

OPIATE JANE

Jessica K. Baker

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It should not be quoted without comparison with the finished book.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Dedication

For everyone who needs a second chance

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Third time's a charm

She was going to do it again. I knew she was. We'd been through this twice before. How could the judge even have considered placing us back in her care? Judges aren't as smart as they think they are. Last time, we were with her for seven months before they came for us. It took them six months to check on us, and by that time, we'd been alone three-quarters of the time. It had only taken her a month to go back to her old ways. Evidently a Friday-through-Sunday weekend wasn't long enough for Mother. She needed to spend most of her week out getting high too. I honestly don't know how she could afford to do it like that. But this time, she'd spent thirty days in some rehab and had gotten a cleaning job at some big house in no-man's land, where we were supposed to live in the garage apartment. Mother had said the house was really old, so I figured we'd be staying in the servants' quarters. And of course, it was in a different school district, so I'd be starting a new school in March of my sophomore year. Great! Why couldn't they just let me finish my school year where I was? It would be the third one this year. This was a waste of time. They'd come back for us. They always did.

So there we were in the car driving an hour away from St. Bernard, where I'd lived for the past three months. I had always lived in Cincinnati; St. Bernard is a suburb. City life was what I knew. Mother always liked to stay in the Over-the-Rhine area. It was more convenient for her that way. Now we were headed to some town called Winchester. What, did they make guns there?

I'd never heard of it and I didn't want to go. One of the other foster kids had told me it was in some really poor county that didn't have anything and was full of farmers and hillbillies. She sure didn't sugar-coat it.

We were about forty minutes into the drive before my mother said a word to me. She and Lizzie had been chatting in the front seat. Mother wasn't responsible enough to realize Lizzie was too small to be sitting up there. Ohio had child-restraint laws and Lizzie should have been in the back of the car. She was only four years old and wasn't big enough to be out of a booster seat, let alone in the front of the car. I knew I should have said something, but I really didn't want to sit up there with Mother. Lizzie was so excited to see her mommy and to be going home. She was even more ecstatic when I offered her the front seat. I think she honestly thought I was doing her some kind of favor. The poor kid, she was just too young to realize what kind of person Mother really was. I guess I'd made sure she didn't know what kind of mother she had. I'd spent the last year of foster care lying to Lizzie and telling her how much Mother loved her even though they weren't together. I told her all the good stories about Mother before she'd started using the drugs. Now Lizzie barely knew her but thought she'd hung the moon. I knew I shouldn't have done that, but the kid needed something to look forward to, and hearing stories about her wonderful mother really made her day.

I looked up to see Mother watching me in the rearview mirror. I would have to say she did look better. She must have gained about twenty pounds and she'd cleaned herself up with a new haircut and makeup. She gave me a look that was riddled with guilt and then asked me why I'd been so quiet. She might have felt guilty, but I knew it wouldn't stop her from going back to her true

love. The remorse wouldn't last long, and Lizzie and I would be the mess she'd leave behind again. I wasn't about to make small talk with her. I gave her a "hmp" and returned to staring out the window.

We finally came to another stoplight; I think it had been about ten minutes since the last one. We turned left into a little town. To the right were a small, older motel and a Subway. It was a strange-looking Subway that seemed more like it should have been a house than a restaurant. There was a white house that looked completely out of place in front of the motel. I saw a gas station, some other building, and a car wash. Houses lined both sides of the street. It took us about a minute to get to a stop sign. There was a hair salon on one corner and an abandoned gas station on the other. The sign at the gas station said gas was \$1.03 a gallon, so clearly it had been empty for a while. We turned left at the stop sign, so I didn't get to see any more of Main Street. Once we made our left, it was houses again, a church, some railroad tracks, and some kind of weird-looking corn-shucking building. I don't know what it was; it had some weird, round buildings and a big barn-looking thing. I figured corn shucking was what they did around there. Hell, it could have been that Winchester shotgun factory for all I knew.

Everything was so drab. The grass was really brown, but it was only the beginning of March, so I started hoping it would green up soon. It just had to or I didn't think I would survive in this town. Granted, the grass can be brown and the trees bare in the city too, but you don't notice it as much with all the asphalt around. Out in the country, all you saw was the brown. It was depressing. I would rather look at asphalt and tall buildings all day than that.

