

Episode One

by J.A. Coffey

The doorbell jangled a frantic greeting over the buzz of customers as the chill November wind sent a flurry of fallen leaves creeping across the black and white linoleum tiles.

“Hey, Sugar. Gimme the house special.”

To any other woman, the sobriquet would be annoying. To Sugar Dennison, it was the norm.

“You got it.”

Despite the cold drizzle making tear tracks on the fogged up row of windows, inside the packed Dennison’s diner was warm and cozy with the scents of bacon and maple syrup. Sugar put a warmer on the coffee of a city councilwoman and made change for the two teachers at the end of the counter.

“Two eggs sunny side and a side of grits, Beau,” she hollered over her shoulder.

“Table Six Order up!” Her cousin Beau set the plate of steaming flapjacks on the serving window as Sugar’s twin sister Honey moved behind the counter, the front of her freshly pressed cotton uniform.

“Can you cover Table Six for me? I need to prep the biscuits.” Honey’s dark eyes scanned the busy breakfast crowd and rested on the regulars stuffed into every booth and wobbly table. Sugar sighed and resisted the urge to smooth creases out of her own butter-colored apron. She’d gotten ready at the ass-crack of dawn. It was barely six a.m. now but the diner was at full capacity. Her hastily gulped black coffee hadn’t even hit her system yet.

“Okay, but tell Mama I’m clocking out early today. I’ve got an interview at two.” Sugar felt her natural curls bounce as she tucked a nibbled stub of pencil behind her ear. Time to take more orders.

The doorbell jangled again as a pair of uniformed police officers made their way into Dennison’s diner, slumping in the vacated stools. Sugar felt her palms go slick, then reminded herself that she wasn’t that same stupid girl who’d gotten sprung out of the county jail last year. It had all been a misunderstanding, but she’d learned her lesson. She gulped and snatched up her notepad.

“What’ll it be, officers?” She willed herself to remain calm.

“You tell me, Sugar Pie Dennison. What’s keeping you busy these days?” Officer Frank Milhouse gave her a slow grin like burnt molasses.

Autumn always twisted her broken heart into shreds. The dead leaves clung to branches just like she’d clung to the memories of the one man who’d abandoned her in this godforsaken backwoods country town. It hadn’t felt like home since the day Jax Brandon had been assigned overseas three years ago. She’d cried when he showed her his orders to ship out. But he hadn’t. That man might have been

carved of stone, but he had more honor rolled up in his pinky than she had in her entire body. Sugar felt her cheeks burn, thinking of how Jax would've reacted to the news she'd been arrested.

"Just workin', as usual." The bell chimed again. Sugar grit her teeth. Busy season or no, there was no way in hell she was going to encourage Milhouse. She hadn't hit rock bottom yet.

"Yeah? Think maybe you could find a little free time this Saturday?" Milhouse's fair skin made a sharp contrast to her own, as he wrapped his fingers around hers and pulled her closer. His partner chuckled and looked away, flushing slightly. "Girl as pretty as you shouldn't be getting dishpan hands. I don't like 'em rough."

"Then maybe you should take your hands off her," said a voice she'd never thought to hear again.

Episode Two

by Luanna Stewart

Sugar's next breath stuck in her throat. No, it couldn't be him. She'd just about healed from his desertion. Had forgotten the look in his eyes when he had devilment on his mind. Had forgotten the taste of his kiss.

She pulled her hand from the cop's grip and turned. "Hey, stranger." No way was she going to let the folks in the diner see what Jax's arrival did to her heart.

Officer Milhouse stood with his hands on his equipment belt. "Do I know you?"

She could almost see the testosterone floating in the air between the two men.

"I know him. Excuse me for a minute." Sugar motioned Jax to follow her into the hall that led to the bathrooms. This could not be happening. Not today. She had enough on her mind with the interview that afternoon, to say nothing of arranging extended childcare for her daughter.

Jax's daughter.

Holy hell.

"Hey, Sugar, how are you? You're looking good."

"I'm fine. When did you get back?" Standing this close, it took every bit of self-control to not wrap her arms around his trim waist, press against his firm chest, and inhale his scent. After all this time, just one hit of his pheromones was all it took to make her forget that he'd left way too easily. That his responses to her emails got shorter and shorter until they stopped. She called to tell him she was pregnant, but changed her mind when it became clear he was too busy to talk—at eleven o'clock on a Wednesday night. She'd not called again and neither had he.

