

# Building Blocks

Sloan St.James

Library of Congress Control Number 2004103957

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means included but not limited to electronic or mechanical without permission from Sloan St.James, the owner. Any similarities to persons living or deceased are purely coincidental.

### **Acknowledgements**

I would like to thank my editor for waving her magical wand over this piece.

Also, my thanks to my son, Scott for creating a great cover.

To my husband, Wayne for the years we spent working and laughing together.

Sloan St.James

## **Dedication**

I dedicate this to my son and daughter-in-law and the fun time we had building their home.

## Chapter 1

“Get it out!” she shouted.

“I can’t. It’s stuck,” he replied.

“That’s impossible. Nothing that small could possibly be stuck.”

“I’m telling you. It’s stuck. See!”

“Are you serious! Do I look like a contortionist to you?”

After ten minutes of being hog-tied to the hardware store’s turnstile, Peg Murphy felt her patience had just about reached their breaking point. For the first five minutes she managed to remain calm, even as the lack of circulation slowly prickled up from her fingers up into her hands. Yet, now, as she looked down at the top of her would-be-rescuer’s sun-washed head, Peg could only pray there was enough blood flowing in her arms so she wouldn’t lose an appendage.

Peg sighed. She knew it was ridiculous the way she wrapped the straps of her sling-back purse around her arms. Of course Sister’s Bay, Wisconsin wasn’t Chicago. Yet, it was going to take more than just three weeks of living in a small town to erase her twenty-six years of street savvy mindset.

The steady clicking sound drew Peg’s gaze back down. The way her liberator jabbed and poked at the chrome column you’d think he was making an ice sculpture.

When the tingling sensation in her hands increased, Peg said, “Seeing as you’re unable to dislodge the straps, why not just cut them?”

When his head came up Peg was confused by the stupefied look in his brown eyes. Did he understand her, or were all those bulging muscles in his arms blocking the flow of oxygen to his brain? As the seconds ticked by, the prickle began to find its way into her shoulders. She shifted her weight from one foot to another. When

at last, his powerfully built shoulders came up in an expressive shrug Peg wanted to scream in his ear to cut the damn straps, now. Instead she locked her jaw and hissed through her teeth, "Cut the straps...please."

This time, when he didn't even offer her a shrug to show he understood, Peg's control was lost. She turned and stretched forward, looking at the small crowd that had gathered around them, she asked, "Does anyone have a knife?"

Suddenly, the tension on the straps released and she did what she knew was a perfect half gainer over the thick shiny arm. As she sailed through the air, she heard the crowds' in-drawn shock and her own scream. Peg was sure the amalgamated sound was something a Star Trek creature would make. However, the moment Peg hit the floor her scream stopped. At that instant, she learned that a body slamming onto a wooden floor at one hundred psi feels exactly like it would when it hits concrete. With her eyes closed, Peg stayed perfectly still. After a minute she drew in a slow breath.

"Are you all right?"

His questioned forced Peg to release her indrawn breath and open her eyes. When she did his face was inches from hers. Was his mouth quivering with a laugh? Were those brown eyes of his dancing with mirth?

When the pain in her backside came alive, Peg's temper did also. If he dared to break into a grin she was ready to verbally flay him within an inch of his life.

"Are you insane?" She screamed as she shoved up onto her elbows. "You could have at least had the decency to warn me you were going to cut the straps."

Before she could take her next breath, the pain in her backside bit like an enraged pit bull but there was no way she'd let this "assassin" see how much she hurt. Peg rolled onto her side. Turning away from him, she bit her lip.

"I only did what you asked," he replied, as he rolled up onto his feet. Once he stood towering over her, he extended his hand to her. Peg glared up into his face. There was no doubt the contrite look on his face was the most flagrantly forged expression she'd ever seen.

## Building Blocks

Peg dropped her gaze from his face to his long outstretched fingers. Looking down her nose, Peg gave out a sharp huff. She then turned her nose in the air and maneuvered her pain-racked body up off the floor. Unfortunately, when she came up, Peg was a step too close to the wall of the man's chest. There was no way she was going down on that hard floor again. Peg teetered for a moment, then quickly reached out with both hands and grabbed onto his knit shirt.

"OUCH!" the man roared. "That's not all shirt you've got!"

The volume of his voice slammed against Peg's eardrums and rumbled down into her chest. For a moment, she stood there holding handfuls of his shirt and watched as a glaze slowly filtered into his eyes. She smiled. Revenge was sweet, and now she was the one struggling to control a bubbling laugh.

Peg released his shirt and cautiously bent back down to pick up the scattered contents of her purse. After a few minutes, she noticed that he hadn't moved. Peg stretched up her gaze to his face and said, "If you're waiting for an apology, you might as well be on your way. Anyone could clearly see it was your total lack of rhythm that caused this fiasco."

His wide eyes and gaping mouth gave him the look of a deer caught in the headlights. As the shock wore off, his eyes narrowed and the flat of his hand slammed against the broad expansion of his chest. "Rhythm? Rhythm? Me? It was you!" Each of his jerking words steadily moved up in both volume and tone.

She squared her shoulders and snipped out, "I beg to differ with you, Sir. As we both know I was not the one in a hurry."

"Yeah, well."

In the short pause, his eyes shifted from side to side then settled on her face. He looked like a little boy caught in a lie and Peg struggled to keep a bubbling laugh down.

"Anyway, you were moving too slow," he clipped, then bent down to pick up a small pink plastic-wrapped cylinder lying at his feet. He came up, staring at the item in his hand.

Quickly she snatched it away from him and stuffed it into her purse. Peg pushed out a quick sharp breath through her nose

before hitting him with her rebuttal. "I'll have you know I was using proper turnstile etiquette."

He erupted in a laugh that quickly turned into a cough. When it settled down, he gave her a lopsided smile that tilted the corner of his mouth. "Turnstile etiquette? Where did you get that one?"

Peg speared him with a hard glare. She hitched the point of her chin up a full notch. Through tight lips she answered, "I'll have you know that I've been in many a turnstile and that has never happened to me before, until today that is."

He gave his head a small shake. "You can always tell a FIP. They think they know it all."

With a single step Peg was within inches of his face. "FIP! Did you just call me a FIP?" she shouted, as she waggled the point of her finger at his face. "I'll have you know that I am no Freaking Illinois Person. For your information, I'm a Wisconsin resident."

"Then you're a transplanted FIP," he said, widening his grin.

As her temper fumed, Peg struggled between kowtowing to the demands to be a lady and lambasting him with words she'd learned while working on her father's construction crew. However, when she turned her gaze away from his face she saw an even larger crowd had circled around them. She immediately spun on her heels and moved towards the crowd. Instantly, they parted like the Red Sea. She stomped through the division totally unsatisfied with the outcome of this encounter. As she walked through the crowd she felt the heat in her cheeks. Once again a handsome man had publicly humiliated her, and once again she walked away without saying a word.

Hunkered down in front of a bin of small copper pieces, Peg diligently searched through the mound of bright nuggets.

"May I help you?"

It surprised her to hear the words "may I". The standard greeting by a clerk was usually, "can I or could I". Hearing that always raised the hairs on the back of Peg's neck. It was refreshing to hear that someone had actually paid attention to their English teacher.

Glancing over her shoulder, Peg leveled her gaze to a pair of

## Building Blocks

well-worn jeans. Before lifting her eyes, she pasted on a polite smile and replied, "I'm looking for a standard half-inch male connector." With each word her gaze moved up the pale blue material and momentarily lingered on the faded line of the zipper. "I think your estimate's a little off," he said.

Peg's gaze shot up to his face. "Oh no. Good God, go away," she said as her shoulders sagged and her head fell forward in defeat.

"I thought you might be a little out of your element."

"Out of my element? Is that what you think? I'm out of my element?" Peg grit her teeth and started to count to ten. When she got to four she realized there wasn't enough numbers in the universe to calm her down. Forcing a calmness into her voice, Peg flicked her wrist as she said, "Saving ladies from chrome dragons won't get you knighted, or a merit badge. So please, leave me alone. I happen to know what I'm looking for. It's only a matter of finding the right male connector and making sure it fits."

The white lines fanning out from the corners of his mahogany eyes disappeared. The devilish glint that shimmered in their dark depths only told half the story. His lining smile told the rest. "I think you'll need something a little larger than a half-inch, if you expect to get a good fit."

When he gave Peg a quick wink, she rolled her eyes. She wasn't in the mood to participate in this juvenile verbal foreplay. Peg lashed out, "Sir, I'm talking about copper pipe."

"So am I," he chuckled then waggled his blonde eyebrows to make sure she caught his double-entendre.

Peg cringed at the thought that she'd fallen into his trap. She snapped her attention back to the bin of copper pieces.

"However, if you're doing new construction the half-inch will work, but up here the old water lines are three quarters."

Stopping her jaw from dropping, Peg quickly looked up to see if someone else had supplied such knowledgeable construction information. When she saw no one else there, she swallowed back a gulp. "I think whatever is standard will do quite nicely, thank you."

His lips curled, and with it came that grin again. "I'm sure it'll

do a real satisfying job.” He stressed the word ‘real’ to near its breaking point, as he reached past her into a bin and brought out a single bright fitting. Before handing it to her, he inspected the piece. “You the new teacher from Chi-town?”

Peg felt her space invaded by his nearness. She thought about pulling back, but that would be far too obvious. Instead, she stayed put and cooled her voice. “If you’re referring to the fact that I’m from Chicago, you’re right.” Peg turned her palm up in anticipation of receiving the copper fitting. “And yes, I am the new fourth grade teacher.”

Before dropping the copper piece into her hand, he gave it a quick swipe over his shirt. “Leasing the Zimmer place, right?”

The familiarity of a small town was why Peg took the job. She loved the idea of knowing your neighbors. Still, she didn’t think they’d be living on her back fence. Since he already knew the answer, she saw no need to comment.

“Have you met the ghost yet?” he asked as he drew himself up.

If he wasn’t there, Peg would have used the shelves to help her up, but not with him standing in front of her. She drew in a quite breath and held it as she slowly rolled up onto her feet. Once in place she covered her grimace by asking, “Ghost?”

His lips didn’t have to form the smile, his eyes showed it. If this was a pick up line, at least it was refreshing, Peg thought as she studied his face. Okay, no smile cracking yet. Peg schooled her face and listened.

“Haven’t you heard all those creaks in the night?”

Peg clucked her tongue. Maybe she’d given him more credit than he deserved for imagination. “Indeed, old houses groan, not ghosts.”

“Better tell Clara that when you see an empty rocker moving.”

“Clara?”

“Yeah, Clara Johnson, a college student, back in the sixties. She lived with the Zimmers for the summer.” His thumb shot out toward the street adding direction to his story.

Caught up in the tale, Peg widened her eyes and asked, “Was she murdered?”

He pulled in his face and gave his head a few small shakes.

## Building Blocks

“Nah. Got sick, went back to Green Bay and died.”

Peg didn't have time to recover from his flatly stated facts, before he was already on to the rest of his story. “When Clara left she told the Zimmers how much she had loved the town. Not long after they got word she died, they started hearing those strange noises.”

That did it. His voice quivered when he said ‘strange’. Peg pushed away from the shelves. “Thank you for sharing that extremely sad, but lovely story. Nevertheless, as I said, Mister...”

Her pause brought him to attention. He quickly shot his hand out to her. “Dolan...Luke.”

Hesitating, Peg studied his hand. When he inched it closer, she was forced to accept it. As her hand slid into his the scrape of his callused palm against her tender skin sent a rippling shiver through her. Then Peg's mind clicked through some of the comments she'd overheard about Luke Dolan. She offered him a small smile. So this was the town's golden boy, she thought as she held her head back from nodding. Why, from the way the town's folk talked about him, she thought he'd be a cross between Moses and Hercules.

She gave her hand a gentle tug and he released his grip. “Well, Mr. Dolan, Luke, I've enjoyed the scary campfire story, but you must excuse me. My haunted house has a broken water pipe,” she said as she stepped past him.

Luke quickly caught up with her. “Why didn't you call old Jim?”

Peg stopped, and angled Luke a look over the ridge of her shoulder. She didn't hold back the snicker that made its way out. “In the last three weeks I've called old Jim's answering machine so often, the machine and I are now on first name bases. I've come to the conclusion that as a handyman, Jim Anderson would sooner be a fisherman.”

When Luke gave Peg his full smile, she thought she heard the ping as a spark flashed off his white teeth. Good Lord, the guy never gives up. Does he really think smiles like that impress women? As she continued looking at him she realized that it could possibly have quite an effect on the opposite sex. It was having a

strange effect on her, but she also knew the smile would be much more effective if he'd remove the conceit from it and sprinkle in a pinch of sincerity.

"I'm pretty good with a wrench. I could give it a try."

Oh, here it comes, the pitch line. Now she had something to pin him to the mat with. Peg tucked her chin in and narrowed her eyes. "Thank you for the offer. However, Mr. Dolan I'm extremely knowledgeable in the field and must inform you that I do know the difference between a monkey wrench and monkey business."

The shocked look in his eyes sent a surge of satisfaction through her that felt wonderful. In addition the added sight of a slight blush rising up into his tanned cheeks had Peg feeling totally vindicated. After saying her piece, Peg quickly moved down the aisle. Suddenly, Luke was standing in her path. "I don't think you know who I am."

Peg let her gaze slowly drift down his full length and back again. Lifting her finger, she impolitely pointed at his chest. "Your reputation supercedes you, Mr. Dolan. You're Luke Dolan. You're the owner of Dolan's Construction. You've worked on some very prestigious projects around the area that has everyone, except a very few of the old timers, thinking you could possibly walk on water. You've built excellent condos that are clearly targeted for the upper end of the economy scale. Yet, as I've just learned, you are a card-carrying hypocrite."

"Hypocrite?" Luke near shouted the word as he pulled himself up to his full height.

It pleased Peg to again see that deer-in-the-headlights look, and she couldn't help but widen her smile. "Why yes, Mr. Dolan. Because it seems the people you sell your condos to are FIPS."

As Peg scooted around him, she relished the pleasure of verbally slamming him in his jaw after all.

"Da, you promised to take this weekend off and come up," Peg said into the phone she held pinned between her shoulder and ear. "Anyway, you just have to see this old house I'm renting. One of the locals said it comes with its own ghost."

Standing in front of the old black stove that took up most of the

## Building Blocks

wall, Peg carefully poured oil into the heated frying pan. It was quiet until she tossed in the moist vegetables, then it spit out a sizzling complaint. Peg ran a wooden spoon through the jumble of yellow, green and red vegetables until they settled down to an even hiss.

“Peigi, darlin`, have the house blessed, immediately. That’ll send the spirit on its way quick enough.” The worried tone in her father’s order had Peg rolling her eyes.

“No, Da, I’ll not call in a priest. It’s only a story. There’s no reason to have the school board believing they’ve hired a superstitious ninny. Anyway, I think this guy was trying out a new pick-up line.”

There was a long silence from the other end of the phone line. During it Peg prepared her own rebuttal for what she knew was coming. Then it came, but it wasn’t in its usual form. It was on the cutting edge of condescending.

“Ya know, darlin’, that wouldn’t be happenin’ if ya were married.”

Peg pinched out a half-cooked pea pod from the pan and popped it into her mouth. She chewed it quickly to make room for her words. “You’re not going to start that again, are you, Da?”

“I’m assumin’ ya still believe that if ya find one rotten apple in a barrel ya go out and chop down the tree? Yar logic is out of kilter, me girl.” The sharper tone in his voice conjured up the vision of his face in Peg’s mind. She knew the naturally red stain in his cheeks was darkening about now, and how she so wanted to see that twinkle glinting in his crisp blue eyes. She missed him so much and had hated to move so far away. Yet, there was no possible way she couldn’t stay in Chicago, not after what happened.

Peg slowly stirred the singing vegetables and released a fragrant bouquet of ginger into the air. She sniffed the air and smiled as she answered, “I’d sooner die an old maid with a bunch of cats than chance that kind of humiliation again.”

“Peigi Elizabeth Murphy, the shame’s on Devon Thompson, not on yarself. I, for one, thought the saints stepped in and blessed ya that day. For if ya hadn’t found out about his cheatin’ ways ya

would've married that slime ball."

Holding back a snickering laugh, Peg tried to keep the tone of her voice from lifting as she said, "But Da, if I had you'd already have those grandchildren you keep hounding me about."

Her father hardly gave her words time to cross the wires before he answered, "Yes, but they would've been born with horns and cloven feet, comin' from that one's seed. Ya'll just have to learn to be more selective when doin' the choosin', darlin'."

"Da, I'm twenty-six, not sixteen. And anyway, if you're so worried about me why don't you come up here and check out all the local prospects for yourself?"

Peg chuckled when she heard her normally eloquent Irish father stumble through his excuses. She knew he needed the rest. He usually put eighty-hour weeks into his small construction firm since Peg's mother died four years ago. This past spring they'd paid off the last of the massive hospital bills, and since then he's promised to slow down. So far, the only change Peg had seen were darker circles under his blue eyes and deeper grooves scoring his weathered brow.

"In fact." Peg added, hoping, to inch the argument a little further in her favor. "If you come up for the weekend, we could rent a boat and do some fishing."

"Peigi, darlin', I don't know."

His weakening argument urged her on. "Oh, and if you bring your toolbox up with you I have a railing on the back porch that needs a new newel post." She had him now. He wouldn't dare refuse his only child his expertise.

When she heard him give in, she mimed the word 'yes' with great enthusiasm. "Good, I'll have a big breakfast waitin' for you." She sent a soft smile into the phone. "Oh Da, just in case you decide to change your mind I want you to know, I really miss you." She knew he couldn't refuse her now. He'd be up on Saturday no matter what.

After hanging up the phone, Peg dished up a plate and carried it out to the dining room. She loved this time of evening when the sky gently turned a slate blue. The world took on a mystical feel like the magical second between a sigh and a kiss.

## Building Blocks

Peg lit the candles she'd placed on the old oak dining room table and settled into her chair. Sitting there, she realized how quickly she'd fallen in love with this narrow point of land so perfectly nestled between impressive Lake Green Bay and majestic Lake Michigan. She knew the area had captivated her just as it had Clara Johnson.

As her mind drifted through Luke's story, a sudden knock brought Peg a good inch off her chair. Her heart trembled while her gaze shot up to the ceiling. She wasn't sure where the sound came from, so she anxiously waited for the next one. When it happened, she released her in drawn breath slowly and pushed back her chair.

## Chapter 2

As the mellowing summer sun crawled behind the house, it sent the front porch into a dusky, blue-gray light. Blended in the torpid tones, Luke stood unnoticed behind the open screen door. He had his hand poised to knock, but as Peg padded across the opening, suddenly all he could do was stand and stare.

The delicate sandalwood fragrance of her perfume rushed out to greet him. Holding the scent for only a minute, he exhaled quickly. Damn, that had a lethal effect on his body. In fact that was the second time today that scent had kick started his hormones.

Earlier this afternoon, as he followed her into the hardware store, her perfume hit his head like a shot of smooth aged whiskey on an empty stomach. He knew he'd pushed too fast through the turnstile, but damn who could blame him. Of course, he most definitely could be blamed for that pseudo attempt he made to set her free from that turnstile. Hell, the intoxicating aroma muddled his mind so much he hadn't even realized she was leaning over the rail when he cut the straps.

Luke smiled at the screen door as he remembered how her eyes flashed like green lightning with a charge that went right down into his work boots. That site alone was well worth the tongue-lashing he'd received. Now once more her perfume was making him act like a fool, a fool with flowers in one hand, bottle of wine in the other and butterflies in his stomach.

"Shit," he whispered when his stomach quivered again. Get a grip, Luke Dolan, you're twenty-eight, not some love starved, horny teenager. She's only a woman, a beautiful one none-the-less, but only a woman.

The pep talk he gave himself helped make it easier for him to knock on the screen door. By the time the porch light flashed on,

## Building Blocks

his self-confidence was firmly back in place.

Peg stood at the door. The vivid color of her eyes and features of her face were consumed by shadows. Behind her the last rays of a dying orange summer sun cut through the windows and sent blazing shafts of light slamming against her flowing auburn hair. It looked on fire; a fire Luke wanted to touch.

He lowered his gaze. The pristine color of her white blouse and shorts were virginal, but not the way she wore them. Thank God they didn't have teachers like that when he was in school or he'd still be there.

Luke didn't have to put on his best smile; it was already in place as he looked into her face. He did, however, have to squeeze a contrite tone to his voice. "I hope I'm not interrupting your dinner."

"I was just about to..."

"I bear gifts." He stepped over her words while quickly holding up the bottle of wine and the small bouquet of mixed flowers he'd picked up at the grocery store. Lifting the bottle higher, he added, "This one's to dull the pain of your bruises." Then the flowers came up level with the wine. "And these are a peace offering."

When she cocked her head, the red-yellow sunlight, squeezing through the hatched screen, gilded the points of her face and sent a glistening sheen over her full lips. Luke swallowed hard, but the dryness in his throat was still there.

"That isn't necessary, Mr. Dolan. For your information, there isn't a single hint of a bruise anywhere on my body, I can assure you."

Just then Luke's vivid imagination took over. He saw her naked, stretched out on a bed and his hands and eyes slowly inching over the soft shadowy plains and valleys of her body. Suddenly, his hormones were at work again. He shifted his weight from one foot to another, hoping to relieve the tension his body was putting on his zipper. He couldn't speak, not yet.

As her silence lengthened, he suddenly became worried she was about to run him off her porch. Until finally she broke the silence, "I am curious, Mr. Dolan. Are you the unofficial welcome wagon, or have you singled me out as the recipient of your concentrated

attention today? If that's the case, it makes me curious if you've run the gambit of the local female population, and so are forced to search out fresh meat." Peg angled her chin to the side and her gaze narrowed. "Is that what this is all about?"

Though Luke knew Peg had caught him flatfooted, he quickly recovered. "I'm only apologizing, Ms Murphy. However, if that's how you feel, I'll just take my small tokens of apology and leave." Luke did a slow turn on his heels. He was betting himself he'd only reach the bottom of the steps when she'd called him back.

When his foot hit the last step, Peg called out, "Well, since this is nothing more than an apologetic visit, won't you come in?"

Luke heard the squeak of the screen door as it opened. He sent a smile out into the evening kissed field. Dang, this was going to be easier than he thought, and he definitely liked easy.

While a full second ticked off the clock, he put a slightly offended look on his face before turning around. "No, I'll leave these." Luke waggled the flowers but held the wine steady. "Don't want to interrupt your dinner."

"You're welcome to join me. It's only a vegetable stir-fry."

"Thanks but I'm..." He liked this. She was almost begging him to stay. He didn't want to stretch this out too long. This fish just might spit the hook out before he got it set, but he definitely liked easy.

"I know, a meat and potato man, right? You could look at the meal as an adventure." Peg said, still holding the door wide. "Having something on your plate that didn't have parents might be a new experience for you, Mr. Dolan."

After a second of fraudulent hesitation, Luke strode past her into the wide space of the farmhouse's kitchen. "Luke, please. It's friendlier," he said as he looked around.

The large space had been toned down with delicate touches of checkerboard fabrics and chinch curtains. The mouth-watering bouquet of cooked food added to the homey feel. "Yellow's a great color for a kitchen," Luke said as he did a slow turn in the center of the room.

"I think it's rather nice."

"You got that right, reminds me of sunshine."

## Building Blocks

Luke took a moment to further scan the room. Above Peg's head a few of the cabinet doors had been taken off their hinges and were resting against the table. "Warped doors?" He asked looking down his nose at the doors. "It's less work to replace them, than fix these old things."

Stepping to his side, Peg carefully grazed the tip of her finger over the door's ridge. "Not everyone has the wherewithal to do that. Besides, I think it's important to try to fix things. You might be throwing away something very special."

Luke watched how her face softened as she looked at the door. "A realist huh? I like that, Ms Murphy."

Peg's face came up and though her smile was wide her eyes still carried the softness she had offered to the cabinet door. "Peg, please, it's friendlier."

Luke's gaze drifted down her full length, then moved away. "Got some glasses?"