We made a right onto Crum Road. I thanked God it was paved and then I prayed to God to keep us on a paved road. If we were to turn onto anything that resembled a dirt road, I was going to start to think we had entered into the movie *Wrong Turn*. And sure enough, just as the thought rolled through my head, we turned onto gravel. Since technically it wasn't a dirt road, I thought maybe I would be okay. The road was named Melblanc Road. *What a strange name*, I thought.

We turned onto a lane I guessed was a driveway. There was a mailbox at the end, so it had to be a driveway, right? Then I saw it. It was a monstrosity of a house. It was a wonder I hadn't seen it from the highway. It was white and huge, kind of like one of those old plantation houses but much bigger. Oh, yay! I was pretty sure the plantation houses were the ones that had the servants' quarters. I so guessed that one right. The house was three stories high, with one part going up to a fourth floor with a rounded roof. It almost looked like something Rapunzel's hair should have been hanging out of. There were huge oak trees and numerous smaller trees in front of the house. That house had to be hundreds of years old. It had a very old style to it but looked as if it were brand new. The house was so white it gleamed from the sunshine that was finally poking through the clouds. The porch was immaculate. There were four high-back rocking chairs slowly rocking from the light March winds that were still blowing after the rain had passed through. It was a little eerie to see those chairs rocking as if someone were sitting in them. The house looked old enough to be haunted. Around the corner of the house was a four-car garage, and to the side of that was a small building with a little porch on the front of it. How odd; that building looked totally out of place there. Then my mother pulled our 1999 Honda Accord up next to it and I knew this was our new so-called home.

Lizzie was shouting, “Let me see my room, Mommy! Let me see my room!” Mother had been telling her all about it during our drive. Mother had been living there for three months already. She had to have a home and a job for three months before she was eligible to get us back after she came out of rehab. I was pretty sure they’d probably given her some random drug screens during that time too. At least I hoped so.

Aunt Darlene had gotten her the job with the Whitmans. Evidently they were one of the richest families in the area. Aunt Darlene went to church with them, and I think we were a charity experiment: *See what happens if you take a family out of the gutter and place them with good people. That’s all they need, right? That will fix them.* Aunt Darlene and my mother didn’t get along at all, but my aunt had declared herself a good Christian woman and had decided to help my mother out.

A woman who was maybe in her early forties came out from the back door of the monstrous house. She was tall and thin. She had blonde hair that was feathered into some kind of eighties hairstyle. She was dressed in a plaid pin skirt and a very expensive-looking button-up blouse. She wore four-inch heels even though she was already very tall. She was wearing way too much makeup. I had to wonder how she washed off all that black gunk from her eyes every day.

She walked toward my mother and called, “Clara, these must be your girls! I’m so glad they’ll finally be joining us.”

She looked directly at me and the ring in my nose and asked, “How was your ride, dear?”

The question was sincere, but the look on her face was one of disgust. If I’d been a mind reader, I would have said she was probably wondering what she had gotten herself into.

My mother looked at me and said, “Jane, this is Mrs. Whitman. She’s been kind enough to let us use her guest house while I work here.”

When I looked at Mrs. Whitman, I caught her staring at the worn-out Chucks on my feet. I acknowledged her anyway. Hell, I even threw in a compliment.

“It’s nice to meet you,” I said. “You have a really nice house.”

Lizzie came running around the car to Mrs. Whitman, started tugging on the woman’s shirt, and shouted, “Can I see my room, lady?”

Mrs. Whitman stifled a laugh and told her she could. She excused herself and then headed back into her huge house.

We started unloading the trunk of the car and carrying our things into our little house. We walked through the front door into a kitchen/living room combination. It was small but very nice. There was an archway at the other side of the living room that led into a small hallway. There was a bathroom straight ahead of the hallway, a bedroom to the left, and a bedroom to the right. Lizzie and I were to share a bedroom. Lizzie wasn’t too happy about that, but I didn’t mind. The last foster home we were in, we’d shared a room with two other girls, so I figured we could survive this situation. The bedroom had two twin beds. I was sure Children Services probably made that some kind of stipulation of Mother getting us back. Last time we lived with her, we’d been lucky to have a mattress on the floor. We’d started off with beds, but it hadn’t taken Mother long to get hard up for cash and sell them. She’d sold everything we had. She’d even sold the iPod that St. Vincent de Paul had gotten me for Christmas that year. It hadn’t mattered to her that it was the only thing I had besides my clothes. She’d needed a fix and it was worth a quick twenty

bucks. She told me I'd lost it, but I found the pawn shop receipt that showed she'd sold it.

