



Maureen Ebdy

**LIFE
CHANGES**

Life Changes



by

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To my husband Tom and my family who encouraged and helped me along the way and to Ann for her constructive feedback,

Thank you,



Chapter One

Elle Ryan woke with a start. She tossed restlessly, attempting to ignore the incessant drilling noise coming from the construction work being done outside. Defeated, she sat up, spun her legs out of bed, and raced to the open window. Workmen had started to dig outside her window. It was a breathtakingly beautiful morning. The sun was already raising the temperature outside. She watched for a few moments before she tried to shut out the noise from the street below and returned to bed. It helped a little to close the window. At least now she could hear herself think.

Elle's thoughts drifted to her mother. It was one year ago today that she died, and Elle thought about all that happened in the past year. Elle had met Pete, someone from school. They had been dating for six months now. She also officially became a doctor, and last night had been her first shift in the emergency department.

Elle shook off the last threads of sleep. It looked like she was not going to get any more sleep this morning. She wondered how she would manage tonight if she did not get any sleep. A shower completed what the drill had started. She was now completely awake.

Thoughts wandered back to her mother and that fateful day one year ago when she received a call from her brother, Mitch, saying he was on his way to see her. Elle told him not to come because she had to leave for work at the hospital. She was a cardiology intern. She said she would meet him there because her apartment was near to the hospital, but Mitch insisted that she wait at the apartment until he arrived. Elle was very frustrated because she did not like being late for work. But there was something strange in his voice, so she waited.

Mitch arrived at 8.45 a.m. Elle knew something was wrong as soon as she opened the

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door. His face looked grey and sunken. He was 35 years old and 10 years older than Elle, but they had always been close. She adored her big brother. He was six feet tall and very athletic with rugged good looks, very much like their father. Mitch told her that their mother had been admitted to the hospital for a major operation. She could not believe what she was hearing. She started to ask what was wrong with her and why had mom not told her. But Mitch pulled her to him and held her close as he whispered, "Mom died before the operation early this morning." He came straight from the hospital. Mom had made both dad and him promise not to tell her that she was so ill. Elle's legs crumbled. She felt sick and screamed for her mother.

At the hospital Elle ran straight into her father's arms. The pain she felt stopped her from seeing how devastated her father and brother were as well. When they were able to calm her, they went to say goodbye to her mother. Elle thought her mom looked like she was sleeping, but Elle knew that the light had gone from her eyes. When she was able to speak, she demanded to know what had happened and why she was left out of the loop. Her dad, Jake Ryan, led his only daughter to the other room.

Her mom, Christine, had been feeling ill for a few weeks when she had gone to see the doctor, he explained. She went through a lot of tests, and the doctor found a tumor in her brain. The doctor hoped to cut some of it away to give her mom more time to live, but it was terminal. Her mom made her dad promise not to tell Mitch or Elle until after the operation. Mitch found out only by chance two days before she died, because Mitch went to pick up Elle's friend Amy, his fiancée, from the hospital where she worked as a nurse. There, he saw their parents leaving the hospital and sensed something was wrong. Both of their faces showed the terrible news. Elle's mom needed to have an operation within the next 48 hours, or it would be too late to operate. But still, the operation would only give her a few extra weeks.

The next few weeks had passed in a haze for Elle. She lost a lot of weight. She felt too sick to eat, and even when she did eat, she still felt sick. The day of the funeral had been particularly bad. All those people who had come to say their goodbyes did not seem to help. She just wanted to be on her own with her thoughts of her mother. And yet, as she looked back now, all those people who took the time to come and send cards made her feel a little better. Whenever Elle thought of her mother though, the phrase, "If only," stuck in her mind. There was no wishing it away. There was nothing she could do to change the situation.

When Elle finally returned to school, she felt pressured to catch up. Her tutor was very good, and he gave her as much individual attention as he could. All her colleagues had been

helpful, but Pete was the one colleague who had been always ready to help. He would not let Elle sit or study on her own. He was a good friend. Although, she did not want to go out, he coaxed her until she agreed to a few nights out.

