



RESCUING BRIANNA

BLU SHARKS TEAM - BOOK ONE

ROSE SMITH

RESCUING BRIANNA (SPECIAL
FORCES: OPERATION ALPHA)

BLU SHARKS TEAM

BOOK ONE

ROSE SMITH



CONTENTS

[Foreword](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Also by Rose Smith](#)

[About the Author](#)

[More Special Forces: Operation Alpha World Books](#)

[Books by Susan Stoker](#)

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

© 2023 ACES PRESS, LLC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

No part of this work may be used, stored, reproduced or transmitted without written permission from the publisher except for brief quotations for review purposes as permitted by law. This book is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This book may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, please purchase your own copy.

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the Special Forces: Operation Alpha Fan-Fiction world!

If you are new to this amazing world, in a nutshell the author wrote a story using one or more of my characters in it. Sometimes that character has a major role in the story, and other times they are only mentioned briefly. This is perfectly legal and allowable because they are going through Aces Press to publish the story.

This book is entirely the work of the author who wrote it. While I might have assisted with brainstorming and other ideas about which of my characters to use, I didn't have any part in the process or writing or editing the story.

I'm proud and excited that so many authors loved my characters enough that they wanted to write them into their own story. Thank you for supporting them, and me!

READ ON!

Xoxo

Susan Stoker

ABOUT THE BOOK

She was doomed to the bitterness of loving a man who complimented women for a living...

Brianna: "I don't date gigolos."

Michael: "She's pretty, but she's a snob—not interested."

She hates him because he's a gigolo. He's turned off by her upper crust snobbery. Will their dislike for each other jeopardize his secret mission where a young girl's life and his best friend's wife's life hang in the balance? As the team pieces together the fragments of evidence, they uncover a web of deceit that extends far beyond the town's borders. Intrigue and danger will take them all the way from South Carolina to Georgia.

After the new Blu Sharks Team is formed to fight drugs and human trafficking, Michael 'Mercer' Miller goes undercover as the latest gigolo to the wealthy Loretta Karrington to follow an important lead.

Her attraction to this impossibly handsome rogue irritates beautiful Brianna Chandler.

Getting ready to wed a man in 10 days, she'll be glad when Michael Miller is out of her hair. Or will she?

CHAPTER ONE

Brianna Chandler relished the fresh air as she treasured her serene surroundings. She gazed out at the shoreline edge where the pine trees thinned out and the tranquil waters shimmered like a brilliant turquoise jewel. The wind whipped—stinging her crimson cheeks on this crisp, windy morning,

Suddenly, pieces of paper—caught in the winter wind—fluttered by Shredder, her Rottweiler, like confetti, startling the spry animal.

He reared on his hind legs, then lunged forward and took off running. “Whoa, baby, hold on!” His sudden sprint caught her off guard, shaking her out of her deep thought about marrying Alcott Muldoon.

Brianna attempted to pull Shredder by tugging on his leather leash, but his head-start put him in full control. Bam! She lost the strap and fell backward—hitting the hard, cold ground in a dull thud. Next thing she knew, muscular arms swept her up—holding her firmly, but gently cradling her. Brianna looked into a face sculptors love to model. The result was a masterpiece. He was much more than merely handsome. His face was as finely chiseled as if some skillful hand had worked on each feature with tender loving care.

She thought back to her mother’s enthralling stories of how handsome Elvis Presley was when she’d met him on a movie set. She’d worked as an extra on the film *Girls, Girls, Girls*. Dozens of teenage girls screamed and swooned every day by the tall, magnificent black wrought-iron gates of Paramount as he arrived on the set. Elvis went viral way before that was even a thing. Brianna thought this man had a handsome enough face to be a movie star. She also detected something else in his demeanor. Proud and strong,

maybe a tinge of arrogance? She couldn't help but wonder.

His dark eyebrows held an upward slant over dark eyes, holding deep concern. Coffee-colored brown eyes, dark and thick chocolate brown hair and a body the gods had etched into muscled perfection. A salute to arms immediately came to Brianna's thoughts. Hard, chiseled arms holding her tight.

"Are you all right, ma'am?"

She thought she detected a hint of a small-town boy accent—not exactly the typical South Carolinian accent. Something much farther away...

Brianna looked toward the blue backdrop of the delightful December sky, the reddish orange leaves of the maple trees burning vividly against it. She looked again into his face and saw a moment of beauty and peace. What a classically handsome man.

"Perfectly all right." She stiffened.

He put her down. Taller than average, Brianna had the long lines and grace of a thoroughbred, but she had to look up to him. She sized him up to be about 6 foot 4.

They stood for a moment in silence, these two. Dark eyes gazing into bluish grey ones—conveying a message more direct than words.

A smile lifted the corner of his sensuously full lips. His sexy, dark-brown eyes burned deep as he gazed at her delicate, oval face. Sunlight fired the red-gold hair that framed her face and the grey eyes that met his were a vivid hue complementing the blue river. He noticed the seriousness in them.

"I apologize for throwing the letter I tore into your dog's path," he told her. "You think it's safe to handle a dog that big? He looks more like a small pony."

"Quite safe," she answered. Brianna smiled. And when Brianna smiled, attractive in tranquility and framed by her red-gold hair, the regal lines of her face held features of classic regularity.

"The number of people who throw paper into the breeze is strictly limited," she pointed out laughingly. "And I'm afraid I my thoughts distracted me. That's how he got away from me. Shredder's big, but quite harmless."

"In that case, I'll be right back." Upon seeing the dog getting further away, Michael 'Mercer' Miller sprinted after him. She watched as he whistled and called Shredder to him. Upon hearing his name, the shiny black and brown Rottweiler slowed—turning. Catching up to the huge animal,

Miller slowed to a walk, then patted his thigh and coaxed the friendly dog to him. He knelt down, petted Shredder, then took hold of his leash and walked him back to her.

Falling to her knees, she hugged her faithful pet. He playfully wagged his tail and licked the side of her face like he was a little puppy. She giggled in delight. She took hold of his leash and stood facing Michael ‘Mercer’ Miller.

“Thank you,” she smiled up at the handsome stranger. “I’m Brianna Chandler by the way.”

She waited to learn who he was. The town and country mansions were filled with visitors during this time of year. She thought he may be a holiday guest, and she wondered a little that she hadn’t met him during the recent seasonal festivities.

Instead of taking the lead she gave, he said, “Brianna’s exactly the right name for you. Brianna Chandler. It conjures up the name of a princess. Real royalty.... serene and lovely; simply lovely.”

A delicate rose stained her wind-whipped cheeks. Not accustomed to such directness, especially when spoken to condescendingly, to give offense. And she definitely was not accustomed to the frankness shining in his eyes. Even through her embarrassment, his admission he found her lovely made her glad.

It seemed her sheltered life was just beginning. At twenty-seven, the life she felt pounding within her at this moment provided a fine, sharp thrill.

Brianna had her share of Southern suitors, but with each one she had thought, *this is not the one. I must wait—no matter how long it might take. Why she was marrying Alcott Muldoon in ten days—she had no answer.*

Now—looking into this handsome stranger’s face, she felt her nipples stiffen. Something she had to admit she didn’t feel around Alcott.

“Well, I’m glad you approve of my name,” she told him, concealing her emotions under a happy-yet-casual manner. “It’s a common one in my family, starting with my grandmother. I’ll be disappointed if yours doesn’t suit you. It should be something out of the ordinary, rather dashing and bold.”

His sexy, dark brows slanted upward. “Is that the way I impress you? I’m afraid I’m nothing like that really, ma’am. And I’m afraid I’m a tad old school. I usually don’t go around telling women I just met that they’re beautiful. Yet seeing you—I’m willing to bet I’ve never seen a truly beautiful lady before.”

His voice was low and thrilling. The most absurd idea popped into Brianna’s brain. She couldn’t help thinking that if he opened his arms, she go

straight into them without question. She felt herself go moist.

At the same time, she realized he was fencing expertly, delaying telling her his name. Her conventional training came to the rescue. She turned toward Shredder, securing his leash. “Thanks for picking me up. Goodbye.”

He hurried after her. “I wish you wouldn’t go,” he said shyly, almost boyishly, like he wasn’t used to this kind of interaction. “Gee, I wish I knew when we would meet again,” he admitted.

Brianna smiled slightly. Surely she’d met him halfway. Why didn’t he tell her who he was?

“We probably shall,” she answered, trying to sound casual. “Little River is a small town.”

A shadow wavered over his expressive eyes. “Truth be told, you may not want to meet me again when I tell you my name. The name is Miller. Michael Miller. Does that make a difference?”

Brianna went red—then her ivory skin paled. It made all the difference. Everyone in town knew that name—and not in a good way. Wealthy Mrs. Karrington made a point of flaunting the name of her newest eye-candy worthy escorts. While look-wise, she could believe he worked as an escort—his shy manner made her question him for a moment. She quickly surmised it was just her and her wishful thinking. She remembered back to Loretta Karrington’s catch phrase...

“I can’t marry,” the petite, platinum blonde widow Karrington always said, explaining the dashing men escorting her around town. “So long as mah late husband left that ridiculous will, forbiddin’ me to marry again. But there’s nothin’ to prevent me havin’ a good time,” she’d drawl in her Southern belle accent. “And aah intend on havin’ one!” She loved having arm candy everywhere she went in town—and on vacation. And she love saying her famous catch phrase... “You know what I always say—the best way to get over one man is to get under another one!” She’d always laugh garishly when she said it.

Brianna knew from her brother, who was vice president of The Little River Bank, that the lovely Mrs. Karrington paid handsomely for her good times. The young man before this one collected \$20,000 before moving on. Michael Miller’s name was on the tongue of every wagger in town. If it was one thing Brianna was good at when she visited the bank, it was ear hustling. She’d overheard them talk about him being the best looking one yet. They were definitely right on that account.

Brianna felt ill. Sick with shame that a man who looked as fine and handsome as Michael Miller should be one of a long line of gigolos.

Gigolo! The word crashed against Brianna's mind through waves of disbelief. She stiffened. The thought fell across her shoulders like a whip, flaying her for responding to his charms.

"I see you recognize the name," he stated quietly. "It's not what you think." He wanted to tell her that his name was Michael 'Mercer' Miller and that some of his friends called him Triple M, and others Mercer, but he knew he couldn't right now. He was known around town as Michael Miller and, for the time being...it had to stay that way. Miller wished at this moment—it could have been different.

She made no reply. And she silently chastised herself. After all, she was engaged to be married. "Come on, Boy." Brianna took Shredder and walked away without a second glance at Michael Miller. *Charming!* Of course he would be. Men of his sort developed a knack for pleasing women. Brianna couldn't help but think how ironic it was she'd meet someone like this—this tall and lean jawed man today—the last day of the year. The years were pretty much alike. They flowed on in even rhythm, one little different from another...spring, summer, fall, winter.

Her thoughts about the years passing were peculiarly fitting, because as soon as she knew who the handsome, muscular man was, she understood that, just like the dying of another year—their acquaintance must end as well. She was marrying soon—everything had already been arranged. And he was hanging out with the loosest cougar in town. Not meant to be. The fireworks that flew when she looked into his eyes were just in her mind. *I don't date gigolos*; she said to no one but herself and the breeze. Though wistfully, she had to admit that for a brief moment when she looked into his sexy eyes, she knew what the quote by Émile Zola meant—"I'd rather die of passion than of boredom."

CHAPTER TWO

In his apartment, Commander Michael ‘Mercer’ Miller stood in front of an open refrigerator door—forgetting what he’d gone into the fridge for. He couldn’t get her out of his mind.

Fuck it! She’s not even my type, he thought to himself. *She’s a snob*. Still, his instinct to blow his cover just because he’d run into a pretty red-head made him shake his damn head. The last thing he wanted to do was put his new SEAL team in jeopardy. Innocent victims ensnared into nightmares they’d never have imagined were depending on them. He would not let them down. The Blu Sharks Team had recently been formed to fight the influx of dangerous drug trade and human trafficking taking place in the Southern States.

Navy SEAL Cookie ‘Knox’ Hunter trusted him to run this new unit and he could not disappoint. Ever since he’d worked with Hunter in Mexico a couple of years ago to break up a human trafficking ring, he’d put in overtime and became known as someone human trafficking outfits should fear. He’d grown so fond of—beautiful Fiona Storme, who’d been kidnapped by human traffickers and taken to a forest in Mexico.

Last year, Knox found out the Navy SEALs needed a new team dedicated to stopping human traffickers from kidnapping victims and putting them on boats traversing the Ashley River through Charleston, South Carolina. He immediately called the friend he called Triple M. Michael ‘Mercer’ Miller readily said yes, and Hunter suggested he run the team.

Knox remembered why he’d given Michael Miller his nickname—Mercer. When they’d joined forces on their first mission—he’d had to jump on Miller’s back. He’d had to practically throttle him to keep him from

pummeling the drug dealer they'd arrested. He'd gone wild. Knox dubbed him Mercer because he said he had no mercy on the bad guys. Then he'd started calling him Triple M because he said he didn't just double down on the bad guys—he tripled down. That's why Cookie 'Knox' Hunter knew Michael 'Mercer' Miller would be the best Navy SEAL to head up the Blu Shark Team.

Miller had no way of knowing his first assignment would set him up as a gigolo to the richest widow in town—but he knew he had to follow any lead that would help break up the largest illegal drug and trafficking ring. A ring with a firm grip on the local community. Miller and his Blu Shark Team had contacts in every anti-trafficking organization throughout the South. He wasn't about to have his focus taken off of his mission by an uptight, snob—no matter how beautiful.

He knew they had their work cut out for them. His SEAL team comprised of five of them, Lorenzo 'Chester' Giovani, who was on leave. Will 'Spider' Robertson and Thomas 'Mister' Smith both were completing current assignments in Mexico and Noah 'Needles' Lewis was also working on an illegal drug bust operation in Paris, Texas. He looked forward to seeing his entire crew next weekend. They'd all get together to celebrate. Chester was marrying Angie Ward, the love of his life.

He grabbed a bottle of beer, popped off the top, and took a swig. He shut the refrigerator door and took himself, a can of Spanish peanuts, and his beer into the living room, where he plopped down on the sofa and turned on the basketball game.

By the time Brianna Chandler reached the big mansion where she and her brother lived, her first blaze of anger had cooled into a mist of regret and overshadowing sadness. She went straight to the parlor, looking for her brother.

Brianna always thought that if Tom had been alone that day, much of what happened never would have. She would have told him about her meeting Michael Miller, and Tom's contemptuous attitude would have strengthened her own. Brianna knew this was one of her shortcomings. She often relied on her family to help form her opinions. Brianna came to the stark realization that her brother's approval of Alcott Muldoon is one of the reasons she finally agreed to marry Alcott. She'd grown up with him. Part of

her good breeding demanded she marry someone in her circle. Generations of strongly held beliefs. Her grandmother had married her grandfather when she was 14. He'd rescued her from an abusive step-father. She looked for her brother for strength and guidance.