Mother came into the room and asked us how we liked it. Lizzie ran up to Mother, hugged her, and shouted, "I love it, Mommy! I do, I do!"

Lizzie was always shouting. She was such a happy little girl for someone who had been through so much in her short life.

Mother was glaring at me, so I knew it was my turn to answer her question.

"It will do," I said. "I'm not unpacking my crap, though. I'm pretty sure we won't be here long. Lizzie can put her stuff anywhere she wants; I'll only be sleeping in here anyway."

I dropped my two backpacks on the bed by the window and sat down next to them.

We were lucky that what few belongings we had were in backpacks. Last time we'd changed foster homes, our stuff had been in brown paper bags. Jennifer, our last foster mom, bought the backpacks for us before we left. She said it was bad enough that we had so little, the least she could do was give us something decent to put it in.

Jennifer was a nice woman; her husband worked as a truck driver and wasn't home much. Jennifer had kept us fed and clean. She hadn't taken too much interest in us, though. She was too busy lingering on the internet all the time. I'm pretty sure she was addicted to Facebook, but she was nice to us. That's a lot for a foster parent. Trust me: They can get bad.

The first time we were taken from Mother, they'd split us up. Lizzie was a baby, four months old. We were separated for eight months. I worried about her so much. I had taken care of her from the day she'd come home from the hospital. When we were placed

back with Mother the first time, Lizzie didn't even know who I was. She'd just turned one and was walking. I had missed her so much. I will never know if the home she'd been placed in had taken good care of her. I hated that I didn't know anything about those months of her life. Thank goodness she was too young to remember it!

I'd been placed in a home I referred to as the Daniels Dungeon. The Danielses had remodeled their basement into three bedrooms, which meant they could house nine to twelve kids. They were totally into foster care for a check. The remodel consisted of slapping paneling on the moldy walls and putting carpet right on top of the concrete floor. Every time it rained, the carpet would get soaked under my bed. I spent my entire stay there with a runny nose and a sore throat. I know there had to be a ton of mold under that carpet. But the wet carpet was nothing compared to the smell coming from the four cats that stayed upstairs. We weren't allowed to spend much time up there, but the smell made its way downstairs. We had to go to our rooms right after school and stay there until supper. We ate supper, did multiple chores, and returned to our rooms. They had a bathroom down in the Dungeon. We weren't even allowed to enter the one upstairs. Mr. and Mrs. Daniels must have been miserable, because they would start arguing as soon as he got home from work and would not stop until about one or two in the morning. It never escalated to the point the police needed to be called, but I think that was only because the neighboring house was empty.

"Jane, what do you two want for lunch?" Mother asked.

Coming out of my memory of the Danielses and their dungeon, I thought, *Wow! She's going to cook for us. Wonder how long that will last.*

“You can fix whatever you want; I’m not hungry. I lost my appetite this morning in the courtroom,” I answered sarcastically.

“I want pancakes!” yelled Lizzie.

“Okay, little one, pancakes it will be,” Mother told her.

I followed them out of the bedroom to the kitchen, then went out the front door to the car to get the rest of Lizzie’s stuff, not that she had much. Just as I loaded up my arms, I heard the sound of an engine roaring to life and about dropped everything I was holding. I’d forgotten we were right next to a four-car garage. I went inside to the bedroom to put Lizzie’s belongings away. Again, I heard the sound of an engine. I glanced out the window to see a brand-new Ford Mustang pulling out of the garage. The tinted windows were rolled down so I could see the teenage boy driving it. I could tell by the flashy car, the dark sunglasses, and the way he shook his head when he turned toward Mother’s car that he was an arrogant ass. *Great, I hope he goes to some expensive private school*, I thought. I sure didn’t want to go to a school where everyone knew my mother was his maid. I guess that wouldn’t have been as bad as them knowing she was a heroin addict. Then again, depending on the school, the maid thing could have been worse.

