

Puzzle of the Heart



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By Jennifer McKenzie

The streamers looked like Pepto Bismal. Tonya glared at the decorations as the office party noise rose louder around her. *Idiots.* She took another sip of her white wine and wondered one more time why she was here.

Yes, the company celebrated Valentine's Day every year. And why not? They were a chocolate company that became successful with a novelty item no one had made before and now had become a staple every February 14th like Candy Canes at Christmas.

"How is your drink, Miss Paul?" Her boss grinned as he waved a bottle of wine in her face. She studied him over her wine glass. Big, jolly and happy, Winston Jergens invented the chocolate puzzles so popular at the moment. Incredibly, the man came up with a brilliant way to use chocolate and created Romantic Riddles. Each box contained a series of chocolate pieces when put together spelled out a personalized message for the recipient. Tonya had been there when the idea had been born.

"Just fine, Winston, thank you." She glanced over Winston's shoulder. Where was he? He liked these little soirées less than she did, but they were like the three legs of a triangle, each necessary to the whole. Was it pathetic that she hungered for these short glimpses of him?

Winston filled her glass despite her answer. His face was a little flushed and he beamed with success. "It's hard to believe it's been three years since we came up with the Heart Puzzles."

Tonya blinked. "Really?" She took a sip of her wine. "It seems longer."

The man's grin dropped away. "You're thinking about Tommy."

“Yes, I am.” Suddenly, she couldn’t take it anymore. She set her glass down and picked up her purse. “I’m afraid you’ll have to continue the festivities without me, Winston. I’ll see you on Monday.”

His fat fingers caught her arm as she started for the elevator. “Sean will be disappointed.”

Tears pricked her eyes and she met Winston’s compassionate gaze. “I assure you. I won’t be missed.” She gently extracted her arm and walked calmly to the elevator. Her coworkers all smiled and waved as she headed out the door. Somehow, she returned their greetings and held her emotions in check. None of them had known her brother. They all came after he was gone, after he’d been killed by his own recklessness. Valentine’s Day, February 14th, a day of love, a day of happiness. Not for her.

The doors to the one of the elevators opened and she didn’t glance up as she stepped into the car. She wanted to escape, run away, be alone. Instead, she was face to face with the one man she did, and didn’t, want to see today.

Sean McHenry.

“You’re leaving.” His voice was so deep and low no one else could hear it. “Get in. We need to talk.”

Her gaze clashed with his. His blue eyes snapped and his lips tightened. She tried not to stare at him. Reddish brown hair, light blue eyes and the straight nose gave the wrong impression. He was no easy going Irish boy anymore. Winston may have come up with the idea for the chocolate puzzles, but Sean made it a multi million dollar industry. She, of course, provided the logistics, the chocolate making, the actual molds that made the puzzles famous. She and Tommy had. “Everything we had to say to each other was said a year ago.”

A muscle in his jaw pulsed and she realized how angry he actually was at that moment. Confrontation, today of all days, was beyond her. She started for the stairs. Instead, he grabbed her arm and yanked her into the elevator. “That’s it,” he snapped. “I’m done being a nice guy.”

He slammed her against the wall of the elevator with one hand and pressed the button to go down to the parking lot with the other. She glared at him. “Let go of me.”

“You’ve been moping around for the past year. I’m not going to allow another one to go by.”

“It’s none of your business.” Adrenaline swept through her veins. All the pent up frustration and anger swept through her. Who was he to tell her how to grieve? He had no right! She gritted her teeth and kicked him. Not exactly dignified, but she had wanted to kick him for a long time.

When he winced, she felt fierce satisfaction. She kicked him again, but this time he smothered her with his body to keep her from doing it again. His features were tight, stretched over his bones and she noted the black circles under his eyes. When she tried to pummel him with her fists, he gripped them and shackled them behind her back.

The elevator pinged and the doors slid open. Without another word, Sean hauled her out into the parking lot. She yanked against his hands in resistance.

“Let me go, you asshole! What are you doing?”

“Something I should have done months ago.” He dragged her to his SUV.