Pete and Elle drifted toward each other. Pete was tall and not very athletic, but with a good sense of humor, he was always the life and soul of the party. Elle felt that they were good friends but nothing more, which was a bit unnerving, as Pete had asked her to marry him. She told him it was too early for her to think of marriage. She had to concentrate on her lectures, to become a doctor, and he should be doing the same. Elle knew that he was not doing very well. He went out far more often than he actually told her. Although they had been together for six months, it was only in the past month that they had slept together. It was just once, but she had been disappointed. Elle had very little experience prior to meeting Pete, preferring to study than hang out with boys. She had to concentrate on her work, so she had only a couple of other sexual encounters with previous boyfriends. She thought, "What do I know about sex?" It was only something she had read about, but she could not help feeling that she was missing out.

Elle drifted off to sleep on the sofa after lunch. At times she woke, feeling drowsy. Her thoughts continued to return to the past year. She wondered why Mitch was coming to see her. Maybe it was because it was the anniversary of her mom's death. But she felt a deep sense of foreboding because he did not often come to see her at her apartment.

Mitch lived in Dalton near to where their parents lived and thirty miles away from Elle. He would call her often and see her when she had the opportunity to visit her dad. She worried what he was going to tell her. She thought, "Maybe dad is poorly." But she new deep down that this was not why he was visiting her. Her dad had promised that he would never keep important things from her ever again. Mitch probably just wanted to make sure that she was okay because of the anniversary.

Elle had just seen her dad the past weekend. He had been very happy. It surprised her a little, especially at this time of the year. Mitch arrived at 4:30 p.m., exactly on time. Elle had been awake for an hour. Mitch gave Elle a hug and asked how she had been. Elle scanned Mitch's face to see what she could read. Elle had a knack for reading people's faces. Mitch looked his usual self, though, without a hint of any problems.

"How are you? And how is the job going? Have you re-organized the department yet?" Mitch asked jokingly.

Elle laughed. "Fine, fine, and no, I have not re-organized the department yet," she replied. "Come on in. I have your tea ready. And to what do I owe this visit from you?"

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Mitch winked at his little sister and moved into the apartment, "Can I not visit my little sister without having an ulterior motive?"

Elle laughed again. "I know you well, dear brother. Come and sit down. I'm starving. Are you? I've made some lamb casserole. I know you like that. Then you can tell me why you are here."

Mitch frowned at his sister. She was so good at reading his thoughts. He made a mental note to try to be more of a closed book around her.

While they ate, they talked about the weather and her friend Amy, who Mitch said had sent Elle her love, and had asked when are they going to get together for a girls' night. He said Amy had a lot she needed to talk to Elle about. They both skirted around the fact that it was one year ago today that Mitch had told her about her mother dying. After eating, Elle fetched them both a hot cup of coffee.

Elle hesitated and then she asked, "Are you here because it's the anniversary of mom's death today?"

Mitch turned to look at her and said, "Yes and no."

Elle turned quickly, "What do mean, 'Yes and no'?" Is it Dad? Is he okay?"

"Dad's fine. I wanted to see how you were today because of the anniversary of mom's death. I wanted to see for myself that you were okay. I also wanted to see you because I need to tell you something of which I am not sure, how you will take it."

"Come on. Spit it out. You're driving me crazy."

"Okay. Dad is seeing someone."

"What do you mean seeing someone? Is he involved with a woman?"

"Yes."

"How could he? Mom has only been dead one year today. How long has it been going on?"

"About two months. He wants us to get to know her. He has asked her to marry him."

"No." Elle felt her heart drop. "Have you met her? What's she like?"

"Yes. In my opinion, she is a gold digger. Dad can't see it. He is totally in love with her."

"What are we going to do, Mitch? We can't let her get her claws into him."

"I think it's too late. You saw him on the weekend. He's so happy and thinks she is what he needs."

"He's still grieving. She is taking advantage of him. I will speak to Dad. He's got to listen to both of us."