Mother would say she was a “recovering” heroin addict. I didn’t believe that. She’d been clean before and had gone right back to it. She hadn’t always been an addict. When I was little, she’d worked hard to make sure I was cared for. It had always been just me and her. I didn’t know anything about my father and I was forbidden to ask. I’d never really thought that much about it. Mother and I had been happy. She went to work and I went to the babysitter. She came home and we would go to the park, take a walk, go on a picnic, or just hang out at home. She

met Lizzie's father, Cole, when I was eight. He was okay. He took up more of her time than I'd liked, but she seemed happy. By the time I turned nine, he had moved in. Three months after he moved in, Mother's knee was crushed in a car accident and she was prescribed Vicodin. Her addiction started innocently. She was in pain, so she took her medication. Then she started taking more and more of her medication. Her cast was off and she was still complaining of pain and taking her medication. I realized there was a problem when I couldn't get her to wake up in the middle of the day. That had struck me as odd since she'd been an active person and had never taken naps. I hadn't thought much of it at the time. I was only nine years old and I didn't know anything about drugs. I didn't know that if someone was sitting up and nodding off so badly that they dropped their cigarette, or that if they constantly had funny-looking white snot coming out of their nose, they might be doing drugs.

When I was eleven, Mother found out she was pregnant. By that time, Cole had been gone for a few months. He'd grown tired of Mother's drug use and had taken off to his brother's place in Florida. It was a shame Lizzie never got to meet him. He wasn't that bad of a guy. Mother never told him she was pregnant, and she refused to tell our social worker who Lizzie's father was. I think she knew that if she did, they would have let Cole have Lizzie and she would never have stood a chance of getting her back. When Lizzie was three, Mother heard that Cole had been killed in a freak accident working for a pipeline in Illinois. Lizzie would never know him at all. Mother was sure to let Children Services know his name then, because she wanted to get Social Security benefits for Lizzie. That was so typical of her—more money meant more drugs. I guess Mother hadn't thought that

one through, because the state ended up being the one to collect Lizzie's check. Mother couldn't collect it since she didn't have custody of Lizzie. Not long after that, she started working on getting clean.

I'm not sure when she started using heroin. She might have been using it while she was pregnant with Lizzie. That would have explained Lizzie's colic. Lizzie cried the first three months of her life. I know because I took care of her. I found a needle in Mother's bedside table when Lizzie was about two months old. The overdose happened when Lizzie was four months old. That is how Children Services had gotten involved with our family.

I found Mother unconscious on the kitchen floor while Lizzie wailed from the bedroom. I'd been at school all day so I had no idea how long Lizzie had been alone and crying or how long Mother had been unconscious. I tried to wake Mother up, but it was no use; she was not responding. She was breathing. It was shallow, but at least she was breathing. I called 911 and ran to get Lizzie. Later at the hospital, Mother was awake but incoherent. She didn't know who I was, and I don't think she even knew who *she* was. She continued to deny it was an overdose; she said she'd had a nervous breakdown. I didn't buy that. The social worker didn't let us linger at the hospital long, so we were carted off not knowing if Mother was going to live or die. Mother told me later she spent three days in the hospital.

I spent five days in a group home waiting for a foster home. Foster homes suck, but that group home was horrible. Mother did the crime and I did the time. That seemed to be how it went. It was the loneliest I'd ever felt. I grieved for the mother I'd once known and for Lizzie. I worried so much about Lizzie. She was so small. I was in my first foster home for two months when I found

out I had an ulcer. My foster mother told me it was probably from worrying so much. I got to see Mother two times and Lizzie once while I was in foster care that time. It was the longest eight months of my life. Mother was really bad about not showing up to see us. We would be sitting at the Family Center waiting on her and she wouldn't show. Heck, most of the time she didn't even call to say why she wasn't going to be there. The social worker would just check her off as a no-show and cart us off, back to the foster home.

Interrupting my thoughts, Lizzie came running into the bedroom to let me know the pancakes were done. I told her I was fine and that she could eat the ones Mother had made for me. She shrugged her shoulders and said, "Whatever."

I followed her out into the kitchen and helped her up onto a stool at the bar. As mad as I was at my mother, I couldn't help but be happy for Lizzie. She was ecstatic that we are all together again. For her sake, I hoped it would stay that way, but I had little faith that it would. I never should have talked Mother up as much as I had to Lizzie. I was going to be sorry about that. I just knew it.

Mother looked my way and said, "Are you sure you don't want any pancakes, Jane? They're your favorite: apple cinnamon."