She managed to get one hand free and swung a fist at his head. He ducked and tackled her. Like a sack of potatoes, he dropped her over his shoulder and she whacked her fists against his solid back.

He tossed her into the back of his car and she was shocked to see a coil of rope beside her. His blue eyes glittered in the florescent glow of the parking garage’s lighting. “Two choices, Tonya. Go with me so we can talk, or get tied up like a rodeo calf.”

“Fuck you!” she bit out the words.

“You did that. Then you dumped me. That’s one of the things we’re going to talk about.” He caught her and shoved her back when she tried to scramble out of the vehicle.

She tried to claw him with her nails and bite him as he used the rope with devastating effectiveness. No surprise. Sean grew up in the rodeo circuit with his father. Tonya was tightly bound, just like a helpless calf in a rodeo competition.

A flurry of curse words flew from her mouth, all of them completely ineffectual against Sean’s determination. Then, her whole body went limp. She couldn’t fight anymore and just lay still. No tears. No protests. Nothing.

She didn’t care what happened. With her face to the back seat and her back to Sean, she just closed her eyes and wished she were dead.

The hatch slammed shut and then, the engine roared to life. Where were they going? She didn't know and didn't care. Nothing mattered anymore. Twelve months had passed and nothing changed. Tommy was dead. Sean was gone. She was alone. She'd always been alone.

She drifted into an exhausted sleep.

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Sean's hands tightened on the wheel. What a fucking mess. For a year he'd let her wallow in this crap, but now, he was done with that. The promise he'd made to Tommy all those years ago seemed hollow and worthless. Now, he was going to fight Tonya's demons and set her free.

If only he hadn't been so damn pissed for the last year. Had he known how withdrawn she'd become, he would have kicked her ass a long time ago. Outwardly, she seemed the same. Tall, confident, cool and blonde, Tonya Paul was the perfect woman. No drama or excessive emotion to deal with. No visible signs of baggage. Yet, her brother had been an alcoholic and died in a horrible crash killing two people along with himself.

And she blamed him.

It didn't matter that her brother had already been drinking when he pounded on Sean's door that night spoiling for a fight. It made no difference that Sean had tried to take away Tommy's keys when it was clear the man was plastered. All Tonya saw was her brother's broken body after a fight with the man she supposedly loved.

The four of them-Winston, Tommy, Sean and Tonya-had been inseparable. Winston had some money and an idea. Tommy and Tonya had the chocolate expertise to make the idea a reality and Sean was the front man, the one who made the deals that made Heart Puzzles a huge success. In five years, they'd created a business to rival Hershey's. Three years earlier, Winston invented Heart Puzzles. A little over a year ago, Sean finally got up the nerve to act on his feelings for Tonya.

But then, Tommy showed up that day, the day Sean was going to ask Tonya to marry him. The confrontation had been ugly.

He shook his head. That time, he'd let Tommy walk away and the man died in a car wreck that ended his relationship with Tonya. Not this time. He and Tonya were going to have it out once and for all. Afterwards,

he'd move on, leave town and start over. He was tired of waiting, tired of hurting.

When they reached his house in the outskirts of Santa Rosa, he slid the car into his garage and closed the door behind them. He popped the hatch and walked to the back of the SUV. She lay on her side like she was dead. Blood roared in his ears. She thought she'd play passive victim, did she? Not likely.

He pulled her out of the back and threw her over his shoulder. Either she would deal with their shit, or not. He had to try. She wouldn't let him explain last year, but this time she'd listen. When he was done, she could walk away. He hoped she wouldn't, but he didn't expect much.

When he dumped her on the bed, she bounced and struggled with the rope. He flicked out a pocket knife and sliced the rope off of her. She bounded to her feet and hit out at him. But when she sprinted for the door, he caught her. "No. Not this time."

"Let me go, you bastard." She spat and she struggled in his grasp, her blonde hair wild and ruffled. She twisted until her business skirt became askew and her heels dangling from her feet.