Mitch and Elle talked for a long time about their father. Elle agreed to visit on her next

day off, which was in three days' time. They agreed that she would not say anything until then.

After Mitch left, Elle had to get ready for work, but her mind was full of what Mitch had told her. She thought, "How could her dad have taken up with someone so soon after Mom's death?" No one wanted him to be on his own for the rest of his life, but she thought more time would pass before he tried to replace their mother. Elle knew she must try not to think about it over the next three nights. She needed to be able to concentrate on her work. The emergency department was very busy. She decided to put all of her energy into her work.

Chapter Two

Mitch awoke at 5 a.m. that morning thinking of his sister's visit. She would be in Dalton today. Amy and Mitch were to meet Elle at 1 p.m. at the café they used to go to as teenagers. After a quick lunch, Elle would then go onto Dalton Heights to see their father. Mitch wondered how she would fare on the subject of May, the woman their father was seeing. Elle had always been the apple of their father's eye, but Mitch felt that even Elle would not win this battle.

Jake Ryan was a very successful businessman. In his mid-fifty's, he still posed a strikingly good figure of a man. He was very wealthy and would still be desirable to most women. Mitch also was very successful in his own right. But he acknowledged that his success was partly due to his father's training and financial help. When Mitch had his idea for the business, it was his father who had put up the money for his venture. His father owned 25 percent of Mitch's business. That was all he would take for the financial help he gave to Mitch. Even then, that was only with Mitch's insistence. After his mom died, his father gave Elle and Mitch the 50 percent share that their mother owned in the family business, and 50 percent of all the other shares and cash that their parents jointly owned between them. Their father said that it was what their mother would have wanted. This made both Elle and Mitch very wealthy too.

Mitch's thoughts drifted over the past year since his mother's death. He missed her so much. She was often the stabilizing force within the family. When he and his sister were younger, their dad was often too busy building up the business to spend a lot of time with his family. Elle did not realize what it had been like in the early years. Because she was so much younger, it had been just mom and him for a lot of years.

His dad had been devastated to hear the news that his wife may not survive the surgery. The surgeon said he could possibly give her a couple of months, but mom begged them both not to tell Elle. She said she would tell her after the operation. She asked Mitch to look after Elle and his dad in the event that she did not make it through the operation. Mitch had begged his mother to let him tell Elle, so she could at least see her before the operation. His mom refused, saying it would be too painful for her to see the look on Elle's face when she knew that there was nothing that could be done. His mom knew the doctor in her would never accept that nothing more could be done. She wanted her to remember her full of life. His mom was so sorry that she had put the burden onto him.

The day he had to tell Elle that their mother was dead had been the hardest thing he had ever done. He knew he had to be strong for his father and Elle. But it was much harder than he had expected it to be. The funeral and the following days had been painful, but he kept up the pretence that he was coping. Without the help and support of Amy, he would not have managed in the early days following his mother's death. She had been his rock, holding him as he cried for his loss and understanding his pain.

He looked at Amy sleeping next to him, her chest rising in steady breaths. The light was starting to shine through the window, picking out the russet highlights in her curly hair against the satin pillow. She reminded him of a fine piece of art with her porcelain skin, transparent blue eyes, and delicate curves. He loved her so much; he knew she was the girl for him the day Elle brought her home for tea. They had been working at the same hospital—Elle, an intern studying medicine, and Amy, a nurse. Although Amy was four years older than Elle, they had hit it off straight away.

Everyone liked Amy. His parents thought she was the perfect friend for Elle. Mitch felt like a moonstruck kid in her presence. He could not understand why this woman had struck him so much. After all, he had dated many beautiful women over the years. But he never found anyone he wanted to spend the rest of his life with until that moment. When he finally asked her out, Amy asked him what had taken him so long to ask her out. His mom had been so pleased. Apparently everyone could see they were meant to be together. They were all so happy for them both. It was strange to think that because of them, his dad met May.