When Peg stepped away from the table to the cabinets above the sink, Luke picked up an old wooden plane, lying on the table. He turned it in his hands carefully studying the tool. "Beautiful," he said as he ran his fingers carefully over the burnished wood. "The Old World craftsmanship on these old tools is something else. It's almost a piece of art in itself."

"Oh that." Peg lit the burner under the large black skillet. "It was my grandfather's."

"Your grandfather's?"

"Yes. He was a cabinetmaker in Ireland. It's about seventy-five years old."

"What are you doing with it?"

She chuckled. "I'm the daughter of a contractor. And though his dream of having a son to pass the business on to never came about, he taught me to use all sorts of tools." A wide smile swept across her face. "Since I was sixteen, I've carried union cards as a carpenter, a plumber, and an electrician. So you see, this afternoon, when you thought I was out of my element, I wasn't."

Peg brought two wine flutes to the table and handed Luke the corkscrew. Luke picked up the bottle. As he opened the wine, he

thought about what she'd look like on a construction site. She'd have on a pair of work boots, also a pair of shorts with fringed edges. Of course, no respectable female construction worker would wear anything but tank top that clung to her bra-less body. A tool belt was a must, hanging low on her hips. To complete the picture there'd be a hard hat. As Luke continued to think on the picture, he decided everything would have to go, except the hard hat.

"No comment as to my qualifications?" Peg asked, looking up into his face.

Even blinking didn't erase the vision from his mind. He could only hope she couldn't read his thoughts. or the bottle would definitely be cracked over his skull any second now.

"Yeah, I'm very impressed by you're ah...qualifications."

Peg gave him a self-satisfied smile. When she offered him a glass of wine, his fingers lingered over hers. For a lengthy moment, they stood locked in each other's gaze. Then suddenly the sharp knell of the phone ripped through the room, making them both jump.

"Oh, God, no." Peg's face drained of color as she spoke into the phone.

Luke suddenly felt a hauntingly familiar feeling strangling his gut. He'd seen that look on his sisters' faces the snowy night Chief Miller told them their parents had been killed in a car accident.

"Yes, I'll be there as soon as I can," Peg choked out. With her back to him, he watched her hand come up to her face. He knew she swiped away her tears.

"Thank you." Her voice quivered out the words before she put the receiver back in its cradle. For a moment she stood rolled-shouldered looking down at the phone her hand was locked onto. Luke heard a soft snuffle just a second before he watched her spine stiffen and her shoulders square. Peg cleared her throat twice before she turned to him. When she did there was a crystallized glaze of unshed tears in her eyes.

Fear layered the room like a thick blanket. The weighted entity closed in around him, and all Luke wanted to do was wrap her in his arms and shield her from it.

## Building Blocks

“Can I do anything?”

“That was Saint Bartholomew’s Hospital, in Chicago. My father has had a heart attack.” With the words still hanging in the air, Peg’s face turned white. Her breathing became shallow and her hands curled into fists. “They’ve asked if I’d come down right away. They said something about the next forty-eight hours being the most critical.”

Her eyes drifted down to the floor. For a stretched out moment, silence strangled every sound. Then before Luke could blink, her body crumpled into a heap. He rushed to her side and swept her up into his arms. When her head lobbed against his shoulder, he cradled it with his cheek as he carried her to the couch.

Seconds later, Peg eyes snapped open. She quickly blinked in shock to see a strange man’s face hovering close to hers. Lines of worry veed his brow, and spikes of fear flashed in his eyes. Then she remembered who he was and what had happened.

Embarrassment pulled her gaze from his. “I’m sorry.”

“Would you like some water?” Luke asked while patting her hand.

Peg shook her head and slipped her hand from his. When she sat up the room still had a slight tilt to it, so she held onto the couch.

“You sure you’ll be able to make that eight hour drive? Luke asked.

Because of the worried look in his eyes, Peg offered him a small smile of thanks. “That’s twice today you’ve been my Lockinvar.”

“Maybe I’ll be knighted after all,” he said as he rolled to his feet and made his way to the door.

Coming up from the couch, Peg was hesitant about looking him in the eyes. When she finally got up the courage, she saw the remnants of concern lurking just below their warm brown surface.

“Thank you.” Her words were just above a whisper.

To go along with his smile, Luke gave her a small courtly bow. “Sir Luke, at your service.” His care touched her heart like a caress. “Your father’s gonna be fine,” he said.

Sloan St.James

“I’m sure of it, too,” she answered.

Hearing her own words cemented them in her heart. Peg knew the synonym for MacAlister Murphy was ‘stubborn Irishman’. “He’ll be cheating the banshee out of her wail for many more years to come,” she added.

Watching Luke make his way to his truck drew a deep sigh from her.

“Be careful.” Luke’s voice carried out over the darkness and momentarily silenced the thick layer of chirping crickets.

As his truck pulled away, she was surprised how reassuring it was to have Luke there. His strength and encouraging words kept her spirits high. Though just a new friend, the concern in his eyes looked genuine. Nevertheless, Peg didn’t have time to delve into that right now. Her father was her main concern.

### Chapter 3

As he drove home Luke had picked at his thoughts about Peg. Now, while sitting inside his truck in his driveway, his worries about her passing out again swelled. He shuffled through some quick lies he could tell her that might convince her to let him drive her to Chicago. He'd even thought about telling her he'd been unexpectedly called there, but even he knew she'd see right through it.

"Dammit."

He slammed his palms against the steering wheel. "Eight hours."

His fingers curled around the plastic and steadily squeezed until the tension rippled up his arms and into his shoulders. "She'll never make it."

Luke shook his head as he stared into the dark near space beyond the windshield. He quickly uncurled his fingers and gave the wheel another hard hit.

Just then, in the rear view mirror, he saw two yellow-white beams of light turning into the driveway. As the car closed-up the distance, its lights ricocheted off the white garage door and flooded into the cab of Luke's truck. After the groan and clatter of a car door, a pair of legs broke through the receding white streams.

"Are you waiting for me?"

Luke looked down and hit the light on his wristwatch. It was strange for his eighteen-year-old sister, Holly, to be home before midnight on a weekend.

"You and Mike have a fight?"

"No, he's got the early shift tomorrow." Holly leaned through the open window. "What are you doing sitting out here in your truck?"

“Just got home myself.”

The glaring light of the headlights vanished. Now only a small porch light and the pale moonlight tickled the black night.

A wide smile splashed across Holly’s face. The moon’s blue light fanned out and cascaded down on the crown of her short cut blond hair. “What? Al’s Place burn down?”

“Don’t get funny, punk.”

“That would be the only possible explanation you’re home early on a Friday night. That or else a girl stood you up. Which was it?” She reached through the opening and shoved his shoulder.

“None of your business.” Luke pushed the door open, forcing Holly to step back.

As he walked up to the porch steps, Holly raced to keep up with his long strides. “Have you given any thought to our earlier conversation?”

Absentmindedly, he listened to Holly’s words but he still hadn’t let go of the fear he’d seen on Peg’s face.

“Maybe you don’t realize how much things have changed in the ten years since you were a senior in high school.”

“If I say this conversation is useless, would that stop you?” Luke asked, putting a sarcastic tone to the question, as he slid the key into the lock.

When Holly didn’t respond, he tacked on, “Anyway, I doubt if the cost of living has skyrocketed since Laura graduated two years ago. She managed on the same allowance you’re getting.”

Holly pulled her shoulder away from the doorjamb and stiffened her spine. “Laura’s so tight with her money she squeaks when she walks.”

“Your sister knows the value of a dollar.”

“No, she’s a tight a...”

Luke stopped turning the knob and stared at his teenage sister. Her face was in shadows but he knew how the right side of her upper lip would be curled. It always did when she was disgusted. Why wasn’t she more like levelheaded Laura or even sweet little Andrea? No, not Holly, she always had to push the boundaries.

Money.

Growing up, he’d never worried about it. After their parents

## Building Blocks

died, what he thought was there, wasn't. He worked damn hard to get them to where they were now. Those lean years were the worst, and Luke never wanted to go back to those days again. He wouldn't, unless his sisters drove him there with their demands for new dresses and what they called essentials.

Why didn't his parents have all sons? Boys are satisfied with a couple pairs of jeans and some tee shirts, preferably the same ones. God, girls are awfully hard on the wallet. As he looked at Holly's face, he realized he wouldn't have traded any one of them for a brother.

He shoved aside the softness he felt for her and replaced it with a hard narrowed-eyed stare. "Watch your mouth, young lady."

"Oh, Luke." Holly moved to the porch swing and plopped down onto it. The springs and chains gave out a loud complaint even under her slight weight. "Wake up, Mister Dolan. Way back when women got the right to vote, we also got something called freedom of speech."

Luke stood on the threshold of the open door. The tiny amber light that spilled down the winding staircase, and out onto the porch, wasn't very much. Still, the flush of his rising anger made him feel as if a thousand-watt floodlight was blaring down on him.

"Sure go ahead talk anyway you like. Just see how fast men are going to beat a path to your door. We like our women soft, delicate and sweet. There isn't a male alive that would turn away from something like that to go after a trash-talking female who thinks it's way cool to use words that come out of construction worker's mouth.

Holly jumped up from the swing and sashayed across the wide porch before Luke could push away from the frame.

"Since I'm supposed to be this delicate flower and wait for Mr. Rhett Butler to come and carry me off, I most assuredly will need an advance on my allowance." Holly drawled out as she fanned her face with her hand and batted her eyelashes.

"I declare," she said slow and sweet. "I just don't know what this world is coming to. My, oh my, the cost of petticoats has gone sky high. I might just have to use our living room drapes for my

homecoming gown.” She continued fanning her face as she waltzed across the remaining distance to stand toe to toe with him.

Luke waited until her smile was firmly in place before he matched hers, than went one better. “If you can’t live on what I give you, maybe you should think about getting a job.”

When his sister’s chin came up he knew the discussion was over. She pushed passed him and through the doorway, to make her way to the stairs. Once at the top, she stopped and turned, keeping her hand on the newel post, she said, “I can only hope that the tight-ass dominate gene that runs through this family skips a generation.” She finished her commentary after she turned. “I sure don’t want my kids growing up to be like their skinflint uncle.”

Peg stood on the back porch and couldn’t believe two weeks ago she’d made a pact with God that she’d do anything if her father lived. Now, she wanted to kill him herself.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, MacAlister Murphy?” she screamed out across the lawn.

Her father stood to the side of the woodpile with an axe poised high above his head.

“Have you gone daft or do you want to make me an orphan?” She threw the dishtowel down onto the chase lounge and ran barefoot across the leaf-covered grass. Who could think of shoes when it came to saving your father’s life? By the time she reached him, the axe was already lowered.

Mac lengthened his five foot eight inch height to its fullest and pinned back his shoulders. Defiantly, he locked his jutting jaw. Four newly split logs lay at his feet and the sight pushed Peg beyond her control. She yanked the axe out of his hand.

“What is wrong with you? Didn’t you hear the doctor when he said you had a coronary occlusion?”

“I’ve had enough of sittin’ in that chair.” Mac angled his thumb to the cluster of chairs neatly placed under the wide branches of a fat old oak. “All I do is wait for the sun to set, just so I can go inside to sit in another chair.”

“That is what you are suppose to do. Rest!”

“I’ll get rest enough when there’s six feet of dirt on top of me.”

## Building Blocks

“If you keep this up, you’ll be getting your rest sooner than you think,” Peg snapped back. She understood it was the loss of his independence that bothered him more than sitting around. However, how could she give him back his freedom without piling up mounds of worry on herself? Letting him go back to Chicago was out of the question. She would have gladly rented him an apartment here, if they all weren’t in the center of town.

From spring break to Thanksgiving tourists came up here in droves. He’d get more rest if he’d pitch a tent in the middle of Michigan Avenue during the Saint Patrick’s Day parade. The only other places available were abandoned farms. The thought sent a shiver channeling down her spine. God, that’s all she needed. She’d probably find him out plowing the fields or something. No, he needed a place of his own with some supervision.

“Ya treat me like those little ones ya teach all day.”

“What do you expect? You act like them. No, worse. They listen.”

“I’m yar father, not yar child. And speakin’ of such, when’s that gonna happen?”

She knew how his mind worked when he was in the wrong. His fancy footwork of topic switching was a trait she’d caught on to long ago.

“Since I’ve been here, ya’ve had one gentlemen caller. At that rate I’ll be playin’ pinochle with Saint Bridget long afore ya have any children of yar own.”

Peg held her ground. She wasn’t falling for this one-eighty turn he took. “Right now you’re all the child I can handle.”

Her father glared at her. “I’ll not be used to appease yar motherly instincts. Ya need a pack of kids to keep ya busy. Why don’t ya go and give that nice Luke Dolan fella a call? Ya brushed him off rather quickly the other night. See if he’ll oblige ya with...”

“I had a feeling that’s what happened.”

The timbre of Luke’s voice brought Peg’s head around so quickly her nose almost speared his chest. He looked overly pleased with himself, while Peg felt her embarrassment rising above the rib neckline of her sweater.

“Luke!”

As if to gain an ally, Mac immediately stepped to Luke’s side. “Mr. Dolan, I’ve a proposition to place before ya. If ya take me daughter off me hands, I’ll pay ya five thousand dollars, cold hard cash, right here on the spot.” Her father’s face held its stern business negotiation look as he arched his short thick arm up and brought it down on Luke’s shoulder.

Luke clamped his lips between his teeth. There was no doubt a laugh was pushing against the walls of his cheeks. After a moment he cleared his throat and asked, “Do I have to do something illegal to get the money, Mr. Murphy?”

Peg’s finger came up like the point of a gun, and she aimed it right at her father’s face. “Da, stop it!”

In an attempt to sacrifice his life for his new friend, Luke stepped between Peg’s firing finger and Mac’s face. “Wait. This is getting interesting.”

“Please do not encourage him,” she clipped out in her best no nonsense teacher voice. Then she quickly turned to her father and shot her finger out to the house. “And you, get in the house and wash up for lunch.”

Mac didn’t flinch at Peg’s insistent command. Instead, he stood his ground pinning her with his blue eyes. Slivers of sunlight peeked through his thinning auburn hair and shadows emphasized the lines in his face. Though the man that stood before her was sixty what she saw was the father of her childhood.

“Don’t ya be bossin’ me around, girl. Mr., Dolan and I are talkin’ business here.”

Still struggling with a smile, Luke took hold of her elbow and began to lead her past a cluster of lawn chairs. “Yes, leave us men to talk.”

Peg dug her bare heels into the soft grass and jerked her arm from his hold. She quickly folded her arms across her chest and plopped down into the nearest wooden lawn chair. The wood creaked loudly almost like an exclamation point before her reply. “I will do no such thing.”

Luke stood head and shoulders above her father. Neither had a single feature that could be considered similar, yet their shocked

## Building Blocks

expression was a common thread that linked one to the other. Peg held them in her beaded sights while she let the silence stretch out.

Luke turned to Mac. "What about that five thou?"

Mac looked up into Luke's face. Even from where Peg sat she could see a hint of mischief in her father's eyes. "Do ya think the figure's too low?"

In an exaggerated act of contemplation, Luke rubbed his chin. "Well, Mr. Murphy, that depends."

Mac quickly stepped over Luke's words. "I think this circumstances calls for dispensin' with the Mister, if ya don't mind. Mac will do just fine, lad."

Luke smiled and nodded in confirmation. "Okay, Mac what about her temperament?"

With a smile, Mac looked his daughter over. "Glory be, she's the sweetest, gentlest creature God ever put down on this earth."

Luke's eyes rolled. "Kissed the blarney stone, have you, Mac?"

Mac's face reddened with restrained laughter. "I call it creative marketin'."

Peg's lips thinned. "I'd call it hogwash."

"Seein' as ya're a son of the old sod and all, I'll make ya a deal..." Mac reached up and placed a hand on Luke's shoulder.

"Before you go any further, I better tell you. I'm only half Irish. The other half is Norwegian. Is that a problem?"

"No, not at all. If I'm not mistaken, those Viking relatives of yars hit Ireland a few times. Who knows if there's not some of that barbarian blood runnin' through the Murphy Clan as well."

Luke smiled. "Now back to that five thou, what would I have to do to earn it?"

Peg jumped out of her chair. Though she'd struggled to keep her face straight throughout their exchange, she found herself losing the battle to keep the corners of her mouth from tucking into her cheeks. It'd been so long since she'd heard her father laugh, she didn't mind being the butt of his joke. However, suddenly she felt she didn't want Luke to hear her father's exact plans.

"Da, if you so much as open your mouth..."

Mac speared his daughter with narrowed eyes. "I'll open it anytime I like, Peigi Elizabeth Murphy."

Then Mac turned to Luke and with sincerity written on his face, he said, "I've one word for ya to think on Luke, me boy...grandchildren."

"Mine or yours?" Luke asked with surprised quickness.

"Mine first, of course. Eventually they'll be givin' ya yar own."

Peg watched as Luke and Mac dropped down into the chairs and shared a long laugh. Though she felt the blush between her freckles was a small price to pay for her father's laughter, she didn't like the flutter in her stomach. Having Luke get the impression her father needed to buy a husband for her was as close to the edge of embarrassment as she could handle.

"If neither of you has any further use of this punching bag, I'll go in and make us some lunch." She turned and started walking back across the yard. Without looking at them, she called out, "It goes against my grain to offer you an invitation, Mr. Dolan, but I feel it's the only neighborly thing to do."

Luke quickly jumped out of his chair and raced after her. "Actually I'm here to ask you out to lunch." He turned to Mac and added, "You also, sir."

"God bless ya, son. Though what I'd really relish is the idea of havin' the house to meself for a few hours."

Her father was right. The break would do them both good. "Since I'm being discarded like an old shoe, I guess I have no choice but to accept the offer."

Luke looked down at her feet and smiled. "Speaking of old shoes."

Peg's gaze fell to her bare feet. She chuckled. "I'll meet you out front." When she turned to her father, he flipped his wrist shooing her along.

As Luke and Peg walked together across the lawn, Mac's voice reached out to them. "Keep in mind, I'll not be payin' the money for ya to sample the merchandise. It's grandchildren I want on me knee, not a fallen woman on me hands."

Luke smiled over his shoulder. "Don't worry Mac, if I get the milk for free, I'll still buy the cow."

## Building Blocks

“Cow?” Peg questioned in a heavy whisper.

Luke gave her a quick wink and a soft smile that fluttered in Peg’s stomach.

As the waitress cleared away their plates, Peg couldn’t believe how quickly three hours had passed. This lull in the conversation was the first they had since they left the house. Yet, the silence wasn’t putting a strain between them. Instead, she felt an almost comfortable easiness stretching out in the space where words didn’t fit.

While Luke gazed out the picture window at the rippling water, Peg took her time studying his face. The lines were definite. Nice chiseled features, nothing ambiguous. His personality was quite the same, straightforward, but not hard. His smile was easy and his laugh was genuine. It was like what you see is what you get with Luke Dolan. This was quite refreshing, after Devon the Devious.

When Luke caught her eye, Peg’s embarrassment pushed her gaze down. “I want to thank you for this afternoon...” Tentatively, she lifted her eyes to his face. “The way you made my father laugh.”

Luke pulled his brow down and tucked in his chin. “I thought it was you he was laughing at?”

Peg gave out a single tsk with a wide smile. “I appreciate your thoughtfulness.” Looking deep into her eyes, she struggled against being pulled into their rich velvet vortex. When a lazy smile crawled across his full lips, she suddenly felt as if he was reading her hearts secrets and it tripped with the thought.

“Sir Luke, remember.” His voice and smile vibrated through her, torching her center then sending an igniting heat that spread through her body.

“Sir Luke, the knight who bravely risks his life to rescue damsels from the chrome dragon, and then just as easily tilts windmills with her father.”

Luke’s gaze dropped down to a spot on the tablecloth. “He’s a lot like my father was.”

Peg heard a slice of pain in Luke's voice. "That's the first time you've ever mentioned your family."

He inhaled deeply and then exhaled it slowly. "Both my parents were killed in a car accident five years ago. I've got three younger sisters. One's a sophomore at Wisconsin State. Another's a senior at Travers High. The other," there was a flood of affection in Luke's eyes when he lifted his gaze from the table, "she's at Culver Junior High."

Peg's heart rolled hearing the tenderness in Luke's voice when he spoke of his family. "So you're big brother, father and mother."

Luke's face cracked into a wide smile. "If you'd talked to them right now, they'd add dictator to my resume'."

She looked at him through narrowed eyes. "Dictator?"

"Yeah, I'm trying to teach them that money doesn't grow on trees."

"How are the lessons going?"

"Not well. They think it's their job to spend the money faster than it can be made."

"Maybe they could get part-time jobs. That might help them learn quicker."

"That's what I told them, but between you and me, they wouldn't last a week."

Peg pulled her brow down. "Why?"

"They've never worked before," Luke chuckled.

"They'll have to learn sometime."

"I think they should concentrate on their studies. Anyway, they get a generous allowance for essentials."

"It must not be sufficient."

Luke's eye narrowed as he pulled in his chin. "I'm not a tight...a skinflint. CD's and makeup aren't some of the things I'd consider as important."

"Those things are when you're young."

Sending her a lopsided smile, Luke asked. "Are you saying I'm old?"

"Well..." Peg stretched the word out slowly and mixed it through a small giggle.

Luke's hand came up to cover his heart in a mock exhibition of

## Building Blocks

being shot. “Oh, that hurt, and here I thought I hid my age well.”

Peg reached across the table and touched the point of her finger to the fanning of lines at the corner of his eye. “There’s a few lines, right there, that give you away.”

Luke captured her hand before she could pull it away. He drew her palm to his lips. Peg’s breath hitched at the delicate feel of his warm breath tenderly caressing her fingers. With her upturned palm just inches from his lips, he lifted his eyes to hers. He held them captive while his lips pressed into the sensitive center.

A chain reaction exploded through every fiber of Peg’s body. By the time he finally pulled his mouth away, Peg was aware of her every breath and each racing beat of her heart.

Holding her in his eyes, he laced his large fingers through her slender ones and held them in place on the table. His strength and power overwhelmed her, yet she was strangely unafraid. There were many sides to Mr. Luke Dolan. As she gazed at their entwined fingers, Peg couldn’t help but wonder if cheating was one of them.

“The town council has asked me to check out a piece of property up on Mill Pond Road. How about taking a ride?”

Peg was grateful that Luke’s question pushed the thought of Devin back. She was quick to agree, the ride was a great idea.

## Chapter 4

"This is a beautiful piece of property. Why did you say it was going on the market?" Peg asked as she scanned the magnificent vista stretching out before her.

The rise they stood on carried the view over the town and well out into the lake. A narrow black road snaked its way up the hillside and got lost beneath a flagrant canopy of fall leaves. Fields of yellow and green rolled over the hills like a patchwork quilt. She'd never seen anything so picturesque. Even Norman Rockwell would be envious.

As she took a deep breath of the fragrant scent of new air coming off the lake, Luke moved to her side to share the view.

"Back taxes," he answered.

"That's awful. Couldn't someone have helped the owner keep this land?"

"That's the problem. Originally it was in a land trust. When the trust dissolved, the assessor, Dean Kramer, couldn't locate the owner. Bert Avery, the town's lawyer, tried to dig further but his search came up empty."

"How could someone just walk away from this?"

Luke shrugged his shoulders and began pacing out a few steps then stopped and turned, before taking two more in another direction. "It'll be cut up and once the condos are here the town will get near ten million."

"Wow!" Peg couldn't stop her mouth from gaping. "That's a lot of money."

"These units will go for approximately two-thirds of a mil each. This close to town, they might even bring more."

She stared at the barrage of colorful foliage flaring out from the surrounding trees. The blaze of reds and oranges were almost

## Building Blocks

unnatural, yet still the hues were something no painter could mix on his pallet.

Suddenly, as if the intensity awoke something in her mind, Peg rushed to Luke's side. "Luke, have you ever thought about making something like this into a retirement community? You know, small homes, with small yards where the residents could plant a vegetable garden or flowers. With the world's population getting older there's a whole untapped market out there for the taking."

Luke's brow veed, as he looked down at her. "The town wants the revenue those wealthy tourists will bring in."

