



# HIGH VALUE TARGET

TRI STAR SECURITIES BOOK TWO

USA TODAY & WALL STREET JOURNAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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**EPILOGUE**

HIGH VALUE TARGET  
Tri Star Securities

Nicole James

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## CHAPTER ONE

Grady Steele squatted down in the thick jungle and looked toward the two shacks, both slick with green mildew, a light rain pattering on their roofs. The one on the right was the most likely holding place for the prisoner. Next to Grady was his partner, Stan Ravenowitz, a man everyone called Craven-Raven—a man Grady had gone through Special Forces training with at Ft. Bragg.

They were both dressed in full gear. BDUs—battle dress uniform. Camo to the rest of the world, though their uniforms belonged to no sanctioned army. They worked in the private field now for a company called Tri Star Securities, a Texas-based firm that specialized in hostage rescue and protection services. They came to the rescue when no one else could help. When clients were down to their last hope, they were the ones called.

“ELN. Looks like five of them.” Grady peered around the compound. His tactical vest was loaded with ammo clips, his pistol strapped to his thigh, an M-4 weapon slung around his neck, and his face covered in camo paint. “The two we saw enter the shack on the left. The two out here, and gotta be at least one in the shack on the right.”

“Could be more,” Stan whispered.



“Could be.” Grady looked at the starlit sky. They had about two hours of darkness before dawn would lighten the dense jungle. A fast boat waited up river to take them to a Navy boat offshore in international waters. They just had to make it there with the man they’d come to rescue, a sixty-year-old oil executive named Enrico Lopez, taken for ransom eighteen months ago by the ELN, a Colombian terrorist group called the National Liberation Army. They worked along the border of Venezuela, taking hostages for ransom to support their operations. All efforts at paying this ransom had only resulted in more demands. Now they wanted some big shot Colombian drug traffickers held in New York to be released.

Lopez’s family didn’t think there was much likelihood that would happen, so they’d finally contacted Tri Star.

“This guy could be in bad shape,” Stan murmured.

“We’ve only got a half click to go. I can carry him that far if necessary.” Grady watched the guards. One leaned against a tree and lit a cigarette. Its golden flare illuminated his face for a brief moment. Grady raised his weapon and sighted down the scope. “You ready?”

“Let’s do this,” Stan replied, aiming his own weapon at the second guard by the door.

*Pop. Pop.* Grady took out the one by the tree, and the man fell silently to the ground.

*Pop. Pop.* Stan did the same with the one by the entrance as he walked around the corner. His body slumped in the

shadows.

“Move,” Grady hissed, and they jogged across the open area, Grady to the shack on the left and Stan to the one on the right. They pressed their backs to the wall and waited.

“Jose? Tienes un encendedor?” A voice called from the doorway. *You got a lighter?* “Jose? ¿Dónde estás?” *Where are you?*

Stan lifted his chin to the door. Grady inched to the corner. One of the terrorists, dressed in dirty green fatigues, stepped around the edge to peer into the darkness. Quick as lightning, Grady put the man in a headlock and snapped his neck with a sickening crack. The filthy terrorist slid to the ground at his feet.

“Alejandro, es tu turno.” *It’s your turn.* The sound of cards shuffling carried to Grady, then some swearing. “Dios bueno. Pablo, ir a buscarlo.” *Good God. Pablo, go get him.*

“Ve a buscarlo.” *You go get him.*

*Someone come get the motherfucker, so I can shoot you in the head.* Grady’s hand tightened on his weapon, tired of waiting while they argued. Every minute counted.

Finally, Grady heard shuffling footsteps inside and glanced at Stan, knowing one or more would come out to investigate. His partner nodded, his weapon at the ready.

Two men stepped out onto the wooden pallet they used as a porch step.

Stan took them both out in quick succession.

Another man came out of the other shack, and Grady put a bullet through his forehead.

Stan checked that hut and gave a negative motion. Their target was not in there. He jogged to Grady, and they both entered the remaining shack, weapons up, a green pinpoint line of light from their weapons flashing around the room. With night-vision, it wasn't hard to see. There was a padlocked door.

Grady pulled his C4 explosive clay, and in quick work, blew it open.

They found Enrico Lopez huddled in the corner, dressed in a dirty button-down shirt that had probably been white at one time, and a ragged pair of camo pants, his dress pants no doubt having long ago fallen in tatters. He looked up at them with terror.

Grady knelt at his bare feet. "Are you Enrico Lopez?"

The man nodded.

"We're Americans. Your wife Luisa hired us to rescue you. I just have to verify your identity with a question. Can you tell me what street you lived on in seventh grade?"

"Berry Rose Road. Is it true? I am free?"

Stan clicked a picture of Enrico's face. "We still have to get out of here."

“Are they all dead?” Enrico asked.

“Depends. How many were there?” Grady asked.

“Five.”

“Then they’re all dead. When does the next resupply come?”

“Someone comes once a week. There’s another camp up the road. I’ve heard them talking. It’s been a while since they’ve come. I heard one of them saying they better come first thing in the morning because we are out of food.”

“Then we’d better hurry.”

Grady and Stan helped him to his feet, a shoulder under each arm.

“Can you walk?” Grady asked as the man’s legs went out from under his weight.

“Yes, my legs are just asleep. Give me a minute.”

“We don’t have a minute.”

They shuffled him toward the door and into the clearing.

“Wait. What about the other man?” Enrico stopped.

Grady and Stan froze.

“What other man?” Grady snapped.

“The American. The soldier. They brought him five months ago. He’s being held for espionage. I overheard the guards talking. They said he was caught with a drone.”

Grady and Stan exchanged a look.

“What’s his name?” Grady hissed.

“I don’t know. They only ever referred to him as *el gringo*.”

“He wasn’t in that other shack. Where is he?” Stan snapped.

“If he’s not in that hut, then they must have him in the pit.”

“The pit?” Grady’s stomach sank. “Where?”

“It is behind that hut, underneath a pallet and some oil drums.”

They set Enrico on the ground and jogged around the building. Four rusted oil drums sat, collecting rain water on top of a wooden pallet.

“Hurry,” Grady snapped, and they both moved to grapple the oil drums, dumping out the water and rolling them away. They dragged the wooden pallet off, revealing a deep hole in the ground with barely enough room for a man to stand upright. A dirty white face peered up at them, eyes blinking against even the moonlight.

“We’re Americans. You’re going home, soldier.” Grady knelt and extended his hand. Stan grabbed the other one, and they hauled the man out.

“Thank you, God,” the man whispered.

“What’s your name?” Stan asked.

“Jason Mallard from Oklahoma City. United States Army. 10<sup>th</sup> Special Forces Group. And you?”

“Green Beret. Well, God damn. I’m Grady. This is Stan. We’re ex-Green Berets. We don’t have a lot of time to chat. There’s a fast boat waiting a half click away. Can you make it?”

“I’ll make it.”

The men gave him some water while Grady clicked on his radio. “Got another target coming with us. Jason Mallard, Green Beret. Held with Lopez. Out.”

There was no response, but they didn’t have time to wait for one. The distant sound of a truck engine carried through the night from the east.

“Resupply,” Stan said, looking at Grady.

“Let’s move.”

Stan put a shoulder under Jason’s arm, and Grady did the same with Enrico. The four moved quickly through the jungle toward the river.

There were shouts in Spanish behind them and gunfire in the air. Grady supposed they’d found their dead comrades.

The men doubled their speed, moving as fast as the hostages could manage.

The sound of thrashing in the undergrowth behind them carried through the quiet night, and Grady stopped and scooped Lopez over his shoulders, carrying him firefighter style the rest of the way.

Shots chopped the vegetation around them as the ELN closed in.

The fast boat waited in the moonlight just ahead, Chris at the helm, and Big Al manning the M2 fifty-caliber machine gun they lovingly referred to as the Ma Deuce. The four men burst out of the thick jungle onto the riverbank and splashed into the knee-deep water.

Grady and Stan quickly loaded the two rescued hostages and climbed aboard.

Big Al fired into the jungle, lighting it up with the glowing trails of the rounds from the Ma Deuce.

Chris wasted no time in throttling up, and the boat roared toward the Caribbean Sea, churning up the water in a huge wake. It didn't matter any longer how much noise they made. Word was out.

Grady knew it was a long sixteen minutes to the gulf. He didn't think the Colombians could scramble their meager Navy in that time, but you never knew.

They passed a few quiet villages, early fishermen looking up in surprise at the fast, armed gunship roaring past.

Reaching the mouth of the river, the boat fought the tide and the surf, Chris heading them into it, nose first. They crashed into the water on the other side. It was a rough ride, but soon they were through the surf and heading to international water.

Dawn was lighting the sky when the big ghostly shadow of the Navy ship came into view on the horizon.

Two hours later, and after receiving medical attention, the men were loaded on a helicopter to Puerto Rico, then on to Miami, where Enrico's family waited, and the Army would be waiting for their missing Green Beret.

As Grady and the Tri Star team stepped off in Miami, they watched the touching reunion. Mission completed, Grady slipped sunglasses over his eyes and picked up his pack, preparing to leave. The Tri Star jet waited on the other side of the airport.

Before he and the guys could make an exit, Enrico's wife ran over to the team, tears in her eyes, and hugged each one of them, too choked up to get much out other than two words.

“Thank you.”

Chris took her hand in his, patting the back of it. “You're welcome. Glad we could bring him home to you, Luisa.”

Her eyes shifted to Grady and the others again. “Thank you all.”



“Just doin’ our job, ma’am,” Grady murmured.

She wiped her eyes and ran to her husband and two daughters.

“That never gets old,” Stan said softly.

Grady couldn’t agree more. “No, it does not.”

Six hours later, they touched down at DFW, then caught the Tri Star helicopter for a fifteen-minute jump out to their facility in Granbury, Texas.

By the time Grady stepped off, stretching, he was exhausted—from the mission, from the long travel time. “God, I’m ready for a hot shower.”

The men all headed to the locker room, but Chris grabbed Grady’s arm and pulled him to the side. “We need to talk about Jason Mallard.”

“What about him?”

“That was not in the playbook, Grady. I took hell from the commander of the ship. They don’t like surprises like that.”

“What the fuck did you want me to do? Leave him there? They had him in a hole, Chris. You know the kind I’m talking about, because you and I have both been in one before.”

Chris drug his hand through his hair. “I get that. And no, of course I’m not saying you should have left him.”

“I was just as surprised as you.”

“You should have given me a heads up before you got to the boat.”

“I tried. The transmission must not have gone through.”

“Okay. All right. I just don’t like surprises.”

“We saved the guy, Chris. Let’s just be happy with that.”

“Not sure my contact in the Navy higher-ups is going to be so eager to help us again.”

“He’s a Green Beret. Hell, maybe we’ll get invited to the White House.”

“Going illegally into a foreign country? Don’t count on it. This mission didn’t happen. They escaped on their own. That’s the official story.”

Grady chuckled. “Who’s buyin’ that?”

“I don’t care. As long as Tri Star isn’t brought into the conversation.”

“What was he doin’ there? Did you ever find out?” Grady asked.

“No one was talking. Probably one of those missions that doesn’t exist on paper.” Chris pulled out his phone. “Gonna call Lanie. Go hit the shower.”

“Tell her I said hello, and tell her to kiss that godchild of mine for me.”

“Will do.”

Grady moved off, leaving Chris standing outside. By the time he made it to the locker room, Big Al was dressed and headed out the door. “You takin’ off?”

“Yeah. Stan just left, too. I’m goin’ home to the wife.” He slugged Grady’s shoulder. “Good mission, brother.”

“You, too.” Grady strolled into the locker room and stripped down, then grabbed a towel and headed to one of the showers. Chris spared no expense on the Tri Star facilities, and that didn’t stop here. Soon steaming hot water pelted his skin. He dipped his head and let it pour over his head and shoulders. The heat felt incredible, and he moaned, feeling his tight muscles relax.

He stood there for a long time before finally filling his palm with body wash and soaping up. Five minutes later, he wrapped a towel around his waist and headed for his locker.

There was a tap at the door.

The only ones who did that were the women, either Heather or Lanie.

“Yeah?” he called out. Heather popped her head around the door.

“You decent?”

“Enough. What do you need?”

“Chris wants you in the conference room. Something’s come up. It’s urgent.”

“Christ, we just got back.”

“Sorry, honey.” With that, she giggled and left, calling out as the door closed. “You’ve still got it, Grady.”

“You checkin’ out my bod?” he yelled back. “You want a good look? I’ll drop the towel.” By that time, the door was closed, and she was gone. She had a boyfriend, but she was still fun to tease.

He dressed and walked down the hallway to the big conference room. As he pushed through the door, he saw a man up on the big screen on a video chat with Chris.

Chris glanced over at him. “JD, this is my best operative, Grady Steele. I’m sure he’ll take good care of your daughter.”

*Wait. What?* Grady came to a stop, and his eyes shifted to Chris, giving him a questioning look.

“Grady, this is JD Wyatt of Wyatt Oil.”

*Holy shit.* The man was a legend in Texas.

“Fantastic,” JD growled in a gravelly voice. “I’ll go with your judgment on this. I just emailed you a list of all of her events and itinerary over the next month. I’m trusting you, Chris. She’s my baby.”

“She’ll have the best protection, sir. I saw the schedule. Noticed some kind of shindig this Saturday. Can that be removed from her schedule?”

“Not a chance. It’s a ball benefiting a charity very close to my wife’s heart. She runs it every year. Tinsley wouldn’t miss it.”

“Yes, sir. Mr. Steele will meet her plane.”

“Fine. I’ve got three bodyguards on staff now, but I’m not sure they can provide the elite service you can. Mr. Steele, they’ll take orders from you. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Thanks, Chris. Call me if you need me.”

The video ended.

Chris put a photo of Tinsley Wyatt up on the screen. “This is the high value target. Tinsley Wyatt. JD “Boone” Wyatt’s youngest child and only daughter. The Wyatt jet flies into Dallas tomorrow. You’ll meet the plane.”

Grady studied the photo and whistled.

“We don’t get involved with clients, Grady,” Chris reminded him.

“Got it.”

“Not that you’ll have a chance; she’s dating Palmer Pace, an ivy league lawyer with political aspirations. He’s set to announce his candidacy for Earl Blackman’s soon-to-be-vacant senate seat.”

“So, she’ll be a senator’s wife...” He couldn’t drag his eyes from her image.

“They aren’t engaged yet, but JD said there should be an announcement on that very soon. He’s pushing hard. I’m guessing he wants a friend in Washington who’s got a sympathetic ear to the oil industry and to him in particular.”

“I guess having that connection also be your son-in-law is gravy.”

“I guess so. While you were in the showers, I did a little research. Seems Palmer Pace is the oldest of three sons. Daddy’s had political ambitions for him since the day he was born. From what I’ve dug up on him, Wyatt probably thinks Palmer will be easy to control.” Chris lifted his chin to Tinsley’s image. “If ever I smelled an arranged match, it’s these two.”

Grady folded his arms and leaned against the conference table. “Why do you say that? Maybe they love each other.”

“They’re hardly ever together. Tinsley spent the last month in Paris. Before that it was a trip to Singapore. Before that, Egypt. Before that, Tahiti.”

“So, the girl likes to travel.”

“Wouldn’t you take your significant other on those trips? She went alone. Just seems like they prefer their time spent apart. I think she’s dragging her feet and trying to avoid a proposal.”

“You don’t know that for sure.” Grady shrugged. “Doesn’t really matter to me, or affect what I do to protect her. So fill

me in on the threats.”

“JD thinks his business dealings have put a target on her back. I asked him to name the possible threats. He gave me a few. Biggest threat seems to involve a land deal with mineral and drilling rights that left the seller with a bad taste. Thinks he got swindled. There was an incident at an oil rig. It looked like an accident, but JD thinks it might have been sabotage.”

“What else?”

“There was some spray paint on a Wyatt vehicle regarding animal rights. The Wyatt women probably have a closet full of fur coats. The team will follow up on those two angles.”

“All right.” Grady stared at the blonde beauty on the screen. She had honey-colored curls to her waist and big blue eyes. If she was done with college, she was just barely. She looked young.

“Go home. Get some sleep. Her plane lands at noon tomorrow at DFW.”

Great... right back where he just left an hour ago.

Chris slapped his shoulder. “I’ll email you all her info.”

“Thanks.” Grady turned to the door. He had his hand on the knob before Chris’s words stopped him.

“Oh, and Grady?”

“Yes, sir?”

“You did good today.”

Grady nodded and went through the door. It was a long walk out to his black truck. He climbed in and sank into the leather seat, then flipped on the seat warmer, regardless of the weather. It felt amazing on his aching back. He sat there a long time, thinking about the last mission and trying to decompress. He knew it wouldn't be long before his mind would shift to the next mission. Finally, he put the truck in gear and pulled out.





## CHAPTER TWO

Tinsley stared out the window of the Wyatt private jet as it taxied to a stop, wishing she were still back in Paris, where she'd spent the last month hiding out from Palmer.

She'd been shocked when Daddy gave him the use of the jet to fly to France with the singular goal of bringing her home like a recalcitrant child.

The only reason she'd let Palmer get his way was because she had to be back for her mother's charity ball. She'd never be forgiven if she missed it. The Ice Ball was an iconic event in Dallas. Everyone who was anyone attended. She'd be practically disowned if she missed it.

"On behalf of the flight crew, welcome home, Miss Wyatt. It's a balmy 82 degrees in Dallas," the pilot's voice came over the speaker.

Before the jet even came to a full stop, Palmer flicked his seatbelt open and stood in the aisle, shrugging into his Armani suit jacket.

"You know, Tinsley, I'm beginning to resent these hoops you're making me jump through, as if I have nothing better to do than fly around the world chasing after you."

"No one asked you to chase after me, Palmer."

He adjusted his cuffs. “It’s all just a big game to you, isn’t it? I thought this little *hard-to-get* act you’ve been playing was cute at first, but it’s getting old, Tinsley.”

She stared out the window at the crowd of reporters and photographers waiting for them to disembark. *Paparazzi*. God, she hated the attention, but she knew Palmer loved it. It especially worked with his plan to run for political office. Which reminded her of the stark facts before her. She’d avoided it all as long as she could, but it couldn’t be put off any further, not with the way things would soon accelerate in Palmer’s plan.

Tinsley knew exactly what her father wanted—*what he expected*—to happen between her and the soon-to-be senate candidate Palmer Pace. A marriage between his only daughter and the young senate candidate would be the cherry on top to the Wyatt’s position in Texas, as well as give her father a very useful connection in Washington. Tinsley wasn’t stupid; she knew there were ulterior motives to everything.

All her life, she’d been expected to be the perfect daughter. Graceful, educated, charming, able to converse with high society, and oh, how she’d tried. Just once, she wished someone would ask what she wanted.

Her three brothers had all followed in the business in whatever position their father had wanted them in. They were all good little soldiers in the Wyatt army, doing exactly what was expected. As the only daughter, marrying for power and

position had fallen to her. She'd tried to buck against it, to rebel by traveling nonstop for the last year, but it had only delayed the inevitable.

It was time to come home and face the music.

She knew in her heart she'd never go against her parents. She'd been given so much, but there was a price to be paid: perfection and obedience. Since she was a child, she was raised to be the perfect daughter. Nothing less was ever good enough.

She just wished she could make her father understand how she felt. She didn't want to marry Palmer, but she knew she'd go through with it; she'd never let her father down. But one worry kept her up late into the night; she'd stare at the ceiling and wonder if when the moment came, as she stood at the altar in a beautiful white bridal gown, if she'd be able to really go through with it, to give her promise to love, honor, and cherish a man she didn't love.

Tinsley tried to envision standing in her father's office and telling him she was going to break things off with Palmer. Her father would stare at her with disappointment written all over his face, as if she'd failed him. Somehow, she didn't think she could bear that.

The jet swung around, and the Wyatt limousine came into view, along with the three bodyguards her father had hired before she left for Europe.

A tall man she'd never seen before stood with his feet wide, his hands clasped, staring at the plane. Although his wardrobe was exactly the same, he stood apart from the other men dressed in suits like Secret Service. "Who's that man?"

Palmer dipped to look out the cabin window. "Your father added another man to your security detail. I'm guessing that's him."

"Why would he do that?"

Palmer shrugged. "Who knows? Probably for looks, baby. Makes you look more important."

He was lying. She could tell. She hated when he acted like she was stupid.

That wasn't the real reason she had newly added security. Something was up, and she would find out what.

Standing in her ivory sleeveless blouse and tight linen skirt, she grabbed her Hermes bag and tossed her jacket over her arm.

"Is that what you're wearing?" Palmer's eyes swept over her.

"Yes. Why?"

"That's Chanel. Put the jacket on. It makes the outfit. And put on the pearls I gave you."

Tinsley rolled her eyes but obediently dug them out of her bag. "Honestly, Palmer. It's not me they'll be looking at. What

does it matter?”

He fastened the pearls around her throat, then held her jacket out for her. She slipped her arms in and turned, straightening it. “Am I acceptable now, *darling?*”

“Don’t be gauche. You know eyes will be on you, and you reflect on me now. Image is important in politics.”

Tinsley let out a huff and turned toward the exit. “Let’s just get this over with.”

They disembarked the jet, walking down the steps and crossing to the waiting limousine. For Palmer, it was a photo op, and not one to miss an opportunity, he stopped to reel in the attention and flashing cameras.

A reporter stuck a cell phone in his face, recording. “Mr. Pace, is there any truth to the rumor that you’ll be throwing your hat in the race for Blackmon’s soon-to-be-vacant senate seat?”

Palmer gave her an aw-shucks smile and winked. “You’ll have to wait and see, ma’am.”

“For how long?”

Another reporter pushed forward. “Is there any truth to the rumor you’ll announce at the Oilman’s Ball next month?”

“You’ll just have to wait and see. Now, if you’ll excuse us, I’m late for an important meeting.”

Tinsley's eyes shifted toward the waiting car as the new man moved to open the rear door for them. She slid her Dolce and Gabbana sunglasses over her eyes and walked that way, her head held high, like her mother always told her. *Chin up, Tinsley, dear.*

Through the dark glasses, she let her gaze roam over her new bodyguard. He really was gorgeous with his green eyes, sandy blond hair, and chiseled jaw. Plus, now that she was up close, she noticed he was much taller than she'd realized. She slid her sunglasses down an inch, meeting his eyes. "And you are?"

"Grady Steele, Miss Wyatt. Tri Star Securities. Your father hired us."

"Us?" Her gaze scanned the tarmac.

"The firm. I'll be your personal protection."

"So, a bodyguard then?"

"Yes, if that's how you want to look at it."

"Is there another way?" She slid into the backseat and scooted over for Palmer, but the new man moved to get in the car with her.

Palmer stopped him with a hand to his chest. "Security rides in the car behind us."

"Not anymore. I go where Miss Wyatt goes."

"Listen, pal..."

“I’m not your pal, and I don’t work for you, Mr. Pace. This is Miss Wyatt’s ride, not yours.” He shoved Palmer’s hand away and slid into the car, sitting across from her.

Tinsley’s mouth dropped open, and she assessed Mr. Grady Steele with new eyes. No one had ever treated Palmer in such a way.

Her soon-to-be fiancé got in the car, pressing close to her. He muttered low. “We’ll see what JD has to say about this.”

“I’ll talk to him,” she replied. “Daddy will get rid of him before the sun sets.”

Palmer put his hand on her leg, and she noticed Grady’s eyes drop to it.

She pushed it off, and Grady’s gaze lifted to meet hers.

Was he judging her? How dare he? Her chin came up again.

The ride into downtown didn’t take long. Palmer was on his phone from the moment the car pulled out until it rolled to a stop at the curb in front of the Corinthian Building, where his father’s company had offices. Tinsley spent the time texting Kiley, her bestie.

Reggie, their driver, exited the vehicle and opened the door for Palmer, who barely gave Tinsley a peck on the cheek before he climbed out. His eyes caught the new bodyguard watching them, and as if to make some kind of caveman point



and mark his territory, Palmer turned back to her and gave her a much more passionate kiss.

Tinsley had never been one for overt public displays of affection, so she squirmed a bit, feeling extremely uncomfortable with the bodyguard watching. Finally, Palmer pulled back, grinned—not at her—but at the new bodyguard.

“I’ll call you later,” he told her. Then he was gone, and Reggie was pulling away from the curb.

Her eyes connected with her new bodyguard. “Don’t ever speak to Mr. Pace that way again. Is that understood, Mr. Steele?”

“I’m just doing my job. Your previous security team may have allowed you to put them in the tail car, but that’s not how I work. We’ll be doing things my way from now on, Miss Wyatt.”

She arched a brow. “Not if you want to keep your job, Mr. Steele.”

“Call me Grady. And just so we’re clear, I don’t work for you either, Miss Wyatt.”

The nerve of this man. “We’ll see about that. I plan to have a chat with my father as soon as we return.”

“Be my guest. He and I have already had a nice *chat* this morning. The current men in his employ are woefully inexperienced. They’re undisciplined and far from prepared.

They're barely more skilled than a mall security guard. Plus, you've got them acting like trained dogs."

Her eyes widened. "Trained dogs? How *dare* you."

A few minutes later, Reggie slowed to make the turn off the highway, stopping at the gate to the Wyatt estate to enter the code. Tinsley watched the twin wrought-iron gates emblazoned with the large gilt W swing open. The drive from the road was long and lined with River Birch trees. Their leaves fluttered in the breeze.

Finally, the home came into view. Her father had built it in a traditional southern plantation style, complete with a circular drive and a large fountain in the center. All just to please her mother, who was from Georgia. It was absurdly out of place in the Texas landscape.

The car had barely come to a stop when Grady reached for the door handle and climbed out, then held his hand out to her, his eyes scanning the landscape, not in an appreciative way, more like he was looking for threats or doing a risk assessment.

Tinsley rolled her eyes and marched past him as the security car with the other three bodyguards came to a stop behind the limo.

It was bad enough she had to cut her Paris trip short to come home for mother's famous Ice Ball. But to be subjected to this ridiculous excess was just too much. She'd see what Daddy had to say about this.





## CHAPTER THREE

Tinsley strode inside her parent's huge home and went straight to the double doors that led into her father's study.

He was on the phone, but that wouldn't stop her from barging in, except something she overheard stopped her in her tracks.

"Forty percent? How did you manage that, you goddamn crook? I will not be threatened. You will never get your hands on the controlling interest. Never. Do you understand?"

There was a long silence and then something made of glass smashed. Tinsley peered through the crack in the door and saw the shattered pieces on the floor by the wall. "Goddamn it. I told you I'd smooth it over. We still have a deal. No. You don't need to do that. I'll make sure. Of course she'll say yes."

She watched him move to the window and peer out.

"Tinsley's home. I've got to go."

Tinsley pushed through the door, her eyes dropping to the broken fragments. "Daddy, what happened? Who were you talking to?"

"Nothing. No one. I just knocked it off the desk. It was an accident. Don't worry about it. The staff will clean it up."

“Daddy, what’s wrong? And why have you added another man to my security detail? It’s bad enough I have one at all. None of my brothers do. But that man”—she pointed dramatically toward the front hall—“is impossible, and I won’t put up with it.”

Her father gave her an impatient look. “He’s the best in the business.”

“I want him fired. Immediately.”

“For what reason?”

“He was rude to Palmer, for one.”

“I’m sure Palmer is a big boy.”

“Well... he’s insolent.”

“Really? And how was he rude to you?”

“He thinks he’s boss.” She slapped a hand to her breastbone. “My boss.”

JD couldn’t hide his smile. “Dear Lord, a man trying to boss around the stubbornly independent Miss Wyatt? No.”

“Don’t be droll. It doesn’t suit you.”

“Come give your father a hug. I haven’t seen you in almost a month.”

She moved into his embrace, pressing her head to his chest.

He rubbed her back. "It's good to have you home, baby girl. And a little more humor would do you a world of good. I've met Mr. Steele. I found him to be very polite and quite professional. He stays, Tinsley. Get accustomed to it."

She pulled back. "Why, Daddy? You haven't told me the reason I need increased security."

He moved out of her arms and returned behind his desk. "Palmer is about to announce he's running for office. That brings out all kinds of crazies."

"Be serious, Daddy. Four bodyguards? That can't be the reason."

"It's part of it."

"What's the other part?"

He leaned in his chair. "Let's just say there've been some unpleasant developments with some business dealings of mine. You and your mother are everything to me. Enemies see weakness. You are my weakness. If anything happened to you..."

"Nothing is going to happen to me."

"Make your old man happy and let me have this, Tinsley. Please."

She couldn't deny him. Something inside her had always made her driven to please her mother and father, even when what was required was the last thing she wanted.

She exhaled with a huff. “How long?”

“Until I deem it no longer necessary.”

“*Indefinitely?* Absolutely not. If this isn’t sorted out by my birthday, I’m going back to Paris. I was quite safe there.”

“You think the men I deal with can’t hop on a plane?”

“Then maybe you should reconsider how you run your business, Daddy. People shouldn’t want to hurt you and your family because of how you do business.”

He couldn’t argue with her, so he ignored her statement. “Grady Steele stays until I say otherwise. Now go upstairs and find your mother. I know she’s dying to see you.”

Tinsley heard her mother humming when she reached the top of the staircase. As she did, she heard the front door open and saw Grady Steele head to her father’s study. What an infuriating man, walking in like he owned the place.

She entered her room and found her mother laying out formal gowns across her bed. “Mom?”

Loretta Wyatt was every inch the proper southern woman, always dressed to the nines, impeccable manners, and style and grace galore. Right now she had her hair in a French twist, a style she favored.



Loretta whirled. “Tinsley, darling! You’re home!” She ran to embrace her, holding her tight. “I’ve missed you so, dear.”

“I’ve missed you, too, Mother.” Tinsley pulled away and studied the evening gowns. “What are all these?”

“Oh, I was just laying out some choices for the ball. What do you think? Come. You must try them on.”

Tinsley let her mother tug her toward the bed. Her room was decorated with Louis XIV furniture her mother had chosen for her when she was fourteen. All white with gold trim. It had cost a fortune; nothing but the best for her daughter, her mother always said. She had a huge walk-in closet and a large free-standing mirror in the bedroom.

Tinsley couldn’t think of anything she wanted to do less right now than try on dresses, but she hadn’t seen her mother in weeks, and it made her happy to help her pick out what she wore to the Ice Ball every year.

She glanced at the selections laid out before her. There were all colors. “No silver and white this year?”

“I thought we’d try something different this year. That was getting tired. Here. Try this one first.” Her mother shoved a long red strapless dress at her and aimed her toward the adjoining bath.

“I’ll need a strapless bra, mother.”

“Yes, yes. I’ll get you one.”

Tinsley went into the bathroom while she heard her mother opening drawers.

“So how was Palmer when you saw him, dear? Did he surprise you?”

“Yes. I wish you would have called and warned me.”

“Did you like his gift?” Loretta tapped on the door, and when Tinsley opened it a crack, she passed her a bra.

“Thanks.” Shutting the door, Tinsley answered her mother’s question. “The pearls? You knew about them?”

“Of course. He showed us before he left. Aren’t they gorgeous? And the gold beading between them. They were just stunning. He got them at Radcliffe’s, you know.”

Radcliffe’s was the most upscale jeweler in Dallas.

“I’m sure they cost a fortune.”

“I wish he wouldn’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Buy me expensive things.”

Loretta cocked her head. “Since when don’t you like expensive things, dear?”

“I just feel... like he’s buying me. Like I’d marry him just for the jewelry or whatever.”

“I’m sure that’s not it at all.”

“Mother?”

“Yes, dear?”

“Do you know anything about what’s got Daddy so worried about my safety?”

“Your father is a worrier. Always has been.”

Tinsley opened the door and walked out.

Her mother put her hands to her mouth. “Oh, Tinsley. It looks stunning on you.”

She walked to the standing mirror in the corner near the French doors. They led out to the verandah that ran the length of the back of the house and overlooked the pool. The stables were visible in the distance.

Tinsley wasn’t looking at the view; she was studying her reflection with a critical eye. The dress fit well enough. Like a glove, really. The neckline dipped, showing a daring bit of her cleavage, and the fabric wrapped around her waist and hips, giving her a real Jessica Rabbit, va-va-voom.

Tinsley turned, studying the side and back. “You don’t think it’s too much?”

“Not at all. And I know the perfect necklace to wear with it.”

“The pearls? I took them off in the bathroom.”

“I was thinking perhaps my diamonds.” Her mother approached behind her and reached around to clasp a circlet of

perfect emerald cut diamonds. It was a necklace her father had bought her for an anniversary present one year.

Tinsley had always thought it was the most beautiful thing. Her hand lifted to it, her fingertips brushing over the settings. “Oh, Mother. Are you sure?”

“Positive. There. It’s fastened.”

“Mother?”

“Yes, dear?” Loretta studied the mirror.

“I overheard Father on a call when I came home. It sounded like someone was threatening him. Do you know what that’s about?”

“I don’t. Threatening, you say?”

“Yes, and then Daddy threw a figurine against the wall. You know, the one Aunt Jane gave him for his fiftieth birthday?”

“Oh my.”

There was a knock at the door.

“Come in,” Loretta called out, and Tinsley expected her father to walk in, but was shocked when the reflection in the mirror was Grady instead.

She whirled. “What are you doing here?”

“Ma’am. Miss Wyatt. I just wanted to know if you’d be leaving the estate again today?”

Her mother answered for her. “She won’t. There will be a small cocktail party this evening to welcome her home.”

“I see.” His eyes took in the room and then the gowns on the bed. “Formal?”

“Those are for the ball this weekend,” Loretta explained. “Are you finding your room to your liking? Is there anything you need?”

“Thank you, ma’am. It’s fine. And the proximity to Miss Wyatt is ideal.”

“Proximity?” Tinsley practically squeaked.

“Thank you, Grady. If there’s nothing else...” Her mother hinted he should withdraw.

He paused at the door and turned with a grin. “I’d go with the red one.”

“No one asked for your opinion,” Tinsley snapped, but the door was already shut. She whirled on her mother. “You put him in the *next room*?”

“Now, Tinsley, he needs to be close if he’s to be of any use.”

“This is ridiculous. I won’t have it.” She stomped her foot.

“Tinsley, don’t make a scene. It doesn’t become you. I’ve chosen that gold cocktail dress for you to wear tonight. Take a hot bath and relax. Drinks are at seven, and dinner at eight.

