

## CHAPTER 1

I didn't want to be the next one to die. But here I was, staring down the barrel of a gun. And it was my first day at work.

"Hey! Are you listening to me?"

My eyes snapped to the face behind the gun, and I found myself thinking, *This can't happen in here in Quincy, Illinois. We're such a small town!*

"I said, I wanna talk to Rich!" The gunman repeated.

*Rich? Who?* My thoughts were slower than cold oatmeal. Oh yeah, my brother. I was working for him. "Rich, uh, Rich isn't here." I blinked a couple of times, trying to clear my mind.

"Call him!" The man's voice held a note of desperation. As I dialed and held the ringing phone, I decided that this was too scary and I never wanted it to happen again.

Rich's voice mail answered. "Rich, call the office now!" I set the phone down with shaky hands, wondering what the gunman was going to do.

He had barged into the office with a determined, angry stride. His eyes were wide and glassed-over, and I wondered if he was high. The gun came out before I could even open my mouth to greet him. After the gun, everything blanked out.

Now I saw that his mop of black, greasy hair looked like he hadn't combed it in days. His jeans and T-shirt were wrinkled, food-smudged and untidy. He was clearly a man who didn't want to wait for anything.

I needed to get some control over this situation. My life depended on it. "Look sir, Rich will call back any second now. I know he will. I won't do anything, I promise. I don't want to get shot."

The man nodded at me. "Okay. Don't do anythin'."

"Why don't you sit down?" He hesitated and glanced over his shoulder.

The reception area of the office was small, containing only the front desk with one chair in front of it, a couch on the side wall, and a small refrigerator. The large plate glass window looked out over the street.

I was desperately hoping that someone, anyone, passing by would see us and call the cops, but I couldn't hang all my hopes on that.

The guy took two steps backward and then sat down on the edge of the couch. The gun was still out and pointing at me.

"Who are you anyway? Where's Pam?" he asked. He licked his lips again and ran a hand through his tangled hair.

"Pam's on maternity leave. I'm just filling in until she gets back. I'm Mel Addison."

The man stopped combing his hair with his fingers and scratched his scalp. "Rich's little sister?" His tone wasn't quite as desperate.

I managed a weak smile for him. He no longer seemed quite as threatening. "That's me."

"I thought you lived in Maryland." He adjusted the grip on his gun.

"I did. I moved back." *This is good, get a rapport going.* "What's your name? So I can tell Rich when he calls."

"Eddie Baker. He knows me." Eddie relaxed a little more.

I studied the gun for the first time. It was a Hi-Power Browning nine millimeter. Single-action. The hammer needed to be cocked in order to fire the gun, if I remembered correctly, and it wasn't. Plus, the safety was on.

"Call again." Without hesitation, I did. Still no answer. Eddie tugged at his T-shirt and he licked his lips again.

A plan popped into my head. "Eddie?" I waited until his eyes rolled around and met mine. "You look thirsty. Can I get you a soda or something while we wait for Rich to call? The fridge is right there." I pointed. "I promise, I won't do anything. I don't want to get shot."

Eddie's eyes lingered on the fridge as he licked his lips again. "Okay, but go slow."

I moved to the fridge as though I was walking through water, and grabbed Rich's coke with my left hand, leaving my dominant right hand free. As I turned back, I studied Eddie's position on the couch. *I can do this.*

"See?" I held out the bottle as I approached. One more step. Eddie focused on the bottle.

I passed his outstretched hand. The bottle connected with the gun, pushing the barrel away from me. I pivoted, hooking my right arm around Eddie. My momentum threw both of us to the floor; a modified hip throw. We went down in a heap, with me on top. The gun clattered to the middle of the room.

Now that I had the upper hand, I needed to keep it. I grabbed his thumbs and slammed him into the floor again. Eddie swore as he hit.