"Right." He wrapped his arms around her in a tackle and slammed her onto his bed. There were a million things he would have rather done with her there, but first, they had to deal with what lay between them. "I had a feeling you wouldn't do this willingly."

She fought like a wild cat, clawing and scratching, but he managed to cuff her wrists to the headboard. Even when she tried to kick him, he remembered how he'd used those cuffs on her in more interesting ways before she'd kicked him out of her life.

With the remaining rope, he secured her feet to the footboard. When she wouldn't stop shouting and cursing him, he produced one of his bandannas from the old days and covered her mouth.

She glared at him, her blue eyes sparkled dangerously, her face flushed. Her blouse had gotten torn in the tussle and he had to force his gaze to hers to stay focused. Times in the past when they had been so eager for each other clothes got damaged flitted through his mind. He shook his head to clear it. "Now that I have your attention," he announced, "I'd like to show you something, something you wouldn't let me show you before."

Back and forth, her head vigorously denied him. She fought against the restraints, but he was relentless. The T.V. in his room faced the bed so she had to watch it from her position. She could close her eyes, but he hoped she didn't. He popped open the disc player and slid the CD in place. He gazed at her, his jaw clenched, his chest tight. "I tried to tell you. Winston tried to tell you. You wouldn't listen. Now, I'm making you listen. After that, you can get the fuck out of here if you want."

The screen went blank and then his own face appeared on the television.

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Helpless. She was helpless. Her wrists ached and her ankles were sore. She'd yanked on them to free them, loosen them, but like her captor, they were impervious. She closed her eyes and tried to shut her ears. She didn't want to hear this. She didn't care what he said. Tommy had told her he would stop the wedding, that Sean wasn't good enough, that he'd betrayed the company. When he stormed out of their house that day, she'd been terrified for Sean, not Tommy. But it was Tommy who died. It was Tommy who ended up drunk and in a car. And he'd gone to Sean. She knew there was something Sean had said that sent Tommy on that bender. It had to be his fault. It couldn't be because-she shoved the unfinished thought aside.

When Sean's face appeared on the screen, she couldn't help it. She stared at him. That was the face she remembered. Handsome, a twinkle in his blue eyes, clean shaven and looking as if a smile was going to break out any minute. Now, he seemed haunted, dark circles under his eyes and somber. There was no breaking smile on his face now.

Sean fiddled with the camera on the screen. She remembered that camera. The year before, Sean discovered the web cam gadgets and played with them for an advertising campaign on the internet. It seems he had been playing with it that night.

"*Heart Puzzles. Make the pieces fit.*" Sean's voice came through the television, so warm, so friendly. All that was gone too. Why was he torturing her with this?

The sound of a knock at the door distracted Sean on the T.V., but he had left the web cam on. "*Tommy! What's up? I figured out the camera and-*" *Sean didn't get a chance to say anything else since a fist slammed into*

his face. Tommy followed the punch with another blow to Sean's ribs that made Tonya wince just seeing it on the screen. Finally, Sean hit back and Tommy ended up on the floor, his familiar face twisted with rage.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" Sean's breathe panted as he stared at Tommy.

"You told Winston." He shouted at Sean.

"I had to. He asked questions." Sean wiped blood from his face.
"Winston agreed to keep it quiet."

"You told her!" He swung another fist at Sean and caught in the ear. Sean tumbled back and Tommy pounded his head into the floor. "You told my sister after you promised to keep your mouth shut."

Sean's head bounced, but finally he got his hand up and thrust it against Tommy's chin. He jumped on Tommy and held him down. "I didn't tell her anything. I love her. It would break her heart."

"Then how the fuck did she find out?"

"Jesus, Tommy, I don't know. Probably the same way I did. She's not stupid. And she's not a bitch. Just go talk to her." Sean's face was bloody and grey colored.

"I don't know what to do," Tommy rolled away from Sean and climb to his feet.

