



A Man Named Jess

By

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A Man Without A Past

Sometimes going home isn't easy. For a man named Jess, it was bittersweet. Ten years ago he'd left his dreams behind. Now he was back and so was Annie McGiver.

Jess returned home to a father he barely remembered and to the loneliness and emptiness that he'd left behind so long ago.

Did Annie remember him? Could she put away the past and forget how much Jess had hurt her? He certainly hoped so. Because sometimes coming home meant taking up just where you'd left off.

A Woman Needing Love

Annie wasn't really stunned when her husband asked her for a divorce. She'd never really loved him anyway. There was only one man she was capable of loving and he'd shattered her hopes, her dreams. Now he was back in her life once again. But where would it lead? Could she open her heart to trust him again? Was time running out?

Can love survive betrayal?

A Man Named Jess

Jess was only three. He stood behind the shabby curtains hidden from view. His poor little body shook and trembled. He flinched when he heard the crack of his father's hand against his mother's cheek.

He was drunk again. His mother pleaded with his father but he turned deaf ears to her. Jess bit his lower lip to keep from crying out as his mother begged for her life. He wanted to run out from behind the curtains and tackle his father and put him to the ground. But he was just a boy. What help could he be to his mother now? It was best to stay where he was, not make more of a mess of things.

His father shoved his mother back, hard. She went sailing across the room. She crashed against a coffee table sending the lamp slamming to the ground. The light shattered and when it did the room was tossed into total darkness.

Jess hated the dark. He was afraid of it. He quelled the need to scream. His knees were shaking now. But he stood firmly where he was. He could hear his mother sliding her way across the floor, a soft moan escaping from her lips.

Douglas Stanford was a large man. And strong. Jess remembered all too well how strong those hands could be when he'd done something wrong. His mother didn't stand a chance and Jess knew it. It scared him more than the darkness.

"Get up, woman," Douglas shouted. "Get up, now."

Douglas lunged for his wife, but in his drunken state he missed her completely. Margaret struggled to her feet. She staggered once. He grabbed her by the ankle and she fell forward against the hardwood floor, banging her chin. She kicked him with her other foot upside the jaw causing him to swear.

The stench of liquor on his breath, mixed with day old sweat made Margaret want to vomit. Instead all she could think about was getting out of there, away from her husband. This was the worst she had ever seen him. She was terrified. She didn't even have time to think about her son. She just ran blindly down the hall toward her bedroom.

She grabbed a suitcase from underneath the bed and began throwing her belongings into the bag. There wasn't much. She didn't have much. The only thing of value was the picture she had of Jess. She'd take it with her so that she would never forget him.

Quickly Margaret closed the suitcase and clamped the locks down securely. Her heart was racing. She was scared. She feared for her life. Douglas was in a rage and he was unstoppable when he was like this.

As she turned from the bed he was there, waiting for her in the door way. His eyes were cold and dark. Ominous. They were the eyes of a killer.

"Where do you think you are going?" Douglas asked with a touch of sarcasm.

Though she was terrified, Margaret straightened her shoulders and moved forward. She was not about to let him know how scared she really was. She did not want him knowing her weakness.

"I'm getting out of here before you kill me, Douglas. I never want to see you again."

He laughed. It came from deep in his throat. "If you leave, it won't be with your son."

And that was the only regret she had. Leaving poor Jess behind. But one day she'd come back for him. If it was the last thing she ever did.

Jess heard the urgency of his mother's steps as she ran across the living room floor. Then he heard the slamming of the door as she left. Without even a good-bye. He didn't really blame her under the circumstances. He would have done the same thing to. He didn't know if he'd ever see her again. He wanted to sit down and cry. But he had to be very quiet. He didn't want his father to hear him and know where he was. He'd become very good at being silent.

15 Years Later

Jess felt the weight of the world lift from his shoulder. Today he was eighteen and he was free. Free from his father. Free from the loneliness he had endured the last years of his life since his mother had left him. Now he was leaving Billings, Montana for good. He was never coming back.

