

Chrissie ended up going out after work with Rita -- not to drink, but to dinner and a movie. They chose a comedy without a lot of plot, but enough laughs to take their minds off their troubles. She arrived home late and was surprised to see lights burning in the house next door.

The house had been empty for over a month now, ever since Tammy Hughes had moved across town. Though Tammy had never come out and said so, Chrissie suspected her young neighbor had moved in with the skinny private who had been a frequent visitor to the little brick house in the months preceding Tammy's departure. Chrissie collected her mail from the box at the end of the drive, then unlocked her front door and went inside, stopping to kick off her shoes in the entryway. Her cats, Rudy and Sapphire, greeted her with pitiful yowls, tails twitching.

"Yes, I know, you're so mistreated," Chrissie said, bending to pet them, her mind still on the house next door. She hadn't thought of Tammy in a while. After Tammy's husband had shipped out to Iraq, Chrissie had tried to befriend the young woman, who had seemed so lost and alone. Despite the fact that she had a child — a little boy called T.J. — Tammy had seemed like a child herself. She thought nothing of wearing her pajamas and eating only cereal and ice cream for days at a time, letting T.J. do the same. When her Honda broke down, rather than have it fixed, she left it sitting at the curb and began driving the red truck her husband had left behind. When the city had finally towed the car — after leaving numerous citations, which Tammy ignored — she had been unconcerned. "I was tired of it anyway," she'd said.

Chrissie had gone out with Tammy a few times, giving in to the younger woman's argument that they deserved to have a little fun. They had spent one memorable evening at a bar frequented by soldiers from nearby Fort Carson. While Chrissie politely fended off the overtures of earnest young men who reminded her of Matt, Tammy drank and danced and flirted and drank some more. Chrissie had ended up pouring her into a taxi and taking her home, and got stuck with the bill for both the taxi and the babysitter.

Soon after that, the private showed up. Tammy would call Chrissie sometimes and ask her to babysit. "I have a class at the community college and my regular girl canceled," she'd plead.

Chrissie suspected the only thing Tammy was studying was the private, but she'd agreed to babysit, if only for the chance to spend an evening with T.J.

The dark-haired toddler with the chocolate brown eyes could melt Chrissie with a single gap-toothed smile. A happy child who loved to cuddle, T.J. had won Chrissie's heart the first time they'd met, when he'd taken her hand and earnestly introduced her to a purple stuffed bear. "This is Mr. Pringles," he'd said. "My daddy gave him to me."

Chrissie had never met T.J.'s father. Captain Hughes. Tammy never talked about him, except once, when Chrissie had tried to broach the subject of Tammy's frequent nights out on the town. "I'm too lonely at the house all by myself," she said, flipping her long brown hair over her shoulder, her mouth shaped into a pretty pout. "If my husband expects me to sit there all by myself until he comes home, he's crazy."

You won't know lonely until they tell you your husband is never coming home again, Chrissie thought, but she said nothing. After that, she stopped trying to give advice to Tammy. But she would babysit whenever she was asked, and spend hours rocking with T.J., reading to him and singing him songs. In those few hours, at least, she was able to fill the hole inside her where a husband and child belonged.

She carried the mail into the kitchen, the cats following, weaving figure eights around her feet. She put the kettle on for a pot of tea, and opened a can of seafood delight for the kitties. From her kitchen window she could see the kitchen in Tammy's house. The light was on, but the room was empty. Had Tammy split with her private and decided to come home?

Or had Captain Hughes returned to his empty house?

Her throat tightened at the thought. Had Tammy's husband been part of the unit that had arrived home today? How must it have been for him, standing in the crowd of joyous families, with no one to welcome him home?

The thought of that man — any man — sitting alone in that empty house after a year away brought tears to her eyes. She blinked them back and did the only thing she could think of to do. She took

a bottle of wine from the rack on the counter, and assembled a plate of sandwich fixings from the refrigerator. Then she put on her coat and started next door.

She made it as far as her front porch before she turned around and went back into the house, to comb her hair and touch up her makeup. Not because she wanted to impress him, but because a man who had been away fighting deserved to look at a woman who had gone to a little trouble for his sake.

She hurried across the strip of snow-covered grass between the two houses, cold wind nipping at her ankles and tugging at her coat. She stepped carefully up the icy walk, juggling the wine bottle and the plate of food, and knocked on the front door.

She waited, the cold burning her cheeks, then knocked again, harder this time. In a few seconds, she heard heavy footsteps and the sound of a lock being turned. Then the porch light came on, and the door opened.