*This is not good.* Eddie not only outweighed me, but I knew he could easily out-muscle me if we stayed this way for more than a couple of seconds. He struggled under me. This would be over too quickly, ending with me dead, an impulsive, stupid corpse.

I immediately switched holds on him, going for a choke hold. At this point, I didn't care if Eddie lived or died; it was him or me. He clawed at my arms around his neck, frantic. I grimaced, tightening my hold. *Come on!* His body arched beneath me in what had to be a last-ditch effort. After what seemed like hours, Eddie collapsed, a deadweight in my arms. I released my hold on him and took several deep breaths in relief. My arms ached.

As I looked at him, lying there motionless, it suddenly hit me. *What have I done? What if I had killed Eddie?* It was certainly possible. My heart seemed to stop. I felt for a pulse on his neck. *Please don't let him be dead.* I had never done anything like this before, never used any of my judo training anywhere except in the dojo. A nice, steady beat thumped under my fingers. *Thank God!*

I untwined our bodies, pushing Eddie away from me. As I sat there on the floor next to my assailant, catching my breath, I thought about what a stupid thing I had done. This feeling wasn't anything new. It was déjà vu from my teen years, but I hadn't felt this way in a long time. My life had been so routine since leaving home, until six months ago. When a careless truck driver took my only son and husband from me. Nothing was the same since. Then I felt the tears welling in my eyes. For these last six months, I had been on a roller coaster of emotions, never knowing when I would cry, get angry, or be depressed.

I narrowed my eyes even as I wiped the tears away. I stepped over Eddie, then kicked the gun under the desk as I headed for the phone to call the police. As I grabbed the receiver, it rang.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah?' You're supposed to answer it, 'Security Investigations,' Mel. You called?"

*Rich.* Anger surged in me. Zero to sixty miles per hour in a nanosecond. My anger is legendary. I think it's gotten better as I've gotten older, but most people would probably disagree with me. "Yeah, I called! You leave me all alone here, this guy barges in!" I spluttered in a high-pitched voice.

"What the...?" Rich interrupted, obviously confused by my tone.

I took a deep breath to calm myself. "'Just a piece of cake', you said. 'Answer some phones, run the computer.'"

He chuckled. "Did a problem crop up?"

"You might say so. A man walked in here and pointed a gun at me. I was just calling the police."

"Are you okay? Is he still there?"

"I'm fine. His name is Eddie Baker."

"Eddie? What would he-Is he still there?"

"Yeah. He's unconscious on the floor," I said, and took a deep breath to calm myself. "Let me call you back after I call the po-"

"No. Don't call the police, Mel. Eddie's not a bad guy. I want to-Just wait on calling the cops. I'll be there in five minutes or less. Are you sure you're okay?"

I took a deep breath. I trusted Rich. I had to; he was my oldest brother. "Yeah, okay, I'll wait for you. But I have to say, this is one heck of a way to start a new job."

"Ha, ha, Mel. Are you sure he's unconscious so he can't hurt you?"

"Of course. Just get here before he wakes up or I might do permanent damage."

"If it looks like he's waking up, hightail it out of there. Got it?"

"Yeah."

"I'm on my way."

I waited for Rich to show up, staring at Eddie on the floor, my thoughts wandering. Finally, Rich scurried into the room. He took a look at Eddie, then me. Then he smiled. Brothers can be so annoying. "Are you sure that you're okay?"

"I'm fine. Who is he?" I asked. I interlaced my shaking hands to calm them, and leaned my elbows on the desk.

"He's an old informant. I have no idea what he wants. Did he say anything to you?"

"Just that he wanted to talk to you or John. He might have been on something." I shrugged. "His gun is under here." I gingerly scooted the gun out with my foot.

Rich picked it up and unloaded it. He smiled once more at me. "How'd you do it?"

I told him, a little pride sneaking in. Now that Eddie couldn't hurt me, I felt pretty good about my plan.

Rich nodded in approval. "Guess that money wasn't poorly spent like Mom used to think."