"No, I'm good," I replied sarcastically.

"Jane, I understand you're upset with me. I get that. But I cannot walk on eggshells the entire time we're together. Could you at least try to tone down the sarcasm for your sister's sake? Quit acting like such a child, Jane. You're fifteen years old. Start acting it."

"Sure," I mumbled.

I woke up the next morning glad it was Saturday and that I didn't have to start the dreadful hick school yet. I was sure it

would be filled with farm-friendly people, especially if the boy I'd seen yesterday was any indication of how "friendly" they were. The disgust on his face when he looked at Mother's car was all I needed to know. Maybe I was being judgmental, but I'd earned the right to be a little cynical. The boy had pulled out of the driveway very fast yesterday. Someone needed to let him know there was a four-year-old around and he would need to be more careful. I didn't care if this was his house. He could be a little more considerate of other people. I was sure he was just as self-centered as he looked driving that brand-new sports car. I didn't care. It wasn't like we'd be there that long anyway.

Stowaway

Landon hadn't answered my phone calls all day. I finally went over to his house around five because I couldn't stand it anymore. Mrs. Whitman said Landon had been in bed all day and she was pretty sure he was coming down with something. She wouldn't let me in to see him. My mother had the day off, so she couldn't tell me anything either. I finally decided to lie down around midnight. I was really worried about Landon. I couldn't sleep. What if he took too much of something and nobody realized it until it was too late?

At around 12:30 a.m., I saw his bedroom light come on. I texted him to see what was up. He texted me back that he hadn't been feeling well and he thought he was coming down with the flu. I asked him if there was anything I could do. I guess he must have been texting with somebody else at the same time he was texting me, because he sent me a text that said he would be in town in twenty minutes. What the hell? I thought he was sick. I decided it was time I found out why he went to "town" in the middle of the night. I guess I already knew why, but I wanted to know where. I wanted to know every person who was contributing to killing my Landon. I wanted to find out who they were and confront them all. It didn't matter to me that they were drug dealers. I didn't care if I could get hurt. I just wanted them to stop supplying Landon with that stuff.

I got out of bed, got dressed, and quietly snuck out the front door. I went into the garage, climbed into the back of Landon's

Mustang, and got down onto the floor. He had a jacket in the back seat, so I put it over my head. I was pretty sure he wouldn't notice me, but I was really starting to shake. What in the world would he say if he found me back there?

He got into the car not long after I got in. I was really freaking out! We were about fifteen minutes into the drive before he parked the car. I waited for about five minutes after Landon got out before I peeked my head up to see where we were. We were at his uncle's house, the same place where we'd played paintball. Why would he have sent that text saying he was going to town? It had to be some kind of dope code.

I climbed into the front seat and quietly got out of the car. I wanted a closer look at what was going on. I snuck over to the side of the house and peeked into the corner of one of the lit-up windows. The window had a crack in it so I could partially hear what they were saying inside. Landon was talking to an older guy who must have been his uncle. He was begging his uncle for another chance. His uncle started scolding him over some money Landon had already cost him. Landon sat down in a chair across from his uncle with the most awful look I'd ever seen on his face.

"I'm sick, Uncle Mac," Landon moaned. "I just need a couple to get me through school tomorrow. I promise I'll replace your money. I've got to have something. I'm sick."

Landon did look bad. His face was pale, he looked like he'd lost another five pounds since I'd seen him last, and he was holding on to his stomach as if it were killing him. Evidently the flu wasn't the culprit, though. Landon was dope-sick. He'd been telling me this whole time that he only did drugs every now and then. He'd been lying to me. He'd been doing them pretty frequently if he was dope-sick.

I didn't understand how in the world he could owe anybody money. That boy was loaded! I heard his uncle say something about how he wasn't "giving in this time," that he was going to have to start treating Landon like every other junkie instead of like family. He flat-out refused to give Landon anything.

A woman walked into the room and ran her hand through Landon's hair as if he were a puppy.

"Oh, Mac, look at the poor boy," she said. "Maybe you should help him out this one last time."

She looked really familiar, but I knew I'd never met her. Why did she look so familiar?

Mac stood and yelled at the woman.

"Lily, I will not give him any more handouts! That boy's family has more money in their little fingers than we will ever see in a lifetime. I know he can find a way to pay me what he owes me. He'll figure it out. No more fronts."