"Winston has agreed to payments, Tommy. And he's not going to fire you." Sean sounded so beaten, so tired. *"All you have to do is pay back the five thousand bucks and—"*

Tommy laughed a high hysterical sound. "Five thousand? That's funny. That's real funny. You and your investigative skills." His voice was tense, anxious. "It's more like five hundred thousand. I can't pay it back, Sean. Don't you see?"

The stricken expression on Tommy's face and the total shock on Sean's bit into Tonya's eyeballs just as the rope bit into her ankles. Tears blurred her vision, but she heard the whimper from her brother, almost a keening cry of pain. She heard Sean's attempt to comfort Tommy and the slam of the door. She heard Sean on the phone to Winston begging him to find Tommy and help him.

She knew it all now.

A year ago, she'd believed Sean had helped her brother steal from the company, from Winston. Her brother's first words after she accused him of embezzlement were that he had to talk to Sean. But Sean had only been privy to the secret, not the mastermind of the crime.

She sobbed, anguish and agony ripped through her body. Pain like she'd never known flooded her system. Her muscles tensed and strained as she cried out in a sound much like the one Tommy had made. Gentle hands released her hands and feet and removed the bandanna from her mouth. Strong arms wrapped around her and cradled her against a solid body.

Sean.

Murmured words she couldn't understand in her emotional state drifted in her ears. She cried tears of grief, tears of anger, tears of confusion as she pounded her fists on Sean's shoulders. "Why? Why did he do it? Why didn't he tell me?"

"For the last year, I've tried to find out. Now, I know." He stroked her hair. "The question is, do you want to know?" He held her away from him and she gazed into his face. What she wanted was the old Sean, the easy going Irish smile Sean, the man who loved her to distraction Sean, back. Instead, all he offered her was the truth.

"I want to know."

"Tommy owed money to the local gangsters. He got taken in by a crooked bookie and the guy said he was rolling his debt over." Sean's features tightened and his fists clenched. "You know how it goes. All Tommy had to do was place another bet, double or nothing, until the debt was so huge, he couldn't pay it. Then, the bookie sold his debt to the local gang. They threatened him." His gaze met hers. "They threatened you." He stood up and handed her a file from his dresser. "There's the proof. Tommy got messages, emails. They threatened to kill you if Tommy told anyone where he got the money. The cops have traced it all back to the bookie."

"Did you know? A year ago, did you know Tommy was being threatened?"

"No." He shook his head. "Shit, you saw it. I didn't even know how deep he was in." He took a deep breath. "I found out two weeks later when another man was murdered and the cops traced it back to "Heart Puzzles"."

She sat on the bed, the file dangled from her hand and her face swollen from tears. "Why didn't you tell me then?"

"You wouldn't let me." He strode to the T.V., his back to her.

Her heart ached as she stared at the unopened file. "I couldn't." She managed to say the two words through a tight throat.

Sean didn't turn around and said nothing. She continued. "That day, before he went to see you—" She stopped and choked. The memory was fresh, agonizing, ugly. All she could see was his angry face, his twisted lips.

"What happened, Tonya?" Sean faced her, but didn't touch her.

She took a deep breath. "He...hit me." She glanced up at Sean from the end of the bed and her hands twisted in her lap. "He grabbed me so hard and..." her lower lip trembled. She met Sean's gaze, her heart broken and bleeding. "He was my *brother*. It scared me. I trusted him. When I told him to stay away from me, that he was a thief, he immediately said he had to talk to you." She buried her face in her hands. "I was so frightened. And then, he was killed and I knew it was my fault." Her head snapped up. "Don't you see? It was my fault. Those two people that died when Tommy ploughed into them died because I turned on him, I confronted him."

"That's insane." Sean's tone was unsympathetic. "Tommy got drunk and drove into those people. You didn't pour the alcohol down his throat. He embezzled the money, but Winston would have understood. Tommy couldn't face it. That wasn't your fault. None of it was."

She kept her steady stare on his face. "Hurting you was my fault. I blamed you. It was so much easier than facing the truth."

"Then face it now. Look at the file."

With a shaky hand, she opened the file. On top was her birth certificate. The man under "Child's father" was Winston Jergens. She blinked and then stared at Sean. "Winston?"