"If only she had not come to our engagement party," Mitch thought. Amy had invited all her relatives to their engagement party to meet her fiancé. She now regretted that decision. May is Amy's mother's, step-sister. She had never bothered anyone or attended any of the family events in the past, but this time she decided to grace the family with her presence. When Mitch visited Elle at her apartment, he had not told her who May was. He had left that

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bit of information out until today. Mitch knew she would not hold it against Amy, but Amy was very upset about the connection.

Amy had heard of May before, but had not met this aunt before the engagement party. Amy's mother told her that May was the black sheep of the family. She was the daughter of her father, Amy's grandfather, who had re-married, following the death of Amy's grandmother. The new wife was a lot younger than her father, Amy's mother told her. Amy's mother and her other siblings were all married when their father re-married. The couple had a daughter, called May. She was only two years old when their father died. She was brought up by her mother and a string of uncles. The rest of the family never saw much of her. Even though they had tried to trace her, they did not see her again until she was much older. When she came back into their lives, she had three sons—two who were currently serving prison sentences for armed robbery, and one son who had fled to Australia to avoid capture by the police.

It had been two months since Mitch and Amy's engagement party. They had a wonderful time. Everyone had enjoyed it. But Mitch knew that Elle and his father would be thinking of the one person who was missing from the celebrations, just as he had done. Amy looked radiant and so happy at the party. He was sad that she now felt responsible for what was happening between his father and her Aunt May. She had been charming at the party. At forty-two years old, she was a good-looking, petite woman. Mitch had not been wooed by her charms. Although he never mentioned it to Amy, her aunt had propositioned him.

It happened during the party. Mitch stepped out of the penthouse apartment to have a quick smoke. He did this in the plant room next to the elevator. When he heard the elevator arrive, he put out his cigarette. As he came out of the plant room, he bumped into a woman, whom he later learned was May.

She had asked him who he was shagging in there, pointing to the plant room. As she said it, she went inside. She saw no one there, and as she came out of the plant room, she looked up and down at Mitch, saying, "Mmm, you are a fit man. Come on, darling, I will give you a good shag if you want, before I hit this party."

Mitch had been shocked by her suggestion, and he asked who she was.

She replied rudely, "What the f... has it to do with you, darling?"

Mitch retorted with, "Everything, darling, it's my party." Her look changed right away, and she became charming, apologizing to him and saying it was just a joke.

She was Amy's Aunt May. Mitch stood aside and opened the door for her. He wished he

could have sent her packing. He knew she was very streetwise and had a coarse tongue, but she was Amy's relative. In hindsight, he should have sent her packing.

At the party, May had continued to be charming when meeting people. She was most gracious when she was introduced to Jake Ryan. She never left his side for the rest of the evening, talking to him, making him laugh, and often laying a consoling hand on his arm. Mitch watched her most of the night, never suspecting that his dad was becoming very attracted to her. He did notice at the end of the night as people were leaving that she had given dad a piece of paper, which he suspected was her telephone number. Mitch did not think he would have noticed so much if he had not been watching her, at times. He even wondered if he had misunderstood her. "Had she been joking out there in the hall?" He now realized she had not, and his feelings about her had been correct.

Mitch had hired a private detective when he heard that his father was seeing May. The results were not good. The detective had found out that police suspected that May had been behind the armed robbery, which put her two sons into prison. But they did not find any evidence to convict her, so they had to let her go. She also had a police record for shoplifting and fraud, but she had always managed to stay out of prison. Mitch had not told any of this to Amy.

Mitch sighed and looked again at Amy, who was beginning to stir. Her nipples beneath the satin bed sheets had slid into view. She drew closer to him. Taking her into his arms, he brought his lips to her throat. Her head tipped back. She moaned when he took possession of her breast. She began to move closer to him as his hand took a slow possessive journey down and around the curves of her body. Cupping her small but firm breasts, he began to kiss her raised nipples. Moving his body over her, he trailed his hot lips down her body. His heart was beating fast, and he got hot as he reached his destination. She felt warm. She tasted so sweet. It never ceased to amaze him how each time felt just like the first time they had made love.