"Yes, but think of all the retired people, like my father, that live right here. I mean something like that would be good for the town."

When Peg saw his face screwed up she pushed the excitement down in her voice. Even though she was sure her idea was a stroke of genius.

"I don't think so, Peg." Luke said with a small shake of his head. "Something like that would put a strain on the community."

"How so?" she asked up into his face.

"For one, retired people would overrun our hospitals."

Peg had to stop her mouth from gaping. "Are you serious?" she snapped out. When she saw the flash of surprise in his eyes, Peg realized her strong-arm tactics were about to put him off. She toned down her agitation. "You really don't think the town would see the advantages of this?"

With her held in his eyes, the hard lines around Luke's mouth slowly softening. "Peg, right now you're wrapped up in how to deal with your father's situation. That's clouding your judgment."

Peg squeezed her fists tighter inside her pockets, in an effort to keep her frustration from peeking. She leveled out her voice and turned out to the colorful landscape. "You're right, I am thinking this would be a perfect place for my father. Yet, I'm sure if I presented this idea to the council they'd also see the advantages."

He stepped in front of her and concentrated on her eyes. "I wouldn't want you to waste your time. The council's pretty much decided condos are the way they're going. I doubt if they'd even consider your idea."

A light suddenly went off in Peg's brain. "Are you going to be the contractor for the project?"

His eyes narrowed with question. "Why, yeah...possibly. What does that have to do with it?"

Peg lifted her gaze to take in his full face. "Do I have to spell it out for you?"

The look on Luke's face told Peg he understood what she meant, but he wanted her to say the words anyway. "I think you do."

After a quick breath, Peg threw out the words. "Conflict of interest."

"Collusion?" Luke glowered down the ridge of his nose at her. "Is that what you're saying?"

With her shoulders now squared, Peg lined him a hard look right up into his eyes. "There's no mystery here, Luke Dolan. Not more than twenty minutes ago you told me how important money is to you. Now that just about spells out the only reason you're in this business is for the money."

"Are you crazy?" An immeasurable hue of scarlet bleached the dark brown of Luke's eyes. His jaw hardened further etching the lines creasing the corners of his mouth. "Sure I am, and so is everyone else in the world that works for a living."

His hard glare attempt at intimidation didn't work on her. Why she stood up against nine-year-olds that were masters and he didn't even come close to their expertise. Although she felt her knees slightly softened when she watched the explosion in his eyes, she managed to hold her ground and give him back the exact look he was firing at her.

"Now I understand," she said. "You're on that fast track to your first million and God help those of us that might put a bump in the road to your success. I bet you wouldn't even blink as you stepped on us little people who are concerned about community."

"What the hell are you talking about? I'm not stepping on anyone to get what I want."

"And you most definitely do not have a sense of community consciousness either."

Luke's full lips disappeared leaving a hard thin line in their

## Building Blocks

place. “First collusion, now conscious, you’re stuck on ‘C’ words.”

“Maybe I should have started with the A's,” Peg bit out.

That tinge of scarlet in his eyes flashed like a forest fire in August. “That’s real nice coming from a teacher.”

Peg gave a single quick snort, and then dismissed his statement with a flip of her head. “Anyway, you are not the one I should be talking to about this. Would you be so kind as to tell me just when the town council is holding its meeting?”

“Why?” Luke’s one word question came out in a huff.

Peg widened her eyes and drew in a breath. She addressed his question in the most indignant tone she could muster. “Why?” She drew out the word, and then let her eyes slowly roll to add emphasis to what she thought was a ridiculous question. Moreover, to prove just how absurd she thought it was, she flippantly added, “Because I want to sell them Girl Scout cookies.”

Luke's lips curled as if the words were bringing a sour taste into his mouth. “The meeting's at seven thirty, Tuesday. So be prepared.”

“Ha.” Peg stiffened her spine. “You have your genders mixed, Mr. Dolan.” Slamming her hands onto her hips, she glared up into his face. She refused to wither under the glare of his sharp gaze. While holding him in her sights, she shot him back her foremost patronizing grin. “That's the Boy Scouts' motto.”

Luke took a single step that brought him toe to toe with her. His height forced her to tilt her head back. For an elongated moment neither said a word as their eyes did battle. Then a lining smile slowly crept across Luke's mouth further slotting his eyes. Peg felt fear crawling up her spine as she stared into their cold black centers. He dipped his face until his nose was almost touching hers, he whispered in a voice void of all emotion. “No, that's Luke Dolan's motto.”

“I’m prepared. I’m prepared. I’m prepared.” Peg had repeated those two words like a mantra since midnight last night. She recited them a thousand times more since entering the high school’s gymnasium where the town council held their regular

meetings.

The place was huge and nearly empty. Only four people sat in the audience, and from the small number of metal chairs set in place, not many were ever expected.

From her corner post seat in the last row, Peg could easily see Luke's profile. The harsh fluorescent lights were extremely gentle on the ruggedly handsome lines of his face. She would've liked him to make some recognition that she was there just so she could snub him, but he hadn't even turned in her direction. Instead, he shared a continual whispered conversation with the town's lawyer, Bert Avery.

The husky built middle-aged attorney looked out of place in a room of casually dressed people. His perfectly styled thick head of white-gray hair and the expensive cut of his suit set him far apart from everyone else in the room. It must not have bothered him that he was extremely over dressed or he would have loosened his tie or removed his suit coat to fit in, but he didn't.

The five men and two women of the board were perched at the head table. A mildly irritated discussion had erupted into a heated debate sending the board president, Gene Boyd, up onto his feet.

An extremely powerfully built man, Gene's height seemed to have some trouble carrying his size. What was it with middle-aged men and Banlon, anyway? Did they really think it was a turn on to see the material stretch to its limits over their stomachs?

Gene repeatedly bludgeoned the table with his gavel. "Listen..." His word was practically buried beneath the echoing report of his gavel.

"Listen to what, Gene?" the bald man two rows up from Peg shouted as he jumped out of his chair. "You've been tellin' us that bridge's gonna be fixed for the last two years."

Even through Gene's sun-bronzed complexion, Peg could see the red stain of his anger filling his large face and spread up into his head of thin mousse brown hair. Gene repeatedly tugged at one side of his collar, then the other. Peg wasn't sure if he was releasing some of his anger or just nervous under pressure.

"Rupert, you're out of order. Sit down!" Gene used the stick end of the gavel to direct Rupert Parish to sit.

## Building Blocks

“This is a town meetin’ and I’m part of this town ain’t I? You gave me the floor, and by golly I’m gonna use it. I’m sick and tired of tryin’ to keep that old bridge together with spit and balin’ wire. When I took on the job as bridge tender, I wasn’t told miracle worker was part of my duties.”

Gene exhaled and shook his head. “I told you the bridge has been put on the state’s list to be fixed `fore winter sets in. I got that first hand from the governor’s office.” Gene again used the stick end of the gavel to stress his point home.

“Well, I’m not gonna... ”

“Rupert Parish, either you sit down or I’ll have Charlie escort you out of the meeting.”

Peg watched as Rupert plopped back down into his chair. From the thin line of his lips, she could see his anger hadn’t yet conceded.

“Now, the next order of business is the one hundred and twenty acres on Mill Pond Road,” Gene said, moving the meeting forward.

Peg jumped out of her chair shouting, “Mr. President, I would like to offer a suggestion for use of that property.” Her heart hammered so loud in her ears Peg could hardly hear the President’s reply.

“Is that you, Miss Murphy?” Gene angled his chin out and narrowed his eyes as he stared out to the audience.

“Yes,” Peg answered, hearing her lumbering lungs strangle the word.

“We don’t hold on formalities here. Why not come down front and tell us what’s on your mind.” Gene said, motioning for Peg to come forward.

On shaking knees, Peg stepped through the empty line of chairs and down the short center aisle. She stopped just a few feet from the board’s table and felt everyone’s eyes on her. However, there was a particular brown pair she was sure she felt boring the deepest into her back.

“Thank you,” she said to Gene. “I’ve heard that the town is considering subdividing the land for condos but...”

“Yes, and that should ease the strain of our tax base.” The

heavyset woman at the end of the table chimed in.

Peg turned to Martha Johnson. Having done her homework, Peg knew Martha's elderly mother lived with her. Peg could only hope Martha would understand where Peg was coming from, because she needed every vote she could get.

With another step to the table, Peg said, "You're right it would, Mrs. Johnson, but did you ever consider the advantages to having a retirement village built on that land?"

"No. But..." The short stocky man sitting next to the board president opened his mouth. However, he never finished his sentence because Peg quickly stepped on his argument.

"Mr. Evans," Peg gave Seth Evans her sincerest smile, "the town could still build the condos, smaller ones and maybe put in a community building."

Seth listened carefully; Peg could tell by his soft gray eyes that her words were making some headway. Before she could carry the ball further down the field, she was stopped.

"We've planned on that." Gene's smile had long since disappeared and again the gavel's end was accentuating his point. "Something where you could have parties and maybe play table tennis. Ain't that right, Cliff?" Gene looked down the length of the table at the gaunt, lanky younger man.

Clifford Adkins was the high school science teacher. He was unmarried. Both his parents were dead. Peg knew her argument would be wasted on him.

"You know the kinda stuff they usually have in those things." Gene held the meeting up until Cliff nodded in agreement.

"Yes," Peg quickly jumped in. "Something like that but also have a doctor's office or nurse's station. Manned twenty-four hours."

"You mean like an old peoples' home...one of those nursing places?" Delores Mitchell asked.

The youngest and most attractive board member, Delores had two small children and her parents were young, healthy, and extremely active. She came from old money. So when she married Matt Mitchell, her father insured her lifestyle would not change one iota by handing his new son-in-law a VP position in his firm.

## Building Blocks

No, Delores wasn't on Peg's list to convince.

Peg turned her eyes to Delores and answered, "No, Mrs. Mitchell, this would be a retirement community. A place where our senior citizens could feel safe, yet still have their freedom."

"I don't think that idea would work here." Gene's face was already pulled in.

"At least hear the woman out," Rupert shouted out from the audience.

Cliff Evans craned his neck to see around the bulk of Martha Johnson. His whisper to Gene came out louder than he had planned. "I thought we voted on that subject last week."

"Nah," Rupert again shouted out. "The vote was to have Dolan look at the project and get back to us with his findin's."

Gene stretched out his gaveled hand and pointed to Luke. "Luke, what've you got to say?"

Without rising from his chair, Luke answered, "I've been up there."

For the first time that evening his eyes met Peg's. She tried to stop the flush rising in her cheeks but she knew it was to no avail.

"And?" Gene asked, pulling his brow down and narrowing his eyes at Luke.

When Luke stood up and walked forward, Peg felt her head tilting back to follow his face. She knew who her real opponent was, and he was walking forward with confidence that vibrated every atom in the air. When his eyes turned to hers, she'd locked onto them and refused to show him her fear. It must have worked because when he looked down at her, he took a quick breath a split second before he turned to answer. "And, the land's prime for the condos."

"Soil been tested already?" Cliff asked.

"Yes. Also had my crew do a plat survey." Luke handed Gene the long cardboard tube then turned and looked straight at Peg. The lines in his face spelled out, 'I told you so'.

Peg snapped her eyes from that pompous look and took another step forward. Glaring right into Gene's gray eyes, Peg said, "Mr. Boyd, I don't understand why you won't at least hear my proposal."

“Let Miss Murphy finish,” Rupert shouted out as he moved up the line of empty chairs to stand at her side.

Stopping his reach in midstream, Gene turned his attention back to Peg. With an almost near smile, he coldly stated, “All right, Miss Murphy, let’s hear it.”

Peg took a deep breath, more to steady her nerves than to fill her lungs. Having only a few minutes to present her case, she decided not to direct her words to the board president. Instead, she shared her attention between Seth Evans and Martha Johnson who both had a senior citizen living with them.

“You see what the town could do is build smaller units. One or two bedrooms, nothing fancy. With those smaller size units you could build more of them, but the price would be less per unit but...”

“But what about all that tourist revenue?” Henry Roan asked. The round faced, gray-haired man, who sat silent all evening, finally opened his mouth.

Henry was the town’s only pharmacist. He and Peg had had a lengthy conversation the afternoon he filled her father’s first prescription. Henry told Peg then that his wife’s mother had a similar attack. Since her mother lived in the next town, his wife was spending more time at her mother’s then she was with him.

“The seniors don’t have children to put a strain on our school system.” Peg directed her statement to Henry. “Collectively they have more money to spend than a lot of other age groups.”

Peg looked over at Gene and saw the lines on his forehead were beginning to smooth out as she talked. “What usually happens with resort condos is they’re eventually set on the market for time sharing. That’s great but that means the people who use them are looking to cut corners for vacations. So they spend less money in town.”

“On the other hand, seniors are a constant tax base.” Peg turned to Luke and flatly stated, “And they would not overrun our hospitals.”

“We’ve planned on sellin’ to people that would only be up here in the summer anyway, so the schools wouldn’t be affected.” Gene looked to Luke with a nod.

## Building Blocks

Their 'good old boy' exchange grated on Peg's composure but she tempered it with patience. "You could do that but you'll have the government slamming an injunction on you for discriminate housing." Even Peg was surprised at how sure her words sounded.

"We're not discriminating," Delores barked out.

Peg's heart no longer raced but the blood was still thundering in her ears as she turned to Delores.

"Yes, you are. To sell to a selected group is against the federal housing law."

Gene's gray eyes rolled pleadingly to Luke. "Wait a minute here. Luke, what do you think?"

Before Peg turned to face him, she braced herself for that condescending look she knew would be plastered all over Luke's face. When she turned she was met by a molten lava look in his eyes that she felt tingling down to the soles of her feet.

"I ah...I'd like to be left out of it."

"That's impossible," Gene protested.

A smile tickled Luke's lips, as he continued looking at Peg. "I don't want to be accused of conflict of interest."

Eugene tsked out, "That's nonsense."

Then with a shake of his head, the board president turned to Peg. "I think we need more facts, Miss Murphy. Why don't you present them to us at the next meeting?"

Luke broke eye contact with Peg to look at Gene. "A month's cutting it close on construction time."

"You could hold a special meeting in three days. That'll give you enough time," Rupert injected. Turning to Luke, then Peg, Rupert's weather etched faced cracked into a smile as it telegraphed his feelings about how brilliant his idea was.

"Three days!" Peg had to rein back the screaming words. "But, I can't."

"That's it then," Gene announced before slamming his gavel onto the table. "A special meeting Friday, seven-thirty, folks. See you then."

"That was quite a display your girlfriend put on last night,

Luke,” Dean Kramer said, as he slid his large frame into the opposite side of the restaurant’s booth. “I don’t think she understands all that’s gone into this plan. If the council sides with her, the loss revenue will turn the citizens of Sister’s Bay into a lynch mob. No one will take kindly to her when their tax bills jump up again.”

As Dean sat in a pool of sunlight, Luke couldn’t help but wonder if the smell of frying grease wasn’t stronger in the diner since the tax assessor sat down.

With a slow sip of his hot coffee, Luke let the chatter of voices and the clatter of dishes of the breakfast crowd fill in space while he decided if he should clarify the label Dean attached to Peg.

Girlfriend? That didn’t sound too bad. A little juvenile perhaps, but it had a nice ring to it.

Dean’s mouth opened, but Luke beat him to the punch. “Don’t worry. The council won’t side with her. All you have to do is worry about multipliers and bond issues, like any good assessor should.”

“And what am I supposed to do when the taxes don’t cover the road repairs or new books for the school? Or even pay your little friend’s salary.” An angry stain quickly rose up from Dean’s sagging jowls into his high forehead. “What then?”

“I said, don’t worry. I’ve already had a talk with Gene. He’s assured me even if the others force the issue, he and Cliff have devised a foolproof plan to keep everyone happy.”

Dean struggled in the limited space of the booth to reach the hanky in his back pocket. When he finally got it out and swiped it over his face. Luke was shocked that the sweaty sheen hadn’t been taken away.

“What type of plan?” Dean asked through curled lips. “Are they planning to split the property in half?”

“Not a bad idea,” Luke said into his cup. “Nope, it’s all or nothing.”

“What do you mean?”

Luke slid out from the booth and dropped a dollar onto the table. “Come to the meeting and see for yourself.”

Preoccupied with putting his money in his pocket, Luke paid no attention to the person stepping up to the booth, but the sudden

## Building Blocks

rushing scent of sandalwood brought his head up in a snap.

“I could not help overhearing the tail end of your conversation. Are you drumming up supporters for your side, Mr. Dolan?”

Luke wondered how much of the conversation Peg had heard. Her mouth was hard and her green eyes glinted coldly, but if she'd heard the whole conversation she'd be down his throat screaming 'conspiracy' for sure.

“I'm only thinking of what's best for the town, Ms Murphy.” They were back to last names. He was positive the term 'girlfriend' was out also.

“Is that 'the town' according to Luke Dolan?”

When Peg spun on her heels without waiting for his response, Luke's infuriation skyrocketed. He glared at her back. However, the way her back pockets took turns shifting from side to side sent his thoughts in a different direction. Though both were a form of frustration, the later warmed parts of him that were strictly controlled by sight. Thank God He made man a sight-driven animal.

## Chapter 5

“Luke, we need to talk, now.”

Forcibly tearing his eyes from Peg’s backside, he turned to the uneven line of his three sisters’ faces. Each set of brown eyes stared straight into his.

“Hi guys. What’s up?” When they didn’t return his smile, he dropped his own.

“We would like to have a meeting.”

The sound of Laura’s no-nonsense voice wasn’t unusual, but the rigid look in her eyes was something Luke had never seen before. Flaring emotions didn’t compute with Laura, so this was way out of character for her.

A full seven years separated them, yet Laura seemed nearer his age than that. Her long, slender frame could be considered more to the rawboned side. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of her beauty was overwhelming. Of the three girls, she was the one that bore the most resemblance to their mother. Just looking into her soft doe-like eyes always warmed Luke’s heart.

Yet, that’s where the similarity ended. Spontaneity was their mother’s trademark. Picnics in December and snow shoe races in July. Whereas Laura’s analytical mind would go into overload if she didn’t have all her ducks in a row. Why, even her single lengthy braid wouldn’t dare to allow the slightest wisp of ash-blond hair to escape.

Sure you could categorize Laura on the uptight side, but Luke didn’t think his twenty-one-year-old sister was anything but a great candidate for a CPA.

“Let’s sit over there.”

After nodding to Dean, Luke turned and began leading the way

## Building Blocks

to a corner booth.

“No.” Andrea’s voice pulled Luke to a screeching halt.

Was that Andrea talking, his sweet baby sister? No. She’d never make demands that way to the brother she idolized and adored. Luke jerked around. There she stood, golden curls framing her cherub face, her body struggling between preteen roundness and the curves of womanhood, and defiance shouting from her eyes.

“Your office.” Holly motioned with her head out to the street.

Luke hesitated. Yet, the tight look around Holly’s mouth told him this time she wasn’t backing down, especially not as long as she had her sisters for support.

Forever the leader or instigator, take your pick, whichever it was, that was Holly. She was feisty and headstrong but all heart. She complained the loudest about being stuck babysitting Andrea, but she was the one who stayed up all night with her when Andrea came down with the chickenpox.

The trio wasn’t odd. What was odd was their combined front.

Luke conceded under the guise of capitulation, but actually it was his mounting curiosity that made him lead the way out of the restaurant.

In a processional line, the three followed Luke down the street to his storefront office. Once inside, Luke leaned against the edge of his well-organized desk and asked, “So what’s this all about?”

Holly’s elbow shot out and struck Laura’s ribs. Laura quickly looked down the narrow strip of her nose at her younger sister. Holly hadn’t seen the terse look because she was too busy pointing her chin at Luke.

Laura turned to Luke and snapped out, “We’ve come to a decision.”

The torque of this unusual confederation surprised Luke, especially between the two older sisters. He planned to use the old standby, divide and conquer. It never failed, and from the sharp look Laura just gave Holly, he saw no reason why it wouldn’t again.

“About what?” Luke asked while mentally calculating how long it would take before they were eating out of his hand.

Stepping in front of her sister, Holly said, "About the way you make us grovel for money."

The girl had a one-track mind. She quickly jumped into things with both feet, but she was slow to move onto another subject once she locked into something. Her persistence was an understatement. It had to be her Irish blood. Luke thanked God she wasn't one hundred-proof, like Peg.

Having her name slip into his mind started it wheeling through images of Peg. Absentmindedly, he felt a smile tilting the corners of his mouth. He suddenly felt so blessed that his sister wasn't like Peg, or there'd be no stopping Hurricane Holly.

Luke re-crossed his legs and folded his arms over his chest. "Oh, so that's what this is all about."

"You bet that's what this is about," Holly retorted.

Stepping to Holly's side, Andrea shoved her hands deep into the pockets of her overalls. When she did, the long wavy locks of her golden blond hair bounced like coiled springs.

"We want an increase in our allowance. What you give us doesn't even cover tampons, let alone makeup."

He jumped to his feet and took one long step that brought him within inches of Andy's face. With narrowed eyes he carefully inspected every inch of her creamy complexion.

"Make-up! Just when did you start wearing that junk. And don't tell me you're using tampons."

Andy pushed out a long breath through her nose. "Luke, I'm thirteen." She fastened her shoulder blades together and looked down at her chest. "Haven't you even noticed I don't wear tee shirts anymore?"

"Stop that!" Luke's bellowing voice rattled the windows in the small one room office.

Andrea's helpless look brought Laura's arm protectively around the shoulder of the baby of the Dolan family. "We are sick and tired of you making us ask you for everything. We want enough money in our allowance to avoid that look you give us."

Luke pulled his brow line low over his eyes. "I never give you any look."

"Yes, you do." Laura's head bobbed in agreement with her own

## Building Blocks

statement. “You don’t see it because you’re never on this side of your face.”

Holly moved to her sister’s side. “We want more money!”

“Okay, okay. Enough of this game.” He pulled out his money clip and started handing a ten to each one.

“No way!” Holly stuck her arm out and waggled her hand over the money. “That won’t cover the cost or my homecoming dress.”

“Or mine.” Laura chimed in.

“And what about you, Andy?” Luke asked, waving a ten-dollar bill in her face.

She lowered her big brown eyes and said to the floor, “Joey’s asked me to the Sweetest Day dance, so I have to stand with my sisters.”

Stuffing the money back in to his pockets, Luke rounded his shoulders and slowly shuffled to the window. He peeked through the slotted blinds. “You three know how jobs get few and far between in the winter.” He turned back expecting to see their heads lowered in repentance, but instead each blond head was high.

“Still you know if I get that condo project, we’ll be eating this winter.”

“Don’t give us that. We know better.” Holly clucked her tongue and shook her head so hard the ends of her short hair flared out.

Laura’s brown eyes flashed with intelligence just before she pointed her finger at her brother. “Yes, I know better.”

“You bet. Bean counter here checked into things.” Holly pointed at Laura but kept her eyes on Luke. “She knows . . .”

“Don’t call me that!” Laura snapped out as she jerked around to Holly.

Luke smiled. The dividing part had started. Now all he needed to do was conquer.

“Sorry,” Holly said to Laura. “Let’s fight one fight at a time.”

Contritely, Laura lowered her eyes and agreed with a quick ‘sorry’.

Luke shrugged his shoulders; this might be a little harder than he thought. “What do you want me to do? I need that money for the

business. Like I told Holly the other night, if you need money so badly maybe you should think about getting jobs.”

He knew this would call their bluff. Them work, not on your life. They had things easy and they liked it that way. So did he. He had their lives pretty much planned out. First there would be college, then a short-term job, then marriage. That’s what women did.

With a stiffened spine, Holly said, “Well...maybe we’ll do just that.”

Laura turned to Holly. “My class load this year is horrendous. Maybe I could make do with last year’s dress?”

Luke could see them weakening already. He held back his smile.

Locking her eyes with, Holly narrowed her eyes and warned Laura, “No way! Don’t you go chickening out on us. That dress looked like a sack on you last year, and you haven’t added any meat to your bones to make it look any better.”