I chuckled and relaxed. Mom hadn't wanted me to take judo lessons when I was a kid or later when I was married. It just wasn't the ladylike thing to do but I never did do anything ladylike when I was younger. I was always the tomboy, unlike my older sister Teresa. "I also used the move that you taught me when I was still in high school, you know, that thumb-hold thing."

"I'm impressed that you still remembered it Mel," Rich said. "How long has he been out?"

"About five minutes. He should be coming around anytime now," I said, studying Eddie.

Rich sighed as he sat in the chair in front of Pam's desk. "Eddie used to give me information when I was still on the force. He's an okay guy. Maybe a little shady at times, does a little coke. He works at a manufacturing plant on the other side of town. I wonder why he threatened you with a gun. Why does he even have one?"

Just then, Eddie groaned, then slowly opened his eyes. He looked around and saw the two of us watching him. He slowly lifted his head.

"Hi Eddie. I see you've met Mel. I don't like my little sister being threatened. You've got some explaining to do." Rich's face was stern.

Eddie glanced at me, then back at Rich. "Sorry. Can I get up, Rich?"

"Are you going to behave?"

"Yeah." Eddie looked at me with new respect.

"Get up. Sit on the couch." Rich watched him closely. After Eddie sat, Rich pointed at him. "Talk."

Eddie stared at me for just a second, rubbing his neck, then turned his attention back to Rich. "My brother Wally was shot dead three days ago. Didja know that?" Rich nodded with a serious look on his face. "Then the next day I get a call from a man sayin' that I need to return 'it.' I hang up on him, 'cause I don't gotta clue what he's talkin' about. That night my car's windows get shot out with me in it."

Rich frowned. "Did you call the police?"

Eddie nodded. "Nothin' came of it. Then last night I get home from work, and these guys are in my house. When I walk in, they start shootin' at me. I barely got outta there alive. I head to my car and they shoot it up worse than before. So I took off runnin'. Been runnin' all night. Every time I settle down somewhere, they seem to find me. I gotta piece to protect myself. I didn't know where else to go, Rich." Finally he looked at me. "Sorry about the gun. I didn't know you and I guess I'm runnin' on low over here."

I waved that it was okay, even though I was still unnerved by the incident.

Rich was watching him. "What do you want from me?"

"Help."

"How?"

"I need to find out who these guys are and what they're after." Rich looked down at the floor. "Look, I can't really pay you, but I'll do my best to come up with somethin' and ya know I'm good for future information and stuff." Eddie sounded desperate. "I'll make payments or something. Please! I need help."

Rich looked up at him. "Okay, Eddie. We'll work something out." My brother glanced at me. "Do you want to press charges, Mel?"

I studied Eddie. "Are you going to pull a gun on me again?"

"No, ma'am," Eddie said sheepishly.

"Then no, I won't press charges." I smiled at Eddie. "Sorry about choking you."

"That's okay, Mel. I understand." Eddie smiled back, then looked at Rich.

Rich nodded. "Come on, Eddie. Come into my office and we'll see what can be done."

## CHAPTER 2

As Rich and Eddie left the detective agency, I waved at them, then turned my attention back to web surfing for information on various people they were investigating. It took me the rest of the day, mostly because I was struggling with getting used to the various programs.

At the end of the day, I locked up the office after pulling the shades down and making sure everything was secure. I paused in front of the office to take in the late afternoon sunlight.

Quincy, Illinois hadn't changed much in the ten years since I called it home. Although it had grown a lot, it still had that small hometown feel to it, a sense that everyone knew everyone. Quincy was on an upswing, but it was still a podunk town in the middle of nowhere. Quincy is sometimes referred to as the belly button of Illinois. When asked about the city, I mention Hannibal, Missouri, and Mark Twain. We're upstream about fifteen miles. Nothing exciting happens here. Still, it's home. Again.

I hopped into my parent's Taurus and headed home. I was temporarily living in an apartment they owned. I hated being so dependent on them.