Amy ran her hands over his body, sending a chill through his whole body. Her body was arching as his hands held her hips, until she was writhing beneath him. She whispered, "Please Mitch." He liked it when she asked him to enter her. With his primitive, undeniable hunger, he was hard and aching. He pressed against her and moved onto her, as she hooked one leg around him, so he could press home more fully. He felt her body shiver as he began to move slowly at first. He thrust hard into her, until he knew he brought her to a dizzy height. Mitch let out a moan, feeling a pulsing throb throughout his own body.

They lay quietly for a while in each other's arms, spent from their love-making. Mitch moved from her open legs. As he did so, Amy whispered, "I love you, Mitch Ryan."

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He smiled, as he pulled her closer to him, telling her how much he loved her before placing a slow sweet kiss on her already swollen lips. As they lay in each other's arms, it felt good to be together—just the two of them. Amy tore herself away from Mitch. The alarm was bleeping. It was 7 a.m. She needed to shower and be at work in an hour.

While she was in the shower, Mitch joined her, soaping her body. She made him want her again. As he grew hard, he pulled her close to him. Amy laughed and pulled away, "No way. I will be late for work."

"Oh baby, give it up. You don't need to work. I can take care of us both."

"What, and be a kept woman? No thank you, darling," she said, as she stepped out of the shower. Mitch could not resist smacking her bottom.

"Oh, you. I will get you back for that later. Do you want coffee?" she shouted as she left the bathroom.

"Yes please. I won't be long. I need to get to work too. You remembered that we're meeting Elle today at 1 p.m., right?"

"Of course, darling. How could I forget? I hope we will have time to have our girlie chat while she is here. I need to ask her if she will be my maid of honor and if she can give me a hand with the wedding arrangements. Mom is keen to help, but I would like Elle's opinion, as she is more my age. And she knows how you wealthy people go on."

"Whatever you want is alright by me, sweetheart," Mitch said. I will do anything, go anywhere, as long as you become my wife. We could run off to Vegas if that is what you want. You don't have to worry about the great and good." (Mitch always called wealthy people this; he was being sarcastic as usual).

"No way! I want the fairy tale. This is a one time event, and I intend to have the full white wedding. Can you manage that, Mitch?"

"For you, darling, anything. I would walk on hot coals to get to you."

Amy planted a long kiss on his lips, before saying, "See you at 1. Try not to be late." She left before Mitch had time to answer.

Chapter Three

Elle was up and ready long before she needed to be. She had not slept well since Mitch's visit on Monday. It wasn't so difficult to forget about things while at work because they were so busy. She pushed all thoughts of her father and this woman to the back of her mind. But when she tried to sleep, she couldn't put it to the back of her mind. Thoughts of her dad and his girlfriend invaded her mind while she was trying to sleep and every waking minute outside of work.

It was Wednesday. She now had two nights off before she had to work again. Her shifts consisted of six months of night shifts before she would change to days. She was just about to leave when her cell phone rang. It was Pete.

"Hi, can I come up?"

"Of course." Elle pressed the door entry system. As she opened the door to Pete, she was shocked. He looked as though he had never slept for a week, and if he had, he must have slept in his clothes.

"Pete, where have you been? I haven't seen you for two weeks. I have tried to phone you."

"I know. I got your messages you left. Sorry, I was summoned home to see the parents, you know, after I failed my finals again. As you can imagine, it was not good, but I really don't fancy talking about it yet. I was wondering if you could lend me \$100 until next week when I get my allowance, as I am a bit short this month."

"Of course. Come and have a cup of coffee and something to eat," Elle said.

Elle did not want to tell him she was going home for a couple of days. Anyhow, she would telephone Mitch and arrange to see them later. She felt Pete needed her more just at this time.

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"No, thanks. I have to go. Paul is waiting in the car for me. We are off to the races, and we won't be back until tomorrow. Sorry, honey. I know we have not seen each other for a while, and we need to catch up. Will tomorrow be OK? I could stay over if you want." Pete planted a kiss on her cheek.