I decided I'd better head back to the car. Landon would probably be leaving soon, since he couldn't get what he'd come for. Right as I crouched down to get past the windows, I heard a noise in the bushes behind me. I figured it was a dog or something and shrugged it off as I went toward the car. But someone grabbed my arm as soon as I got to the corner of the house. It scared me to death. It was an older man with long gray hair. He looked like something right out of the mountains. He turned me toward him and got in my face.

"What the hell do you think you're doing, young lady?" he asked.

I froze; I didn't know what to say. I didn't want to tell him I was with Landon and get Landon in more trouble with his uncle.

"Ain't got no answer, huh? That's all right. I'll take you in the house to see Mac. He can deal with you," he grunted.

He dragged me by the arm around the corner of the house and in through the back door. When Landon saw me come in, his mouth dropped.

“Hey, Mac, look what I found outside peeking in the window. What do you suppose I do with this?”

The gray-haired man let go of my arm and gave me a shove toward Landon’s uncle.

Mac jumped up out of his chair, grabbed a pocket knife off the table, and headed toward me. Landon ran over in front of me and stopped his uncle.

“She’s with me, Uncle Mac,” Landon said. “She was supposed to stay in the car.”

Landon turned and gave me a furious look, and Mac backed off.

“What the hell are you doing, Landon? Trying to get me busted? I can’t be having this shit. I’ve told you time and time again not to bring anybody but Kyle with you. I thought you were smarter than that, boy.”

Landon put his hands up in the air.

“I know, I know. It’s pretty dark outside. I thought she would stay in the car and you would never have known she was here. I’m sorry, Uncle Mac. It won’t happen again. I swear.”

Mac sat back down in his chair.

“I’m glad to hear you’re sorry, boy, but I just can’t let her leave. She saw too much. She could run straight to the cops.”

Landon shook his head.

“She wouldn’t do that Uncle Mac,” he said. “She knows better.”

Mac’s face was getting redder by the minute.

“How am I supposed to believe that, boy? You thought she was smart enough to stay in the car and Jed caught her snooping

in the window. I can't take that chance. Jed, put her in the back room and make sure she can't get out. I need time to think about what it is I'm going to do with her."

I couldn't help myself. I opened my big fat mouth before I realized what I was doing.

"Wait! Don't worry, Mac," I said. "I'll keep your secret and make you a deal. I won't tell anybody anything about your operation here if you promise to not give your nephew any more of that crap. I can't believe his own family would contribute to killing him just so they could make a buck."

Mac threw his hands into the air.

"Jed, get her and put her in the other room before she makes me mad enough to kill her. Get her the hell out of my sight. Now!"

Jed grabbed me by the arm again.

"Sure thing, boss."

Landon came over and knocked Jed's hand away from my arm. Mac moved quickly over to where we were and grabbed hold of Landon. Mac was a big guy, and Landon didn't stand a chance against him. Jed told Lily to get him some rope as he dragged me into the hall.

Landon tried to follow, but Mac still had a hold of him.

"You're going to stay right here with me, boy. We're going to have a talk," Mac scolded.

Jed took me to the back of the house. It was really dark and I had no idea what he was going to do with me. He took me into an empty room and Lily followed. Jed told me to sit down and Lily handed him the rope. Jed tied my hands together, then my feet, and then my arms to my legs. I was pretty sure it wasn't the first time he'd tied someone up. He seemed to know what he was doing. I was terrified. I should have kept my mouth shut. I should

have kept my butt in the car. This was not a world I wanted to be a part of, yet there I sat, tied up in the middle of it. They left me in the room by myself, and it sounded as if they'd locked the door on their way out. I didn't know how I was going to get out of this, and I had no idea what they were out there doing to Landon. I was so scared that I'd started to cry. I should have stayed home. Thanks to my curiosity, I now had Landon and myself in a world of trouble. Any sane person knows you don't piss off dope dealers. This was crazy. What the hell had I been thinking?

I sat in the room for at least a good hour. I could hear movement in the other room, but I couldn't hear well enough to figure out what was going on. I was so worried about Landon. I had tried to wiggle myself out of the ropes, but it was no use. Jed had tied them really tight. It wasn't long after I'd given up on trying to get out of the ropes when I heard a really loud noise. It scared me. I didn't know if it was some kind of explosion or if it was a gun shot. I started screaming for Landon.