He knew Annie wasn't going to be happy about this. She had gotten some far fetched fantasy in her head that they would one day be married, have a family and live happily ever after.

It hadn't taken him long to realize that love and marriage and family wasn't for him. Not when there was every possibility he would end up like his father.

Jess cringed to think about it. He didn't know where he was going, or what he was going to do with the rest of his life. But one thing was for certain. He wasn't staying here. He had to get out or else he just might end up killing his father. The thought came more and more frequently these days.

Jess had remained silent all those years, never letting on that he had heard the scuffle between his father and mother. Most of Jess's younger years were spent in mortal fear of retribution from his father. He'd learned early on when to avoid Douglas Stanford. He'd learned his many moods. When he was drunk. When he was depressed. When he was just angry. That was most of the time, as far as Jess was concerned.

Jess couldn't remember a time when his father was ever anything but angry. He'd never seen him smile, or heard him laugh. He most certainly never told Jess that he loved him. He tried to pretend that it didn't hurt. But it did.

Jess tossed a few shirts, underwear, and jeans into a suitcase. He threw in a couple of pairs of socks, some toiletries, and a few hundred dollars. It was all he had. His life savings. When he thought about it, it scared him. He took a deep breath wondering if he was really doing the right thing. The truth of it was, he couldn't get out of here quick enough.

He loathed this town and his father too. He'd never forgiven him for driving his mother away. It ate at him each and every day of his life. Having kept silent all these years had burned a hole deep down in his heart. He didn't think he could ever love or feel anything for anyone. Most of all Annie.

Not only was Annie sweet, she was beautiful. She was a dreamer. When she looked at Jess, it was different than the way anyone else looked at him. Sometimes he hated the way she just seemed to glare at him. It was as if she were telling him with her eyes that she loved him. He didn't want her love. He couldn't freely accept it when he could never give it back.

Jess had told Annie that so many times. But she never wanted to listen. Now he was leaving and he didn't have the heart to tell her good-bye. So he decided he wouldn't. He'd just get in his beat up old white truck and disappear. Just like his mother had.

He'd often wondered about his mother. He'd found an old torn and faded photo of her when he was five. He buried it between the mattresses in his bed and every night before bed he'd take it out and look at it.

He was going after her. To find her. He'd done some research and found the last place she'd been seen was in Bolder, Colorado. Jess couldn't imagine what she was doing in a place like that. But it didn't matter. He needed to see her. To know how she was doing. To know that she had at least missed him. He had to satisfy himself that much.

He slammed the front door. His father was passed out on the couch and wouldn't even realize that his son had left. He wouldn't know at least for a few days. That's how long it would take to sober him up again.

Jess threw the suitcase on the seat beside him. He started the engine, put the truck in gear, then he sped off, leaving a trail of smoke and gravel in his wake. He'd never come here again. Never.

Ten Years Later

It was well past midnight. Jess stared at the ceiling above his head, willing for sleep to come and take him away for just a little while. He needed an escape. He needed to close his eyes for just an hour, to get away from the memories that kept haunting him.

Pictures of his dead mother. It had taken him ten years to finally track down Margaret's whereabouts, only to find out that she had committed suicide five years earlier.

So many thoughts raced through Jess's mind. If only he had found her sooner. Maybe he could have made a difference in her life. Maybe she wouldn't have felt the need to end it all.

Jess closed his eyes, squinting hard against the tears that threatened to spill out. Then the phone rang, jarring him out of his musings. He thought of ignoring the call. He couldn't imagine who would be calling at this hour of the night. It wasn't like he had any friends to care about him. No. He was a loner. Had been since the day he left Billings, Montana.

After the third ring, Jess jerked the receiver up to his ear. "Hello," he barked into the phone. His voice was full of tension. So was his body.

"Jess."

Jess froze, holding the phone to his ear. That voice. It sounded so familiar. But it couldn't be. How could it be?