"Be a love and get that money for me please?"

Elle hesitated for just a second because she knew that Pete was not in a good place at this time. She knew not to push him too hard though. She wanted to help him, but she was not keen on him staying over. She always tried to avoid him staying, as she knew he would want sex. He would not understand if she refused him. Heck, she did not understand. So how could she explain how she felt to him? She got her wallet from her purse and handed him the \$100. "Is that enough?" Elle asked.

"Well if you could let me have a little more, I am sure I will win it back." Elle frowned and handed him a further \$50."

"Here, treat yourself to a meal. You look like you need it."

"Thank you, honey. I will see you tomorrow about 8 p.m. I shall then give you this money back with interest from my winnings."

When Pete had left the apartment, she walked to the window. She watched as Pete got into the car with Paul. She had never met him before. Elle was concerned for Pete. He had been drinking. She could smell it on him. She needed to help him get back on track.

Elle would find out tomorrow what he intended to do now that he had failed his exams. She picked up her coat and left the apartment.

Driving down to Dalton was nice. It was a beautiful day, and she drove with the top down on her VW beetle car. Going over in her mind how Pete had looked and sounded, she was sure he had been drinking too much lately. Elle smelled it on him on a number of occasions. Pete was three years older than her but often acted much younger. He liked to be the center of any meeting or party. She decided to try not to think about Pete though. That would have to wait until tomorrow when he came over. She would find out what was going on. He had helped her. Now it was time for her to help him.

As she neared Dalton, her thoughts turned to her father and this woman. She still could not understand how her father could have wanted someone so soon after her mother's death. Maybe she was being too harsh. She realized men needed company more than women. Maybe that was it - not lust or only friendship - had Mitch been unfair to call her a gold digger?" she wondered. She pulled into the parking lot and saw that Mitch and Amy were already at the café.

Elle was so pleased to see her friend Amy. She had not seen her since the engagement party. They had become very close, meeting up often before she had to move onto Coverfield Hospital in her final year.

"How are you, Amy?" Elle exclaimed. "You look radiant!"

"Thanks, darling. It's this big lump standing next to me that has me all of a fluster. I have never been happier. What about you and Pete?"

Elle thought for a while. She knew that she never thought of Pete as Amy did of Mitch, but she knew that she loved him in her own way.

"He's fine, a little down at the moment. I told you that he failed his finals, didn't I?"

"Yes," Mitch chirped in. "Come on, sis. Where is my hug?"

After they finished eating, they started to talk about their father. Mitch explained to Elle who May was. Amy hung her head down, but Elle took Amy's hand.

"It's not your fault, love," Elle reassured Amy. "You cannot help the family you are given. Look at what I got," she said in jest, as she smiled at Mitch. But she knew she would not change him for the world.

"I remember her. She was quiet, a sweet charming woman. Maybe we've been too harsh on them. They could be just friends." Amy told Elle what her mother had said about May.

"Well maybe her sons got in with a bad crowd. It can happen. As a mother, she could be devastated and ashamed about her kids."

Mitch let out a moan. As usual, Elle wanted to see the best in people. She had always been that way—always looking for a reason as to why people did things that were wrong. He nearly told them about the private detective, but thought better of it, as he did not want to upset Amy any more than she already was. Maybe he would tell Elle later when he saw her on his own.

He could not help saying, "No, she is up to no good. The charming bit is all a front. You mark my words, Elle, there is something about her that you don't know."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing. You'll see for yourself."

"There is something you're not telling us, Mitch?" Amy was quick to ask.

"OKI will tell you. At the engagement party, May made a pass at me."

"What! Why did you not tell me? I wish I had known. I would have sent her packing right there and then. What did she do?"

Mitch explained what had happened the night of the party. Amy was furious, "You should have told me."

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"I did not want to upset you any more than you were, darling."

"We should have no secrets from each other. We are getting married in a couple of months."

"Sorry, darling. I know it was wrong not to tell you, but you do understand why I did not, right?"