There was a crack in the window and a strange smell was coming in through it. I heard the noise again. The second time, I was sure it was an explosion of some kind. It sounded a lot like one of those really big fireworks they let off on the Fourth of July. The smell was getting really bad. I had to get out of here. I didn't know if the explosion had happened outside or if it had happened in the house and had caught the house on fire. I was moving around a lot trying to get loose when Landon burst through the door. He didn't even waste time to untie me. He just picked me up and carried me out into the hallway.

The smell was starting to get to me; I felt like I was choking. When I finally stopped coughing, I asked Landon what had happened. He just shook his head and told me not to talk. Once we made it to the front porch, he sat me down and untied me.

I was so out of breath.

“Landon, what is going on? What was that noise and what is that smell?”

Landon was frantically untying me.

“There was an explosion in the shed. Everybody ran out there when it happened. They’re busy dealing with it right now, but we’ve got to get the hell out of here before they realize they left us alone in the house.”

Landon finished untying me, grabbed my arm, turned me around, and pointed me toward the car. When we got out into the yard, I noticed there were three people standing at the corner of the house. I stopped to take a second look when I realized one of them was Ivy Lang. Then it dawned on me that the woman in the house reminded me of Ivy and that was why she’d looked so familiar. They were sisters. That must have been who Landon had been texting. I knew that girl was bad news. Now it all made sense. Landon had said his uncle’s girlfriend and her sister lived here. Ivy lived here.

Landon came back to where I was standing and dragged me to the car.

“What the hell are you doing, Jane? We’ve got to get out of here. If Mac and his gang don’t get us, the cops will. After an explosion like that, they have to be on their way. We’ve got to go *now*.”

Landon was quiet until we got out onto the main road. I could tell he was scared and upset. He was gripping the steering wheel so tight his knuckles were snow white. Finally he spoke.

“Jane, what were you doing? Do you realize he really could have—and would have—killed you? The only thing that saved your life was that damn explosion. How did you know where I

was? How did you even get here?"

I tucked my knees up to my chest and wrapped my arms around my legs.

"I snuck into the back of your car before you left," I said. "I wanted to see where it is that you go in the middle of the night. Once we were here, I couldn't help myself. I had to take a look inside. I wanted to see what you were doing. I guess I should have known."

Landon pressed his foot down harder on the accelerator. The speedometer read 85 mph.

"Oh, here we go," he said sarcastically. "You should have known what? That I was going after pills? Yes, I was. But only because I'm not feeling well and I knew they would make feel better. I'm catching the flu or something."

I slammed my legs onto the floor of the car.

"After all the crap we've been through tonight, don't even give me that bullshit, Landon!" I yelled. "I know you're freaking dope-sick. Why can't you just admit it? You own up to doing them, but you just can't seem to own up to how much control they have over you. That stuff is running your life. You live for it anymore. If you're not high, you're chasing it or sick because you can't find it. Do you think I'm stupid, Landon? I know you're high when you're in a great mood. I see the white stuff crusted in your nose sometimes. I know what that is. I know that when you're impatient, quick-tempered, or not feeling well, that means you're out of them. You must have forgotten that I've lived through all this stuff a time or two. I've seen it before."

Landon still had a very tight grip on the steering wheel and was still flying down the road. He was really scaring me. I had never seen him like this.

“Why do you put up with my pathetic ass if you know everything then?”

Why *did* I put up with all this? I didn’t let my mother get away with any of it. I still gave her a hard time about it, yet there I was sitting with Landon after almost having my throat slashed by his drug dealer uncle. What was wrong with me? Oh, right: I loved him. That’s what was wrong with me. I’d always heard stories about women who had been beaten by their boyfriend or husband. People would ask them why they stayed with someone who hurt them and they’d always say, “Because I love him.” That’s how idiotic I sounded. *Why do you stay, Jane?* Because I love him. Ugh!

“Because I love you, Landon Whitman. That’s why,” I cried.

That was the first time I’d ever said the actual words to Landon. He stayed silent. He did manage to slow down the car for the rest of the ride home. He parked the car in the garage. I got out and walked around to the driver’s side.

“Aren’t you going to get out of the car?” I asked.

Landon laid his seat back.