"Jess."

Jess couldn't breathe. He couldn't speak. He was so suddenly numb he shot up in bed. He wanted to slam the phone down in its cradle thinking this was some kind of sick joke. But it wasn't. It was really Annie. Annie McGiver on the other end of the line.

"Jess are you there?" Her voice was strained.

"Yes, Annie, I'm here. How did you find me? Why are you calling me after all these years?"

Annie was silent. Jess could hear the slight rasping of air as she took a deep breath. "Jess, I'm calling on business. It's your father."

She said nothing more. She just waited, wondering how long it would take for the call to be disconnected. She waited and waited. After a brief pause Jess finally spoke.

"What about my father? I despise the man and never want to see him again. There's nothing you could possibly say that I want to hear."

"He's dying," is all Annie said. It's all she needed to say.

Again there was silence.

"Jess, say something," Annie pleaded. "Don't just stand there. Say something for God's sake."

"I have every right to hang up on you, Annie. You had no right to call me and spring this on me. Why would you even think that I'd care if my father was dying?"

"It's my job, Jess. I work for the hospital here in Billings. Your father has about three days left. It's my job to contact the next of kin to notify them. Well, you are the next of kin whether you want it that way or not."

Three days. His father had three days to live. Shock registered. At first Jess thought he might have felt some kind of relief at hearing this news. But somehow it did very little to pacify his anger and grief over his mother's senseless death.

"What do you want me to do, Annie?"

"He's asking for you, Jess," Annie notified him. "He's been asking for you since he got in. He says he needs to talk to you. To set things straight."

"Well there's no straightening out this mess, Annie, so don't even try."

For a minute she just sat there without saying a word. "It isn't for me to try, Jess."

And that was the truth. Was it his place to try? His father's? What was he suppose to do now? So many questions ran through his mind.

"Well, then, I'm not coming. Tell him good-bye for me."

Jess was just about to hang up when he heard Annie speak through the receiver.

"Just like that, Jess. You're going to walk away from your father just like that?"

"Annie, in case you didn't know it already, I walked away from my father ten years ago. Why would I come back now after all this time?"

"Out of obligation," Annie whispered.

"I have no obligation where that man is concerned. None at all."

"Jess," Annie's voice cracked. "At least here him out. Let him speak his mind. Listen to what he has to say. Maybe things won't be so bad."

"Then fine, put him on the line and let him tell me what he has to say. Then we'll be done with it."

Annie grew angry. Her fingers tightened against the receiver turning them white. "I never knew you were so unforgiving. I don't know what I ever saw in you, Jess Stanford. Somewhere in there I thought you had a heart, a soul. I suppose I was wrong. Very wrong." She stopped speaking long enough to gulp down the lump in her throat. "Have a good life."

And the phone went dead in Jess' ear. Oh hell. Now what was he supposed to do?

Two Days Later

Sleep still did not come. Jess lay there in the semi-darkness listening to the sounds around him. No matter how he tried, he couldn't forget his mother. He couldn't push the thoughts of her aside. And the more he thought of her, the more angry he became with his father.

One thing he knew for certain was that this would never be over. Not until he finally spoke with Douglas Stanford. He had a burning desire to tell his father exactly what he thought of him. It would be the only thing to set him free once and for all.

He had thought leaving Billings, Montana behind would solve everything. But in essence it hadn't

solved a damn thing. Only made things worse. Far worse.

But going home meant facing Annie again. How could he face two demons at once? Facing his father was one thing. But facing Annie was entirely another. Especially knowing that all those years he'd been away from her, he'd never forgotten her either.

The sound of her voice was always at the back of his mind, stirring feelings in him he had tried so hard to deny. The color of her eyes were so vivid and her smile so warm and comforting. The touch of her hand so soft and yielding. Was he prepared to see her again? To deal with the collage of emotions that had been pent up for so long?