Dickie, my dad, is a retired cop, and he now runs a bar close to the house, the Full Moon. It's heavy on family atmosphere in the daytime. At night, half the police force can be found there. Beside my dad, two of my brothers are cops: Rich, retired due to an accident he suffered while on the job, and Mitch, currently a patrolman.

Then there are the firefighters who like to show up too. I also have a brother in that department, Cameron, and two cousins. Many nights at the bar it's a big competition between the cops and the firefighters: darts, pool, cards. One time they even had a competition for who could carry a railroad tie the farthest. It probably doesn't help that Cam is part-owner of the bar; he and Dad are always egging on the friction between the two forces.

My apartment is a small two-bedroom place above the bar. I took the outside steps up to my apartment and let myself into the relative cool. August in Illinois is a hot and very muggy affair, sort of like swimming in thick chicken soup. Dropping my purse, I looked around the kitchen for something to eat. Nothing looked good. I sniffed. A savory smell drifted into my apartment, making my mouth water. *Dad must be cooking tenderloins in the kitchen downstairs.* I smiled, realizing that was just what I wanted.

I locked up my apartment and headed downstairs to grab a sandwich. Dad probably would sucker me into waiting tables or tending bar if they were busy. Since I didn't know what I was going to do with my life, again, I had accepted the odd job here and there. First the bar and now with Rich.

I walked into the Full Moon and wandered into the back, where Dad was cooking on the grill. He smiled in greeting.

"I heard you had some excitement at Rich's today."

I nodded as I grabbed a fry that had fallen on the counter. "Tenderloins?" I pointed to the fry basket.

"Yep."

"Where's Mom?"

"Church meeting." Dad swung his head out the door to check on his patrons. "Can I get you to help here tonight until things calm down a bit?"

"Sure. I didn't have any plans anyway."

He leaned over and gave me a kiss on the cheek. "Doing okay?"

"Yeah." Tears crowded my eyes, but I refused to let them spill. I swallowed hard. "The nights are the hardest, but I'm okay."

"Have you heard from the lawyers in Maryland about your lawsuit?"

"No, not recently." I stuck my hands in my pockets as I looked at the bubbling oil in the fryer. "Look Dad, I really don't..." I glanced at him, hoping he would drop the subject.

He stopped working and looked at me, his blue eyes full of love. He gave me a quick hug, then he stared into my eyes. "Do you want to talk about it, Sweetie?"

"No." I swallowed down a lump. Dad only called me 'Sweetie' when something bad happened.

"I know you don't like to talk about emotional stuff. You're kind of like me in that respect." His smile was soft and gentle. "But that's my job."

"I know. But I'm fine. Thanks."

"Sure." There was skepticism in his voice. "If you want to talk, you know where I live."

I smiled, thankful that he'd dropped it for now. "I'll go help Cam." I grabbed an apron from the hooks near the door.

I slipped by several men and slid behind the bar. "Hey Cam, the cavalry is here. Where do you need the help?"

He turned from making change and smiled in relief. "Can you bus the tables first? Then do the waitress thing for awhile?"

"Sure." I exchanged greetings with a couple of regular customers and headed to the back for the square plastic bus box to gather up glasses, plates, and trash. Within minutes, the tables were cleared and I was working the room for orders.

"Hey, Mel!"

I turned to the raised voice from a far table. There were only a dozen tables in the bar and this group was a bunch of police officers. I smiled and worked my way over to them. "Yeah, Butch?"

He was an older guy with gray touches at the temples, and less than a year before mandatory retirement. "Last time I saw you, you were a blond." I grimaced. I had experimented with being blond for about two weeks over a year ago.

Butch chuckled. "Brown suits you better. Can't tell you're an Addison without the brown hair and blue eyes. Anyway, how about a refill on the pitchers, since you're playing waitress?"

I shifted the weight on my hip. "Why should I? You're one of the lousiest tippers in the whole town." Everyone at the table laughed at him.