Don't be late, darling." With that, she withdrew in a cloud of Chanel No. 5.

Tinsley's eyes fell to the gold dress, and she sighed. Her mother was picking out her clothes like she was five years old. She already missed the freedom she'd had in Paris.



## CHAPTER FOUR

Tinsley was thankful for at least one thing: the guest list for the cocktail party was uncharacteristically small. As she came down the curved staircase, she counted only a dozen couples, most of whom were friends of her mother and father. She was grateful for that. Other than Palmer, his father and mother, and one of his brothers, it was either her family or her parents' friends. Except for Kiley, her bestie since high school, who ran over to hug her.

“Look at you.” She stepped back, still holding Tinsley's hands, her eyes sweeping over the gold dress. “You look amazing. Did you bring this from Paris?”

“No, but I brought some beautiful scarves. I have one for you.” Kiley was a pale-skinned beauty with a smattering of freckles and long, red hair pulled to one side with a glittering comb. Her dress was a to-die-for white Grecian sheath held up by a gold circlet around her throat. “I love these.” Tinsley tapped a finger on the golden cuffs Kiley wore. “You look beautiful tonight.”

“Thanks. Tell me all about your trip. I would kill to run off to Paris for a month. I wish I had an aunt living there.”

“Aunt Jane is amazing. She's eclectic and fabulous and so full of life. She doesn't care a hoot what anyone thinks. I wish



I had the guts to live life like her, just doing what I wanted, answering to no one.”

“No one? Wouldn’t that be awfully lonely?”

“I don’t think so. I think it would be totally freeing.”

“If you say so. I, on the other hand, intend to land a rich husband and wile away my days lazing by the pool and working on my tan.”

“Gee, you’re so *driven*, Kiley,” Tinsley teased with a roll of her eyes. “And who have you set your sights on this season?”

“Randall Davis. He’s new in town. Made a fortune in the tech segment. He’s from Silicon Valley, but he plans to set up an office here. My father introduced us. I’ve been seeing him all summer while you’ve been gallivanting all over the globe.”

“You should have invited him tonight.”

“He had to fly to New York on business. I’m inviting him to your mother’s ball. He’s going to be my plus one.”

“I hope he’s bringing his checkbook. You know Mother. She’ll be hitting everyone up for major donations. The Children’s Hospital is near and dear to her heart. She’s hoping to raise a record amount this year.”

Kiley looped her arm through Tinsley’s. “Let’s find the bar, and I’ll tell you all about him.”

They found the bar set up in the study, where most of the men were gathered.

“What may I get for you ladies?” a uniformed bartender asked.

“Lemon drop martini, please,” Tinsley replied.

“Oh, that sounds delicious. Same,” Kiley added.

Palmer turned to look over his shoulder. “Tins, there you are.” He snagged her free hand and leaned to kiss her cheek. “I need you to settle this for us. Which summer was it that Perry totaled his Porsche 911 Targa? I say it was the summer we all went to Galveston, but he claims it was the year of your sweet sixteen.”

Tinsley’s eyes shifted to Palmer’s younger brother. He gave her no smile; just stared with his gray eyes. “I, ah, don’t recall.”

“Sure, you do, Tinsley,” Perry insisted. “You remember it very well.”

She did remember. She just didn’t want to. It was the summer he’d pushed her against the boathouse wall at her parents’ lake house and kissed her. They were all there for her sixteenth birthday. Perry was nineteen and Palmer was twenty, though he’d been dating Rachel Chu that summer.

Tinsley had struggled to get free, but Perry was strong and had easily held her, smiling like he’d owned her. Until her birthday, he’d never once made a move. She still remembered

Kiley whispering later that perhaps Perry was just waiting for her to age out of the jailbait category.

It still gave her shivers to recall how vulnerable she'd felt that hot afternoon. If her oldest brother, Jed, hadn't come around the corner, she wasn't sure what would have happened.

"You okay, Tins?" Jed had stood there for a moment, unsure if what he'd interrupted was consensual or not. In his moment's hesitation, Perry had pushed away, muttered happy birthday, and stalked off.

Jed had twisted his head, watching Perry leave. Then he'd turned to his sister. "Stay away from that one, Tinsley. Okay?"

"Sure," she'd muttered, embarrassed, and feeling like she'd done something to lead Perry on, though she hadn't. She'd dashed up to the pool party on the upper level.

It wasn't long after that she'd heard his Porsche roar away. She'd heard the next day he'd crashed it on the way to Dallas.

Tinsley smiled and sipped her cocktail. "I'm sure I don't know, nor do I really care what summer it was. If you'll excuse me, I have guests to greet."

Kiley took her by the hand. "Come on, Tins."

They moved into the other room and Kiley and her exchanged a glance. "That guy gives me the creeps. He always has. How are you ever going to stand having him as a brother-in-law?" Kiley gave a body shiver.

"I thought he'd moved to California," Tinsley whispered.

“Well, he’s back.” Kiley leaned over and whispered behind her hand. “I heard his business venture was a bust. Blew through all the money his daddy gave him.”

“Tinsley, dear.” Her mother approached. “You remember my dear friend Fiona.”

Tinsley let her mother lead her around the party for the next hour, insisting she tell each guest all about her trip to Paris. Many of them, especially the women, seemed more interested in whether there would be a wedding to plan.

The entire time, Tinsley couldn’t help noticing her bodyguard standing against the wall in a dark suit, keeping an eye on her.

“Mother, must he be here?” she asked behind her martini glass. She was now on her third, and she was definitely beginning to feel them. “It’s so creepy. He just stands there, staring at me.”

“Your father insisted, honey. I tried talking to him, but you know how he gets when he’s decided something.”

Yes, Tinsley knew all too well. Like when he’d *decided* she and Palmer would be a perfect match. *He’ll be good to you*, he’d said. *He’ll take care of you. You’ll have a good life.*

She wasn’t so sure that was true. How did one have a good life married to a man they didn’t love?

“Hey, Kiley.” Tinsley nudged her bestie, who was chatting up one of her brothers.

“What is it?” she whispered.

“Go distract my sheepdog. I want to slip out for a few minutes. I need some air, and I don’t need him over my shoulder.”

Kiley eyed the bodyguard against the wall. “Hello. How did I miss *him*? He’s gorgeous, Tins. If he were my bodyguard, I sure wouldn’t be trying to ditch him. I’d be trying to lead him into the gardens.”

Tinsley rolled her eyes. “Go flirt with him. He’s all yours.”

Kiley downed the rest of her drink and headed Grady’s way. Tinsley watched his eyes sweep down Kiley’s knockout body. This was her chance. She faded behind a potted palm and slipped from the room.



## CHAPTER FIVE

The pretty redhead stepped closer, her fingers walking up Grady's lapel. "Aren't you a muscular one. Do you lift weights?"

Grady glanced over her shoulder to where Tinsley had been standing, only she wasn't there. He scanned the room, looking for her telltale gold gown. He couldn't find her anywhere.

"I'm Kiley Bernard. Tinsley's friend."

"Kiley, where is she?"

"What do you mean?"

He took her wrist and pulled her around the corner into the entry hall. "Where is she, Kiley?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

"I'm here for a reason. Her father thinks she could be a target."

"A target for what? Are you saying she's in danger?"

"Yes. Now tell me where the hell she went."

Her mouth dropped open. "It was all in fun. She said she just wanted to slip away for some air. I was supposed to distract you."

“This isn’t a game.” He stepped around her, heading to a set of double doors leading to the back patio.

“I’m sorry,” Kiley called after him. “Try the garden. Or the stables.”

He searched the rose garden behind the house first, but he didn’t see any sign of her. There was a brick path leading toward the stables set fifty yards back from the main house. Three lamp posts provided dim lighting along the way. He didn’t see Tinsley, but that didn’t mean she couldn’t already be out there. He heard a horse snort and whinny and jogged that way.

As he got closer, one of the rolling doors was ajar just enough for a person to slip through. He did so without a sound. Carrying a gun under his jacket, his hand automatically slid to it now, resting lightly on the butt. The interior was dimly lit, but he saw the glittering gold dress at the end of the aisle and breathed an internal sigh of relief.

She stood stroking the forelock of a big black horse. His footsteps carried to her, and she glanced over her shoulder, eyes locking with his. “You again.”

“It’s my job.”

“I wanted to be alone.”

“Then today is not your day. Tomorrow isn’t looking good either.”

She rolled her eyes. “I’m sure I’m safe here.”



“Are you?”

She studied his face. “You don’t think so?”

“As long as I’m here, you are. This your horse?”

“Pharaoh. Yes. He’s a prized jumper.”

Grady stroked his neck. “I don’t know anything about jumpers, but he’s a big animal, isn’t he?”

“That he is. He stands sixteen hands. He’s a thoroughbred. He used to race.”

“Your family is into racing?”

“No. I actually adopted Pharaoh from a thoroughbred rescue charity. I gave him a second life as a jumper.”

“And a little thing like you rides this big beast?”

“Little thing like me?”

“Sorry, ma’am. Didn’t mean any disrespect.”

She scratched under Pharaoh’s jaw. “He’s my baby, and I’ve missed him so.” She turned to confront him. “Why did my father hire you?”

“Ask your father.”

“I’m asking you. He won’t tell me much.”

“Well, maybe there’s a reason for that.”

“How can I protect myself if I don’t know the threat?”

He agreed with her on that and sighed.

She crossed her arms. “Spill.”

He told her what he knew, everything he’d been briefed on. And added today’s latest development. “Your father received a threatening letter. It was vague. Just promised violence and that he’d be sorry.”

Grady studied Tinsley. Her eyes were glazed. It did not surprise him, considering how many times he’s seen her drink refreshed.

She leaned toward him, her hands settling on his dress shirt. “You’ll protect me, though, won’t you?”

Grady studied her, confused by her sudden one-eighty. But then he supposed the alcohol was responsible.

Her palms slid upward to his neck and she pulled him down until his mouth met hers. Her lips were soft, and he couldn’t resist his tongue slipping inside for a taste of her tempting mouth. Sweet and lemony, like the drinks she’d been downing all night. It reminded him of her vulnerability. The kiss was exploratory and promised so much more, like first kisses do, but he knew he had to stop. It was wrong on so many levels. He put her at arm’s length. “I think you’ve had quite a bit to drink tonight, ma’am.”

“I think I’ve had just enough.”

“Don’t you have a fiancé, Miss Wyatt?”

That threw cold water on her response. She pulled back. “There’s no ring on my finger.” She shrugged. “I’m beholden

to no one.”

“Right. Don’t try your wiles on me. I’m sure you’ve used them to get your way your whole life. But they won’t work this time.”

“We’ll see.” She turned, then paused. “Maybe one of the other bodyguards will be more receptive.”

He grabbed her upper arm and spun her around. “You try these games with any of them and I’ll—”

“You’ll what?” She arched her brow. “Turn me over your knee?”

“First good idea you’ve had.”

“You wouldn’t dare.” She pushed his hand off her.

“Try me.” He took a threatening step toward her, and she took a step back.

“You should return to your party, Miss Wyatt. You have guests, remember?”

She strode down the aisle, her heels clicking loudly.

Once she was through the door, Grady heard a low whistle and whirled.

Perry Pace leaned against a post at the end of the aisle, blowing smoke toward the rafters. “She sure is a handful, isn’t she?”

“You really shouldn’t be smoking in here, Mr. Pace.”

“You’re quite right. E-cigarette.” He held it up. “No harm. Right?”

Grady didn’t have time to question Perry about why he was in the stables. He had to go after Tinsley, and so he headed back to the party. If he had anything to say about it, she wouldn’t be served another drink. Perhaps he’d have a chat with her father, make sure she was escorted to her suite for the night before she did something foolish.

Later that evening, he was not pleased to find out the Pace brothers would be staying in the guest rooms on the lower level. But the expression on Palmer’s face when he discovered Grady had been given the room adjacent to Tinsley made up for it.



## CHAPTER SIX

Grady got up at sunrise, an old habit from his days in the service. He dressed and went to the kitchen to get a cup of coffee. A short, heavysset maid greeted him with a warm smile. “Coffee, señor?”

“Si. It smells wonderful.”

She winked. “That’s Maria’s secret ingredient.”

“What’s that?”

“A pinch of cinnamon in the grounds. Takes the bitterness away.” She snapped her fingers. “I’ll get you a cup.”

He leaned against the counter. “Have you worked here long?”

“Since Miss Tinsley was a baby.” She passed him a cup and saucer, the rich aroma rising from the steaming liquid.

“Has she come down yet?” He took a sip from the fine porcelain and set it in the matching saucer.

“No. She’s not in her room either. I just checked.”

A shiver of panic shot up his spine, and he set the coffee aside with a rattle of China. “Where is she?”

Maria picked up a towel and wiped the counter, shrugging. “She’s usually with that big horse of hers.”

“Thanks.” He left the coffee and stalked out the door.

“Señor, your coffee.” But he was already gone.

Grady jogged down the path to the stable. It was quiet inside, and Pharaoh’s stall was empty. He walked through to the open doors on the opposite side and found Tinsley out in a corral. On second observation, he realized it was more of a practice ring, set up with small jumps.

He watched as she sat atop the big horse, in perfect English riding gear, trotting the horse around the ring. She didn’t see him, and it gave him a moment to study her dedication.

She clenched the reins in her white knuckled grip, and he couldn’t help but conclude how much like a tightly wound spring she was, always striving to be perfect. He supposed her parents demanded no less.

But he was still pissed she’d eluded him. If he’d found her gone himself without the information Maria had given him, he would have been turning the estate upside down to find her. It’s hard to protect someone who avoids their protection assignment. He realized that protecting this spoiled little rich girl was going to be difficult, to say the least. He wasn’t about to let that behavior start. Best to squash it now.

“Get over here,” he barked, causing her head to whip around.

She moved the reins toward his position, and Pharaoh obediently trotted over.

Her eyes drift over him. “I was going to give you a nasty look, but I see you already have one. What’s the bug up your ass so early in the morning?”

“I can’t protect you if I don’t know where the fuck you are, Miss. Wyatt.”

“Such language.” She made a tsk-tsking sound, then nudged Pharaoh closer and leaned down. “Let’s get this clear, Mr. Steele. I don’t take orders from you.”

“Oh, really?”

“Really. You’re nothing but hired help.” She gave him a smirk, eyeing him up and down, then jerked the reins to trot away.

“That first step off your high horse is gonna be a bitch, honey. Tuck and roll.” Grady turned to walk away when a large thud had him spinning around and dashing to the rails.

Tinsley lay on her back in the dirt.

Grady vaulted over the top rail and moved to run to her, but she held up a hand.

“Don’t you dare. I’m fine. You think this is the first time I’ve fallen off a horse? I don’t need your help.”

He started laughing.

“Shut up.”



“Sweetie, I’m not laughing at your bad luck. I’m merely cheering on Karma for doing such a great job of biting you in the ass.”

She flipped him off. “Fuck you.”

“Oh, you’d love that, wouldn’t you?” He laughed again and turned to walk away.

“Someone seriously needs to shove a rainbow up your ass.” She called after him.

“Pot, kettle, darlin’,” he replied without a glance.

“I’ve got a sparkling personality.”

He finally turned and walked backward. “Yeah, right. Couldn’t prove it by me.”

“That’s just your effect on me.” She pulled herself in the saddle in one fluid motion that impressed the hell out of him. He watched her ride away, her bottom bouncing in the saddle.

An hour later, Grady peered through the sheer curtains of the French doors off the breakfast room. Tinsley sat outside at a glass table. Even through the panes, Grady could overhear her begging Palmer to stay.

“Why must you always run off? We haven’t even had breakfast.”

“We have all had breakfast, Tins. You’re the one who slept in late.”

“I didn’t sleep in late. I was in the ring at sunrise, putting Pharaoh through his paces.” She closed her eyes and pressed her fingers to her temples. “And now I have a pounding headache. Don’t you even care?”

“Of course, Tins. That’s why I had the maid bring you aspirin. What more do you want me to do? You down lemon drop martinis like water all night, then put yourself through training at the crack of dawn, and now you wonder why you have a hangover.” He stood and leaned to kiss the top of her head. “I’m sure you’ll live, dear. I’ve got to run.”

Grady watched the man head around to the driveway where a car was waiting, Perry in the driver’s seat. Grady clicked on his radio, calling the man at the front gate. “The Pace brothers are leaving.”

“Yes, sir.”

Once they pulled away, Grady opened the door and headed outside to join Tinsley. It was always a fine line between invading a client’s space and keeping close. He’d given her time with Palmer. Now she was alone, and he didn’t like that. He especially didn’t like how Palmer had blown her off.

Grady walked up to the table and glanced at her sullen expression. She looked like a four-year-old who’d just been told she couldn’t go to Disney World.

“Go away.” She didn’t even look at him.

“Can’t do that.”

“Well, I’m going shopping today, and you’re not invited.”

“You don’t go anywhere without me, Miss Wyatt. Those are the rules.”

“Screw your rules.”

“What’s the matter? Did Mr. Pace have better things to do?”

“That’s none of your business.”

Maria carried out a tray with a silver pot of coffee, a pitcher of ice water, and a pretty blue and white porcelain bowl of daintily cut fresh fruit, which she set in front of Tinsley along with a silver spoon.

“Will that be all, Miss Tinsley?”

“Yes. Thank you, Maria.” Tinsley, her elbow on the glass table, didn’t bother to lift her head off her fist.

Maria looked at Grady. “More coffee, señor?”

“No, thank you, Maria.”

She turned, her starched white apron tied in the back with a bow, and retreated inside.

Tinsley pushed the bowl away. “Making friends with the help, are you?”

“I’m just likable.”

She snorted. “Right.”

“What’s the matter? Did you just find out the world doesn’t revolve around you? Here, let me pour you a tall glass of *get over it.*” He picked up the pitcher of water and filled her glass.

She grabbed the goblet and threw the water in his face, then jumped to her feet and ran toward the driveway where a white Mercedes SL sat.

Grady wiped a hand down his face, shaking the water off. “Miss Wyatt. Wait.” She ignored him. “Goddamn it. Wait.”

She jumped in her car and roared off, laughing as he chased after her fifty yards down the drive. Using his radio to call the front gate, he barked, “Don’t let Miss Wyatt leave.” A moment later, he watched her car veer off the blacktop and crash into an azalea bush.

His eyes widened, and he raced to it. Just as he made it down the drive, his heart pounding, she jumped out of the car, screaming.

Seeing she was okay, he bent, his hands on his knees, breathing heavily. “You trying to piss me off? You don’t go anywhere without me. I thought I made that clear when I just finished telling you that *not one minute ago!*”

She pointed at the car, and he noticed how pale her face was. He straightened, a slither of warning flashing through his spine. “What is it?”

“There’s a... a... a snake in the car.”

He stepped closer and saw a four-foot rattler slither out of the door and disappear into the brush. He glanced toward the house. "Someone put it there."

"Why would someone do that?"

"You tell me."

"That's crazy."

"Is it?"

"What the hell is going on?"

He grabbed her upper arm. "I don't know, but until we figure this out, you listen to every word I say. Understand me?"

She nodded once. Fear filled her face, her eyes wide, her skin pale, her body trembled under his hold. She was really scared this time. Good. Maybe he needed her scared. It might make his job easier.

She jerked her arm free. "I'll do what you say from now on, but I need you to do something for me."

"What's that?"

"I need to know my horse is safe. I don't want anything to happen to Pharaoh. What if someone attacks him?"

"I'm concerned about *your* safety, not your damn horse's."

"It would destroy me if I lost Pharaoh. Please, Grady."

“Fine.” Her use of his first name didn’t escape him. He knew she was turning on the charm. Why couldn’t he resist her pleas? “I’ll see that one of the other men watches over the stables. I’ll tell him the horse is worth a fortune, and it’s by orders of JD.” He ran a hand through his hair and paced. “Where were you running off to?”

“Anywhere. Nowhere. I felt like I was suffocating. This damn charity event, all the demands, all the pressure to be perfect.”

“Is that why you went to Paris, and Singapore before that, and Tahiti before that? Avoiding the pressures of your high society life?”

Her expression turned shocked. “So, what, are you digging into my past now?”

“Part of my job.”

“No, it’s not. What I do and why I do it is no concern of yours.”

“I need to know everything about you if I’m going to keep you safe.”

“None of the other bodyguards ever did.”

“No shit. And how’s that working out for you?”

She stared at the car’s open door. “You think someone did that on purpose?” Her gaze shifted to the house. “What if there are more?”

“I think your vehicle was easy to access. You probably didn’t even lock it, did you?”

“Why would I? It’s on the estate.”

“That’s why.” He pointed at the car. “From now on, you lock your vehicle.”

She stalked off. “I need another shower.”

He called after her. “Check the stall before you get in.”

“Not funny,” she replied, still walking away.

“Wasn’t meant to be, darlin’.”

“I’m not your darlin’.”

Grady couldn’t keep the grin off his face at her emphatic response. Then he climbed in her car and backed it off the azalea bush, its tires spinning until it caught the pavement. He got out and inspected the body. It wasn’t too bad, a few scratches that could probably be buffed out with a good waxing.

He put his radio to his mouth. “Cancel the order on Miss Wyatt. She won’t be leaving this morning. But I need you to get a staff member to give her car a good wash and wax. She just went off roading with it.”

“Off roading, sir?”

“Never mind, just make the call.” He climbed back into the vehicle and drove the expensive car back up to the house.







## CHAPTER SEVEN

Tinsley retired until her pounding headache eased. It was mid-afternoon by the time she descended the stairs to find Grady leaning in the doorway of her father's study, chatting with the man like they were fast friends. Had the world turned upside down? Her father rarely conversed with the staff, and that's what Mr. Grady Steele was to her. Staff. Nothing more. Even if he had given in and told her he'd make sure Pharaoh was looked after.

She breezed past the door on the way to the front entrance. "I'm going shopping now. If I'm not back by dinner, start without me."

She heard her father chuckle. "I guess you're going shopping, Mr. Steele."

Grady pushed off the doorframe and sighed, following her out.

Secretly, she smiled. She was going to have a marvelous time torturing him today. She glanced timidly in the door of her car, looking around, unsure if she should climb inside the thing.

"Don't worry. We've checked it top to bottom. No more crawling or slithering creatures to pop out at you." Grady opened the passenger door.

She slid her shades on and climbed behind the wheel.

Grady climbed in the seat next to hers. Before he could buckle up, she pressed the button that put the convertible top down. “I hope you don’t mind the sun.”

“Do I have a choice?”

She didn’t bother replying and gunned the gas pedal. The tires fishtailed for a moment before they caught. God, she loved her car.

“Whoa, there. Maybe I should drive.”

“Not a chance. This is my baby.”

“I thought the horse was your baby.”

“They’re both my babies.”

“Lucky you.”

“I am, aren’t I?”

“So, what are you shopping for today?”

“I need a dress for the Ten Best Dressed Women in Dallas luncheon and fashion show tomorrow.”

“Great. This should be loads of fun.”

She giggled. “Oh, it will be.”

“Maybe for you.”

She shrugged. “You took this job. It’s not my fault if you hate your work.”

“This isn’t usually what I do.”

“Really? I thought you were the best in the business.”

“I am.”

“How can you be if you don’t usually do this?”

“Let’s just say I have more action-packed assignments. Dress shopping’s never been on the agenda before.”

“Sorry I’m not thrilling enough for you. I’ll have to work on that.”

“Oh, Christ,” he said under his breath, slipping his own shades on as she pulled through the gate and on the road.

Tinsley took out her phone and made a call. “Hey, girl. Meet me at The Villages. I’m headed there now.”

Kiley groaned. “It’ll take me an hour to get ready.”

“Just put your hair in a loose bun, throw on that adorable sundress you bought last week, and meet me there. I’ll have a mocha Frappuccino waiting for you.”

“Fine. You can always twist my arm with a mocha Frap.”

Tinsley giggled and disconnected, then her eyes scanned over what Grady was wearing. “Is that the best suit you’ve got?”

“I only wear it to blend into the scenery.”

She huffed a laugh. “Darlin’, in that suit, you don’t blend in anywhere. I guess we’ll have to get you something better

today.”

“I don’t need any new clothes.”

“You do if you’re going to accompany me around town. Especially to the events I’ll be attending over the next month. You’ll stick out like a sore thumb at the Ice Ball and the Oilman’s Ball.”

His jaw tightened, and he stared at the scenery. “Then I’ll rent a tux.”

She wrinkled her nose. “A rented tux? Gross.”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

She grinned big. “Not as much as I’m going to enjoy the rest of the day.”

Grady huffed and rested his arm on the door.

She settled her hand on his knee, then gave it a squeeze. “Don’t worry, Grady. I’ll be gentle.”

He picked up her wrist and moved her hand off him. “Both hands on the wheel, please, Miss Wyatt.”

With that, she laughed out loud and pressed the gas pedal.

Twenty minutes later, Tinsley pulled up to a valet stand at an exclusive looking outdoor mall. A young kid in a white shirt, black vest, and pants opened her door for her as she checked

her lip gloss in the rearview mirror. He handed her a claim ticket.

As she climbed from the car and snatched it from his hand, she checked his name tag and gave him a flirty smile, patting his cheek. “This is my baby, Kevin. Take good care of her.”

“Yes, ma’am.” The Valet grinned big, and his face turned red.

Grady climbed out on his side and joined Tinsley on the walk, watching her car zoom away. “You just gave that kid the biggest thrill of his day.”

“He’ll remember me, won’t he? And I guarantee when he brings my car back, there won’t be a mark on it. Come on.”

The mall was beautifully designed with Spanish architecture, arches, wrought iron lamps and brick sidewalks, big planters filled with flowering plants lined the walk. She led the way along a row of high-end stores. They passed Chanel, Alexander McQueen, Dior, Carolina Herrera, Christian Louboutin, Cartier, and a blur of others.

Tinsley paused outside a store window, and Grady followed her eyes to the mannequin, then to the name of the establishment. Tom Ford.

“Don’t even think about it.”

“Why? That suit would look fantastic on you.”

“I don’t disagree. How much do you think something like that would cost?”

Tinsley tilted her head to the side. “Hmmm. Probably about six.”

He studied the suit, thinking maybe he could swing it. “Hundred?”

“Thousand.”

His brows lifted, and he huffed a laugh, then took her elbow and pushed her along. “Keep walking.”

“It would be my gift.”

“Absolutely not.”

She pulled her elbow free. “Fine. I appreciate your ethics, you know. It’s just a crime for an attractive man to walk around in a bad suit.”

Her first stop was Starbucks, where she ordered a tall chai tea latte and a grande mocha Frappuccino. She turned to Grady. “What would you like?”

“I’m good.”

She rolled her eyes. “Come on. It’s just a coffee.”

“Fine. Short Americano.”

She paid, and they found a seat. They were halfway through their drinks when Kiley showed up. Spotting Grady, her smile faltered.

“I didn’t realize he would be here.”

“He’s my bodyguard, Kiley. Kinda means he goes where I go.”

“Right.” She slipped in the seat, hardly looking Grady’s way.

It was then Tinsley realized exactly how Grady had known she was in the stables last night. Her gaze shifted between them and paused on Kiley as she slid the frozen drink across the table. “Here you go, *traitor*.”

“Me?” Kiley put her hand to her chest, then dramatically rolled her eyes. “Okay, fine. I told him, but he twisted my arm. For real.”

“You don’t deserve that mocha Frap.”

Kiley quickly took a sip. “Well, it’s mine now. I licked it.”

“That’s what you said about Bradley Carson in high school,” Tinsley teased.

Kiley took another sip off her straw. “Well, I can assure you, this is much better than Bradley Carson ever was.”

Tinsley almost snorted her drink out of her nose. She quickly covered her mouth with her hand. “I wouldn’t know. I never dated him.”

“Lucky you. So where shall we start?”

“Across the street at Red Door.”



“Fine.” Kiley nodded toward Grady. “He’ll carry our bags, right?”

Tinsley grinned at the idea, but dismissed it when she saw the glare he gave her. “He’s not a pack mule, Kiley.”

She shrugged and took another sip of her Frappuccino. “He’s got all those muscles. Why waste them?”

Grady stood, downed the rest of his coffee, and crumpled his cup, displaying all that strength. “Let’s get this over with.”

Tinsley’s eyes fell to his tight fist.

“Get this over with? That’s not a very positive attitude,” Kiley said, rising from her chair.

“Come on.” Tinsley stood and led the way.

They walked across the lane of diagonally parked cars. Grady scanned for trouble and Tinsley rolled her eyes. Did he think someone was going to jump out from behind a parked car to do her bodily harm?

They entered the store and were immediately greeted by a sales associate with a curly mop of hair, a purple tie over a pinstripe shirt, and red-rimmed glasses. “Good afternoon, Miss Wyatt, Miss Bernard. Sir. Are we shopping for anything in particular today?”

“I need a dress for the Ten Best Dressed luncheon, Jonathon, and a gown for the Oilman’s Ball.” Tinsley pulled her glasses off, glancing around the store. “I’m only interested in the latest lines.”

“Excellent. I’m sure we can find everything you need. Follow me.” He led them to a curtained off room with several plush chairs and a three-way mirror with a pedestal. “Would anyone care for champagne?”

“I’d love one,” Kiley said.

“Sure,” Tinsley replied.

The women sat. Grady clasped his hands in front of him and stood outside the curtain. It was tied back on either side with a tassel.

“And you, sir?”

“I’m working, Jonathon.”

“Very good, sir.” The associate scurried off to pull dresses. He returned with a female sales associate, each of them carrying several dresses over their arms. They hung them on hooks on the wall. “I have several suitable for the luncheon, and three gowns for the ball. All just off the runway. Would you like to try them on, Miss Wyatt, or shall I have April model them for you?”

“I’ll try them.” She couldn’t wait to torment Grady.

“Excellent. I’ll leave you in April’s capable hands.” He exited the curtain, dropping the tie backs and giving them some privacy.

“Shall we get started with these short gowns?” April asked.

Tinsley stood and walked to them. “Let’s start with this pearl gray one.”

April helped her into the gown and brought her matching heeled sandals. Tinsley stepped up on the dais and looked at her reflection. The gown was a Zac Posen pleated tulle fit-&-flare midi dress. She did a little twirl, and the skirts flared out from her hips.

“It’s pretty,” Kiley said. “But I’m not sure if that shade is right for you. It washes you out.”

Tinsley cocked her head. It was a sweet dress with a fifty’s vibe, but hardly anything that she could torment Grady with. “I’ll try another, please.”

Next, she slipped into an Oscar De La Renta floral poplin dress with little cap sleeves, fitted bodice, and a full skirt. It showed a good amount of neckline.

“Grady,” she called out. “Come in here.”

He poked his head through the curtain, his eyes immediately dropping to the dress.

“What do you think?”

“Very pretty. Reminds me of Sophia Loren somehow.”

Tinsley studied her reflection. She could see that. “Thank you. That’s all.”

He withdrew, and she slipped on the last short dress.

It was another Oscar. It was a bold pink and orange striped, one-shoulder mini with a huge bow on the side.

“I love it,” Kiley said.

Tinsley put her hands on her hips. “The bow’s not too much?”

“It’s divine, Tins. You’ll definitely get your picture in the paper with that dress.”

Tinsley cocked her head, studying the dress. “Grady.”

He poked his head in. “Whoa. The bow’s bigger than the dress.”

She did a little turn. “Too much?”

“Too short. It barely covers your...”

“My what?”

“You’re behind, Miss Wyatt.”

She grinned. “Thank you.”

“How much is it?” Kiley asked April.

“That one is just under five.”

“Five hundred?” Grady’s mouth dropped open.

“Five thousand,” April corrected.

Grady’s brows shot up, and he pinned Tinsley with a look. “You’re going to spend five thousand dollars for that?”

“That, sir, is an Oscar De La Renta original. Straight off the runway,” April defended.

“There’s about a yard of fabric in the whole thing!”

Tinsley turned to the mirror, a smile tugging at her mouth. “That will be all, Grady. Thank you.”

He jerked the curtain shut as he left.

Tinsley caught Kiley’s eyes in the reflection.

Kiley stifled a giggle and whispered, “You are so bad.”

“I’m just getting started.

She tried on the gowns and made her selection. Then she asked if there were any to-die-for items that had just come in.

“We just took a delivery from Alexander McQueen. There are two things I think you’ll love. April returned with the items and hung them on the hooks on the wall.

Tinsley’s mouth dropped open at the first one. It was a pale blue gown with a strapless boned corset embroidered with silver threads and encrusted with rhinestones that dripped down through the flared handkerchief edged skirt.

“Oh, Tinsley,” Kiley whispered. “It’s perfect for the Ice Ball.”

“Mother wanted me in a red gown. I think she was going for a fire & ice theme this year.”

“Do you love it more than this one?”

“No.”

Kiley stood and approached the gown, touching the fabric.  
“It’s so delicate. Like a wisp, really.”

“It’s called Cosmic Rain,” April informed them.

“Try it on, Tins. If you don’t, I will.”

“Fine.”

April helped her into it, then smiled. “I have the perfect shoes for it.”

She returned with a pair of pale blue Louboutin jewel encrusted pumps that matched perfectly.

Tinsley slipped them on and looked at her reflection. Kiley appeared behind her.

“It’s stunning, Tins.”

“It is perfect, isn’t it?”

“You have to get it. He won’t be able to take his eyes off you.”

“Who?”

“Palmer, silly.” Their eyes met in the mirror, and Kiley leaned to whisper in her ear. “Unless you had a certain bodyguard in mind.”

“Hush,” Tinsley hissed, but couldn’t stop wondering if Grady would like it. This dress she didn’t want to show him. She wanted it to be a surprise. It wasn’t overtly sexy. It was

just pretty in a way that made her feel beautiful. Her eyes moved to the other hanger. “What’s that?”

April lifted it from the garment bag, holding it up to Tinsley’s body. She looked in the mirror. It was a short black trench coat that flared out at the belted waist and barely covered her upper thighs. The moment Tinsley laid eyes on it she knew she had to have it. She knew exactly what she’d do with it, too.

“I’ll take it.”

“Wonderful. And the Cosmic Rain?”

“How much is all this?” Kiley asked, motioning to the dress and shoes.

“Well, it is Alexander McQueen...”

“How much?” Tinsley asked.