Finally he realized it didn't matter. Nothing really mattered at all. He just needed to go, to set the past straight, to make amends for his part in breaking Annie's heart. If he didn't accomplish anything else in this lifetime, at least he could do that.

The Next Day

Jess drove two hundred and forty miles to the hospital in Billings. He'd sat in his truck for nearly an hour contemplating whether or not he should go in or just drive back the way he had come. This was a place he'd never thought to revisit. It wasn't home. In fact, there was no place he could call home.

He'd spent his last tens years drifting from town to town trying to locate his mother. The place he'd just come from, he'd been there for longer than he'd been in any one place. He'd worked in various jobs. He'd been a mechanic, a janitor, a short-order cook. He'd taken a series of odd jobs that didn't pay well, but at least provided him a means of feeding himself. He'd spent a lot of time working on ranches for room and board and meals.

In all the places he'd lived, he'd never met anyone he could call a friend. He had numerous girlfriends and lovers. But none of them had filled the empty space in his heart that had been left behind when he walked away from Annie McGiver.

And this is what it was all about now. He wasn't ready to face her. Never would be as far as he was concerned.

At last he got out of his truck. He hesitated before going into the hospital. But he finally did that too. He found his way to the information desk. He asked which way to Annie McGiver's desk. He received a curious look and was politely told there was no Annie McGiver. Instead they directed him to Annie Bishop.

So she was married. He'd never thought of that. But why did it come as such a disappointment? When he stood outside her door, he hesitated before knocking. He inhaled deeply, fighting off the nerves. Then he lifted his fist and lightly knocked against the frame.

"Come in."

The sound of her voice was like music drumming in his ears. When he opened the door, he was not prepared for the emotions that assailed him at the slightest glance.

Annie was beautiful. Splendid really. She was taller than he remembered. She wore a dark gray skirt that fit a little snug around the hips and tapered to just above the knees showing off a wide expanse of leg. She wore a lighter gray satin blouse with a knitted sweater tied around her shoulders.

Her hair was long and luxuriously silky laying against her shoulders. Her eyes were as green as he remember. They reminded him of a grassy field in the middle of summer.

He must have taken her by surprise too. She just stared at him a little breathlessly. Her eyes shot to his and held for a long moment and he could read so much in that one look. She still loved him after all these years.

"Jess, you came." Such simple words.

"I had to. You made me feel like such a heel."

She smiled then. It brought warmth to his limbs. A warmth he hadn't known in quite a long time. If ever.

"Well your father is hanging on, but it is only a matter of time. I think the only thing keeping him alive is his hope that you'll come."

Jess didn't know what to think. His feelings were a jumbled mess. He found it hard to breathe, hard to focus on anything but the sound of Annie's voice.

When he didn't say anything, Annie moved around her desk and came to stand in front of him. So close. So close he could almost lift his hand and touch her hair, her cheek, her lips. He swallowed hard

against the feelings she provoked.

"I'll show you to your father, now," Annie said with a professional air about her. "I'm sure he'll be glad to see you."

Jess didn't respond. What was there to say?

They walked in silence down a series of well-lit halls. The hospital was nearly deserted, the hallways empty. After a few minutes they arrived at his father's room. Annie glanced at him and held his gaze.

"I'll leave you alone, now. If there's anything you need, just let me know and I'll do what I can to assist you."

She turned then, to walk away.

"Annie?"

There was so much desperation in his voice. So much anguish, sadness.

She turned back to him, looking up into that handsome face. The face she had never once forgotten.

"Yes."

"Can you come in with me?" he asked.

In anticipation of her answer, he forgot to breathe. Had it meant that much to him to ask her such a question?

"Are you sure? This is really a private matter between you and your father."

"Yes, I'm sure," Jess answered. "I can't do this alone."

Together they entered the room. It was cast in darkness. At first Jess stiffened. When Annie realized what was happening she reached for the light switch and turned it on. Immediately the room was awash in bright light. Jess' posture changed and the monetary tension left him.