Holly dipped her shoulder and studied Laura’s behind. “Anyway, last year you weren’t in Phi-Si. Your sorority sisters will toss you out on your ear if you show up in last year’s dress.”

Laura let out a long sigh and nodded slowly in agreement.

Hell, this was the first time they stuck together on anything. The Dolan female defensive line was a tough wall to crack when they banded together.

Luke took the money out of his pocket again and waved it at them. “This is my final offer. Take it or get a job.”

The three blond heads quickly pulled together. The hiss of their whispers carried across the room. Then suddenly it stopped.

The first head to pop up was Holly’s. She snatched the money and said, “We’ll take your ten and still get a job.”

Luke smiled as he walked around the desk. He knew the ten would be sufficient just as he knew he’d buy them each a new dress for the dance. That would be the last of their bluff of getting a job. “Good. That’s settled.”

“Now.” Laura held up a hand to stop him. “We’d like to apply for a position.”

“Get real.” Luke pushed out the words on a half laugh and

## Building Blocks

angled his thumb to the window. “Hit the bricks like everyone else. Dolan Construction doesn’t hire relatives.”

Holly shot a quick narrowed-eyed look at him, and Laura only shook her head slowly. Luke expected their responses but not the surprised look on Andrea’s bright shiny face. When he didn’t back down, they turned on their heels.

Luke smiled at their backs as they walked out of the room. This was almost as easy as he thought it would be. Conquering the female psyche wasn’t hard. All you needed was a little common sense. That usually threw them off center every time.

“Use the common sense the Good Lord gave ya, Peg darlin’.” Mac dropped the newspaper to the floor.

“Da, the council said if they liked the plans, and if they saw the quality of our work, they’d give the idea their careful consideration. I thought you’d be excited to hear that.”

Her father turned his empty palms up. “Peg, we don’t have a license here in Wisconsin.”

“They said we wouldn’t need it to work on this place, only a permit. Licenses aren’t required for remodeling your own home. If we pass all the inspections and they approve us we can apply for a license then.”

“But...” Mac came up from his chair and purposely stood in Peg’s path across the floor.

She pulled up to a stop and looked down at her father’s face. His lack of enthusiasm confused her.

“Da, I’ve shown you the sketches and taken you out to the property. You fell in love with the place. Why are you putting the stopper to this?”

“I don’t think ya understand the work that’s involved.” Mac shook his head as he talked. “And to start with, we’d have to buy this old ramshackle place, just to fix it up. That would take a hellava lot of money.”

“There are such a thing as mortgages.” Peg braced herself for his words.

Her father stretched out his short legs and made his way across

the room to the windows. "Don't be tellin' me about those blood suckers. I just paid the last of them off. I don't want to have to face another banker again as long as I live."

"Since I'll be the one living here, it's only right that I be the one getting the mortgage."

She knew that was one reason he hesitated, but there was something more. Something, he just wasn't telling her.

"Anyway...what about yar teachin' job?"

"If we call Martin and Kevin up, they could work during the day and when I came home I'd pitch right in. When you closed the business they went on the union role. I'm sure they'll be happy to get a steady job. They could move in with us. We have more than enough room in this old place for all of us."

Peg's excitement climbed.

Mac gave out a hearty belly laugh and turned around to her. "Martin Sullivan and Kevin McConologue will not only eat ya out of house and home, they'll drain Sister's Bay dry of all its beer."

She joined him in the hard laugh. Martin was like an uncle and she'd adopted Kevin as her cousin a long time ago. They never drank on the job but after work, that was a totally different story.

"They do love their Guinness," she attested. "But the wiry pair can put up a house in a week, even with a hangover."

"Aye. That they can." Mac stepped to the window and smiled a wistful smile out at the sunshine. "I taught them all I know."

When he turned back to Peg and the small smile it brought a warm twinkle to his eyes. Peg stepped to his side and wrapped her arms around his waist. "That's right and you can supervise them again."

He pulled her in tighter to him. "I'd enjoy havin' them two to boss around once again."

The seconds stretched out in silence then he added, "Peg, I just don't know about acceptin' the project of that old peoples' home though."

Peg could feel the defeatist attitude pushing aside his strength. She pulled back and gave him a wide smile. "Retirement village, Da."

The twinkle returned to Mac's eyes. "A mule is a mule even if

## Building Blocks

ya put a bonnet on it. Anyway, yar still bitin' off far more than ya can chew with that project."

She held her smile until her cheeks hurt. Peg knew this was right. "Once the council gives us the green light, we can hire a larger crew, maybe even Dolan Construction. Wouldn't that be a kick in the head for Mr. Luke Dolan, taking orders from us? We could sit back and watch him do all the work."

Her father's thoughts were almost clear enough to read in his eyes. He confirmed them when he said, "Peigi, when ya give me that smile there's not a thing I can be refusin' ya." His head began to shake slowly as he added, "I only wish ya were this determined to get a husband and give me grandchildren."

"Da, a husband isn't in the cards but the old folks' home is."

"Retirement village, Peg darlin', a retirement village," her father said, squeezing her into silence.

Luke knocked at the back door but the construction concerto that reached out to greet him swallowed up the small sound. He stood there listening to a steady beat of the hammer pounding out the rhythm while the whine of the saw carried the melody of this blue-collar symphony. As the scent of fresh-cut wood wafted out through the screen door, he felt his palms itch to pick up a hammer.

When the saw slowed and the hammer stopped he heard a strange male voice shout out. "Tis Miller time. But in me case that would be a Guinness."

"We have another hour before we quit," Peg shouted in answer. "I want the railing up tonight."

"Union rules, Peigi. They clearly state that a carpenter quits when he's thirsty and right now me throat's parched."

"Your throat is always parched, Martin." From the opposite side of the house came the sound of another male voice adding his comments to the discussion.

"Tis a curse I know, but look at it this way. I'm keepin' the Guinness stock up."

"And the way you manage that is you get falling down drunk,"

Peg laughed out at her own joke.

“An Irishman never falls. We’ve lead in our feet.”

Peg’s laughter mingled with her comment. “As slow as you’ve worked today, I would have thought that lead was in your...”

Luke started a hearty laugh but when Peg appeared at the door, he strangled on it. There she stood, the vision of every construction worker’s dream. Tank top; cut off shorts; work boots and a heavy tool belt slung low on her slender hips.

Okay, so his thoughts were lewd. He was a man, they were allowed. However, the longer he let them race through his mind, the faster his blood drained from his brain.

Then, with the only thought that was left in his mind, he blared out. “Where’s your hard hat?” Okay, so that wasn’t the thought he had, but you never antagonize a woman with a hammer.

Peg turned to the door. “Are you asking as the inspector?”

“Never mind.” Luke swallowed hard when he saw how the material of her tank top stretched over the curved line of her breasts. He couldn’t help but follow the clinging material as it hugged her flat stomach. He wondered if her crew was blind or eunuchs. Unless her father walked around with a pistol strapped to his hip, Luke couldn’t imagine how they got any work done.

However, when he finally did force his eyes from her, Luke was shocked just how much they’d accomplished in three days.

“Looks like things are coming along?”

She glared out at him through the screen. As the steadily ticking seconds stretched out, he became unnerved. Still there was a look in her eyes that held a sliver of welcome.

“Aren’t you going to ask me in?”

She stepped aside. “Is this official...inspector?”

“Peg, I’ve tried to explain but you aren’t answering my calls.”

“What is there to explain? You’re the man to say whether we pass or fail. I think the board’s decision to make you the inspector of this project is unfair, but I don’t have any choice now do I.”

“Well, since you’ve a gentleman caller, Kevin and I will just be punchin’ out for the evenin’.” A short man, with a weather-etched face, said as he turned through the doorway. In his wake walked a lanky younger man with a shock of russet hair. There was no

## Building Blocks

mistaking the shorter man's smile came from his heart because it reached up into his eyes. However, the younger man looked shy, with his gaze cast to the floor.

"I do not have a gentlemen caller," Peg huffed. "This is Mr. Luke Dolan, the Village Inspector."

Peg's eyes moved from Luke to the two men that stood at her side. "Martin Sullivan and Kevin McConologue, are my crew."

Martin reached across Peg and offered his hand to Luke. "Hello to you, Luke Dolan, inspector." Martin's grip was firm. Like his smile, his handshake was real.

Kevin offered a speculative look and a nod with his hand. Luke was familiar with that look. He'd used it himself on every one of his sisters' boyfriends.

Stepping away, Martin hung his tool belt on a nail between the opened studs and Kevin followed. "You'll have to be excusin' me nephew and meself. Since the boss lady here is allowin' her slave laborers to quit for the day, I best be takin' her up on it."

"Slave labor is it?" Peg bit out. "You get free room and board."

"Aye that we do, that we do, but if you'd add in the drink, you'd have a happy crew."

Peg narrowed her eyes at Martin's back as he and Kevin made their way through the door. "If I added in the drink, I'd have a drunken crew."

The exchange of banter between Martin and Peg didn't have an ounce of hostility in it. They were more than just her crew there was no mistaking that. When Peg looked at them, her eyes were as soft as the spring grass. A sudden slash of envy cut through Luke.

"Good evenin' son." Mac stepped into the room. He adjusted his cap as he walked to the door.

Luke was surprised to see the color in Peg's father's face. His eyes looked a sharper blue, and there was even a spring to his step.

"Good evening Mac."

Peg's face scrunched up as she asked, "And just where are you going, Da?"

"I thought I'd go down to the pub with the boys. Though I can't share in the drink, I still love the smell of stale beer after a hard

day's work."

Luke chuckled, "Al's is the best place in town for it."

"Don't be waitin' up for me, darlin'." Mac brushed a kiss on Peg's cheek. "I'm sure the boys and I will be home before the sun gets up."

"I want you three to know, we start at five thirty tomorrow morning," Peg shouted down to them from the door.

"Good, because that's just about the time we planned on gettin' home," Martin called out from his truck's window.

"Those guys are really characters." Luke stepped up and forced his hands not to capture her waist.

"Yes, they are but make no mistake they know their stuff."

Peg skirted around him and unbuckled her tool belt. Luke felt his dream coming true, first the tool belt then... He shook the vision out of his head.

Turning his back to her, he scanned the room. She was right. Even his crew couldn't do a better job. "From what I can see, I'd have to agree."

"If that's so, could I have you sign off on a few things while you're here?"

"Peg, about that."

Her shoulders lined and her spine stiffened. "I'm a big girl. I know the rules."

"I can't believe you'd think I'd actually try to ruin your chances."

"No, I suspect you'll blast them out of the water the first chance you get."

"I wouldn't do that." Luke tried pushing his sincerity from his voice into his eyes to show her he was telling the truth.

When Peg looked up, he saw hope in hers. "Then you'll help?"

"My hands are tied." he replied. But he knew he did have a choice. He could've refused Gene when he offered Luke the job. At the time Luke was ready to say no, but he knew Peg was going to be crushed. No, he couldn't help, but he could soften the blow for her.

Still spearing him with her eyes, Peg tossed out, "Of course not, that would be collusion. A word I'm sure you're quite familiar

## Building Blocks

with.”

Luke cut a sharp breath. Dang, that woman was as stubborn as they come. “There’s that word again. Don’t you know any others?”

“Yes, I’m a teacher, remember. I have an extensive knowledge of the meaning of many words.”

The tingle of anger sent Luke’s gaze racing over her body. “Do you happen to know the definition of the word feminine?”

“Yes,” Peg gave him a curled lip smile. “It means that I can do anything you can do, plus do you one better.”

Luke pulled his chin in. “One better? Like what?”

“I can look great in a negligee.”

The heat of his body continued to climb but it was no longer being fueled by anger. The vision of her in something small and lacy suddenly set off an inferno in his blood. He reached out and grabbed her wrist, pulling her against him. The feel of her breasts molding to his chest sent his blood thundering through his veins. He searched every inch of her upturned face. Slowly, he moved his lips to within a breath of hers, but her words stopped him from reaching his target.

“Luke, this won’t solve anything.” Her whispering words rushed over his face.

“Yes, it will,” he answered in a thick, raspy whisper. “It’ll solve my wanting to kiss you.”

He cupped her face in his hands. With his thumb he brushed away a small smudge from her cheek. He followed the hollow of her cheek with his thumb to the soft contour line of her lips. Tenderly, he ran his thumb over them. Then, while Luke put gentle pressure to the point of her chin, his lips made a slow decent to her mouth.

The force of his kiss held Peg’s lips open while his tongue made a sensuous foray into her mouth. Tiny points of light shattered behind her eyes. The slow steady rhythm of his mating tongue carried her away on a turbulent sea of sensations. Her hands slid up his chest and twined around his neck.

When she pulled him to her, she heard a low guttural moan but was unsure where it came from. His hands trailed down her back, pressing her body to his. Luke’s mouth had drugged her mind. If

nirvana existed it was here in his arms.

Peg opened her mouth further; inviting, no begging him to take more. For a moment, the world stood paused. Then she felt his hand curling the underside of her breast and suddenly she was shoved back into reality.

She tore her mouth from his. Her heart slammed in her ribs as she struggled to slow her ragged breaths. When she felt in control, she said, "If you think this will make me remove my proposal from the town council you're sadly mistaken?"

Comprehension doused the amber glow of passion from his eyes. His jaw slacked for a second. "What type of man do you think I am?"

As Peg pushed her splayed hands against the wall of his chest, she felt his heart rumble beneath her fingertips. His coiled arms released her. Alone in her space, she felt cold and empty.

"You have your own agenda, and you'll do everything in your power to accomplish it. I'm quite familiar with this type of scenario. This little lady is not so inclined as to fall in line with some engorged male ego."

Luke's eyes widened. "What, you a feminist or something?"

Peg would have laughed, but the squeezing in her stomach kept the smile away. "In a way I guess I am."

With one, long, backwards step, Luke opened up his view of her. She felt the trailing heat of his gaze as it zigzagged over her body.

His lips curled and he spit out, "Then dress like one."

Forced by the hard glare of his scrutinizing eyes, Peg looked down her own length. What was he seeing? Whatever it was didn't come close to the disgusted look he'd given her.

"What's wrong with the way I'm dressed?"

His hand shot out and he pointed from one breast to another. "Why, those things could put someone's eye out."

Dropping his shoulder, he angled himself to glare at her backside. With a twisting flip of his hand, his gesture was plain.

"And those shorts...it's a wonder you can breathe."

Peg rammed her hands onto her hips. "You have no right to say anything about the clothes I wear."

"I have every right. Remember I'm the inspector."

## Building Blocks

Peg's chin shot up. "Inspector of what, nipp..? She slammed her mouth shut and stomped to the open door. She gave the screen door a hard shove, making it wedge itself open. "Get the hell out of my house!"

"Don't worry, I am." He pushed past her and didn't stop until he stood within the frame. When he turned, his lips were curled. "But I'll be back in a week to inspect your work...pal."

## Chapter 6

“Please, Mr. Cooper,” the blond preteen girl begged as she followed the portly storeowner down the aisle of paint cans. Her young face held a determination that even the cloud he stirred up with the feather duster couldn’t defuse.

Without so much as a hesitation, Paul Cooper continued stroking the pink feathers over the cans. “Andy, I’d like to, but I just can’t.”

Undaunted by his inattentiveness, Andy tailgated him all the while keeping her eyes glued to the floor. She didn’t see he’d put on the brakes until she slammed into his wide back. She quickly squeezed her apology between the words of her verbal resume.

“I’m a good worker. I get straight ‘A’s’ in math, so I know how to make change. I’m a fast learner, you can ask any of my teachers. I already know how to clean. And I really, really need a job.” She’d added more emphasis to the last sentence than she did to the others.

Before she finished her plea, Paul’s baldhead was already rolling from side to side. “It’s not that I don’t believe you could do the job, but my insurance man would have my head if I hired a thirteen year-old kid.”

“I won’t tell him,” she said, widening her beseeching brown eyes. “Anyway, I’ll be fourteen in five weeks so you won’t have to worry after then.”

Peg listened to the girl’s heartfelt appeal. However, it was the girl’s last statement that squeezed Peg’s heart.

“My sisters and I really need the money.”

Seemingly unaffected by the girl’s application, Paul went back

## Building Blocks

to dusting. “Andy, I just can’t do it no matter what the reason is.”

The girl’s chin fell to her chest in defeat and a flood of ash blond locks covered her face. With her hands dug deep into the pockets of her overalls, she slowly shuffled away.

After a few steps, the young girl stopped and gave one last imploring look at the storeowner’s back. When Peg saw the glaze of unshed tears in Andy’s brown eyes a vision of a rundown shack with half-starved little girls looking down at empty plates, sliced through Peg’s mind.

As the girl trudged past, Peg instantly called out. “Excuse me, I couldn’t help but over hear you’re looking for a job.”

“Yes.” The girl’s gaze lifted up from the floor. A spark of renewed hope flashed in her eyes.

“I could only offer you a few hours after school and Saturdays.”

“Wow. That’s what I’m looking for.” Andy’s shoulders unrolled and her eyes flashed wide open. “What kinda job is it? If it’s babysitting, I love kids and they love me too.” Andy didn’t bubble with excitement she sizzled with it. “If that’s what you want me to do, I’d be...”

“No, I’m not married.” Peg heard herself say those words many times before but never once did she ever see a sadness in someone else’s eyes. This girl’s heart was tender and Peg was sure Andy would have been a terrific baby sitter.

“What I’m looking for is someone to clean up.”

“I know how to do that.” Andy’s eyes flared with exhilaration, while her smile continued to widen. “I’m not too good with windows though.” She added enthusiastically tripped over her own words. “I can’t seem to get the streaks out.”

“I’m remodeling my home so there’s hundreds of small things that need to be done. My construction crew is pretty lazy when it comes to picking up after themselves.” The warmth of appreciation she saw reflecting in Andy’s brown eyes infected Peg.

“Oh, I sure know about lazy construction crews.”

The statement didn’t register in Peg’s brain because as she looked into the girl’s eyes, Luke’s face jumped into Peg’s mind and her thoughts locked up.

“When do you want me to start?”

Shaking back her thoughts, Peg answered, “How’s tomorrow morning, around nine. Here’s the address.” Peg scribbled the directions on a piece of paper.

“That’s the old Zimmer’s place?” The girl’s face screwed up. “You must be Ms Murphy. I heard about you.”

New teachers are just like new students; they really stand out in a small town. “Yes.”

“I’m Andy, that’s short for Andrea.”

“Andy,” Peg repeated extending her hand to the girl. “Please call me, Peg.”

Andy eagerly shook Peg’s hand. “I guess I’ll see you tomorrow bright and early Ms Peg.”

Peg only had a moment to nod before Andy raced out the store leaving a line of narrowed-eyed customers glaring at her back.

The sight of Andy’s bouncing curls and skipping steps sent Peg’s heart flying. This was the first time in days Peg actually felt happy about anything. Maybe she should go around town doing more good deeds just to keep the feeling going.

She tried to keep her smile in check but there was no stopping it from spreading across her face. However, as she walked to the checkout, her eyes were drawn to the turnstile and she again felt the weight of her heart.

Damn him!

It was only a kiss, one small kiss. Peg knew she was lying to herself but it made it easier to keep control. Suddenly, her lips warmed. She tried bringing their temperature down by dragging her tongue across them but she only ignited a stronger memory. It was bad enough she tossed and turned all night and now...dammit!

Peg snapped her head around and refused to look at the brightly polished metal as she gave the cashier her credit card. Luke went from Lochnivar to Lucifer in less than three weeks. That had to be some sort of a record.

No, Devon went from lover to louse in one night, and that was only two nights before their wedding. If she could survive that, she could most assuredly survive one small kiss.

As Peg made her way through the door, she couldn’t help but

## Building Blocks

take one last look at the chrome column. She drew in a breath to help lock her reserve in place. Courage was only one step beyond fear and she knew how to take that step. So Mr. Dolan, you're in for the shock of your life. Women are not the weaker sexes. We only let you men think we are.

"What do you mean, you're rejecting that hook up?" Peg pulled away from the studded wall and glared into the long black circuit box.

The sweet scent of sandalwood permeating the air made it difficult for Luke to concentrate on the clipboard he gripped in his hands. The bouquet's magical powers brought his other senses to their heightened attention.

"You heard me." He moved away from the box to delude the effect her perfume was having on him.

"You're crazy. That hook up is perfect."

When he stepped back, he got the full picture of her rounded backside. She wasn't wearing tight jeans or a tank top but even in a pair of loose fitting slacks and a baggy sweater he knew exactly where every curve would be. He forced his concentration back to the small squares on the checklist.

"Like hell it is. That thing will spark and this old place will go up faster than the Chicago fire."

Peg moved to his side and brought the scent with her. He wanted to back away but, instead, his body involuntarily shifted its weight to her. Her heat reached out to him. Its spreading warmth rushed over him and bored right into his core. Instantly, his body remembered the softness of her breasts molding to his chest, the feel of her hips cradling him.

Luke quickly stepped back to the box and tried to constrict his mind to the jumble of colored wires.

"You do not know what you're talking about. I did this job myself, and it's perfect."

"Perfect is it?" Luke poised the sarcastic question while pointing the tip of his pen at the junction of colored strands. "The circuit breakers you've used are so large it won't kick off until all the

wires have melted down and the firemen are sifting through the rubble looking for any survivors.”

“Are you serious?” Peg asked, squeezing her head between the box and his face.

Luke swallowed but it didn’t help his dry throat. While tiny points of sunlight danced over the flowing length of her auburn hair, his fingers ached to know if they’d spark in his hand. He cleared his throat once more and locked his jaw against the demanding urge.

“No matter what you think of me, I honestly don’t want this place to go up in flames.” His clenched jaw was so tight he could hardly get the next words out through his teeth. “I know what I’m talking about.”

When he heard the soft sigh of Peg’s concession, he gripped the clipboard so hard his knuckles whitened.

“Okay, but if I replace it right now, will you pass us?”

“I can’t.”

She threw up her hands and moved away. “See, that’s what I mean. You’re just looking to flunk us on anything and everything to keep us from meeting our deadline.”

“The reason I can’t because I’ve got a meeting with Bert Avery.”

Peg turned her face to his. The look on it forewarned him what she was going to say. “Still planning on those condos, Mr. Dolan?”

“I see no reason not to be prepared.”

“Sure. As long as you’re the inspector, you have an inside track to this, don’t you?”

He was tired of trying to explain the situation to her. She said she was a big girl and knew the rules. Also that she didn’t need someone to hold her hand. Luke turned to the doorway. “Peg, get an electrician to explain how to break up the wattage. After you’ve redone the box, give me a call. The town pays me for each trip.”

Peg stepped into his path. Rooting herself to the floor, she glared up into his face. “So that’s how this works. It’s a win win situation for you. You’re pushing awfully hard to make that first million, aren’t you.”

With one forward step, Luke felt his ego swell with the power of making her head tilt to look up into his eyes. Curling his upper lip,

## Building Blocks

he pushed the volume of his voice down until only a slow growling hissed worked its way out his throat. “Even if I already had it, I’d still reject that hookup.”

When Peg didn’t cave against the onslaught of Luke’s omnipotence, he captured the back of her head. Slowly and steadily he pulled her face to his, keeping his eyes stayed locked on her lips.

His mind screamed out, *punish her mouth*, and he slammed his lips against hers. Instantly, their delicate sweetness shattered his anger and the devouring kiss turned gentle and warm.

Peg’s lips parted, offering Luke the sweet nectar of her mouth. The drugging substance set his body ablaze, and only the feel of her flesh could release him. Luke’s hand pushed up her sweater and slid under her bra. The satiny feel of her skin splintered his mind. Hungrily, his fingers kneaded the fleshy globe, and when her nipple reached out to greet his palm, a deep moan tore from his throat.

Faster and faster his tongue dove into her mouth touching and dancing with hers. Beneath his fingers her heart hammered in answer to his own wild beat.

“Peg, Peg,” he whispered against her ear. “Oh, Peg.”

Her fingers threaded into his hair and she clung to him, softly chanting his name on each ragged breath.

The sound of a distant voice spiked into his mind.

“I’m reporting for work.”

Jumping out of Peg’s arms, Luke shouted, “Andy! What the hell are you doing here?”