"I landed yesterday, spent the night at my folks. They told me you still worked here."

"Yup, still slinging hash. And as you can see we're busy as hell, so..."

"They also told me you had a run-in with the police last year."

Oh, the joys of small town living. She bet they all knew when she got her period too because Mrs. Hennigar at the drug store would notice when she bought tampons, and the checkout clerk at the grocery store would notice when she stocked up on chocolate.

"It was a misunderstanding, all cleared up. What else did your parents tell you? You must have had a long conversation, catching up on everything over the last three years."

"You have a child, a daughter. How'd that happen?"

She smirked. "Based on my experience, you know exactly how that might happen."

"How old is she?"

Well, shit. Luckily Sophie was petite, so some fudging on her age wouldn't be too hard to pull off. "She's two."

His eyebrows lifted. "Who's the dad? Anyone I know?"

Sugar's stomach plummeted. She hated lying. But Jax had made it abundantly clear he wasn't interested in maintaining their relationship when the going got rough. She didn't want him back if it was just because of some sense of responsibility. He hadn't loved her three years ago, at least not enough. And she wouldn't settle for anything less.

"No one important, just a guy who left and never came back."

Episode Three

By Aubrey Wynne

Jax Brandon looked at her through hooded eyes, catching the jab aimed at his failed communication. How could he explain? The memory of her tears the day he left had haunted him every night since. Before each mission, he would look at her picture, running his finger over her smiling face. Yet he knew the chance of a safe return became slimmer with each assignment.

How could he explain that he had stopped contacting because of his love for her? The pain she'd felt that day would have been nothing compared to the misery if he'd been killed in action. And Jax cared too much for this Sugar to cause her that kind of grief.

"You look damn good." The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them. Jax had intended on avoiding her while he was in town for the holidays. Somehow, he had found himself walking by the diner and there she stood in the window, taking an order. When he'd seen the cop putting the moves on her, he couldn't help himself.

"Yeah, right," she said as she pushed those silky, dark curls away from her face. He fisted his hands to keep from reaching out and tucking one stray lock behind her ear. "Looks like the Marines have been good to you."

"Well, they didn't kill me," he answered lightly in the hopes of seeing a smile.

"That's not funny." Her blue eyes flashed with anger. His stomach clenched with remorse; his crotch tightened with three years of pent-up desire. Had he really thought he could let her go?

"You're right," he said and reached out to brush her cheek with his thumb. "War is a serious game and I'm very lucky to be here."

Sugar's eyes closed briefly and her slight tremble told him that her feelings had not changed. Did he have a chance? It would take a lot of convincing. This woman still held a grudge from a fifth grade romance.

"Please don't do that," she whispered. Shaking her head and backing away from his touch, she continued in a tight voice, "I have to get back to work. It's been nice seeing you again."

"I deserve that." Jax didn't want to end the conversation quite yet. He hadn't heard that sweet southern drawl in three years. "Are you going to the tree lighting Thanksgiving weekend?"

"Of course. Sophie and I will be there with my parents." Panic shone in her eyes then she quickly turned and walked away.

Sophie. The name they wanted for their first girl. Sam for a boy. He suddenly had a few more questions for his parents.

“So stranger, I don’t seem to recognize your mug.” The cop who had been flirting with Sugar stood in front of him, invading his personal space. “How do you know my girl?”

“Your girl? You’re dating?” Shit. Had she met him when she got arrested? He still needed to find out more details on that tale. When the man hesitated, Jax had his answer. “I’m Jax Brandon. My folks run the hardware store. I don’t seem to recognize you, either.”

“I transferred here from Atlanta a year ago. And I was about to ask Sugar out when you interrupted.” He puffed out his chest like a rooster, as if trying to make himself bigger, then fondled his holster. Jax towered over him by at least a foot and enjoyed the man’s obvious disadvantage.

“Well, thanks for the warning but Sugar and I have a history. And the ending hasn’t been written yet.” He brushed past the officer, winked over his shoulder at a grinning Honey, and walked out the door.

Episode Four
By Kris Calvert

Sugar couldn't contain her smile as the father of her little girl walked his finely tuned tight ass out the door. She'd convinced herself she didn't care for him over the years, but deep in her soul she knew it was merely a self-preservation tactic. Only a fool would continue to pine for a man who clearly didn't want to be with her, and Sugar told herself every day that she wasn't that kind of fool.