But he was not alone. He was bending over Richard Karrington, who sprawled the full length on the divan. Tom was trying to persuade Richard that a pick-me-up was what he needed.

"Don't want," Richard said, pushing the glass of tomato juice away. "Won't take."

Brianna moved forward, taking the glass from her brother's hand.

"Come on, Rich, take it for me."

His head lolled away. "Not even for you, Brianna," he said thickly. "Just wanna rest for a while. Wanna see the old town again; and my stepmother, my dear, dear stepmother. She..." The rest trailed off in an unintelligible blur.

Brianna stared with pitying eyes on the flushed face and rumpled clothes of the man who had been her friend since childhood. She was remembering him in the days before his father disinherited him in favor of the drop-dead-gorgeous stepmother and started him on his downhill trajectory. And his cruel stepmother found twisted pleasure squandering the fortune Richard's dad left her on men like Michael Miller.

"I wouldn't waste too much sympathy on him," warned Tom.

Everyone liked and pitied Richard, though a minority of the upper crust condemned him for letting disappointment ruin his life. Brianna and Tom belonged in the opposite camp, the ones who condemned the elder Karrington for surrounding his son with every luxury, then he abruptly left him to fend for himself.

"When did he come?" She whispered to Tom.

"I found him at the club and brought him here. Poor devil." Her brother shook his head.

Richard opened his blue eyes. "Poor devil," he repeated, slurring. "That's right. Five million for Loretta, one dollar for Richard, 'cause Loretta was one smartie and tore up dad's will...I know."

Tom covered him with a blanket. "Try to sleep, old man," he said gently. "You'll feel better after a while."

"Come on, Richard. Take it for me."

His head lolled away. "Not even for you, Brianna," He said thickly. "Just

wanna rest awhile.”

“Not the money, ya understand,” Richard persisted. “Hurts that my dad would hurt me like that. Well, happy new year!” A few minutes later he was snoring lustily.

Tom drew Brianna out of the room, closing the door behind them. “Nothing we can do for him. He’ll just have to sleep it off.”

Tears gleamed in Brianna’s eyes. “Did you see his shoes? I can hardly bear it,” she whispered. “Tom, do you think there’s any truth to his story that his dad made a later will?”

“Oh yes,” her brother declared firmly. “There’s no doubt of it. Robbins and Foster drew it up. His father left one-third of the estate to Loretta with the no marriage restriction, then the rest he left to Richard. But that will wasn’t found. Loretta claimed she knew nothing about it, except one time she heard her husband say he was going to destroy it.”

“You think she destroyed it herself?”

Her brother shrugged. “There would be a strong inducement, for certain, when the first will left everything to her. That one was drawn up after Richard and his father had a bitter quarrel over Loretta. Richard thought she was marrying his father to get her grubby hands on his father’s money. I don’t believe Old Richard had any intention of letting it stand. The proof of that is he drew up a second will. I’ve always supposed they had another blow up and he destroyed it in a rage.” Brianna sighed deeply. “Poor Richard. I believe him when he says it’s not so much the loss of the fortune as the idea his father would treat him that way, which hurts.”

“I do, too,” Tom promptly agreed. “He detested Loretta from the day Old Richard married her. It’s galling to him that she won out, and he really has no recourse.”

Tom looked at his watch and whistled. “I’ll have to rush and get dressed, then go pick up Jean and be at the Danzinger’s dinner party by 7. We’ll meet you and Alcott at the club around 10. If Richard comes to, fix him up with some of my clothes and bring him along.”

Brianna watched as he took the steps two at a time. She adored her only brother, 10 years her senior, who had tried to take the place of father and mother to her.

Perhaps it was just as well she hadn’t told him about Michael Miller. There was no need to worry her big brother about something so trivial as her meeting Loretta’s new gigolo.

The incident was trifling. She had met a man she had an instant attraction to. She could have fallen hard for him. But just as instantly, she'd learned the situation was simply impossible. That was all. A candle lit in memory of the old year and promptly extinguished. She began mulling over what she'd wanted to discuss with her older brother. Whether or not she could go through with marrying a man she didn't love.

CHAPTER THREE

Brianna watched wistfully as Nancy Danzinger opened the door and she saw who was standing there. She watched as Michael Miller waltzed in with Loretta Karrington breezing in behind him—clutching one of his muscular arms. She couldn't remember the last time she'd seen a man with such magnificence. He looked drop-dead gorgeous in his navy blue Armani suit and crisp light blue shirt and silk tie. The red rose boutonniere he wore was a not-so-secret signature of Loretta's, letting the ladies in town know he was hers—her gigolo.

“Dammit!” Brianna whispered under her breath. She absolutely despised being attracted to one of Loretta Karrington's gigolos! The thoughts running through her mind when she saw Michael Miller made her blush. She had class—impeccable breeding—etiquette. But all that seemed to go out the door when she laid eyes on him. Her body tingled all over—he was handsome as hell.

“I must admit, Michael, you sure do gussy up good!” Nancy exclaimed. Loretta beamed. “I thought you were a vision in your tennis outfit this afternoon—but good gosh almighty. You look absolutely divine!”

“Glad you think so, Nancy.” Loretta had a hint of jealousy in her voice. She looked around the room, clutching Michael's arm a little tighter. “I'm surah all these Southen' women are havin' those very same thoughts.”

Michael smiled a grand piano of a gorgeous smile at both of them. “You ladies are going to make me blush.” He teased.

Both women giggled like star-struck teenagers.

Once George Raft laid eyes on Loretta snuggling up to Michael Miller as

they walked into the room—he scowled—then snorted. Loretta saw him when she looked up. Clumsily, he placed his finished Scotch and soda on a server’s round tray, who happened to walk by—the server had to use his quick hand to steady it.

“If y’all will ‘xcuse me for a moment.” She let go of Michael Miller’s arm. “There’s someone I gotta talk to a quick minute. Back in a jiffy.” The slender widow made her way over to George Raft.

“Hi ya, Retta. Been waitin’ for ya.”

“George,” she drawled sweetly. “What are you doin’ here? I thought you were leavin’ town.”

“Not yet, Deary...got some things keepin’ me here.”

She got closer. “Don’t make a scene—especially here. You know we need to keep flyin’ under the radar in this town, George,” she whispered. She looked at him with disdain. “You’re drunk. Ya nevah could hold your liquor. You’d better keep your damn mouth shut. I got too much to lose.”

The widow Karrington pivoted and glided back over to her date. She took Michael Mercer’s arm. “Let’s go to the bar and get somethin’ to drink.”

“You’re not gonna dismiss me so fucking easy, Retta.”

Loretta Karrington rolled her eyes dramatically. Raft shrugged out of his suit jacket as the guests around him moved away. He circled the couple.

Miller calmly placed Loretta against the wall. “One sec...” he told her.

Raft came sliding in. He flung two quick lefts at Miller’s face. Michael Miller’s feet stayed still. Only his head moved as the two blows whistled past his ear. Then he moved his fists. Thud! George Raft hit the floor. He lay crumpled up in front of the couch. Raft watched Miller out of dazed eyes for a fleeting moment, then flopped on his stomach, turning over an ashtray on a marble-topped side table. He lay face down without moving. Blood trickled out of his mouth.

With his fist outstretched, the man suddenly stood and lunged at Michael Miller. The undercover Navy SEAL caught the man’s two wrists with one hand. Seizing him firmly—he held him in a fierce grip. The angry man tried to twist out of Miller’s arms, but Loretta Karrington’s new man was too strong. The man writhed and squirmed, to no avail.

“Happy to let you go, if you stop swinging at me, dude. I came here to have a good time—didn’t come here to fight.”

Loretta Karrington stepped in. “George—your bein’ ridiculous. Let me clean you up. Let him go suga’. Michael Miller let the man go.

Loretta said, "I'll be back in a minute, Hon."

"Take your time," Miller told her. He turned and walked out onto the balcony.

"Did I miss all the fireworks in there?" Brianna asked.

"Nothing special to see," Michael told her.

As their glances met, an unfamiliar sensation, shockingly pleasant, tingled down Brianna's spine.

"I was wondering where you'd gotten off to." He said, his voice low and completely magnetic. He could feel the insta-bulge in his pants as his eyes traveled from her red hair to her lovely blue-grey eyes. Michael lingered awhile on her soft, full lips, sweeping to her slender waist, slowing down around the soft curves of her hips.

"Well, well," he murmured, "wishes do come true."

She managed a soft laugh, trying to control her racing heart as she glanced down at his hardness. She felt the maroon color rising to her cheeks. Suddenly, the very air around her seemed charged with excitement. "That's strange," she said softly, with her velvety voice. "I wished on the first star when I came out on the balcony a few minutes ago."

Drinking his drink, he moved to stand next to her. "I wished on it too," he said. "I wished to meet a gorgeous redhead with incredible blue-grey eyes. I make sure my wishes are very specific." His handsome grin made her so wet. The material of her bra brushed against her rock-hard nipples.

Lifting the dry martini to her lips, she took a long sip. It had a nice dry zing and its potency spread through her, dissolving her tenseness, and quieting the butterflies in her stomach.

Her heart foolishly stumbled. "Frankly, I'm allergic to lines," she chided. "Especially ones said by men like yourself." When she turned, before she had a chance to walk away, he gently took her hand.

"Please don't leave. And please don't believe things you hear about me. I can't explain—but I'm not who—or what you think I am." His voice was deep and rich, but there was a tinge of pleading in his tone that caused her to hesitate. She wanted to believe him. Before she got a chance to say anything, Alcott walked through the sliding door and onto the balcony. Instinctively, Michael let go of Brianna's hand.

"Here you are. I've been looking all over for you. There's an emergency at the Inn. I'm afraid I need to leave."

“I was just coming,” she told him. “By the way, have you met Michael? Michael Miller? This is Alcott Muldoon.”

“No. We haven’t met.” Alcott stepped toward Michael and gave him a friendly handshake.

“Let’s go,” Brianna told Alcott, taking his arm. “Goodnight, Mr. Miller.”

“Goodnight.” He turned toward Alcott. “Nice to meet you, Alcott.” Michael sighed as he watched them leave, then turned toward the moon, and holding the frosty glass in his hand, finished his drink.

“Where’d you two meet?” Alcott questioned as he got into the driver’s seat after helping Brianna into the passenger seat.

“We actually met near the river. He startled Shredder the other day. Shredder took off running on the beach and Mr. Miller retrieved him for me.”

“Nice. Startled him by accident, I’m assuming?”

“Oh yes, definitely not on purpose.”

“Seems a nice enough chap.”

“If you can call someone who’s a gigolo for Loretta Karrington, nice. Definitely not my type.”

“I see,” Alcott said, even though he saw and sensed something entirely different.

Just a few moments later, gorgeous Michael Miller stretched his sexy 6 foot 4 inch frame beside her on the creme-colored chenille couch in her boudoir. It was a large couch, big enough to hold even his muscular, considerable length. She lay on her back, looking dead into his handsome face as he lay on top of her...amazed at how quickly and expertly he’d taken off the gown she’d worn to the Danzinger affair.

She breathed deeply, then placed her arm behind her head to lift it a little. Her bold breasts, mounds of beauty barely visible in her dark room, seemed to stir, taking on a life of their own—tingling and sending warmth from the tips of her nipples throughout her stomach, her back, all the way down to her tingling toes.

He caressed each shadowy nipple lightly and expertly with his warm, moist tongue—taking his time—filling her up with electric pleasure. Brianna’s knees—drawn up slightly, allowed her wet pussy to feel the bulge coming through his pants. She could not think straight—dizzy in thinking only of having all of him thrusting inside her. She wanted, needed, every single inch...

“Sorry, we had to leave so abruptly,” Alcott told her as he drove down the winding road toward the Muldoon Inn.

She almost gasped aloud...as his voice instantly tore her from her fantasy. “That’s okay. It’s no big deal, really. No big deal at all.” Still feeling her tantalizing moistness, Brianna blushed, then uncrossed her legs. They sat mostly silent through the rest of the drive.

CHAPTER FOUR

Brianna stretched her long, sexy legs under the dining room table at the Inn. She'd been there over an hour. Alcott was down in the boiler room, helping the maintenance crew shut off a busted water pipe.

He'd sent word to Brianna that it'd be awhile and told the staff to set her up in the penthouse—but she'd refused. Truth be told, she was sitting there thinking of one of the last times she'd seen her parents celebrating.

It was here, at the Inn, across the restaurant in the private reception room across the hall. She'd help her brother Tom surprise them. They'd gather their closest friends and family for an anniversary party. She remembered the tears that had shone in their mom's eyes when Brianna had flipped on the lights and everybody yelled, "Happy Anniversary!"

She remembered their dad's speech declaring how surprised he was that he could even be more in love with his beautiful wife after all these years than when they'd first met. Sitting here, thinking about them, made her happy somehow—almost like they were with her. Her heart was warm when she indulged in a frothy caramel cappuccino and delicious sugar-dusted beignet from the restaurant while she waited.

Another 30 minutes passed before Alcott came to the closed restaurant where Brianna waited.

"I'm drenched," he told her. "We just had the pipes repaired less than a month ago. That plumber couldn't have known what the hell he was doing. The pipes have been leaking inside of the walls since then."

"Oh, dear."

"I can't contact them until Monday," he sighed and slumped his shoulders. "Anyway...I need to get out these wet clothes."

“Say no more,” Brianna said quietly.

“Why don’t you come upstairs with me? Wait for me in while I take a quick shower.”

“Sure.” Brianna stood. When they walked past the closed reception room where she and Tom had celebrated with her parents, she got a little misty-eyed.

She followed him to the 5,000 square foot penthouse—larger than most houses. The rich mahogany wood furniture and earth colors reminded her of an oil baron’s digs. Even though she didn’t feel like sleeping here tonight—she always appreciated the decor and quietness of this private suite—literally the best room in the house. She could just imagine all the rich and important men who’d rented this suite, smoking cigars and playing Texas Hold ‘Em.

Alcott came out of the bedroom, freshly dressed and smelling good. She could see why she’d thought he’d be a good catch. She had to admit her second thoughts about marrying him had little to do with him. He’d always been kind to her. She knew he loved her.

The coziness of her bedroom bathed in the warm glow of dimmed lights. The soft music he’d turned on from his phone filled the air. Alcott gently pulled her up from the couch in her bedroom—pulled her into him and began swaying gently to the music.

“You look absolutely breathtaking, Brianna. Why don’t you stay here with you tonight? Tom is probably at Jean’s house. Brianna.” She stood still and pulled away from his embraced—he could feel the undeniable tension in her.

“Brianna, what’s the matter? I thought you loved that song. What’s wrong? You know you can tell me anything.” Muldoon nervously fidgeted with the buttons on his shirt. He’d sense for days now that something was off with Brianna.

She smiled awkwardly. The air was thick with her unspoken emotions. The last thing she wanted to do was hurt someone as nice as Alcott Muldoon. Even though her eyes were radiant—they held a hint of sadness.