The shocked look on his face helped Peg to clear her mind. With narrowed eyes, she looked from one face to the other. “Do you two know each other?” Peg asked.

Andy stood wide-eyed and answered Luke. “Ms Murphy hired me,”

Luke took a single step to his sister. “You mean you’re working here.”

Peg pushed her voice two notches up on the volume scale as she pointed to Luke then Andy. “Excuse me, but do you two know each

other?"

"Yes." Luke and Andy answered in unison, but split paths as they said, "He's my brother." "She's my sister."

"Oh no. That's just great." Peg said with an exaggerated sigh and a roll of her eyes.

Andy quickly turned from her brother to Peg. "Does this mean I don't have a job because I'm Luke's sister?"

Peg didn't know how to answer that. She didn't want to step over Luke's authority or give Andy hopes that wouldn't come to fruition. "Luke did you tell your sisters to get a job or not?"

"Yes, but..." He answered with a slight shrug of his shoulders.

Peg had him on the run and she knew it. "It's the 'yes' part that's in question here."

"But," Luke tried to finish his statement.

However, Peg trounced on his words. "Luke there's no 'buts' here. You've just confirmed that you told them they should get a job." Long after she finished her statement, Peg continued to stare at him. Would he shift his words around to fit the situation or take responsibility for them? He gave a quick sigh and a small shake of his head, and Peg knew he'd passed her test.

"Too bad the others didn't take me as literally as you did, Andy."

"They did."

Andy's two-word statement reignited Luke's irritation. "What?"

With a scrunched up face, as if to weather his fury, Andy said, "Holly got a job at Mabel's Cafe and Laura's doing some part-time bookkeeping work for Mister Kramer."

Luke's eyes rolled, then his head lobbed down in defeat. "You're kidding right?" He peeked up at her with squeezed eyes. "When were you three going to tell me about this?"

When the gale force of his anger turned out to be nothing more than a brisk breeze, Peg wanted to wrap him in her arms. He loved his sisters and nothing they did would ever change that, even when they pushed the boundaries of his control.

"Tonight." Andy's voice quivered. "We wanted to tell you all together, but now it looks like only Holly and Laura will be able to say they got real jobs."

## Building Blocks

After a loud sigh, Andy's lower lip came out and the corners of her eyes slid down. "Because of you, I'll have to rake Mrs. Johnson's lawn for a dollar an hour."

Peg moved to Andy's side and lifted her fallen chin. "Andy, just because you happen to have the most pig-headed brother in this state doesn't reflect on you. I've hired you to clean up after school and Saturdays. The job is still yours if you want it?"

Luke glared down at the pair. "Hey, wait a minute. I didn't say it's okay." Peg bit down on her bottom lip to keep from laughing. He couldn't let go of that control.

Andy stepped forward while Peg stepped back. "Are you saying you'll give me all the money I need?"

"Well, no. But I'll buy your dress."

"Cool. Then I can use the money I make here for makeup and tampons." Andy's bright smile returned.

From behind Luke, Peg added, "Don't forget CD's."

When Luke jerked his face around, Peg greeted him with a smug grin.

He sliced her a hard look then snapped his head back to Andy. "I'm not so sure if you should be working here."

Angling her head to peer over Luke's blocking shoulders, Andy asked, "Peg, do I need his permission?"

"Unfortunately you do. Although it seems to me that your brother is trying to keep both of us under his thumb."

At her flatly stated commentary, Luke shot Peg a look she had become quite familiar with.

Andy's big bright eyes narrowed at her brother. "Luke, are you purposely trying to fail Ms Murphy on her inspections?"

"What type of an inspector do you think I am?" Luke asked his baby sister.

Luke didn't wait for her answer before he shifted his slashing eyes to Peg. "I wasn't asking you."

"Good. I don't feel adults should use such language in front of children."

However, though Luke's face reddened with anger, Peg was sure that wasn't the case. This was all bluster for Andy's benefit.

Peg knew she had him in the proverbial corner. She stepped to the table and quickly scribbled a few words on a piece of paper. She shoved it at him. "Sign here and Andrea Dolan is my new employee." Peg watched how his hand shook as he signed his name. Vindication tingled as it rushed through her veins.

Andy squealed and jumped in place. "I've got a job, a real job."

"You can start upstairs," Peg said while pointing to the newly built staircase.

"Aye, Aye, boss lady." Andy shot out a salute, and then raced up the steps, taking them two at a time.

Luke picked up the clipboard he dropped and started for the door. He stopped and turned back to Peg. "You do know she doesn't really know which end of the broom to use?"

"Unlike you, I believe it's important to give a person a chance."

After a shake of his head, Luke walked down the steps. "See you early Monday morning for round two of your inspections."

As she watched his truck pull down the driveway, Peg felt the singeing imprint of his hand on her breast. She slammed the door.

Stupid! Stupid woman! That kiss meant nothing to him. If it had he wouldn't have reacted so quickly when his sister came into the room. Keep acting like this and you'll be crying "oh poor little old me" all over again.

Peg slapped on her tool belt and stomped across the room. Right now, the feel of a hammer slamming some wood would really help.

## Chapter 7

“Please come in and meet my sisters.” Andy begged through the car’s open window.

Peg felt like a spy sitting in Luke’s driveway. However, her logical reason for being there was a kind offer to drive her new employee home. Yet, she knew it was nothing more than deep-seated curiosity to see where and how Luke lived. In addition, the place didn’t disappoint her in the least. From the pristine clapboards on the large farmhouse to the perfectly cut lawn, the house screamed of Luke’s control. The one word, ‘Stepford’, jumped into Peg’s mind.

“I don’t think so, Andy. I have a dozen errands to run.”

“Then wait here a minute.”

Before Peg could protest, Andy was bounding up the steps of the wide porch and shouting out two names. When she raced back out the door, two young women followed. The one almost Andy’s height stayed close on her heels. The tall and slender one gracefully moved down the steps. Peg felt obligated to get out of the car to greet them.

“This is my boss, Peg Murphy. Peg, these are my sisters, Laura and Holly.”

Holly was the first to respond to the greeting. The dark hint of a sneer on Holly’s round face was probably a preconceived notion her brother had put there. Holly’s greeting didn’t surprise Peg in the least. “Oh, so you’re Peg Murphy.”

Though Holly’s face lightened up with a smile, Peg couldn’t help but question. “You said that like my name has a sour taste to it.”

Peg wasn’t sure if her directness surprised Holly or pleased her.

The squinting line around Holly's eyes opened, and she eagerly shook Peg's hand. "I'm sorry but..." Holly didn't have time to finish her apology before Laura stepped in.

When she offered Peg her hand, it was as graceful as a hawk gliding on warm air currents. This was the true leader of the Dolan women. Her movements were calculated and sure. Luke said she was twenty-one, but Laura's eyes said much older. The way she offered Peg her hand wasn't the least bit unusual. However, when she clasped Peg's hand in both of hers, Peg felt a warmth that was born from Laura's heart.

As the sisters stood side-by-side, even without Luke there to compare them to, the evidence was clear. Each took on one of Luke's qualities and perfected it to a tee. Laura had his strength, no doubt about that. Holly had his puncheon for control that was evident in her 'get to the point' greeting. Yet, Andy had his caring heart. That was evident when Peg told Andy she didn't have children.

These were the sisters he raised and the characteristics he nurtured. He either was a saint or had an insatiable ego; Peg wasn't quite sure which just yet.

"What my sister is trying to say is we've heard your name mentioned quite frequently lately," Laura clarified.

Holly gave a quick laugh. "Yeah, but our brother always has an explicit adjective attached to it."

"Oh, I can imagine the words Luke would add to my name," Peg snickered out. The three joined in, and brought Peg's snicker up to a full-fledged laugh.

"My brother hasn't been himself of late." Laura's defense of her brother was a heartfelt sentiment.

However, Holly's addition was nearer to Peg's. "Yeah, he's been real touchy since you've been in town."

Peg suddenly felt guilty but for what she didn't know. "I'm sorry if I've caused any problems."

"I don't think you've caused them, I think you are the problem." Peg stared at Laura trying to interpret her body language.

"What? But I've only..."

Holly slammed her hands over Andy's ears. "What Laura's

## Building Blocks

trying to say is Luke's problem is he's got the hots for you and it's messing with his mind."

Andy shoved Holly's hands away and glared hard at her sister, "Like I couldn't hear that."

When Andy turned back to Peg, there was a bright smile spearing deep into the young girl's cheeks. "Anyway, you do have to admit he's the cutest thing on two legs."

"Yes," Peg blurted out. It surprised her how easily she'd shared that with anyone, especially Luke's sisters.

"Won't you come in for a cup of coffee, Miss Murphy?" Laura asked.

"Please, call me Peg and though I'd loved to I've already told Andy I've errands in town."

"Just one cup, Peg," Andy whined.

Peg looked from sister to sister, and saw the honest invitation in their eyes. "I guess one cup won't take all that much time."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence Bert, but the board hasn't reached a decision yet." Luke said, as he rolled back into the leather chair that sat across from Bert Avery's wide desk.

Slices of sunshine slipped through the blinds and scored the wall of law books filling the shelves. The massive space was all maroon and silver with small odd pieces of collectibles that looked expensive. Bert did well for himself. The only lawyer for miles around and with his connections in the state capitol he often helped Sister's Bay get the governor's attention when it was needed.

"Don't you think this meeting's a little premature though?" Luke posed his question to Bert, but it was Dean Kramer, standing at the window, that turned a surprised face to Luke.

Bert pulled his back from the chair and slid the manila folder across the glazed surface of the desk. "It's a foregone conclusion. So why not be prepared."

Luke liked having a plan in place but something was eating at his craw. Peg? She didn't help, but it was something else, something that kept slipping through the cracks.

“Didn’t you say it was in the bag? What happened?” Dean asked. His brow was pulled down so low it shadowed his eyes, changing their steel gray color to a weathered metal.

Bert and Dean were tight, had been that way for five years. Nevertheless, they were as different as night and day. Bert’s distinguish looks and suave air reeked with conviction, but Dean. God, the man needed to work off some of his nervous energy and take a couple of pounds with it.

“Nothing’s ever written in stone.” Luke dropped his gaze to the now open folder. “However, this contract seems to be.” The type blended together all except one small block. It leapt off the page. He carefully studied the section. “All but this clause.” Luke pointed his finger to the cube of printed lines.

Bert smiled. “As your lawyer, I’d advise you not to worry about that. It’s just some legalese we like to throw in to make it look like we’re actually earning the big bucks we get.”

“It states here all waivers and invoices will be sent directly to the treasurer’s office. Why aren’t they going to the title company? They issue the checks.”

“That’s right. However, in this case, Dean’s responsible for collecting the waivers before the title company can process them.”

Luke lifted his gaze from the paper to Bert’s face. “I thought Gene would do that. He is the board president.”

“This transaction is being handled differently. See, both Dean and I will be signing off on the bills.” Bert leaned across the desk and tapped his finger to the top of the paper. “It’s standard for contracts over a million to have two signatures.”

“Checks and balances,” Dean added.

“Yes, that’s it. Checks and balances.” Bert smiled up at Dean. “The money is sent to us. Then we make out the check to you and you distributed the money to the subcontractors as usual.”

Bert’s smile moved to Luke then widened. “Of course, that’s after you take your standard five percent out.”

“I usually deal right with the title company,” Luke restated.

Bert pushed out of his chair and came around the desk. He braced himself against its edge. “Luke, I think Dean’s qualified to handle the paper work. If for some reason he makes a mistake, I’ll

## Building Blocks

be right on his tail to catch it. Lawyers are naturally part bird dog. We love to flush out problems. In this case, I'll also be a hound dog, cause I'll be hounding you to get that job finished A.S.A.P." Bert broke out in a loud laugh at his own joke.

After a hesitation, Dean joined in.

Luke smiled but didn't find enough humor in Bert's joke to laugh. "Weather and material are the only things that could delay the project once the board approves it."

Dean was the first to recover. His face was already sober when he said, "That and an Irish woman who thinks she's man enough to stand up to a guy like you."

Luke rolled to his feet and took steps to bring him to Dean's side. "Peg's idea is a good one. I hope the board sees it's feasibility for a project down the line."

The tax assessor angled back and paused to swallow. "It is, it is. But right now we need to concentrate on this project. This one will have the town singing Luke Dolan's praises from the rooftops. Won't that be a boast to your ego?"

"Not to mention how it will boast your bank account." Bert stepped to the duo at the window. "Just think what your sisters could do with all that extra money."

"CD's; make-up and... Let's just say they've already made a list." Luke felt almost giddy thinking about what they'd do with all that cash.

"Girls have a way of doing that," Dean added.

"Wait until they get to be women," Bert rolled his eyes, "then you'll really have your hands full."

Luke narrowed his eyes at Bert. "You mean it gets worse?"

Bert's hand came down on Luke's shoulder. "My first wife is still taking a big chunk of change out of me every month for alimony. My two daughters would sooner die than be caught dead wearing an outfit twice at that expensive eastern college they're attending. What's even worse is my second wife thinks nothing of bending the plastic to near its breaking point." Bert let out a long sigh and dropped his hand to his side.

"You've a lot to be grateful for Luke. The women in your life will

soon be someone else's worries."

"Luke's planned every facet of his life and ours." Laura's comment brought Peg to attention. The one cup of coffee had turned into two. It was obvious the warmth in the house wasn't from the sunshine cutting through the windows, or the smell of cookies baking in the oven. It generated from their laughter. There was fledgling feeling of sisterhood Peg felt steadily growing.

Laura's statement caused Peg to clamp her hands around the coffee mug to keep her excitement in check as she peeked into the personal life of Luke Dolan. "What?" she asked, almost needing reassurance that they were allowing her peak into Luke's world.

Excitement exploded in Holly's eyes, as she aggressively nodded her head to confirm Laura's statement. Her eagerness was beyond obvious. "Yes. He's even gone one further and written it out like a shopping list. One, Laura graduates from college. Two, Laura marries. Three, Laura has kids."

Peg knew Luke was a control freak but this was borderline obsessive. No, it actually jumped over the border and rammed head long into maniacal tendencies. Though Luke's sisters were sharing this with her, Peg thought they had to be making this up.

She drew in her chin and lined her eyes at Holly, and asked, "You're kidding, right?"

As if to give her what she was about to say room, Laura slid her cup forward. "No, seriously, my list even has the number of children I should have before I'm thirty." The slight rise in her voice, and the lift of eyebrows, was a calibrated indication that Laura was telling the truth.

This blew Peg's mind. The guy was beyond help. "He's actually given you the list?"

"No." The three giggled out. "They're pinned up on the bulletin board."

"Oh, he must have been a great kid. I bet he drove your parents up the wall with his lists," Peg said.

Laura turned to share her pulled brow with her sisters. "Being just a few years younger, I probably remember more. Let me tell you, the Luke you see now is no where near like the Luke then."

## Building Blocks

As Laura refilled Peg's cup, she talked. "His senior year of college he spent a total of four hours studying."

"Four hours a night?" Peg asked.

"No." Laura smiled into her coffee cup. "Four hours for the whole year."

Peg stopped her cup half way to her gaping mouth. "How did he graduate?"

"He almost didn't," Laura replied. "He'd be out every night, most of the time with a different girl. If there was a party within a hundred miles, he'd be there."

"What brought him to this point?" Peg asked before taking a slow swallow of the hot coffee.

"The responsibilities of raising three sisters, I guess." Laura shrugged her shoulders and drained the last of her coffee.

"That would do it for me." Peg added with a shake of her head. "But he's done a terrific job, couldn't he lighten up now?"

"I think he's forgotten how," Holly commented quickly.

Peg smiled. "Somebody should give him a refresher course in life."

Andy stiffened her spine and squared her shoulders. Looking down her nose she pushed her voice as deep as she could. Then in her best Luke voice, she said, "Every life needs a plan."

Peg almost fell off her chair laughing. There was no mistaking Andy had invested a lot of time into her imitation. Getting her second wind, Peg asked, "What about his list?"

Laura looked from sister to sister. "None of us have seen it. Every so often he tells us he's crossed something off."

In an attempt to mimic Andy's performance, Peg said, "I bet it has, one, make a million before forty. Two, make two million before forty-five."

Andy quickly took the next line and in a stellar repeated performance. "Three make a new list."

The three others screamed with laughter as each took a turn at her version of Luke.

"You guys making a shopping list, or something?" Luke asked, coming in on the tail end of the conversation.

The room exploded with high-pitched screams and female laughter. The cacophony reached fevered pitch each time one looked at him or each other.

Peg blended so well with his sisters, for a moment she was lost in the faces of the Dolan women. She looked so at home that he never questioned her being there. In fact, it was he who felt out of place. Three and a half women in a kitchen, the estrogen level was so high even he could feel it.

It was Peg's musical laughter that had him wanting to wade in these uncharted waters. The sound drugged his mind, forcing him to pull up a chair next to her. He knew his smile was wide because his cheeks hurt, but their infectious laughter had control of his face. "I guess you're making a list, huh?" he asked again.

Laura looked over at Peg and winked. "One red headed child, and please trim the fat."

"Oh, God," Peg coughed out. "I can't breathe, please stop."

"What's so funny?" Luke asked, "I enjoy a good joke."

"No." Peg pushed out the words. "Trust me you wouldn't."

"Why?"

Her hand came up as if to hold him back. "Just trust me on this one."

Luke's eyes clouded over while his face pulled in. "You might not know this but I've got a sense of humor."

"I don't doubt that, but what you need is a lesson in how to live." Peg tufted out the need to burst out laughing when Laura's eyes rolled.

Luke turned to Peg and asked, "Since you won't share the joke, how about sharing a beer down at Al's?"

"No thanks." Peg fought against each word, but when she looked into Luke's face her reserve broke. Her laughter burst out, eliminating every bit of air from her lungs. She gasped for air and squeezed out a sentence on what little breath she sucked in. "It's not on my list."

Her half-buried words sent the three others into screaming waves of hysterics. Peg rolled up out of her chair. For a stretched out moment she stayed folded over, waiting for the spell to pass. The others were no help with her plight. Their snickers, or stifled

## Building Blocks

giggles, would send Peg right back into the thick of it. In the end, the four clung to each other as they laughed their way out the door and down the porch steps to Peg's car.

Suddenly, the silence in the room was deafening. It ripped through Luke like a bolt of lightning. Bert was wrong. Luke wasn't lucky.

### Chapter 8

The music and smoke in Al's place has a way of intensifying one's mood instead of placating it. From the far end of the bar an Irish borough called out, "Luke, why don't you join us?"

Looking down the long line of faces, Luke saw Martin waving a beer bottle high in the air. Luke picked up his bottle and made his way to where Martin and Kevin sat. Even in the dim amber light their ruddy complexions glowed as bright as their smiles. It told Luke they'd been here awhile.

"Good evenin' to you, me boy. Are you clearin' away the saw dust in your throat or the dust in your brain?" Martin asked.

"Neither."

"Tis a lady then. We Irish are known to love too easily and too often for our own good."

"It's not a lady, it's three." Luke opened up his throat and downed as much of the cold liquid as he could get in one swallow.

"Well lad, a single rose is trouble but a bunch, why that's when the fun begins."

Luke paused to take another deep swallow from his beer. "I think the fun is about to end too soon. Then I'll be left alone."

"Maybe you shouldn't have spread yourself so thin. Why not concentrate on one, and take your chances?" Kevin's soft-spoken pearls of wisdom were almost buried beneath the rattle of voices in the bar.

Luke snapped his gaze to the young man's face, but Kevin's eyes stayed locked on his drink.

Martin slapped Kevin's back and nearly folded the younger man over the bar. "Aye, never could settle on one myself. That's why I spend my evenin's in places like this. If I was a wee bit younger,

though, I'd change my ways."

"You have regrets, Martin?" Luke asked. While he waited for Martin's reply, Luke finished the last of his beer and signaled for another.

"Regrets are like ice cubes in a drink. A few help the taste, too many and you water down its effect."

"Are all Irishmen philosophers?"

"Only the best ones are. We know how to live life to its fullest. We love music and the drink and of course a pretty face. But then all women are beautiful."

"Some more than others," Luke whispered down the neck of the beer bottle.

"Could there be a special lass?" Kevin now turned a smile to Luke with the question.

Luke grinned back over the rim of his bottle. "Are the Irish psychic also?"

Martin answered before Kevin could open his mouth. "No, we're people watchers. And the way you watch our Peigi would make you the honorary president of the club."

"Well, she's worth watching."

Studying the empty bottle, Martin turned it in place. "Aye, she's a keeper, she is. But to do so, a man would have to learn about life first."

"What's there to learn?" The 's' slid slowly off Luke's tongue. The tingle of a buzz was creeping into his head and it felt like the hand of a friend.

"To laugh; to sing; and to love and don't give a damn about the cost of it."

"Well, Mr. Freud, the first one is easy. Luke threw his head back and bellowed out a laugh that had every eye snapping in his direction. He rolled his head back in place and gave Martin a smug smile. Luke slotted his eyes and pursed his lips, as he said, "Singing? I don't know about that one."

"Me nephew here could teach you." Martin tapped his elbow into Kevin's side. "Go on, lad. Show the boy here how it's done."

Kevin smiled and set his bottle down. His eyes lit up and then he opened his mouth. A soft, sweet note rose high over the ruckus,

## Building Blocks

and like the hand of God, it brought a hush over the room. Kevin's voice swelled and hit notes that Luke didn't know existed on any musical scale. When the young man reached up for the final note, not a person in the room took a breath, and when he finished his song awe filled every corner.

Luke couldn't believe what he'd just heard. Kevin went back to his beer and took a long swig. He then turned and sent a smile at Luke.

"Why in the hell are you swinging a hammer?"

"Because I love what I do."

Luke narrowed his eyes at Kevin. "God gave you that talent. You have no right to keep it to yourself."

Kevin held his smile under Luke's scrutiny. "I share it with Him in church and with anyone else that cares to listen."

"Man, you could make millions."

Widening his smile, Kevin answered, "I don't need millions, when I'm already wealthy."

"Dammit." Luke slammed the empty bottle on the bar. "You Irish are a strange race. You love music, singing and drinking yet money seems to be a sin. I can't figure you people out."

Martin lifted three fingers up and the bartender appeared with three more beers. "See, lad, that's the difference between the rest of the world and the Irish."

"You're all crazy, right?" Luke didn't waste much time downing another long swallow.

"No, we love. Period. That's what makes us wealthy."

He heard Martin's words but he couldn't think of a comment that matched the statement. Luke reverted the subject to their original line of conversation. "I could never sing like that so your formula's already shot to hell."

Martin lined a smile that slotted his bright blue eyes. "The singin' part is somethin' you could do on the inside."

"Okay, fine. Now I know I don't need practice on the loving part."

Kevin grinned into his bottle. "Got that down pat, do you?"

"I haven't heard any complaints yet."

“I don’t mean the act.” Martin’s voice lowered a notch. “A hand could do the same job.”

“A what?” Did Martin just say what Luke thought he did?

“You heard me. Love is something that comes from here,” Martin’s finger jabbed into his chest then angled to his crotch. “Not here.” He winked and then continued, “Women can tell the difference.”

The beer was getting a sweeter taste with each mouthful. Luke’s smug smile further lined his eyes. “Not the way I do it.”

Kevin was staring at Luke with not a hint of a smile on his lips. “The right one can tell the moment she looks into your eyes.”

Martin turned to Luke blocking his sight line to Kevin. “We men are visual creatures, but women they listen. First they listen with their minds, then with their hearts. They’re God’s most perfect creation, but most men think it’s the other way around.”

Luke would have found Martin’s philosophy easier to take if he had another beer.

“We only provide the seed, but they create life,” Martin continued.

Just about then the thought struck Luke. When he turned to Martin, he put a little too much spin in the movement. Luke latched onto the bar and held tight until the room stopped spinning. When everything was back to normal, he sneered, “Why should I listen to you? I don’t see you sittin’ before a fire with your woman at your side.”

“It’s the old sayin, ‘don’t do as I do, do as I say.’”

“Philopsee, damn to hell.”

“If that’s not to your likin,’ how’s about I teach you to enjoy the finer things in life, like drinkin’?”