She'd worked hard to pull herself up by her bootstraps, to be a good mother, the kind of mother Sophie deserved. The smile faded from Sugar's face as Jax's heavy presence faded from the bustling room.

"What the hell was that?" Honey asked coming to her side.

"What do you mean?" Sugar nervously wiped her hands on her apron and immediately turned to Beau looking for table three's barnyard strangler breakfast special.

"What do you mean, *what do you mean?*" Honey repeated. "You're being an ass."

"*I'm* being an ass?" Sugar asked as she picked up her order and walked it to the table, avoiding a rush of patrons moving in and out by spinning on her heels to stay ahead of the chaos. "Please dear sister, enlighten me."

"I don't think you're an ass," Frank interjected. "But I think you have a nice one."

Sugar took a deep breath and faced the over zealous would-be suitor. "Get out of my face before I junk-punch you so hard, your man business will go from dangling between your legs to hanging from your badge. Do we understand each other Officer Millhouse?"

A roar of applause erupted from the female patrons while Frank's fellow officers bowed their heads in embarrassment. Sugar, too mad to notice anything but the ringing in her own ears, stormed from the front of the diner to the back of the kitchen.

"Shit-fire, Shug," Beau said following his cousin into the storeroom. "You know I care about you, but you just can't go around shaming police officers in the restaurant."

"He deserved it and you know it."

"Of course he did, but the decent officers help to keep the riff raff out of here. If you keep them all away, I can guaran-damn-tee we'll get robbed."

Sugar stopped her incessant pacing long enough to offer an apology. "I'm sorry, Beau," she said as tears of frustration and shock from seeing Jax began to pool in her eyes. "I just..."

"I know," he said pulling her in for a hug.

"You smell like onions and peppers," Sugar said as she laughed through the tears that now flowed freely.

"If you'd stop pushing the Mexican omelet, I wouldn't smell like this."

Honey stuck her head into the storeroom and let out a sigh letting them both know there wasn't time for a breakdown—at least not during the breakfast rush. "Guys, the grill is about to catch on fire, the dining room is a hot mess, I've got one pissed off officer paying for his breakfast and..."

"And what?" Sugar asked wiping the tears from her cheeks.

"And one Marine standing in the parking lot—waiting."

"What?" Sugar asked.

"Dry your tears sister."

"Are you kidding me? What's he waiting for?"

Honey stared into the teary eyes of her sister knowing the many nights she'd cried herself to sleep and said one word. "You."

Episode Five

By Anne Lange

Jax leaned against his old, held together with rusty wire and duct tape, pick-up truck. The last time he'd driven this poor girl was the afternoon he'd told Sugar about his orders to ship out. Then he'd held her while she cried and pounded his chest with her small, curled up fists. When she'd calmed, they'd driven down to the lake and made love until dawn.

That memory of laying her in the tall grass next to the softly rippling water, stripping her work uniform from her luscious body amongst a spray of wild flowers surrounding them had kept him sane for the last three years.

He'd spent hours that night memorizing every inch of her with his hands, his mouth and his tongue, scared shitless he'd never have the opportunity to touch or lick her sweet flesh or kiss her lips again. Thankful for the curtain of privacy the flora provided, he'd indulged in every wicked desire he could imagine.

As the sun began its ascent, he'd finally pushed his aching cock into her trembling body, and then he'd simply held her close, inhaled the faint fragrance of her shampoo, fighting against his need to find release—wanting to prolong the inevitable for as long as he could. Knowing that when at last they looked into each other's eyes as he moaned through his orgasm, and tears slipped down her cheeks, that this might be their last time together.

"What are you still doing here?" she asked as she crossed the parking lot, slowly making her way toward him.

All he could picture was her beautiful ass snug in the palm of his hands, her long lean legs wrapped around his hips, and those succulent brown nipples...fuck, he could still remember their taste. His mouth watered.

Trying to act nonchalant, his sweaty palms fisted inside the pockets of his jeans, he glanced around them. A minivan pulled in and found a spot closer to the back of the lot. A teenage couple came out of the restaurant and ambled over to their bikes they'd left leaning against the old oak tree.

"Like I told the nice officer inside," he replied, "our ending hasn't been written yet." He looked down at her, willing her to hop into his arms and kiss him with reckless abandon.

Just like she used to.

Before he left.

A strange light lit up her eyes, but she shuffled her feet, dropping her gaze to the pavement.

“Tell me about Sophie,” he said.