“The gown is eighteen-nine, and the Louboutin’s are twenty-two.”

The amount made even Tinsley hesitate, but they were all so perfect. “I’ll take them, as well.”

Jonathon appeared at the curtain. “How are we doing, Miss Wyatt?”

“April has my selections. Can you have them delivered to my address?”

“Of course, Miss Wyatt.” He bowed.

“Thank you.”

“Anything for you, Miss Bernard?”

“Not today. Thanks.” When the curtain closed, Kiley hissed in a whisper. “Won’t your father kill you? The gown you picked for the Oilman’s Ball was twelve thousand dollars, and this one was almost nineteen. The bow dress was five, the trench was another five, the clutch was almost four, and the shoes were two. Plus, those cocktail dresses you added. It’s all about fifty thousand, Tins.”

“I know how much it is, Kiley. Palmer expects me to look good.”

“Okay. Suit yourself.”

They walked out, and Tinsley wagged her fingers at April at the register. “Thank you, hun.”

Grady fell in behind them, and Jonathon hurried to open the door for them all, insisting the purchases would be delivered before five.

They wandered through several more stores, and when they passed an upscale lingerie store, Tinsley couldn’t help dragging Kiley inside, Grady in tow.

The discomfort was written all over his face as he stood against the wall in his dark suit, trying to look anywhere but at the rows of barely-there teddies, nighties, and thongs.

Tinsley perused the displays and grabbed a few items. She stopped at the perfumes and couldn’t help teasing Grady with it.



“Palmer finds this perfume intoxicating.” She got close to him in a seductive way, spraying a bit on her. “What do you think?”

He breathed in the scent, his eyes moving over her face to stop on her mouth, staring like he might kiss her, then said, “You smell like drama and a headache.”

Slamming down the bottle, she moved to a table nearby and held up a tiny thong of silk and lace. “Do you find this sexy?”

Grady shoved his hands in his pockets and cleared his throat, avoiding answering her.

Tinsley grinned in the knowledge she was getting to him.

“Let me know if there’s anything I can help you with,” a smiling saleswoman said.

“Do you have a 32C bra that goes with this one?” She dangled the thong from the end of her finger, her eyes shifting again to Grady, watching his Adam’s apple bob as he swallowed.

The woman dug in a drawer and came up with one of the sexiest bras Tinsley had ever seen.

“Wonderful. I’ll take it.”

“Would you like to try it on?”

“That won’t be necessary. But I would like to try these on.” She held up one of the sexier teddies she’d found and a

couple other items.

“Right this way, ma’am.”

“Is there somewhere my... gentleman friend can sit?”

“Yes, ma’am. Follow me, please.”

The clerk led them through a door in the rear corner of the store and a hallway to several dressing rooms and a small area with chairs and a large gilt mirror.

“I can wait out here,” Grady objected.

“No, sit here. I’d feel safer,” Tinsley insisted.

“Miss Wyatt, I—” Before he could finish, she disappeared into a room and heard him sit down with a huff.

It didn’t take her long to undress and shimmy into the garment. With a quick turn and glance over her shoulder to make sure everything was tugged straight, she opened the door and strode out. “I need a man’s opinion on this one. Do you think Palmer will like it?”

Grady froze, his eyes sweeping over her as she twisted and turned in front of the gilt mirror. The room was painted a deep burgundy, and the lighting was dim, setting an erotic tone. It wasn’t necessary; the garment was doing all the work.

It was a red lace teddy that exposed a large section from neck to waist, held together with tiny straps.

“What do you think?” She put her hands on her hips and twisted to show off her curves to the best advantage.

“Holy hell,” he whispered under his breath, then cleared his throat. “It’s, ah, very nice.”

“Nice? That’s the best you can do?” She stalked into the dressing room and came out two minutes later in a pale pink satin corset that hooked down the middle and had laces going up both sides, revealing a lot of side boob. It had a matching panty and garter with stockings in the same pale pink. She moved in front of him. “Maybe you prefer something a little more feminine?”

He whistled softly.

“Do you think Palmer will like it?” She ran her hands down her body, then turned to the mirror, revealing her bare ass cheeks in the thong.

“Jesus, Miss Wyatt.”

“Does that mean you like it?”

“Any man would like it.” He stood and moved to the door. “I’m waiting outside.”

“Wait. Which one?”

He paused. “You want my opinion? The pink if you want him to make love to you, the red if you want him to fuck you hard over the nearest piece of furniture.” With that, he flung open the door and disappeared.

She couldn’t help the big grin that tugged at her mouth. Mission accomplished.

A few minutes later, she was at the counter with her purchases. Scanning the room, she found Kiley browsing a display, and Grady leaned against a wall, staring her way. She gave him a wink, mouthing, "I'm getting both."

"Well, look what the cat dragged in."

Tinsley whipped her head around to find a woman sneering at her from the next register.

Nora Jensen, Palmer's ex-girlfriend. A vile girl with long dark hair and perfect olive skin. She was a walking replica of Kim Kardashian... at least she tried to be.

"Nora. What a surprise. Buying more pushup bras? I'm sure you need all the help you can get."

Nora's eyes dropped to Tinsley's chest, and a catty smile climbed her face. "From what I hear, you're the one who could use a boob job."

"From what you hear?"

"Some men like to talk." Nora tossed her head and winked.

"Some men?"

"Oh, come now, Tinsley. We both know Palmer's not exactly the most reserved when it comes to gossip, is he?"

Tinsley's brows hit her hairline and her voice rose three octaves. "Are you saying you and Palmer spoke about me?"

“Tins, darling—that is what he calls you, isn’t it? We talk all the time. Why I saw him just the other day.” One hand lifted to flip her hair over her shoulder.

With that, Tinsley lunged and grabbed a fistful of that vile hair.

Nora shrieked and dug her sculpted nails into the tender skin of Tinsley’s forearm. Tinsley was about to sink her teeth into Nora’s hand when a strong arm locked around her ribs and hauled her off.

A deep male voice growled in her ear. “Let her go, Miss Wyatt.”

Tinsley was forced to release the fistful of hair she held onto, and Nora stalked out of the store, pointing a finger at her.

“You’ll pay for that little stunt, you bitch.”

After Nora exited the doors, flipping Tinsley off through the window, Grady tugged her toward the same door. “Let’s go.”

“But I haven’t finished my purchase.” She tried to pull back, but he was having none of it. She yelled toward her friend. “Kiley, my stuff!”

“I’m on it. I’ll catch up.” Kiley moved to the counter and whipped out her credit card. “Sorry about my friend. Catty ex-girlfriends push her over the edge.”

Grady hauled her out the door and around a corner that led to a walkway between buildings. He pushed her against the

stone wall. “Have you lost your mind?”

“That bitch is the crazy one, not me.” She pointed back to where Nora was climbing into her car.

“Well, apparently, some people wear their crazy better than others.”

“Don’t you dare take her side.”

“You just started a cat fight in an upscale store in the priciest mall in Dallas. You’re lucky they didn’t call the cops. You can’t seriously be this stupid.” He huffed a laugh and speared his fingers through his hair with frustration. “I lose track of how many times a day those words run through my brain.”

“Don’t overreact.”

“That’s rich coming from you—the woman who just overreacted in a big way.”

“Whatever.” She tried to walk away.

“What’s up with you, Tinsley?”

“I’m under a lot of pressure this weekend. All these events... there’s a lot expected of me. Last thing I need is to have Palmer’s ex in my face.”

“That woman is not worth your time or energy. Don’t validate her by giving her either one.”

“You’re right.”

“Nice to hear you agree with me for a change.” He took her arm and spun her in the direction of the valet. “Okay, then. That’s enough for today. We’re leaving.”

“But I still have shopping to do.”

“You’ve already spent a fortune. What more could you possibly need?”

“I was going to buy you a new suit, for one.”

“I don’t need a new suit.”

“I disagree. Majorly.”

“Come on.”

“Let go of me.” She tried to twist free. “You can’t do this!”

“Uh, yeah, let me write down your complaints, and I’ll check to see if I give a shit later.”





## CHAPTER EIGHT

“They always this late?” Grady waited at the rear door to the limousine with Reggie, the driver.

“Yes, sir. Mostly so.”

The luncheon and fashion show started in half an hour. With every minute that passed, getting from the estate to downtown was cutting it closer.

“Where’s this shindig being held?”

“The downtown location of Baker & Banks, the most upscale department store in Texas. It’s been around over a hundred years. Anyone who’s anyone shops there. Oscar De La Renta personally made an appearance at this event in 2008. It was quite the occasion.”

“You’ve been around a while, huh, Reggie?”

“Yes, sir. Since Miss Tinsley was a baby.”

“Any idea who’d want to do her harm?”

“Miss Tinsley? No, sir.” He paused for a moment, frowning. “Well, there was that time when I was stuck in traffic and a woman jumped out of the car behind us. She threw paint all over the car, screaming how Miss Wyatt supported the murder of animals.”

“What happened?”

“A traffic cop ran over and arrested the woman. I believe the Wyatts pressed charges.”

Finally, Loretta Wyatt came down the steps. She was dressed in a black sheath dress with pearls, a fox stole, and a wide brimmed black and white hat fit for Paris, or at the very least, the Kentucky Derby.

Reggie opened the door for her, and helped her into the car. “You look stunning, Mrs. Wyatt.”

“Thank you, Reggie. Tinsley should be down in a moment.”

Grady looked toward the carved double doors as Tinsley emerged. She wore the mini dress with the gigantic bow on the side. It went from hem to shoulder. Grady wasn't sure how she'd fit in the car, let alone get a seatbelt fastened.

He stepped forward and took her hand, helping her into the car himself. “Good morning, Miss Wyatt.”

“Good morning.” She slipped in the car, and he followed, taking the rear-facing seat. The chase vehicle with two of the Wyatt security team followed them down the drive, through the gate and onto the road.

Tinsley had a small hat on her head with a brim that covered her eyes and netting that covered her face. All Grady could see was her mouth with its perfect red lipstick. His eyes skated over the length of leg exposed to his gaze, right down

to her painted toes revealed by the strappy high-heels, the same perfect shade of pink.

She ignored him, but he didn't expect any less, especially with her mother in the car.

"Tinsley, dear. Have you heard from Palmer?"

"He was running late. He promised to try to make it for the fashion show."

"He'll miss the luncheon?"

"Possibly." Tinsley stared out the window.

"He'll miss my speech then."

"He knows you're the chair of the committee this year. I'm sure he'll try to be there if at all possible."

"It's important to me."

"I'm aware, Mother. You've done a wonderful job with everything. It's going to be a smashing success."

Lorretta nodded, watching the traffic as they drew deeper into downtown Dallas. "Your father promised he'd be there for the speech. I know it's not a man's event, but I don't often make speeches."

Tinsley squeezed her mother's gloved hand. "You're going to be fantastic."

Loretta looked over at her daughter. "How do I look?"

"Stunning. Audrey Hepburn's got nothing on you."

Loretta turned back to the window. “I always liked her. She was a true fashion icon. Do you know she was inducted into the International Best Dressed List Hall of Fame?”

“No, but I’m not surprised you know that. You’re certainly channeling her today.”

“I try hard to be presentable, Tinsley. Image is important when you’re the wife of someone like your father. Being the wife of the richest man in town isn’t easy, darling.”

“Try being his daughter.”

“I love you, dear, and so does your father. He demands a lot, I know.”

“Understatement of the year.”

Loretta took her hand and patted it. “Thank you for putting up with me. I know this isn’t your cup of tea. It never has been.”

“In case Daddy doesn’t tell you, I’m very proud of you. It’s not easy making the Ten Best Dressed List in this town, and I know how much this recognition means to you. You deserve it. This is your day. Enjoy it.”

“Thank you, baby.” Her eyes filled, and she had to wave a hand. “You’re going to ruin my makeup.”

Tinsley laughed, and then Loretta laughed, too.

Grady sat on the leather seat, trying not to call attention to himself. It was like they forgot he was here. They’d exposed a

side he hadn't known was there. Family dynamics can be complicated and tricky, and figuring them out based on assumptions never led him to the correct answers.

Grady tried to be open-minded, but he was as guilty as the next man of making assumptions about the rich society types. It was easy to forget they had hearts that bleed and hopes and dreams like everyone else.

It was easy to only see the materialistic side, harder to look beyond all that to what lay beneath the surface.

The car pulled up at the golden front doors of Baker & Banks. A waiting valet opened the rear door and helped the ladies out. Grady climbed out the other side. The chase vehicle slowed for the man in the passenger seat to exit, then the driver made a loop around the building to find a parking spot.

Grady lifted his chin to Thomas, the man who joined him on the sidewalk. "Stay out here and watch the street. Anything suspicious, report to me immediately. Any uninvited guests, any unexpected delivery trucks, anyone you see walk past more than once. Understand?"

"Yes, sir. On it."

"Send Bobby to the alley and loading docks. Same orders." Grady followed Tinsley and Loretta inside, where they were greeted by a host who steered them toward a photographer and a banner display. They stood in front of it and had their photo taken.

Next, a reporter asked them what designer they were wearing and a few other questions Grady had no interest in. He was busy scoping out the building. It was indeed an upscale store and especially so for this event. He stepped to a man who looked like a store manager.

“I’m security for the Wyatt family.”

“Yes, sir. How may I help you?”

“How many entrances to the store?”

“Well, we have one off Main Street, and another off LaSalle. Then, of course, there’s the entrance from the Copeland Hotel.”

“Excuse me?”

“The hotel across the street. We have a connecting glass sky bridge on the second floor. It leads from Women’s Wear to the floor of the hotel with the Crystal Ballroom. That’s where the luncheon and fashion show will be held. Cocktails and mingling are here in the store, as well as the trunk show later this afternoon. Everything else will take place at the hotel.”

“Are you freaking kidding me right now?” Grady muttered under his breath and dashed to the LaSalle Street exit. He glanced up and saw the sky bridge. “Goddamn it.”

He wore an earpiece, the wire running down his collar, another to his cuff with a microphone. He lifted it to his mouth and hissed into it. “Thomas, part of the event will be held at The Copeland’s Crystal Ballroom. There’s a sky bridge

connecting the two locations. Guests will be using that. We now have ten times the area to cover.”

“We can’t do that, sir.”

“The entrance to the hotel is across the street. Get on the corner and do the best you can to watch both. I’ll try to call in backup.” Grady got on the phone with Chris.

“Yeah?”

“I need more men. Can you spare anyone?”

“What’s up?”

“The show at Baker & Banks downtown just turned into the store *and* the hotel across the street. There’s a glass sky bridge between the two. The show and luncheon will be held at the hotel. Cocktails only at the store.”

“Stan and I just happen to be in Dallas, meeting with a potential new operative. We’ll head that way now.”

“Thanks.” Grady disconnected and headed to catch up with Tinsley.

He found her mingling near the jewelry counters and watched as she and her mother greeted other attendees, all of them decked out in the latest designer wear. It was obvious they all traveled in the same social circle. Dallas high society. This luncheon was apparently a highly prized invitation, sought after by anyone who was anyone.

He constantly scanned the area, looking for anyone out of place, anyone who appeared nervous, anyone more interested in Tinsley than the conversation they were having. Everything seemed normal.

There was a moment when Grady froze as Tinsley and the girl from the lingerie shop came face to face. Palmer's ex-girlfriend. What was her name again? Nora something. He held his breath, waiting for an interaction or more likely an explosion, but none came. Either they were on their best behavior for the public event, or Tinsley didn't want to upset her mother.

Soon it was time to move across the sky bridge to the hotel.

A transmission came in.

“Grady?”

He put his wrist to his mouth. “Yeah? Chris?”

“We're outside.”

“The guests are moving across the sky bridge now. Meet me in the hotel.”

The Crystal Ballroom was decorated in the art déco theme similar to the store in blacks and golds with large vertical banners of black and white photos of fashion icons going back decades, which hung along the walls. The tables were set with crystal, candlelight, and flowers.



While the guests were seated and luncheon was served, Grady, Chris, and Stan scanned the ballroom, watching every waiter, every bartender, every male guest. They checked every stairwell and exit.

A woman took the podium to the left of the stage and runway that extended into the grouping of round tables.

“Welcome, ladies and gentlemen, to the famed luncheon fete thrown by the ladies behind The Ice Charity Ball. As you all know, this event kicks off the fall social season here in Dallas.

“Ladies, you all look lovely. I see so many of you perfectly preened and dressed head-to-toe in the finest of fall regalia.”

A rear door opened, and Grady’s head jerked around. JD Wyatt strode in and took a seat at the table with his wife and daughter, leaning over and kissing Loretta’s cheek. Grady noticed two other place settings to Tinsley’s left that remained vacant. The woman at the podium continued speaking.

“This afternoon our Ten Best Dressed Women of Dallas will walk the runway, wearing Jean Paul Laurent’s Fall 2024 Collection, followed by their daughters modeling Monsieur Laurent’s Haute Couture Evening Collection. But before we get started, I’m honored to present to you the chair of the Ice Charity Ball, Loretta Wyatt.”

There was a round of applause as Loretta rose from her seat and took the podium, smiling brightly in the spotlight.

“Thank you for that warm welcome, and I want to thank all of you for coming. This charity which supports our wonderful children’s hospital is very dear to my heart. Your support for this event each year means a great deal to me, and to everyone involved.

“I’m so thrilled this year to bring you our very special guest, designer Jean Paul Laurent.”

There was a round of applause.

“Thank you. Yes, yes, isn’t he wonderful? I can’t wait to see his collections. And I’d like to thank our major sponsor, Baker & Banks, which has held a special meaning to this city for decades. It’s been the place to go for the best designers, the latest fashions, and the utmost customer service for Dallas women since they were old enough to choose their own outfits.”

That got a round of laughter.

“When I came to Dallas years ago as a young newlywed, I was overwhelmed. I was a Georgia peach suddenly transplanted to the land of the Texas rose. I needed a place to go to help me dress the part of my new station, and I found it in Baker & Banks. I was welcomed and given a world of assistance with every question I had, and they certainly found a loyal customer in me.

“As my children came of age, and most of you know, there were three sons before I finally, praise God”—she

clasped her hands in prayer and looked toward the heavens —“had my daughter, Tinsley.”

Tinkling laughter filled the room.

“She’s been a pistol like her father, but my pride and joy. And where did I bring her for her first Easter dress, Christmas dress, and her complete wardrobe when she was old enough to start school? Baker & Banks.

“And when it was time for her Debutante Ball, where did I come for her dress?”

This time, the crowd answered with her.

“Baker & Banks!”

“You got it, sisters. That’s right. Baker & Banks. So, I’m so thrilled to have them sponsor this event. I know you’re all dying to see Jean Paul’s latest collection. Let’s face it, ladies. It’s why you all came. I know it wasn’t for the lobster bisque or the grilled salmon, although they are to-die-for, are they not?”

“So, let’s get the show started. I’d like to ask all of this year’s Ten Best Dressed Women of Dallas and their daughters to join us backstage at this time. The show will begin momentarily. Thank you all for coming, and for your continued support of the Dallas Children’s Hospital. Thank you.”

There was applause, then quiet piano music began as Loretta left the podium.

Grady saw Tinsley place her napkin on her plate, pushing her chair back.

He strode to her.

Tinsley, along with about twenty women, all slipped away from their tables. Grady caught up to her, touching her arm.

“What’s this? Where are you going?”

“Backstage to change. We’re walking the runway in the fashion show.”

“Up on stage with a spotlight on you? Are you kidding me?”

“What did you think was happening?”

“I thought you’d be in the audience.”

Loretta Wyatt approached. “Is there a problem?”

Tinsley gave him a cocky smile and shrugged. “Sorry. Duty calls.” As she walked away, she looked back and winked, then mouthed the words, “Keep your eyes on me, bodyguard. I’ll be walking last.”

Grady followed her down the hall to a room. She stopped him at the door with a hand to his chest. “What are you doing?”

“Protecting you.”

“You can’t go in here. There are ladies changing.”

His jaw tightened, and he exhaled, taking a step back.

The door closed in his face.

He stood with his hands in his pockets, his back to the wall. An assistant looking harried rushed into the hall, yelling in his phone. “You have to stall. The Fellini gown is still en route. No, no. They’re rushing it over from the airport now. Have someone waiting downstairs to escort it up. Yes, yes.” He hung up, grumbling about being short one hairstylist, and went back inside.

Stan came down the hall. “Everything okay, brother?”

“Yeah. They’re dressing for the fashion show. Hey, can you watch here while I check the front?”

“Sure.”

Grady went into the reception hall. He had a view of the front entrance through the plate glass windows. A delivery van pulled to the curb, its flashers flicking on. A driver got out and opened the rear doors, and two young women rushed from the hotel, taking what looked like a garment bag. The thing was big enough to fit a ball gown. They hurried inside, and the van pulled away.

Grady went into the ballroom and found Chris standing in the back. “Everything okay here?”

“Yeah. Nothing suspicious. You?”

“Should be starting any minute.” He glanced to his right where the main door opened. In walked Palmer and his brother

Perry. Grady let out a frustrated breath, drawing Chris's attention.

"That the boyfriend?"

"Yeah, and his brother," Grady replied.

"I recognize him from his photo."

"He's kind of a douche." As he said the words, the music started, and the first model walked down the runway to the applause of the crowd. There were ten in all, Loretta Wyatt walking the runway last to applause.

The lights dimmed, and the music changed as the daughters began modeling the evening wear. The dresses were haute couture and, as such, the styles were a little out there to Grady's thinking.

"Do people really wear this stuff?" Chris whispered.

"No idea," Grady replied, and he froze. Tinsley was the last model to emerge, wearing what must be the Fellini gown they'd all been waiting on. It was a dramatic, form fitting gown of nothing but sheer netting with black lace flowers and twining vines in a strategic pattern that only covered her most private area, leaving her breasts almost entirely exposed. A long train of rows of ruffled lace fanned out behind her as she walked—no, *strutted*—down the runway.

There were gasps and applause from the audience.

Tinsley paused at the end of the runway, her hand going to her hip, her face a mask of disinterest, her eyes done up with

dramatic dark makeup.

Grady's gaze swept over her. She was something to behold. His jaw tightened, knowing Chris and every man in the room could see her body. Even the waiters stopped pouring wine and clearing dishes to glance up at the stage. She was a stunning sight to behold.

She held the pose for a moment, then turned, flipping her train behind her and swaying her hips as she sashayed up the runway to applause.

Being the last model to walk, she was then joined by the designer himself, along with her mother, the three of them linking arms and walking the runway together. The designer bowed, and Tinsley and Loretta turned to him, joining in the applause.

There was a standing ovation, and Jean Paul Laurent blew kisses to the crowd.

For just a moment, before the three turned to walk back up the runway, Tinsley locked eyes with Grady. Her smile faded. It only lasted a moment before they turned and exited the stage.

Grady pulled his tie and suit coat off and strolled out the French doors off his room onto the second-floor gallery that

faced the back of the Wyatt estate. It was almost midnight; the sky was full of a million stars, and he was exhausted.

He sat in one of the cushy chairs of the Wyatt's expensive outdoor furniture, put his feet up and lit a cigarette. He rarely smoked, but it had been a long day. The estate was finally quiet, and Tinsley was tucked safely in her bed. Mission accomplished.

His gaze roamed over the moonlight glittering on the pool and the stables in the distance. All was quiet. He noticed a light on in one of the tiny windows, and sat up, frowning. It clicked off.

“Who the hell—?” he whispered.

“That’s Sal,” a voice to his right said, making him jump. He whirled around to see Tinsley leaning in the open door to her room.

“You scared the crap out of me.”

“Sorry.” She smiled and came forward.

His gaze swept over her. She was dressed in a pair of pajamas consisting of loose fitting knit pants that rode low on her hips and a tank top with thin straps and obviously no bra underneath. It was all in a soft peach that accentuated her golden tan skin. Her hair was still damp from her earlier shower. “Got a light?”

He dug into his pocket. “Didn’t know you smoked.”



“I don’t.” She leaned over the flame of his lighter, toking on what obviously was a hand-rolled joint. She inhaled deeply, firing it up. “Cigarettes, that is.”

Grady clicked his lighter closed, and she held the joint out to him.

“Have some.”

He waved it off, crushing his own smoke out.

“Let me guess. You’re still *working*.” She made quotation signs in the air with her fingers.

“I’m always working.” He lifted his chin toward the stables. “Who is Sal?”

“He takes care of Pharaoh during the day. Usually he doesn’t spend the night, but he has a bed out there if he’s too tired to drive home.”

“What’s his last name?”

“Vitelli. Why?” She took another drag on the joint, then tapped it on the balustrade, extinguishing the glowing ember.

“You do that often?” he asked, changing the subject.

“Just on days like today when I find it hard to unwind.” She studied him a moment, then moved to him and flipped her leg over his, sitting on his lap facing him.

Grady’s hands automatically closed on her waist. “What are you doing?”

“We should talk.”

“About what?”

Her small, pert braless breasts were practically in his face, and his eyes dropped to them. Her nipples strained against the thin fabric, begging for his mouth. He closed his eyes, trying to regain some shred of professionalism, and trying hard to forget the image of them this afternoon in that dress she wore.

“About this.” She finally answered his question and before he could open his eyes, she pressed her mouth to his. Her lips were soft and tempting. He didn’t break it off, he let her kiss him, but he held himself back from what he wanted to do, which was cup her face and drag her fully against him.

She lifted and stared into his eyes, whispering, “Kiss me back, Grady. Just once.”

And then her mouth was on his again, and he let himself respond the way he wanted to the first time.

She moaned when he took control, capturing her face with his large palms and holding her just so while he took the lead, pressing soft kisses over her lips, then delving in for a deeper kiss, stroking his tongue over hers, then more soft kisses, then another deep one until her hands cupped his neck.

He knew in another moment he’d slip his hand under her top, so he broke off the kiss.

“Don’t stop,” she panted.

“Miss Wyatt.”

“For God’s sake, my tongue’s been in your mouth. Call me Tinsley.”

“Fine. This can’t happen, Tinsley. You know that.”

“Why? Because you work for my father? Because you’re my bodyguard?”

“Something like that. Plus, there’s Palmer.”

She sat back. “Did you like the fashion show?”

“Your dress was obscene.”

“Did I look beautiful?”

“You know you did.”

“Maybe I want to hear you say it.”

“You were beautiful.”

Her face broke out in a radiant smile, and her eyes sparkled with emotion. “Was that so hard to say?” she whispered.

He bumped his forehead to hers, then pressed a kiss to her temple and inhaled deeply. The floral scent of her shampoo filled his nose. For all the expensive perfumes this girl wore, he preferred the clean scent of her freshly washed hair.

“You should go to your room, Miss Wyatt.”

“A minute ago, you called me Tinsley. I like it better.”

“I need to remember I work for you. I’m just... what did you call me? Hired help?”

“Maybe I was angry when I said that.”

“Maybe you were being a spoiled brat.”

She leaned back. “Is that what you think of me?”

“Isn’t that what you are? You blew through fifty grand shopping without batting an eye. You don’t like it when you don’t get your way. Did I miss something?”

She pushed to her feet. “A lot. You missed a whole fucking lot, bodyguard.”

With that, she stalked to her door, and he knew it was for the best.

She paused and looked back. “Thanks for killing my buzz.”

When she slammed the door, he let out a sigh. “That’s me, your buzz-kill bodyguard.” He supposed he’d have a new nickname by morning. He stared off at the stable and then pulled his phone out, typing a quick text to Chris.

**Grady:**

**Run a background check on a guy named Sal Vitelli. He takes care of Tinsley’s horse and sometimes sleeps in a room in the stables. He’d have easy access to everyplace on the estate.**

It was a long shot, but he didn't want to leave any stone unturned.



## CHAPTER NINE

Grady stood in the foyer in his running clothes. “You sure you’ve got it covered?”

Thomas shoved his hands in his suit pockets. “Yes, sir. Go on. We can certainly take care of things for an hour. Miss Wyatt hasn’t even come down yet.”

“I shouldn’t be gone long.” Grady checked his watch, and his eyes were drawn to the stairs.

Tinsley stopped short halfway down when she spotted him. She was dressed in shorts, a racerback tank, and running shoes, pods in her ears. She yanked them out.

“You’re kidding me.” Her eyes swept over him.

His brow shot up. “You run?”

“Yes, I run. I didn’t know *you* did.”

He held the door, grinning. “This should be fun.”

She skipped down the rest of the steps. “What’s that crack supposed to mean?”

“Nothing. Let’s go.”

“You’re not coming with me.”

“I’m your protection detail, so yes, I’m absolutely coming with you.”

She spun around. “Forget it, then.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. You like to run. I like to run, so let’s just do this.” He arched his brow. “Or are you afraid you can’t keep up?”

Her eyes narrowed, and her chin lifted. “I’m not afraid of anything. Try to keep up, bodyguard.”

He grinned as he followed her out. He jogged easily at her side and studied her, thinking about the night before.

She caught him looking. “Just FYI... I’m out of the pills that make me like you.”

“*Like me?*”

“Tolerate you, then.”

“Right.”

They jogged to the end of the driveway. Granted, it was a fuck of a long driveway, but he was surprised when she was already out of breath. She stopped to rest, and he stopped, too. When she turned back, he laughed.

“You can’t be serious?”

“What?”

“Let’s keep going. I thought we’d at least take the road down to the next crossroads.”

“That’s like two more miles.”



“Yeah. We’ll start small today. Or don’t you think you can do it?”

“I can do it. Let’s go.”

They headed out, and he slowed his pace to match her shorter stride. She surprised him by keeping a good pace. Obviously, she was capable of the distance, so he had to surmise she was just being lazy in only wanting to do the driveway. “I try to run every morning if I can. I’ve missed the last couple of days.”

“You like routine, don’t you?”

“I do. It builds character,” he replied.

She snorted. “Right.”

“You don’t think so?”

She ignored him.

“I’ll make you a bet.”

“What kind of bet?”

“If I beat you to that stop sign, then you make your bed for a week.”

“How do you know I don’t already?”

“Do you?”

She didn’t reply.

“That’s what I thought.”

“For what reason would you want me to make my bed?”

“I’ll tell you after you lose.”

“You’re so sure I’m going to lose?”

“Prove me wrong.”

“But you’re a lot taller than I am. It’s not fair.”

“Life isn’t fair. But I’ll give you a head start.” He slowed to a stop, and she did, too. “We start here. I’ll give you to that big pecan tree. That’s about twenty-five yards. When you get to it, I’ll start running. First one to the stop sign wins. Deal?”

“Okay. Deal.”

“Ready to start?”

She took a few breaths and took off, running flat out.

When she got to the tree, he took off, really digging deep and finding his top speed. He closed in on her, but she kept in the lead until the last ten yards, where he was able to pass her.

They both slowed to a stop. She bent over, breathing heavily.

“Good job. You almost had me there,” he said, breathing hard himself.

“You suck,” she replied.

He chuckled. “Come on, we’ll go slow on the way back.”

“I hate you.”

“Yeah, that’s how I felt about my drill sergeant after a ten-mile run.”

They slowly jogged back.

“So, why do you want me to make my bed?”

“Because starting your day completing one simple task sets you up for the whole day. It’s a fact.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“When I was in the military, I went through special forces training.”

“You were in special forces?”

“Yes, ma’am. Endless days of long, torturous runs, obstacle courses, unending calisthenics in the hot sun, days without sleep and nights of always being cold and miserable.

“The instructors were constantly trying to find the weak of mind or body, but also those who could lead in an environment of constant stress, chaos, failure, and hardships. It was a lifetime of challenges crammed into six months of training.

“Making your bed is a simple task, mundane at best. To make it to perfection, we had to make sure the corners were square, the covers pulled tight, the pillow centered just under the headboard, the extra blanket folded neatly at the foot of the rack.

“But it taught us all something important. If you make your bed every morning, you will have accomplished the first task of the day. It will give you a small sense of pride, and it will encourage you to do another task, and another. It reinforces the fact that the little things in life matter. If you

can't do the little things right, you'll never be able to do the big things right."

"That sounds stupid."

"I admit it does. But it works."

When they got back to the house, she left him without a word. He realized she was just as competitive as he was, and she hated to lose. Seemed they had at least one thing in common.

Grady stood at the bottom of the staircase as she stomped up them and slammed the door to her bedroom.

He tried to look on the bright side. If she stayed in her room all day, miffed at him, he didn't have to worry about her. The ball was tonight, and the team was already scouting the facility for him. After yesterday's debacle, he wasn't about to be surprised again.

He grabbed a quick shower, then came down, got a cup of coffee, and went outside to sit at a table by the pool. He needed to go over the building schematics Chris had sent to his phone. The ball would be held at the Tucker Hotel, a brand-new towering glass high-rise.

He was studying all the stairwell and elevator accesses when the door behind him clicked open. He twisted his head and caught sight of Tinsley out of the corner of his eye. She sashayed toward one of the lounge chairs, threw off her sheer white coverup to reveal a tiny black string bikini.

Grady's mouth went dry as she reclined back, pushing her sunglasses to hold her hair back. His eyes moved over her. She must have rubbed in some sunscreen already, because her skin glowed like it had been rubbed with lotion.

If breaking his concentration was a competition, she'd just won. It was games like this where the fairer sex always had the weaponry and advantage. The corner of his mouth pulled up. She knew her assets, and she knew how to use them.

"It's hot out here," she said, fanning herself with her wide-brimmed hat.

"Yes, ma'am." His eyes strayed, stopping on her breasts barely covered by the tiny top. He cleared his throat. He knew what she was up to with this stunt.

"Stop staring."

"Don't you have better things to do?" he asked.

"I need a nice sun-kissed glow for the ball tonight."

He tried to go back to what he was doing and ignore her, but it was a challenge.

After about ten minutes, she flipped to her stomach and untied her top. She glanced over, and caught him watching. "It's a backless dress. I can't have a tan line, can I?"

Grady tried to ignore her, but it wasn't easy. Not when all she had on was a skimpy bottom that didn't leave much to the imagination.

He got a text from Chris and checked his phone.

A moment later, a splash drew his attention. The lounge chair was now vacant, except for the little string bikini top. He glanced at the water, and saw her come up on the far side, then swim back.

When she reached the edge, she hoisted herself up, coming out of the pool and walking to her chair to grab her towel and wrap it around her.

Then she strode past him without a word and disappeared inside.