“It’s my parents,” she told her half-truth. “When I was waiting for you in the restaurant downstairs, I was thinking of the time they had their surprise anniversary party across the hall. It made me sad is all. I think I’d like to be alone tonight, Alcott. I just want to go home and go to bed.”

“That’s perfectly understandable, Brianna. I miss them, too. They were some of the nicest people I’ve ever met.”

“They were. I do miss them so very much. Thanks for understanding, Alcott.” While looking out the window as Alcott Muldoon drove her home, Brianna took a deep breath and fixated on an imaginary spot on the window.

As Brianna entered her house, Shredder furiously wagged his tail and jumped on her happily, then bounded up playfully to Alcott—one of his favorite people in all the world.

“Hello, Boy!” He said while he bent down to give his friend a huge hug. “I haven’t seen you in a little while.”

As she forced a smile, then as she was about to kiss Alcott goodnight, she said, “Alcott, I’m afraid I haven’t been entirely honest with you. I do miss my parents, but it’s not just that. I need to be honest with you. There’s something I’ve been struggling with, and I don’t want to lead you on any further.”

Alcott's heart sank as he struggled to maintain a composed facade. His voice trembled as he said, “Go ahead and tell me, Brianna. You know you can tell me anything.” At that moment, Brianna couldn’t help wishing that she was as crazy about Alcott as Shredder was.

“I’m afraid I can’t marry you, Alcott. It would be so unfair to you.”

“Is there someone else?”

“I don’t know yet—that’s about as honest of an answer that I can give you right now. But, what I do know is that marriage isn’t at all right for me right now. It breaks my heart.”

“Mine too. But at least I appreciate you being honest with me. Friends?”

She reached up and grabbed his face and kissed him on the cheek. “We’ll always be friends, Alcott. Thanks for being so understanding.”

“I’m really not, but what else can I do?” With a half smile, he walked out the door.

CHAPTER FIVE

Viewing himself in the hotel mirror rehearsing in his room in Atlanta, Georgia...all he could see was his bundle of nerves. Miller couldn't shake them. Even though he wouldn't be giving the best man's speech for hours—he'd already been up practicing it for some time—starting early, 5 am. He couldn't sleep.

He'd tossed and turned most of the night. It didn't help that he'd flown into Atlanta late to be the best man at his buddy's wedding. Lorenzo 'Chester' Giovani, also assigned to the new Blu Sharks Team, was Michael 'Mercer' Miller's best friend. Later today—Chester would marry the love of his life—beautiful Angie Ward. And while Miller couldn't be happier for his friend—he cursed to himself that part of his duty was giving the best man speech. Michael 'Mercer' Miller would rather die than stand up in front of all those people—friends and family or not—and give a damn speech.

It floored him that he was actually more comfortable ripping the throat out of a bad guy than giving a speech. Michael 'Mercer' Miller thought back to that time when Knox had to practically climb his back to wrestle Dickson Adams loose from the death grip he'd had on the criminal. He'd told Cookie 'Knox' Hunter that one day he'd explain why he'd gone into a blind rage that day. Too often, his demons sent him to a dark place.

Dealing with them—even if it meant talking to someone about them was something he knew he needed to do. If only his parents hadn't been murdered. How he wished they were here watching Lorenzo get married. They would've been so happy for the man who went into the Navy right behind his best friend. The young man they'd watch grow up alongside their son. So much would be right with the world if only they could be here.

“Wow! These Navy SEAL guys get better and better looking!” The maid of honor mused to the bridesmaid sitting next to her as she watched Michael ‘Mercer’ Miller breeze up to the podium on the stage.

After a day full of nerves and rehearsal, the moment he was so nervous about had come. Standing at the podium, decked out in his black tux and royal blue bowtie—he cleared his throat and spoke the words that had taken him weeks to painstakingly search for and write. Words that came directly from his heart to someone who was like a brother to him:

“The love between Angie Ward and Lorenzo Giovanni is evident to everyone that’s ever had the pleasure to be around them. Their love is real—a love that you can see in their smiles and the way they interact with each other. And the fact that they can barely keep their hands off each other is another clue.”

The whole audience chuckled. Miller relaxed a little.

“I also have to admit that as I stand before you today as the best man, I’m armed with a few stories and embarrassing anecdotes. One story: people assume we gave Lorenzo ‘Chester’ Giovanni his nickname based on his tough-guy image. Some have even guessed it’s got to do with that chiseled chest of his.”

On cue, Lorenzo stood and curled his arm and poked out his chest. Everyone laughed—some in the audience even clapped.

“Actually, we dubbed Lorenzo Chester because of his love of *Gunsmoke*. The man does a mean imitation of Matt Dillon’s deputy, Angie. You’ll have to get him to do it for you one day.”

Amused, Angie looked at her husband with a twinkle in her pretty blue eyes. “I will. I will,” she assured Michael, smiling widely.

“And that’s one thing I admire most about Lorenzo. He has an uncanny ability to find joy in the most unexpected situations and make everyone around him burst into laughter.

“And let’s not forget that behind every great man is an even greater woman. And Angie, you are that incredible woman. You bring out the best in Lorenzo. Taming his wild antics just enough to keep him out of trouble, but still allow him to be his authentic, full-of-fun self.

“Marriage is an adventure—an adventure that requires patience, compromise, and unwavering support. It’s about embracing each other’s strengths and weaknesses and building a strong foundation on which your

love can flourish. And as you embark on this adventure together, know that you have an army of friends and family standing behind you, ready to provide love, guidance, and support whenever you may need it.

“Angie and Lorenzo, may your marriage be a sanctuary of love and understanding, a place where you find solace in one another’s arms. May your journey be filled with laughter, adventure, and shared dreams. And may you always find joy in the simplest of moments, for it is in those moments that the true beauty of life lies.

“So please join me in raising your glasses to toast the extraordinary love of Angie and Lorenzo. May your love grow deeper with each passing day, and may your lives be forever intertwined in a tapestry of happiness and love.

“Cheers to the newlyweds! Now—let’s party!”

CHAPTER SIX

As her favorite Atlanta Lions basketball player hit a three from beyond the arc, Spencer Foster almost spilt her drink as she cheered. After the raucous crowd died down—she couldn't help ear hustling. She overheard the couple sitting next to her speculating on whether or not NBA player, Dillon Reynolds, was going to show up and sit next to them. Spencer hoped to get a glimpse of him. She looked around and breathed it all in. She couldn't believe they were in front row seats at the Atlanta Lions Stadium.

“I don't know what I'm more excited about, Dad, the fact that this is the first time I've seen you in a few days, or that you made up for it by getting these awesome tickets!”

Her dad grinned. “It's quite all right if you're more excited about watching the Lions. I hate that I've been so busy. I needed something to knock out the park to even halfway make up for up.”

“You totally knocked it out of the park, Dad! This is the best birthday! But, I can't believe I'm sitting here, watching Dereck James in the flesh!” She bit into her hot dog—chomping down on a jaw full of deliciousness—then gave her dad an appreciative grin. “Of course, being with you is the best, Dad!” she exclaimed.

She reached over and pecked his cheek. He smiled at his daughter, glad to be spending time with her instead of away in a lonely hotel room reading tons of legalese on his computer until his eyes felt like they were bleeding red and his head ached to high heaven. Boy, was he glad to be back home. This last case took him to South Carolina and had him working tons of overtime, but he knew a man's livelihood could hang in the balance. Still, he knew he'd been neglecting Spencer. He was glad he'd gotten a chance to spend some

time with her.

“Uh oh, Dad. I’ve got to go to the bathroom.” He started to stand, but she gestured for him to remain seated. “No, Dad, you stay here. I want to know what happens while I’m gone. You can fill me in.”

“You sure? This is a big place. Sure you won’t get lost?” He scratched the right side of his forehead with three fingers; he did that often when he worried—even though his forehead didn’t itch.

“I’m a big girl, Dad. Remember—I’m sixteen. And besides—my cell’s all charged. If I do get lost, I can always call and you can tell me how to get back here.”

He looked at his daughter wistfully. “You are all grown up, aren’t you?”

“I am.” She stood and grinned down at him. “I’ll be back in two shakes.”

“Two shakes,” he echoed.

Spencer made her way up the steep stairs and into the large hallway of the stadium—looking for the signs to guide her to the nearest bathroom. Hearing the audience cheering loudly—Spencer rushed her footsteps. Right now, she wished she had a normal bladder the size of almost every other adult in the arena. At times like this, she swore she had one more the size of an infant’s. It seemed she couldn’t drink much without her bladder quickly filling up. At every outing where she’d be enjoying drinks, she had to make sure there was a clean bathroom nearby. Racing through the corridor unexpectedly took her mind back to the time when she was thirteen.

Spencer and a group of her friends caught the city bus to the roller rink. They were all having a fabulous time until she slipped and fell on her bottom. She laughed so hard, along with her friends, she wet herself. For a good five minutes, she’d resisted taking her best-friend’s hand, who’d tried to help her up. Once Lizzie did help her up, the group saw the little puddle she’d made.

When she went to the bathroom to clean herself up, she couldn’t help notice the stares she got from other patrons—and from her friends. The next day—it went round the school she’d wet herself at the skating rink. But what hurt her the most was when her best-friend, Lizzie, joined in with the popular kids who decided to call her Tinkle Bell. She and Lizzie were no longer friends, as Lizzie started hanging with a couple of the more popular girls at school.

She loved anything Disney—but those painful memories cut her deep out of the blue sometimes when she watched a Disney movie or like now—when she thought about her tiny bladder. She physically shook her head to shake

the memory out of her mind. *Not going to ruin this night with Dad with my negative thoughts*, she said to herself.

She found herself almost trotting in the nearly empty corridor leading to the nearest bathrooms. Finding hers, she raced to the door and pushed her way through. Her small bladder was screaming to be emptied. “Sweet Heaven!” She exclaimed under her breath. Sweet Heaven was a phrase she’d come up with after watching one of her favorite teen influencers on YouTube.

“Elegant teens don’t curse,” she explained. Instead of cursing, Spencer came up with the phrase Sweet Heaven whenever she was tempted. She winced and tore at the top button on her blue jeans to open it. She barely had time to smile back at the woman standing at the sink who smiled at her as she rushed past her. Once in the stall, Spencer unbuttoned herself, then crossed her legs. Spencer gathered a handful of toilet paper and took a small bottle of sanitizer from her jacket pocket—squirted it on the seat, then wiped the seat clean. She quickly pulled down her pants and squatted. The teen sighed as relief spilled over her when the pressure-pain of her bladder dissipated.

She buttoned up and straightened her pants, then unlatched and pushed the stall door outward and walked over to one of the sinks that was unoccupied to wash her hands. Spencer looked over at the brunette woman and gave her a proper smile.

The friendly woman smiled back at Spencer through the mirror and said, “I can’t believe we’re in here instead of in the stadium cheering. They’re cheering their heads off in there. The home team must be winning.”

“Yeah, that’s always a good sign.” After washing her hands, Spencer Foster looked on the wall nearest to her—looking for the paper towel dispenser.

“Oh, the towels are here, under the mirror,” the friendly woman pointed.

“Geez, the sign’s right in front of me,” Spencer giggled.

The woman laughed, too. “I did the same thing. I’m so used to the receptacle on the wall or even the wall dryer. It took me a while to find them. Just like you—I didn’t even see the sign.”

The teen dried her hands and threw the wet paper towels into the trash can below the sinks. She gave the friendly woman a warm smile. “Well, I’d better get back. Don’t want to miss any more of the game.”

“Neither do I. I just have to clip my earring back on.”

“Nice talking to you.”

“You too. Enjoy the rest of the game,” Spencer Foster said.

“You too, dear. Nice talking to you as well.” The woman smiled, then turned back to focus on her reflection in the mirror.

Spencer turned and made her way toward the door. She hurried down the corridor, silently cursing the Atlanta Stadium for being so big.

More cheering came from inside the arena, causing her to move faster. When her phone rang, she pulled it out of her jacket pocket and punched the button.

“Derek just hit two free throws to tie the game!” Her dad yelled into the phone. “Everything ok?”

“Sure is. I met a real nice lady in the bathroom. She reminded me of Mom.”

Her dad paused. “I miss her too, pumpkin. You know she’d be right here cheering the Lions on with us.” The crowd roared once again.

“She sure would.” The thought made Spencer incredibly sad. She wished they hadn’t lost her to leukemia this year. If there was anyone who didn’t deserve to die such a horrible death—it was her mother. With a heart made of pure gold, she was only 40 when they lost her. “Okay, dad. See you in a couple minutes—love you.”

“Love you, too.” Spencer’s dad closed the call and went back to cheering on Derek James.

Spencer tucked her phone back into her jacket pocket. Finally reaching the double doors leading to the aisle where their seats were, she loosely gripped the handle—before she had a chance to pull them open—everything went pitch black.

She felt something over her face—felt someone gripping her about her neck. Her heart beat out of her ears and her chest. Spencer reached behind her with both hands, desperately trying to keep her balance while being pulled back hard by the neck. She grabbed her neck with both hands, tugging—pulling—trying to loosen the tight pulling grip. Instinctively, she cried out.... “Help! Someone plea—.” Someone roughly covered her mouth.

“Shut your fucking mouth, or I’ll slit your throat,” someone exclaimed in her ear. Spencer felt something sharp pressed against her neck then, the pulling at her neck continued. She lost her balance—falling backward. Spencer felt a hand steady her, then cover her mouth again. She opened wide and bit down.

“Owwwww!” a pained, angry voice cried out. “Why you little bitch!” She

felt herself being swung around. The hard slap stung her face. Tears and terror sprang out of her eyes.

Someone roughly threw her over their shoulder and she felt them drape something over her—her abdomen cramped in pain. Every step they took hurt her all over. After several steps, the person stopped. Spencer squirmed and frantically tried to kick and make muffled noises, even though her face was still covered. The sixteen-year-old heard someone heave a heavy sigh before she smelled peculiar chemicals as a faint mist came through whatever was covering her face. She coughed a couple of times—then lost consciousness.

CHAPTER SEVEN

When Dereck James pumped faked, then took the ball to the hole for two—putting the Lions up by five, Thompson Foster jumped up from his seat—cheering with the rest of the home crowd. He looked behind him toward the steep stairs—expecting to see his daughter. She wasn't there.

He looked at his phone. It was a few minutes past when they'd spoken. He remembered her telling him she was right outside the stadium door. Did she get lost? Maybe she decided to get something from the concession stand. No, that made no sense. She just had a hot-dog and soda before she went to the bathroom.

He looked again at the stairs and saw a restaurant worker balancing a couple of beers on her tray—but no Spencer. Where was she? He scratched his forehead. He pulled out his phone again and punched her button on his favorites. Her phone rang and rang—then went to voice mail. He got up from his seat and went looking for his daughter.