Sean nodded slowly. "When your parents died, he wanted to be your guardian but you loved Tommy so much, he settled for giving Tommy a good job. That's why Winston had no intention of firing Tommy for embezzlement. It makes sense."

"I don't know how I feel." Her thoughts were jumbled and confused.

A hooded expression fell over Sean's face. "I realize that."

She studied his face. "Do you?"

Silence stretched between them as she desperately tried to sort out what this all meant. Did he still love her? Had he done this so he could walk away now?

He handed her the disc. "I leave next week. Or I don't. That's up to you."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not the same man you kicked out of your life two years ago. You'll have to decide what you want." He stayed arms length away from her and stepped back when she got to her feet and came towards him. "When you know what you want, let me know."

"But—"

"I wouldn't decide now. I've dropped a few bombshells on you."

She stared at him. She didn't know this version of Sean McHenry. He was cold, distant, unapproachable.

Her shoulders slumped as she started to leave. And then, something happened. Her backbone stiffened and she turned around to glare at him. "I'll decide when I'm damn good and ready."

His gaze narrowed on her face and his eyebrow shot up. "Meaning?"

"Meaning I don't know how I feel about this," her finger tapped the file, "but I know how I feel about you." She tossed the file on his dresser and walked closer to him. He backed up until his back was against the wall, his fist clenched at his sides. She poked her finger into his chest. "I love you. I always have. And you gave up on me. You walked away. How do I know that the next time I go nuts and tell you to "go away" you're not going to listen to me?"

He blinked. Twice.

She poked harder. "I was wrong. Dead wrong. Why didn't you stay and fight for me?"

His hand shot up and gripped her poking finger. "You told me to get out of your life."

She glared at him. "I'll probably tell you to drop dead on occasion too. Are you going to do that?"

His lips twitched. "No."

Her lips trembled and tears clogged her throat. “I’m sorry, Sean. I’m so sorry.”

He cupped her face with his hands. “I’m sorry too. I let my pride get in the way. I love you, Tonya. So much.”

She smiled and he bent his head to kiss her. The minute their lips touched, it was like coming home. Here. Here was everything she ever wanted. Her fingers tangled in his hair and she pressed him closer. It had been too long. She wanted it all now.

He broke the kiss and dropped his forehead against hers. “Tonya,” he breathed her name like a sigh. “It’s been so long. I want it to last.”

When he claimed her lips again, she melted and he groaned. Their tongues danced together and their bodies fit like a key and a lock. A loud knock at his door made them break apart, breathless.

He growled and stopped out of the bedroom. Tonya followed behind him, a giggle rising up in her tummy. Sean opened the door. “What?”

A Heart Puzzle delivery man handed him a box. “For Sean McHenry. Sign here.”

Sean sighed and frowned at the box. Tonya peered over his shoulder. “Who is it from?”

“Winston sent it.”

Tonya grabbed the box from Sean’s hands and dumped it onto his coffee table. “Let’s see what it says.”

It wasn’t easy. The trick was to put the pieces together without eating them and Tonya wasn’t sure she could. But Sean smacked her hand playfully a few times and they put the pieces in place. For a moment, as they were arguing over where a piece belonged, he looked like his old self, the man with the easy smile and the twinkle in his eye.

When it was finished, Tonya stared at the chocolate heart. The message was startling.

“Happy Valentine’s Day to my Daughter and Son-in-law to be. May your love flourish.”

“How did he know?” Tonya shook her head, stunned.

“I don’t know. He’s a smart man.” A smirk lifted Sean’s lips. “Maybe he thought this would spur me to take action.”

“Speaking of taking action,” she said as she gripped his shirt and yanked him close. “It’s been a long year of waiting. How about we do a little “flourishing”.

And there it was. That easy smile and the twinkle. She almost cried it was such a joy to see it again. “First one naked and in bed gets to eat the chocolate.”

“No fair! I have more clothes to take off.”

He grinned. “All’s fair in love and chocolate.”

THE END