His dick was rock hard. It was becoming a permanent state of being around this girl. He wasn't sure he'd last the week. He glanced to the lounge chair, seeing she'd left her bikini top, and grinned. A memento for him?

The metal chair scraped along the concrete as he stood and walked over to scoop it up. He stuffed it in his pocket. Perhaps he'd twirl it around his finger in front of her, like she had those damn panties.

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It was past sunset, and the family was due to come down to leave for the Ice Ball soon.

Grady waited outside by the limo. “When do you think they’ll come down?”

Reggie looked at his watch. “Not for a good long while yet. Maria told me she heard Mr. Pace and his brother were coming over for cocktails before they all left together.”

“How long have you worked for the Wyatts?”

“Going on six years this Christmas.”

“You like it here?”

“Sure. Mr. JD’s always been good to me, and I usually get a big bonus at the end of the year. The work’s not too hard. I just maintain the vehicle and do a lot of waiting around. But that’s okay. I get to play games on my phone and get paid for it. Can’t beat that, huh?”

Grady chuckled. “Guess not.”

Palmer pulled up in a black Audi R8. He climbed out dressed in a tux complete with cufflinks and studs, his shoes gleaming like patent leather. His brother climbed out the passenger side.

Palmer glanced over at Grady before they headed inside. “Make sure no one touches my car.”

“I’m not his damn valet,” Grady grumbled, his jaw tightening.

Reggie chuckled. “That man sure is somethin’.”

“He’s a jackass.” Grady straightened his cuffs. JD had called him into his office this afternoon and offered him the use of one of his son’s tuxes. Together they’d found one suitable, but Grady felt out of place in it as he stood by the limo. This wasn’t a world he either fit in, nor desired.

Give him a wood burning fire, a braided rug, and a comfy sofa, and he’d be happy. He sure as hell didn’t need the fancy cars and all the rest. Not if it came with dealing with the kind of cut-throat, back-stabbing people he’d observed. Ones who smiled to your face, then whispered behind their bourbon and branch what they really thought of you.

“Those two always are together, aren’t they?” Grady mused aloud, watching the men disappear inside.

“Yes, sir. Been that way since I started working for Mr. JD. Back then, Miss Tinsley was in high school. They were all in the group that hung around together. There were about a dozen or so. They called themselves the Brat Pack after that movie.”

“Right. What do you think of the Pace brothers?”

“Ain’t my business to think one way or t’other. I just drive.”

“You ever hear any gossip?”

“Sure. I hear lots of gossip.”

“About the Pace family, I mean.”



“Well, those boys are competitive, and they’ve had their share of fights. There’s a third brother, you know.”

“A third? Where’s he?”

Reggie shrugged. “Not my business. But I will tell you, I heard Perry went to California with a bunch of money from his father. Gonna start a business or something. Heard he lost every damn penny. Heard that’s why he’s back in town.”

Finally, the Wyatt’s emerged, the ladies in their glittering ball gowns and the men in their formal wear.

Tinsley looked lovely in a sparkling pale blue and rhinestone gown.

Tinsley and her parents, along with the Pace brothers, all climbed into the limo. Once they were seated, Grady gave a hand signal to the team in the car behind them, then he slipped inside the limo. The ride to the event location was unusually quiet, almost as if some tense words had been spoken inside before they came out.

Seriously, no one was speaking. He scanned one face after another. JD stared out one window and Loretta another. Tinsley toyed with the beads on her clutch, and Palmer scrolled through his phone. Perry seemed to be the only one in a good mood, whistling a soft tune under his breath.

Grady shifted in his seat. It was going to be a long ride into downtown Dallas.

Once they reached the hotel and everyone was inside the building, it ran like a well-oiled machine. The event was in the grand ballroom on the second floor, up a sweeping staircase.

The couples posed for photographers, and gave interviews with reporters from local news stations. They spoke with Loretta Wyatt about the charity and how much she hoped to raise with tonight's gala. Many of the questions for Palmer Pace regarded if and when he was going to announce his bid for the soon-to-be-vacant Senate seat.

As he did at the airport, he gave vague answers that only heightened their thirst for answers. He was thrown by a question from one reporter regarding his family's business and his personal finances, hinting that there was something they'd found.

With a little political double-talk, he smoothed his way out, and he and Tinsley made a hasty retreat into the ballroom.

Grady took up position against a wall, and the other members of the team held positions around the building.

After an hour of cocktails and mingling, the plated dinner and wine were served while a member of the hospital board spoke about all the good things that would be achieved with the donations raised. While dessert was brought out, a comedian took the stage and got the crowd laughing.

Grady watched Palmer get up and stroll to the bar set up in the corner to his right. A few minutes later, Perry joined him. They were close enough Grady could overhear their conversation from where he stood on the other side of a large potted palm. He didn't think they were aware he was there.

“Check this out, bro.” Palmer pulled a small box from his pocket. Even a man like Grady knew that particular shade of blue was Tiffany's trademark. Palmer popped it open, revealing a huge diamond ring. “I'm doing it tonight, Perry. I've decided. I don't want to wait anymore.”

“Wow. What girl could say no to that?” Perry lifted his drink and clinked it to his brothers. “Congrats, brother. Are you doing it right now?”

“No. I've got to wait for the right moment. They'll be a live feed from the ten o'clock news on channel four. If I play this right, we may get some free publicity. Can't hurt when I announce my campaign next month, huh?”

“You're always playing the angle, aren't you, Palmer?”

Palmer slapped his brother on the shoulder. “Take notes and learn, bro.” Then he walked away.

Grady didn't miss the look Perry aimed at his brother's back. *If looks could kill.*

Soon the music started up, the lights dimmed, and the dancing began.

Grady watched Tinsley take the floor with Palmer. She was beautiful in her sparkling gown, the delicate fabric swirling around her. She danced with her father next, and the dance floor got crowded.

Grady strained to keep his eyes on her.

When she finally danced into view again, she was in the arms of Palmer's brother, Perry. It was obvious they were talking, and Grady noticed the man held her close, closer than Tinsley seemed comfortable with. When the music ended, she applauded, then excused herself and left the floor.

Palmer was back at the table, having a bourbon with her father. Tinsley put a hand on his shoulder, leaning in to tell him something. Palmer smiled, pulled her hand to his mouth and kissed the back, then released it and turned to her father.

Tinsley slipped through the tables and headed toward the exit.

Grady followed her into the outer hall.

Her heels moved across the carpet, and he had to jog to catch up with her.

She must have heard him, for she whirled on him. "What are you doing?"

"Following you."

"To the ladies room?" Her voice got higher on the last words.

“It’s my job to—”

“Don’t you dare tell me you’re following me into the ladies room. For heaven’s sake, I’m perfectly safe.”

“I’ll wait outside the door.”

“You most certainly will not. Don’t you dare stand outside the door. I’ll be embarrassed if you do.”

“Fine. I’ll be just down the corridor, then.”

Tinsley rolled her eyes. “You’re being ridiculous, but whatever.” She disappeared down the hall that led to the men’s and women’s restrooms.

Grady walked to the large windows that gave a fabulous view of the Dallas skyline. Distant lightning lit the horizon. He lifted his sleeve to his mouth, speaking into the wired microphone.

“Tom, report in.”

“Nothing down here. It’s all quiet. Just a couple of valets with their hands in their pockets and some limousines lined up, their engines idling, drivers playing on their phones. How’s it goin’ up there?”

“Dinner is over. The music and dancing is going on.” He checked his watch. “Not sure how much longer the Wyatts will stay.”

“You ever seen anything like these people? Must be something to have that kind of money.”

“Yeah.” Grady noticed the storm on the horizon was moving fast and the lightning was increasing. “Hey, have you heard anything about the weather?”

“Storm’s moving in. Damaging winds. Possibly hail. Sure would be nice to get the family back to the estate before it hits.”

Grady studied the sky, not sure that would be possible. “I’ll mention the weather to Mr. Wyatt. This is Mrs. Wyatt’s crowning event, so leaving early may not be in the plans.”

“I’ll check the weather report for any updates.”

“Good. Keep me posted.” Grady inhaled and frowned. The smell of something burning carried to him. He turned and searched the hall, spotting no one and no smoke. He drew in another deep breath, wondering if it was some flaming dessert in the kitchen, but dessert had already been served, and this smell was not food cooking or grease.

“Fire!” Perry dashed out from the end of the corridor leading toward the restrooms.

A smoke detector alarm sounded about the time Grady ran after him.

Smoke came from around the ladies room door.

“I can’t get it open,” Perry said, pulling on the handle.

Grady shoved him out of the way and yanked, but the thing wouldn’t budge. *What the fuck?* He pounded on the solid wooden door. “Tinsley! Open the door!”

He heard coughing and then pounding from the other side.  
“Grady! I can’t get the door open.”

Smoke rose from under the crack.

Perry’s eyes got big. “Oh, my God. Is *Tinsley* in there?”

“Call 911.” Grady slammed his shoulder into the door again and again, but it wouldn’t budge. “Tinsley, is it locked from your side?”

Another spasm of coughing. “No. There’s no lock on this side. Grady, help me!”

Perry smashed a glass case, pulled out a fire extinguisher, and rushed over.

“That won’t do any good if we can’t get in the door,” Grady snapped.

Hotel employees rushed over.

Grady searched the door frame and spotted a piece of metal wedged in the top. “What’s that?” He grabbed the fire extinguisher from Perry’s hands and banged the canister into the side of the metal wedged in the crack until it loosened and fell out. Tossing it aside, he yanked the door open, and Tinsley fell into his arms. “I’ve got you, Miss Wyatt. I’ve got you.”

“Tinsley,” Perry shouted. “My God. Are you okay?”

Grady scooped her up and carried her. “Get out of my way. Back up everyone.”

“There’s an ambulance on the way, sir,” a hotel manager said.

“Make sure there’s no one else in there. And find the source!” Grady yelled over his shoulder. The manager covered his mouth with his lapel, grabbed the extinguisher, and dashed inside the restroom as smoke poured out.

Grady set Tinsley on a couch in the reception area of the second-floor corridor. She bent over with a coughing fit. He spoke into the hidden microphone in his cuff. “There’s a fire in the second-floor ladies room. Has the fire department arrived yet?”

“Just got here,” Thomas shouted over the sirens.

“Send someone up with oxygen. Miss Wyatt was trapped; she inhaled a lot of smoke.”

“Is she free?”

“I got her out. Just get them up here. Now!” Grady knelt at Tinsley’s feet. “Are you hurt? Burned?”

She shook her head and clutched tightly to his hands. “Thank you.”

Her voice was raspy, and the emotion in it tightened his throat. “You scared the crap out of me. What happened?”

“I don’t know. I came out of the stall and the room was filling with smoke. I think it was coming from the trash, but it was hard to see. I tried to open the door, but it wouldn’t budge. You saved my life, Grady.”



It only took a moment for a half dozen firefighters to come charging up the grand staircase, oxygen tanks on their backs, masks on their faces, and axes in their hands. Grady waved one over. “She was trapped. Smoke inhalation.”

The fireman knelt and pulled his mask off, putting it to Tinsley’s face. “Breathe deep, miss. Are you burned?”

She coughed and shook her head.

The ballroom was emptying, people running for the stairs. JD, Loretta, and Palmer rushed over while everyone else followed directions to the exit.

“My God. Tinsley,” JD shouted. “Is she okay? What happened?”

“She was trapped in the bathroom. It was filling with smoke.”

“Trapped? What the hell do you mean, trapped?”

Palmer knelt by Tinsley’s feet and played the concerned boyfriend, while Grady grabbed JD’s arm and pulled him a few feet away, not wanting to alarm her. When he had his full attention, he told him what he found. “A piece of metal was wedged in the top of the doorframe. Do you understand what I’m saying, sir? Someone trapped her in there on purpose.”

“My God.” JD went white.

“Listen to me. That someone could still be in this building. Plan A didn’t work out. He’ll be pissed, maybe enough to try plan B, whatever the hell that might be. I want to

get everyone back to the estate. Immediately. We make no stops unless it's to take her to the hospital. Understand?"

JD nodded. "You're right. Absolutely. Let's move out."

"The car might be difficult. It could be blocked in."

"I don't give a damn about the car. We'll take a cab if we have to."

The paramedics hustled up the stairs and knelt at Tinsley's feet, taking over.

JD waved a Fire Marshall over. "I'm JD Wyatt. Do you know what started it?"

"Sir, you all need to move downstairs and out the exit. Immediately."

"My daughter—"

"They'll carry her out. Go."

Grady stayed by Tinsley's side as the two paramedics loaded her on a stretcher. Two firefighters helped them carry her down the stairs. She reached out her hand and grabbed Grady's, squeezing hard.

Their eyes connected. Hers, big and worried over the top of the oxygen mask.

He felt the overwhelming need to comfort her. "You're going to be fine, Miss Wyatt."

She rolled her eyes at his calling her that, and then he knew she was okay. The corner of his mouth pulled up, and he

winked.

Palmer pushed him out of the way and took Tinsley's hand. "I'm here, darling."

Once they had her outside, the security team converged, and Grady began snapping orders.

"Thomas, can Reggie get the car out, or is he blocked?"

"I'll make sure he gets it out, sir." Thomas jogged to the line of limousines, which by this time were all scrambling to get out with their passengers.

Grady scanned every person milling around on the walk just out of the way of the fire engine, ladder truck, and ambulance. He searched for anyone who seemed especially interested in Tinsley, who was walking away from the action instead of toward it like most people on the city street. A crowd was forming, looking skyward, as if they expected one of the upper windows to burst from heat and flames and smoke to pour out like in a Hollywood movie.

It didn't happen.

Grady caught word from one of the responders that the fire had started in a trash receptacle and had been contained. He said there'd be an arson investigation and that the second floor would probably be closed off, but that once the smoke cleared, the rest of the hotel guests wouldn't be affected.

He scanned the crowd again. This time his eyes connected with Nora, Palmer's ex. Before Grady could cross the road,

she turned and faded into the crowd. She would have had access to the bathroom without raising any suspicions, and she definitely had a motive. It seemed the list of suspects kept growing.

Perry came by the ambulance to see if Tinsley was okay, making sure to point out how he had smashed out the glass to retrieve the extinguisher and also making sure no one missed the fact that he'd been injured in his valiant rescue attempt. He had a small cut on his hand, which the paramedics insisted he let them look at.

Grady rolled his eyes.

Loretta patted Perry's arm. "Thank you for your efforts to save my daughter."

"Of course, Mrs. Wyatt. We can't let anything happen to our dear Tinsley. I'm just grateful she made it out of there in time."

JD slapped him on the shoulder. "We have you to thank then, Perry."

Reggie was able to get the car around traffic, and he blared his horn. Grady gave him a thumbs up and moved toward the ambulance.

"I'm not going, Daddy, and that's final." Tinsley argued between gulps of water from the bottle she'd been given.

No one seemed to be able to make her, not her father, not her mother, not even Palmer, who ran a frustrated hand

through his hair.

“Look, we can’t make her go if she refuses,” a paramedic told her worried parents.

“But is she okay?” Loretta asked in a shaky voice.

“Her oxygen level is back to normal. If she won’t go to the hospital, she should at the very least be checked out by her own doctor tomorrow. Just to make sure there’s no damage to her lungs or esophagus.”

“I’ll make sure that happens,” Loretta insisted. “Thank you very much for everything you’ve done.”

“I just want to go home.” Tinsley sounded tired and irritated, and Grady didn’t blame her. He preferred she be checked out at the ER as well, but it wasn’t his decision, and it wasn’t his place to push the issue.

“The car’s waiting, sir,” he said in a low voice in JD’s ear.

“Good. Thank you.” JD took Loretta by the elbow. “Go along, dear. Get in the car. Palmer and I will help Tinsley over.”

Once they were all loaded in the car and pulling away from the curb, Tinsley reached over and squeezed her mother’s hand. “Mother, your event. I’m so sorry.”

“I’m just thankful you’re okay, darling. The event doesn’t matter.”

“But it does.”

“Not another word about the damn event,” JD snapped, then dragged a hand down his face. “Sorry.”

“You’re on edge. We all are. It’s understandable,” Loretta insisted.

“Daddy, does this have something to do with me? With why I have protection?”

JD’s gaze flicked to Grady for the briefest of moments. “I’m sure it was just a careless employee smoking in the restroom. They ought to be fired.”

“And the door?” she whispered.

“It was just stuck, baby girl. Nothing more.”

Grady didn’t like frightening her, but he didn’t like seeing her treated like a child, either. She was a grown woman, intelligent, with a quick mind. He didn’t like keeping her in the dark.



## CHAPTER TEN

Grady stood on the covered gallery outside his room, watching the rain and sipping on an inch of bourbon in a rocks glass. It had been one hell of a day.

He'd changed out of the tux and into a pair of cargo pants, and a t-shirt with a flannel shirt over it. It felt good to be out of the suits he'd been wearing nonstop and back into his normal clothes.

He went over in his head everything that led up to the fire. There had to be something he was missing; he just couldn't put his finger on it. He remembered Tinsley had been in good spirits when they'd arrived. He'd seen her laughing at the comedian during the dinner, and then dancing with a smile on her face, but when she'd left the dance floor and headed to the restrooms, her mood had changed. What had he missed? And was it even important?

Chris said they'd checked out the leads JD had given them and had come up empty. He'd also checked out the stable hand. The man didn't have a criminal record or any trouble in his past. Grady clenched his jaw and exhaled heavily. It was always easier when you knew your enemy.

The French doors to Tinsley's room opened, and Grady glanced over his shoulder. She stood there dressed in the same



skimpy pajamas he'd seen her in before. She was beautiful, but she looked tired.

“How are you feeling?”

“I'll live.” She approached and stood next to him. “I always love it when it rains. Everything smells fresh and clean. We never seem to get enough of it, though.”

He noticed her voice was still hoarse. “What did the doctor say?”

Loretta had called in a favor, and the family doctor had made a house call just after they returned home.

“I'm okay. He didn't think the damage was severe. I'm breathing okay now. He said as long as I don't get worse, I should be fine. If I do start feeling worse, then I'm to go straight to the emergency room.”

“Look at me.” She did, and he held her eyes with a non-sense expression. “Do not take this lightly. You start to feel worse, you say something. Understand?”

“I understand.”

He grinned. “Your voice does sound sexier, though.”

She laughed. “Sorry, he said this is only temporary.”

A gust of wind blew through, and they both caught the spray on their faces and laughed. Tinsley rubbed her bare arms. Grady shrugged out of his flannel and wrapped it around her. “How's that?”

“Warmer. Thank you.”

“No problem.”

She dipped her nose against the fabric and breathed in. “It smells like you.”

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

She grinned. “Good. I like it.”

He glanced toward the stable. “Looks like Sal’s spending the night again.”

“Pharaoh doesn’t like thunder. He’s probably with him. I’ve seen Sal curled up with a blanket, asleep in a lawn chair in Pharaoh’s stall a time or two.”

“That’s dedication.”

“That man loves horses. He truly cares about them. A man like that is hard to find.”

“I bet he is. You trust him?”

“Completely.” After a moment, she turned to face him, her brows pushed together. “You’re not suggesting any of this has been Sal, are you?”

“I’m just considering all the possibilities. He may not have motive, but he’s got opportunity. Loads of it.”

“Well, none of this is Sal.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes. Absolutely.”

“I’ve been standing here going over everything. I can’t figure this guy out, and I absolutely hate not knowing who or what I’m dealing with. Hell, I’m not even sure it is a male.”

“Well, if it helps, I can’t think of anyone who’d want to hurt me, either.” She paused to laugh. “Except maybe Nora.”

That made Grady swing his head toward her. “You think she’s capable of putting a snake in your car?”

“Maybe not. But she might pay someone to do it.”

Grady cocked his head. “Can I ask you something?”

“I suppose.”

“What happened before we left for the gala?”

“What do you mean?”

“Everyone came out seeming tense, like something had upset everyone.”

She bit her bottom lip, like there was something she didn’t want to say.

“Tinsley, spill.”

“Okay. I suppose you should know, especially in light of what happened.”

Grady straightened, a chill prickling his skin. He didn’t like where this was heading. “Talk.”

“Mother had laid out the red strapless gown you’d seen me try on. The one you’d liked.”

Grady grinned. “I remember. You’d looked smokin’ hot in it.”

“I wanted to wear the one I’d bought, and we had words. I slammed out of the room, and she did, too, going to her room. Anyway, after cocktails, I’d gone up to dress, and the red gown had been...”

“Had been what Tinsley?”

“Someone had taken a pair of scissors to it. It was completely ruined.”

“You thought your mother...?”

“At first, but why would she destroy the dress she wanted me to wear? If she was that spiteful, she’d have destroyed the gown I’d purchased.”

“You think one of the staff?”

“I don’t know. I hate to think any of them would do such a thing. It sounds more like something a true enemy would do—someone like Nora. Of course, that’s crazy. She doesn’t have access to this place.”

“Did your father know about the dress?”

She shook her head. “No, he just knew we fought. I didn’t want to upset him or Mother on her big night. We’d already had a fight. So, I just balled it up and shoved it in my closet. I didn’t show anyone.”

“Who do you think did it?”

“I don’t have a clue.” She rolled her head on her neck.

“C’mere.”

She stepped toward Grady, and his hands closed over her shoulders, squeezing and massaging. “Mmm. God, that feels good.”

“Your muscles are tight. It’s all the tension you’re carrying around. I wish I could tell you there’s nothing to worry about, but I’m not gonna lie to you. Whoever’s doing this has got me worried.” He continued to squeeze his big hands over her muscles.

She closed her eyes and dropped her head. “But you’ll protect me, right?”

“I’m not leaving your side. I just need you to stop trying to ditch me. Got it?”

“Got it.”

Grady took a sip of bourbon and watched the lightning flash in the distance. “What’s the deal with Perry?”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s always around.”

She shrugged. “He and Palmer are extremely close.”

“Is that all?”

“Pretty much.”

“Pretty much?”

“Well, he tried to kiss me once.”

“Recently?”

“No. On my sixteenth birthday. I pushed him away, or tried to, then my brother interrupted us, and he finally let me go and stalked off.”

“Whoa. Back the train up. Did he try to force himself on you?”

“I suppose you could call it that.”

“But your brother stopped him?”

“Yes.”

“He ever try anything with you after that?”

“Nope.”

“Do you think he still has feelings for you?”

“I doubt it. I think it’s always been about him being in competition with Palmer.”

“Is he dating someone?”

“Not that I know of. Why?”

“Has there been anyone special that you know of?”

“For Perry? Not that I’m aware. What are you thinking? That this is all him? That’s ridiculous.”

“Is it? Maybe he’s obsessed with you.”

“You’re being crazy. I’m...”

“You’re what?”

She cleared her throat and picked at the railing, refusing to meet his eyes. “I’m marrying his brother.”

“Oh.” A knot formed in his throat. “So it’s set, then?”

“Not officially.”

“You should probably get some rest, Miss Wyatt.”

“Oh, so it’s Miss Wyatt, again.” She spun away, and Grady watched her go. He needed to remember why he was here. It wasn’t to let himself get close to a woman who was so unattainable it was laughable.

He drained his glass and went inside.





## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Two days later, Grady accompanied Tinsley to an auction by the Texas Thoroughbred Association.

“See that guy over there? He represents Sheik Mohamad Bansal.”

Grady looked toward the tall man, surrounded by a group. If he were a rap artist, people would call that his posse. “Yeah. What about him?”

“He bought Sunstar a few years ago and took him back to Saudi Arabia. Everyone thought how great that was, that the thoroughbred champion would live out a wonderful life to stud. After a couple of offspring, they shipped him off to slaughter like he was nothing. He’d won the Belmont Stakes five years ago.”

“Some people are cruel.”

“It’s so sad. These horses are magnificent animals, highly intelligent, and with big hearts. Yet men like him dispose of them like they’re used up garbage.”

“Outbid him.”

“What?”

“Outbid him. You spent more at the mall yesterday.”

“Daddy told me I could only have one.”

“What if you could do what you wanted? What would you do?”

“I’d have a stable full. I’d start my own rescue. It would be called Second Chance Stables. We’d rehabilitate them. See if they could become jumpers or perhaps therapy animals to children with disabilities. Whatever suited their personalities. Thoroughbreds are intelligent and sensitive animals with strong personalities. They love deeply, are spirited, and often goofy at times. But they are, above all, incredible athletes. They deserve a good life. They deserve so much more than to be sold at auction to buyers who ship them to slaughter. I would try to find good lifelong homes for them.”

“And why can’t you do that?”

“Palmer’s plan is to go to DC.”

“I see. What will you do there?” Grady longed to ask if she loved the man, but that was one question he could never verbalize. It wasn’t his business.

She shrugged. “Give parties and live a useless life, I suppose.”

“Don’t say that.”

“I suppose I’ll turn into my mother. Plan balls and such to raise money for children’s hospitals or homeless shelters.”

“Nothing wrong with that.” He studied her. “But it wouldn’t be your passion.”

“No, it wouldn’t.”

“You couldn’t combine the money raising aspect with saving the retired racehorses?”

“I’m sure I’ll be expected to do something more along the lines of a children’s hospital charity. Washington society won’t be thrilled about racehorses.”

“Also a worthy cause.”

“Yes.”

“But not your passion.”

“I can’t say I don’t want to help sick children.”

“Heaven’s no. You’d be tarred and feathered.” He laughed, and she joined him. “Seriously, you can’t do both? Combine them?”

“I’m sure the political party will have a list of charities I’ll be steered toward.”

“The stubborn Tinsley Wyatt I’ve heard so much about caving to social pressure?”

“I’ve spent my whole life caving to social pressure. Conforming. Being perfect. Doing what’s expected.”

“That’s not the girl I met in the dressing room at that lingerie store.”

She smiled. “That was private.”

“What about that fashion show? That wasn’t so private.”

“That was runway fashion. It doesn’t count.”

“You have a strange set of rules about what counts and what doesn’t.”

“Don’t I know it.”

“So why are we here if we’re not bidding?”

“This was on the way, and I like to look at the horses. And we’re killing time.”

“Killing time? Until what?” Grady didn’t like when he didn’t know the day’s agenda. He didn’t like being thrown for a loop by surprises. “What is this on the way to?”

“The rodeo.”

“The rodeo?”

“Come on.” She checked her Longines watch. “It’s just a few miles from here.”

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Twenty minutes later, they sat in the metal stands of an indoor arena that was louder than any concert Grady had been to in his life. The metal building echoed and amplified every sound.

Tinsley dug in the box of popcorn he held and lifted her chin to the ring. “This is my favorite event.”

“Yeah? What is it?”

“Barrel racing.”

A rider came racing out and circled one barrel, then raced to the next, then headed out of the arena. Her time was displayed up on a board.

“Is that fast?”

“Really fast. That girl qualified for the national finals last year. I think she’s even better this year. Wouldn’t surprise me if she wins a world championship.”

“Huh. You know a lot about this sport.”

“Yep.” She studied him, assessing, like she was deciding whether or not to trust him. “Truce?”

“I thought we already had one.”

“I’ve always wanted to do that,” she confessed, bumping her shoulder into his and nodded toward the event.

“Barrel racing?” He pulled his chin back, staring at her. “For real?”

“Yes. Hard to believe, is it?”

“Shocking,” he teased. “Why haven’t you?”

She laughed. “Right. The daughter of JD and Loretta Wyatt, barrel racing. The Junior League would have a field day with that one. Besides, my father would never stand for it. He doesn’t like the jumping, but at least it has some legitimacy.” She dug another handful of popcorn.

“Barrel racing isn’t legitimate?” He was teasing her, but one look at her face revealed she didn’t take to it.

She got huffy and stood to leave. He grabbed her arm.

“What’s wrong?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t understand. You know exactly what I mean.”

“I can see no one ever teases you. You need to loosen up. Sit back down. I’m enjoying the event.” He glanced at the box in his hands. “And there’s still popcorn left.”

She sat and took another handful.

“Never stop dreaming your dreams.” He bumped shoulders with her, and she finally smiled and bumped him back.

“I don’t plan on it.”

“So, tell me all about barrel racing,” he asked, seriously interested because she seemed passionate about it.

“Well, it’s the only female dominated rodeo sport. The rules are simple. It’s the execution that’s hard.”

He grinned, loving the light in her eyes as she filled him in all about the sport she was so passionate about, and he was glad he was able to give her someone to talk about it all. It gave him another glimpse of a very real side of her, one that wasn’t concerned about image or status or being someone else’s idea of perfect, and he loved every second of it.

When the events were over, they headed to her car.

“I’ve got one more stop to make.” She slid her sunglasses on as the sun was setting. “Two actually.”

“We gonna be back at the estate before dark?”

“Probably not.”

She drove to a toy store. She made a call to someone as they headed to the entrance.

Grady couldn’t hear much of her conversation, but he did hear her ask someone how many rooms were occupied in the children’s wing.

They went inside, and she bought forty stuffed animals. Grady didn’t say a word, because he had an idea where their next stop would be.

He looked at the bags. “These going to fit in your car?”

“They will.”

“You sure.”

“Yep.”

He cocked his head. “You’ve done this before, haven’t you?”

“Many times.”

“Was this planned?”

“Everything I do is planned.”

“You need to be more spontaneous.”

“I keep *you* guessing, though, don’t I?”

He chuckled. “That you do, Miss Wyatt. That you do.”

She drove them to the Dallas Children’s Hospital, and he followed her inside, carrying half the bags while she carried the rest. They barely fit in the elevator. It stopped on a floor between the ground and their destination, and the doctor took one look and backed up.

The doors slid shut again, and they both burst out laughing.

“This is fun,” Grady admitted.

“It’s always fun to play Santa Claus, especially when it’s just a regular day.”

They reached their floor, and he followed her to the nurse’s station. An older nurse came around the desk and hugged her like they were old friends.

“Miss Wyatt, lord-y, you just made my day.”

“Good to see you, Jackie. Can we pop in?”

“Sure, honey. Just not those two over there. They’re in quarantine, but I’ll make sure they get theirs.”

Tinsley held a bag open, and Jackie grabbed two stuffed animals. She looked at Grady. “And who is this fine-looking man?”

He held out his hand. “Grady Steele, ma’am. Nice to meet you.”



She gave Tinsley a look as she took it. “You done upgraded, child.”

Tinsley rolled her eyes. “He’s just a... friend.”

“I’d change him from friend to boyfriend if I were you, sweetie.”

Tinsley laughed and moved to the first room, tapping on the door and poking her head in. “Can I come in?”

A mother sat in a chair next to the bed of a little girl about eight years old.

“Hi, I’m passing out stuffed animals. Is there a little girl in here who would like one?”

The child raised her hand, and the mother smiled.

“Hi, I’m Tinsley. What’s your name?” She approached the bed.

“Amanda.”

“Well, hello Amanda. You can pick out whichever one you want.” Tinsley held the shopping bag out for her to choose.

The little girl picked a white puppy dog and hugged it to her chest with a shy smile.

“What do you say, Amanda?”

“Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome, Amanda. What will you name it?”

She thought for a moment. “Snowball.”

“Why, that’s a perfect name.”

Her mother hugged Tinsley. “Thank you. That’s the first smile I’ve seen on her in days.”

“Are you all right?”

“I’m holding up.”

“Do you need anything?”

“No. You just gave me something I’ve been hoping for. You made my little girl happy.”

“It’s nothing. I’m glad to spread a little cheer.” She held up the bag. “Well, I’ve got more puppies and bears to find homes for. You have a good night.”

Grady followed her out, and over the next hour they delivered one to every room, until the bags were empty.

When they got back in the elevator, he looked over at Tinsley. “That was really nice.”

She shrugged it off. “It was very little, really.”

“You made them happy, if only for a few hours.”

She smiled and stared at the floor. “I hope so.”

“You have a way with them—the children. Do you want kids?”

“Someday. Very much.”

The doors opened at the lobby, and he followed her out to the car. Today she'd shown him a whole side to her he'd had no clue existed.

"You doin' anything the day after tomorrow?" he asked as he climbed in the passenger seat.

"I don't think so. Why?"

"Want to take a ride with me?"

"Where?"

"Something I've got to do."

"Hmm. Now, who's the mysterious one?"

"Gotta keep you guessing."

"All right. I'll *take a ride with you.*"

He grinned. "You are such a smartass."

She laughed. "Kettle black, darlin'."



## CHAPTER TWELVE

“I like the jeans and boots look. It suits you.” Grady’s eyes did a once over as he sat with Tinsley at the dining room table, sipping on morning coffee. She looked damn good as a country girl. He could almost forget she was worth a fortune.

“Thanks, bodyguard. I’m glad you approve.”

He chuckled, and she grinned back.

Suddenly, the quiet morning was pierced by JD’s loud curse.

“Goddamn it.”

Tinsley jumped up, and Grady followed her into the hall. Her father stood just outside his study. “Daddy, what in the world’s the matter?”

“Bodie didn’t sign these papers. Rowen, get in here. Take these out to the #7 Derrick in Midland. Get his signature and bring them right back.”

Tinsley snatched the papers from the frazzled butler. “I’ll do it, Daddy.”

“You’re sure?”

“Of course. I didn’t have anything planned. Palmer is in Austin today.”

“Okay. If you’re sure. I need them back asap though.”

“All right.” She cocked a brow at Grady, holding her keys in the air. “Feel like doing something *spontaneous*?”

Grady pulled his own set of keys out of his pocket. “I drive.”

She rolled her eyes. “You are such a guy.”

“All the way through, darlin’.”

Tinsley stalked toward the door. “I’m still not your darlin’.”

He grinned and followed. JD chuckled after them.

Grady led the way to his pickup and held the door for Tinsley. It was a step-up model with a lift kit, so he offered her his hand, then went around and slid behind the wheel. “When’s the last time you rode in a pickup truck?”

“You act like I’ve never ridden in one. This is Texas, for God’s sake.”

“When?”

She shrugged. “The last time was probably when we took Pharaoh to a competition.”

“Competition?”

“He’s a show jumper. He won the Ocala Grand Prix last February. Mother even had hopes I’d make it onto the Olympic Team for Paris in 2024.”

“Didn’t happen?”

“No. I think it was the first time I’ve ever not lived up to her expectations.”

“And yet, here you are, still alive. You crushed her hopes, failed to be perfect, and yet you survived.”

“I guess it sounds silly to you, but there’s a lot of pressure to succeed in our family.”