Foster bounded up the stairs and opened the door leading to the hallway of the Atlanta Lion Stadium. Looking toward the concession stand, he could see an older couple there—but no Spencer. He went toward the bathrooms. Once he got there—he pushed open the door to the women's bathroom and called out.

“Spencer? Are you in here? Spencer—are you here?”

No answer. Suddenly, this part of the stadium seemed more like the inside of a tomb. Where was his daughter? He walked into the women's bathroom and checked each stall. If a woman came in—he'd apologize and explain he was looking for his daughter. He punched her under Favorites once more. The call echoed the last one he'd made. First the ringing—then

her voice mail. He raced over to the concession stand to ask if anyone had seen a young teenager with shoulder-length blonde hair. No one had. Panic and dread crept over Thompson Foster—something he'd never felt this intensely. Something was terribly wrong.

Thompson Foster stretched his limbs, rushing as he took the steps down two at a time—praying—pleading that Spencer was back in her seat and her phone battery was simply dead. She was notorious for misjudging the battery life on her phone. *Please God, please, let her be there*, he pleaded to himself. Their seats were empty. His heart dropped out of his chest.

He raced back up the stairs and out of the stadium into the inked stained night. To him, it seemed to take forever to get back to his car. Once he pulled up directions on his car map, he drove to the nearest police station.

At the front desk he said, "I can't find my daughter. I need to speak with someone in charge." The desk sergeant directed him to sit in a chair outside the supervisor's office.

"He'll be right with you," he directed.

"It's urgent. Something must've happened to her. She'd have never left there on her own. I think someone has kidnapped her." He scratched his head as he sat.

The desk sergeant dialed the supervisor and told him Mr. Foster needed his help right away.

"Come with me, Sir."

Foster got up and followed the sergeant back into the supervisor's office.

"This is Lieutenant Walter Dickens. Lieutenant Dickens, this is Mr. Thompson Foster. His daughter is missing."

Dickens stood and shook Foster's hand. "Have a seat," the balding, pale detective told him. "Tell me what's going on, Mr. Foster."

"My daughter is missing," he told the police lieutenant.

"Did you have an argument?"

"Of course not! We were at the game—the NBA game. Today is her sixteenth birthday. I've been working lots of overtime in South Carolina and this was our first chance to spend the evening together. She went to the restroom by herself and never came back. I knew I should've gone with her." He nervously scratched his forehead with three fingers.

Dickens looked at him suspiciously.

"You think someone kidnapped her from the NBA game? From the stadium?"

“What else could’ve possibly happened?”

“She could’ve met up with a friend or someone else. Maybe she ran off with them.”

“Why would she tell me she was on her way back to her seat?”

“Maybe to give herself time to get away.”

“That’s utterly preposterous!”

“Why, even more so is her getting abducted at the Lion’s Stadium. That’s highly unlikely. Highly unlikely. And unfortunately, since we have so many runaway cases, I’m afraid we can’t report her as missing for another 24 hours.”

“Twenty-four hours! I tell you, she’s not a runaway!”

“What proof do you have of that, Mr. Foster?”

“Why, I don’t—I don’t have anything—no physical proof. Just my instincts. I’m telling you—she called me and said she was on her way back to her seat! Actually, she didn’t call me—I called her after she was gone a while. I wanted to make sure she was all right. Anyway, it doesn’t really matter. All that matters is that she’s gone. She said she was on her way back, I tell you!”

“I’m afraid we’ve already been over that, sir. Look, I feel for you—I really do. We get runaways all the time, but the good thing is—within 24 hours, they’re usually back home. I’m certain you’ll hear from her soon.” Lieutenant Dickens stood. “Here’s my card, Mr. Foster. Please go on home and wait for her to call. Hopefully, she’ll call you real soon—and this ordeal will be over. I’m sorry you have to go through this. But I assure you—teenage girls don’t get kidnapped from an NBA Stadium. It just doesn’t happen.”

Foster got up and took the lieutenant’s card. “I hope to God you’re right,” He told him. “But if you’re not...”

“I assure you...it’s never happened. Not in a place as public as that.”

“I’ll give it 24 hours. Thanks for your time.” Knowing there was nothing else he could do, the distraught father left the precinct and drove home.

Lieutenant Dickens repeated the name—“Thompson Foster. Why do I know that name?” He called his sergeant on duty. “Do a search for me will, ya? Get me all the information you can on Mr. Foster Thompson.”

“On it, Lieutenant.”

The foul taste of bile hitting the back of Spencer’s throat woke her with a

start. Disoriented and dizzy—fright gripped her heart as she recalled the darkness that surrounded her before she'd blacked out. But now—she wasn't smothered by the opaqueness. It was dark—but she could make out shadows. She realized it was the room that was murky—nothing covered her face. She also realized she wasn't being carted around on someone's shoulder. Still—her body ached from the bruises she'd sustained when she was being carried. She was lying on a hard surface. She tapped it with her foot. It felt like a wooden floor. But even though the wooden slats were beneath her—she felt disoriented somehow. The floor did not feel steady. The room felt stuffy, damp, and musty. She could feel the tightness of the rope binding her hands behind her back.

Panic leapt from her brain—but she convinced herself to gather her thoughts. She had to assess her situation. Where was she? What had happened? How long had she been unconscious? To calm herself—she resolved to set her mind to answering whatever questions she could. But her fear leapt in and took over.

I'm so fucking scared right now! Thoughts about replacing curse words with Sweet Heaven were out the window. *This is a fucking nightmare that requires real fucking cursing!* A chilling sense of uncertainty and fear sleeked through her brain like a slither of snakes. She had no idea where she was, how long she'd been unconscious, or who had taken her from the fucking stadium. She only knew she was absolutely scared shitless.

Dammit, I've got to gather my thoughts. She consciously slowed her breathing, then took a few deep, tortoise-like breaths. In through the noooooossssse, out through the moooooouthhhhh, she remembered the slow, deliberate words of her favorite You Tuber on tips on how to calm down when you're stressed.

Suddenly, hope and excitement replaced her fear. *My phone—my phone!* She laid on her side and tried pulling—no luck. The rope on her hands was too tight. She pulled and pulled, but her efforts proved futile. Tears slid down her moist face. She was as helpless to stop them as she was to untie herself.

Seemingly out of nowhere, she heard a sound from the other side of the room and realized she wasn't alone. "Who's there? Who are you?" Spencer Foster cried out. "What do you want with me? Where am I?"

Spencer's father sat there racking his brain—wondering where his teenage daughter could be. Wherever she was, he knew she must be filled

with fear. He felt absolutely helpless. Reluctantly, Thompson Foster slogged up the stairs to his bedroom. He got undressed and went to bed. With the police insisting nothing could be done for 24 hours, he didn't know where to start. He'd called her number several more times. No answer. Out of desperation, he grabbed his phone from the end table and called again. Nothing. As it did each time he called her, his heart dropped from his chest. Tear slid down into his ears. *God, please let her be alright!* He begged. He lay there for about 15 minutes, knowing he could no more sleep than he could eat while Spencer was missing. Then, he shot up like a rocket and jumped out of the bed—the solution becoming as clear as glass. He threw his terry-cloth robe on over his pajamas and grabbed his phone, running down the stairs two at a time and went into his home office.

Spencer Foster peered into the pitch-darkness. Next thing she knew, a figure stood in front of her, bending down and gruffly pulling her up from the floor.

“Wait, who are you?”

The figure pulled out a scarf, turned Spencer around and roughly pulled it between her teeth and tied it tight.

“That'll keep you from askin' dumb questions,” the kidnapper barked, then brusquely pushed her back down to the floor and left the room. Spencer's heart pounded with fear. She laid there crying for a while.

With each passing hour, she delved deeper into despair, wondering if anyone was close to finding her. She knew her father would be frantic, and she felt entirely helpless. There was absolutely no way of letting him know where she was. She didn't even know.

The unprecedented kidnapping sent shockwaves through the town, and residents became gripped by a mixture of disbelief and paranoia. A teenager—kidnapped at the Atlanta Lions Stadium. Just saying the words sounded unbelievable.

As the news spread, Lieutenant Dickens cursed himself for not digging into the teen's disappearance sooner and throwing the situation off as just another runaway. He'd given the kidnapper or kidnappers more than enough time to traffic the girl, sexually assault her...even kill her. He retrieved a new bottle of antacid from his top drawer—unwrapped the tamper-proof plastic that made it damn near impossible to open. Dickens took two out and chewed

them down, resolving exactly how he could move forward and help—determined to unravel the mystery and restore confidence in the police to the distraught community. The information Sergeant York had provided didn't help.

Thompson Foster had information on the Karrington family—one of the richest families in all of South Carolina. One of his clients—a retired lawyer—was in possession of a codicil to Mr. Karrington's will. Thompson Foster could not reveal the information because of the attorney privilege he had with his client. Recently, Foster's client had fallen into a coma, then died. He'd left a letter accusing the widow of trying to dispose of the new will so she wouldn't have to share Karrington's fortune with her stepson. Now that it seemed Thompson Foster's daughter was not a runaway—he wondered if this information may somehow be tied to her disappearance.

CHAPTER EIGHT

“Go get it, Boy!” Brianna Chandler threw the stick as far as she could down the turquoise shoreline. Shredder took off—sprinting near the water—loving the feeling of the water lapping up and wetting his huge paws. Dressed in tight Prada blue jeans that hugged her curves and long legs, and a sky blue long-sleeved top with a caramel leather jacket that complemented her auburn hair, she looked down the shoreline—then back the other way. No sign of him. This was the third day she’d come to the beach near where she met Michael Miller, hoping to run into him again. Just like the day before and the day before that—he was nowhere in sight. She’d even called her friend, Nancy Danzinger, to get her help in cancelling her wedding to Alcott Muldoon. She hoped Nancy would drop some gossip about Michael or even Loretta, but she didn’t.

And Tom hadn’t seen either of them at the bank the last few days. Michael Mercer and Loretta seemed to have vanished. Once again, she was disappointed. She hadn’t seen him for days. She cursed herself for being on the prowl for a gigolo!

“Good Boy!” She gushed when Shredder came sprinting back with the stick. Dropping to her knees, she gave him a generous hug and slipped a treat she had in her sweater pocket in her mouth. “That’s my baby. Good Boy.”

As she got to her feet, her heart leapt. Looking down the beach a ways, she saw a tall-dark haired man with a petite blonde. She recognized Loretta Karrington and thought that the man was the one she wanted to see, but when she walked down the beach and got a little closer to them, she saw that the man Loretta was with was not Michael Miller, but the man who’d attacked Michael at the party.

As they walked toward her, she could tell they were having an argument. Loretta was animated. Neither one of them even noticed her as they got even closer.

“Dammit, do not fuck this up for me!” She overheard Loretta yell. “You know what to do.”

The dark-haired, husky man snatched the paper from her. “Don’t worry, Retta, I’m all over it. I won’t let you down,” He reassured her. Before they got to Brianna, they turned and walked up the stone walkway—away from the beach. They looked like two people up to no good. She couldn’t help but wonder what the hell they were up to.

The SEALS lined up near the dance floor at Atlanta’s To Have And To Hold Reception Hall—ready to donate money to the bride and groom during the dollar dance. Nice-looking Noah ‘Needles’ Lewis was first to dance with the bride.

“Is it true they call you Needles cuz you had an—um—encounter with a cactus?”

“Afraid so,” he admitted, blushing.

“I got a little too smashed one night while we were on assignment in the desert and I fell backward and landed my backside on a cactus full of needles. I spent hours in the doctor’s office—he had to remove those painful needles one-by-one. One thing he did say, though, is that I was lucky I didn’t fall face first into the cactus. As drunk as I was...I easily could have.”

“Gosh, that sounds awful painful.” She smiled. “You must have been a sight.”

“Yeah, a bottom-full of cactus needles. I’m afraid I brought that nickname all on myself.” Noah ‘Needles’ Lewis and Angie Giovani both laughed.

“I’m happy for you both,” he said, smiling down at her. “Chester—I mean, Lorenzo sure is crazy about you.”

“The feeling is absolutely mutual,” Angie beamed. “And I know even though I call him Lorenzo, you all on the SEAL team call him by his nickname. I think the way you all give each other nicknames is sweet.”

Needles smiled, then stepped back and bowed to the bride. Will ‘Spider’ Robertson dropped his money into the basket held by Cynthia Darrow, Angie’s maid-of-honor, then stepped up to dance with the bride.

“I knew from the first moment Chester told us about you—he was

hopelessly in love with you,” the handsome, brown-haired, bearded Navy SEAL told Angie.

“Well, I’m sure glad of that. I don’t know if I really even believed in love at first sight—but once I laid eyes on Lorenzo—I fell head-over-hills in love. This is the best day of my life.”

“His, too. All of us—we’re like brothers. Now, you’re like our little sister.”

Angie said, “I feel happier than all you could ever know about getting a bunch of brothers with my new husband, especially since I’m an only child.”

Ruggedly handsome, Will ‘Spider’ Robertson smiled, then let her go and bowed while the last of the Navy SEAL team, Thomas ‘Mister’ Smith, placed his cash into the money basket, then danced with the bride. Devastatingly gorgeous at 6 foot 3, he stood as tall as her husband. She couldn’t remember a time when she’d been surrounded by so many muscular, good-looking men.

“I can’t help feeling like I’m in the middle of my grandmother’s favorite movie,” Angie mused, shyly.

“What’s that?” Thomas ‘Mister’ Smith asked.

“*Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*. It’s a classic musical I used to love watching with my grandmother. Just like Jane Powell in the movie, I’m surrounded by a group of handsome men. They were actually brothers.”

“We are too,” Mister said. “Just not blood.”

“Oh, I know Mister Smith—I know...” Angie laughed. She was so happy to be surrounded by so many people who loved her and her new groom.

When the festivities ended and her new husband finally drove to his house, then carried her over the threshold—she thought she might burst from sheer happiness.

“As much as I loved our wedding. I’ve been wanting to get my hands on you all night, Babe. Or should I say, Mr. Giovanni?” The new bride said, glad they finally made it to Lorenzo’s condo.

“The feeling is absolutely mutual, Mrs. Giovanni.” He gently cupped her chin—pulling her soft lips to him—planting his luscious lips on hers.

The handsome groom removed his lips that were locked on hers, letting them trail down as his hand had done, following the line of her neck and shoulders. His kisses produced sexy noises. Then suddenly his mouth reached a buxom, quivering breast. He kissed it all over, still smacking his lips, then fastened himself to the quivering nipple like a vampire sucking blood. At the

same time, his hands went under her resilient and silky hips.

“Oh shit, you are so sexy,” he muttered. “You goddam beauty, I’ll never let you go.” Then his lips started exploring and swirling again.

“I’m all yours, Babe. Forever and ever!”

“All this—all mine!” He echoed. In a surge of irrepressible passion, the new groom firmly caressed his new wife’s gloriously curvy body, then buried his full lips in her neck. He pulled her heaving breasts against his hairy chest, his probing physique searching out the velvet of her. Her hands clutched his taut thighs. Her heart pounded in anticipation.