Her first impression of him was of strength and height - muscles straining the shoulders of his dress uniform, his head bent to look down at her. He had dark hair cut close at the sides, and dark eyes that fixed on her. "Yes?" he asked, his voice gruff.

She cleared her throat, trying to find her voice. "I...I saw the light and...and wanted to welcome you home." The words sounded stilted to her ears. Would he think she was merely nosy?

He continued to stare at her, looking her up and down as if she were an escaped lunatic. Or a ghost. She could feel his gaze on her, burning her.

She held up the bottle of wine. "I thought you might like something to eat, or drink."

He stepped back, and opened the door wider. "Come in."

She hesitated, then decided she'd look even more foolish standing on the porch in the cold. She stepped over the threshold and he shut the door behind her. "Let me take those," he said, relieving her of her burdens.

"I'm Christine Evans," she said. "I live next door." She followed him into the kitchen and watched as he found two glasses and a corkscrew.

"Ray Hughes," he said.

"It's good to meet you," She'd seen a picture of him once before, one Tammy had carried in her wallet. The picture had not done him justice. It hadn't given a true idea of the way he filled a room with his presence.

He handed her a glass of wine. "Why don't you take off your coat," he said.

"It's a little chilly in here." The house was like ice.

"Sorry. I hadn't noticed." He walked into the other room. She followed and saw him turn up the thermostat. The heat kicked on, with the burnt-dust smell of a furnace that hadn't been used in weeks.

There was no furniture in the room except a coffee table and a recliner. Chrissie stared at the chair, frowning. Tammy must have taken the other furniture when she left. Why? Hadn't she realized how cruel she was being?

But no, Tammy was not one to think of the impact of her actions.

Ray sipped the wine and studied her. "How long have you lived next door?" he asked.

"Three years," she said. Since six months after Matt had died.

"Then you must have known my wife."

"Yes, I knew Tammy." She sipped the wine and avoided looking at him. Yet she couldn't keep her gaze averted long. There was something so compelling about his face, something that drew her to study the firm line of his jaw and the jut of his nose.

At the mention of Tammy's name, his face took on a closed-off look. "Did you say your name was Christine? So people call you Chrissie?"

"Some people." She hugged one arm across her chest. Tammy had called her that.

"You were Tammy's friend," he said.

She nodded. She had tried to be Tammy's friend, but her brand of friendship was not what the young woman had wanted.

He drained the wine glass, then rolled the stem back and forth in his fingers. "She wrote me about you."

“She did?” The words — and the chill in his voice — startled her. “What did she say?”

“She said the two of you went out together. That you were single and a lot of fun.” His voice was clipped, louder than it had been.

“We went out a couple of times.” Despite the heater, the air in the house was colder than ever. Chrissie forced herself to stand still, to not act afraid.

Ray glared at her, a white line of muscle standing out along his jaw. “Instead of staying home with our son the way she should have, she was out running around with you. You probably introduced her to the guy she ran off with.”

“No. I had nothing to do with that.” She shook her head.

He hurled the glass against the wall. It shattered. She jumped, her heart racing, and set her own glass on the counter. Her hands were shaking so badly, she had to clench them into fists to keep them still.

“Get out,” he said. “I don’t need you screwing up my life anymore than you already have.”

She opened her mouth to argue, to explain she had nothing to do with Tammy’s defection. But one look in his eyes told her he was in no mood to listen. She pulled her coat more tightly around her and walked past him to the door.

Once outside, she broke into a run. Only when she was safely in her own house, the door locked and bolted behind her, did she realize tears were streaming down her cheeks.

She walked to the sink and filled a glass with water, then took a long drink, waiting for her pounding heart to slow. She tried to tell herself Ray’s outburst didn’t mean anything. Of course he was upset; he needed someone to blame and she was handy.

But his words still stung. She’d wanted this man, more than any she’d met in a long time, to like her. She’d felt the pull of attraction to him the moment he opened the door and stood, towering over her yet still vulnerable. The feeling had scared her, but she’d been determined not to run from it. Not this time. After three years, she was ready to move past the hurt. To allow herself to fall in love again. The idea was as thrilling as it was frightening.

And for a few minutes there, she’d held out hope that Ray Hughes would be the one. The man who would help her move past the fear and hurt into something wonderful.

A man who hated her now, before he even knew her. On the scale of things, most would say it was a minor loss, but it hurt all the same. She looked out the kitchen window, toward his now darkened house. Was he sitting there in the dark, brooding? Did he regret anything he’d said?

Was there any way for the two of them to reach across the misconceptions and try again?