“Nope, this is where I’ll be staying tonight.”

I wrinkled my eyebrows.

“Why would you want to sleep in your car? You have a perfectly good bed up in your room.”

He shrugged his shoulders.

“Just makes things easier that way.”

I was getting frustrated. Just answer the freaking question; don’t dance around it.

“It makes what easier?” I persisted.

He rested his head back against the seat and closed his eyes.

“Just go to bed, Jane.”

I started walking toward the garage door. He could be such an ass sometimes. As mad as I was at him, I couldn't stand the thought of leaving him there by himself, sick. I turned around and climbed back into the passenger seat of the car.

Landon turned his head slightly my way and didn't even open his eyes.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

I folded my arms across my chest.

"I'm staying in the car too then."

He turned his head back toward the window and mumbled, "Whatever."

It didn't seem like it took him very long to fall asleep. So there I sat, in his car, watching him sleep. He hadn't been asleep for long when he started moving around a lot. His legs started kicking around. Then his arms started to twitch. He couldn't stay still. I don't know how he was sleeping the way he was moving around. He would try to pull his legs up to him, but the steering wheel kept getting in the way. This was so much worse than I'd thought. He must have been using a lot more than he said he was.

I sat there for a while just watching him. I knew I shouldn't snoop through his stuff, but for some reason I felt like I had to. I knew I was going to find things I didn't want to, but I had to look anyway. I slid his phone out of his coat pocket and started searching his texts. The first one I read was from Ivy. She was telling him to come over and she would hook him up. I hated that girl. There were multiple texts from her, and they were all drug-related. I really didn't think anything physical was going on between them, but the constant contact between the two of them drove me crazy. I'd asked him multiple times to not have anything to do with her, but he continued to do it anyway. He'd told me he

didn't talk to her anymore, but apparently he just couldn't help himself. The drugs had taken him over and she was a way for him to get them.

There were lots of other texts from people I didn't know. I would say 97 percent of the 269 texts in his phone were about drugs. The other 3 percent were from me. I didn't even bother to read his sent messages. I was nervous he would wake up and catch me with his phone, so I slid it back into his pocket.

I rested my head against the seat and closed my eyes for a few minutes. I was getting really tired. It was going on 4 a.m. I'd been through a really stressful night and it had exhausted me. I would have to head into the house soon. I didn't want Mother to realize I was gone. I sat upright; I didn't want to fall asleep. I decided to open the glove box and see what was inside, and I pulled out a small tin box and opened it. I shouldn't have been shocked, but I was. I couldn't believe Landon would be so careless to carry something like that right in his car. The tin box had a small piece of paper in it. It also had a small straw and white powdery residue all over the inside. He was taking a huge risk with this, which meant he was completely out of control. What was I supposed to do? Something horrible was going to happen to Landon if he didn't stop. He *had* to stop.

I had just put the tin box back into the glove box when I heard Landon's voice.

"Why are you still out here? You need to go before you get into trouble."

"I was watching you sleep," I replied, "if that's what you call sleeping. You kicked and twitched all over the place. How long has it been since you had anything? I didn't realize things were this bad. My feelings for you seem to have blinded me from the truth.

I should have seen what was right in front of my face. Landon, you're killing yourself. I'm so afraid for you. This needs to stop. Please, Landon, stop."

He frowned at me.

"Jane, I'm fine," he insisted. "I have everything under control. I'm not going to discuss this with you. I'm going to hang out here for a few and then head in. You need to get to bed before your mother figures out you're gone. I'll see you tomorrow."

I sat there for a few minutes. I was beginning to wonder why I even tried. I decided I was very tired and I really didn't want to get into trouble. I got out of the car, slammed the door, and walked out of the garage without giving Landon a second look. I snuck back into my room, threw on some pajamas, and climbed into bed. I'd been lying there for about ten minutes when I heard Landon's Mustang pull out of the driveway. I looked out the window and watched him drive away. He must have been on the hunt again.

It's so sad how addiction takes over a wonderful person and turns them into someone who will lie or steal to get their next high.

Every time Landon left, I worried he wouldn't make it back. I was so upset, I figured I wouldn't be able to sleep. Being tired must have overruled being upset, though, because it wasn't long before I fell asleep. I dreamed of Landon's funeral. It made realize I would have to do something soon or that nightmare would become a reality.