“Oh, Lorenzo. Fuck me, Baby. Fuck me hard. Fuck me good. Oh, yes, yes, yes!” She bucked—fought to match his rhythmic contortion, and she was marvelously skilled at it. But before her climb to ecstasy was even under way, he was at the peak, blowing out his pent breath in a great gasp. Then his body totally relaxed in her arms.

CHAPTER NINE

“Let’s go for another walk, Boy.” Shredder wagged his tail as Brianna Chandler picked up his leash and led him out the door and down the path toward the beach. The crisp air bit into Brianna’s cheeks. She let Shredder off the leash and watched him tear off toward the shoreline. Looking around—she still didn’t see who she hoped she’d see. She couldn’t help but wonder where he was and why she hadn’t seen him in the past few days.

While she and Shredder were enjoying walking on the beach, Brianna Chandler’s phone rang, displaying an unknown number. Typically, she’d let it go unanswered—preferring to let it go to voicemail in case it was an annoying sales call. Instinctively, she answered.

“Hello?”

“Brianna, it’s Michael, Michael Mercer. I just spoke to your brother, Tom. Loretta gave me his cell number. He was reluctant at first—but he gave me your number. I must speak to you. It’s urgent. I’m out of town at my best friend’s wedding—but I just had to speak to you. I’ve been drinking—so I’ll blame it on liquid courage,” he chuckled.

“Are you sure you should be calling me? Don’t you belong to someone else?” Haughtiness filled Brianna’s voice as she stood with her arms crossed in defiance.

“Look—I know what you think,” he said, as if he could see her impudence. “But this is important. Please, Brianna.”

That same pleading quality that was in his voice when they’d first met melted her anger. It was as if he had a telepathic connection to her heart.

“All I can tell you is that I can’t completely explain what I’m up to—but it’s not what you think. I want to tell you one more thing, Brianna—La Mia

Bella Rossa—that means my beautiful redhead in Italian.”

Brianna’s heart thumped.

“All I can think about is how badly I want to run my fingers through your beautiful hair. I’m surrounded by people tonight—but all I want to do is to be alone with you only you...don’t give up on me, Brianna.” He hung up.

Brianna’s favorite fairy tale breezed through her mind. For a fleeting moment, she really wished she was Cinderella at the ball meeting her handsome prince. She’d grown up believing in happily ever after. Now, here was Michael Mercer...speaking to her heart, speaking the language she longed to hear.

CHAPTER TEN

Lorenzo ‘Chester’ Giovanni woke with a wide smile on his face. He felt as if he’d died and gone to heaven. Married life was all he thought it would be. He couldn’t think of anything better right now than waking up laying next to the woman he adored.

The two of them lying there; two comfortable people sprawled out together. Two souls lying in his room where the only motion was a wilted lace curtain, breeze-blown, lazily stroking the open windowsill.

In the alley below the window, a pair of brown-haired, scruffy six-year-olds were rolling little steel balls at a line scratched in the sand-colored dirt. They wore blue jeans and squinted against the morning sun. One of the four unwashed hands was folded round the crushed brass tube of pink lipstick. Both boys looked up briefly when the sound of a ball split the air above them.

Up in the bedroom, Lorenzo ‘Chester’ Giovanni reached out a firm hand and shut off the alarm clock’s metallic stutter.

Chester stretched, and muscles ripped sexily along his bare arms. He didn’t open his eyes, but yawned. Chester combed fingers through his hair—black hair, thick and naturally oily. He grinned suddenly, and there was a flash of straight teeth contrasting whitely against the dark olive color of his cheeks and strong jaw.

Giovanni grinned because he’d been married only a day, and everything was explosively fulfilling. This wasn’t like it had been with his mom and dad. All day long sometimes, it seemed.

All that fighting and name-calling in Italian. One thing he didn’t feel like doing in his bedroom at the moment was fighting. All they’d done last night

made him feel good this morning. Even after getting home late—even if they had to keep on working instead of taking a honeymoon. The honeymoon would come in a couple of months when they could both take more time off from their jobs.

“Hey Angie,” he said to her. “It’s almost 6.” No answer. That was Angie for you. When she did her thing—she did it well. Sleep, for instance. Out cold. Lorenzo yawned and wiggled his toes against the cold sheets. He shivered.

“Angie, you’ll miss your ride!” Heavy-lidded eyes closed comfortably—he reached his hand out to gently grab a delightful tousle of her soft blonde locks.

Instead of long, soft strands of gold, he felt stubble and heard the wiry rasp of it as his fingers passed over a square chin.

Snatching away his hand as if it had been burned, his eyes flew open as he jerked into a sitting position.

He stared at the other side of the bed. A man lay there. Covered by a pink wool blanket, one of the man’s arms hung down limply to the faded leaves and flowers of the old rug.

Lorenzo whipped aside his blankets, turned his bare legs over the side of the bed, and thumped his feet onto the floor. He swiftly glanced around the bedroom. She wasn’t there.

“Angie!” The word crumbled to dust in Lorenzo ‘Chester’ Giovanni’s throat.

Chester saw the large blot—so dark red it was almost black—on the blanket just above the man’s chest. He tore the blanket away. He searched the dead man’s face—looked at the dead man’s eyes. Don. The dead man in his bed, lying next to him, where his new wife should have been, was Don Helm.

Fully clothed, Helm wore a ruffled, grey flannel suit, a white shirt, and a shamrock green tie with white whirls. The type of clothes you’d wear to a wedding. Lorenzo couldn’t recall seeing Don Helm at their wedding—or at the reception. The chest of his coat was blood-soaked. His pinkish hair was mussed, but the familiar pink was gone from his cheeks. They were grey except for the coppery glinting of a day’s worth of whiskers.

Helm was dead. He had been dead for several hours. Lorenzo could tell without touching him. As a Navy SEAL, Lorenzo ‘Chester’ Giovanni witnessed death more than he sometimes cared to. Just this type of death—sudden and violent.

But it was typically where he expected it—on the battlefield—during mercenary missions, preventing bloody coups. But this? This was different. So close at hand—catapulted at him like this. On his wedding night. Lorenzo stood still, his broad muscular hands clenching his rock-hard thighs through the thin cloth of his cotton pajama pants. He stood there for half a minute—30 second drawn out ticks.

Turning quickly, he sped into the tiny bathroom. The cracked white tiles were sharp and cold against his feet. She wasn't there.

“Angie!” Panic was tugging at him, but he kicked it aside. She was safe. She had to be safe.

He ran through the tidy kitchen and out to the living room. Angie wasn't there either. He sprang onto the sway-backed couch and his fingernails sank into its green cotton slip-cover as he looked behind it. She wasn't there.

A twist of the glass knob and a yank of the redwood doors showed him that Angie wasn't in the small bed that folded into the living room's east wall. Only one other place was left. Lorenzo sprinted back to the bedroom and yanked open the closet door with the narrow, full-length mirror on it. His arms beat at the colorful dresses, the sport jackets and the white Navy uniform hanging there.

Fear clamped down on his heart. Slamming the closet door, he dropped to his knees and glanced under the bed, half expecting to see Angie lying there as silently as Helm.

She wasn't.

He got up, and his eyes went automatically to the dead face on his wife's pillow. Thoughts were tumbling and crowding into his mind. Thoughts he hated. Don Helm and Angie had been engaged once. Don Helm, tall and good-looking, junior executive at Hennessey's Corporate Headquarters. He'd nearly married Angie until—

The thoughts went skittering crazily from Chester's brain as his dark brown eyes fell upon the open bureau drawer...the lowest one. The gun—his extra .38 revolver—was gone. His holster was lying on the pile of balled-up socks. It gaped at him empty.

Chester went quickly to Helm's side. Working nimbly, his fingers tugged at Helm's green tie, unbuttoned the white shirt and spread it open.

A .45 slug hadn't made that size hole. And it was too large to be the work of a .25. The best guess was that a .38 had put it there. Lorenzo 'Chester' Giovanni's .38.

Without realizing what he was doing, Giovanni put the chair back on its four mahogany legs and sat down. There was no expression on his face. He stared at a nail hole in the blue and white geometric wallpaper.

He didn't believe it. He absolutely didn't believe it. But the facts were there—long, finger-like facts pointing in one direction.

Had Angie done something to him? Did he try to hurt her in some way and she had to fight back? Giovanni knew Angie hated Don Helm. She had good reason. Maybe she'd killed him and then run away, taking along the murder gun—not knowing what to do next. The revolver of a man she'd only just married.

He thought about the woman Angie had told him about the other day. She'd killed her sexual abuser, and the system gave her life in prison. That same justice system gave six months to Eric Donovan, a college swimmer who had sex with a woman who was drunk and unconscious. She knew full well how unfair the justice system could be.

For a long time, Lorenzo 'Chester' Giovanni stayed there on the blue-velvet seat, listening to the sounds of kids playing marbles in the alley.

Abruptly, he got up. His eyes were blazing. He swore at himself for being nothing but a Navy SEAL who couldn't tell a clue from a hole in the ground.

She couldn't have done it. Angie wasn't the type. She was gentle and kind. Angie positively hated guns, hated the fact that Chester had to even carry weapons. Hated killing of any kind. Even killing bad men. A.38? No. It had to be just a coincidence that she wasn't here. Maybe she'd decided to go out early—maybe she had to meet her parents before they left town. She might not have wanted to wake me, he reasoned.

Chester started back to the living room. In the bedroom doorway, he paused. His bare toe had touched something sticky on the rug. A pink-colored blob. Reaching down, he poked it with a forefinger. He sniffed it. It was lipstick, slightly perfumed. Angie must have dropped it.

Returning to the living room, he picked up the phone. As he dialed a number, he wondered how in the hell Don Helm's body had gotten into the apartment.

"Hello?" said Mrs. Ward, Angie's mother.

"This is Lorenzo." He tried to keep the concern from his voice. "Did Angie come visit you and your husband in your room this morning?"

"Why, no. Isn't she with you?"

Lorenzo hesitated. He didn't want to upset Mrs. Ward or Angie's father.

“I thought she was, but I guess I was mistaken.”

“I don’t understand...” Mrs. Ward’s voice trailed off. Lorenzo could visualize her standing in their hotel suite, a small plump woman. Her husband was probably standing close by, listening and worrying about the concern in his wife’s voice.

“It’s nothing to worry about,” added Lorenzo. “She probably left me a note. That’s it—there’s probably a note around here some place.”

He knew there was no note. And he also knew that Mr. and Mrs. Ward could tell he was lying. When he was nervous like this, he couldn’t tell even a small lie without his tongue tripping all over itself.

“Let me speak to him, Honey.” His wife handed her husband the phone. “I don’t like it, Lorenzo,” Mr. Ward shot off. “You two married only a day.” He paused, then gave the phone back to his wife after he saw her outstretched hand.

“Have you phoned Vivian? She used to stay nights with Vivian sometimes. She wasn’t able to attend your wedding, but I know Angie had been wanting to talk to her before she left town again.”

“No,” said Lorenzo. “But I will right away. She mentioned the other day she needed to speak to her. Thank you—I’ll check right now and get back to you all. Goodbye.”

He put the phone down quickly, feeling sick to his stomach. With a dry tongue, he licked his lips. Everything was worse now. More and more, it looked as if Angie had run into some kind of trouble. What the hell could’ve happened to her?

Again, he lifted the phone. He knew he should dial homicide and report it. But he couldn’t. Not just yet. They’d start a city-wide search for Angie.

Her picture would be in all the papers, and media outlets and social media would crackle with her name. Angie Giovani, killer-bride, commits murder on her wedding night. They’d have a field day with the sensationalism of it all. And when they found her and arrested her, she’d be scared. She’d say the wrong thing, get herself in deeper and deeper.

No, he couldn’t phone—not until he’d tried to find her first himself. Instead of calling the police to report a dead body—he called his commander. His finger trembled as he punched in the Favorite digit for Michael ‘Mercer’ Miller.

“Don’t call anybody else. I’ll take full responsibility. We’ll be there as soon as we can. Let me call Knox and fill him in.” After hanging up, Miller

punched in Cookie 'Knox' Hunter's number. "We've got some trouble going on here in Georgia," he told him, filling him in on the corpse at Chester's house and his missing wife.

"Damn! Chester must be out of his mind. What could've happened to her?"

"He is, and he has no idea what could have happened to Angie. But we can only hope that someone has her, and she hasn't suffered the same fate as the man Chester found."

Mercer said, "I'll contact the rest of the team and we'll get over there right away."

Knox didn't say anything for a brief moment. "I'm afraid I've got more bad news for you. I was just getting ready to call you, as a matter of fact. As bad as the situation is...there was an incident that happened last night that will require help from your team as well. You met my cousin, Ralph Stockton, during our stay in Albuquerque."

"Yes, I remember meeting him."

Knox continued. "One of his buddies—Thompson Foster—called him a couple of hours ago, asking for his help. He remembered my cousin had ties with a Navy SEAL unit, so out of desperation, he asked Stockton if he could get my help. I've already been in touch with Police Lieutenant Walter Dickens—who Thompson Foster talked to about his daughter. Her name is Spencer Foster. She just turned sixteen, and she came up missing during a game she attended with her dad at the Atlanta Lion's Stadium."

"She went missing in a basketball stadium?"

"It does sound unusual, but as we've been briefed on this major issue of human trafficking in the US—we're no longer taking any possibilities off the table. The traffickers are becoming bolder and more willing to take risks. They've even gone to marking cars in shopping malls so someone in the ring can follow the women home and abduct them—or kidnap them before they have a chance to leave the mall. After I told him about the urgency of the situation, Dickens nixed the routine 24-hour wait to get on this right away. He's already sending someone to the stadium. I also briefed him on your new team. He'll be in touch with you as soon as he has more details from the stadium. What's interesting about all this is Thompson Foster has ties to the widow you are tailing in South Carolina."

"Loretta Karrington?"

"The very one. Seems he has privy to information that puts her husband's

will in question. As usual, there's no time to lose in either situation."

"I'll call Needles and Mister and have them meet the police at the stadium ASAP." Mercer said. "Meantime, Spider is on his way to pick me up. We're heading to Chester's."

"Good. Now that Chester's wife is missing, too, Triple M—two lives hang in the balance. Seems we put your team together just in time."

"Right. We're on it. I'll keep in touch." Mercer Miller ended the call.

Meanwhile, Lorenzo 'Chester' Giovanni dialed a number he hoped against hope would lead him to his missing wife.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Six, then seven times, the receiver rang metallically in his ear before Vivian Mason answered.

“Yes?” She asked in her silken tone.

“Hello,” he said. “This is—”

“You don’t have to tell me!” Cut in Vivian. “I’d know your voice anywhere, Lorenzo ‘Chester’ Giovanni. Such a nice, deep voice...”