His father lay on his back, the covers pulled to his chest. Tubes and monitors were hooked to him. The smell of alcohol and medicine permeated the air. The beeping of the heart monitor rang throughout the room.

Douglas Stanford was pale, thin, and extremely weak.

"Dad. Dad, it's Jess."

It took a few minutes for him to respond, but Douglas' eyes slowly fluttered open.

"Dad, can you hear me?"

Annie stood to the side of the room, silently watching as father and son stared at each other for the first time in ten years.

"Yes, son. I can hear you."

"I hear you've been asking for me. Why?"

Douglas' voice was slightly raspy. "To tell you I'm sorry."

"Dad, I'm not sure this is a good idea under the circumstances."

Jess' father lifted his frail hand and stretched it out toward his son, reaching for him. Jess refused to take the hand he offered. Douglas let his hand fall to his side. "I need to tell you things, Jess. I need to clear the air."

The tears began to flow. Tears that had been held in for so long.

"What can you say that will make anything better, dad? I don't even remember you much. I tried to forget about you."

"I know," was all Douglas could say. "I wasn't the best of husband's," he acknowledged.

"Or the best of father's either."

"I know that too." Douglas was growing weaker. He could barely keep his eyes open and alert.

"You know what, Jess? Leaving me was the best thing you could have done for me."

Jess stiffened once again. "I didn't leave for your sake, dad. I left for mine. And for mom's. I searched and searched for her. For years dad. I wasn't going to stop until I found her."

Douglas nodded. "I know. Do you know that after you left, I never took another drink. Not once."

Jess just stared at his father's near lifeless form. Each breath was an effort. "Why didn't you do that for mom?" Jess asked. "Why didn't you do that for her?"

"I was messed up, Jess. I didn't know what I was doing at the time. Just like I didn't know what I was doing to you."

"Do you know that night that mom left, I heard everything. I saw what you did to her."

"You were three, Jess. How can you remember anything that far back."

"I might have been three, dad. But I remember."

"How?"

Jess felt the tension taking over his body again. He had to move, to get away from his father. He stepped to the window and peered out of it. He didn't know what he was looking for. Anything. Nothing. He just had to look away from his father before he lost control of all emotions.

"I was hiding behind the curtains. It was a game me and mom use to play. When you came home that night, I was afraid. I knew you might be drunk. So I made sure to stay hidden. Then when you hit mom, I heard everything. I heard the terrible things you said to her."

A single tear drained from the corner of Douglas' eye. "I'm not proud of that, son. I was not a good husband to your mother. I don't blame you for hating me."

Jess continued staring out the window. He didn't notice anything that was spread out before him. He just could no longer look at his father. Nausea rolled in his belly and he had to tamp down the urgent need to hurl.

"Do you know that mom committed suicide? Five years ago?"

Jess turned to his father then, watching his expression carefully. His hand shook so bad he had to stuff them in his front pockets to hide them from his father. He saw the slightest remorse cross his father's face. His eyes turned bleak and a somberness took over him.

"I've wondered many a time what ever came of your mother. I can't say what possessed me that night to behave as I did. But I've regretted it ever since."

Jess had a hard time believing that. He wasn't certain what to think anymore.

Douglas sputtered and spit. His breathing became more shallow. He took a moment to rest before continuing. "I loved your mother, Jess. I want you to know that."

Jess nearly laughed. It took every ounce of energy not to. "You had a funny way of showing it to."

Douglas didn't respond to that. He just laid there staring up at his son with tears in his eyes. "I loved you to, Jess. I know I never took the time to tell you. I didn't take much time for anything except drinking. I wish I could have been a better father to you, son. But I can't go back and right my wrongs, boy. But I can leave this world knowing, that I at least told you the truth."

Jess gave him credit for trying. He was speechless and dazed. He couldn't find the words to speak. The only thing he could do was lean over and take his father in his arms. He grasped him so tight he thought he felt his ribs cracking beneath his strength. The tears flowed endlessly for both.