Her head jerked upright and her dark eyes narrowed. She hesitated a moment too long before she gave a weak shrug. “Nothing to tell.” She jabbed a toe into a crack in the asphalt.

“Aw, come on, Sugar, every mama likes to talk about their kids. And I haven’t been around in three long years.” Three aching long—where he’d thought of her every one of those damn days—years. “I’d think you’d want to show her off.”

“Um...”

“Why Sophie?”

Surprise widened her eyes. She licked her lips. “I liked the name.”

He dragged his gaze away from her mouth and back up to see her reaction. “That was our name, Sugar. We’d picked that out long ago.”

She looked over to the family spilling out from the van, over to the young couple walking their bikes side-by-side down the street, but she wouldn’t land on him for a second.

“Got a picture of her?”

She swallowed heavily. And blinked rapidly. His heart raced, but all the sound and activity around him seemed to slow to an agonizing pace and become thunder in his ears. Her reluctance to say a word was as good as yanking out a photo album.

“I’m good at math, Sugar. And you were never a woman to sleep around.”

“Jax, please. Don’t do this.” She turned pleading eyes up to him. Her bottom lip trembled.

“Hey, Sugar, is he bothering you?” That asshole officer, the one who thought he had a claim on Sugar, strutted over and paused much too close to Sugar for Jax’s comfort.

But Jax didn’t even acknowledge him. He glared at Sugar, doing his best now to reign in his temper.

“I want to meet my daughter, Sugar.”

Episode Six

By Caroline Lee

She hadn't said anything to his demand; just turned and walked back into the diner. It had taken every ounce of self-control—control that the Marines had taught him—not to follow her, especially when the cop started to puff up. He started talking shit again, as if he was already dating Sugar or something, and Jax climbed into his rusty pick-up truck to turn over the engine. The guttural roar drowned out the cop's angry words when the man got too close to the window.

The dude was still standing there in the parking lot like he owned the town when Jax pulled out.

The drive around the lake was always pretty, this time of year. He didn't want to go back to his parents' house—not now when he had so much to think about, and Mom would want to know why he was so distracted and not eating a third piece of pecan pie—and every other place in town was too crowded. But the lake, now—the lake was his special place. Where Dad had taught him and Darren to fish when they were kids, and where he'd taken his prom date to neck after the dance. But sitting there on the levy, with the reflection of the maples turning the water brilliant reds and yellows, Jax knew he'd always associate this place with *her*. She was the last one here with him, and as far as he was concerned, the most special.

Sugar Pie Dennison had a daughter. He pulled his hands from his jeans' pockets and ran them across his starting-to-grow-out-again hair. A daughter. That fine-looking woman, who'd snagged him with her humor, her balls, her ingenuity and her loyalty, had gone through a pregnancy, birth, and raising a kid while he was on the other side of the world. She hadn't been alone—there were more Dennisons around these parts than there were Brandons—but he hadn't been here with her, and that was rough.

Not that she'd needed him. She'd made it real clear four years back that they were equals, and she could do anything that he could, and didn't need him swooping into her life to take care of her. But partners supported each other, and it hurt to think that she'd gone through such a life change—it couldn't've been easy—without him.

Hurt almost as much as thinking that *he* was the cause. Was Sophie his kid? Lord knew that he and Sugar had talked about kids, about maybe getting married and settling down in one of the white-picket-fenced craftsman homes along Main Street. But then he'd been deployed, and he knew that it was going to be a long time before he got home again, if at all. So many of his buddies hadn't made it

back, or had made it back in pieces, or had refused to go back. But he was lucky; he had the chance to see his family in time for Thanksgiving.

And maybe find a new family.

He started along the path that circled the lake, glad for his Dad's old "My Son Is A Marine" sweatshirt. It'd been three long years since he'd seen maples this color, or felt the cool nip of an autumn breeze, or smelled this hint of woodsmoke. Three long years since he'd held a woman's dark hand, or thought of the future.

Jax inhaled, liking the way the cold air hit his lungs hard. Sugar had a daughter, and she might be his. He needed to know, to know if he had a future here with her. With them.

One thing's for certain; they'd be at the Lion's Club parade on Thursday morning. The whole damn town went, and no mother would deny that to her little one. Sugar and Sophie would be there, and what if the girl didn't look like him? What if he wasn't her father? Would it matter? He still wanted Sugar—had wanted her for years—and maybe he was ready to be a Daddy.