Lorenzo swallowed. Vivian always made him feel uncomfortable. Like Angie, she was blonde, but flashier—quite a bit flashier. Her eyes were nearly violet, and she wore the brightest lip rouges, the highest heels, the lowest-cut blouses. He’d been smitten with Vivian—until he’d met Angie and fallen in love. Angie was more fun. She got a kick out of baseball and tennis and wasn’t afraid to get her hair wet at the beach. She was more real.

“I was wondering,” said Lorenzo. He hesitated and at the same time heard a small thumping sound at the other end of the line.

“Sam!” shouted Vivian. “Get down from there! Excuse me a minute, Lorenzo.”

The phone clattered as Vivian set it down. She returned after a moment.

“Sorry, Lorenzo. That damn cat was up on the mantle again after the goldfish and knocked down a book. Now what were you wondering about?”

“Did you have some kind of emergency where Angie had to come over there with you by any chance?” Breath tight in his chest, he waited for her answer.

Vivian laughed. “Well, the honeymoon’s over already! What did she do, Lorenzo, run home to mom and dad?”

“No!” he said angrily. “You know better than that!”

“I don’t know,” laughed Vivian. Her voice softened, becoming almost husky. “You know, Lorenzo, honey. I’m still carrying a big torch for you. I’ll be home tonight if you’d like to—”

“Thank you, but I’ll be busy.” Lorenzo hung up. He dialed Angie’s parents to update them.

“Vivian hasn’t seen her.”

“Do we need to come to your house?” Angie’s father asked.

“No. My team members and I are going to be tracking down leads. They’ll be here any minute. Why don’t you all stay put in case she tries to reach you at the hotel? I’ll check in with you and keep you all updated.”

“Okay.” Angie’s father hung up. Chester opened the door to let Mercer and Spider in. They both dapped and hugged their friend.

“We’ll do whatever we can to find her, Chester.” Mercer reassured his friend. Chester gave them both a worried smile.

“Where’s the body?” Chester took them into the bedroom.

“Not only was Angie once engaged to him—he used to work with her. He got her fired.”

“There’s no way Angie would have anything to do with this guy’s death, dude.” Mercer reassured his friend.

“She couldn’t hurt a fly. No matter what.” Spider echoed. His team members’ words reinforced what he already knew.

“Let me call this into Knox so he can patch me in with the Atlanta Police Department.”

While Michael ‘Mercer’ Miller was on the phone, he couldn’t keep from pacing. He racked his brain—not knowing where they should start looking for Angie. He hoped Lieutenant Dickens and the rest of his team would have some luck at the stadium. Maybe someone saw something—anything.

Spider and Chester went into the living room, where Spider tried distracting him with small talk. Lorenzo ‘Chester’ Giovanni nervously looked out of the window as he’d done several times. He started to turn from the window—and then from the edge of his eye he saw her.

Angie.

At the narrow mouth of the alley, half a block away. But she wasn’t coming home. She was quickly walking away. “There she is!” He shouted to Spider. “You guys stay put in case she circles around and beats me here. I’m going after her.”

“If she gets here before you—I won’t let her out of my sight.” Spider

reassured him.

There was a thick roaring in the Navy SEALs ears as he poked his bare feet into his sneakers and grabbed the blue shirt up off the rug. He ran through the kitchen, his left arm stabbing the air, trying to find the shirt sleeve flapping out behind him.

Down the front steps he went, three at a time. He ran along the narrow concrete path past the purple dahlias and yellow daisies and past the fat garbage that was brown with running ants.

She'd crossed Twenty-third Street and was walking in the alley beyond. Stuffing in his shirttail, Lorenzo sprinted.

When he was a hundred yards behind her, he shouted. "Angie!"

She didn't stop. She walked even faster, the paper shopping bag swinging in her hand.

His lungs were hot and heavy in his chest by the time he caught her elbow and yanked her to a stop.

He blurted: "Angie!"

And then he felt as if he'd been slugged across the eyes with a baseball bat.

The girl wasn't Angie. This blonde had small brown eyes, a bump on her nose, and a small, angry mouth.

"Say! What d'you think you're doing!" She tore away from his grasp.

"Sorry," said Lorenzo. He took out his black leather wallet, fumbled it open, and showed his identification. "Military," he muttered. "Made a mistake..."

Turning, he walked slowly back down the alley, his sockless feet sliding around in the untied shoes. He felt sick. From the back, that girl had been a dead ringer for Angie.

She walked the same way, held her shoulders in the same erect manner. He should've known by the hair-do and the clothes that wasn't Angie. But he wanted so desperately to believe it was her that his eyes had run away with his brain.

He aimlessly walked back into the condo, his hands deep in his pockets. Mercer and Spider were standing in the living room. "Wasn't her," he explained, heaving his heavy shoulders.

"Lieutenant Dickens didn't get any viable leads at the stadium." Mercer told him. "He's on his way here. He'll be along with the coroner to collect the body and process the scene for clues."

Chester barely heard Mercer. He'd been a fool. Here he was appointed to a new eagle-eye team acting like an apple-green rookie. Instead of thinking things through calmly, the way an experienced SEAL would've done, he'd bolted out there like a scalded dog.

While Spider and Mercer sat in the living room waiting for Lieutenant Dickens, Chester walked down the hallway toward the bedroom, forcing himself to think slowly. There were two ways of looking at it. Somebody had killed Helm, there was no doubt about that. But did that person harm Angie? Where was she? What would they have done with her? Was it someone connected with them at Hennesey's?

Helm was one of the assistant managers at Hennesey's where Angie had worked in the cosmetic section. They'd been engaged, but Angie had broken it off. She said Helm was too immature—too headstrong. He'd proved that later by having her fired for some small thing. Helm was quite a power around the store. Anybody could be a power if his father was the store's vice president.

Thoughtfully, Chester scrubbed his fingertips through his thick, dark hair. Helm's body must have been in the bed all night. It was there when Chester came in. If he hadn't been so careful not to wake Angie, if he had put on the lights, he would have discovered the body then.

It had been a grim joke—hardly the sort of thing Angie would do. Maybe it was somebody else's idea of humor. Someone with a funny sense of proportion, funny enough to know what a shock it would be when Chester found the body beside him in the morning. *It would have to be someone with a grudge against me*, he thought. Someone who, at the same time, had a reason for wanting Helm dead.

When the doorbell rang, Michael 'Mercer' Miller shouted, "I'll get it!" Loud enough for Chester, who was still in the bedroom, to hear.

Lieutenant Walter Dickens introduced himself to the group. "I left the rest of your team—Needles and Mister with my sergeant to try and track down any leads at the stadium. So far, unfortunately, we've come up bone dry. We haven't found anybody who saw anything yet, but we're still interviewing employees who were working that shift."

Meanwhile, Spider looked out the window, watching the war-games going down in the alley. The small boys who were now throwing sticks that were supposed to be flaming arrows.

Something about the way the sun glared on their faces made him take

notice of the color of the war paint the six-year-olds had rubbed on their tanned bodies. Pink—frosty pink. On a hunch, he turned and went back to the bedroom doorway, where he'd stepped on a blob of color right after walking away from the dead man's body. The two shades matched—it looked like it could have been lipstick.

He shouted down: "Hello, there, fellas. What're you supposed to be—Cherokees or Navajos?"

They stopped throwing sticks. One said:

Naw, we're Indians!"

"American Indians!" The taller boy corrected. "My mom said they're American Indians!"

"Okay," said Spider. "Where'd you get that paint?"

One of them held up a crushed brass tube. "Found this in the alley."

"I'll give you each a dollar for it."

The boys immediately became financiers. "Cash?" one asked.

"Be right down. I'll be right back," Spider told the group, then went outside. He handed each boy one dollar—they handed him the brass tube. Spider examined it. It was frosted pink lipstick, all right, and the tube had been smashed, probably stepped on, explaining the stain on the rug.

Spider wondered if it had any significance. He walked into the bedroom where Chester was still sitting by the corpse—lost in thought.

He held up the lipstick tube. "This look like it could be Angie's?" He questioned.

"It *is* Angie's!" Her husband exclaimed. The tube was evidence, damned important evidence. Hurriedly, he slipped into his sports jacket, which concealed the holster at his hip, and went into the bedroom where Mercer was briefing the lieutenant on who the corpse was. He wasn't sure, but there was a good chance now that Lorenzo 'Chester' Giovanni finally knew where he was going...he explained to Mercer and Lieutenant Dickens he had a lead and needed to visit Vivian.

"Take Spider with you," Mercer told him.

Chester kept thinking about the lipstick and a dark, warm Georgia night about a month ago. He and Angie had stood together on the outermost rim of Rainbow Pier, a tremendous bow of soft-colored lights which pushed out into Lake Lanier.

They'd held hands and watched the white manes of the waves breaking against the rocks below. He didn't remember exactly what started it, but they

began criticizing one another in fun. Blue eyes impish, Angie said she absolutely could not stand the green necktie he was wearing. She said it resembled a piece of anemic celery.

Chester laughed and said he didn't like her frosty lipstick because it was the same kind Vivian wore—and he didn't think she should go around reminding him of former girlfriends. So they had a little ceremony. Chester took off the tie and dropped it into the black waves. Angie took the brass tube from her purse and tossed it in. And he'd spent the next ten minutes kissing off the rest of the frosted pink lipstick.

He was sure Angie hadn't bought another one. So how had the pink lipstick got on the rug? Maybe Vivian would know.

Maybe Vivian put it there.

On the way, Chester told Spider, "Vivian is a good friend of Angie's. As a matter of fact, she introduced us. I used to date her. I need to talk to her. See if she has anything to do with Angie's disappearance."

Vivian Mason resided in a small yellow-shuttered white cottage on East Tenth Street. Lorenzo 'Chester' Giovanni slammed his white coupe against the curb and was stepping out before the wheels stopped rolling, with Spider stepping out and following right behind him.

Chester frantically rang the doorbell, then banged on Vivian's white bead-boarded front door. No answer. He banged again and waited. Still no answer. He and Spider walked around the side of the cottage—checking windows—looking for a way in.

"I forgot! She leaves a key in the large flower-pot on the porch."

"Let's go!" Spider said. They rushed to the porch.

Chester raked through the soil in the pot until he found the key. He pushed the key into the lock and after opening the front door—both Navy SEALS went in.

Chester began rifling through papers she'd left on her dining room table, searching for any clues. Spider went down the hall into Vivian's bedroom.

When he went back into the kitchen, he told Chester, "Looks like she may have gone somewhere in a hurry. A bunch of clothes are thrown on her bed, still on hangers." He looked at photos plastered on the front of her refrigerator. "Where's this?"

Lorenzo 'Chester' Giovanni grabbed the photo from him. "Imperial Yacht Tours. This guy's wearing a blue shirt that reads Imperial Yacht Tours."

"What are those smaller letters under the name?" Asked Spider. Chester

squinted so he could see the letters better. “South Carolina.” He punched Imperial Yacht Tours into his cell phone’s search app—Ping. “The Ashley River in Charleston.” He tucked the picture into his sports jacket pocket and called their commander.

“I’ll radio for a police helicopter,” Lieutenant Dickens said. “Let’s go,” he told Michael ‘Mercer’ Miller. “Chester and Spider will meet us at the airport. I’ll send a police car to pick up Needles. Sergeant York and Mister can stay here in Atlanta tracking down leads on anything they can find on Spencer Foster’s whereabouts.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Brianna's phone rang. "Richard! Where in the world have you been? Tom and I have been worried sick about you!"

"I'm in trouble, Brianna. I need your help. Some guys are after me. I owe them some money. Can you help me out?"

"Don't I always? How much this time?" Brianna knew when Richard needed drug money, he'd make up stories to get it from her or Tom. Recently, Tom had been putting his foot down with Richard—but Richard knew Brianna was an easy mark. No was not in her vocabulary when it came to her best friend.

"Two thousand. You have that much in the safe, don't you?"

"Yeah, but I'll have to leave Tom an IOU. He's at his fiancé's."

"I can be there in 20 minutes."

"Perfect. See you then."

"Just look for me and bring it out to the car. I'm not feeling good. My stomach's giving me fits," Richard told her. "I'll text when I get there."

"Okay." After she'd taken the cash from the safe, she left her brother an IOU. She'd replace the funds with her trust fund money next week. The money she and Tom kept in the safe was their house fund.

After freshening up, she noticed she only had 5 minutes before Richard would be there. She threw on a heavier jacket—it was getting windy and colder. Once he texted her, she tucked her cell phone in her back pocket. She bounded down the stairs and walked outside, where he was waiting. When he saw she was coming to the driver's side, instead of rolling down his window, he gestured for her to go around and get in on the passenger side.

"Here you go," said Brianna, handing him the money.

“Thanks,” he muttered, not looking up at her.

“Feeling bad, uh?”

“Yeah—especially for what I’m getting ready to do.”

“What?”

“I’m so sorry, Brianna—but I need more money—a whole lot more than what you just gave me.”

Confused, she looked at him. When he finally looked at her, she saw the pain registered on his face.

“Please forgive me.” With that, he sprayed the knock-out mist in his best friend’s face—knocking her out cold.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Spencer Foster couldn't be sure of how much time had passed. Earlier, someone had come in and thrown her a stale sandwich and some Cheez its. She barely ate any of it—the tasteless food only made her queasy. And when the captor brought her food, after they gave her time to eat, they came in, then they covered her head—untied her feet and walked her to a foul smelling bathroom to let her use it. She would've taken more time to use the bathroom just to get relief from her feet being bound, but the smell was putrid. She felt she'd been submerged in a never-ending nightmare that was only getting worse.

Shortly after the last time she was allowed to use the bathroom, and retied and shoved back onto the rock-hard floor, she heard loud voices. She laid perfectly still. Years of ear hustling at home and at school had taught her when to go as silent as a church mouse and listen. At first, the words were muffled. They intensified, however—as the tone got angrier—turning into a shouting match. She could hear two distinct voices. She stretched her ear out and listened to make out the words.

“Are you a complete idiot? You took her from the basketball stadium, of all places?! I just heard it on the news.”

“Like I told you...wasn't no one no where around her. There wasn't no one...”

“That should've been the least of your worries, dummy. Now—because you did it in a stadium—Einstein, even the national news has a hold of the story. Everyone's looking for the girl. We had one simple job to do, and you made it a thousand times harder by bringing her into this!”

Spencer now knew the kidnappers felt the heat of the community. They

were regretting taking her from the stadium. Hope filled her heart. Spencer kept listening.

“The fact that you got her from the stadium alone meant the kidnapping is getting wall-to-wall coverage on the local news...everywhere—even TNN News Central. We have to move—and move fast. Only problem is—they’ve locked down the docks—and we still can’t get outta here!. I’m so annoyed with you right now. And now it’s time to sort shit out. You’d better hold things down around here. I need to get things ready.” Spencer heard a door slam.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The police chopper landed in less than an hour. Police cars were waiting at the airport to drive the lieutenant and the Navy SEAL team to the docks at the Ashley River. “Remember, we’re looking for Imperial Yacht Tours. It happens to be the only lead we have to tie into Chester’s wife’s disappearance. All of you saw the picture of the yacht. We need to comb these docks thoroughly and find it. Let’s do this!”