"Yes I suppose I do, but no matter how painful anything is we need to face things together."

Mitch nodded his head and squeezed her hand.

Elle smiled at them both. Even though Amy had been upset with Mitch, she would forgive him. They loved each other so much. She felt a pang of jealousy. If only she and Pete were like that, she would be so happy.

Mitch made his apologies and left them to talk about the wedding, as he needed to get back to work. He would see Elle later when they visited their father for dinner. Amy had taken time off work to spend some time with her friend; they agreed to return to Mitch and Amy's apartment to talk about the wedding plans. Elle was delighted that Amy had asked her to be her maid of honor. They talked about everything—the girls' night before the wedding, the dresses, the wedding vows, and the reception. Elle promised to go with Amy and her mother to look at wedding dresses and accessories on her next days off. Amy had already worked it out, and she had arranged time off at the same time as Elle.

The time passed quickly, and soon Elle had to head over to her father's house. She had arranged to be there around 6 p.m. Her father had told her he was looking forward to seeing her. He had something he wanted to tell her about. He sounded so happy, and yet Elle knew that what he had to tell her was not going to be too much of a surprise.

Jake Ryan was waiting for his daughter to arrive. He made dinner for 8 p.m. Mitch and Amy would also be there. He planned for Elle to meet May at dinner that night. He hoped Elle would like May. He knew that it was still soon after his wife's death, but May had made him want to live again. After Christine died, he felt his only reason to live was for his son and daughter. It was important to him that his family accepted her. He had told Mitch about May a week ago. Mitch had been venomous about her, and they had argued, causing a rift between them. They had not spoken since that night. Jake did not like to have his son speak poorly about May. It made him uneasy not to have Mitch accept his wishes, but Jake had to accept that his son was not a child any more.

Jake knew that May was Amy's aunt and that she had a lot of history, which she had

been honest about, telling him about her sons and the heartache she endured with their actions.

May had told him about her upbringing and her struggle to raise her children well. She had received no help from her extended family and had struggled to put food on the table. This only served to draw him closer to her. Jake could relate to some of what she was saying. He also was raised by very poor parents who did things that they shouldn't, just so they could feed their children. He had worked hard to get his family to where they were today; Mitch and Elle had never had to wonder where the next meal would be coming from.

Elle arrived promptly at 6 p.m. Hugging her father, she asked him how he had been.

"I am fine, darling, how are things with you?" he asked.

"I am okay, Dad, a little tired until I get used to doing night shifts. I'll probably just get used to them when I change back onto the day shift. I'll put my things in my room and come back down."

"Yes, then come back down. I need to talk to you about something."

"OK, sounds ominous. What is it?"

"Go put your things away, and I will get us a cup of coffee."

"OK, not very important then," she said as she hurried up the stairs to her room.

She had not told her father that she knew about May. Mitch asked her not to. Their father wanted to tell her himself. But Mitch felt that she should know, so she could have time to prepare before her father dropped that little bombshell.

Elle dropped her bag on the floor and sat on the bed. She never came to Dalton Heights without feeling sad that her mother would not be here to greet her as she used to do. Elle wept for her loss for a little while, she could imagine her mother here so well, helping her to unpack and asking about her work. After a few minutes, she washed her face and went downstairs to talk with her father.

Jake could see that Elle had been crying. He saw that every time she came home, but he had stopped asking her why she had been crying because he already knew why.

"Come on, sit down. Have your coffee while it's hot."

"Thanks, Dad, just what I need."

"Elle, darling, there is no easy way to say this, so I will just say it. I met someone."

"Do you mean a woman?" Elle tried to look surprised.

"Yes, her name is May. You might remember her from Mitch and Amy's engagement party. She's Amy's aunt."

Elle had her head down. She did not know how she would have reacted if she were

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hearing this for the first time. He said she was Amy's aunt as though it was not as bad as taking an unknown woman to his bed so soon after mom had died.

"Please, darling, say something. Have I upset you?"

"It's a bit soon after mom, isn't it, Dad? Yes, I am upset. I am sure she is a nice person, but it is so soon."