“It doesn’t sound silly at all. I come from a long line of military men. My dad, uncle, both granddads. So, there was a lot expected of me, too.”

“Where did you grow up?”

“I’m a Bama boy. Went to the University of Alabama.”

“Then the Army?”

“Yep. Joined the ROTC. Went straight into the Army after I got my degree. Graduated Special Forces training and became a Green Beret. Next stop Afghanistan.”

“I can’t imagine that life.” He felt her eyes on the side of his face. “Was there a girl you left behind?”

“There was.”

“Spill.” He heard the humor in her voice and glanced over to see her grinning.

“No way.”

“Come on. You know all about Palmer.”

“No.”

“Please. It’s a long ride.”

He exhaled loudly. “Fine. I met Angeline in college. She was hot, and I was instantly in lust. I was already in the ROTC at that point. I knew I wanted to be career Army. Before I was deployed, I gave her a ring. She wanted to get married before I shipped out.”

“Did you do it?”

He shook his head.

“Why not?”

“Something held me back. Anyway, back then, shit was hitting the fan with the war on terror. My tour of duty was extended several times. I ended up being over there fourteen months.”

“That’s a long time.”

“Yep. Evidently too long for Angeline. One day at our base in Bagram, I got a letter in the mail. She’d met someone else. She even enclosed the ring I bought her.”

“Wow. Doing that while you were deployed. That’s cold.”

“I thought so.”

“What’d you do?”

“I wired the ring to a grenade and shot it out of a launcher into the desert.”



“Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“You didn’t call her or ever see her again?”

“Nope. No point. She didn’t want me; I sure wasn’t going to beg her to love me.”

“Anyone since then?”

“No one serious.”

They drove a long time before Tinsley pointed out the window. “Turn here. It’s that one in the distance.”

Grady drove them down a long dirt road and into the gravel lot. A Texas flag snapped in the wind, and a tall oil derrick towered a hundred feet above the rig floor, standing about the size of a ten-story building. He’d never actually seen one up close before, and he leaned forward to peer out the windshield. “That’s somethin’, isn’t it?”

“I guess,” Tinsley said, pointing to a spot. “Park there.”

Dust blew up as Grady drove to where she indicated. He threw it into park, and Tinsley reached for the door handle.

“Wait there,” Grady said, climbing out on his side and going around to get her door.

“Such a gentleman.” He took her hand as she jumped down in her jeans and boots. She shaded her eyes with the papers she’d come to have signed and waved to a man up on the rig watching them. “Where’s Bodie?”

The man jerked his thumb over his shoulder toward what looked like a shipping container. Except it had windows like an office trailer. “In the doghouse. Come on up.” He tossed two hardhats down.

They climbed the long, narrow metal staircase up to the rig floor and over to the door of the doghouse.

Grady was surprised at how loud the drilling was. Screeching metal on metal sounds at incredible decibels. It was like nails on a chalkboard to him and he didn’t know how they stood it all day long.

Inside the doghouse, it was a bit quieter, and cooler. A tall man stood, downing a bottle of water and wiping his forehead with the back of his glove. He glanced over.

“Tinsley. What the fuck are you doing here?”

She fanned herself with the papers. “Dad said he needs your signature on these right away.”

He took them from her and scanned them briefly. “What are you, a document courier service now, Tinsley?”

“I just needed to get away for a while.”

“Don’t you always.”

“Grady, this is my brother, Bodie.”

Bodie scrawled his signature and studied Grady. “You the new bodyguard? I’ve heard about you.”

“Yes, sir.”

“I’d shake your hand, but I’m covered in grease.”

“I understand.”

“I’ve got to get back out there. We’re behind schedule. Don’t tell Dad.”

Tinsley locked her lips and threw away the key.

Bodie lifted his chin to Grady. “Ever been on a rig?”

“No, sir.”

“Want to see what we do?”

“I’d love to.”

Tinsley rolled her eyes. “I should have known this was going to happen.”

They followed Bodie out onto the derrick floor, where men were all in hardhats, jeans, and t-shirts covered in grease and mud. It was, apparently, filthy work.

Bodie pointed to two men grappling with some large clamps. “Those are the floor workers, sometimes called roughnecks. One’s operating the lead tong, while the other’s operating the backup tong. That guy over there is the driller.” He pointed to a man operating some cables and pulleys. “And that guy’s the motorman.”

They watched the men work, moving in an orchestrated way, each man doing his part in the complicated dance without a word to each other. There was no yelling, no talking at all.

“What are they doing?” Tinsley asked.

“They’re working. They’re feeding their family. Turning, burning, and earning. This is the real world, Tins.” Bodie chuckled. “Sorry. I couldn’t resist. In layman’s terms, when one section of drill pipe has been drilled into the earth, another section needs to be added so that the well can be drilled that much deeper. There’s a bit more to it, of course, but they are basically adding pipe to the drill string so they can drill deeper, until they reach TD, aka Total Depth.”

“And how deep is that?” Grady asked.

“This one? Imagine the depth of the Grand Canyon. This one’s about twice that deep.”

“What do you do?”

“Supervise it all.”

“I see why I haven’t seen you around the estate,” Grady mused.

“We operate 24 hours a day, seven days a week. I’ve got a trailer over there. I’m here until this job is done.”

“You work too hard, Bodie,” Tinsley said, shielding her eyes from the sun.

“That’s the way Dad wants it. I have to learn the business from the ground up.”

“That’s how he got started?” Grady asked.

“Yes, sir.”

“It’s incredible witnessing these guys work almost like an orchestra. Each person does their own task, and nothing is verbally communicated. Amazing. Reminds me of how my team worked in Afghanistan.”

“You a team guy?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, thanks for your service.”

Grady lifted his chin to the roughnecks. “These guys deserve a thank you, too. I’ve got nothing but respect for the coordination and grit it takes to work a rig like this.”

“This is a Kelly rig. Very old school equipment and technology. And you’re right. These guys deserve respect. They do a hell of a lot more work than most men do on a daily basis.”

“Is that the speed they work at all the time? That chain he’s throwing looks like the most dangerous part of the operation. These guys deserve all the money they make.”

“Yep. Heavy machines, lots of tension, lots of torque, and lots of risk.”

“I see about a thousand different ways for a man to lose an arm or a leg.”

“You got that right.” Bodie extended his hand to Grady. “I’ve got to get on it. Nice to meet you. Take care of my sister.”

“Will do.”

Grady and Tinsley turned-in their hardhats and returned to the truck.

She smiled at Grady. “You loved that, didn’t you?”

He chuckled. “I won’t deny it. That was cool as shit.”

He pulled out, and they headed toward the highway. Once he hit blacktop, Tinsley looked over at him. “Are you hungry?”

“Starved. Anything out here?”

She grinned. “I know a place.”

“What about your father? He said he needed that paperwork.”

“We won’t be long.” She directed him to a rundown looking shack on the side of the highway. The only place for miles, it appeared. The sign read, Rosa’s Taqueria. “Pull in here.”

He looked through the windshield. “This place? Real people go here. You might actually have to mingle with them,” he teased.

She rolled her eyes, and he got out of the truck, coming around to open her door. “I used to come out here with my father back in the day.”

“You pullin’ my leg?”

“Nope. This was our favorite place to eat lunch.”

It was so out of character that he paused. “Seriously?”

“Cross my heart.” She led the way inside. It was tiny, with a few chipped Formica tables and old yellowed pictures hung on the stucco walls. There was a small counter to order, and a narrow hall leading back to a bathroom and a doorway to the kitchen.

“Juan and his wife, Rosa, run this place.”

A man came out wearing a white apron. “Señorita Wyatt. I haven’t seen you in so long.” He gave her a hug.

“Hello, Juan.”

“Who is this, mijo?” The old man asked with a glare at Grady.

“My bodyguard. He’s stuck to me like glue. Daddy hired him.”

“I see.” Juan shook a finger at Grady. “You take care of Miss Wyatt.”

“Yes, sir.”

He took their order, left, and returned with their drinks.

“I see you. I’m watching you.” Juan glared at Grady.

“I’m watching you, too, ol’ man.”

Juan grinned. “I like a man who stands up for himself.”

“You’re lookin’ at one, then.”

Juan elbowed Tinsley. “I like him better than that last one you brought in here. The one who shoved his plate aside, acting like my food wasn’t good enough for him.”

“Okay, thanks, Juan.”

He jerked a thumb at her, his words for Grady. “That look? That means she wants me to leave her alone.”

“Yeah, I got that.”

He left.

“Last guy?” Grady queried.

“Palmer.”

Grady snorted his drink. “You brought Palmer here? And it didn’t go over? Why am I not surprised?”

She balled up her napkin and threw it at him.

He studied her, then the room. “It’s like you’re two different people. I never know who I’m going to get with you. The snob or the angel.”

“Angel? Hardly.”

“You have your moments. I’ve seen them. Like at that children’s hospital.”

“That’s just for the charity.”

“Bullshit. That was real.”

She looked uncomfortable.

“What?”



“Nothing.”

Juan returned and set shot glasses filled with a golden liquor. “My best tequila. On the house.”

“Thank you.” Grady lifted his glass. Juan nodded and returned to the kitchen. Grady looked at Tinsley. “To the hard-working men who do backbreaking work, all so you and I can fill our gas tanks.”

She giggled. “I’ll drink to that.”

They clinked glasses, and Grady downed his, surprised when Tinsley threw hers back like a pro.

“Not your first rodeo?”

“The tequila? No. Not my first rodeo, ‘Bama boy. This is Texas. The land of tin stars, tacos, and tequila.”

He snorted. “Well said for a woman who’s probably more used to Mercedes, martinis, and Monte Carlo.”

“I’m a Texas girl, born and bred. Don’t underestimate me.”

“Never.”

Juan reappeared with two heavily laden plates and set them on the table. “Enjoy.”

They dug in, and Grady moaned around his mouthful.

“Good, right?” Tinsley asked.

“Why isn’t there a line out the door?”

She laughed. "We probably missed the lunch rush."

They ate in silence for a few minutes. Finally, Grady broke the quiet.

"This has been nice."

"What? The food?"

"No. The ride out here with you. We got to talk. It was nice," he said.

"It was nice."

After they finished eating, Juan came over with a paper bag. "This is for Señor JD. His favorite. You give it to him, yes?"

"That's kind of you, Juan. Tamales? He'll be thrilled."

He gestured to Grady. "You bring him back. I like him. He cleaned his plate."

Grady chuckled. "It was the best I've ever had."

"Gracias."

They pushed their chairs back and stood. Grady shook Juan's hand. "Thank you for a wonderful meal."

"You're welcome."

Grady held the door for Tinsley, and they went out into the afternoon sun. "I liked him."

Tinsley smiled. "He liked you, too. They were always good to me when I was a little girl coming out here with my

dad. Juan used to give me lollipops after I ate my food.”

Grady pulled the passenger door open for her.

A huge boom vibrated through the air, and he instinctively covered her with his body, pushing her down on the seat. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw a cloud of black smoke rising in the distance over the flat land toward the horizon. “I think that’s the #7 oil derrick.”

“Bodie!” Tinsley screamed her brother’s name.

Juan and Rosa came running out the door.

“Holy Moses,” Juan said.

Grady yelled back to him. “Call 911.”

Juan nodded and hustled back inside.

Grady helped Tinsley into the truck, and he fired it up and tore out toward the rig.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Grady raced back to the oil rig, the plume of smoke growing larger the closer they got. When they approached the lot and turned in, they saw a food truck parked near the entrance, and men gathered around one injured man on the ground.

Tinsley saw her brother among them and practically jumped from the truck before Grady had a chance to put it in park.

“Bodie!” She ran to him. “Thank God you’re okay.”

He was shouting orders, then he got on a radio and called in a medivac helicopter.

“I’m fine. I’m okay, Tins. But I’ve got a man injured.”

“What happened?” Grady asked. “What can I do?”

“I don’t know. There was an explosion.” He looked at Tinsley. “It wasn’t a blowback. It was over at the fuel tanks.”

“What’s a blowback?” Grady asked.

“When the pressure backs up and blows up the pipe.”

Grady’s eyes drilled into Bodie’s. “The tanks. You think it was an accident?”

“No. No way. We’re too meticulous about safety.”

“Have you called Father?” Tinsley asked.

“Not yet.”

“I’ll get him on the line.” She pulled her phone out and made a call. While she was busy, Grady pulled Bodie to the side.

“You know why I was hired, right?”

“Threats.”

“Right. You think this could have something to do with that? Sabotage maybe?”

“Maybe.”

“The taco truck showed up, and we’d just stopped for a quick lunch break. Only reason we weren’t all closer to that explosion. If we’d had been on the derrick, no telling what would have happened. As it is, it blew all the east-facing windows out of the doghouse.”

“Could it be a disgruntled employee? Have you fired anyone recently?”

“Nah. Not in years.”

“You got security cameras in this place.”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s look at last night. Maybe while you were busy working the rig, someone was sneaking around the tanks.”

Tinsley knelt by the injured man, wiping the blood from his temple with the bandana she pulled from around her neck.

“Follow me.” Bodie led him up on the derrick and into the doghouse. He pulled up the tapes from last night and they watched them together.

Grady studied the film. “These are the perimeter cameras?”

“Yeah.”

“Point out the fuel tanks.”

“Here. These six.”

They watched, keying in on the tanks, fast-forwarding until they saw movement.

“Stop right there.” Grady pointed at the screen. “Back up a bit.”

It was after two a.m. on the timestamp when a man’s dark shape emerged from the surrounding cottonfields. He was just a dark shadow, with nothing to identify him.

“I want to check that area out,” Grady said.

“Let’s go.” Bodie stood.

They walked around the area near the edge of the field. Grady squatted down. “Here. There’s a set of footprints.” Bodie compared the size of it to the size of his own construction boot.

“Looks about two sizes smaller than mine. But they seem like a similar style construction boot judging by the tread.”

“He’s probably a few inches shorter than you. Come on.”

They followed the trail along the row between the cotton plants. About fifty yards back, Grady held his arm up, indicating Bodie to stop, and then he pointed to several crushed cigarette butts. “Here. Look.”

“Son-of-a-bitch. Someone was out here,” Bodie hissed.

Grady pulled his phone and snapped a picture, then squatted down, pulled out a bandana, and gathered the butts for testing. “We might be able to get some DNA off these. I’ll have Tri Star check them out.”

“Maybe we should call the sheriff,” Bodie said, leaning with his hands on his knees.

Grady tilted his head back. “You really think they’ve got the resources to investigate this? They’ll make a report and be done with it. My team will dig into this thing like a dog with a bone.”

“All right. JD hired you guys. That’s good enough for me.”

Grady pointed at the ground where two different sized footprints were visible. “There were two of them. One waited here.”

“Yep. Looks that way.”

“This one’s much smaller with treads like a pair of running shoes.” Grady took a picture of the tread print. It could be important if they could match it. He stared down the row. “They came from that direction. What’s over there?”



“I think there’s an access road.”

“Down any of these roads,” Grady pointed around. “Are there any businesses at all?”

“Rosa’s that way. A gas station that way and that way. Why?”

“We may be able to pull some video if they’ve got cameras. It might be a long shot.”

The sound of helicopter blades chopping the air carried to them, and they straightened.

“That’s the medivac coming in for my guy. I’ve got to get back. Do me a favor and get Tinsley out of here.”

“Will do. I want to check out those gas stations, see if they’ve got any cameras.”

Twenty minutes later, Grady walked out of the second gas station and climbed into his truck. Tinsley had waited there while he’d gone inside.

“Anything?” she asked.

“Yeah. Let me call my team.” He pulled out his phone and put it on speaker. He’d already filled in Chris on the explosion. “Chris? I’ve got a lead. I was able to talk the employees at both gas stations into letting me look at their cameras in the hour before and after we saw the man show up on the derrick’s surveillance. Got lucky with the second place.” He dipped his

eyes to read the sign. “Energy Star on 1788. A white truck was visible going in the direction of the oil rig field prior, and going the opposite direction after, headed toward Midland. It was the only vehicle that passed the station between midnight and 3 am.”

“Anything identifiable?”

“There was a logo on the driver’s door, but I couldn’t make it out. I got some pictures of the video. I’ll send them to you.”

“I’ll get Stan and Al out there. We’ll dig into it. Maybe we can find a better image of the truck on camera farther down the road somewhere. Get me those cigarette butts, and we’ll see if the lab can pull DNA off them.”

“Will do.”

“Did you have a chance to look at the damage?”

“Not too close, but the guy wasn’t carrying much. Probably some C4 he popped on like the kind we use to blow doors. Wouldn’t take much to ignite those fuel tanks.”

“Right. Okay. Be careful.”

“Always.” Grady disconnected.

“Do you think this is all connected?” Tinsley asked, worry lines on her forehead.

Grady gave it to her straight. “I think somebody’s pissed at Wyatt Oil or at your father specifically. Which one it is, I

don't know. You got any ideas?"

"No. I think we should have a conversation with my father."

"I think you're right." He put the truck in gear and pulled out.

The sun was setting by the time Grady and Tinsley made the drive from Midland to Dallas. When they walked in, they found out JD had flown out to see the damage himself, and he wasn't back yet.

"Can you grab me an envelope off your father's desk?" Grady asked.

"Sure." Tinsley walked in his study, and Grady followed. She opened a drawer, searching for one. As she shoved things around, she came across a note. It was scrawled in chicken-scratch handwriting. Tinsley identified it immediately. Palmer's father had scribbled in exactly that manner when he'd signed her birthday card last year.

*Do we have a deal?*

She picked it up and stared, wondering what kind of deal her father would make with Palmer's father.

"Find one?" Grady asked.

She shoved the note in the drawer and shut it, then searched in another. “Here’s one.” She carried it to Grady.

“You okay?”

“Sure. Why?”

He looked toward the desk.

“I’m going up to take a shower,” Tinsley said, pushing past him and climbing the stairs.

Grady watched her go, then he shoved the cigarette butts in the envelope and sealed it. He found Thomas outside.

“I need you to take this envelope to Tri Star in Granbury.”

“Where’s Granbury?”

“Southwest of Ft. Worth. Google the address. Go. It’s urgent.”

He grumbled, but replied the way he was expected. “Yes, sir.”

By the time JD returned to the estate, it was late. Grady met him in the entryway.

“We need to talk.”

“Can it wait? I’m exhausted.”

“No. It can’t. Do you have any ideas about who would have done that today?”

“Anyone on the list I gave your boss.” JD shrugged out of his jacket.

“That list isn’t panning out.”

JD snapped, whirling around. “Then find out who the hell it is!”

Grady straightened.

JD rubbed his forehead. “I’m sorry. It’s been a long day. Come into my office.”

Grady followed him in, and JD moved behind his desk. He pulled out a bottle of top-shelf bourbon and filled two rocks glasses with an inch of amber liquor, shoving one across the desk toward Grady.

“Have a drink with me.” He took a sip. “You know, I started out on a rig just like that one back in the day. Good ole Kelly rig with a spinning chain. Some of the best years of my life were spent on a rig just like that one.”

“I didn’t know that, sir.” Grady studied the man.

JD nodded. “My first week on a rig floor I was hit in the face by the motorman’s thumb. Can you believe that?”

“After what I witnessed today, I know it’s a dangerous job. That’s for sure.”

“He was spinning chain. He didn’t even know it was missing off his hand. My own hands were so numb from the cold, I guess I could understand it. It was eleven below zero

that day. A record low for that part of Texas, and don't get me started on the wind chill factor.

“Anyway, I picked up the piece of green glove it was in and looked over at the driller and said I had to talk to him in the doghouse. He shut it down and went in after me. I showed him what was in the glove. He looked out the window at the guy still wrestling with his tongs and said, call him in. Poor bugger came in, the driller told him to sit down, and asked to see his hands. Then the guy went right into shock and fainted! He had to be airlifted to a hospital, and they stitched it back on.”

“That's quite a story. You ever get hurt?”

“Sure. I remember getting hit by the spinning chain when the tail broke off. That hurt like a motherfucker.” He held up a hand. “But I still have all ten fingers!”

“Beat the odds, sounds like.”

“I didn't stay a roughneck. I had brains, and I wasn't going to spend my life making someone else rich. So, I went out on my own. Wildcatting, that's what they call it. I didn't have two nickels to rub together when I met Loretta. Barely scraping by, pouring every dollar I made into the business. She went against her father and took a chance on me. Even talked him into staking my next well. I hit it big with that one. Made a fortune for both of us. After that, he gave me his blessing to marry his daughter.” JD smiled. “She would have married me without it, but it was nice to have.”

“That’s a nice story. I’m happy it turned out for you.” Grady cleared his throat. “And now the tables are turned, and you’re the father looking out for a daughter of your own.”

“That’s right.”

“I’m sure you want her happiness, just like your father-in-law wanted for Ms. Loretta.”

JD nodded, avoided his eyes, and drained his glass. Then he stood—a sure signal their talk was over. “I’m sorry I can’t give you any names or leads. I wish to God I knew who this was. The fact is, I burned a lot of bridges, stepped on a lot of people on my way up. The list of people with a grudge against me is long. I’m sorry I can’t be more help in narrowing it down.”

Grady stood. “We’ve got a couple of leads we’re following up on. Hopefully, we’ll be able to narrow it down soon. I, uh, asked Tinsley to take a ride out to my place tomorrow. I hope you don’t mind. It’s my mother’s birthday. I moved her out here from Alabama a few months ago. She doesn’t know a lot of people, so I’d like to go by and bring her a cake and flowers or something. If that’s okay with you.”

“Of course. It’ll be good for Tinsley to get away. Spending the day at your place will probably be the safest for her. Take as much time as you need.”

“Thank you, sir.”







## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

“What are you doing?” Tinsley asked Grady as he pulled into the grocery store parking lot.

“It’s my mother’s birthday. I’m picking her up a cake and some flowers.”

“You can’t be serious. Supermarket flowers? I know a place. Turn left at that light.”

He exhaled, but spun the wheel around, making a u-turn in the parking lot and heading back out on the road. “That place had everything all in one spot. The cake, card, and flowers.”

“Stop grumbling and drive.”

She led him down to a street that contained a bunch of places, all associated with weddings and events. “They call this street Wedding Row. They’ve got everything you need right on this street. Pull in here.” Grady turned into the diagonal spot in front of a bakery with a pink and white striped awning. “Wilson’s has the best cakes. Come on.”

This time, she didn’t wait for him to come around and open her door. Instead, she met him up on the sidewalk.

He paused. “You sure about this? It looks expensive.”

“Isn’t your mother worth it?”

“You’re right. How do I know what to order?”

She held her hand out. “Come on, this won’t hurt a bit. Let me do all the talking.” She led him inside and to the counter, grinning.

“Good morning. Welcome to Wilson’s. How may I help you?”

“Good morning. We need a birthday cake.”

“What date do you need it?” The girl picked up an order form.

“I need it today. Right now.”

“Now? Um, let me see what we have.”

“Is Miss Ruth working today?” Tinsley asked.

“She’s in the back.”

“Can I talk to her, please?”

“Sure. I’ll get her.” The girl disappeared through a swinging door.

Grady looked at the display case of fancy bakery cookies. “Maybe I could just bring her some of those cookies.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. We’re getting her a cake.”

“But they don’t have any ready, and the grocery store has plenty sitting in a case, all ready to go.”

“Shush. They’ll have one for us. Don’t worry.”

A moment later, a heavy-set woman with bright blue hair came out, wiping her hands on her apron. “Tinsley Wyatt. Why I haven’t seen you since your parents’ anniversary last year. How are you?”

“Fine, Ruth. My friend here is in desperate need of a birthday cake for his mother. He was going to get her a store-bought cake from the grocery store, if you can believe it. And for his own sweet mother. I just couldn’t allow it. So here we are.”

She gave Grady a look. “Grocery store cake? We can’t let you do that. No, sir. Now I’ve got a few made up in the back. Does she like strawberry? Italian Cream? Chocolate Mousse? How about Black Forest Royal? Or maybe my four-layer chocolate drip cake?”

“Um...”

Tinsley smiled. “I think he’s a little overwhelmed.”

“Mama grew up in Alabama. She has simple taste. I’m sure whatever you think is best will be fine.”

“Fine? This cake can’t just be fine. These cakes are magnificent.” Ruth snapped her fingers. “Oh. I know. I think I’ve got one red velvet left.”

Grady pointed at her. “That’s the one. Red velvet. Mama loves those.”

“I’ll box it up. What’s her name?”

“Ellen.”

A few minutes later, Grady carried the pink box tied with a string.

“Next stop, the florist. This way.” She led him down the sidewalk past a dress shop with a big white ballgown in the window. Then past a stationery shop, and finally to *Blossoming Blooms*.

She inhaled deeply. “Flower shops always smell so good, don’t they?”

“Yeah, sure. I guess.” Grady followed her inside, glancing around.

Tinsley approached the counter, then turned to Grady. “What’s her favorite flower?”

“Beats me.”

“Come on, Grady. Think.”

He shrugged. “I usually just get her a mix.”

“Does she like pink?”

“Sure.”

Tinsley turned to the clerk. “We need an arrangement with some peonies or floribunda roses, mixed with some white hydrangeas and some greenery, please.”

“How large would you like it?”

“I think about eighteen inches. Thank you.”

“I’ll have it ready in about a half hour.”

“Thank you. The name is Wyatt.”

“No. The name is Steele.”

“Right. Steele. Sorry.” Tinsley pulled his arm. “There’s a coffee shop across the street. Come on.”

They had a coffee in a booth in the window, and Grady set the bakery box on the seat next to him. “This feels like a lot of trouble you’re going to for someone you don’t even know. But you seem to be enjoying yourself.”

Tinsley smiled. “I am. It’s fun. I should have been an event planner. I love doing this stuff. I think I have a knack for it.” She put her finger in a chocolate éclair they’d agreed to split and licked the icing off her finger.

“Maybe you should start your own business.”

She shrugged. “Maybe one day.”

Grady cleared his throat and stared out the window, lifting his chin to the wedding gown in the display across the street. “Sounds like soon you’ll have a wedding to plan. Every girl’s dream.”

The happiness drained right out of her. “Sure. I suppose it is most girl’s dream.”

He cocked his head. “But not yours?”

She glanced at her watch. “The flowers should be ready. Come on.” The last thing she wanted to do was talk about her and Palmer.

When they picked up the flowers, she loved the look on Grady's face.

"Damn, Tinsley. Those are beautiful. You really do have a knack."

She smiled. Somehow, praise from this man gave her heart a glow. She spied a display of cards. "And look. Cards."

"Handy." He stepped over and picked one out. Then paid and grabbed a pen from the cup on the counter and scribbled a message and his signature.

Tinsley didn't see what he wrote, though she strained to look.

He shoved it in the envelope, and they headed to his truck.

It was a forty-five-minute drive out to his place.

He turned down a long drive out in the country and stopped at a split log house with a porch. She could see some outbuildings in the distance and a corral with a couple of horses.

Unbuckling her seatbelt, she leaned forward to peer out the windshield. "You have horses?"

"Yep."

"Oh, so you *do ride*."

"Never said I didn't."

"Every time you've been around Pharaoh, you've been acting like it's all foreign to you."

“Well, that English-style shit is foreign to me.”

“Shit?”

“Sorry, babe. I’ve got no filter. Stuff just comes out of my mouth sometimes. Come on.”

He carried the cake and card under one arm and the flowers in his other hand as they walked in the front door.

“Ma? Your boy’s home.”

Tinsley couldn’t help smiling at the way he said it.

“Grady?” His mother came around the corner, wiping her hands on an apron. She was small—really small in comparison to Grady’s height—and her hair was pulled up in a bun. Tinsley could tell it was blonde, but it was turning gray, especially in the front. There were wrinkles around her cornflower blue eyes. “I wasn’t expecting you. Or company. Hello there.”

Grady set the box down and held the flowers out to his mother. “Happy birthday, Ma.”

Her eyes lit up. “Oh, my. They’re beautiful. Thank you.”

“Ma, this is Tinsley Wyatt. Tinsley, my mother, Ellen.”

Tinsley came forward, holding her hand out. “Pleased to meet you, Mrs. Steele. Happy birthday.”

“Thank you, dear. I have a feeling my boy had some help picking out these flowers.”

“Guilty as charged.”



“Well, thank you. They’re beautiful. Come to the kitchen. I made a fresh pot of coffee.”

“Good, because I also brought you a cake.” Grady held out the box.

Ellen put a hand to her cheek. “Flowers and cake? My, my.”

“And a card,” Grady added.

“Well, let’s all have some.”

Tinsley unboxed it, while Ellen got some plates and silverware, and Grady got three mugs down.

“Sorry, Ma. I don’t have any candles, but we can still sing.”

“Oh, hush. You will not. I’m sixty-two, for goodness’ sake. No one needs to sing about that.” She picked up a knife. “My, it sure is beautiful. I almost hate to cut into it.”

“You better. I’m starved,” Grady said.

“It’s red velvet,” Tinsley tempted with a brow waggle.

“In that case, let’s dive in.” She cut three pieces and served them up. “This is the best surprise I’ve had in a long time. Flowers, a beautiful cake, and my son brought home a lovely girl.”

“Ma.” Grady distracted her from that line of talk by sliding the envelope her way. “Don’t forget your card.”

“Right. My card.” She pushed the flap back and pulled it out. As her eyes moved over the words Grady had written, they filled with tears. “Oh, son. Thank you.” She leaned over and kissed him.

After the cake, Ellen insisted Grady show Tinsley around.

“I’m not sure she’s interested, Ma.”

“Of course, I am. I want to see those horses.”

“Wonderful. Why don’t you two go for a ride? It’s a beautiful day. Take her down to the creek.”

Grady looked at Tinsley. “You up for a ride?”

“Sure. Though, I’ve never ridden a western saddle.”

“You’ll be fine. Come on.”

Grady saddled them both a horse.

“What are these? Quarter horses?”

“Yes, ma’am. Don’t worry. That’s Sally, and she’s sweet as pie.”

He led her around the outbuildings and down a trail into some tall pecan trees. It was cooler in the shade, and Tinsley loved it, even though her legs felt weird hanging in the low stirrups. Sally wasn’t nearly as big as Pharaoh.

After a bit, Grady reined up, and Tinsley stopped next to him. He extended his arm, leaning toward her. “See that?” he whispered. “It’s a fox. I’ve seen her around with some kits. Three of them.”

She pointed off about twenty feet. “There they are.”

“Yup. Whole family.”

They watched until the animals ran off, then Grady looked over at Tinsley, raising his reins slightly. “The creek’s that way. Race ya.” He heeled his horse in the sides and off he went.

Tinsley laughed and tore off after him. He held her off on the trail, but when they broke through to a clearing, she sailed past him, leaning over Sally’s neck.

They came to the creek, and both pulled up, the horses stopping quickly and blowing and snorting.

“I beat you!” Tinsley jabbed a finger toward him. “You cheated, too.”

“Me? No way.” He dismounted, and so did she. He took both the reins and tied the horses to a tree.

Tinsley sat on the ground and picked up a stick, snapped it in two and tossed it in the water. “It’s pretty here. Do you own this land?”

Grady sat beside her. “Yes, ma’am. From the house to another fifty yards beyond where we’re sitting. Eighty acres all together.”

“What are you going to do with it?”

“I was thinking of building right over there. It’s got the best view.”

She searched his eyes and could see the excitement in them when he talked about the land. “What you do for a living... it isn’t all bodyguard work, is it?”

“Nope.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“It can be.”

“Tell me about it.”

He shrugged. “Couple of years ago, we went on a mission to save a woman who worked in our office. It’s a long story, but she was taken across into Mexico by a drug cartel. We went down and got her out of there. Got into a couple of firefights. Nothing I haven’t seen in Afghanistan.”

“Wow. I had no idea.”

“Mission before I got assigned to you, I was in Columbia with a teammate freeing a corporate employee who’d been taken for ransom. Carried him to the river where Chris and Al were waiting in a fast boat to take us to the coast and out to a Navy destroyer.”

She frowned. “Were you in danger?”

“People we go up against are usually armed, so, yeah.”

“You must worry your mother to death.”

“She’s used to it, I guess. Plus, I don’t tell her much.”

“You’re close, aren’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He threw a rock in the river. “I came out here for a job. Wasn’t sure I’d land here for good or not, but I liked Tri Star. Once I knew I was staying, I talked her into moving out here. I didn’t like being that far away from her, and she lived alone. Now she’s on me to give her grandkids.”

Tinsley chuckled. “Oh, my.”

“Right?”

“Do you want kids?”

“Sure. Gotta find the right woman first. I’m kind of old-fashioned that way.”

She laughed. “Do tell.”

His grin faded, and he shifted his attention to the river. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

He looked at her. “You still gonna marry Palmer?”

She stared at the river, picking up another stick and breaking it into pieces. It was the last topic she wanted to discuss. “I really should get back.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He stood and pulled her to her feet.

He captured her gaze, and she couldn’t look away. His thumbs moved over the backs of her hands. She was mesmerized. And then his eyes dropped to her mouth, and it was all over. She lifted on her toes and pressed her mouth to his. She wasn’t even sure if he expected it, but he responded

quickly enough, tilting his head to the side to get a better fit. He groaned and took a step closer.

It felt so good, but she knew it was wrong. What was she doing?

She pressed a hand to his chest and broke the kiss, breathing heavily. "I'm sorry."

"No, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that."

"I just..." She wasn't sure what to say.

"Come on. Like you said, we should head back." He walked over to the horses and held Sally while Tinsley pulled herself up in the saddle. Then he climbed on his own horse, and they rode to the house.

After removing the saddles and putting the horses in their stalls, they headed inside and said goodbye to his mother.

Tinsley gave her a hug. "It was such a pleasure meeting you, Mrs. Steele."

"Please, call me Ellen."

Grady kissed his mother. Then they got back in the truck.

"Thank you for today," she said. "It was fun. I enjoyed meeting your mother."

"She liked you, too. She doesn't get much company."

"We made a plan for next week while you were in the kitchen."

“A plan? What kind of plan?”

“I’m going to take her to my favorite salon and get her hair done. Then maybe we’ll go to lunch or shop. It’ll be fun.”

“Thanks, but you don’t have to do that.”

“I want to.”

“You want to? Why do I find that hard to believe?”

“I don’t know. Why do you?”

“Never mind.” He took her hand and kissed the back. “Thanks for all the help today. Ma was thrilled with the attention. I could tell.”