Annie wasn't sure how long they embraced. Jess continued to hold his father and rock him until he took his last and final breath. And when he did, Jess' body began to shudder violently with the tears he should have cried a long time ago.

Annie came up slowly, and silently behind him. She didn't say a word. All she could do was gently lay her hand on his shoulder and let him know he wasn't alone.

After all these years, Annie finally understood him. She understood the Jess that had abandoned her. It had taken her half a lifetime to get over that. Actually, she had never gotten over the fact that the one man that she loved in all the world had never loved her back.

Annie was about to pull back when she felt Jess' hand grasp hers. Then his fingers intertwined with her own. The next thing she knew he was holding her palm against his cheek. It felt so good. So gloriously right. Except it wasn't.

Slowly she moved her hand away. She smoothed her palm over her skirt. Suddenly she felt awkward in his presence. Suddenly she felt this overwhelming need to comfort him. To shield him from his suffering.

She turned away from him, trying to fight the tears. In all her life she'd never felt this way about anyone, as she did about Jess.

When she looked at him, it was as if she were seeing him for the first time every time. He was handsome, and strong. He was rugged and fierce. He was so much combined all into one magnificent picture.

As she wiped her tears, Jess slowly came up behind her. She could feel his heat. She was disturbed by it. She felt his arms creep around her waist and wrap around her middle. He drew her closer in his embrace until there was nothing separating them.

She let her body relax and she leaned into him.

"Answer me one thing, Annie. How'd you know where to find me?"

She twisted in his arms to face him with all the love shining in her eyes. "I've always known every where you went. I tracked you down. It wasn't easy. It took me a long time to first find out where you went. But once I found out, I never lost track of you again. It's what eventually led to my divorce, Jess. My husband knew it wasn't him I loved. It was always you."

Jess didn't know what to say, think, or feel at that moment. He had the sudden desire to lower his lips to hers and kiss her until neither of them could breathe. But that wouldn't solve anything. Annie deserved so much more. She deserved some answers. After all this time, she needed closure.

"Annie," Jess said softly. "We need to talk. Not today. Maybe not tomorrow. But when this is all over, we'll sit down and talk. You need an explanation why I ran off like I did. I'm not saying you'll ever understand."

"I think I already do," she replied sweetly.

"Will you have dinner with me, Annie, after my father's funeral. We'll talk then, if that's alright with you."

A smile broke out on her face. "That will be fine, Jess. Just fine."

Three Days Later

Jess stared across the table at Annie. The funeral was over. He never would have made it without her by his side. Her strength and positive attitude is what kept him going. He had to say, he didn't deserve the friendship she was offering. She was always smiling and pleasant. Always beautiful and sexy. It would be hard for Jess to let her go a second time.

The dinner plates were cleared away and they were waiting for a slice of apple pie and coffee to be delivered to their table.

Annie hadn't taken her eyes off Jess since they had arrived. She had done most of the talking so far and Jess felt a little bad about that. But he let her ramble on. It was as if she needed to do this. As if it were exercising the past somehow.

Now it was his turn. He didn't know where to begin. He didn't feel any explanation would be adequate. Nothing he said could possibly justify his actions of the past ten years. Nothing could erase the sadness that Annie had endured when he left. Nothing could make amends for shattering her dreams and dashing her hopes.

After the pie and coffee were set on the table and the waitress has disappeared, Jess thought now would be a good time to start trying to set things straight.

He cleared his throat and peered at Annie from across the table. Her hands were resting on the table beside her plate. He reached over and took one in his hands as he gazed protectively into her eyes. Those deep, bright green eyes. He stared at her for the longest time, just memorizing everything about her. These would be memories to take with him. Memories that would stay with him the rest of his life.

"Annie, I'm sorry," Jess spoke slowly, painfully. "I don't know that what I'm about to say will make any difference to you. But I hope that it will at least put things into perspective."

Her hand fell away as Jess continued to talk.