Butch smiled and wagged his finger. "Be good, or I'll tell everyone about the time I found you in the Blairs' back yard, holding an impromptu swim party while they were on vacation."

"Everyone already knows that story, Butch. And again, let me thank you for telling my dad. I was grounded for four weeks, thanks to you." I grinned. This was an on-going joke with us. "What can I get you guys?"

A younger guy spoke up. "Bud." His face was new.

"I don't know you. Let me see some ID." The group at the table laughed even harder. They began teasing the 'rookie'. He took the ribbing with a natural grace and ease.

"What's your name?" I asked him.

"Why?" He had short brown hair and intense blue eyes. His smile was genuine as he gazed up at me.

Steve Wettle, another cop at the table, leaned over and in a mock-conspiratorial whisper said, "Hey man, she's one of us. Mel is okay, in a best-friend's-little-sister kind of way."

"Little sister?"

"Okay." Steve grinned. "More like one of the guys but softer." He lifted his eyebrows suggestively.

"You wish," I sneered. The guys at the table laughed at Steve as he stood and moved to the bar with a chuckle.

I turned my attention back to the new guy. "I don't serve anyone I don't know," I said evenly. "If I don't know you, you have to get your own beers." I gave him a mocking smile.

Steve's voice interrupted us, quieting the entire bar instantly. "Check out the news." Cam turned the TV up louder.

"Marion Williams, the Republican candidate for mayor, has announced that, should he get elected, he will raise the pay of city workers with at least a cost-of-living increase. He'd like to see an across-the-board pay raise for the police officers and firefighters who protect this town with their lives."

A cheer went up from those assembled, mostly city workers.

"Quiet!" Steve silenced the crowd.

The reporter continued, "Mayor Schnabel couldn't be reached for comment but his chief publicity agent, Tom Bressler... " I stopped listening when a picture of a man dressed sharply in a blue suit appeared on the screen.

"Tommy?" I whispered to myself, then chuckled. *Who'd have thought someone I would never have taken home to Mom and Dad would be in such a powerful position now?*

"... But the constraint of the city council put an end to the proposal put forward by Mayor Schnabel. Bressler assures us that the mayor is not going to give up his fight to fairly compensate the police, fire, and city workers. I'm Cindy Singleton. WGEM news... "

The immediate muttering around the bar was that both men were out-and-out liars. I shook my head at the thought of my old friend and his job.

"My name is Max Bauer."

I snapped my attention back down to the lopsided smile of the rookie. His blue eyes were shining bright in the fluorescent lighting of the bar. He held out his hand.

We shook and when I touched his hand, I felt a warm rush of feeling. *Weird*. His grip was light yet strong. "I'm Melissa Addison. Call me Mel."

"Addison? Are you related to Mitch?"

"She's related to everyone," Butch interjected with a chuckle.

"Mitch is my older brother," I explained. I gathered up the three empty pitchers. "Who's buying?"

In unison, they all said, "Max." I smiled and moved off to the bar. Cam was busy, so I put the three dirty pitchers in the sink, grabbed some clean ones, and drew the beer.

After I sat them back on the table, he handed me the money. "Keep the change," Max said. I could feel his eyes burning into my back as I walked away.

The night went by quickly and things started to slow down. I was just getting ready to call it a night, when I felt a body move in next to me. It was the new cop, Max.

"Hey," he said, putting the empty pitchers on the bar top. He looked at me. "We missed our waitress. I thought once you knew me, I wouldn't have to get my own beers."

I smiled. "I only do the waitress thing when Cam and Dad are busy." Dad had long ago closed down the grill and was now serving behind the bar with Cam. "So, I haven't seen you before."

Max nodded. "I'm new to the area. Just took the job. Nice town." His blue eyes lingered on mine.

"How long have you been here?"

"Three weeks."

"Where are you from?"

He gave me a startled look. "Is this some sort of interrogation, Mel?"