“You’re welcome.”

When they got to the estate, Grady left her in the entryway.

“I’m going to go make some calls. See if Tri Star found anything yet.” He disappeared through the French doors off the kitchen, heading out to the patio.

Tinsley moved to the stairs, but hesitated, staring toward her father’s study. She could hear him on the phone with someone.

Tinsley knew in her heart she couldn’t keep pretending everything was fine. Right then and there, she decided she had to break it off with Palmer. She moved to her father’s study to tell him, but stopped with her hand on the doorknob when she heard him arguing with someone. She put her ear to the

wooden panel. She recognized Mr. Pace's voice, Palmer's father, and then she remembered the note she'd found earlier.

"It doesn't matter."

"Yes, it does," she heard her father reply. "I've been doing some soul searching lately. It should be her choice."

"Fuck your soul searching. This was all settled. My son's going to Washington, and someday the White House. And nothing is going to derail that plan. This is good for all of us. Unless you want the Securities and Exchange Commission to find out about that little stock tip you used to make your fortune."

"Now you listen to me, you son-of-a-bitch. That's blackmail. Is there nothing you won't stoop to?"

"I'll destroy you, JD, and you'll go to prison. Think about that. Either Tinsley marries Palmer and plays the good little politician's wife, or we can do it your way and you go to prison. You decide."

The call disconnected. Tinsley peeked through the crack in the door and saw her father with his face in his hands, his shoulders shaking.

She covered her mouth and pressed her back to the wall, one thought running through her head. *My father is being blackmailed.* She couldn't stop the tears that welled up and ran down her cheeks.



She dashed out to the stable and to Pharaoh, finding him and clutching his halter, leaning her forehead to his forelock. “Oh, Pharaoh. How can I choose my own happiness over my father’s destruction?” She burst into tears. Amid sobs and soon hiccups, she whispered to the horse all the things she couldn’t say to anyone. “Does Grady even want me? Could we have a life together? Is this insane?”



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The next morning, Tinsley met Grady in the foyer for their run. They headed down the drive toward the road. They ran two miles and came back. Then showered and changed, meeting again in the dining room for breakfast.

By that time, her parents joined them.

“Good morning, dear.” Her father kissed her on the head, then took his seat at the head of the table. Maria brought him coffee. “Thank you.”

Loretta made a plate from the food laid out on the buffet and sat. “Is Palmer due back today?”

Tinsley met Grady’s eyes briefly. “Yes, I believe so.”

“Will you be seeing him?”

“I, ah, suppose so.”

JD snapped a newspaper open. “Where is he?”

“Austin. Meeting with possible donors who can finance his political campaign.”

“I see, and what are your plans today?”

“I didn’t really have any.” The doorbell rang, and Maria answered it.

Kiley came into the room, and Tinsley took one look at her face and knew something was wrong. She set her napkin aside and jumped to her feet. “Kiley, honey, what’s wrong?”

“Randall broke it off with me.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. What happened?” She wrapped her arm around Kiley.

“I don’t know. He called me last night and said he didn’t think we were right for each other.”

“He did it over the phone? What a coward.” Tinsley couldn’t help thinking how she was about to break it off with Palmer for exactly the same reason.

“I know, right?” Kiley burst into tears.

“Come in and sit down. We were eating breakfast.” Tinsley squeezed her shoulders and steered her to the table. “Eat something. You’ll feel better.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to disturb you, Mr. and Mrs. Wyatt.”

“Don’t be silly, dear. Come in. Maria will make you one of those coffees you love so much.”

Kiley sat down, her eyes red and puffy.

“Who’s this about now?” JD asked, folding his paper.

“Randall Davis, sir.”

“Davis? I’ve heard of him. It’s a good thing he broke up with you.”

“Daddy!” Tinsley hissed.

“It’s for her own good. That man’s a shyster. Phony as the day is long. He’s a complete fraud. I’m sure the reason he broke it off with you is because he’s left town in disgrace trying to stay one step ahead of being arrested.”

“Dear, how do you know all that?” Loretta asked.

“I hear things at the club. Why, he tried to swindle Evan Newman out of fifty thousand. He’s bad news, I tell you.”

Kiley sniffled. “Are you sure about this, Mr. Wyatt?”

“Damn sure. You do not want your name connected with his, Kiley. He did you a favor.”

Tinsley’s phone rang, and Palmer’s name lit up the screen. She excused herself and went out to the patio to take the call. “Palmer? Where are you?”

“Still in Austin, Tins. I’ve got a line on a major donor. He wants to meet for drinks tonight, then if it goes well, Bill says he’ll want me to come to his office tomorrow.”

“So, when will you be back?”

“I think I’ll be staying here for the next three days.”

“*Three days?*”

“At least. This is a really successful trip, Tins. I’ve got a good feeling.”

“Call me when you’re headed back, then.”

They ended the call, and Tinsley returned to the dining room.

“What’s the matter, Tins?” Kiley asked. “You look like you just lost a puppy.”

Her face must have given her away, but not for the reasons they thought. She wasn’t sad about not seeing Palmer. She was sad about having to put off breaking up with him. “Nothing’s wrong. Hey, Daddy, can we use the lake house for a couple of days? I think Kiley and I need to get away from Dallas for a bit.”

He looked at her over the brim of his coffee cup. “Sure. I don’t see why not. Will Palmer be joining you?”

“Um, no. He’s got more business in Austin. He won’t be back for a few more days.”

“Well, then. It’s the perfect time for you and Kiley to have some girl time. Go ahead. Have fun. I’ll call and have Juanita make sure everything is in order, and stock the fridge with some basics for you.”

Tinsley got out of her chair and hugged his neck. “Thank you, Daddy. I love you.”

“I love you, too, baby girl. Now go pack a bag. And Grady, you’re to accompany the girls.”

“Yes, sir.” His eyes shifted from JD to her.

She tugged on Kiley’s hand. “Come on. Help me pack, then we’ll go pick up some things at your house on the way.”

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It was a little over a two-hour drive west of Dallas to the exclusive conclave on Possum Lake. They used Grady's truck, since he had a crew cab with room for all of them, plus their bags.

Grady was glad to see the lake house was in a gated community. It gave some element of added security, although if someone wanted access to the property, it was waterfront and therefore had access from the water by anyone who had a boat.

He pulled down the drive, amazed at the massive structure. It was done in a Mediterranean style with a red-tiled roof. "How big is this place?"

"Four levels, seven bedrooms, a wine cellar, multiple terraces. The view is amazing. Come on."

They climbed out, and Grady retrieved the bags while Tinsley unlocked the door and shut off the security system. He followed them inside.

The interior was just as impressive as the exterior. Where the estate was classic southern in style, right down to the décor, the lake house had a definite Texas vibe with chocolate leather furniture, cowhide rugs and throw pillows, high

ceilings with big beams, stucco walls and fireplaces, and terracotta tiled floors.

Grady set the bags down and followed the girls onto the stone terrace that overlooked the lake. The house sat on high ground, giving them a panoramic view of the water. “Now that’s a view.”

“It is lovely, isn’t it?” Tinsley leaned on her hands on the waist-high stone wall.

Off to the right was a fireplace, with seating under a grape arbor. She strolled toward it, and Grady followed.

“My parents designed this area after a little restaurant in Italy on the island of Capri where they honeymooned. I’ve always thought that was so romantic.”

“Have you ever been there? Capri?”

“No. Italy is one place I’ve never been. I’ve always thought I would save it for when I found the right man. It’s such a romantic country.”

Kiley strode inside. “I’m going to the cellar to get us some wine. Then we’re going to drink our sorrows away.”

After she disappeared, Tinsley looked at him, stepping closer. “I may have had an ulterior motive in coming here.”

Grady grinned, glancing at where her hands settled on his abs through his shirt. “Really? And what was that, exactly?”

“Time alone with you.”



“I see. And if Palmer hadn’t been staying out of town for three days?”

“Maybe this is fate, giving us this chance.”

Grady studied her beautiful blue eyes, seriously considering if he could trust in what she was saying. It wasn’t that he didn’t believe she wanted to spend time with him, it was that he wasn’t sure if he could trust she’d give up Palmer if it came to that. “Do you believe in fate, Miss Wyatt?”

“I do, Mr. Steele. Don’t you?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’ve always leaned more toward the theory that life was like a game of pickup sticks—completely random chaos you had to find your way through.”

“That’s an interesting theory, but it’s kind of sad.”

“Is it? Why?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’d like to think things are put in our path and people are put in our life for a reason—to help us, to teach us, to heal us.”

Grady nodded. “Maybe you’re right. I guess we’ll never know until the game is over.”

She stepped closer and tilted her head. “Do you believe in soul mates?”

He lifted a hand and touched her chin, then ran his thumb over her lower lip. “The more I’m around you, the more I’m starting to believe a lot of things are possible.”

Kiley walked out the sliders with a bottle of wine held up in each hand. “Red or white? Pick your poison.”

They broke apart, and Grady shoved his hands in his pockets.

Kiley slowed her steps. “Did I interrupt something?”

“No, ma’am. Miss Wyatt was telling me about her parents’ honeymoon in Capri.”

“Oh, right. The arbor. It’s my favorite spot, but we need a fire.”

“Then I’ll build you one,” Grady offered.

“Thanks, bodyguard dude. You’re the best.”

Tinsley headed inside. “I’ll grab us some glasses. Kiley, play some tunes.”

“On it.” Kiley pulled her phone out. “Hey, bodyguard dude, what kind of music do you like?”

“Surprise me.” He knelt and stacked wood and kindling in the fireplace. “And I have a name. It’s Grady.”

She popped on The Turnpike Troubadours.

“I’ll make you a deal, bodyguard dude. I’ll stop calling you that, if you stop calling Tinsley, Miss Wyatt.”

“I need to remember to be professional. This is a job. I work for her.”

Kiley leaned forward, her voice lowering. “What if you didn’t?”

He turned to the fire, lighting the kindling.

“Come on, Grady. There are enough sparks flying between the two of you to light up the sky.”

He sat back, his forearm resting on his knee, and watched the flames catch. “She’s got Palmer, Kiley. I’ve already had one woman give me back a ring. I don’t need to get my hopes up with a woman who’s so obviously unattainable to someone like me.”

“What’s wrong with someone like you?”

“I could never give her the life she’s accustomed to. I’m not the kind of man she’s expected to marry. It’s best not to deceive ourselves.”

She scoffed. “That’s all a load of crap.”

“Why?”

“Tinsley doesn’t think that way.”

“She dropped \$50k shopping the other day without blinking an eye. You think she’s going to settle for sales from the big box chain in the future?”

“None of that is important to her, I’m telling you. Buying all that stuff? She’s just doing what’s expected of her.”

“Well, that’s not me. I’ll never be what they expect from her. What happens then? She loses her family over me?”

Kiley lit up a cigarette. “You’re overthinking this.”

“Am I? *Really?*”

“Sometimes love happens between two people no one on the outside can understand. But that doesn’t matter. Love is love, and it’s stronger than anything else on this planet. Give it a chance. See where it goes.”

He huffed out a laugh. She was tempting him to risk his heart again, and that might be the hardest thing for him to do. “Says the girl who just got her heart broken.”

She pointed her cigarette at him. “I’ll tell you one thing, that asshole is not going to make me hesitate to take a chance when the next guy—who may turn out to be Mr. Right—comes along. You gotta kiss a lot of frogs.”

He chuckled. “Right.”

She reclined in a cushy chair and put her feet up on the table. “I like you *bodyguard dude.*”

He rolled his eyes. “I’ll stop calling her Miss. Wyatt.”

“Promise?”

“If you try to make me pinkie promise, I’m leaving.”

Tinsley returned with three wine glasses and a corkscrew. “What’d I miss?”

“Nothing. Grady was showing me how to build a proper fire, weren’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am. It’s all in the way you stack it.”

“Fascinating. Come open the wine.” Tinsley held out the corkscrew.

Grady stood and took it from her hand. He popped open both bottles, then grabbed a glass. “What’ll you have, Tinsley?”

She smiled at the use of her name. “White, please.”

“Kiley?”

“Red, darling.”

He grinned and filled them all, then raised his glass. “Here’s to day drinking.”

Kiley raised hers. “Amen. Why limit happy to just an hour, I always say.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Tinsley added.

“So, bodyguard, ever been married?” Kiley asked.

“Thought we had a deal.”

“Oh, right. Sorry.” She cleared her throat. “Grady, have you ever been married?”

“No, ma’am.”

“Wait. What deal?”

“Never you mind.” Kiley looked back at Grady. “Can I ask your opinion on something, as a man?”

“I suppose.”

“What do you think makes a good marriage?”

“*As a man*, I’d have to say a good marriage is one that allows for honesty, understanding, and an extra fridge just for beer.”

Both girls laughed.

“I like him.” Kiley pointed at Grady with her cigarette. “He’s a keeper.”

“Thanks, Kiley. That means a lot,” Grady teased. He pulled a cigar out of his pocket and looked at Tinsley. “You mind? Your father gave this to me.”

“Go ahead.”

“Light ‘em if you’ve got ‘em, I always say,” Kiley added. “You wouldn’t happen to have a joint in that pocket, would you?”

“Sorry.”

“Story of my life.”

Grady dipped his head and puffed until it was lit, then blew the smoke toward the grape arbor.

“I’ve got another question for you,” Kiley said.

“Shoot.”

“Why do men like long hair so much?”

He grinned a wicked grin around the cigar. “We like to gather it up and wrap it around our fist.”

“Shut. Up. Is that true?”

He shrugged. “Maybe that’s just me.”

Kiley gave Tinsley a wide-open, gaping look. “Told you he was a keeper.”

Grady chuckled. “Answer *me* a question, ladies.”

“Shoot,” Kiley threw his word back at him.

“Why do y’all always go to the restroom in pairs?”

Kiley grinned. “That’s an easy one. So we can talk about which guy we think has the biggest dick.”

“Kiley!” Tinsley shrieked. “Oh my God.”

“Riddle me this one, Batman. Why do men always want women to dress in sexy lingerie? Is that better than being naked?”

“Men are visual creatures. We see it, we want it. The lingerie is just a tease—a challenge for us to talk you out of.”

“Talk?”

“I’ve always found the way to turn a woman on is all about what you whisper in her ear.”

“Ooh... that’s so true. I do love dirty talk, and when a man whispers in my ear, that’s hot.” Kiley drained her glass and reached for the bottle, filling it up again. “This is fun. We can pick his brain for everything men think.” She sat back. “So tell me this, why do men always want sex first thing in the morning?”

“That’s easy. Morning wood, darlin’.”

“You’re being all quiet, Tins. Ask him something.” Kiley extended her index finger off her glass, gesturing to Grady.

“It’s too much fun listening to you.”

“I’ll ask one,” Grady offered. “What turns you on?” His question was for Tinsley, but she sucked her lips into her mouth and shook her head.

Kiley’s arm shot up. “Oh, I know. She loves when a man backs a woman against a door or wall or something.”

“Kiley!” Tinsley covered her face with a throw pillow.

“What? Every time we see that in a movie, you always swoon over it. Don’t deny it.”

“Good to know,” Grady teased, puffing on his cigar.

“What turns *you* on?” Tinsley dropped the pillow and gave it right back to him.

“I like a woman who initiates sex once in a while. I don’t want it to always have to be up to me.”

“Hmm. Good to know.” Kiley lifted a brow toward Tinsley. “Isn’t that good to know, Tins?”

Tinsley smiled behind her glass. “I can’t believe we’re having this conversation.”

“This is the best conversation I’ve had all week, maybe all month,” Kiley replied.

They finished both bottles of wine, and Tinsley and Kiley were getting glassy eyed and silly.



Grady tamped out his cigar. “Maybe we should eat something. You got a grill on the property?”

“Of course. It’s on the patio off the kitchen.” Tinsley pointed behind her.

“Your father said he’d have someone do some shopping for us. Let’s go see if there’s anything we can throw on the grill.” Grady stood and extended his hand to her.

“Okay.” She let him pull her to her feet.

Kiley leaned her head back. “You two go. My head is spinning. I’m just going to sit here a minute and watch the sunset.”

“You have to open your eyes for that, sweetie,” Tinsley teased.

“Shush,” Kiley replied. “You’re killing my buzz.”

Grady held the door for Tinsley and followed her inside. He paused, noticing the portrait above the fireplace. It was of Tinsley and Pharaoh. He pointed to it. “I like that shot.”

She followed his eyes. “Oh, God. It’s embarrassing.”

“Why? It’s a great shot.”

“I have three brothers. I’m the only one over the fireplace in that prime spot.”

“You’re obviously Daddy’s favorite, huh?”

“There’s the proof to rub in my brothers’ faces.”

“I’m sure they don’t care. I’m sure they don’t want their photo up there.”

“It’s huge.”

“Well, the shot of Pharaoh is nice.”

She slugged him in the arm. “Brat.”

He chuckled all the way to the kitchen, then opened the big double door refrigerator that probably cost more than his truck. It was spotless, with food and drink neatly lined up. There were steaks, lamb chops, salmon, eggs, sparkling water, juices of all kinds, and a multitude of fresh fruits and vegetables.

Tinsley came to stand at his side.

He tipped his head to meet her eyes. “Steaks okay?”

“Devine. I’ll skewer up some veggies to throw on with them.”

“Deal.” He took the meat, located a platter and a set of tongs, and headed out to the grill.

Half an hour later, they gathered around the table and enjoyed a nice meal and more wine. Afterward, Kiley had a crying jag, and Tinsley put her to bed.

Grady carried the dishes to the sink and rinsed and put them in the dishwasher.

Tinsley returned. “Wow. A man who is house trained.”

“I’ve done a dish or two in my day.”

“Good to know.”

“I need to make some phone calls. Check in with Tri Star,” he said. “Thanks for a lovely meal.”

“You did the cooking.”

“You helped.”

“Well, goodnight then. I think I’ll turn in, too.”

“See you in the morning, Tinsley.”



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

By mid-morning the next day, the girls were in bikinis, reclining on lounge chairs, and watching Grady do laps in the pool. He made his last one and hoisted himself out on the far side, closest to the house. “I’m going to get a drink. You ladies want anything?”

“Water,” Tinsley called out, and he gave a thumbs up, turning to walk inside.

Kiley slid her glasses down an inch. “My, my, that man is cut. And look at that ass.”

Once he disappeared through the sliders, Tinsley looked at her BFF. “Can I tell you something?”

“Always.”

“I think I want to have sex with him,” she confided.

“You’ve been attracted to him from the get-go, haven’t you?”

“We hated each other at first, but the more I’m around him, the more I really like him. He makes me feel safe.”

“That is his job.”

“I don’t mean in a bodyguard way. I mean... emotionally safe. Like I could talk to him about anything, tell him my

goals and dreams, and he wouldn't laugh at me."

"That's sweet. That's how it should be."

"I think so. But I never feel that with Palmer."

"No surprise there."

"You don't like Palmer, do you?"

"It's not that I don't like him. He's an okay guy, but he's wrong for you, Tins, and we both know it."

Tinsley fidgeted.

"You know I'm right. Look, once Palmer puts a ring on your finger, it'll be too late. You'll always wonder what if. What if I'd had the guts to take a chance? What if there had been something there? What if I'd missed out on the love of a lifetime? It's now or never, honey. He's single—which by the way, shocks the shit out of me. You're *semi-single*. Take a fucking shot. If it doesn't work out, it doesn't. At least you'll have—what I'm sure will be—a phenomenal night to look back on."

Grady returned with bottled water and passed them out. Then took the lounge chair next to Tinsley. She stood and pulled her sunglasses off.

"I need to cool off." She dove into the water, swam to the other side, then came back and climbed up the ladder.

Grady's eyes slid over her wet body, and he didn't hide the fact from her. He wanted her. She could see it in his hot gaze.

In that moment, she decided to listen to her friend's advice.

He tossed her a towel, and she caught it. "Thanks."

Towelng off, she returned to her lounge chair.

"We need a pool boy to bring us Mai Tais," Kiley murmured, her eyes closed, her head back.

"With all the wine you drank last night? Haven't you had enough alcohol?"

"Bite your tongue. There's no such thing."

Tinsley giggled. "No booze for you today. Your bff is not letting you turn into a sloppy drunk."

"Well, that sucks the fun right out of the day."

"Drink your water."

Kiley stuck her tongue out. "Make me."

"Well, if you're not going to drink it..." Tinsley cracked open a bottle and splashed it over Kiley, who shrieked and sat up. Tinsley burst out laughing while Kiley shook off the water.

"Not funny!"

"Oh, it *so* was."

Kiley's phone went off. She picked it up and looked at the screen.

"Is it that rat-bastard Randall Davis calling?" Tinsley asked.

Kiley frowned. “No, it’s my brother.” She put it on speaker. “Hey, Mikey. What’s up?”

“I’ve got some news, Kiley. I drove up to tell you. I’m at the gate. Can you have Tinsley call the gatehouse and tell them to let me in?”

Kiley frowned. “What news, Mikey?”

“It’s Gram, sis. She passed away last night.”

“This better be a joke.”

“I wish it was.”

Kiley’s eyes filled with tears, and Tinsley immediately grabbed the phone from her. “I’ll call them now, Mike.”

She made the call, and five minutes later, they’d all thrown some shorts and tees on and met him at the door. His eyes were red from crying, but it was obvious he was trying to be strong. For a nineteen-year-old little brother, he was the mature one in the family.

Kiley flew into his arms, and he hugged her tight.

Grady shoved his hands in his cargo shorts, and Tinsley waited until they broke apart to hug him, too.

“Come in, honey,” she said softly. “I’m so sorry. What happened?”

“Just old age, I guess. She never woke up this morning.”

“I can’t believe it.” Kiley sucked in a shuddering breath. “She’s really gone?”



Tinsley felt her throat tighten, and she couldn't speak. It broke her heart for the pain her friend was feeling. She took Kiley's hand, giving it a squeeze.

"I came to bring you home, Kiley. Mom needs you. We all do."

"How is mom?" Kiley asked with trepidation in her voice.

"Not good. She hasn't stopped crying, and she started drinking when I left."

"Oh, Lord," Kiley whispered. "I'll go pack."

"I should go with you," Tinsley offered, but Kiley shook her head.

"You stay here. There's nothing you can do. It's better if I deal with my mother alone. You know how she gets."

Tinsley gave her a hug. "I'm so sorry, honey. I always loved your gram."

"I know you did. She loved you, too."

Kiley pulled free and dashed from the room, wiping tears from her cheeks.

Grady extended his hand to Mike. "My name's Grady. Sorry to be meeting you under these circumstances."

Mike shook it. "Mike. Nice to meet you."

"Come sit down." Tinsley led them into the living area of the great room. "Can I get you a juice or something?"

“No, I’m fine.”

“Is your father home?” Tinsley asked softly.

“Yeah, surprisingly, there were no business trips this week. Usually, he’s out of town.”

“That’s good. Someone should be there with your mother.”

Mike nodded, then stood when Kiley came back, her bag in hand. He moved to take it from her.

Tinsley hugged Kiley tight. “Call me, okay?”

“I will.”

“I’m so sorry, Mike.” Tinsley gave him another hug.

“Thanks for everything, bodyguard dude.” Kiley hugged Grady and whispered in his ear. “I’m rooting for you, sweetie. I never liked Palmer.”

Grady gave her a half smile when she pulled back. Then he shook Mike’s hand again. “Drive safe.”

Once they were gone, a melancholy settled over the place. Tinsley sat on the sofa and stared out at the lake.

“You okay? Can I get you anything?” Grady offered.

She just shook her head, so he withdrew, letting her have space.

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Later in the afternoon, Grady found Tinsley sitting outside under the arbor, just staring into space.

“Do you want me to build a fire?” he asked softly.

She shook her head. “I just want to be alone.”

So he withdrew again.

At sunset, the wind picked up, and the temperature dropped, and still she hadn't come in. He carried a throw blanket out and wrapped it around her.

“Come inside, babe.”

She let him lead her through the French doors that led to the master bedroom. He tucked her in the big Mediterranean style bed and built a fire in the fireplace.

Then he kissed her forehead, turned out the light, and let her sleep.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Tinsley finally woke and checked the time on her phone. It was after 9 pm.

The room was warm, and the fire was still burning. She pushed the covers back and went to the French doors, peering out. There was a full moon shining brightly. Grady sat at a table, staring out at the lake, a drink next to him.

She wanted to go to him. She wanted him to hold her in his arms. No, she wanted much more than that. What happened today only brought home for her the fact that life is finite, and she only got one shot at living it the way she wanted. She was so sad for Kiley, but her best friend had been right about one thing. She shouldn't be afraid to go after what or who she wanted.

She turned from the window and went in search of the room Grady had claimed. She found what she was looking for, grabbing one of his dress shirts. Returning to the master, she slipped her clothes off and pulled his shirt over her naked body, leaving the placket unbuttoned.

Stepping outside, she only walked a few steps, soundless in her bare feet.

Something made Grady turn. Perhaps his training, perhaps her breathing. He froze, his eyes sweeping over her, and she

could tell he hadn't missed the inch wide gap in the shirt or the fact that she had nothing on under it. But perhaps she was in the shadows, and he couldn't see clearly.

"Nice shirt. You raid my closet?" he teased. When she didn't reply, he called her name in a softer, more serious tone. "Tinsley?"

"I don't want to be alone right now," she whispered.

"I'm right here, princess."

"That's not what I mean." Be brave, she told herself as she shrugged out of his shirt, and let it fall.

His lips parted, and his gaze moved over every inch of her. His voice was gravelly when he finally found words. "You sure about this?"

"I've never been more sure of anything in my life."

The metal chair scraped along the slate tiles as he stood. He moved to her slowly until he stood before her. She had to tilt her head to look at him.

"You wanted my attention. You've got it, sweetheart."

"I don't want to regret not taking a chance."

"What about tomorrow morning? I don't want to be something else you regret."

"I could never regret a minute spent with you."

He scooped her into his arms and carried her to the bedroom, kicking the door shut behind them. He set her down

and backed her against the wall.

She sucked in a breath at the cool plaster pressed to her back. He put his hands on the wall above her head, bracketing her in. His head dipped, and he kissed her like she wanted, with passion and heat.

When he broke the kiss, he was breathing hard. “I won’t want to stop. One night will never be enough. Last chance to back out, Miss Wyatt.”

“Never, Mr. Steele.”

He pulled back an inch, as if he was having second thoughts. “Maybe you just like the forbidden. Is banging your bodyguard hot?”

“You know it’s more than that.”

“Is it?”

“When I bought that red lace teddy, it wasn’t Palmer I imagined wearing it for. It was you. It’s you I lie awake at night and think about.”

He leaned close and whispered in her ear. “I think about you, too. I fantasize about you sliding down my body, licking your way to my hard and ready cock. Then you sink your pretty mouth over it, and I thread my fingers through your hair and fuck your mouth slow, enjoying every second. Goddamn, the thought of that makes my balls ache so badly I have to get myself off every night.”

Her breathing came faster now, her chest rising and falling, and she felt herself get wet. “I... I want that, too.”

He dipped his head to her other ear, licking the lobe before whispering in his low, deep voice. “I want to put you on all fours and run my hands over your ass and up your spine. I want to dip my fingers in your pussy and find it hot and wet for me. I want to play with you until you squirm and beg me to take you, beg me to get you off.”

Her nipples were hard and throbbing, and she felt another gush of lubrication flow. She rolled her head against the wall. “Yes, yes. Please. I want that. I want to give you that.”

His big hands settled on her hips, giving a squeeze. The first contact made her jump, her heart pounding.

Warm, calloused palms slid over her skin, trailing upward over the indentation of her waist, over her ribs until finally they closed over her breasts, squeezing firmly.

His mouth covered hers, taking her moan into his throat, teasing her with his tongue, and she tasted wine on his lips. Rough thumbs found her sensitive engorged nipples and strummed them, driving her higher.

She arched into his touch. It was heaven, and she wanted more.

With a groan, he deepened the kiss. His tongue slid against hers until her head fell back, and she gasped for air. He took advantage and blazed a trail down her throat, licking and



sucking until he reached the tender skin where her collar met her shoulder. He sunk his teeth in, giving her a gentle nip.

She sucked in a breath, as her bare body was yanked against his fully clothed one. Their eyes locked, and she felt his erection, strong and hard, through his jeans.

His thumbs toyed with her nipples until that wasn't enough, and he dropped his head, his arms banding around her waist to hoist her up until he found one nipple and then the other with his hot, wet mouth. He sucked hard, and she bucked against him.

He carried her to the bed, and gently laid her on it, then followed her down, settling over her. His weight felt delicious, pinning her to the mattress, and she clutched at him.

His mouth trailed over her skin, pressing hot kisses, sometimes sucking, sometimes nipping, working his way lower until his shoulders spread her thighs apart, and she was wide open for him. He looked his fill, and the heat in his eyes sent another ripple of desire through her.

“Close your eyes,” he said in a voice thick with hunger.

When she did, he brushed barely-there kisses along the soft skin of her thighs, moving ever closer to the apex.

She lifted her hips, desperately wanting more, but he made her wait, torturing her with anticipation until she couldn't stand it anymore. Her skin tingled, eager for his mouth.

“Oh, please,” she begged, but it was no use. He wasn’t going to be rushed. He took his sweet time until finally his thumbs brushed over her and spread her folds open. His tongue dragged flat against her clit in one long, incredible swipe that stroked over a million nerve endings. Every inch of her skin sizzled with need.

He came back for another, and another, and then sank two fingers inside her and worked her into a frenzy with his thrusts. He found that spot inside her that had her bucking against him, her breasts jiggling.

He took her higher and higher until she was so close to the edge.

“Pinch your nipples,” he ordered.

She did, and in that moment, he sucked on her clit, and she went barreling over the precipice to soar into the sweetest orgasm. Her head went back, and her mouth opened, and she moaned. While she sank into reality, he lapped at her release, licking every drop clean. Sinking her fingers into his hair, she scraped her nails along his scalp and studied his every movement, until he withdrew his fingers and carried them to her mouth.

“Suck,” he ordered. And she did, His eyes turned molten, watching her, and with his free hand, he unbuckled himself and pulled his dick free. “Goddamn, that’s hot.”

She glanced down. He was long and hard and beautiful. He wrapped an arm around her waist and hauled her up the

bed, until she was propped against the headboard a bit, then he straddled her and brought his dick to her wet lips with his fist. He swirled the head around them, getting it slick.

“Open.”

She complied immediately, and he sank into her mouth to the hilt. She moaned around his girth, and her tongue stroked the underside.

“Fuck, yes. Take it all.” He rocked his hips, pulling out and driving in, slowly at first, until his desire grew unrestrained.

She grabbed him, pulling him close.

“You want it?” His voice was gravelly.

She bobbed her head, and a moment later, he came down her throat. She swallowed and sucked and lapped up every drop.

He withdrew and collapsed against the headboard next to her.

“You’re not done, are you?” she teased.

He grinned. “Not by a long shot. Just give me a minute.”

She used her time to unbutton his shirt and trail kisses down his chest, to his abs, to his bellybutton, and down that sexy stripe of hair that led into his jeans. By the time she got there, his dick was already bobbing to life. She took hold of it

and stroked. He covered her hand with his and taught her the motion he liked. Soon he was hard again.

He stood, dug in his pocket for a condom, and tore his clothes off. Moving to the foot of the bed, he grabbed her ankles and dragged her down the bed. She yelped.

He rolled the condom on and climbed over her, then swirled the head around the opening of her pussy, dipping it in the wetness, getting it slick and ready.

“Tell me this is mine,” he said.

“Yes, yours. All yours.”

“Only mine?”

“Only yours.”

He thrust inside, going up on his hands and staring into her eyes as he sank deep. She gasped at the sensation of being filled so completely. She moaned as he rocked his hips against her, dragging his body over her clit with each slow movement.

His eyes dropped to her breasts, watching them bounce with each thrust he made.

Then he gathered her hands in his and pinned them to the bed above her head. She stared into his eyes, watching them heat with desire.

“So good,” she panted. “So, so good.”

His jaw tightened, and his speed picked up, like her words had heated the fire even hotter between them. “I’m never

gonna want to stop.” He repeated his earlier threat.

“Never,” she agreed.

He shifted, taking both wrists in one hand, freeing his other to squeeze her breast and play with the nipple. He brought his head down and captured the bud, sucking hard. She threw her head back, a sharp ripple of desire shooting through her, and she wrapped her legs around him, squeezing tight on his dick.

He moaned, then moved his hand between them, and his thumb found her clit. He brushed it again and again, in slow, firm strokes, until she thrashed beneath him, eagerly pressing her hips up for more. He kept at her, never changing pace, until her breathing grew ragged.

He dipped his head and ran his nose along her ear. “Come all over my dick, pretty girl.”

She exploded at his words, coming long and hard, a gush of wetness coating him.

He released his hold on her, planted his hands in the bed and fucked her hard until he finally followed her over the edge into oblivion.

Gasping, he collapsed on top of her, and she gladly took his weight, reveled in it, stroking his back, until his breathing finally slowed.

He went up on his elbows, kissed her, then slowly pulled out of her. She felt an immediate emptiness and wanted him

back, but he stood to go into the bathroom and take care of the condom.

When he returned, he gathered her close, stroking her arm.

She cuddled against him and pressed a kiss to his chest.

“What happens now?” she whispered.

“You want to give this a shot?”

“Yes. More than anything I’ve ever wanted.”

“Then we’ll figure it out.” He pressed a kiss to her temple.

“Grady?”

“Yeah?”

“There’s something you should know.” She felt his body tense.

“What’s that?”

“I think my father is being blackmailed.”

“Blackmailed? Over what?”

“I heard him talking to Palmer’s father. It was something about an illegal stock trade that could send Daddy to prison. If I don’t marry Palmer, it sounded like Patrick Pace would turn him in.”

“Do you believe he’d do that?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you think Palmer knows?”

“I don’t want to believe he does. Grady?”

“Yes, baby?”

“I have to go to the Oilman’s Ball Saturday.”

“I know.”

“With Palmer.”

His chest moved as he blew out a breath. “I get that.”

“But I promise, right after that, I’ll tell him it’s over between us.”

“All right.”

“You believe me, don’t you?”

“Until you give me reason not to, I’ll believe everything you tell me. Trust is a sacred thing, Tinsley. Once it’s broken, it’s hard to repair.”