A hawk circling overhead cried, and Jax sighed. He needed to know, needed to meet Sophie, but wasn't sure it would change anything. Thanksgiving was only a few days away, and Mrs. Dennison was the best cook in town. But that didn't mean that he couldn't invite her daughter—and granddaughter—over for some of Mom's pie Thursday evening. The parade, the turkey, the pie, the tree-lighting... Yeah, he was lucky to be home time to celebrate.

And if he played his cards right, he might have more to be thankful for than he could've guessed.

Episode Seven
By Valerie Twombly

Sugar stormed across the parking lot, searing tears streaming down her face. If that wasn't enough, Mr. tough cop was hot on her heels.

"Sugar! What the hell did he mean by his daughter?"

She spun to face him, all fury and flame. "How many ways do I need to spell out? Leave. Me. Alone! I'm not interested in dating you." With a sigh. "I've got enough damn trouble as it is." She whirled and walked back through the door and headed straight for the storeroom. She was a wreck of emotions. A ball of guilt for not telling him he had a daughter. Anger boiled just under the surface like the sun about to erupt. After all, it was he who had left her and then made it perfectly clear he didn't love her. Then there was her heart. How many lives did it have left? Broken to pieces when he'd deployed, fractured when he cut off communication and today? Today it had shattered into a million fragments when she'd seen him again.

Damn it all to hell and back.

She still loved him. Heart, body, and soul.

"Sugar!" Her sister entered the room as pissed as a cat in a back alley fight.

"I know." She pulled a tissue from her apron and blew. Pushed her curls out of her face and straightened her shoulders. "Sorry, I'll be out in a sec."

"Listen. I know your hearts breaking, but you need to do what's best for Sophie. That man has a right to know his daughter and her, her father." Her eyes softened. "Give him a chance, Sugar. War is hell, and something tells me deep down he still loves you. Always has."

Before she could reply, her sibling vanished back into the sea of customers. Her sister was right. Sugar owed her daughter. Her heart said to give him a chance. Her body begged her to slip into his arms and forget the last three years had ever happened. Her mind however, said to pack up and run. She closed her eyes and inhaled. After the rush was over, she'd head to their favorite spot. Something told her she'd find him walking the lake. As she exited out the door and into the breakfast crowd she knew it was the right decision. She only hoped her heart didn't stop beating completely.

As she slid by Beau, he gave her a wink. "Things will work out. They always do."

She smiled. "Thanks cuz."

Her sister looked up from her note pad and gave a nod of approval. "You cut outa here in thirty. I'll handle the rest."

Then it was settled. In less than an hour she'd likely make a fool of herself, but she'd sleep with a rattlesnake to ensure her daughters happiness.

Episode Eight

By Lena Hart

It took Sugar longer than she anticipated to leave the busy diner, but as the breakfast rush began to die down, she jumped into her mother's old station wagon and zipped through their small, beloved town of Hartsville and headed straight toward Kissmee Lake. She hadn't been down to their old spot in three years. Not since their last night together, when they had shared the most explosive moment of her life—and had created their daughter.

Sugar made it to the lake in time to see Jax sitting in his truck. The back lights glowed as he began to pull out of his parking spot.

Was he leaving?

For good?

The thought of not setting things right between them, of never seeing him again, sent her into a panic. Sugar whipped her station wagon alongside his. She barely had the key out of the ignition before she jumped out of the car and ran to his truck.

"Jax, wait!"

Jax hit the breaks, a sort of stunned confusion on his handsome face. Sugar ran to the passenger side and climbed into the tall truck. He put the truck back into park and cut the engine.

"Sugar, what the hell? I could've hit you."

She smiled at him, not at all bothered by his ferocious frown. She knew him and knew he only got that look when he was scared. "No, you wouldn't have. You would never hurt me."

His expression softened. "No, I wouldn't."

"Then why did you stop writing me?" Sugar hadn't meant to blurt out those words, but his sudden cut of communication had torn her heart apart. She knew this moment wasn't about her, it was for Sophie and having her daughter know her father, but Sugar was still hurt by his callous abandonment and needed to get the words off her chest. She glanced down at her hands and exhaled. "I know why you had to leave, Jax. I hated it, but I know *you*, and I know you could never turn your back on your responsibilities. But me? I never imagined you would turn your back on *me*."

Her voice caught and Sugar kept her gaze averted as silence stretched between them. Suddenly, he opened the glove compartment and pulled out a small bundle of letters in varying degrees of wear. Without a word, he handed her the stack. Sugar stared down at them curiously before gingerly pulling them from his grasp.

