape her.”

“She told you that?”

“No, but she didn’t have to. The nature of her injuries are obvious, if you know what to look for.”

Gail did, unfortunately, and Jim felt the familiar hot rush of fury he always felt when he remembered the first time he had seen his wife.

“I don’t suppose she’ll be willing to prosecute.”

Gail shook her head, and they were both left with the bitter taste of frustration they often felt when bullies got away with rape and worse, because the victims were too afraid to prosecute. Gail, unfortunately, understood all too well. Without Jim, she would never have been able to face that ordeal herself nearly a decade ago.

“I told Cathy she could stay as long as she wants,” Gail said firmly, pretty sure her husband wouldn’t mind but making it clear where she stood.

Jim smiled his approval and caressed her cheek once more. “Good.”

He drew her back into his arms and they held each other closely for a very long time.

Chapter 1

October...fifteen years later

“Hey, Cat!”

“Hey, Sal!”

Cathy greeted the eldest of the Maurizio brothers as he came around the end of his family’s delivery truck and opened the roll-up door.

“Got a couple of boxes of nice baking apples no one wanted today,” he told her cheerfully.

“Terrific! I can already smell the apple crisp.”

“Yum!”

Cathy laughed. She doubted very much that all the restaurants and grocery stores in the city had turned down the apples, but it was a game they had played for almost two decades. The Maurizio Farms, of which there were now four—dairy, poultry, fruit, and vegetables—were run by the eight children of the elder Mama and Papa Maurizio, who had immigrated to America right after World War II as a very young, newly-married couple and started a small produce farm to support themselves. Papa Maurizio had started the tradition by leaving anything left on the truck after his daily deliveries to the city’s restaurants and grocery stores with various charities not long after they had opened, but as the years passed and both the Farms and their family grew and flourished, Mama had insisted that tithing was in order, since God had been so generous to them, and so the Bethalto Street Mission and become one of their regular stops. Thanks to the Maurizio Farms’ generosity, they had been able to add breakfast to the menu and now served three meals a day, Monday through Friday, with a late brunch and early dinner on both Saturdays and Sundays.

Cathy started breakfast daily and did most of the cooking throughout the day, while Gail managed all the volunteers and bookkeeping, helped with the food preparation, served meals, and took care of the cleanup after dinner—except on Thursdays when Gail and Jim insisted Cathy take both the afternoon and evening completely off. Cathy only took the time begrudgingly, though, and only because she knew it made her friends worry about her less. The truth was, the Bethalto Street Mission had become her home over the last fifteen years, and she had no desire to go anywhere, or do anything, else.

Dumping a large bag of potatoes into the sink, she took up a brush and started scrubbing. It always made her smile to scrub potatoes. It was the first job Gail had given her. After arriving at the Mission, it had taken Cathy nearly three days before she had been steady enough on her feet to come downstairs to eat with everyone else, but by the end of the first week, she had asked Gail for something to do to help. By the end of the second week, she had been cutting all the veggies as well as cleaning them, and by the end of the third week, she had asked to stay for good.

Between the Maurizios' generosity and Cathy's talent in the kitchen, they had been able to add that third meal at the Mission during the week, and Cathy had spent more than one Thursday afternoon at the main branch of the city library looking for better, more nutritious, and tastier ways to feed a crowd on a budget, desperate to give back to this community of people who had allowed her into their lives. It had paid off in spades as along with the needy, thanks to a growing reputation for good food, their patrons began to include people who worked in the surrounding businesses who would stop in for breakfast or lunch, leaving generous donations in the jar on the counter.

Cathy had lived in Jim and Gail's extra bedroom for the first few months, but as donations started coming in in direct response to Cathy's cooking, Jim had talked the board into adding a line item into the budget for a third small salary, which had allowed Cathy to move to a tiny studio apartment a block away. Furnished with the best that could be found at St. Vinnie's and the Salvation Army, it suited her just fine these days, since her wardrobe had come from the same two establishments, and while those who had known her in her former life would have been appalled at her new lifestyle, it suited

her just fine. Maybe she couldn't yet claim to be entirely happy, but she was needed, and in that she had at last found a sense of belonging she had never known before along with a measure of contentment.

Male voices from the open door brought her attention back to the present, and she couldn't suppress a grin when she saw who had come in.

"Tony!"

"Hey, Ms. Cathy!"

Cathy quickly switched off the tap and reached for a towel to dry her hands before hurrying to the storeroom door to meet the lanky teenager as he emerged after setting down his load.

"Long time no see," she teased, reaching up to give him a hug and a kiss. Was this kid ever going to stop growing?

"Yeah, well..."

"Tell me what happened," she insisted.

Tony hadn't been in with his father for deliveries since school started in late August due to the three Cs that had appeared on his final report card in the spring. While not all Maurizios had to go to college, and Tony hadn't shown any interest in doing so, it was a hard and fast family rule that any Maurizio who decided not to attend college didn't do so, because they were academically ineligible.

Tony grinned. "I got an A on my first math quiz," he told her proudly.

Salvatore cleared his throat noisily, and Tony blushed. "Yeah, and I got an A on my first English essay."

Cathy laughed at his discomfort, and gave him another hug. "Good for you!"

"I don't see what the big deal is," Tony grouched, though Cathy knew it was forced when she glanced at his father, who winked at her.

"How are you gonna communicate, if you can't write well?" the older man asked.

"It's not like I'm gonna write a book or anything," Tony reminded him.

Cathy laughed. "Well, if nothing else, I can tell you those As have earned you a blueberry muffin this morning."

"All right!"

“Pour your dad and yourself a cup of coffee, too, Tony,” she called to his back as he headed for the counter where the muffins were cooling on wire racks.