“I’ll never break your trust. I swear it.”

“And I’d climb any mountain if you needed me. Always.”

“I... I think I love you, Grady.”

“Good, because I’m sure I love you, Tinsley.”

She lifted her head and smiled. “We’re really doing this.”

He grinned and brushed a light kiss on her lips. “We’re really doing this.”





## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Grady stood along the wall of the ballroom of the Wagner Hotel. This year's location of the Oilman's Ball. The theme was art déco, Gatsby style, so there was a lot of black and gold.

Palmer stood as dessert was being served and tapped his butter knife against his wine glass. "If I could have everyone's attention, please." The round table quieted. "I wanted to wait for my parents and other brother to arrive, but it seems their plane was diverted due to a storm, and I can't wait another minute. I've put this off long enough." He looked at Perry and slapped him on the shoulder. "At least I have my little bro with me here tonight." He cleared his throat and turned to his other side, where Tinsley sat. She looked up at him with a wary, questioning look.

Grady got a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. He suddenly knew what was coming. Tinsley looked beautiful tonight in a long glittering gold dress, her back exposed as low as was decent.

"I think you all know the lovely Tinsley Wyatt. Crowned queen at her debutante ball, magna cum laude graduate, and daughter of one of the ten best-dressed women in Dallas." He turned and lifted his glass to Loretta. People laughed and

applauded. Palmer turned back to Tinsley. “This girl has had my heart for longer than she knows.”

The smile on her face disappeared, and the blood drained from her face.

Palmer set his drink down, dug in his pocket, and got down on one knee. Even from across the room, Grady recognized the Tiffany box.

When he popped the lid back, Tinsley’s mouth fell open. The diamond was big enough to sparkle in the light clear across the room. “I love you, Tinsley. I want to spend the rest of my days with you. I want to give you the life you deserve. I want to make you happy. Be my wife. Make me the happiest man alive.”

With that, he pulled the ring out, took her hand and slipped the giant rock on her ring finger.

Her panicked eyes searched out Grady as she was embraced first by Palmer, then his brother, then her father and mother. Cheers went up, and the band started playing *The Chapel of Love*.

Grady watched it all like a slow-motion train wreck, destroying the future he’d hoped could be theirs. She’d said she’d planned to break it off with Palmer. Now she wore his ring, and she didn’t seem to be putting the brakes on this farce.

Perhaps he’d misjudged her. Perhaps she’d played him. Perhaps he was just someone she’d used to keep her amused

while her lover was out of town.

Could he have misread everything so wrong? He didn't have to look far into his past to know the answer. He felt the same heartache he'd felt when Angeline had mailed him back his ring.

The ball continued, with Palmer leading Tinsley out onto the dance floor. Throughout the night, they received congratulations from many of the other attendees, the *crème de la crème* of Dallas society.

Grady couldn't wait for the evening to be over.

And then suddenly there was a murmur through the crowd and the vibe changed in the room. Grady looked around, trying to figure out what had happened, what he'd missed. People were whispering behind hands, and then he saw Palmer sitting with his head in his hands, and Tinsley rubbing his back. Perry shook his head over and over. Then Palmer was handed a phone, and he took it, stalking out of the ballroom. His brother and JD followed.

Tinsley and her mother sat at the table, their heads together, Loretta's arm around her daughter.

Grady strode over. "What's going on?"

Tinsley turned, tears running down her cheeks. "Their plane went down. Oh, Grady, all of them. Palmer's mother and father, and his younger brother. There are no survivors."

"Are you sure?"

She nodded. “He just got the call.”

Loretta stood. “Perhaps we should head to the estate. We can deal with things better from there. Would you have the car brought around, Mr. Steele?”

“Of course. Let me tell them we’re heading down.” Grady stepped away, letting Thomas know they’d be moving to the estate now.

It was a long, silent ride. No one in the car knew what to say, it seemed.

Once they were at the estate, JD took them into his study, where Grady heard him verify the facts of the plane crash. Apparently, they’d been in the Pace private jet, flying from a quick trip to Corpus Christi when the jet went down in an onion field in DeWitt County, southeast of San Antonio. The wreckage had been found, and the plane identified by its tail numbers. The Texas State Police confirmed all passengers had perished.

There had been storms in the area, but what had caused the accident had not immediately been determined. No emergency radio transmission had been heard from the pilot.

Palmer tried to be strong, but devastation was written all over his face. Mrs. Wyatt leaned over where he sat and tried to comfort him.

Grady couldn’t help studying JD, knowing what Tinsley had told him. If there was any truth to the threats and

blackmail story, then JD just got off the hook. He no longer had the threat of exposure for SEC violations and prison time hanging over his head.

His father's death was sure to affect any political ambitions of Palmer's. Patrick Pace had been a powerful and influential man. Without his connections, it wasn't such a sure thing that Palmer would win the senate seat he—or perhaps more likely—his father had so badly wanted for him.

It seemed everything that had appeared like such a solid, locked in path just hours ago, was now up in the air.

“You and Perry should stay the night,” Loretta insisted. “I'll have guest rooms prepared for you both.”

“I'll make sure Maria and Cloe prepare them now, Mother.” Tinsley slipped out of the room. Grady followed.

“Tinsley,” he hissed, motioning her around a corner into the dining room. She followed.

“Oh, Grady. It's all so horrible.” She went into his arms.

“Don't you see what this means? There's no one left to blackmail your father any longer. You don't have to worry about how what you do will affect him.”

She nodded. “I know. I thought of that. But, Grady, Palmer is so devastated. I can't reject him now. I have to wait until he gets through this.”

“And how long is that, exactly?”

“I don’t know. The funeral I suppose.”

Maria came from the kitchen, and they broke apart. “Miss Wyatt, should I serve coffee to everyone?”

“Um, yes, but we need to make up the guest rooms. Palmer and his brother will be staying the night.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll see to it.”

“I’ll help you.” Tinsley moved to follow her. She looked over her shoulder at Grady, and mouthed the words, *I love you*.



## CHAPTER NINETEEN

The funeral of Palmer's father, mother, and brother was long and heartbreaking. The entire day was excruciating, and by the end, Tinsley had the headache to end all headaches.

After the burial under the hot Texas sun, mourners were invited to the Wyatt's estate for coffee and cake.

Tinsley kept going over how she would tell Palmer the engagement was off. She couldn't think of the words to start. The man had just lost so much. Would this be the straw that broke him?

Greeting guests grew to be too much for her, and tomorrow she would have to go through it all again at the memorial service for Kiley's grandmother. It was all too much. Tinsley made her escape, claiming to need to check on the coffee service.

She fussed at the table, straightening silverware that didn't need straightening, and taking a minute for herself.

Perry approached, coming to stand at her side, his hands in his pockets. "How are you, Tinsley?"

"Oh, Perry. I'm okay. How are you holding up? This day must be incredibly hard for you."



“It is.” He stepped closer, and she took the cue and enfolded him in a hug. He dipped his head to her shoulder. “I can’t believe they’re all gone. Now it’s only Palmer and me. I just can’t wrap my head around it, Tins.”

She patted his back and tried to pull away, but he clutched tighter. “At least we have you.”

“Always,” she murmured.

Palmer walked up, and they broke apart. He put his arm around Tinsley’s waist and spoke to his brother. “Hamm would like to arrange a time for the reading of the will. He suggested next week, but I have a lot to do with the company. We settled on tomorrow afternoon.”

“Good of you to consult with me before you both settled on a date.”

Palmer rolled his eyes. “Don’t start. You know this is hard for me. I’ve got to step up and deal with the company. That wasn’t exactly in my plans, either. Deal with it.”

“Guys—”

Perry stalked off.

“Palmer, he’s hurting, too.”

“We both are. But all the responsibility has fallen to me, not him.”

“Then share it.”

“Share it? He pissed away two million dollars before he came home with his tail between his legs. I’m not letting him anywhere near the company.”

“You may not have a choice, depending on what the will says.”

“Dad wasn’t stupid enough to leave him a controlling interest. Mom would make sure he was taken care of financially. He was always her favorite, but Dad would make sure the company was locked up tight from him.” He looked around the crowd, then back at her. “You’ll come with me, of course.”

“Tomorrow?”

“Yes, it was the only day that worked with my schedule.”

“I can’t. I’ve got Kiley’s grandmother’s funeral tomorrow.”

“Tinsley. You’re my fiancée. You need to be with me. How would it look?”

Anger flared inside her. “What about how it would *look* for me to not be there for my best friend? It’s a funeral. That trumps your reading of the will, Palmer. You’ll just have to go alone.”

He frowned, and Tinsley knew the look on his face was probably because she’d shocked him. It wasn’t often she put her foot down.

“I’m not sure I like this side of you, sweetheart.”

“Ditto.”

He arched a brow at that. “This isn’t like you at all.”

She rubbed her temples. She knew in another moment she’d snap at him that she was through with him, and as true as that was, this was not the time or place. She could wait another day. “I have a headache.”

“I knew there had to be a reason. Another one of your migraines?” The way he said it was condescending, as if he doubted their existence. “Perhaps you should go lie down.”

“Perhaps I should.” With that, she turned on her heel and clicked down the hall. She didn’t take the stairs to the second floor, instead she spied her father sitting on the patio by the pool.

Grady moved off the wall, across the room and through the crowd, to follow her, but she stopped him at the French doors with a hand to his chest.

“I just want to talk to my father in private.”

He nodded. “I’ll wait here.”

She knew he’d have eyes on her at all times, watching through the glass.

She moved to the outdoor sofa and sat next to her father.

“You okay, Daddy?”

“Yes. Just needed some air.”

“It’s been a long day.”

He rubbed her back. “How are you holding up?”

“I’m fine. Things have changed, haven’t they?” She turned to look at him. “With Patrick’s death.”

“I suppose they have. Palmer will need you more than ever.”

She looked away.

“Are you happy, baby girl?”

“Happiness doesn’t figure into it. I do what I have to do for the family. Only the strong survive, right? Only the best win? You taught me that, Daddy.” She looked at the horizon. “Perfection is all that matters.” She was in a mood, and she was letting all her built up grievances show.

“That’s not the lesson I want you to take from me. That’s not the legacy I want to leave you with.”

“It’s how you’ve always lived.”

“There are things I need to tell you, things I need to say.”

“I’m listening.”

“Happiness *does* figure into it, Tinsley. It’s all I’ve ever wanted for you. I’m sorry if I made you feel you had to be perfect. I just saw so much potential in you, baby girl. I came from nothing, worked my way up. Did some things to get where I am that were wrong. Straight up wrong. I cheated, stole, lied, whatever I had to do and made excuses for every one of ‘em. I told myself I was doing it for my family.” He

shook his head. “But that was only partially true. I think, in the end, I just wanted to prove to my ol’ man I was somebody, that I was worthy, that I could succeed. He’d always told me I was born worthless, and I’d die worthless.”

Her eyes filled.

He looked at her and squeezed her knee. “I guess that’s why I always told you that you were worth so much more and the reason I always pushed you so hard. Here I thought I was letting you know how much I believed in you, but instead, all I was doing was putting too much pressure on you.” He scoffed. “I guess too many expectations can be just as bad as none at all.”

She swallowed and tears formed in her eyes.

He brought her hand to his mouth and kissed the back. “I love you, baby girl. I need you to know that.”

“I do, Daddy.”

“Good.”

“I need you to tell me the truth about something, Daddy. I overheard you talking to Patrick Pace. He was blackmailing you, wasn’t he?”

Her father sighed. “He was pressuring me to put his son at the top of your suitor list, make sure he got a shot. Try to convince you to accept his proposal. I thought you two hit it off. But if he’s not the one for you, I wouldn’t have cared what

Palmer's father thought he held over me. You think I'd sacrifice my daughter's happiness?"

"Well, it's a moot point now, I guess. He's dead and buried."

"You believe me, don't you?"

"Sure." She nodded, tears filling her eyes. She wanted to believe him.

"Love's a funny thing. You've got no control over it." He looked at the horizon. "Your momma sure was something when she was your age. I wish you could have known her back then. Came from a good family, an important family. She took me on when I didn't have two dimes to rub together. She could have had her pick of men more suited than me. But a man's worth can't be proven by a bank statement, honey. Guess she taught me that over the years." He looked at her. "I just wanted better for you, Tinsley. You're a smart girl, and you've got your momma's good sense. You know what's in your heart. Follow it." He squeezed her hand again. "Judge a man by what's in his, and you'll do well."

She nodded.

"Come on. Let's go back inside."

They stood, and he put his arm around her. Tinsley tried to keep the thought out of her head that maybe her father had arranged Patrick's death somehow. It was a ridiculous thought. It was an awful thought. Surely, no matter how cut-throat he

was in business, he wouldn't kill a man, woman, and their sixteen-year-old son.





## CHAPTER TWENTY

It had been four days since the Pace family funeral. The day after, Tinsley had attended Kiley's grandmother's funeral. Watching the emotion in her best friend, Mike, and their entire family cut such a stark contrast for her of how Palmer and Perry had acted at their parents' and brother's funeral.

They'd been stoic, she'd thought, but now, as she sat at her dinner table where the brothers had been invited, she knew it was something more. There was a coldness there she hadn't seen before. She could understand sometimes the relationship between fathers and sons, and even between brothers was difficult, but my God, they'd lost their mother, their little brother, yet all they talked about was the division of the estate and the division of the workload and the responsibility the business added.

She picked at her food, wishing the meal was over and she could escape.

She hadn't been able to find a moment to break things off with Palmer. No time ever seemed right. It was hard to find him alone, and she knew the moment she did, all hell would break loose. Did she rock the boat the day of Kiley's grandmother's funeral? The day the will was read? The day he spent trying to get a handle on the business? The day he finally

saw all the financials and realized things weren't going well? The day her mother tried to give them a nice dinner and family time?

Or was she just making excuses?

Why was it so hard?

She was dragging her feet.

She'd do it tonight. She had to stop thinking of everyone but herself. She had to just get it over with. After dessert, she'd ask to speak to him outside. She'd do it quickly. Short and sweet. Just say the words. *I can't marry you, Palmer. I don't love you.*

Dessert had just been set before each of them—Mother's family recipe for peach cobbler—when Palmer's phone went off.

"I'm sorry. I should have silenced it," he apologized, while taking it out. "Sorry, this looks important. Excuse me for a moment."

He tossed his napkin on the table and walked into the foyer where Grady stood, always on duty.

Tinsley nibbled on her dessert, not really hungry now that she'd decided the moment of truth had come.

A moment later, Palmer appeared in the doorway. "Something urgent has come up. I've got to leave. I'm so sorry. Thank you for a lovely meal, Mrs. Wyatt. Tinsley, I'll call you."

And then he was gone, before she'd even stood from her chair.

"Sit and finish your cobbler, dear," her mother said, eyeing her with a look that told her a lady does not run after a man.

The meal dragged on for another half hour before she was able to get away.

Finally, her father invited Perry, her brother Jed, and Cooper, who'd made a rare appearance, and even Grady, into his study for brandy and cigars.

Tinsley took the opportunity to sneak off to the stables. She entered Pharaoh's stall and fed him a carrot she'd snatched from the kitchen. "There's my good boy." She picked up a brush and stroked his flanks. She brushed him for a long time. When she was through, she kissed his nose.

"I thought I'd find you here."

She whirled to see Grady standing with his hands in his pockets.

"Grady." She smiled and moved toward him, but he held up a hand, and she froze.

"You know, I may not make the most money. I may not have a high-powered job or a future as a senator, but baby, I'd have been there for you when you needed me."

"You sound like you're breaking it off with me."

“Breaking it off?” He lifted his chin to the diamond she still wore. “You wear another man’s engagement ring. You said you’d break it off with him. Yet, it’s been days, and you still haven’t done it.”

“I will. I promise. I was going to do it tonight, I—”

“Stop, Tinsley. I don’t want to hear your excuses. I may be slow to see the light, but I finally see it.”

“I’m going to tell him. It’s you I want. Everything I said —”

“Everything you said? I’m beginning to think everything you said was bullshit. You didn’t mean any of it, did you?”

“That’s not true. I did. I do. You have to believe me.”

He shook his head. “I’ve made arrangements for another operative to be your bodyguard from here on out. I just can’t do it anymore, Miss Wyatt.”

“Don’t call me that like I mean nothing to you. I love you, and you love me. I know you do.”

“That doesn’t seem to matter.”

“It does.”

“Goodbye, Miss. Wyatt.” He turned and walked away.

“You don’t mean that.” Tears streamed down her face. “Grady, tell me you don’t mean that!”

He walked out of the stable, leaving her alone. A moment later, her oldest brother came in and took her into his arms.

She sobbed on his shoulder.

“Shh, Tins. It’s for the best. You’ll have a new bodyguard tomorrow.”

“I don’t want another bodyguard. I want Grady. What did he tell you?”

“Just that things had crossed the line, and he needed to step back, and Tri Star would have another man here in the morning.”

“I love him, Jed. I love him.”

“Shh,” he whispered, pressing her head to his shoulder.

*He won’t really leave, she thought. Not after everything we shared. He’ll be here in the morning. He has to be. He loves you.*

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The next morning, when Tinsley awoke, Grady was gone. She went to go find him and stopped short when another man stood in the foyer.

“Hello, Miss Wyatt. I’m Stan.”

She shook her head. No. Grady couldn’t be gone. Not for good. She ran to her room and called his phone. It went to voicemail.

She tried to text him, but he wouldn't respond. After the third text, she knew she was starting to look pathetic.

She stood at the window, looking out as it rained, pattering the glass.

Somehow, she'd get him back. She knew where he lived. She'd drive to his house if she had to. She'd stake out Tri Star. She'd make him see it wasn't all a lie. She'd make him see how much she loved him. It couldn't be over between them. She wouldn't let it be. He loved her. He'd told her so.

Tears fell down her cheeks.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Grady stood in the Tri Star conference room, going over everything they had on the explosion at Wyatt Oil Rig #7. He stared at the map and pointed to the area west of the rig. “Whoever stood in that field and smoked those cigarettes down to the butts had something to do with this.”

Chris stroked his chin. “We have to find out who owns the white truck.”

Big Al hustled in. “Found it. Hit the jackpot at a burger joint on the edge of Odessa. Look at this.” He held up his phone and showed them a recording he’d made of the security footage. “The place is open all night. He stopped at the drive-thru.”

Chris and Grady crowded around, watching intently.

“Give it a second. There it is.”

Grady leaned in.

It was footage of the drive-thru window. The white truck pulled up, and they could clearly see Ajax Plumbing on the side of the door.

The employee passed a bag of food to the driver, a man in a ball cap.



“There’s a passenger,” Chris said, leaning closer. “Looks like a woman.”

“I think so, too,” Al agreed. “The manager said she thought they’d been in there before.”

“Can you see the license plate?” Grady asked.

“No. I ran the shot over and over. There’s too much glare from the lights,” Al replied.

“Get a line on this company. Find out how many of these trucks they have and who might have been driving this one at two am that night,” Chris ordered.

“I’m on it,” Grady replied.

“I’ll help you,” Al said.

The two of them did a quick computer search and got an address for the business, then pulled the address up on a maps app and studied the street picture.

“Looks like a house,” Al said.

“Must be a one-man operation.”

“What reason would this guy have to attack the rig?” Al asked.

“Ex-employee maybe?” Grady mused. He did some more searching and found the company registered to a Frank Bonner. He dug in his pocket and pulled out the card Bodie had given him, then texted him.

**GRADY: Do you have any ex-employees by the name of Frank Bonner?**

Bodie didn't reply immediately.

"He's probably on the rig floor working," Grady mused. "Let's drive out there and check out this address."

Al drove to the address of Ajax Plumbing. Sure enough, a white pickup truck sat in the driveway. Grady copied down the license plate.

While they waited for Bodie's response, they parked down the street and watched the house. Eventually, Grady's phone dinged with a text.

**BODIE: I checked back five years - no employee by that name**

Grady held the phone up for Al to read it.

"They're on the move." Al tapped Grady's arm.

Grady straightened and watched a man and woman come out and get in the truck. "Follow them."

Al pulled out.

"There were two sets of footprints that night. The one that hung back had a smaller shoe size. Must be the girl. She waited in the cotton field while Frank set the explosives."

“Makes sense. Only thing that doesn’t is why.” Al hung back so they wouldn’t realize they’d picked up a tail. They followed them to a diner, where the couple parked and went inside.

Grady observed them together as they entered. “I think they’re married. What do you think?”

“I think you’re right.”

“If so, we might be able to use that to get one of them to flip on the other.”

“Maybe so,” Al agreed.

“You know what I’m thinking?”

“We need their DNA.” Al rubbed his jaw.

“Right. I’m thinking we get it off something they touch in there.”

“Good idea.”

“Let’s go talk to the manager.” Grady reached for the door handle.

“Wait. Let’s use these,” Al leaned across and pulled two badges out of the glove box, tossing one to Grady. Then grabbed a couple of evidence bags, which he jammed in his pocket.

“FBI?” Grady asked, reading the badge.

“Hey, I’ve used them before. They open a lot of doors and a lot of mouths. People don’t fuck around when they think

they're dealing with the feds.”

“This is highly illegal.”

“So is a lot of shit we do.”

“True, but we need to play this lowkey. We can't send up alarm bells before we get our hands on that DNA.”

They entered the diner and sat in a booth away from their targets. When the waitress came over, they discreetly flashed her the badges.

Grady read the girl's name tag. She looked about eighteen.

“Hi, Zoey. I need you to play it cool right now. Don't turn and look, but there's a couple in a booth over there. Guy's wearing a black ball cap. After they finish and leave, I need you to make sure no one touches the dirty dishes on that table. Once they pull out, we're going to need to confiscate the glasses and silverware for DNA evidence. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“It's really important you don't touch anything on their table once they walk out. Understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I need you to act normal.”

“Are they serial killers or something?”

“No, ma'am. Just wanted in connection with an explosion.”

“Oh.”

“Can you do what I asked, Zoey?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Great. While we’re waiting, could we get some coffee? We need to look like regular customers.”

“Yes, sir.” She returned with two mugs and set them on the table. Grady noticed her hands shaking.

“Nothin’ to be nervous about, Zoey. We’re just trying to verify if they’re who we’re lookin’ for. You’re in no danger.”

“Okay. You want some pie?”

Grady grinned. “Sure. Pie would be nice.”

They drank coffee and ate apple pie while they waited. Finally, the couple got up, paid at the register, and left.

Zoey hovered over the table, pretending to bus it. Once the white pickup pulled out, Grady and Al walked over and bagged the drinking glasses, silverware, and napkins.

“Thanks, doll. You’ve been a real help.” Al passed her a twenty and they headed out.

When they got back to Tri Star, Chris had the evidence sent to a private lab that did rapid DNA testing and should be able to do a DNA comparison with the cigarette butts quickly.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Tinsley went to her room early, faking a headache. Stan was down talking to her father in his study, assured she was up in her room for the night. The man followed her like a hawk. She tried Grady for the umpteenth time, but still, he didn't reply. Frustrated, she tossed her phone on the bed and opened the doors to the gallery. She looked up at the quarter moon in the starry night and remembered it had been full the night she and Grady spent together. It was a bittersweet memory. If only she'd known then how things would turn out. Oh, how she'd have done things differently.

A whinny from the stables carried to her, then another. She frowned. Something was wrong with Pharaoh. He sounded agitated. Her first thought was for his safety. Why just last week, she'd heard about a stable fire in Oklahoma that had killed almost a dozen horses. Without thinking, she dashed down the stairs and across the path.

Pushing the big door open, she noticed a light on the far end.

Pharaoh whinnied again.

Tinsley approached his stall and opened his door. Pharaoh was in the corner. She stepped in. "What is it, boy?" She stroked his neck, and someone covered her mouth and dragged

her out of the stall. Pharaoh whinnied again, prancing and kicking the wall.

A strong man, his sleeves covered in black sweatshirt material, dragged her to the far end of the building. She twisted enough to see he wore a hoodie, but it was too dark to see his face. Then she realized there was something between his gloved hand and her mouth—a rag soaked in something that smelled awful. She struggled but couldn't avoid inhaling it. Soon everything was fuzzy, and she slipped into oblivion.

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Early the next morning, Stan entered the kitchen.

“Good morning, señor. Can I get you coffee and some of my delicious churros with chocolate sauce?”

“Sounds delicious, Maria. Thank you.”

She poured him a cup and carried it to the table. “I know you like it black.”

“I do. Thank you.”

She moved to get a plate for him.

Stan sipped the rich coffee. “Mmm. Your coffee is delicious, Maria.”

“Now what is that horse doing, eating my begonias?”



Stan twisted to see her peering out the window over the sink. It was such an odd statement that he stood and walked to her, peering over her head. “Is that Miss Wyatt’s horse?”

“Yes, that’s him, though I’ve never seen him unattended before. He doesn’t even have a bridle on.”

Stan jerked the door open and slowly approached the horse, looking for any signs of injury. Dread flooded through him, and he dashed inside and into the foyer.

JD was just coming down the stairs and turned with a surprised frown as Stan bolted up the steps past him to Tinsley’s room.

The door was locked, and Stan pounded on it. “Miss Wyatt? Are you in there?”

JD appeared at his side. “Good Lord, what’s the matter?”

Stan pulled a tool out of his pocket and popped the lock, flinging the door open. He strode through the room, taking in everything. The bed hadn’t been slept in. She wasn’t in the closet or bathroom. He tried the door to the gallery and found it unlocked.

He whirled on JD. “Have you seen your daughter this morning?”

“This morning? Why, no. What’s wrong?”

“Pharaoh is standing loose in the patio area.” Stan dashed through the French doors. “Search the house for her. I’m checking the stables.”

Stan ran down the path. Shit, the big door was wide open. He pulled his gun and searched the dimly lit stable. Pharaoh's stall door stood open. He moved swiftly, checking every stall, then the tack room. Nothing. No clue. He moved to the door on the other side. It was open about three feet. Stooping down, he studied the dirt outside. There were drag marks that led to tire tracks.

Whoever had taken her had dragged her from the stable to a vehicle. If she was dragged, she was probably unconscious. Stan didn't even want to think of the alternative. He saw no blood.

JD ran in and bent over, hands on his knees, panting. "She's nowhere to be found."

Stan straightened and pointed to the tracks. "I think someone took her. I think they loaded her into a vehicle right here. Must have caught her in Pharaoh's stall, left it open when they took her out, and the horse wandered out onto the patio." He turned on JD. "She went up to bed at ten pm. If no one's seen her since then, the window of time when she was taken could be as long as ten hours ago."

"Oh, my God."

Stan pulled his phone out to call the front gate. While he waited for the man to pick up, he put the phone under his chin and looked at JD. "I need all the security footage." No one picked up. That wasn't a good sign. "No one's answering at the gate."

“Come on.” JD jogged to his late model truck.

“No. No vehicles. There may be tire tracks. We could risk destroying evidence.”

“You’re right.”

“Stay here, sir.” Stan jogged down the drive, keeping to the grass. He approached the guard house slowly and peered in the window. He saw no one inside and tried the door. It opened about six inches, and then stuck. A body lay face down, a gun on the floor several feet away as if the guard had dropped it. Shoving inside, he put two fingers to the man’s neck. It was too late. His skin was already cold, and there was no pulse.

Rolling the body over, he noticed a cord wrapped around the man’s neck. He’d been strangled. Touching nothing else, he backed out and dialed Chris.

“Hey. What’s up?”

“Miss Wyatt’s been taken. The guard at the gate is dead. Last time I laid eyes on her was when she went to bed at ten pm.”

“Christ. Did you check the security footage?”

“Not yet. We just discovered her missing. Her horse was loose, the stall door open. I found what looks like drag marks and some tire prints. I think she was unconscious when they took her to the vehicle.”

“If she was dragged, then there wasn’t a second person to lift her legs,” Chris surmised.

“That or the driver waited in the vehicle.”

“Could be. We’re on the way.”

“We’re not going to be able to keep this under wraps for long. We’ve got a dead body. JD’s going to want to call the police.” Stan ran a hand through his hair.

“Stall him until we get a look at the security footage. Once the police arrive, we’ll be shut out of everything.”

“On it.” Stan hung up and jogged to the house.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

“You think it’s Frank Bonner?” Grady asked the team in a hushed whisper.

They’d scoured the estate. There was no other sign of Tinsley other than the drag marks and tire tracks near the stable. They were now in the IT room, going over every bit of security footage. There were a lot of cameras, so they’d first keyed in on the ones they knew would be most valuable. The gate cameras and the stable cameras.

At just before ten, a white pickup pulled up to the gate. A sign on the door said, Tri Star.

“What the fuck?” Grady murmured.

“I’d ask if that was you, Grady, but I know we don’t have marked vehicles, and that isn’t even our logo,” Chris said.

“I wasn’t here. I swear.”

“There’s no license plate,” Al observed.

They switched to the camera that aimed at the driver’s window and watched the guard walk out to ask the man for identification. He rolled his window down and flashed some kind of phony ID card.

“The guard saw the Tri Star name and never questioned it,” Stan said.

Grady studied the footage, but the man had a dark ball cap pulled low, hiding his face. The guard waved him in, hitting the button that opened the gate. The pickup drove past and the guard went back inside.

“Is there a camera inside the guardhouse?” Chris asked.

“No. Just aimed at the road and driveway,” Grady replied.

“So who killed this guy?” Al asked.

They continued watching, and Grady noticed something. “Wait. Play that again.”

Al rewound and played it again.

“There.” Grady pointed to the screen. “See the way the drive turns a red color?”

“Yeah. Brake lights,” Chris surmised. “The pickup truck backed up.”

They continued watching, and saw a man in a dark hoodie, his face covered, flashed in the camera, jerking the door open. Everyone stood motionless, knowing that this was the exact moment the guard was fighting for his life. After a moment, the gate swung open again, then the dark figure dashed off camera to where his truck was waiting.

“Son of a bitch. He didn’t have to kill the guy. He’d already gained access. He could have just as easily waved as he drove out with Tinsley hidden on the floorboard,” Stan murmured.

“He didn’t want to leave a witness. This guy is cold blooded,” Grady said.

Chris nodded. “That, or he was afraid the guard might have recognized him.”

“You think it was an inside job?” Grady asked.

“Someone knew to use the Tri Star name to gain access. Who would know?”

“Anyone associated with the estate, family, friends, business associates... all might have learned the name of the security team JD had contacted.” Grady drug a hand over his jaw. All he could think about was Tinsley in the hands of this monster. “She texted me that night. It was just a few minutes after ten. I didn’t reply. God, I wish I’d picked up the phone and called her.”

“Don’t. That doesn’t help us now. The best thing you can do is concentrate on your job. We find her, bring her home, and you can work out your misplaced guilt then,” Chris said.

They watched the stable footage. There were only exterior cameras. The one that covered the exit they’d taken her from was pulled up first. The white truck appeared and parked.

“He’s put the truck between the camera and the door. He’s purposely blocking the view,” Chris surmised. They watched the man climb out. “Can you figure out his height?”

“Judging by how tall he is in comparison to the roof of the truck, I’d say about 5’10” – 5’11”,” Al replied.



They watched him lift an arm, and a split-second later, the exterior light went out.

“He shot it,” Stan said. “I never heard a shot.”

“Probably a silencer. It doesn’t completely drown out the sound, but if you’re inside with the doors closed...” Chris explained.

“Pharaoh would have heard it. He’d have started acting up,” Grady said.

“Maybe that’s what drew Tinsley out there. She heard the horse making a commotion,” Chris suggested.

The figure dressed in black shoved the door open and disappeared inside. A good five minutes passed before he reappeared. He was in shadow now, and they couldn’t see much. The truck shifted with weight as he loaded what Grady had to assume was Tinsley into the backseat of the crew cab. He closed his eyes for a split second and said a prayer. *God, please, let her still be alive.*

“What about the guy you said worked at the stable?” Al asked. “Has he been accounted for?”

“He’s here now. He claims he spent the night in jail, picked up for a DUI. It checks out,” Stan said.

“Then I keep coming back to the oil rig explosion. It’s got to be tied together,” Al said. “Frank Fucking Bonner.”

“Let’s go pick that motherfucker up. I’ll make him talk.” Grady flexed his fists. He wanted to tear the man apart. If he

had Tinsley...

Chris held his hand up. "We need to do this smart. I've got an idea. I heard about this scheme a detective friend of mine once used. It'll require us to cross a bunch of lines legally, but I think it'll get us the results we're after."

"What's the plan?" Stan asked.

"We pretend we're the FBI. You've already got the fake badges, I hear. We bring the husband in for questioning. Drive him to Tri Star in the back of a black SUV. Cover all the Tri Star signage. We photocopy some FBI logos and place them on binders, just enough to make him think it's some temporary field office.

"We walk him in and let him see his wife already sitting in a room with an open door, and we slap a sign on the door that says, interrogation room. They make eye contact."

Grady snaps his fingers. "Make him realize she's there, and he can't control her or what information she's telling us."

"Exactly, but we don't stop there. We do this up big. We make him think we've got a ton of evidence against him, like we've connected him to something much bigger. It's a gamble to get him to confess, but I think it'll work."

"How do we make him think we've got evidence? He's not going to believe us."

"We label a bunch of notebooks and files and set them up to look like we've been working a bigger case, and he's just a

small part. But we put his name on everything. We stack some boxes marked Frank Bonner Taskforce, so his perception is this is big.”

“Okay.”

“We pull his driver’s license photo—”

“You can do that?”

“I’ve got ways, believe me. We use it to make a composite drawing that looks just like him and we show it to him and tell him a witness saw him. This is you, man. Then we show him the drive thru footage, and the DNA report.”

“He’s gonna piss his pants.”

“He’s gonna tell us everything.”

They exited the room. JD was waiting in the foyer.

“What did you find? I’ve called the police.”

Chris nodded. “A white pickup truck. It’s got our name on the door, but it’s not our logo. I can assure you, JD, it wasn’t our vehicle. Tri Star doesn’t own any white trucks, and we sure as hell don’t mark the vehicles we do have. Whoever this is, he used our name to gain access past the security guard. The guy let him through, then it appears he backed up, went in the guardhouse, and killed him.”

“Who the hell did this? Who took my baby girl? I want her found.” The veins in his neck stood out, but his voice

cracked, and his eyes filled.

The front door opened, and Palmer strolled in. “I’m here to see Tinsley. What’s going on?”