“What are these?”

“My final letters to you.”

Sugar’s eyes snapped up to his. She knew what he meant by that and in that moment, the possibility that he would not be sitting next to her in his old pick-up truck, where they had share so many fiery moments, became a stark reality.

“Oh, Jax.”

He reached out and brushed the single tear that escaped from her lids. “Don’t cry, sweetheart. The last thing I ever wanted to do was cut you out of my life. But I couldn’t stand the thought of what my death might do to you. I didn’t want to put you through that kind of pain so I thought I could help you forget me. But I was a fool and caused us both unnecessary pain.” He nodded toward the letters in her hands. “I wrote you every chance I got after your last email. It was the only thing that kept me sane out there.” He paused then said gutturally, “No matter how much I tried, Sugar, I could never let you go.”

Tears brimmed her eyes as a series of emotions reeled through her, but she blinked them away. Glancing down at the letters, she flipped through each one, losing count after thirty. On the face of each letter was her name in his bold handwriting with exes and ohhs scribbled underneath. A quavering smile tugged at her lips. It was the same way she had signed off all her emails to him.

“Jax... I—”

Her words were cut short when suddenly a police cruiser pulled up behind his truck, flashing its bright red and blue lights. From the outline of the figure inside, Sugar could make out Officer Milhouse’s stocky frame.

Episode Nine
By Chanta Rand

Jax hopped out of his truck, ready for battle. He'd had enough of this dude's shit. He'd met plenty of guys like Milhouse overseas—all bluster and no balls. The only reason he got away with his intimidating behavior was because he was a big bully in a small town.

Jax knew all about taking down bullies. He'd done plenty of that for the last three years. He'd even had nightmares about it. One more bad dream wouldn't matter. In fact, it'd be worth it to put a hurtin' on this fool he'd never forget.

One scuff-toed boot foot followed the other as Milhouse exited the cruiser. He stood, legs bowed like a wishbone. Son-of-a-bitch acted like he owned the world. A grim line occupied the place where his mouth should have been. Steel eyes shaded by the crisp brim of his cowboy hat bored into Jax.

The two stood nose-to-nose. Millhouse puffed his chest out. "Listen, buddy. You can't just skip into my town trying to lay claim to something that's clearly not yours."

"Your town?"

"You heard me. Now, why don't you slink back in your truck and get the hell out of here before I send you home with your tail between your legs?"

Jax tensed. "You think just because you're wearing that tarnished badge I won't kick your ass?"

Milhouse snatched the gold-tone metal from his lapel and flung it to the ground. "Badge is gone now, punk." Then he unfastened his gun belt. It slid to the grass and landed with a soft thud on the grass. "It's just you and me. Man to man. You sure you wanna tangle with—?"

Jax punched him square on the jaw. Milhouse's head snapped back, and then he fell forward, landing flat on his face on the carpet of grass. It was over before it began.

Jax's warrior instinct kicked in. He stalked over to the cop's unconscious body and used his foot to shove him onto his back. "Just like I thought. All talk."

Sugar rushed forward. "Oh, my God! Is he dead?"

"No. But when he wakes up, he'll wish he was."

"Jax..." Sugar's hand clasped his, her slender fingers lacing with his calloused ones. "Let's just go, please," she begged. "You can get in a lot of trouble for this."

He shook his head, keeping his gaze pinned on Milhouse. "I defended my country. I can damn sure defend the woman I love."

"You can't just assault a—wait. You love me?"

He faced her, his heart wrenching at the flickers of hope dancing across her blue irises. Lord, she was beautiful. Beautiful and perfect and everything he wanted in a woman. In that moment, he knew he'd do anything to protect her, and the child he believed was his.

"Yes, I love you, Sugar Dennison. I think I loved you from the moment I laid eyes on you." He brought her hand to his lips and pressed a tender kiss on her knuckles. "The whole time I was away, I prayed I'd get back to you. I went to bed thinking of you. I woke up wondering about you. Now that you're standing before me in the flesh, I'm never gonna let anything separate us again."

A single tear slid down her smooth cheek. "I thought you'd forgotten me."

"Never."

Her lips parted, begging to be kissed. He'd dreamed of those lips. Fantasized about her curvaceous body. Plotted what he would do if he ever saw her again. The memory of her had sustained him like water to a man in the desert. He leaned in, ready to show her just how much he'd missed her.