“I know how to do that.” Luke reached for his beer but the bottle was empty. “No Irishmen has to teach me that.”

“Good. Now let’s have another round. And just to show good faith, we’ll let you do the payin’.”

Luke pushed away from the bar and squeezed his hand into the front pocket of his jeans. He pulled out a clip of money and brought it up to his nose. “There’s enough here for some real lessons. Let’s get started.”

## Building Blocks

Slamming the wad of bills on the bar, Luke silently looked down the length of his nose for a long moment. The rotation of the earth was making him sway in place, so he jammed his hands in his pockets to keep his balance. Without lifting his lowered gaze he made an uneven pivot and staggered away from the others.

“Luke, the lessons have just begun,” Martin called out over his bottle of black beer.

Not answering, Luke aimed his feet and followed the uneven path they took him. Almost as an after thought, he stopped and turned to Martin’s voice. Lifting his chin from his chest, Luke shouted out, “Gotta call Peg and tell her I’m takin’ lessons.”

Between the duet of soft snores wafting from the back seat of her car, and Luke’s off key attempt to hum along with the song playing in his head, Peg wanted to roar with laughter. She knew she couldn’t, at least not yet. The illusion of anger had to stay in place until she got her carload of intoxicated men home. Then, she promised herself, she’d sit down and have a good long laugh.

When Luke’s sporadic baritone humming stopped the non-sound Peg turned to him. As his head continued to rock to the beat of the imaginary song, moonbeams played through the tousled sandy strands of his hair. The gentle blue light, spreading through the windshield, thawed the normal hard lines around his mouth, or was it the alcohol?

If that’s the case, Peg swore she’d play Carrie Nation and smash every damn bottle in town. No man with the face of a god, and the body every female would worship, should have access to such lethal substance.

Still, she had to admit his face was easy on the eyes at two in the morning. She mentally chastised herself for the thought, and turned her attention back to the black road rolling out before her.

“Calling and telling me he’s taking lessons in life,” Peg clipped out the rough whispering words to the two beams of light battling the darkness. “What did he think I’d do, scream hallelujah?”

When she felt her irritation steadily climbing, she pulled it back. “What is it about Luke that sends my blood pressure up?” she

asked in a soft sigh. She couldn't understand why there was no even keel when she was around him. She either wanted to beat him bloody or slather his face with kisses.

After pushing out the last of her sigh, her mind picked another question to mull over. "Why must he always push me to the edge? God, I wonder what he would have been like if his parents hadn't been killed in that accident?"

The casually posed question exploded through her like a jolt of lightening. Her fingers clamped down on the steering wheel and her elbows locked straight. Instantly, her arms screamed from the tension.

"He's afraid of losing the ones he loves." She wasn't sure if it was her mind or mouth that shouted the words. Her heart raced with the revelation. She shot her gaze to Luke's face. Seeing his eyes still comfortably closed, she turned back to the road and blew out her drawn breath.

Suddenly, her mind flipped through all of what she knew of Luke Dolan. She searched for something to negate her findings, but nothing changed the conclusion she came up with. Her heart ached when she thought of the fear that racked her when her mother died, and the terror when she heard her father was in the hospital. Losing a parent is devastating at any age, but to lose two at once.

"Wanna know what I learned tonight, Teach?"

Luke's voice was like sweet heavy cream. It flowed over her heart, filling the small cracks. Peg cornered her eyes to give him a quick look. His eyes were closed, but a tiny smile tickled the line of his full lips.

"Thought they were smart, but I fooled 'em. Wanna know what I did?" Luke's disjointed thoughts showed in his one-sided conversation. "Irishmen not only ones know how ta live. I showed 'em." His head rolled back and forth in an exaggerated no. "Can't sing like Kevin. He puts Pavarotti ta shame."

Suddenly, Luke's face jumped in front of hers. His eyes were now wide opened. "Ever hear Kevin sing?"

Peg shifted in the seat to see around him. "Luke, sit back, I can't see the road." She stiffed-armed him back into the seat but

## Building Blocks

his head didn't stay back, it fell to her shoulder. For a long moment he was silent, then his knuckles scraped down the length of her jaw line. The rough-tender sensation pulsated through her nerves setting their ends on fire. His soft warm breath trickled down over her coat's collar and seeped through the sheer material of her nightgown. Its tender caress brushed over her breast and sent a shiver down her spine.

"You're beautiful Peg?"

Though Peg knew it was the liquor talking, his comment still tripped her heart. She took a steadying breath and stretched her eyes up into the rearview mirror. Only half of Martin's face looked back at her. With his brow unlined, he looked at peace with his dreams.

"When I get my hands on your neck, Martin Sullivan, I'll wring it for sure." Peg offered the whispered warning on an exhaling breath.

Nothing came from the back seat, but her shotgun rider whispered, "Gotta nice neck."

When his lips touched below her ear, her body curled inward. "Here." He placed a warm, slow, soft kiss on the sensitive spot. Then his lips followed the column of her neck and circled to the hollow of her throat, "and here." His lingering lips had her melting into the car seat. The touch of his tongue tenderly skimming across her skin had her near gasping for a breath.

"You taste sweet."

As Peg labored to drag air into her lungs, she steadily dug her fingers into the steering wheel fighting for self-control. Her voice was spiked with ragged breaths, when she ordered, "Luke, sit back."

Luke instantly obeyed and fell back into the seat with his eyes closed. Once she had her wits about her, Peg glanced at him. "How could those two have done this to you?"

Peg wasn't about to expose Luke's sisters to him in his condition, so she pulled up into her own driveway. Peg's father was already out on the porch waiting, as she rolled the car up to the house. Before she was out the car's door, Mac had opened the

passenger's side.

"Da, what are you doing up?" Peg asked over car's roof.

"I heard the boys' telephone call. Thought I'd give ya a hand with them this evenin'." Mac peered inside and then turned to Peg. Shimmering silver moonbeams caught the surprised look on his face.

"Yes, tonight there's three 'boys'."

The surprised lines in Mac's face uncurled. "I'll help you with the big fella."

Instantly, Peg pushed her father aside and unbuckled Luke's seat belt. "No Da, remember what the doctor said about lifting. Why don't you go and make up the spare bed? I'll get Old Liquid Legs Luke up there myself."

Just then the back car door opened, and Kevin carefully unfolded. He held a perfectly painted smile on his face, and his eyes were as wide as half dollars. He offered neither word, nor help to Peg. Instead, he took off for the steps, navigating them steady and straight. To the untrained eye he looked as sober as a saint but Peg knew better.

Seconds later, Martin followed. His crooked course was like the old man's mile, one step to the side, two back, and then three forwards. He was too far gone to be of any help. As Peg watched him make his way into the house's opened door, she sighed.

"Well pal, it's just you and me." She hammered the word pal to stress her point. Taking Luke's hands, she pulled him out of the car. Once on his feet, she used the car to keep him there while she closed the door.

Peg stepped to Luke's side and crawled under his arm. "Do you think you could hang onto the world a few minutes longer? I promise once I get you up to bed you can pass out."

With Luke's arm draped over her shoulder, Peg made her way up the steps and into the house. He followed easily. "Maybe I should add a hefty shot of whiskey to your morning coffee, as a little added insurance for our inspections?"

Luke didn't comment. All his attention was centered on moving one foot in front of the other. When they made the first landing, Luke offered a slurred compliment about how soft she was and how

## Building Blocks

nicely she fit to him. Peg had noticed that point long before he'd made it. They did fit together...perfectly, line for line.

The length of his draping arm brought the tips of his fingers to the crest of her breast. Peg could do nothing to stop it from reacting to his touch, but what sky rocketed her excitement was the fact Luke was leaning on her. The thought set about a chain of images flashing in her mind.

His face hovering over hers; the muscles in his jaw quivering and his naked body shuddering as ecstasy's small slice of death carried him to where there was no control only...

Peg's heart fissured.

Love.

The word she'd kept tucked away ripped out. The shock of it pulled her to a sudden stop. The idea and the ache of the word nearly sent her to her knees. As the thought settled in, she felt the searing pain ease. She expelled a heavy sigh and with it a single word.

"Dammit."

"Huh?" Luke asked without opening his eyes.

"Nothing." Peg dropped her head and restarted their trek to the bedroom. This was too absurd. There was no way she could love him. Just the thought of that word made her stomach roll.

"Peg, I'm gonna be sick."

"Me first." Peg shook her head and continued trudging them forward.

When Luke pulled to a halt, her gaze jumped from the floor to his face. Even in the warm amber glow of the hallway light his face was pale. To complete the picture, a hint of green outlined his mouth.

"I'm gonna be sick," he repeated, clarifying the statement of any slurred speech.

"Oh, I'm sorry. This way." Peg quickly turned to the first door and pushed it open with her foot. Luke dove in. Before she had the door closed, his face was already deep into the bowl.

From behind the closed door, Peg heard the retching sounds and then came a long pause.

“Are you all right?” she asked to the closed door.

The silence continued to stretch out. Then she heard, “No. Dead.”

“It would be better if you’d lie down.”

“Already lying down.”

“Luke, I’m coming in.” Peg warned as she pushed open the door.

His sprawled out body near filled the floor, forcing her to step over his long legs to get fully into the small room. She bent down behind his head and shoved his shoulders up off the floor. “I’ve got to get you out of here and into bed.”

His body was dead weight and rubbery, almost as if he hadn’t a bone or muscle in his upper body. His head lobbed back and forth; in an extreme effort to insure she understood his meaning.

“Can’t do it. Alcohol and sex don’t mix. Give me a rain check.”

“Sorry to disappoint you, Mister Dolan, but that was not a proposition,” she grunted as she pushed him to a sitting position. “This is the only bathroom we have, so I cannot have you occupying it all night.”

Suddenly, he hooked one arm around the toilet and held on with surprising strength. His face turned up to hers and his glazed eyes opened wide. “Why don’t cha like me? I only wanna be prepared.”

Peg stepped to the other side of the bowl and pried his arm free; only to have the other one lock down even tighter.

“Being prepared is one thing,” she said, straining against his strength. “Being subjugating is another.” Between each word she pushed out a grunt.

They played a game of toilet, toilet who’s got the toilet for a few passes.

“Couldn’t control you though,” Luke said to the back of her head.

Peg refused to turn to his words. If she did, their lips would slam right into each other. “I wouldn’t let you.”

“I’m not what’s-his-name, Devon.”

Her mind splintered. Damn that Martin! He had no right telling Luke about Devon. Peg lifted her eyes to the ceiling and let out a long breath. Before she rolled them back, Luke said, “Glad he

## Building Blocks

was stupid. Now I've got a chance."

Slowly, Peg turned her face to Luke's. She purposely pulled back to insure their lips were as far apart as they could be in these tight quarters. His glazed eyes were open wide, as he asked, "Say I got a chance, Peg."

As she looked at him, her stomach fell. For a moment she thought she'd join Luke in the bowl. She screamed at herself to breathe. Once a breath pushed past the lump lodged in her chest, she turned her attention back to removing his arms from the bowl.

"You have a chance."

She had no idea where the whispered answer came from, but once it was out her heart felt lighter. He probably wouldn't remember her saying it, but she suddenly felt the stone around her heart crumble away.

"You're just saying that to get me to let go, right?" Luke snorted out.

Peg stopped pulling at his arms, and hardened her face. She turned to him and pushed out a strong, "Yes."

Luke's eyelids were dropping to half-mast and his lips were at a full smile. "If I let go, will ya repeat whatcha said?"

With her arms crossed over her chest, Peg rocked back onto her heels. She pushed him into a verbal game of chicken. "Let go and see."

"Are you two goin' to play there all night? If so, I'll use the backyard as a privy."

Peg switched her hard gaze from Luke to the sound of Martin's voice in the doorway. "Martin Sullivan, you are a dead man."

"Peigi, I didn't know the man couldn't drink."

"You should not have used yourself as the scale."

"The lad did extremely well for bein' only half Irish. You know it's his non-Irish half that's pukin' his guts out. Once that half is through, the Irish part will be as right as rain."

"What did you and Kevin pour down him?"

"You're talkin' like we used a funnel."

"Martin," Peg sang his name on a tone of warning.

"Twelve beers and a couple of whiskeys to wash them down. As

I said, he was doin' extremely well until about the ninth shot."

"Twelve?! Were you trying to kill the man?"

"He had four whiskeys before I saw any real difference in him."

Martin leaned into the room as if to share a secret. "Peg, did you know he shines his work boots?" After he made the statement, Martin shifted out of Peg's reach. "The man's not normal."

Straightened her spine, Peg quickly defended Luke. "Most people take pride in their appearance."

"But Peg, work boots?" Martin gave out a single loud cluck of his tongue and turned in place. "Work boots. No one can be that prissy." The last sentence was given down the stairs as he took one cautious step at a time.

Once Luke released the bowl, he actually helped her get him off the floor. He was even easier to steer down the hallway to the extra room. Peg maneuvered them both through the doorway that Mac stood sentry at. Once inside, Peg positioned Luke at the side of the bed.

"Thanks Da. Now, you get back to bed. Those dark circles under your eyes are showing again."

When Peg removed the arm she had snaked around Luke's waist, he crumpled to the bed like a house of cards.

Mac gave her a wide smile and nodded his head. "I guess I will. The lad's harmless enough in that condition."

While Luke lay half on, half off the bed, Peg removed his shoes and placed each foot onto the bed. His shirt was next. As she rolled him forward, he whispered into her ear. "Peg, you're beautiful. Say I got a chance."

Even if she wanted to answer, the sight of his muscular chest stopped every cell in her brain from working. The hallway's delicate light spread through the open door, warming the rippling muscles that spanned his chest. Shadows deepened the valley and brought the planes into prominence. Even Michelangelo couldn't sculpt such beauty.

Slowly, she reached out and ran her splayed fingers lightly down the taunt surface. It felt like warm satin over granite. When he sighed, she snatched her hand away and jumped off the bed. Quickly, she tossed the cover over him and rushed to the open

## Building Blocks

door. Peg paused as she closed the door to watch him sleep. A sliver of light cut across the room and washed over his face. Standing with her face pressed to the opening, she whispered, "You have a chance, Luke Dolan."

"Top of the mornin' to ya, lad."

The knell of Mac's voice clanged inside Luke's head, stopping him dead in his tracks. He sucked in a gasping breath, and grabbed his head with both hands.

"Put a haze on it, Mac, or they'll find your body in the next batch of concrete I pour," Luke said through gritted teeth.

Taking in a slow breath, Luke lifted his gaze from the floor. He would have offered Mac a scowl but the pain in his head wouldn't allow it.

"Are you alive?"

Peg's soft voice was like a cool cloth to Luke's fevered brow. When he tried shifting his gaze to her, sunlight bounced from wall to wall and stabbed into his brain.

Damn yellow paint.

Reaching the table, he slowly folded into a chair and waited until the wave of nausea passed. After a quick second ticked by, he swallowed and slowly lifted his gaze to her face. Even through the red glare, she looked beautiful.

His stomach shifted. It wasn't a happy camper this morning. "I wish I wasn't."

"Try this." Peg stepped to the table and offered him a cup of something that looked like pine tar.

Luke pulled in his face when he looked down at the black pitch. "What the hell's that?"

"It's a dash of this and a drop of that and a whole lot of the hair of the dog."

Any other day Luke would have loved Peg's smile but right now it was far too spunky for him. "No." Luke made sure he only said the word. Any movement he was sure his head would be bouncing to the floor. He was in no mood to be chasing it.

"I'll pass. My tongue's a wooly mammoth right now." Luke

pushed the cup slowly across the table.

Peg set a tall glass of tomato juice in front of him. "At least take the dash and drop part."

Luke sighed with relief when his stomach didn't revolt. He took a large swallow. "Tabasco!"

"Yes, that's the dash part." Peg's voice quivered.

Luke stared at her back. He wasn't sure if his eyeballs were vibrating or her shoulders were shaking. Either way one of them would be dead soon if it continued.

"Dash! You didn't put a dash in that."

Peg turned back to him. Through his blurred eyes he could see how she struggled holding back a laugh. "No, the dash is to help the alcohol get out of your system faster."

"How? Burn a hole right through me?"

Peg's face was somber as she looked at him over her steaming cup of coffee. She took a long, slow sip. "No, it should be kicking in right about, now. "

"Shit!" Luke's eyes widened and he exploded out of the chair. He nearly barreled Martin down racing up the steps.

"Now." Peg let lose a laugh.

A few minutes later Luke walked back into the kitchen. He aimed his eyes at Peg. She was snickering and biting down on her in drawn lips. The sparkle in her green eyes was worth what she'd just put him through. He had to admit, his stomach wasn't screaming at him for being so stupid last night. Actually, even the coffee didn't smell so bad after all.

"Here have a cup of this and some toast. That should stay down."

He took the plate and moved to the table. "What did you smear on the toast, castor oil?"

"No, I put that in the coffee."

"What?" He choked on the mouthful.

Peg pulled out the chair and sat down with him. "Oh, stop acting like a baby."

"Who's acting? Hangovers are worse then the flu."

Peg rolled her eyes. "Don't tell me you're one of those men that fanes dying if he gets the sniffles?"

## Building Blocks

Luke stiffened his spine. "I don't have time for colds."

"Right, a millionaire before you're forty, I forgot your list." Peg broke a piece of toast off his extra piece and popped it into her mouth.

He liked the way her nose twitched as she chewed. "What list?" "Nothing." Peg only shook her head and took a sip of her coffee. "I'll drive you to Al's to get your truck."

Luke reached up to scratch his head, but when he touched his hair it hurt so badly he quickly changed his mind. "How did I get here? I don't remember much about last night."

The thick fog in his head thinned with each sip of coffee. The redness behind his eyes was now only a pink haze. He stared at Peg in utter amazement.

Sunlight shimmering through the flowing auburn strands of her hair had him mesmerized. Most women didn't look good until after noon. Of course, Peg Murphy wasn't most women.

"Martin called just before two this morning, and said that if I didn't come down, the three of you were going to hop a train to Dublin."

"Train to Dublin?"

"Yes, neither Martin nor Kevin knew what country they were in, and you kept insisting Al call you Buzz Lightyear."

"Buzz?" Luke took a chance and shook his head. It rattled a little but didn't fall off. "What was in those drinks?"

Peg's smile spread. "It wasn't what was in them so much as the amount." She hesitated the last part of her sentence, almost like a question.

"I think it was somewhere around nine," Luke answered for her.

"Try twelve, with four shots of whiskey."

The pain of widening his eyes slashed through Luke's head, when he heard the number. "Even in college I didn't drink like that."

He watched as Peg's smile took on a tinge of smugness. "I bet you didn't do much wrong in school."

"Well," Luke paused, than took a small swallow of coffee. "In a

small town you don't have much of a chance."

The word 'chance' in Luke's sentence jumped out at her. Did he put a heavier inflection on that word? She narrowed her eyes to see if there was any reaction on his face. No, not a single muscle changed around his eyes or mouth. He didn't remember.

"Before you know it, you're stopped dead in your tracks." Luke had finished eating one piece of toast and started on the piece Peg had left. "Sure knocks the wind out of your sails when you and your buddies are sneaking drinks under the high school bleachers and all our mothers show up."

Each time Peg peeked inside the history of Luke Dolan, she felt more comfortable. "Really?" she asked as her gaze drifted down from his face to the open line of his shirt. The stretch of satiny skin of his chest held her mind captive as her fingers tingled with the remembered feel of his skin. She forced her gaze back to his face. Even behind the sandy stubble, his face was soft to look at.

"Yep." Luke drained his cup.

Had the air in the room become heavier? Peg pushed out of her chair and collected the cups and plates. She used the moment at the sink to pull herself from the thoughts that had kept her awake all night. Get a grip girl, remember what happened the last time you fell for some guy. Pain big time. Who knows if Luke isn't another Devon. Didn't God just give them different faces so we could tell them apart? Peg's cynical mind said the words, but her heart knew Luke Dolan was a special man, a very special man indeed. "I'll take you to your truck now."

## Chapter 9

Turning around in her seat to look out the back window, Peg maneuvered the car down the long driveway. Luke held himself back from placing a kiss on her full soft lips.

Once Peg had the car traveling on the blacktop road, she asked, “Didn’t you ever get into any trouble as a kid?”

“Sure.”

“Like what?”

Luke turned to the road and sent a smile as long forgotten memories filtered into his mind. “We did a little drag racing.”

“Wow, be still my heart. Drag racing, on empty country roads, miles away from traffic. You were really pushing the envelope weren’t you, country boy?”

“Okay Miss City Woman, what did you do?”

“We laughed in the face of danger.” After that profound statement, Peg puffed out a double ‘ha-ha’.

When she pushed her chin up and straightened her spine sunlight shimmered against the satin waves of her auburn hair. He wondered how it would feel brushing against his bare chest. His thoughts started to run ramped, so he reined them in. “Okay. Now, you’ve got my curiosity peeked.”

Peg sent him a serious look as she said, “I went to an all girl’s school.”

Luke held his silence but the muscles in his cheeks quivered.

“Oh now, don’t give me that smug grin of yours. Girls can be just as mischievous as boys.”

Luke snorted. “Since when?” When her mouth hardened, he quickly added, “Okay, okay so tell me.”

She turned her attention back to the road as she spoke. “A group of us decided it was payback time for all those hours of

detention Sister Veronica had assigned. A few of us came up with this ingenious plan. With a little help of a clothesline and the smallest girl in our group, we did it.

At midnight, we dressed the girl in a white choir robe and tied her up to one of those pulley type clotheslines. We threw stones at Sister Veronica's window and voila. A celestial messenger to warn Sister Veronica if she didn't lighten up on the girls she wouldn't get into heaven."

Luke couldn't hold back a roaring laughter. The tumultuous sound covered the rumble of the car's engine. If it weren't for the shoulder belt, holding him in place, he would have folded in the seat. The picture Peg's words created had him gulping air between laughs. When Peg started to continue, he held up his hand to stop her. "Give me a chance, to catch my breath."

When Peg speared her gaze at Luke, he couldn't help but continue to laugh. "Did you get away with it?" Luke choked out between laughs.

"I only wish. The rope started to snap and the so-called 'heavenly visitor' got so frightened she started screaming words no divine apparition would have ever uttered. By the time we got her down she had shouted out a threat that had each one of our names tacked onto it. Far into her rapture, Sister Veronica never heard the names, but Mother Superior did."

"Then you did get away with it."

"Well, we thought so but at mass the next morning, Father Gerard asked the six of us to stand up and publicly apologize to Sister Veronica. And for the next six weeks we spent our Saturdays cleaning the church pews." By the end of her story Peg was laughing just as hard as Luke.

Still a little breathless, Luke said, "I guess I was a Wally Cleaver to your Bonnie Parker."

Peg pursed her lips, "Saint Alphonse Academy, the home of public enemy number one Peigi Elizabeth Murphy, if you please."

"You got that right." Luke started in laughing again. "Those nuns never had a chance."

Her smile dropped quickly, but Luke widened his.

Pulling into the unpaved parking lot, Peg steered her car up to

## Building Blocks

Luke's lonely truck. "We're here."

"So I see." Luke nodded. He hesitated then reached for the door handle. Before opening the door, he turned to her. "Thanks for the bed and the breakfast, though I wouldn't recommend the hangover cure."

Peg chuckled. Shifting in her seat, she gave him her full smiling face. "You're not going to count it against me because my crew got you drunk. Are you?"

"No. They couldn't help it. They care about you, that's all." He reached out and placed his wide hand on hers. When it trembled beneath his, he gave it a quick squeeze. "Don't take it out on them."

He held her eyes as he leaned his face to hers. He placed a tender kiss on her cheek then quickly moved back. "You should give them a chance like you promised me."

"What?!" Peg screamed. Jerking her hand from beneath his, she slammed it over her mouth.

Luke burst out with laughter. The shocked look on her face was worth the shrill that rattled in his head from her scream.

"Peg, I was drunk but I remember every word you said. You made a promise and I'm holding you to it." He quickly gave her another peck on the cheek and pushed out of the car before she had a chance to slap his face. He slammed the car door to put some safe space between them.