I shrugged. "I like to know the men in blue, in case I should ever need to call on any of you."

"California. Breakers Point on the coast." He leaned on the bar facing me.

I was puzzled. "So, what brought you to Quincy?" He shrugged. "It must be the tremendous pay rate."

He laughed. He had a really nice laugh, deep and vibrant. "Steve Wettle knew I was looking to leave the coast and sent me an email. I met Steve in college." He smiled. "Just a change of pace, for awhile."

"Well, Quincy has one of the fastest paces around," I said with sarcasm.

He laughed again. "I take it you've lived other places too."

I nodded as I drained my bottle. Dad walked by and, without a hitch in his stride, set another beer in front of me. He winked as he moved further down the bar.

With a quick twist of my wrist, the bottle cap came off. I noticed that Max was watching me. I gave him a smile and with a flick of the hand, tossed the bottle cap into the trashcan behind the bar at the end.

He chuckled. "That's an impressive distance. Do you do that a lot?"

"Practice. And it's just hand-eye coordination. I play a lot of darts." I nodded toward the three steel dartboards hanging on the wall and took another bite of my sandwich.

"Are those things any good?" He dipped his chin at it.

I nodded. "One of the good things about Quincy."

"Really?"

"Yep."

Suddenly there was a hand grabbing me around my waist, a soft voice in my ear. "Hey WT, wanna go for a ride?"

I grimaced, setting down my sandwich. I recognized that voice. It was a former date who just happened to be on the force, and it sounded like he was already two sheets to the wind. I turned slightly. "Hi, Frank. I think you've had plenty."

A drunken laugh echoed in my ear. Frank's hands squeezed my waist, then migrated upwards.

Anger burst inside of me. I grabbed his thumb and with a quick move, twisted around on the bar stool. Standing, I turned him at the same time, pushing his arm up and behind his back. Then I slammed him to the ground. He jerked a couple of times and I ground my knee into the small of his back.

The bar went silent for the second time that night. Everyone was staring at us. I was breathing hard. Anger does that to me.

"Uh, Mel," I heard my father's voice. "Calm down. Do you have a problem here?"

I took a deep breath. "No problem, Dad. Just Frank and his fast fingers. I think he's had enough and maybe someone ought to take him home or call a cab for him." I looked up to see everyone still staring at me. My eyes locked with my father's. I could see that he was assessing things and trying to defuse the situation.

"Sure, Sweetie... Uh, Mel, you want to let him up?" Everyone in the bar laughed and went back to their conversations. I released Frank, and two other cops helped him to his feet. They patted him on the back, hustling him out to one of their cars. As Frank left, he looked at me and I gave him a finger wave to show that I had no hard feelings.

I brushed my hands off. Twice in one day now I had used Rich's thumb-hold. Several men in the place called out to me good-naturedly and I smiled at them. When I turned, I found Max still leaning on the bar watching me with a very amused look on his face.

Dad was moving down the bar toward me. His eyes were, however, watching the path taken by Frank. He moved nearer to us as I sat down again. "Maybe I should have a talk with Frank tomorrow."

"Dad, you know Frank. Let it go."

Dad shook his head.

"Let it go. He probably won't remember in the morning anyway. It's history. No harm done."



Dad just stared at me. I knew that look. I'd gotten it lots of times in my youth. It was the 'You needed to be more careful' look. "But-" he began.

"Don't go there."

He held up his hands, resignation on his face. This was not a new thing for us. "Okay, okay. You can take care of yourself. It's history." Dad walked away shaking his head, as usual. He muttered to himself.

Max looked between my dad and me, perplexed. However, when his gaze returned to me, he smiled. "Good move on Frank, Mel." I laughed softly, taking a drink of my beer. "I take it you know him." Max's blue eyes were shining with amusement.

"Yeah, I dated Frank for awhile a long time ago. When he drinks, he forgets that it was a long time ago. I think some of the guys egg him on just to see how fast I can knock him to the floor. It's happened before."