The sharp blast of a car horn waylaid his plans. Tires crunched gravel as a brown and white station wagon pulled into the parking lot. A face he recognized peered through the driver's side window.

"Hey mama," Sugar called.

Mrs. Dennison's shocked gaze flitted from Sugar to him. "Jax? Jax Brandon is that you?"

"Yes, ma'am."

She stared at the lifeless figure on the ground. Jax knew he probably looked like Captain Morgan on steroids. Knee bent, sneaker firmly planted atop Milhouse's sternum.

"Good Lord! What is your foot doing on that cop's chest?"

Before he could answer, a beautiful, cherub-faced little girl with dark bouncy curls caught his attention. She stared wide-eyed out of the back window. She took one look at him and then her little lips scrunched into a frown.

"Aw, shit," he muttered.

"Hey," Sugar elbowed him. "Watch your language in front of my mom—and my daughter."

Episode Ten

By Kishan Paul

The world turned silent as father and daughter eyed each other. Sugar sucked in a breath and headed to her baby. Sophie was her life. The best thing that had ever happened to her. Everything she did was for that child. Her baby deserved the best and Jax was the best. Her heart had always known this to be true, it was her pride that refused to listen.

She looked over her shoulder just in time to see him move his foot from Milhouse's chest. His mouth was open and a smile tugged at the corners as if he was in awe of what he saw. She followed that gaze to the backseat of the car. To her baby girl. *Their* baby girl.

Did he notice Sophie's eyes were the same caramel as his? Or that her cheeks dimpled in exactly the same spot as his? Then there was her stubborn streak. There was no question they were the same blood.

A mix of excitement and nervousness flooded her and her heart pulsed against her ears. By the time she'd made it to the passenger side door of her Momma's car, Jax was at the other. They both opened their doors and slid in besides Sophie at the same time.

"Hello, Mrs. Dennison," Jax said with a nod toward the driver's seat where Sugar's mother sat. Momma smiled back at him. "I'm glad you're home safe, son."

Doe like eyes, too big for that tiny face, stared up at the two women and then turned to assess Jax. Sophie slid her tiny hand into Sugar's, held on tight, and pointed at him. "Momma, who that?"

A flash of pain shot through Jax's face and it tugged at her heart. She should have never kept this a secret from either of them and it was time she came clean. She opened her mouth to do just that when he cleared his throat and reached out his hand.

"Hi, my name's Jax. What's yours?"

The child leaned toward her and whispered loudly. "Is he a stranger, Momma?"

Sugar fought back the tears and shook her head. "No, baby. He's family."

Satisfied with the answer, Sophie smiled at him and offered her tiny hand to him to shake. Jax stared at her palm for a moment and as soon as he wrapped his fingers around her, Sugar knew the child had stolen his heart. His eyes were red with emotion. He blinked them away and kissed her hand. A lone tear streaked down Sugar's cheek.

"Why'd you hurt Popo?"

His mouth dropped and he flashed Sugar a questioning look. She chuckled as she nudged her chin in the direction of Milhouse.

“Hands and feet are not for hitting. Right Mamma?” Sophie’s imitation of her made Sugar blush.

“That’s right baby.” Her affirmation seemed to give Sophie the encouragement she needed.

She pulled her little fingers out from Sugar’s grasp and waved one at her father. “Popos are our friend. You should never hit Popo.”

Jax grinned and leaned in close. “I’m sorry, sweetheart. You’re right it wasn’t nice.”

The tiny face turned to the back window and stared at the officer who was now on his feet. “You need to pawlagize.”

He nodded his agreement. “Maybe you could help me do that?”

Sugar’s mouth dropped as she watched him unbuckle Sophie from the car seat. The two walked hand in hand toward a red-faced Milhouse. She had no idea what they said to the officer but his anger visibly faded from his face and shoulders. He even squatted and let Sophie give him a hug. Shortly after the embrace, he picked up his badge and belt from the grass, got in his car, and drove away.

Sugar turned around and looked at the rearview mirror, catching her mother’s gaze. Momma’s lips trembled and her eyes were red with tears. “Don’t let that man go this time, Baby.”

She nodded and looked behind her at the man in question. He still had Sophie’s hand in his and listened intently to whatever her baby was saying.

Her chest tightened. What worried her wasn’t if he’d leave. He was already falling hard for the daughter he never knew he had. The million dollar question was would he ever forgive her for not telling him?

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