Michael ‘Mercer’ Miller said, “Spider and I will start on the opposite end of the harbor—Needles and Chester, you two look in the mid-dock area.”

“We’re on it,” Needles confirmed. They dashed off to their designated area.

Lieutenant Dickens said, “I’ll cover this end.”

After about 15 minutes of combing the harbor, the team came up empty. None of them spotted any vessel named Imperial Yacht Tours. Time was ticking for all of them, especially Chester.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do if I lose her, man,” he told Spider, raking his fingers through his hair.

“You’re not going to lose Angie. We will find her.” Spider reassured his friend. They searched for another 30 minutes, and Spider called Miller to update him when Chester’s phone rang.

“It’s Vivian Mason.” He gestured for Spider to keep their commander on the line and put Vivian on speaker. “Hello, Vivian. Do you have any news for me on Angie?”

“Hello, Lorenzo,” she purred before getting serious. “I do. I’m afraid I do. Are you at your house?”

“No, I’m not, why?”

“Because I need you to meet me,” Vivian told him.

“Where?”

“I’m afraid I’m not in Atlanta.”

“Look, Vivian, just tell me where to meet you. Is Angie there?”

“Sort of.”

“What does that mean?” Lorenzo questioned, irritated by her evasiveness.

“You’ll see when you get here. She didn’t want me to contact you...but there’s something you need to know. I’m in South Carolina. I’m on a yacht at the docks on the Ashley River.”

“What side of the dock?”

“On the East side. The boat is tied up behind a large black cargo ship named Ladybug.”

“I’ll be there in 5 minutes.”

“Five minutes, bu...”

Chester hung up before she could question him.

“We’ll be right behind you guys,” Mercer told Spider. He hung up, then called the rest of the team and told them where Vivian Mason was.

“I’m here,” she waved at Chester and Spider.

Once they came up the plank, she ran toward Chester. She was wearing a long, tomato-red clingy dress with red spiked heels. Her straight yellow hair was pinned back with gold buckles. Tears glistened wetly in her violet eyes as she tumbled against him, wrapping her arms around his neck.

“Lorenzo, how did you get here so fast? Why are you in South Carolina?”

“Not now, Vivian. This is Will ‘Spider’ Robertson.” Spider nodded. Vivian looked at the handsome Navy SEAL and batted her eyes.

Chester was frantic. “Take me to her.”

“Poor Angie!” she cried. “It was awful. There was a bottle of sleeping tablets in the medicine cabinet—”

Chester unstrapped Vivian’s hand from his neck and twisted around. As he bolted through the bedroom door, his blood seemed cold, thin water in his veins.

“She’s down here.”

His wife was lying on the ruffled, unmade bed in the nightgown she’d worn on their first night together as man and wife. Chester shouldered Vivian aside and bent over her.

“Angie!” he whispered hoarsely. “Angie!” He didn’t even hear the rest of the team when they came up behind him.

Her eyes were closed, and droplets of perspiration clung to her dark eyelids. Her face was an oval as pale as paper. There was no color to her lips, but her long hair, unbrushed, was a tangle of brilliant gold fanning across the crumpled hump of the pillow.

She lay there as motionless as the blankets.

“Good Lord, Vivian, is she all right?”

“I don’t know if I found her in time, Lorenzo,” said Vivian.

Chester dropped to his knees by his lovely wife’s side. The .38’s holster caught in the upholstery and pressed awkwardly against his hip, but he hardly noticed it. Hands jammed across his face, he sat slumped forward.

Vivian’s voice was calm, but had a taut undertone.

“I’ve known Angie for years. I never thought she’d do anything like this.”

“What happened?” Chester asked Vivian, desperate for answers.

“I’m getting to that,” said Vivian. “About 2 a.m. she showed up yelling about Don Helm and how she’d shot him. She opened her purse and there was a gun in it and everything—and I, well, I just didn’t know what to do.”

Michael ‘Mercer’ Miller questioned Vivian. “What about the man she says she shot?”

Chester looked up sharply.

Miller pointed to a gun lying on an end-table. “This gun?”

Vivian nodded her yellow head. Chester didn’t have to look twice to know it was the extra .38 he’d kept in the lower bureau drawer.

“She was hysterical,” added Vivian. “She kept crying that she’d killed Don Helm because he was going to tell Lorenzo that she and Don were still—were still in love.”

Vivian was marching nervously up and down in the small bedroom, her spiked heels digging into the carpet. “I calmed her down,” she explained. “At least I thought I did. I went out to fix breakfast. When I came back here, there was the empty bottle of tablets and I couldn’t wake her up. I even slapped her. And then I got scared and phoned the—”

Taking her moist hand in his, Chester said softly, “Thank God!”

Angie was awake.

“Hello...” whispered Angie. “Gee, do I feel—funny.”

With a corner of the sheet, Chester blotted the perspiration from her forehead. He didn’t want to question her; he didn’t want to cause her any more pain, but he had to know.

“Angie,” he said gently. “Did you take the sleeping tablets?”

The blue eyes blinked. “Tablets?”

He nodded. “Did you take some?”

“No. Just the milk Vivian fixed for me. It—tasted funny.”

“Milk!” Chester gripped Angie’s hand. “Can you tell me the rest—everything that happened last night?”

She nodded. The words came slowly, half-whispered. “Vivian phoned me last night. She told me I couldn’t ask any questions, but she had a dire emergency I needed to help her with. There was no one else she could ask. She said she was in real trouble. I didn’t want to wake you. She asked me if I could bring a gun—I told her about the one in the bureau. I wrote you a note and took a cab—”

Chester blurted, “I knew it! I knew you must have left a note!”

“Yes,” said Angie weakly. “I left it on the pillow so you’d get it first thing—but Vivian said I’d probably be back before you woke up. Well, when I got here, Vivian and Don Helm were drinking. I told Vivian to hurry. I needed to get back to you. I must’ve dozed off because the next thing I remember was Vivian waking me up, saying we had to come to the harbor. She assured me it wouldn’t take too much longer. When we got here, she fixed me the milk. I drank it then I got so sleepy. I dropped the glass. And that’s all—that’s all I remember...”

Lorenzo ‘Chester’ Giovanni straightened up. “It’s enough, honey.” He looked at Vivian—his voice was steady. “Vivian, were you over at my place last night?”

“No. Why?”

“You’re sure, absolutely sure?”

“Of course. You think I’d lie to you?”

In reply, Chester drew the crushed brass lipstick from his pocket.

Instantly, Vivian’s hand snatched at it. “Where’d you get that! I threw it out the win—” She snapped off the sentence, realizing she’d said too much.

Chester kept his voice low, but there was a cutting edge to it. “You killed Don Helm, Vivian. And you fed Angie the sleeping tablets, trying to make it look like she tried suicide after shooting Helm. You got Helm drunk and took the keys from Angie’s purse after she was asleep. You took Helm to our place and shot him with the gun Angie mentioned was in the drawer!”

“No!” Vivian’s slim fingers seized Chester’s arm. “Don’t say such things!”

Chester yanked his arm away. “You dropped the lipstick in our bedroom and it got stepped on, putting a smear on the rug. So you tossed the broken tube out of the window.”

Still kneeling near the bed, he grabbed Vivian’s leg.

“What are you doing?” She demanded.

He pulled off her shoe. “Here’s the evidence. A smear of frosted pink lipstick was on the side of the shoe.

“This proves it, Vivian,” he said.

She glanced at the shoes—and her lower lip trembled. “I know, Lorenzo. I—I was such a fool. That Don Hem—I hated him! He thought I was swell to have fun with, but when it came down to marrying me—” Her voice broke.

As Lorenzo stood watching, she clamped her arms around his neck. “Anyway, Lorenzo, I never loved him. I’ve always loved you! I couldn’t stand it when Angie got you—and I thought if I killed Don Helm, then I could marry you!”

“A hell of a lot of sense that makes!”

“It’s true!” She cried. “I loved you so much I didn’t want to kill Angie because I was afraid they might accuse you! That’s why I called you and told you where we were right after she took the milk. I was sure they would arrest her. And Lorenzo—”

Chester spoke through clenched teeth. “Vivian, you didn’t want to save Angie. You waited as long as you could before calling. You didn’t know I was already in South Carolina and you wanted to be sure I wouldn’t have a chance to prove Angie was innocent!”

“Yes, Lorenzo.” Vivian’s warm, perfumed lips brushed his cheek. “Lorenzo,” she whispered anxiously. “No real harm done. You can think of some way of getting me off, can’t you, Honey?”

He broke away and shoved her against the door. “No!” he exploded. “And stop disrespecting my wife. You’ve put her through enough—trying to help you—a friend! I love her even more than you can ever imagine!”

Vivian’s mouth became warped. She was suddenly a snarling, scratching she-cat. She threw herself at him.

He caught her wrist and held the shuddering, shrieking weight of her off at arm’s length until Lieutenant Dickens put handcuffs in place.

They led Vivian to the patrol car, where a local policeman was waiting. She brushed a strand of yellow hair from her forehead. She slipped a hand inside the arm of the younger patrolman, the handsome one with the neat

mustache.

“I like policemen,” she said. Her violet eyes looked up at him softly. “I’m going to especially enjoy riding to the station with you...”

But Chester didn’t hear her. He was sitting on the edge of the bed with Angie, holding her hand and smiling down at her. After the ambulance arrived, Chester went with Angie as they transported her to the hospital. Spider promised to keep him informed about the search for Spencer Foster and Chester called Angie’s parents so she could talk to them and let them know she’d be all right.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Once the patrol car drove off with Vivian Mason, Michael ‘Mercer’ Miller, Will ‘Spider’ Robertson, Noah ‘Needles’ Lewis, and Lieutenant Walter Dickens stood outside of the slip holding the Vivian Mason’s Imperial Yacht Tours vessel plotting the team’s next move.

Dickens quickly checked in with Sergeant York. “He and Mister are still tracking down and interviewing employees who were at the stadium the night Spencer Foster disappeared. No leads yet.”

Mercer said, “This harbor is the major trafficking hub in the South. My instincts tell me there’s no way someone would risk taking a teenager from such a public place without something special in mind. I think we should do one more roun-”

The sound of bullets rang out and someone screamed—“No!” Another shot rang out.

“It came from over there!” Shouted Needles. The team sprinted toward the large cargo barge named Ladybug—catty corner to Vivian’s yacht.

Halfway there, a dark figure came barreling out of the barge and took off in the opposite direction.

Spider sprinted after him. When the man saw the Navy SEAL, he turned and fired a shot. Spider ducked, and the bullet whizzed past. He took out his pistol and returned fire. Once he got close enough, he dived into him—tackling him to the ground. He smashed the man’s hand onto the pavement, causing him to let go of the gun. Spider climbed on top of him and hit him hard with his fist. Spider said to the stocky man, “If you aim to try, just step up.” The man looked at Spider, heaved, then stopped struggling. Spider turned the man over onto his stomach and slapped handcuffs on him and took

him to one of the patrol cars that Lieutenant Dickens had called to the scene.

The door from the ground-floor hallway to the cellar stairway was also locked, but Miller jiggled the lock with the tip of the big blade of his knife. Cautiously, he descended the rickety stairway.

It was pitch dark in the cellar, but he turned on his flashlight, then made his way into an elongated room, found a light bulb dangling on a wire from the ceiling and snapped it on. The illumination was dim, but at least he, Dickens, and Needles could see by it.

Mercer eyed a pile of wood in the far corner. He looked in back of the piled timbers, but saw nothing. Needles walked out of the small room into a small, foul-smelling bathroom. Mercer then noticed a tall closet in the opposite corner of the large room. The door was locked, but again, he used the tip of his blade to open it. He gasped. Facing him was the body of a man with colorless, staring eyes. “Damn,” said Lieutenant Dickens, who was standing behind Mercer.

Needles could hear faint, muffled sounds. He followed them to the tiny closet in the bathroom and opened it. He saw the crumpled figure, mercilessly hogtied, struggling to breathe in that hole in the wall of a bathroom. Needles pulled out his knife and cut through the scarf tied around her mouth and the ropes around her wrists and feet.

“Please be all right! Please don’t die.” The cries came from another room. Mercer and Lieutenant Dickens followed the sounds. Mercer gasped at what he saw and ran to her.

“Brianna! What are you doing here?” He cried out. She couldn’t answer—she was unconscious.

“It was me. I brought her here.” Mercer stood, then gruffly gripped Richard Karrington by the neck. “Is she dead?”

“No, he sobbed. He shot her in the shoulder—she’s lost a lot of blood. We’ve got to get her help.”

Lieutenant Dickens was already on his phone to 911.

“If she dies—I swear—I will kill you with my bare hands!” The crazed look in Mercer’s eyes caused Richard to shrink. Mercer let him go and went back and sat by Brianna—cupping her hand. Lieutenant Dickens walked over to Richard Karrington and cuffed him.

Needles came into the room, holding Spencer Foster’s hand.

“It’s her—the teen who was taken from the Atlanta stadium.”

“Are you okay?” Lieutenant Dickens asked, as he simultaneously called

for another ambulance.

“She’s weak and has some bad rope burns. She’d been hogtied.” Needles told him.

“I can see she has a bruise on her face,” the lieutenant said.

Suddenly, the odor of smoke bit their nostrils. Dickens followed the smell into the room with the woodpile. Flames were eating their way through the timber of the dry pile of pine in the teeth of the blazing fire. Lieutenant Dickens looked frantically for a fire extinguisher—there wasn’t one. He rushed back into the room where the others were. “We need to get out... now!”

Mercer cupped Brianna into his arms and carried her out of the cargo barge, and Needles led Spencer Foster out. They all got out safely—including Richard.

Ping!

“Oooooow!” Lieutenant Dickens cried out and grabbed the back of his thigh. He went down. A large, hulking man came from the direction of the fire, coughing, gagging and shooting. They took cover behind some cars. He shot twice more before he ran out of bullets. He flung his gun into the river and ran.

“Stay with them—we got this!” Spider called out to Mercer, who was still cradling Brianna.

Spider and Needles raced after the man. Needles dove and grabbed the man by the knees. He barely made the huge man bend. The man stood and looked at both Navy SEALs. They both looked at him, then at each other. The man was at least 6 foot 6 and resembled the Hulk in bulk. He just wasn’t green.

Needles took out his gun. Before he got a chance to cock it, the massive man slapped it out of his hands like it was a toy.

With one big hand, Needles hit the 6 foot 6 hulk with his fist. His other hand caught the man hard across the face. The crack of the blow was loud as a gunshot. A thin trickle of blood stained the man’s chin. He licked the blood with his tongue and smiled like a Cheshire Cat.

Spider quickly stepped in. With all his strength, he swung out.

The hulky criminal grabbed Spider and gave him a bear hug. Needles grabbed his jagged edge knife and jabbed it into the man’s thigh.