“You spoil us, Cathy,” Salvatore told her.

“It’s only a muffin and coffee, Sal,” she insisted.

“Yeah, but I don’t like taking free stuff from you,” he insisted.

Cathy stared at him, raising her eyebrows in a stern look that spoke volumes. The Mission hadn’t paid a dime in ten years for what came off the back of a Maurizio truck, and she’d be damned if she wouldn’t provide a free muffin and coffee once in awhile.

Salvatore grinned and gave her arm a friendly squeeze. “You know, you look just like Mama when you do that.”

Cathy laughed again, knowing round, dark, older woman and she herself had absolutely nothing in common in appearance. “I’ll take that as a complement.”

“It was meant as one.

“Come on, Tony,” he called out to his son. “We need to get going before the traffic gets too bad.”

“I’m coming.” Tony came towards them with two covered to-go cups, each with a muffin balanced on top.

“Did you go to college, Ms. Cathy?” he asked, as she opened the door for them.

“I’m afraid so,” she said.

Tony stopped and stared at her. “So how come you’re working here at the Mission?”

“Tony...” his father said in a warning voice.

“That’s okay,” Cathy told him. “I work here, because it’s what I want to do,” she told the teenager.

“So what good did it do to go to college?” Tony grumbled, glaring at his father.

“Well, for one thing, it allows me to do the research that helps me to find all those great recipes for items like those muffins,” she said with a smile. “It also allows me to hold my own, when people start arguing with me about something.”

Tony grinned. “I guess that’s something.”

Salvatore laughed, took one of the cups of coffee and slapped his son on the back.

“You have to watch out for these educated women, Tony,” he advised. “They can talk you into anything.”

“Like Mom?”

“You bet!”

Cathy grinned as she waved them off. She had met the whole family on several occasions when the Mission had invited the Maurizios to special thank you dinners over the years, and she didn't doubt for a minute that Sal's wife, Antonia, held her own and then some with her husband and five sons.

Shutting the door against the morning chill, Cathy headed back to her potatoes. Finishing up the scrubbing, she moved to start cutting them. Someone had donated an industrial steel French fry cutter, which she discovered was ideal for starting hash brown potatoes. One quick shove through the cutter and a few cross cuts with a knife, and she had pieces of potato that cooked fairly quickly. They were kind of odd shaped for hash browns, but the kids all like them, and it saved loads of time dicing potatoes.

She was humming to herself and well into the mound of potatoes when she heard Gail's light step coming down the stairs.

“If they can outlaw Jake brakes within the city limits, why can't they outlaw those confounded roll-up doors?” Gail grouched as she headed for the coffee pot.

“If they did,” Cathy pointed out helpfully, “people like you would need to buy an alarm clock.”

“Ha, ha,” Gail grumbled. She poured her first of several cups of morning caffeine and sipped appreciatively. Cathy never drank the stuff, sticking almost exclusively to tea, but she never failed to make a perfect cup of coffee.

“Good one,” Gail allowed, referring to Cathy's comment as much as to the coffee.

“I've been saving it,” Cathy told her with a smile.

“Figures,” Gail mumbled, though without rancor. While Gail had never failed to complain about being awakened by the Maurizios' morning delivery, no one was more appreciative of all the family had done for the Mission, and she knew Cathy couldn't help teasing her about her grumbles anymore than she herself could help complaining about being rudely awakened every morning. That was just family.

Taking her coffee to the counter, she sat at one of the stools and watched Cathy expertly prep the hash browns, finishing with the potatoes and moving on to the sweet onions she always added to the mix.

“Are you okay?” she asked softly.

“Sure. Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Gail said, sipping her coffee before setting it down on the counter. “Maybe because it’s mid-October, and you always get a little melancholy this time of year.”

Cathy froze in the process of slicing an onion then gently set the knife aside. “Melancholy” was as good a word for it as any, she supposed. The worst time had been the first year, when Gail and Jim had thrown her a surprise party for her first anniversary with the Mission. They hadn’t known that the day she had arrived here was also her son’s first birthday. Cathy had barely held it together long enough to see the last guest to the door, before she had broken down sobbing. She had then told Gail and Jim everything—about the first baby she had aborted, and the son she had forced on another woman—certain they would turn her out after hearing her confession. Instead they had held her close, cried with her, prayed with her, simply been there for her in a way Cathy had never dreamed. They had forgiven her, asked God to forgive her, and begged her to forgive herself. Cathy was, fifteen years later, still working on the last one.

“I’m okay,” she finally managed, though that was somewhat questionable after what she had found at the library yesterday afternoon. “You shouldn’t worry so much about me.”

“Can’t help it,” Gail told her. “I love you.”

Cathy glanced up to meet her friend’s frank gaze and smiled. “I love you, too.”

Gail smiled, and pushing back from the counter, jumped off her stool and came around to give Cathy a hug.

“Don’t hold it all inside, if you need to talk, Cat,” Gail admonished her.

“I won’t,” Cathy told her.

“Promise?”

“Promise.”

Gail stepped back, studied her intently then reached up to kiss her lightly on the cheek.

“Okay, then.”

Obviously only somewhat satisfied, she turned away. “I’d better go call Father Kerns to see if they’ve finally decided which weekend they want to bring their youth group in, so I can talk the Presbyterians into the other open weekend.”

Cathy watched her friend head for the small office off the kitchen and shook her head. Give her hash browns and apple crisp for a hundred people any day over juggling well-intentioned volunteers. Nobody did it better than Gail, and Jim did a whale of a job raising awareness and funds for the mission, but all in all she’d rather just stay in the kitchen, she decided as she reached once more for the onion and knife.