Still smiling, he leaned into the car's opened window. "See you tonight about eight thirty. Oh yeah, by the way, although I loved that white night gown you had on under your coat last night, I'd advise you to wear something a little more formal. See you tonight, Bonnie."

The blueprint had sat unlooked at on the kitchen table for the last half-hour. Luke's intentions were good when he unrolled it, but within seconds his mind drifted from the paper to what it wanted to think about.

Peg.

Her smile.

Her warmth and her body.

Of course, his mind lingered on the latter far more than any other of her attributes. Martin said she had been burned by that son-of-a-bitch, Devon. Though Luke spit out Devon's name, he almost wanted to praise it. The idiot might have made things a little difficult for Luke, but not impossible. Nothing was impossible when it came to love.

Damn, that word sounded great. Luke repeated it in his head a few more times and with each one, he widened his smile. Okay, now that it was settled in his mind, he only had to convince Peg.

Dinner, wine, soft music, and kissing her senseless would do the trick. It sounded like a plan to him. Why not? She had always been a willing partner when it came to kissing. That was before last night, that is. Just in case she was still a little unsure, he could tell Mac he got the milk for free and now had to buy the cow.

His laughter ripped through the silence of the kitchen. Yet, he knew this was one serious step he was taking.

"Luke, is a blind land trust to protect the owner's privacy?" Laura's question brought Luke's laughter to a screeching halt.

He coughed to clear it from his throat before he answered, "Most of the time."

Laura pulled out a chair and sat down. "Is that a normal thing?"

"It depends."

She set a manila folder on the table then studied the blueprint. "Would it be unusual for a small town like Sister's Bay to have one?"

Luke turned his attention to the blueprint. "Maybe not."

"What about two?"

"That's a little unusual, but not earth shaking."

Laura turned her face to his. "What about four?"

Luke snickered, "I doubt any small town would have four?"

Her brown eyes widened, "We do."

Staring at his sister, Luke tucked in his chin. "What?"

Without a word, Laura pushed the envelope on top of the blueprint. Luke pulled down his brow and concentrated on his sister's face. When her head slightly bobbed, he took the envelope.

## Building Blocks

“What’s this?”

“Something I stole from Kramer’s office.”

Luke’s eyes snapped up to her face. “Shit, Laura why did you do that?”

“Because it’s got Dad’s name on it and because of what’s inside.”

“What? Let’s see?” Luke hurried with the metal clasp and dove his hand into the envelope’s mouth. On the first page of the stapled group was a letter from the State Bank of Wisconsin, in Greenbay. It was addressed to their father. “It says here that Dad bought one hundred twenty-six acres on Mill Pond Road on December 22<sup>nd</sup>.”

“I know, I read that. He did that a day before the accident.” Laura moved her gaze back to the blueprint while Luke continued reading the packet of papers.

He fumbled through the pages, scanning the lines of the contract lingo for something, but for what? Just then something jumped out at him. “This has got to be a mistake or Bert would have mentioned something when the estate was settled.”

“Do you think he maybe didn’t know about Dad buying that land?”

“Dad didn’t make a move without Bert knowing about it.” Luke continued studying the paper.

“Maybe Dad did on this one.”

Luke shook his head and pushed up from his chair. “Let me make a copy of this. Then, I want you to put it back before you’re fired from your first job.”

He smiled down at the lines in his sister’s upturned face. “Don’t worry, I’ll get this figured out soon enough. Anyway, if Dean fires you, Dolan Construction can always use a good spy.”

“Why, you already have Andy in Peg’s camp.”

Luke shook his head. “Wrong. There’s no way Andy will break Peg’s confidence.”

Laura narrowed her eyes up at him. “That look in your eyes tells me you like that idea. Or is it Peg that you like?”

“What do you think?” Luke knew his eyes were giving her the answer.

“I think you’re planning to add another woman to the Dolan

clan.”

Luke’s face sobered quickly. “Would that upset you?”

Laura reached up and patted her brother’s arm. “Not in the least.”

“When you said eight-thirty, you meant it, didn’t you?” The sentence sounded idiotic even to Peg’s ears, but she was happy anything came out of her mouth after seeing the way Luke looked in a suit. Her heart stammered at the beauty of his broad shoulders being tamed by the black jacket. She knew ‘beauty’ wasn’t a word normally used in reference to a man, but no other came to mind, except, perhaps, perfection.

Luke’s smile widened as he stepped through the opened door. “I’m a man of my word.”

Once inside the room, Luke took one more step to bring him into Peg’s space. The spicy fragrance of his aftershave only added fuel to already electrified air. It sent a charge through Peg’s body making it tingle with anticipation.

“Are you?” he asked, taking yet another step forward.

The melting look in his eyes empowered her. She knew the dress was working its magic. Of course, she did have to thank the hours of manual labor she’d been doing these last few days and of course the makers of this black silk dress. Although between the sleeveless low cut neckline and a hemline that cut her six inches above her knees, there wasn’t much material to be thankful for. What there was of it, knew Peg’s body well. It didn’t just cling to her narrow waist and full breasts. It hung on for dear life.

“A man?” Peg questioned, with a tilt of her head.

The tiny fanning lines around his eyes disappeared, as Luke studied her face. The same critical eye he carefully moved his gaze over her body. “No, I don’t think so. Not in that dress.” The thickness in his voice said more than his words.

Peg loved the way his gaze felt on her body. Wanting it to stay on her a moment longer, she shifted back and slowly ran her hands from her waist to the top of her thighs. “Is this too much?”

The sound of Luke’s in drawn breath shot right into her heart. “No.” He quickly took another breath to add, “just right.”

## Building Blocks

Peg angled her head to bring his eyes back to hers. She added a soft smile to hold them there. “I mean, am I over dressed? You said something a little more than my nightgown. That left a whole gambit of styles to choose from.”

“You couldn’t be more perfect.” Luke’s head did a slow shake. “But the way you look, we just might not get out of your driveway.”

He slid his arm around her waist and pinned her to him. When his lips began to make their slow decent, Peg found a strange courage to wedge her hands against his chest and hold him in place.

“Stop right there. I would like to clarify for the record and make it known that I’m here strictly under protest. You tricked me into that promise.”

Luke stared into her eyes as he captured both her hands in his and held them against his heart. The slight tattoo felt like thunder beneath Peg’s fingers.

“Okay, I’ll give you the first promise, but not the second time. You made that one totally on your own.”

Peg’s eyes flew open. A tiny gasp escaped with her question. “You heard that?”

“Alcohol does a lot of damage to the body, but I’ve never heard of it being the cause of hearing loss.”

His fiery gaze drifted to her mouth and her lips ignited under the heat. She tried cooling them with her tongue, but her own temperature was far too high to be of any help.

Luke’s fingers squeezed her hand. “So, you can either keep up the charade, or close that sweet little mouth and let me kiss you.”

Releasing the pressure she applied to his chest, Peg smiled. “Won’t the town council consider such action manipulation of a public official?”

His lips followed her jaw line to the point of her chin. Their softness had Peg tilting her head back to give him room. He placed a line of kisses down her throat and back again. He stopped just inches from her lips and whispered, “You could call it that but I think stimulation is a more appropriate definition. Of course we could have a heated debate, after dinner.”

The instant his words stopped, Luke captured her mouth in a kiss that had Peg praying her knees wouldn't buckle under her. Leaning into him, she let the strength of his arms enfold her as his tongue dipped into her mouth. The satin feel of its tender caress sent out a blast of colors behind her closed eyes. Her hands slid up around his neck and her fingers reached up to thread through the strands of his hair.

Every nerve, every cell screamed the delicate word she refused to say aloud. Withholding it would keep it safe but it torqued her heart.

The slow rhythm of his tongue was the primal ritual that leveled all beasts. Each stroke drove her further and further into the sensuous world of need. Her tongue joined in the dance as her body formed itself to his. Lost in the feel and taste of him, she suddenly felt a cool breeze rushing over her lips. She opened her eyes.

Luke took two steady breaths then tightened his hold around her waist. "You have a choice, either stop kissing me and we go to the restaurant, or continue kissing me and we go upstairs and let me collect that rain check you promised."

Peg pulled her chin in and squeezed her eyebrows together. "I did not give you a rain check. You misinterpreted my words."

Tiny slivers of amber danced in his brown eyes. "Did I misinterpret that kiss?"

Her delicate smile answered for her.

"I didn't think so. Okay, so which shall it be?"

Peg stepped out of his arms. She let the moment lengthen, then said, "Dinner."

"Dammit," Luke snapped his fingers. "I knew I shouldn't have given you the choice."

Peg turned her back to him and walked to the door, putting an extra sway to her steps. She desperately wanted to see Luke's face, but when she heard low groan she knew the effect had worked.

## Chapter 10

The wine and dinner had both worked in Luke's favor. However, the soft music from the bandstand was backfiring on him. It was supposed to help him complete the scene, but what it did was make him ache with need. Peg fit in his arms perfectly and the way she felt had to be a sin.

Yeah, okay, it was, but didn't the Good Lord say go forth and multiply. At this moment, all Luke could think about was doing the Lord's bidding, literally. However, the dance floor wasn't the spot Luke had in mind.

"You do know what you're doing," Luke whispered into her ear.

Tilting her head back, Peg asked, "Doing what?"

"Don't give me that look? You know very well what you're doing."

A lining smile stretched across her mouth and burst into her sparkling eyes. "What am I doing?" Peg pressed her hips to cradle him and added enough pressure for the blood to drain from Luke's brain.

He held back a gasp. "Rub your body against mine like that again and this town will be talking about what happened tonight for generations."

Peg took a step back and looked up into his eyes with a feigning contriteness on her face. Yet, her eyes wouldn't go along with her lie. "Luke, I'm dancing with you. Our bodies should be together."

"Right, and when I take you in the middle of this dance floor are you going to explain that it was all your fault."

"My fault! I'm dancing."

"Well your rhythm is too slow."

"Slow? Me? I'll have you know I'm using proper dance floor etiquette," Peg chuckled out.

Luke held down the bubbling laugh, but let his smile spread. "I

think we've had a similar conversation a while back.”

“Yes,” Peg purred, “and look how that turned out.”

“Which part? When you wanted to bury a hammer in my skull, or now?”

Peg closed the few inches that separated them and melted her body to his. “I think now would be a better yard stick.”

The sensation sent Luke's eyes snapping open and him gulping a mouthful of air. The way her body followed the slow beat pushed Luke into a struggle to keep things under control. Each movement drove him closed to the edge. He stopped his steps and hoped she followed his lead. “Speaking of yard sticks, we better get out of here.”

She stopped dancing and rolled out of his arms. As Peg walked away, she lined him a look over her shoulder. “Is that your evaluation, Mr. Dolan?”

Under normal conditions, Luke would have easily followed her quick wit, but the way his body throbbed took a toll on his abilities to follow the conversation. He finally pieced her words together. Once they formed a sentence, he quick-stepped to catch up to her and wrapped his arm around her waist. As they walked back to the table, he leaned into her ear and whispered, “Evaluation based on fact.”

Peg snickered behind her hand while they wove their way through the maze of tables. As they approached the door, the sound of Bert Avery calling out Luke's name pulled them to a stop.

Bert pushed through the crowd with his young blond wife following slowly behind him. After he shook Luke's hand, Bert moved on to giving Peg a very slow once over before his wife joined the group.

“I didn't know your duties extended into the night.” Bert asked, finally lifting his eyes from Peg's low cut neckline to Luke's face.

Luke gave Bert a nod and a wiry smile. “Peg Murphy, this is Bert Avery and his wife, Jean.”

“How do you do Mr. Avery?” Peg extended her hand to Bert.

“Bert, please,” he corrected and offered his hand in return. “Bert and Jean.”

## Building Blocks

Jean Avery stood back with her hands tucked into the pockets of her mink jacket. She was beyond slender, nearly pushing anorexic. Her shoulders were pinned back and her spine stiff. Her face remained frozen as she looked down her nose at Peg. Then Jean shifted her gaze to Luke and offered him a warm smile. “It never hurts to woo the enemy. Does it, Luke? I’ve heard that the obligatory dinner and wine has been known to work wonders.”

Peg’s eyes rounded to Luke.

“This isn’t business. It’s purely personal, I can assure you.” Luke coiled his arm around Peg’s waist, and inched her closer to him.

Bert let an overly loud laugh burst out. The sound drew the surrounding faces to him. “Don’t let anyone fool you, business and pleasure mix very well.”

“Not tonight.” Luke snipped out his reply.

The smile on Bert’s face fell, yet the red stain of laughter lingered on. “Oh, by the way, Luke, I got your message this afternoon. I’ll be in the office tying up a few things tomorrow. If you’d like to stop by, we can go over a few things?”

Tucking in her chin, Peg asked, “You work on Sunday?”

“No rest for the wicked.” Bert speared his wife a sharp gaze. “Anyway, if I don’t keep things running, the little wifey here doesn’t have enough pocket change to spend every other day at the beauty shop or buy a new mink coat like this each year.”

The pinched look on Jean’s narrow face didn’t slow Bert’s comments down in the least. “Like I told Luke, women are expensive.”

Peg felt honor bound to defend her gender. “That’s unfair to lump ‘the many’ in with ‘the few’ to come to that generalization.”

Bert’s short burst of laughter was more for effect than genuine. “I haven’t met any of the ‘few’ you speak of.”

“Maybe you haven’t looked in the right places.” Peg knew her comments were uncalled for, but something pushed her on to say them anyway.

With a hooded-eyed look, Bert replied, “Maybe I should have checked out the school systems.”

Luke nudged Peg forward. “Will you excuse us? Nice seeing you both. I’ll be in your office about ten, Bert.”

Unsmiling, Peg added her good nights. Bert offered a cordial reply, but Jean turned without a word.

“Bert’s wife needs a reality check,” Peg said to the yellow beams of headlamps scratching the black road’s back. “And while we’re on the subject of the Averys, are you and Bert still working out a strategy for that land deal, or planning your concession speech?”

Peg turned to Luke but his gaze stayed fastened on the road ahead. “There’s just something I need to go over with him.”

“Then you’re still planning those condos?”

“Nothing’s changed about that.”

Peg shifted in her seat to catch any change in his face. “How can you say that? I thought...”

Luke turned his head ninety-degrees then snapped it back again. “Peg, I said this is personal tonight.”

“I heard that, but I assumed.” The word ‘assume’ stopped Peg’s sentence short. Assume. Ass out of you and me is the real definition. That was never more clear than tonight. She was positive she acted like an ass tonight.

Shifting higher in his seat, Luke asked, “You assumed what?”

“Nothing,” Peg clipped out.

“If it’s nothing why not tell me?”

She turned and caught the tail end of Luke’s gaze. “I thought this evening, we were getting, well, you know.”

“Peg nothing’s changed.” The quality of Luke’s voice was near void of emotion. The level sound prodded Peg’s anger.

“Silly me.” Peg turned back to the windshield. “I thought everything changed.”

“Yes, but...”

“But nothing...right?” Peg pulled her coat tighter around her collar and pushed back into the truck’s thick seat.

“I thought we were going to give each other a chance.” Luke argued but the bite of his words had softened.

Keeping a tight rein on her emotions, Peg made sure her eyes stayed forward. “No. If I recall I was to give you a chance. For some

## Building Blocks

strange reason that seems a little one sided to me, now.”

“You don’t understand.” Did Luke’s voice just sharpen? Peg wasn’t quite sure.

She used her hand to stress her points in the argument. Pressing the tips of her fingers against her chest, she tightened her voice. “As I’ve told you before, I’m a big girl. I understand.” Those same fingers tapped against her temple. “I might get a little muddled by the changing rules now and again but I know how the game is played.”

“Game?” Luke’s voice definitely hardened now. It bordered on a roar. “Is that what you think this is about?”

“What else? Like Jean Avery said, wine and dine the little lady and she’ll go along with anything you want.” Peg clucked her tongue and pushed out a fast huffing breath. “For a highly educated woman you’d think I’d know the difference between reality and fiction.”

Even in the sparse moonlight pushing into the cab of Luke’s truck, Peg could see the tenderness in his eyes when he glanced her way.

“Peg, tonight is reality.” His voice lost its razor edge.

Yet, Peg wasn’t buying it. Devon had played that trick once too often. “You can turn off the charm. I know now where this was going.” Peg continued chastising herself. “God, when will I ever learn? I called it right earlier, manipulation. You’re taking it above and beyond the call of your duty as inspector.” Peg shook her head, as her argument continued to snowball.

“Were you afraid the council would side with me and that’s why the mad rush?” The grip around her heart pushed her to ask the question but she held her breath as she waited for his answer.

“Christ,” Luke’s roar vibrated the windows of his truck. “You don’t know me at all, do you?”

The sound shoved Peg’s anger right up to the top. “I know that you plan to be a millionaire. And most self-made men don’t take up with insignificant little schoolteachers just for the fun of it. They take women like Jean Avery. The ploy is over Mr. Dolan, but the war is still on.”

“Damn you, Peg, listen to me.” Luke slowed his truck to turn onto Peg’s stone-covered driveway.

“No, you listen,” Peg shouted back. “I’ve had it with your type. I let my guard down thinking that you were special. But you’re nothing more than Devon in a different face.”

Luke hit the brakes and the truck chattered on the gravel until it finally came to a halt at her front porch. He slammed the gearshift and shoved open his door. Before he got to Peg’s side of the truck, she was already out the door and half way up the steps of her house.

Wide yellow beams of light flared out of most every window, setting the white farmhouse in a circle of light. The clattering sound of Peg’s spiked-heels slamming against the wooden steps where answered by the pounding sound of Luke’s thunderous steps. The strange clamor hammered back the stillness of the crisp fall night.

“Peg Murphy, for a teacher you’re as dense as they come.” Luke grabbed her arm. “I happen to be in love with you.”

She tugged back on her arm but Luke’s grip held her in place. Peg glared down at his banding fingers.

“Just because some jerk screwed around and played you for a fool you think we’re all alike. Well, you’re dead wrong. Men are different. If we aren’t then each one of you women are the same. And that makes you just like Jean Avery.”

“I am not!” Peg shouted her rebuttal into Luke’s face.

“Prove it, now.” Luke held her gaze just as tight as he held her arm.

“What! You’re crazy. I can’t stand here and prove it to you.”

“Neither can I prove that I’m not Devon. You have to trust me. With time we’ll both have the answers. I know that trust is something that has to be earned but if you won’t give me the chance I asked for, how can I earn it.” Luke’s voice softened and the hard lines around his mouth melted. “Please Peg, I’m not asking for a chance, I’m begging for one.”

The pleading in his eyes squeezed her heart, but the remembered pain Devon had caused her pushed back. “I don’t know.”

## Building Blocks

Luke released the grip on her arm and let his hand slide to hers. He brushed her fingers with his but didn't try to capture her hand. "Yes, you do," he said in an almost whisper, "look inside your heart. I know it's still there." His fingers toyed with her hand, then carefully threaded through hers. "Peg, I'm saying this again, I love you." For a long moment he was silent as if letting the words work their magic. "It won't be the last time I say them if you give me a chance, but it will be the last time you'll hear them if you don't."

The begging in Luke's eyes pushed Peg's gaze down. "Those words slipped from Devon's mouth so easily."

Luke tipped her face back up to his. "Look at me, Peg. Look deep into my eyes. They say they're the windows to our souls. What do you see?"

"Don't ask me now, I can't handle any more hurt."

Luke sent her down a soft smile. "Good. That's what you see then. I'm hurting Peg. Won't you just give me, no give us a chance?"

She felt her head begin to shake but the sadness in Luke's eyes slowed it to almost a stop. Had she made the same mistake? The look in Luke's eyes said no, but the scars on her heart were still tender. Peg's temples began to pound. Today had started off delightful only to plunge right into disastrous.

Lowering his face to hers, Luke placed a delicate kiss on her forehead. "I'd like you to think it over tonight. Call me tomorrow with your answer."

Peg watched as the red taillights of Luke's truck faded off in the distance. When the two, tiny, red dots disappeared around the bend, her heart sank.

Love?

He said the word so easily. Was he using it as Devon had, to cover up his sins? If he wasn't, then Luke had the courage to push his heart out there, knowing she might slap it down.

The enigma, Luke Dolan, was beyond logic and nothing she heard about him ever gave her a hint that he wasn't a determined man. Would he use that word to achieve his goal? Her heart screamed, "no!" Yet, her calculating mind shouted, "yes." Leading

## Sloan St.James

with ones heart only left you with massive scars, but always listening to one's mind left you lonely.

Before entering the house, Peg slipped off her high heels. Once inside she immediately starts turning off all the lights. Plunging the living room into darkness, she stepped to the wide bay window and pushed back the gossamer curtain.

The black glittered sky shimmered above, while the full amber harvest moonlight spread down on the stretch of unharvested cornfield that yawned out before her. Peg sighed and let the curtain fall back into place. The night didn't hold the answers, her heart did.

As she turned to the steps, a small red flashing light on the answering machine reflected like a beckon in the darkened room.

“Peigi, we've left a message for you at the restaurant and told the police to find you. So I'm hopin' you've already heard this message. Kevin and I are with your father at the hospital. I dinna know how things are, but you better hurry down here.”

Peg grabbed her coat off the hook and hopped across the floor as she tried putting on her shoes while racing to the door.

## Chapter 11

The quick paced clicking of Peg's heels ping-ponged down the empty hospital's corridor as she hurried toward the high jutting sign marked 'waiting room'. Though her steps were fast, the sound didn't even come close to matching the rapid beat of her frantic heart.

As she neared the opened doorway, Kevin's head popped out. "In here," he instructed. Deep veeing lines furrowed his high brow and spilled worry into his eyes.

"Have you heard anything?" Peg asked, moving into the room.

Martin jumped up and rushed across the room. He quickly swept his arm around her shoulder. "No, the nurse only came out to say that the doctors are workin' on him and they'll be out to speak to us soon."

The trio walked to a space near the window and sat down. Each looked out at the eerie amber glow the street lamps dropped down on the two vehicles huddled together in the parking lot.

"What happened?" The question took more of an effort to ask than Peg thought it would. Between the ache in her heart and the lump in her throat, the words trickled out in something just above a ragged whisper.

Kevin took the lead. "We were watching the telly and Mac said that his dinner wasn't stayin' settled. A few seconds later he said it felt like an elephant was sitting on his chest. Martin quickly called the ambulance. The fellas were at our door in a matter of minutes. That was about ten-thirty."

Peg didn't care if her plowing fingers tore apart her hair do. She needed to do something with her hands besides wring them. "It's twelve now. Why hasn't someone come out with information?"

"Ms Murphy?" The soft female voice easily reached across the empty waiting room. It slammed into Peg's ears like a roar.

Jerking her head to the sound, Peg looked at the soberness in

the petit young nurse's face. Peg hoped the hammer in her heart would stop clanging in her ears so she could hear what the woman was about to say.

"The doctor would like to speak to you. Please follow me."

In unison the three lifted from their seats. Peg paused until Martin and Kevin were in position at her sides. The unified front would help her face whatever the doctor had to say. Knowing this, Peg took that first step.

Flipping over the colored papers on a clipboard, the slender-faced, premature balding, young doctor announced, "Your father's had an angina attack." The doctor only lifted his eyes for a second before dropping his gaze back down and scribbling something at the bottom of one of the pages. When he finished writing the click of the pen's point sharply accented his next sentence. "We've stabilized him." He brought back the papers to their original position and then placed the board on the table beside him.

Peg's lungs shortened, leaving no room for expansion as she waited for him to continue.

His eyes moved from each of their silent faces, then settled on Peg's. "With medication, and a few days rest, he should be fine."

The doctor rolled back into the gray vinyl chair. His body language gave Peg the impression that what had been said was the most important part, and what he was about to say, wasn't. "Has he been overly taxing himself lately? Worried or something? That's usually what triggers these types of attacks."

The project.

She didn't say it aloud but the voice in her head instantly answered the doctor's question. Peg remembered her father saying how much work it would be, but she wouldn't listen.

Damn her arrogance.

Guilt closed her throat. "Yes, he has." The tone of Peg's answer reflected her confession.