A lump rose in her throat, as she tried to gulp back the tears. It felt so wrong—here in her mother's home to hear her father talk about this other woman.

Jake went on to say, "I have been so lonely without your mom, Elle. No one will ever take her place for me. You know that, but May's a good person and I like her company."

Elle could not stop the tears rolling down her face. Her father took her in his arms and whispered, "You will like her when you meet her."

Through her tears Elle said, "I have met her. I met her at Mitch's engagement party."

"When you get to know her, I hope you will become friends with her—if not now, but later, in time. Please, Elle, give her a chance. It's so important to me that you all get along. She will be here tonight for dinner. She is so excited to meet you and Mitch again. She prepared everything herself."

Elle sobbed softly in her father's arms. It felt good and safe to be there. She knew her sobs were not just about Dad and May, but about how life was changing, and she did not want it to. She wanted everything back the way it was before her mom died.

After a while, she went back upstairs to wash her face and get ready for dinner.

Mitch and Amy arrived at 7:30 p.m. and May arrived shortly after. She hugged everyone, saying to Elle, "I hope we are going to be great friends."

Turning to her niece, she said, "How are you and the family, Amy dear? Is your mother okay?"

"Fine."

"Tell your mother I will call one day next week for a chat."

Amy nodded. She felt her Aunt May was trying to appear very friendly with the family, but in reality, she had only known May as much as Mitch and Elle had known her. Mitch sensed her distress.

They went through dinner without an incident. May was charming. She kept the conversation flowing, talking about the family, the weather and current news topics. Mitch only grunted in the right places. Amy and Elle were polite, and Dad looked happy at how things were going. After dinner, Dad suggested they all have a drink in the lounge before Mitch and Amy had to leave. Mitch was hesitant and he

said he was tired, but Dad persuaded them to stay for one drink. He wanted to tell them all something.

Dad opened a bottle of champagne, and Mitch and Elle looked at each other. Mitch said, "What's going on, Dad?"

"I have asked May to marry me, and she agreed. I would like to toast our engagement with my family."

Mitch put his glass down, "Come on, Amy. We are going. We are not staying for this charade; you're making a fool of yourself, Dad. I told you last week. She is not what she is trying to portray—a miss goody two shoes. Isn't it a bit soon? You have only known her for all of two months."

Jake raised his voice and told Mitch to be quiet, saying, "You will not speak or be disrespectful about my fiancée like that."

"What do you expect, Dad?" Mitch shook his head and turned to Elle. "Talk some sense into him, please. I cannot stay here or I might say something I regret. See you later." Then Amy and Mitch left.

Elle took a gulp of her champagne; she needed it. She saw the hurt on her father's face. He turned to look at her.

"Give him time, Dad. He is still hurting."

Jake gave his daughter a half smile, "I know we all are, but we now need to move on. I have," he said, taking May's hand. "I am so happy that you have agreed to be my wife, and I am sorry for how my son acted."

"He will be OK, darling. He will come around. You will see Jake, darling. We cannot live our lives for our kids. I know mine will be happy for us."

Elle could not help thinking they will be delighted to have a rich stepfather, but refrained from saying anything, as she did not want to upset her father.

May looked at Elle saying, "Have you anything to say about your father and me? It's probably best to hear it now."

"Dad knows that I feel it is too soon after mom's death, but if it is what he wants and he will be happy, I wish you both every happiness." Raising her glass, she took another gulp of champagne and whispered, "congratulations."

Elle did not know how fast to leave the lounge. Placing her glass down, she excused herself, saying she was tired. She gave her father a kiss on the cheek, and she bid them both a goodnight.

Elle felt worn out as she got into bed.

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She thought, "Why oh why, did life have to change so much?" She could tell that her father was determined to stay with May. If Mitch and Elle did not want to lose their father too, they were going to have to accept May. And when she messed up his life, as she knew she would, he would need his family around.

Thankfully, sleep engulfed her, but she tossed and turned all night.

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