Max laughed. "Where did you learn that move?" He held up his thumb and wiggled it.

"From Rich, my oldest brother. He used to be on the force until about two years ago. Took a bullet in the line of duty. Now he runs a detective agency here in town."

He just looked at me, his eyes burning into my soul. "You got fast moves."

"Judo. I took lessons as a kid. Then before I moved back to Quincy, I got my black belt." I lowered my voice and looked at the beer bottle on the bar. Sometimes life was just so hard.

Max touched my arm. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to stir up any bad memories."

I nodded, not really looking at him. I could feel my emotional roller coaster starting again. *I need to get out of here.* "Not a problem." I swigged down most of the rest of the bottle. "I gotta be going anyway."

Cameron walked by just then.

"Cam, get one to go?" I handed him the nearly empty bottle and he replaced it with a cold one.

My little brother smiled. "Thanks for the help, Mel."

I winked and stood up from the stool.

Max caught my arm, giving me a strange look. "He shouldn't let you go with it. You can't drive with an open beer."

"I'm not driving." I pointed up to the ceiling. "I live upstairs. Nice to meet you, Max." I walked out the door to the back of the building.

After locking my door, I stripped off my clothes and cranked up the air conditioning. I hopped in the shower, and when I emerged, I found that the temperature had only slightly cooled in the apartment. I rummaged around in a box for a pair of shorts, located a T-shirt in another one, and sat on the bed looking at the room.

The bedroom was cluttered with unpacked boxes from the move. I really needed to get a dresser from somewhere. I didn't know where to start unpacking, so I went to the kitchen.

The kitchen was somewhat organized. There were no boxes in there, and it looked like I had actually moved in. I walked back out to the living room and looked over the vast number of eclectic CDs crowded in a box. The only thing set up in here was the stereo system.

*What did I feel like?* I ran my finger over the CDs and finally decided on a somber classical piece. A dark Dvorak symphony keyed up as I walked into the small second bedroom. This one was packed floor-to-ceiling with boxes. I leaned against the door frame. I knew I had to go through them, but I couldn't move as the music washed over me.

After a couple of tracks, I reluctantly pushed myself away from the frame, picked up the nearest box and headed to the living room. I set it on the coffee table.

A smell wafted up and hit me. Craig's cologne. Tears swelled in my eyes and I quickly closed the box; I hadn't expected this. As the tears flowed down my face, I slowly opened it up again. I had to do this-I had to figure out where everything was. My family had packed my entire house for me, and now I felt lost, confused. I didn't know where anything but the essentials were.

This box contained legal documents and file folders, probably from Craig's desk at home, judging by the bottle of cologne and the necktie that had been thrown on top. I quickly scanned

through the files and placed them on the coffee table to go through later when I was a bit more coherent. Under the files, I found his business-card holder. I picked up one of his business cards. Craig Blakemore of 'Landry, Blakemore, and Brooks'.

*Why Craig? You never did answer me. What were you thinking, you rat bastard?* I crumpled the card and threw it against the wall. My eyes drifted down to the box again, hoping to find something else I could throw, something that I could destroy, but instead my eyes lit upon a small frame with a drawing in it.

I gently picked it up and tears slid down my face unchecked. Robbie had drawn this for Craig on my husband's birthday, four months before the accident. I hugged the frame to my chest, heaving out sobs. Leaning back on the couch, I cried for my son, and cradled the picture until I could cry no more.

Setting it on the couch next to me, I wiped at my tears again, replaced the files and card holder, and closed the box. I grabbed the black marker on the table and wrote, 'Craig's office stuff.'. Then I walked it over to the other boxes in the room and set it on the pile.

Time for bed. I lay down and prayed for sleep tonight. I couldn't cry anymore, but the ache in my heart was an open, festering sore. I curled my hands around the frame, and finally, at some point, fell asleep.