Doctor Simms' gray eyes locked onto Peg's as he straightened in his chair. "Whatever it is, he better stop."

Peg nodded in compliance. "You can be sure, I'll stop it."

"Good." He offered a slight smile with his quick nod. "The nurse

## Building Blocks

will take you back to see him now. I want him to stay here a few days until we get his meds leveled out. I also want to see him in my office next week.”

“He’ll be there.” Peg offered her hand to the doctor and with it her heartfelt thanks.

Though the curtained off space gave the illusion of privacy, Peg knew the white hanging cloth wouldn’t stop her voice from spreading. Looking down at her father’s gray pallor, the only thing that highlighted his sunken cheeks was the narrow translucent oxygen tube.

When she reached out and touched his hand, he slowly pushed his eyes open. “How was your evenin’, darlin?” His smile and voice were weak but she held onto the twinkle glinting in his eyes.

“A lot better than yours, I see.”

“Not as excitin’, I imagine. Or was it?” He winked and Peg’s heart burst with the joy at his small response.

“No, you trumped me on that one.”

“I thought for sure I’d be writin’ out that five thousand dollar check to Luke.”

Peg widened her smile as the vision of her father and Luke that afternoon flashed in her mind. God, that was so long ago. These last few weeks seemed like years and when she looked down at her father’s face, it told the same story.

“The doctor said you need to stay here a few days and get some rest. So I want you to listen to them.”

“There’s far too many things that need doin’ for me to be wastin’ me time in this bed.”

“Da, we have everything under control, so stay put and enjoy people waiting on you.”

“I can’t say I mind these pretty faces, but I’m a little concerned when so many of them want to take me temperature from me bums.”

Martin and Kevin had silently stood at Mac’s bedside but his retort made them forget to keep their laughter under control. Peg struggled between a cough and a laugh herself.

Sloan St.James

Her father smiled, but his glazed eyes said it was time to leave. Peg bent down and placed a gentle kiss on his forehead. "I'll bring you a pair of pajamas so they won't have such an easy target."

Mac squeezed her hand. He angled his head around hers to Martin and Kevin. "Just because you fellas saved me life won't change how I scream and yell at you when you make a mistake."

"I knew that before I made the call, that's why I hesitated pushin' the buttons on the phone," Martin replied.

Kevin leaned into Peg's back to reach over and put his hand on Mac's shoulder. "I'll make sure me uncle does a fine job."

Mac stretched his gaze up to Kevin's face. "And just who is that'll be keepin' an eye on you?"

"Don't worry about that, Da." Peg leaned down and pressed her lips to his lined brow again. Fear of losing him had her holding his hand longer and tighter than she should. God threw these little warnings at her and she ignored them, but no more.

No more.

## Chapter 12

“This is not a game. If you’re there, pick up the damn phone.” The sound of Luke’s irate voice scolding her over her own machine chipped at Peg’s patience. His pause was only a few seconds before he started in again. “I’m going to give you the benefit of the doubt, but if I find out you’re there, watch out. I’ve got to meet with Bert, but I better see your message on my machine when I get back.”

She didn’t have time for this now. There were far more important matters to take care of first. Systematically, she went through the house with a punch list and scheduled each job right down to the minute. With the list in hand, she sat down at the kitchen table and gave the sheet a quick tally. What was left should take them three days to complete. If they worked into the night, they could cut the time down to two.

The night shift it would be.

Peg called Kevin and Martin into the room and gave them instructions for the day’s work. “We will have this place done before Mac comes home.” She deliberately emphasized the word ‘will’, leaving no doubt in their minds what her plans were. In answer to the shocked look in both sets of eyes, she shaved the sharpness down in her voice. “I know I’m asking a lot, but we have no choice.”

“We’ll put in as much time as it takes to try to have everythin’ finished,” Kevin promised.

“Trying isn’t good enough. Not now.” Peg corrected, returning the crispness to her voice.

Kevin’s face went into shock. Martin stepped to Kevin’s side. “You mustn’t mind Peg this moment, son. Her mind is on the tip of her tongue.”

“Yes, and I’m sorry,” Peg said the words but didn’t have her heart in the apology. There was too much hard determination in her to soften her stance. “However, I refuse to have Mac come home to face even the slightest thing unfinished. I know we can do

it, if we put our minds to it.” She held onto her resolution. “I have my mine set. Will you?”

Together Martin and Kevin both nodded their heads and shot out a quick, “aye.”

“Thank you are two such small words for what I feel right now.” Peg reached out and tenderly put a hand on each one’s arm. “I will never be able to repay the two of you for all that you’ve done.” She stepped closer and slid her arm around their shoulders.

Wrapping them both in a tight hug, Peg buried her face between theirs. “Now,” she whispered, “that’s all the time I’ll give you to rest. So start hitting those boards with your hammers. We’re on a tight schedule.”

The circle of arms broke, and each man took off in search of his assignment. Peg watched their backs, and thanked the Lord for such wonderful friends.

After her shower, Peg slipped into a pair of jeans and sweater. She went into Mac’s room and tossed a few of his things into a small nylon bag. With it slung over her shoulder, she ran down the steps. When she reached the back door, she called out. “I have one stop to make before I go to the hospital. I’ll be back in two hours.” She lifted a pointed finger up into the air and her gaze followed. “And when I do, I expect to see the first four items checked off the list,” she scolded.

The rumble and clatter of a vehicle speeding down the long gravel driveway brought her attention outside. A cloud of white dust chased after Luke’s truck like a gossamer comet. It chattered to a sudden halt but the cloud continued until it had the truck wrapped in a flimsy white blanket. Luke stepped out of the smoke like an avenging angel. His eyes were fluorescent with anger as he stomped forward. He took the steps two at a time until the distance between them was short enough for him to reach out and grab her arm.

“Listen you,” he shouted giving her arm a shake. “What the hell are you trying to prove? Do you think it’s cute to have a man grovel at your feet?”

Grovel? Did he say grovel? No, that couldn’t be right. The dust

## Building Blocks

must be clogging her ears. Peg jerked her arm out of his hand and pushed past him down the stairs. "Luke, I don't have time right now."

As her foot hit the ground he had again latched onto her arm. He spun her around and glared hard down into her upturned face. "Yes, you do, dammit. This is important."

Holding him in a tight glower, Peg hissed, "The world doesn't revolve around Luke Dolan. She shoved at his chest to break his hold on her. "Get out of my way."

Luke stepped between her and her car door. The anger in his face was fading and in its place were shadows of fear. "Where in the hell do you think you're going?"

"To the hospital." Peg snapped out the words but her anger was softening. Did he think she was leaving?

Locking his spine, Luke asked, "Hospital?"

"Yes. My father had an angina attack last night and I'm going there to drop off some things to him."

Luke's face went pale. The slight fear that tinted it before now filled every worried line. "How's he doing?"

Peg couldn't help but put her hand on Luke's sleeve to ease his worry. "The doctor said he's stable."

After a long moment, Luke gave out a long sigh, "I'm glad."

"So you see I don't have time right now to give you your answer."

"I can wait, concentrate on Mac. I have to go up to Greenbay for a few days. If anything happens, call Laura. She'll know how to reach me."

Luke's large hands cradled her shoulders and slid down the length of her arms and back again. The warmth and sincerity in his eyes came from his heart. "Darling, please take care and don't worry. I told you once before Mac would be all right, and he was. I know it again this time."

His fingers dug into her upper arms seconds before he pulled her into his arms. He cradled the back of her head, pressing her cheek to his chest. The comfort of being in his arms chipped away at Peg's control. Tears swelled in her eyes but she blinked to keep

them back. She pulled her head back and looked up into his face. His words of encouragement were there in his smile. “Thanks, I know everything will be fine, because this time I know how to fix things.”

He brushed his lips against hers. The sweetness of the kiss touched Peg’s soul. For one moment there was nothing but his gentle mouth telling her what was in his heart. She had heard his words but didn’t believe them, but this kiss told her the truth. Luke’s heart was pure and so was his love.

Pulling back sooner than she did, he gave her a soft lining smile. “Tell Mac I said hello and I’ll see you both in a few days.”

“Gene, this information has been checked and rechecked.” Luke insisted, as he leaned over the wide desk and tapped the papers Gene Boyd held in his thick hands.

“These people in Greenbay know what they’re doing. All I need is for you to call a special council meeting. Say it has something to do with Peg’s proposal and they’ll take it from there.”

Gene’s gaze snapped up from the papers. “There isn’t any proposal.”

“What!?”

Shrugging his meaty shoulders, Gene looked up from his papers. “Stopped by here Sunday afternoon, saying she wanted to withdraw the proposal. Her explanation was kinda jumbled. Somethin’ about her father’s life was more important than a pile of bricks and mortar. The next day I get a letter from her retracting her bid.”

Luke rubbed his fingers over the scored lines between his eyebrows. “Dammit. Why didn’t she wait a few days? It would’ve made things a hellava lot easier.” Luke could only take a few steps in the confined space before he was already across the room. For Gene’s large size you’d think the man would have a bigger office.

“Has anyone heard how Mac’s doing?” Luke asked the question between retracing his pacing steps.

“What I heard, he’s gonna get out of the hospital today.”

“Great.” Luke absentmindedly smiled while plowing his fingers through his hair. They didn’t stop until they reached the nape of

## Building Blocks

his neck. He rubbed the tightly coiled muscles in hopes of stimulating some thoughts back into his brain.

“What excuse should I use to call the special meeting?” Gene’s voice shattered Luke’s thoughts.

“Use your imagination. Just remember make it seem almost an after thought. I don’t want any alarms going off.” Luke replied then spun on his heels and took off down the narrow hallway.

## Chapter 13

Air rushing out through the open windows of Peg's house, pushed the pungent odor of fresh paint out onto the porch where Luke stood. Martin answered the knock, but with a load of scrap lumber teetering on his outstretched arms, he didn't have time to chat.

"Where is she?" Luke asked, holding the door open.

"Upstairs. But I'm warnin' you, don't get too close or she'll slap a paint brush in your hand."

Taking the new oak steps two at a time, Luke followed the sound of Peg's voice calling out instructions to Kevin in the next room.

Her clothes were a rainbow of splatters and dots of paint. The bandana that was tied around her head had not gone untouched by the paint. When she looked up at him, he stifled a laugh. Streaks and smudges of dark green paint were on her face and stretched up into the patch of hair that peeked out from under the scarf she wore.

"Is that you under all that paint?" Luke fought a hard battle against his laughter, but couldn't stop the little spurts that squeezed through the fingers he held over his mouth.

Peg's irritation showed on her face between the green dots and the splash of freckles. Green fire flashed in her eyes. Surprisingly, the two greens didn't clash. "Not now. I have to spread paint over these walls before I bring Mac home."

Angling his head to study her face, Luke pulled in his smile. "And when are you going to rest?"

Quickly, Peg turned back to the job at hand. "What?" she snapped. "No, why should I?"

Luke reached out and captured her chin, then held her eyes with his. "Because those black rings under your eyes say you should."

Peg pulled her chin from his grip and turned back to the wall.

## Building Blocks

“Maybe later. I have two rooms and a hall to finish in four hours. Unless you have some life and death situation to resolve, I suggest you get out of my way.” Peg plunged the roller into the tray of paint and gave it a quick run over the ramp.

Luke jumped back when a large green tentacle leaped out of the pan and aimed right for his foot. “I came for some answers.”

With a huff, Peg zigzagged the paint over the blank wall. “You promised you’d give me a day or so.”

“Not those answers.” Luke’s temper was on a short string and this conversation was trimming the end quickly. “Why did you pull the plug on the retirement village?”

Peg didn’t stop to give her explanation. “The doctor said Mac’s condition was brought on by worry and work. When I suggested this project, Mac hesitated. I thought he was worried about the money, but he must have known what a strain it would put on him.” Peg stopped the roller half way through a long stroke. She stood there locked in her thoughts. “I cajoled and pleaded until he gave in.” Her shoulders sagged and her voice cracked. “It was my stubbornness and enlarged ego that nearly killed my father.”

She straightened her spine, and continued painting. “So when he comes home, he’ll stay here in my newly remodeled home and do whatever makes him happy.”

Luke slowly moved around the room. “I see. Does Mac know yet?”

“No, but that doesn’t matter.”

“I think it will. He’s gonna expect the right answers, and they better total up to his question.”

Peg took another load of paint from the tray and hit the wall with the roller. “Don’t worry, I plan on telling him the truth.”

When the roller looked less likely to send tiny droplets of paint through the air, Luke stepped to Peg’s side. “That he’s an invalid and needs to sit in his rocker and wait to die?”

She stopped and shot him a look that no forty-five could match. Luke felt leveled by it.

“Stop that,” she shouted.

Hating himself for hurting her, he pulled at his reserve. She

needed to have her stubbornness slapped on its behind once in a while. Just to get her to realize what she was doing.

“Gladly,” he snipped out.

When her eyes began to glaze, Luke’s chest tightened. “Your father’s a man that knows his own mind. If you pushed him into being an invalid, he’ll hate you for it.”

Luke couldn’t go on belittling her. He had to soften his stance. “Your idea for the village was wonderful. And if you resubmit it, I’m sure the town will see the true merit of it.”

Peg’s head started shaking before Luke finished and it continued long after he’d stopped.

“There’s a special meeting at four thirty. Come. Bring Mac, I promise it won’t run too long.” Luke stepped to her and with the point of his finger on her chin he tilted her face up to his. He wanted to kiss her lips but green paint had beaten him to it. “After the meeting you and I could have our talk.” He added a tender smile to his voice.

Peg sighed. “Okay, I’ll be there, and since you’ve put me behind on my schedule, I might as well forget about trying to finish this job. I’ll probably be in the shower an hour trying to remove this paint anyway.”

“That shower might take longer than an hour. You’ve got more paint on you than you have on the walls.” Luke tweaked her nose.

Pinning her shoulder blades together, Peg clipped out, “If you think you can do any better, why not pick up a roller?”

“No thanks. Remember I’m a boss, not a laborer.”

“I wish I had a few extra hands to finish this off. Maybe that green will attract some the leprechauns and they’ll magically finish the job.” Peg put the roller into the bucket and peeled off her rubber gloves. She and Luke walked out of the near finished room.

At the doorway, Luke stopped and looked back over his shoulder with a speculative eye. “Yeah, wouldn’t it be great if there were leprechauns.”

The arrangement of metal chairs in the auditorium was exactly as always. Though the meeting drew few more faces than usual, Rupert still took up his favorite spot.

## Building Blocks

It had taken longer to check out of the hospital than Peg had planned. When she told Mac about the meeting, he insisted on going directly there. As they sat in the chairs, Peg carefully studied Mac's face. She was determined that at the first inkling of strain, or change in the straight line of his shoulder, they'd be out of there. When he caught her staring at him, he pulled down his brow and glowered back. She smiled and turned to look at the audience.

From their back row seats, Peg could see Bert Avery and Dean Kramer in the far front corner. The splash of unfamiliar faces warmed Peg's heart. Maybe the meetings were starting to draw a crowd. Every voter should sit in on at least one town meeting. That's where the real workings of our government.

The board members were settling in when Luke and his sisters entered the room. As the girls slid into Peg's aisle, each gave her a warm smile of hello. Luke stopped only long enough to give Peg a wink before he continued up to the council's table. He handed a packet of papers to Gene and then sat alone in the front row.

Andy settled in the seat next to Peg. Almost instantly a strange fragrance wafted from the young girl. The pungent odor circled under Peg's nose, forcing her to draw in her face.

Turpentine or very cheep cologne?

After Andy's quick smile, Peg volleyed one back to the young girl. Then Peg's gaze drifted down to Andy's folded hands. Each fingernail was outlined in green. There's no accounting for a teenager's taste in style.

Gene stood up and tapped his gavel onto the table. The hollowed cracking sound pulled everyone's attention to him. "As you all know, I've called this special meeting to clear up a few things."

"First, though I'm sure everyone already knows this, I want to officially inform the board that Miss Murphy has withdrawn her proposal for the retirement village."

Mac's chin hit his chest seconds before his gaze slashed over Peg's face. "Did I hear right?" he whispered loud enough to pull a few faces in his direction.

Peg instantly put her finger up to her mouth. "Shhh, Da, we'll

talk about that when we get home.”

“And now Luke Dolan has something to say that will fill in the rest of the meeting,” Gene said before sitting back down.

Bert and Dean shared a smile.

“Thanks, Gene.” Luke stood up and turned to the tiny audience. He centered his attention on Peg as he spoke. “I’ve asked Gene to call this meeting to inform the board that the retirement village project is still on. I’m applying for permits with the township tomorrow.”

Dean bounced to his feet and Bert followed. “What the hell is this all about? You can’t do that!” They shouted simultaneously.

Luke turned to their shouts and calmly replied, “I can do anything I want with my land.”

“Your land?”

“Yes. My land. Isn’t that right Bert?” Luke speared Bert a hard look with the question.

Bert’s face tried to show shock, but anger shoved it aside. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, Dolan.”

“Sure you do. It says right here that my father bought that land.” Luke threw a warranty deed out on the table. Your signature is here, as his attorney. Or is that a forgery like the one you did of my father’s on this transfer of ownership?”

Bert opened his mouth, but Luke stepped up to Bert’s face before a word escaped. Luke’s lips were already curled in anger. He knew he didn’t have to shout to be heard because you could hear a pin drop in the room now. Still, he had to get his anger out or he’d slam his fist into Bert’s face.

“You bastard, you stole that land from my sisters and me by not adding it to the listing of our parent’s estates. You knew my father set up a blind trust for each of us. And when he died, you let the information die with him.”

“I could never have done that.” Bert sneered back.

“No, not alone you couldn’t.” Luke shot a hard lining look at Dean. “Your loyal servant covered your ass with misinformation and God knows what else. He did it to cover up his years of embezzling the real estate taxes he’s collected.”

Luke turned away from their silent lying faces. “Gentlemen,” he

## Building Blocks

called out to the audience.

Four unfamiliar men stepped forward. They didn't stop until they had Dean and Bert encircled in the center of their group.

The shortest of the men pulled out a small black wallet and flipped it open at Bert's face. "Mr. Avery and Mr. Kramer, I'm agent Phil Zachary of the FBI. You're both under arrest for fraud and embezzlement of government funds."

Dean's knees weakened, and he wavered for a moment, but the strong arms of the law held him up.

After the commotion of taking Bert and Dean out in handcuffs settled down, Gene lightly tapped his gavel on the table. His frown and drooping eyes set the stage for the bad news he was about to spread. "I must inform the board that as of this moment the town is bankrupt. From what little information I was able to gather, in such short time, Dean has been stealing our tax dollars for the last six years. I hope you understand that all previous proposed projects will no longer happen." Gene never lifted his eyes to the audience or the board.

"Does that mean the bridge won't get fixed?" Rupert shouted out from his seat.

"Sorry Rupert, the state would only give us half the money. We were to come up with the rest."

Peg knew Gene's apology was being pulled through his shame. Like captains, council presidents were responsible for every thing that happened. He looked like he was going down with the ship.

"Dammit, I think I'll hang Dean myself," Rupert shouted out while shaking his closed fist in the air.

Gene hesitated a moment before he called for order again. "Rupert, you're out of order."

Peg rolled to her feet and called out, "Mr. President, I have a suggestion that might help the town. Why not divide the land? Build the retirement village and still build those more exclusive condos. Of course, all the town will get is the tax revenue and maybe some of their vacation dollars, but at least it will add something to the town financial situation."

Luke stepped back down the aisle to her side. "That sounds like

a plan,” he whispered down to her.

Before she could answer his gaze was back up to Gene’s face. “Dolan Construction will apply for permits for this new idea.”

Gene’s face lit up. “Terrific, and we’ll even wave the fee.”

Rupert jumped up from his chair. “Wait a minute. We need every penny we can get. I want a vote on that.”

Gene’s arm shot out and the gavel was again back in service stressing his point. “Rupert, you’re out of order... again.”

As the Indian summer sun settled down into the land, the sound of clapping hands and Kevin’s voice spread out through the open windows onto Peg’s porch. In the dusky shadows of the porch the clank of the chain’s loose end was out of time with the musical beat but it matched the steady movement of the swing that Luke and Peg sat on.

All the remodeling work was finished, thanks to Luke’s sisters. While Peg was picking up her father, the three of them, together with Martin and Kevin, finished the work and set everything in place.

Peg cried with appreciation when she saw how beautiful everything was. That was the first time Luke had actually seen tears run down her cheeks.

Stretching his neck out, Luke looked down at Peg’s nonmoving bare feet. “You better not be along for the ride.”

“Why, you do such a great job at the controls, I thought I’d let you lead.”

“What?” Luke asked with wide eyes. “You no longer think I’m controlling?”

“Sure I do.” Peg snuggled closer putting her head on his shoulder. “But sometimes it’s nice to follow someone else’s lead.”

Curling his arm around her, Luke felt his chest swelling. “And just where am I leading, I’d like to know?”

“You’re going to break your promise, aren’t you?” Peg slid her hand around his waist and gave him a gentle squeeze. “You said you’d give me a few days.”

Luke’s breath hitched. “Yes, I did but any true member of the anal retentive club knows you must have a plan.”

## Building Blocks

“Right, a plan.”

“Yes.”

Peg released her hold on his waist and sat back up. The angle of the setting sun danced in her eyes. Their beauty pushed up Luke’s courage. He’d have his answer now.

“What type of plan do you have?” Peg questioned.

That was the opening Luke looked for. He screwed up his courage and said, “I planned to kiss you then hit my knees and ask you to marry me.”

Peg face registered total shock, but even that couldn’t put a shadow on her beauty. “You would actually get down on your knees and do that?”

“Yes, that’s my plan.” Luke couldn’t stop his gaze from burrowing into hers. He needed to know what her answer would be and her eyes wouldn’t lie to him. “If you prefer, I’ll ask your father first.”

Peg pulled back her head and angled him a look down her nose. “Oh, you have an alternative plan.”

“Every good strategist has an alternative plan.”

Peg’s eyes were dancing again and Luke knew her answer.

“What if I said no?”

Smiling, he leaned to her and whispered, “Then I’ll drive you mad with kisses.”

“Mad, is it?” Peg narrowed her eyes at him. “That doesn’t sound too bad.”

He kissed the tip of her nose, “I didn’t think you’d mind that. So, should I hit the floor, or your lips?”

The smile Peg was struggling with leapt across her mouth and she put her lips inches from his. “Lips first, then the floor.”

Laughing Luke pulled her onto his lap. The swing gave out a loud rattle, but that didn’t stop him. Nothing was going to. Not now.

While staring into the green pools of her eyes, he saw the reflection of his love and his heart thundered in his chest. He moved his lips onto hers gently at first, warming them to his. Over and over he shaped and reshaped them, until finally his tongue

followed the line of her mouth. When it opened he quickly plunged in, tasting her sweetness.

He wanted her, every inch of her.

Luke tightened his arms around her, trying to melt her body to his as their souls welded together in the kiss. His hand moved up and captured her breast. She moaned into his mouth and a spectrum of colors opened in his mind. The colors of love.

His ears only heard his heart screaming, "I love you. I love you." But between his heart's anthem, he heard a small sound.

Paper crumpling?

Luke opened his eyes and a shaft of white flashed up into his eyes. A piece of paper was being flagged at him.

"Here, son, I never welsh on a bet."

Quickly, dropping his hand from Peg's breast, Luke stretched his gaze up to Mac's smiling face. Sheepishly, Luke smiled back. "Why don't you put that into an account for that grandchild you want?"

Mac's smiled widened.

From behind Mac, Laura's voice reached out to Luke, "Only one child? And just tell me why you're only having one." The group spilled out the doorway onto the porch. Each face had a smile stretched wide across it.

Peg lined Luke a serious look. "He hasn't the exact number on his list yet."

"Yes I have." Luke shot the reply out.

His sisters roared with laughter, leaving Martin, Kevin and Mac in complete darkness.

Luke's quick response had shocked Peg for a moment, but then she regrouped and asked, "What number is in your plans?"

Tucking her to him, Luke said to the group. "I always liked four. The first a boy and all the rest girls."

Pinned to his chest, Peg added, "Good planning."

## Building Blocks