"What I did to you was wrong. I was a coward the day I left. I didn't want to see your face when I said good-bye. I didn't want to be responsible for the tears in your eyes. So I just left, without a word to you about where I was going or what I was going to do."

Annie was speechless. She just sat there watching Jess struggle with his feelings, his guilt.

"I owed you an explanation then, and I owe you one now. Most of all now."

"Look, Jess. You don't owe me anything," Annie stated, staring down at the uneaten piece of pie in her place. She twisted the corner of her napkin with her fingers. "I never really understood what you went through as a boy. But seeing you in there with your father, it made me understand."

"Understand what, Annie. That I was a failure? That I wasn't worth the time of day? What Annie."

"It made me understand things I didn't see then. You were a little boy, afraid of your own father. Your mother left you without as much as a good-bye. You didn't know where she was. Your father never told you that he loved you." She began to cry then, the tears washing over her cheeks.

"Oh, Annie, please don't cry," Jess begged.

She wiped the tears with her napkin. "It's okay Jess. These are good tears." She laughed then. "You didn't really have much guidance in your life Jess. You behaved just as you had seen your parents behave. I can't blame you."

Jess slammed his hand down on the table. The silverware rattled. "Damn it Annie. You're always living in a bubble. You don't want to see things as they really are. I was no good for you then. I'm no good for you now, nor will I ever be."

"Jess, I don't understand what you mean. How can you think you aren't worthy of another person's love."

"Do you love me, Annie. Truly love me."

"I always have, Jess. I always have."

"Despite the fact that I have nothing to offer you. Nothing but the shirt on my back to prove that I even exist. My last ten years have been spent trying to find my mother because I couldn't stand the thought that she could just walk away from me and never once miss me."

"How did you feel, Jess, when you found out she committed suicide?"

"It was hard. Really hard. I had almost wished I'd never found out. Then I could have had an excuse to keep moving on to the next town, the next worthless job I could find. I would have had an excuse to end up just like my father."

"You are nothing like your father, Jess."

"I'm every bit like him. I was afraid to love you, Annie. Afraid I'd end up being just like him. I couldn't see putting you through the same things my father put my mother through. It wouldn't have been fair to you."

Annie got up out of her seat and came to sit next to Jess. She rested her hand on his thigh as she glanced up into eyes filled with bitter sadness.

"I never thought you'd end up like him. You were always sweet, thoughtful and kind. It's why I fell in love with you. Did you ever love me, Jess? Did you ever think about me when you were gone?"

"I thought about you every single day. There wasn't an hour go by that you didn't cross my mind. It was only after I found out that my mother died, that I realized once and for all that I loved you. That I had always loved you."

"So where do we go from here, then?"

"We, Annie? How can you even think of me like that? I crushed your heart once. What makes you think I wouldn't do it again?"

"Because I know you, Jess. I always have. If you loved me even half of what you loved your mother, I'd consider myself to be one lucky girl."

"I have nothing to offer you. I have no skills. No job to fall back on. How will I take care of you?"

Annie grinned broadly, her eyes lighting up with unshed tears. "I'm sure you'll find a way, Jess. There's plenty of opportunities just waiting for you.."

"And if there isn't?"

"Then we'll face that when we get there."

"So where do we go from here, then?"

Annie laughed. It was a hearty laugh. Her face shown with sheer happiness. It was then that he took Annie in his arms and pulled her to him. He held her face in his hands and he lowered his lips to her. He caressed her gently at first, then he picked up the tempo until he was kissing her passionately. She kissed him back with as much fervor as he did. When their kiss broke apart, both were heady with breathless excitement.

"So, I guess I can move back into my father's home, until we can find one of our own."

"Or you could just move in with me," Annie said as she clamped her lips to his for one more kiss. This kiss seemed to last forever and ever and ever.

But one thing Annie new for certain, was that her every wish had just come true. Jess was back in her life. This time for good. She'd never let him go again.