He screamed and let Spider go. Both men jabbed the man in his wide stomach with their fists. They wrested him to his knees, and Spider aimed

and kicked the man in his groin. His face went purple.

Grunting—his arms flayed. Needles stepped in and swung hard with his right fist. He connected with the man's stomach. As he was bending over, Needles kicked him in the face. Dazed, the man gave ground. The man fell straight over—flat on his face.

Three hours after Spencer and Brianna were rushed to the hospital, and Lieutenant Dickens had his bullet removed, Spencer saw the absolute joy on her father's face when he burst into her hospital room. They hugged each other and Spencer smiled to herself when her father sat on the side of her bed, scratching his forehead with his three fingers. It brought warm memories of him holding her mother's hand in the hospital—comforting her while she was dying and scratching his forehead with his other hand. It was one gesture she was so glad she'd be around a long time to see over and over.

A guy builds up his idea of the girl he wants to love, then suddenly one day she's there. Now Mercer faced possibly losing her. Time dragged by on hands and knees until the doctor finally came into the waiting room to let Mercer know Brianna would be okay.

"We removed the bullet, and she needed a transfusion. She'll need to be here a few days—but she'll be fine."

"Thanks doctor." Mercer vigorously shook her hand.

After being with Angie in the hospital until she fell asleep, Chester went to the waiting room to hug his best friend after finding out Brianna would be okay. They both knew all too well the hell each had just been through.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Two days later, the Navy SEAL team gathered at 8 a.m. to take a conference call from Cookie ‘Knox’ Hunter.

Mercer and his team reported that Richard shot the dead man on the barge after he shot Brianna.

“Richard Karrington went off the deep in with his drinking and his cocaine addiction. Brianna and Tom were the only people in town who wouldn’t give up on him.”

“And even though he did this to Brianna,” Mercer said, she’s still sticking by him. “She says it was the drugs talking for him—not him.”

“She’s a real loving person,” Commented Mister.

“It still blows me away,” said Knox, “that Vivian Mason not only killed Don Helm, she was willing to frame her friend for it.

“That’s what I call bat-shit crazy,” Chester said.

“Yeah,” Knox said, “she didn’t end up giving her the sleeping pills as early as she wanted to because her partner—John Williams—the hulky one who shot Lieutenant Dickens, took Spencer Foster from the stadium. He threw her plan off when he caused the harbor to be shut down. She had to leave Alice on the yacht and deal with the problem he’d caused. And Brianna was an unfortunate victim of Richard’s drug problem. One thing that helped push Richard Karrington over the edge was what his step-mother was doing to keep him from what was rightfully his. She and George Brent were plotting to keep Richard from getting his hands on the other will.”

“A whirlwind of trafficking, lies and deceit,” Spider commented.

“And you all were there to prevent it all,” Knox said. “I knew when we assigned you to the Blu Sharks—you all would not disappoint. The entire

team will be awarded commendations along with Lieutenant Dickens and Sergeant York, of course.”

“Thank you, sir,” the team said in unison.

A month later...

Cookie ‘Knox’ Hunter opened his front door with a wide grin on his face. He gave Michael ‘Mercer’ Miller a big hug.

“Here she is. I’d like you to meet Brianna Chandler. Cookie ‘Knox’ Hunter is the one who is clearly responsible for bringing us together. If he hadn’t recommended me for the assignment—we would’ve never met.”

Knox gave Brianna a big hug. “Whoa, Triple M. She sure is a beauty. She’s a keeper.”

Brianna blushed.

“She’s my La Mia Bella Rossa.”

“That means my beautiful redhead in Italian,” Brianna said before Michael got a chance to say it. They all laughed.

After visiting with Knox and having lunch together, he told Brianna he had a little surprise for her.

They drove out to the country to a large white mansion. When they walked up to the entryway, a gentle-looking brown-haired woman greeted them.

“Wait here just a minute.”

She walked down the hall and when Brianna looked up—she was walking toward them with Richard Karrington.

“Richard!” Brianna ran up and hugged him. He greeted the rest of the group.

“I’ll never be able to forgive myself for what I did to you, Brianna.”

“Richard—you have to learn to forgive yourself. I have. Remember, you came to your senses. You saved me from the man who was trying to hurt me.”

Tears streamed down her friend’s eyes as he hugged her again. “Because of you—Mr. Hunter stepped in and arranged a plea-deal for me to come here instead of jail. I’ve been clean since the day you got shot.”

After thanking Knox for what he did for Richard—Michael and Brianna drove down the white road beside the crescent sea wall toward town. Brianna had on jeans and a brown leather jacket with cowboy boots. As they visited

the city, the hours went by like magic.

Back in the hotel room overlooking the beautiful blue beach, the smoldering sparks dancing in Mercer's eyes continued charming Brianna's heart. His finger curled around a lock of her hair. He drew her against him, and whispered against her hair... "La Mia Bella Rossa." Mercer slipped his arms around her under her chocolate brown leather jacket. He bent his head and took possession of her eager lips in a kiss that was full of passion. A kiss full of pent-up emotion and frantic satisfaction. Lightly, he ran his fingers down her cheek. His hand closed over her arm. Her pulse beat away the moments as she stared up at him. His kiss had awakened slumbering emotions she hadn't dreamed were possible. She had only to listen to her wildly hammering heart to give herself fully. His gorgeous dark eyes were full of affection.

"Yes, Michael. Oh, yes."

She saw the muscle tighten in his strong jaw. He peeled off her jacket and dropped in onto the side chair in a heap. She flung herself down across the bed.

"Take me, Michael."

"I've waited so long for this, Brianna. I want you so bad. Thinking I may have lost you made me realize how much I need you in my life."

He moved a little, and his other hand, the left one, began to fondle and squeeze Brianna's pretty feet. Then it rose gradually, stroking her calves, her smooth and satiny thighs and fondling her pussy. It was so cool, wet, and soft to his touch. The hand climbed still higher—flicking her nipples, and at the same time, his lips crushed themselves to her eager mouth.

In Michael 'Mercer' Miller's arms with his lips against hers, she'd discovered an ecstasy that was almost frightening—catching her up in all its intensity. Never before had a man ever made her feel as she was feeling now—all burning hot and icy cold at the same time. This must be love. It had all the symptoms. Her kiss still warm from his kiss.

Dragging herself from the bed, she walked over to a window. Michael "Mercer" Miller nearly stopped her heart with a kiss—a long, lingering kiss that was all Brianna had ever desired.

"Oh, Michael—Michael—you fill me up," she said breathlessly. She knew the love she'd finally found was an awakening not just to passion, but peace, contentment and the trust in him she'd already possessed in her heart. Tall and voluptuous—standing before him without shame—a tinge of

defiance flickering in her blue-grey eyes by allowing herself to fall in love with a man she thought was a gigolo. He'd rescued her in so many ways. Mercer smiled down at her and his magic filled her soul.

ALSO BY ROSE SMITH

Blue Sharks Team

Rescuing Brianna

SEALs on Vacation

Saving Satin

Blood Moon

Guarding Cherish

Rescuing Rosemary

Loving Layla

Shielding Charlotte

Loving Lancelot

Magic New Mexico Alphas of Red Fire Pride

Flying Fawna

Beyond the Silver Door

Other

Biting Time

My Hired Husband

Beast

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hi, I'm bestselling author Rose Smith. My latest novels include, *Saving Satin*, *My Hired Husband*, *Flying Fawna* and the upcoming *Beyond the Silver Door*. I live in New Mexico with my secret lover (aka hunky husband) of over 30 years.

I blame my ongoing love affair on all the 'research' I'm 'forced' to do for my romance books. My wish for you is that you--like your favorite heroine, find the romance of your dreams. Here's to loving a lifetime's worth!



There are many more books in this fan fiction world than listed here, for an up-to-date list go to www.AcesPress.com

*You can also visit our Amazon page at:
<http://www.amazon.com/author/operationalpha>*

Special Forces: Operation Alpha World

Christie Adams: [Charity's Heart](#)

Linzi Baxter: [Dangerous Rescue](#)

Misha Blake: [Flash](#)

Anna Blakely: [Rescuing Gracelynn](#)

Julia Bright: [Saving Lorelei](#)

Cara Carnes: [Protecting Mari](#)

Kendra Mei Chailyn: [Beast](#)

Melissa Kay Clarke: [Rescuing Annabeth](#)

Gia Cobie: [Saved from Revenge](#)

Samantha A. Cole: [Handling Haven](#)

KaLyn Cooper: [Spring Unveiled](#)

Janie Crouch: [Storm](#)

Jordan Dane: [Redemption for Avery](#)

Tarina Deaton: [Found in the Lost](#)

D.M. Earl: [Claire's Guardian](#)

Riley Edwards: [Protecting Olivia](#)

Dorothy Ewels: [Knight's Queen](#)

Lila Ferrari: [Protecting Joy](#)

Nicole Flockton: [Protecting Maria](#)

Hope Ford: [Rescuing Karina](#)

Amy Gamet: [Guarded by the SEAL](#)

Desiree Holt: [Protecting Maddie](#)

Danielle Haas: [Crossroads of Betrayal](#)

Jesse Jacobson: [Protecting Honor](#)

Rayne Lewis: [Justice for Mary](#)

Ireland Lorelei: [The Detective](#)

Kristin Lynn: [Worth the Risk](#)

Callie Love & Ann Omasta: [Hawaii Hottie](#)

JM Madden: [Rescuing Olivia](#)
A.M. Mahler: [Griffin](#)
Ellie Masters: [Sybil's Protector](#)
Trish McCallan: [Hero Under Fire](#)
Naomi McKay: [Twist](#)
Rachel McNeely: [The SEAL's Surprise Baby](#)
KD Michaels: [Saving Laura](#)
Olivia Michaels: [Protecting Harper](#)
Annie Miller: [Securing Willow](#)
MJ Nightingale: [Protecting Beauty](#)
C.K. O'Connor: [Delaney's Bodyguard](#)
Melinda Owens: [Betraying Katie](#)
Victoria Paige: [Reclaiming Izabel](#)
Danielle Pays: [Defending Sarina](#)
Taryn Rivers: [Savage Cove](#)
Lainey Reese: [Protecting New York](#)
KeKe Renée: [Protecting Bria](#)
Taryn Rivers: [Savage Cove](#)
TL Reeve and Michele Ryan: [Extracting Mateo](#)
Ariana Rose: [Chasing Paige](#)
Deanna L. Rowley: [Saving Veronica](#)
Angela Rush: [Charlotte](#)
Rose Smith: [Saving Satin](#)
Tyler Anne Snell: [Cowboy Heat](#)
Lynne St. James: [SEAL's Spitfire](#)
E.M. Shue: [Discovering Tyler](#)
Bella Stone: [Rexar](#)
Jen Talty: [Burning Desire](#)
Reina Torres, [Rescuing Hi'ilani](#)
LJ Vickery: [Circus Comes to Town](#)
R. C. Wynne: [Shadows Renewed](#)

Delta Team Three Series

Lori Ryan: [Nori's Delta](#)
Becca Jameson: [Destiny's Delta](#)
Lynne St James, [Gwen's Delta](#)
Elle James: [Ivy's Delta](#)

Riley Edwards: [Hope's Delta](#)

Police and Fire: Operation Alpha World

Freya Barker: [Burning for Autumn](#)

B.P. Beth: [Scott](#)

Jane Blythe: [Salvaging Marigold](#)

Julia Bright, [Justice for Amber](#)

Gia Cobie: [Saved from Revenge](#)

Hadley Finn: [Exton](#)

Emily Gray: [Shelter for Allegra](#)

Danielle M. Haas: [Crossroads of Betrayal](#)

Deandra Hall: [Shelter for Sharla](#)

Jenna Harte: [Dead But Not Forgotten](#)

Amber Kuhlman: [Protecting Paisley](#)

Reina Torres: [Justice for Sloane](#)

Aubree Valentine, [Justice for Danielle](#)

Maddie Wade: [Finding English](#)

Tarpley VFD Series

Silver James, [Fighting for Elena](#)

Deandra Hall, [Fighting for Carly](#)

Haven Rose, [Fighting for Calliope](#)

MJ Nightingale, [Fighting for Jemma](#)

TL Reeve, [Fighting for Brittney](#)

Nicole Flockton, [Fighting for Nadia](#)

As you know, this book included at least one character from Susan Stoker's books. To check out more, see below.

SEAL Team Hawaii Series

Finding Elodie

Finding Lexie

Finding Kenna

Finding Monica

Finding Carly

Finding Ashlyn

Finding Jodelle

Eagle Point Search & Rescue

Searching for Lilly

Searching for Elsie

Searching for Bristol

Searching for Caryn

Searching for Finley (Oct 2023)

Searching for Heather (Jan 2024)

Searching for Khloe (May 2024)

The Refuge Series

Deserving Alaska

Deserving Henley

Deserving Reese

Deserving Cora (Nov 2023)

Deserving Lara (Feb 2024)

Deserving Maisy (TBA)

Deserving Ryleigh (TBA)

Delta Team Two Series

Shielding Gillian

Shielding Kinley

Shielding Aspen

Shielding Jayme (novella)

Shielding Riley
Shielding Devyn
Shielding Ember
Shielding Sierra

SEAL of Protection: Legacy Series

Securing Caite (FREE!)
Securing Brenae (novella)
Securing Sidney
Securing Piper
Securing Zoey
Securing Avery
Securing Kalee
Securing Jane

Delta Force Heroes Series

Rescuing Rayne (FREE!)
Rescuing Aimee (novella)
Rescuing Emily
Rescuing Harley
Marrying Emily (novella)
Rescuing Kassie
Rescuing Bryn
Rescuing Casey
Rescuing Sadie (novella)
Rescuing Wendy
Rescuing Mary
Rescuing Macie (novella)
Rescuing Annie

Badge of Honor: Texas Heroes Series

Justice for Mackenzie (FREE!)
Justice for Mickie
Justice for Corrie
Justice for Laine (novella)
Shelter for Elizabeth

Justice for Boone
Shelter for Adeline
Shelter for Sophie
Justice for Erin
Justice for Milena
Shelter for Blythe
Justice for Hope
Shelter for Quinn
Shelter for Koren
Shelter for Penelope

SEAL of Protection Series

Protecting Caroline (FREE!)
Protecting Alabama
Protecting Fiona
Marrying Caroline (novella)
Protecting Summer
Protecting Cheyenne
Protecting Jessyka
Protecting Julie (novella)
Protecting Melody
Protecting the Future
Protecting Kiera (novella)
Protecting Alabama's Kids (novella)
Protecting Dakota

New York Times, USA Today and Wall Street Journal Bestselling Author Susan Stoker has a heart as big as the state of Tennessee where she lives, but this all American girl has also spent the last fourteen years living in Missouri, California, Colorado, Indiana, and Texas. She's married to a retired Army man who now gets to follow *her* around the country.

www.stokeraces.com
www.AcesPress.com
susan@stokeraces.com