Grady spun on him. “Where were you last night?”

“What do you mean? Where’s Tins? She’s not answering her phone.”

“Where were you, Palmer?” JD snapped.

“I was at the office until about eleven, trying to figure out the damn accounting system they use. There’s money missing. Why?”

“Tinsley’s gone.”

“What do you mean? Gone where?”

“She’s been taken.”

“Taken? By who? You mean like kidnapped?”

“Yes.”

“Oh my God.” He ran a hand down his neck and spun in a circle. “Where are the police?” He pointed toward the Tri Star team. “You aren’t trusting this to these morons, are you, JD? Not with our Tinsley’s life in the balance. Oh, my God. My baby.”

Grady shoved him against the wall. “Don’t pretend like you care, you son-of-a-bitch. I overheard that *urgent* call you took at dinner the other night, the one you had to rush out and

deal with. It was Nora Jensen on the phone. Your ex-girlfriend, and it appears, maybe not so ex anymore.”

“That’s a lie.” His eyes went over Grady’s shoulder to where JD stood, his eyes narrowed and his mouth tight. “JD, he’s lying.”

Grady gave him another shove. “I did a little digging into you afterward, Palmer. Those nights you were supposedly in Austin wooing campaign donors, you were really checked into the Astor hotel in Houston. Guess who else checked into that hotel those same days, JD? Nora Jensen.”

“Get out,” JD ordered. “Don’t ever come back here, Palmer. This family is through with you.”

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Frank Bonner was sweating. He glanced at the stack of binders marked FBI, others marked ATF, then at the file box marked Frank Bonner Taskforce. He turned white as a sheet and his leg bounced up and down. He licked his lips. “Why’s my wife here?”

Grady smiled. They had him right where they wanted him. “Why do you think? She’s telling us everything she knows.”

Chris tapped his pen on the desk. “Maybe you should tell us your side before she hangs you.”

“That bitch. It was her idea to take the money. I didn’t want anything to do with it. What we got is never enough for her.”

“What money?”

“There was this guy. He offered us a bunch of money to blow up that oil derrick. I didn’t want to do it.”

“What guy?” Chris leaned forward.

“Said his name was Charlie. We met him in a bar we frequent. He played a game of pool with us.”

“What did he look like?” Grady asked.

“He had dark hair, about my height. Maybe about thirty.” Frank shrugged.

“That’s all you can tell us?” Chris pressed.

“I don’t know. He was average, except for the fact it was obvious he didn’t fit in with the McGuire’s Pub crowd.”

“Why not?” Grady asked.

“He had one of those weird haircuts with the front part longer and the sides short.”

Chris and Grady exchanged a look. Then Chris tilted his head. “You mean a Princeton cut?”

“I don’t know what the hell it’s called.”

Chris pulled up a picture on his phone. “Like this.”

“Yeah, like that. And he wore loafers. Nobody wears loafers in West Texas Oil Field country. Nobody. I shoulda known better than to get messed up with his shit. Used a damn money clip. Who does that?”

Grady sucked in a breath, one face crystallizing in his brain. He pulled his phone out and searched. He found what he was looking for on Tinsley’s social media and held the picture up. “Was it this guy?”

Frank Bonner’s eyes widened, and he pointed at the phone. “Yeah. That’s him. He’s the one. He paid me three grand to blow up that rig.”

Grady turned the phone to Chris. “Perry *motherfucking* Pace.”





## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Tinsley sat tied to a chair in some remote trailer that smelled of mildew and stale beer.

Perry walked circles around her, slugging down thirty-year-old scotch straight from the bottle. He paused at her side and stroked the back of his index finger down her cheek.

“It always should have been you and me, Tinsley. My pretty little debutante queen. Did you know I asked your father for your hand last summer? The son-of-a-bitch turned me down.” He grinned. “I showed him, though, didn’t I? Destroyed two of his oil rigs. Serves him right for discounting me.”

“You blew my father’s well?”

“He picked the wrong brother.” Perry laughed. “It should have been me running for senate with you by my side.”

Tinsley was sick to her stomach. He was out of his mind and capable of anything. If she didn’t cooperate, he had no use for her, that much she realized. So, she had to play along, make him believe she never wanted Palmer. That shouldn’t be hard to do.

“I never wanted Palmer. Your father was blackmailing mine, forcing me to do what he wanted, or he’d make sure my

father went to prison.”

Perry laughed. “My old man. What a piece of work, huh? Although, I’ve got to give him credit for that little scheme. I might use it myself someday if you ever try to leave me. JD wouldn’t last long in prison, would he?”

“Perry, you were always the smarter one. Everyone knew that.”

“Did they?” He straightened, almost preening under her compliment.

“Of course. Everyone in the group always liked you best.”

“I don’t remember it that way.”

“They only gave you a hard time because of the stories Palmer always made up about you.” She was making it up as she went along.

“Stories?”

“He confessed it to me a few months ago. Said all the things he said were made up. How you liked women’s underwear, how you slept with a teddy bear. It was all crazy stuff. I never believed any of it. Palmer said he was jealous, that’s why he did it. Of course, he was jealous; you were better at everything.”

“Well, who’s laughing now? With Mother and Father gone, the money goes to us. Once I have Palmer out of the way, I’ll have it all: the company, the money, I’m even going to take his sought-after senate seat.”

“Was your parents’ death an accident?”

“With a little help. I paid a guy to switch out some engine parts for some broken ones.”

“Oh, my God.”

“I did it for us, Tinsley. Now I can give you the life you deserve. When I run for senate, we’ll move to Washington.”

“You want to be a senator?”

“Why not me? You don’t believe in me? Is this all an act?”

“No, I swear. I just didn’t know you’d planned to go to Washington. I thought that was Palmer’s dream.”

“Father always thought he was the best. Palmer could do no wrong. Palmer was the best at sports. Palmer was the best at debate club. Palmer. Palmer. Palmer. I’m so sick to death of him. I don’t want to hear his name again. When I’m through, no one in this state will remember him. The only name they’ll know is Perry Pace. Someday, they’ll only remember my father as that man who raised the famous Perry Pace.” He drained the last of the scotch and looked at the empty bottle. “Son-of-a-bitch. Guess I’ll have to make a beer run.” He chuckled. “Or in this case, a thirty-year-old scotch run. God, I crack me up.”

“What are you going to do to Palmer?”

“Do you care?” He got in her face, his whiskey breath making her pull back. “He’s been cheating on you with Nora Jensen, sweetheart. This whole time. It started before he went

to Paris to bring you home.” He snorted. “I arranged that.” He poked himself in the chest with his thumb. “The dumbass. He fell right into my plans.”

“What will you do now?”

“Finish my plan.”

“What’s that?”

He squatted and grinned. “I suppose I can share it with you. After all, you can’t tell anyone, can you?”

She shook her head.

“I’ve made a trail of financial records that will make it look like the company was being embezzled. And it all leads straight to Palmer. He’s going to have it spread out all over his desk. I even wrote a nice suicide note. He’s going to blow his brains out tonight at approximately nine pm. Exactly the time he thinks Nora is meeting him for an illicit rendezvous at the office.” He bowed his head, laughing. “Pretty good, huh?”

“What happens to me?”

“You, my love, will be with me on a jet to the Seychelles. I’ve already transferred a good sum of money through Palmer’s accounts to an account there. Now the only question is, do you go willingly or do I drug you and bring you on board stuffed in my luggage?” He stroked her cheek. “I’m going out to get more booze. You think about it while I’m gone.”

He headed to the door, grabbing a set of keys.

“Wait. Perry, please. Don’t leave me here like this. Please.” She had to convince him she was with him. “You’re right. I never wanted Palmer. I was going to tell him at the ball. Then with the funeral, I just couldn’t.”

He smiled. “I always knew you didn’t want him. You shouldn’t have made me mad. I heard from Nora Jensen you were buying lingerie for Palmer. I was furious at the thought.”

Her eyes widened. “Did you cut up my red dress?”

“It was a whore’s gown. I couldn’t let you wear that.”

“Perry. Untie me. Please.”

He smiled and walked out.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

“Where the fuck would he have taken her?” Grady paced in front of the wall of windows in Chris’s office. He dragged a hand through his hair.

Chris tapped his thumb on the desk. “Wait. He’s driving a rental car.”

“How do you know that? He had a truck.”

“He’s got access to a lot of vehicles, but they’d all trace back to him. I bet he’s in a rental.”

“But that’s traceable, too.”

“Not immediately. Not like a license plate is.”

“So, how does that help us find him?”

“Rental companies have GPS tracking on all their vehicles. We go in and flash those FBI badges. Ask for the tracking locator information on the vehicle of one Perry Pace of Dallas, Texas.”

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They hit pay dirt on the second rental company they tried.

The girl behind the counter punched in some numbers.  
“The car shows it’s at 1224 Poplar Blvd. Midland.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

Grady and Chris hurried out to the car. Al and Stan were in a second vehicle.

Grady jerked his coat and tie off and tossed them in the backseat.

Chris lifted his chin to Al. “Pull in that gas station down the street. We need to change.”

They drove half a block and changed from their ‘FBI suits’ into camo pants and t-shirts.

Stan pulled up the address on a maps app. “Carson’s Inn. Looks like a bar.”

“A-game, boys. We’ve got to be good on this one,” Chris said.

“We’ve got to be lucky, too,” Big Al added.

“Fuck luck. I’ll take skill and training anytime,” Grady replied.

“Let’s move.” Chris climbed back into the car.

Grady got in the passenger seat. He looked over at Chris as they pulled out. “We get me in that car. He takes me to Tinsley.”

“You’d have to be in the trunk.”



“I realize.”

“I don’t like it. Too many things could go wrong.”

“We can’t take a chance on losing him. He’s the only one who can lead us to her. He won’t go near her if he’s approached. He’ll never tell us where she is. And we don’t know how much time she has. If he decides he has no use for her, he’ll kill her. He’s already proven what he’s capable of.”

“Fine.”

They found the bar and pulled in. Chris cruised through the parking lot.

“There it is.” Grady pointed to the blue sedan.

“You got your tools?” Chris asked.

Grady patted his pocket, then strapped on a bullet-proof vest and helmet. He checked the clip on his pistol and slid a bowie knife into his belt, then wrapped the strap of his M1 around her shoulder.

Chris circled again and stopped in the next lane. By now, darkness was falling. Grady slipped out and ducked between cars. When he got to the blue sedan, he got out his tools and popped the trunk, then climbed inside.

Chris radioed Al. “Go inside. Start a fight with our mark. We want him in his car and leaving.”

“On it.”

“And Al?”

“Yeah?”

“Be careful. He has a gun, and he’s not afraid to use it.”

“Got it.” Al climbed out of the second car and jogged to the door. Five minutes later, the two men came outside. Perry dashed to his car.

“Stay away from my wife, asshole.” Al shouted after him.

Perry climbed behind the wheel and tore out of the parking lot.

Chris pulled out after him. Al scrambled in the car with Stan, and they hauled ass.

Fifteen minutes later, Grady felt the car stop. It rocked as Perry climbed out and the door slammed shut. He strained to listen, and heard what sounded like him climbing a couple of steps, then a door opening and closing.

As soon as he figured Perry was inside whatever structure he’d stopped at, Grady pulled the emergency release and slowly climbed out of the trunk. They were at the end of a long drive. He turned and saw a single wide trailer with a small porch leading to the door.

The nearest neighbor was fifty yards away.

Keeping low, he ran to the side of the trailer and tried to see inside, but the windows were covered.

He spotted Chris and Stan pull into the neighbor's drive. They exited the vehicles and ran across the open field. Grady waited until they were in perimeter positions, lying on their bellies in the scrub brush that surrounded the place.

Once everyone signaled, Grady crept up the three steps, being as silent as possible, his M1 at the ready. He was going to have to hope the door was unlocked.

He tried the knob, and it turned in his hand.

*One. Two. Three. Exhale. And go.*

He flung the door open, stepping into a living room, his weapon up.

Tinsley was standing with Perry near the kitchen.

When Grady came through the door, Perry yanked a gun and put it to her head, holding her in front of him. She looked terrified.

Grady was a good shot, but there was a lot at risk, and he couldn't afford to miss. He cautiously approached, with an eye down the site.

"Stay back. I'll kill her," Perry warned, shuffling back.

"Then you lose your shield, and I blow your brains out. Maybe it's me that gun of yours should be aimed at. I'm the threat. Not her." Grady kept moving toward him. "You better decide, cause in another second I'm going to have this barrel pressed to your forehead, Perry."

Sweat beaded on Perry's brow, but he smiled. "You won't let me kill her. Now get back. We're leaving."

"There are half a dozen men outside. You're not going anywhere, Perry. Now lower the gun or shoot me."

"I said stay back."

Grady kept coming.

Finally, Perry swung the gun toward Grady, and Grady shot him in the head. Perry squeezed the trigger as he fell back, but the bullet went harmlessly into the ceiling.

Tinsley screamed, but Grady caught her in his arms before she slid to the floor.

"I've got you, baby. I've got you."

She clutched at his bulletproof vest and pressed her face into his chest. Her whole body shook. Chris and Stan came through the door, guns drawn.

"It's okay. He's dead."

They lowered their weapons.

"Are you hurt?" Grady asked Tinsley, brushing her hair back. She shook her head, her face still buried. He rubbed her back. "It's over. It's all over. You're safe."

Her arms went around his neck, and she clung tightly to him, sobbing.

Grady led her outside, never letting go of her. He held her for a long time until she could finally stop shaking.

She pulled back and stared into his eyes. “You came for me.”

“I’ll always come for you.”

“I was so scared. He was crazy. And then I saw you come through the door, and I was terrified he’d kill you.”

“It’s over. You’re safe.”

“I’m so sorry about everything. I don’t want Palmer. It’s you I love, Grady. Only you.”

“Hush. We’ll talk it all out later. Right now, we need to call your parents and let them know you’re safe.” Grady pulled his phone out and dialed JD. “Mr. Wyatt? We’ve located your daughter. She’s safe. She’s here with me.” He passed her the phone.

“Daddy?” The moment the word was out of her mouth, tears flooded her eyes again.

Chris moved to his side. “Police are on the way.”

Grady nodded. There would be a lot of questions. They may even take him into custody until they had everyone’s statement and could determine it was self-defense. He was ready for that; he didn’t regret what he’d done. He’d do it again if he had to. He would have taken a bullet to save her.

“It’s gonna be a long night,” Chris warned.

Grady nodded. It didn’t matter. The only thing that mattered was they’d saved Tinsley. When he’d seen that gun

pressed to her head, and the look of terror on her face, it had shaken him more than he cared to admit. It was his job to remain calm under crisis, but that was easier said than done when what was at stake was the woman he loved.

Stan walked to the cars and came back with a jacket. He tossed it to him, and Grady wrapped it around Tinsley. Then he held her tight while they waited for the police and her parents to arrive.

Soon, flashing lights appeared in the distance.

“Here comes the cavalry,” Grady murmured in her ear.

Tinsley shook her head. “The cavalry already came.”

Grady smiled and tucked a loose curl behind her ear. “Anytime, Miss Wyatt.”

Then he dipped his head and kissed her.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Tinsley took Grady's hand and led him into her father's study. She had always loved this room with its cozy, warm, neutral-tones, and wall of bookcases surrounding a fireplace on the opposite wall from where his desk sat. In addition to that, he had tons of windows on two of the other walls.

When she was a child, she would come in here and curl up in one of the chairs by the fire and read her favorite mysteries.

When she would look up at all the books, she imagined her father must be the smartest man in the world. It wasn't until years later that she learned her father was a self-taught man who'd never had the benefit of an ivy-league education or a secondary education of any kind for that matter.

While Tinsley's mother, on the other hand, had majored in French in an elite girls' school in the south. She could converse conversationally, and had made sure her daughter could as well, taking her on many trips there over the years. It was one of the reasons Tinsley had always loved Paris.

So Tinsley felt this was the perfect room to tell her parents of the decision she'd made, knowing how it would affect them, since it would not be the path they expected for her life.

Lorretta stood near the desk, behind her husband's chair, her hand resting on his shoulder. "Are you feeling well, dear?"



It's only been two days since all that dreadful business. I worry about you so. What with all the police questions, it's a mystery you got any rest at all."

"I'm fine, Mother. Really. I wanted to talk to you both about something."

Loretta turned to her husband. "Is it really necessary that Tinsley still have a bodyguard, dear? After all, now that we know who the threat was, and that has been taken care of—"

"Mother, that's what I want to talk about. If you could just sit down."

Loretta's eyes dropped to how close her daughter and the hired bodyguard sat.

Tinsley caught her eye and reached over and squeezed Grady's hand where it sat on the armrest. "If you could just sit down, mother..."

Loretta's eyes narrowed. "What is this about?"

Tinsley sucked in a breath and exhaled. Fine. Then she would just say it outright and skip the spiel she had prepared to ease her parents into this. "Grady and I—"

Her mother cut her off. "Grady? You mean Mr. Steele, don't you, darling? We mustn't be too familiar with—"

"The hired help, Mother?"

Loretta pursed her lips. "You know that's not what I meant."

“Isn’t it? Grady and I have spent a lot of time together, out of necessity, of course, but over that time we’ve gotten to know each other very well—”

Loretta skirted around the desk, as if she could fend off what she must realize was coming. “Tinsley, could I speak with you privately, dear?”

“No, Mother. I have something to say, and I’m going to say it.”

“Please don’t be hasty, Tinsley.” Loretta wrung her hands.

Tinsley switched her attention to her father. “Daddy, I’ve fallen in love with Grady, and he loves me. We want to be together.”

“Tinsley, stop this insanity right now. I’ve never heard of something so ridiculous.” Her mother folded her arms.

“I know it’s not your plan for me, but—”

“Our plan for you?” Loretta’s voice rose. “Our plan for you was to marry a man of prominence. One who could give you the life you deserve. Why, Palmer was going to take you to Washington. You would have traveled in the highest social circles. You could have been influential, you could have done so much, you could have—”

“Loretta. Enough,” JD cut his wife off. “Palmer is not an option any longer. Not after what he’s been up to with that Nora woman. Add in the scandal of his brother’s crimes, and his political ambitions are toast.”

“But JD, you can’t want this for your only daughter.” Loretta’s hand flung out toward Grady.

“Loretta. I said enough.” Her father leaned in his chair, stroking his mouth with the side of his index finger as if he were deep in thought. “Tinsley, is this sincerely what you want?”

“Yes. Truly. I’m going to be really selfish, Daddy. I’m doing this for me. Only for me.”

Her mother shook her head. “But Tinsley, have you thought this through? Are you really sure? What will people say?” Her mother turned her back on her, folded her arms defensively, and stared out the window.

“I don’t care anymore. I’m through being your perfect daughter. Life is too short to waste my time trying to make everyone happy but myself.”

Loretta whirled. “Do you think I don’t understand that kind of love? I do. I gave up everything to be with your father. I moved across the country, away from my family and friends and everything I knew. Tinsley, I want you to know your life will be very different, and I’m not sure you’re prepared for that. You’ve been pampered your entire life, my darling daughter.”

Tinsley lifted her chin, sure of what she knew in her heart. “I’ve learned a great deal in the past few weeks, Mother. I’ve seen the difference between a man who is only concerned about appearance, and one who knows what’s truly important

in life. Judging Palmer by the cover, I know you think he seemed to be “Mr. Right”, but when I look deeper into what’s inside, he was so totally “Mr. Wrong”. I’ve seen what it truly means to be a good man: strength of character, values, ethics, and morals that can’t be bought and paid for by the highest donor.

“I need a man who won’t compromise what he stands for to gain power, money, or fame. I need a man who will make a good husband, partner, and father to my children, one I know I can count on to be there when I need him most. I’ve found all of those traits in this man. He’s more than I could have ever dreamed of or hoped for. I know I don’t deserve him, but he loves me anyway, and I’m going to spend the rest of my life devoted to being worthy of that love and to making him as happy as he makes me with just one smile.”

“But Tinsley...”

“I love him, and he loves me, and that’s all you need to know to see that I will be fine, I will be taken care of, and I will be happy. Do not fear for my future, because I have the best partner I can imagine to face all that life brings us. I’m going into that future fearlessly, enthusiastically, and confidently because I know I am truly loved the way you always said I deserved to be loved.”

JD stood, came around the desk, took her hands, and looked into her eyes. “Then I wish you all the happiness in the world, my beautiful, stubborn girl, and I won’t ever say

another word.” He held his hand out to his wife. With tears in her eyes, she joined them.

“I just want you to be happy, my baby girl,” Loretta whispered.

Tinsley wrapped her arms around her mother. “I am, mother. So very happy.”

JD shook Grady’s hand.

They walked out into the foyer and waited while Tinsley went upstairs and packed a bag.

When she returned, Grady’s eyes fell to it. “You ready to go?”

“I am. More than ready.” She hugged her mother, and then her father. “I love you both, and I’m grateful for everything you’ve done for me. But I’m twenty-five, and it’s time I figured out my own life. I can’t keep staying in my childhood bedroom. I hope you both understand.”

“Tinsley, are you sure?”

“Yes, Mother. I’m very sure. I love you both. That won’t ever stop.”

JD put his arm around his wife, tears in his eyes. “Love you, too, sweetheart. We’ll talk next week.” He squeezed Loretta’s shoulder. “Dear?”

“Of course. I just want you to be happy, Tinsley. If this is what makes you happy, I suppose I have to be brave and let

you go. You'll both come for dinner the weekend after next. Promise?"

"Promise." Tinsley hugged them again, then smiled and slipped her hand into Grady's and walked to his truck.

He held the door for her, tossed her bag in the back, and climbed behind the wheel. He looked over at her. "That went better than I expected."

Tinsley blinked a tear from her eyes. "It went exactly as I expected."

Grady reached over and took her hand, giving it a squeeze. "You're leaving your home. That's a big thing. It must be a bit sad for you."

She shook her head, looked up at the house, and blinked the tears away. "No. I'm finally starting my life—the one I was always meant to have."

"Where are we going, darlin'?"

She smiled at him. "I know this pretty spot down by a river."

"Do you, now?" He grinned and put the truck in gear.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Grady thrust inside Tinsley. She trembled at the first touch, and he momentarily stilled. She stared into his eyes, and he saw unconditional love in those blue depths. He was lost in her. She owned his soul completely. He moved in and out of her. His dick dragged along her clit with each slow thrust as he brought himself almost all the way out of her and then slid back in.

She trembled around him with each stroke, and he fucking loved that. He rocked against her, his body over hers, his weight on his arms, his palms on the bed. He increased his pace, slowly building her up. His eyes trailed to her breasts, watching them jiggle with every movement. He dropped his head and sucked hard on one nipple and then the other before increasing his speed until he was slamming into her hard and fast. She cried out and clutched him, her pussy clenching around him, her eyes heating and her legs wrapped tight around his waist.

He loved every fucking second of it.

Her head went back, and her mouth dropped open, and she slid over the edge. It was the sweetest thing to watch. He'd never tire of the look on her face when he made her come.



Grady slowed his pace, fighting his own release, wanting this to last. Christ, he wanted to keep his dick buried in her tight pussy forever.

“Grady,” she cried out, and her body quivered around him as he pounded into her. The sound of his name on her lips sent him over the edge, and he came long and hard.

“Fuck, baby. So good.”

She rode out her orgasm as he pumped into her with several more long, slow strokes.

He sucked air in and out of his lungs and brushed the hair from her face as her legs dropped from around his waist. He slid free, and she moaned as if she missed the contact.

He fell to the bed next to her and gathered her close. She burrowed against him, her head resting on his chest.

His fingertips trailed up and down her spine.

She giggled. “I’m so happy right now, baby.”

He loved hearing her laugh almost as much as he loved hearing her call him baby. He was the most relaxed he’d been since that night at the lake house. Pressing his lips to her forehead, he closed his eyes and thanked God once more. Knowing how close he came to losing her made each moment with her precious.

“Come on.” He stood, then grabbed her and put her over his shoulder and carried her into the shower. He flipped the water on, checking the temperature before he pulled her naked

body under the spray. He poured body wash into his cupped hand, then soaped her slick body, stroking over every curve and hollow. Turning her back to his chest, he wrapped his arms around her and paid special attention to her breasts, toying with her nipples until she moaned. Then one hand dipped between her legs.

Her head fell against his shoulder, and his mouth found her neck as he separated her folds and stroked her clit.

She stuttered in a breath.

“Sensitive?” he asked.

“Mmmhmm,” she moaned.

“Want me to stop?” he whispered in her ear, his voice gravelly. God, would he ever get enough of this woman? His dick was already getting hard, bobbing against her.

She shook her head and spread her legs wider, giving him better access.

He groaned and increased his pace a notch.

Her back arched, and she thrust her ass out.

He wrapped a strong arm around her waist and growled in her ear. “Bend over.”

She did without hesitation, splaying her hands on the tile.

Taking his dick in his fist, he brought the head to her pussy and circled her opening once, twice, until she moaned and wiggled. Then he thrust inside her in one push, grabbing

her hips in his hands and holding her in position. He stayed motionless for a moment, buried deep. “You take me so good, pretty girl. Every inch.”

She dropped her head, moaning and clenching around him.

He pulled back, almost all the way out, then thrust slowly in. It was sweet torture for them both, but he didn't want to rush it; he wanted to savor every moment.

His dick was rock hard, and her pussy was slick, and he knew he'd found heaven. He brought one hand around to stroke up her spine, pushing her farther and tilting her ass up even more. She moaned again, louder as the new position thrust the head of his dick against that sweet spot deep inside her.

“God, yes. Right there.”

He shifted, rubbing against it, stroking in small movements that drove her wild. She began to pant and tried to wiggle, but he held her tight with his hands on her hips. He rocked against her until her breasts swung with every movement.

He couldn't resist, so he stroked his palms upward and took their weight in his hands, squeezing and kneading the soft flesh.

With her hands on the wall supporting her weight, she couldn't do anything but take what he gave her, how he gave it

to her.

He pinched her nipples, and she clamped down on him. She was getting so close now; he could tell by the way her breathing increased.

He moved one hand down and his fingers sought out her clit. He rubbed tight circles around it until she threw her head back and screamed his name, coming hard all over his dick.

Then he grabbed her hips again and pounded into her, hard and fast, following her over the edge. Once he came, he slid in and out slowly, dragging out her orgasm until he wrapped his arms around her and brought her upright, his dick still buried deep.

She moaned. “Don’t pull out. Stay inside me, baby.”

He bit her shoulder. “Not goin’ anywhere, pretty girl.”

“I wish we could stay like this forever,” she panted, her breathing slowing.

He felt the strength draining out of him and put one palm on the tile.

“Your arm is trembling,” she whispered.

“You do that to me. Gonna suck the strength right out of me, woman.”

“Are you complaining?”

“Not a chance. I plan on starting every day like this for the rest of our lives.”

She giggled. "I'll sign on for that plan."

He chuckled. "Oh, you will, huh? Good to know. I plan on sliding between your legs every morning and waking you up with my mouth on you until I get you good and wet and begging for me."

"Sounds like heaven."

"I aim to please."

She giggled. "You do it so well."

"Back atcha, babe."

He finally pulled free and soaped her body again, then toweled her dry and carried her to bed. They dozed until the sun filtered through the curtains and the smell of bacon carried from the kitchen.

"Ma's making breakfast," he murmured. "You hungry?"

"Starved."

He pulled his arm free from under her and stood, yanking his jeans over his bare ass.

Tinsley rolled to her side and let her eyes run over her man's beautifully sculpted body. He was muscled, and there wasn't an ounce of fat on him. She smiled, thinking she could stare all day at the dimples that rode low on his back.

It had been a few months since she'd moved in with him.

Tonight, they were having dinner with her parents. They'd started a bi-weekly tradition the week after she'd left.

Grady returned to the bed, leaned over, and dropped a kiss on her lips. "You comin' or you want me to make you a plate and serve you breakfast in bed?"

She grinned. "And have your mother think I'm too lazy to come to the table? No way."

He chuckled. "She loves you too much to think that."

"Just give me a minute to get dressed."

She watched him walk out of the room. He really did have the sexiest body.

That evening, after dinner, Grady reached over and squeezed Tinsley's hand. Her parents had seemed to accept the fact that they were a couple and that wasn't going to change.

Loretta stood from the table. "Tinsley, I want to show you the new drapes I put in the master."

JD stood as well. "Come on, Grady. Let's you and I retire to my study. I've got a bottle of fine Scotch I'm dying to try."

Tinsley went up on tiptoe and kissed him before she left with her mother, and Grady followed her father into his study.

JD got out two crystal rocks glasses and poured an inch of the amber liquor into each one.

Grady studied the man and decided this was as good a time as any to ask what had been on his mind for weeks now.

JD capped the bottle and handed one glass to Grady. He looked up and cocked a brow. “Anything on your mind? You look deep in thought.”

Grady stood, his hands in his pockets, more nervous now than when he’d faced down a horde of al-Qaeda in Afghanistan.

He drew in a breath, and a calm settled over him, because he knew his path was set, and he knew it was the right one. Of all the things he’d ever done in his life, he was most sure of this one. “I’d like to ask for your permission to marry your daughter, sir.”

JD studied him for a long moment. “Do you love her?”

“More than I knew was possible.”

JD lifted his glass. “Then you may have my permission, Mr. Steele. I wish you both all the happiness in the world.”

Grady grinned and blew out a breath. It was easier than he’d thought it would be. “While we’re here, there is one other thing I’d like to ask you about. It’s for your daughter.”

“What’s that, my boy?”

“It’s big, but I thought maybe you could count it as an early wedding present for her.”

“I’m listening.”

Grady proceeded to lay out his plan.

After they worked out the details, JD slapped him on the shoulder. “Welcome to the family, son.”

\*\*\*

*Two weeks later—*

Grady continued to keep his word; every morning he woke Tinsley with his mouth on her pussy.

She moaned and shifted, her fingers threading through his hair.

He brought her to orgasm, then crawled up her body.

He stared down at her. “I love to watch you come, baby. The way your breathing changes...” He paused, his eyes skating down her body. “The way you get all flushed. The way you melt like a big ol’ pile of mush.”

She tried to laugh, but she didn’t have the energy.

He grinned a devilish grin.

“Grady, no.”

“I’m not done with you yet.” His mouth latched onto her nipple, and his fingers slid between her legs, thrusting inside



to stroke her deep and long until her hips were lifting off the bed.

“Grady, I can’t, not again,” she pleaded breathlessly.

He lifted his head to stare into her eyes, determined. “Yes, you can.”

She thrashed her head from side to side, moaning, “No.”

“Yes,” he insisted, increasing the pace of his strokes, his thumb taking up a relentless rhythm over her clit. He brought his mouth down, just bare millimeters from her lips, giving her enough room to breathe, and he whispered, “Again, Tinsley. Give it to me again.

She bucked beneath him, and he leaned farther over, one leg pinning hers to the bed as he kept at her, and at her, and at her, until she crashed over the edge, giving him what he’d asked for gasping his name.

A second later, he plunged his hard cock inside her, his body looming over her, one hand planted in the bed next to her head.

“Oh, God, baby,” she breathed.

“Wrap around me, Tinsley,” he commanded, and she did, wrapping both legs around his waist. “Hold onto me.”

She did, and he began thrusting, hard and fast.

They stared into each other’s eyes, his focused and intent, rapt... hers wide with wonder and awe.

A moment later, he was pulling out, only to flip her around and push her on all fours. He slid into her as he bent over, his mouth at her ear.

“Love how you take it however I want to give it.” He lifted off her, his hands gripping her hips, pulling her against him. One big palm slid to the small of her back, stroking up her spine almost reverently. “So pretty, baby.”

He began moving inside her again, and every stroke hit that sweet spot that had her tilting her ass up to meet them.

And then his thrusts became frantic until he finally went rigid above her and exploded inside her with a deep male groan. *So good. So fucking good.*

After several more slow gliding strokes, he collapsed on top of her.

“I love the feeling of your body on top of mine, pinning me down,” she whispered in a husky voice that drove him crazy.

“Good. Get used to it, ‘cause I like it, too.”

She reached back, stroking her hand over his ass and trailing her fingers up and down his hip.

He moaned in her ear.

He finally lifted on his elbows, his palm brushing the hair from her neck tenderly. Then dipped his head to sprinkle

kisses all over the length of it. “Was that selfish of me?”

“You didn’t hear me complaining.”

They slept for another hour until the sound of tires on gravel carried through the window screen.

Grady moved to the window and dipped to look through the blinds. “They’re early.”

“What is it?” Tinsley lifted on one elbow.

“Get dressed, baby. Got something to show you.”

She slipped on her panties and jeans, then slid her arms into one of his denim shirts, rolling up the sleeves. Moving to the window, she peered between the slats. A pickup with a long horse trailer sat idling. Two men got out.

She frowned. “That’s Sal and his son.”

Sal opened the back of the trailer and dropped the ramp, then backed Pharaoh slowly down.

Tinsley’s brows shot up. “That’s my horse.”

Sal’s son climbed in and backed out another big animal, then another. Tinsley slowly realized there were a half dozen horses inside the trailer.

“They’re thoroughbreds,” she whispered in awe. “Oh, look, they’re so beautiful.”

Grady came to stand at her back. “Thought you might want to get a start on that thoroughbred rescue. No time like today, right?” He dipped his head and kissed her ear.

“You did all this for me?” Her voice was soft, her throat tight with emotion.

“You bet,” he whispered against her temple.

She whirled and hugged him. “I can’t believe you did this.”

His arms came around her, and his chin rested on her head. “It’s your dream, right?”

She nodded, tears in her eyes, then pulled back to look at his face. “It’s the best gift ever.”

“Come on.” Grady led her outside, and they watched the men unload them all. The last horse out was definitely not a thoroughbred.

She frowned. “That’s a quarter horse.”

Grady took the reins from Sal and walked this one to her. “She’s yours, baby.”

“Mine?”

“You want to barrel race? She’s the best in Texas.”

Tinsley’s mouth fell open. “You bought me a horse?”

“Pharaoh is a great jumper, but he’s no barrel racer. You’re gonna give it a shot, you’ll need a good horse under you.” He lifted his chin to the pretty mare. “She’s the best.”

“Grady, she must have cost a fortune.” This man. How did she get so lucky?

He chuckled. “No shit. Best barrel racer in Texas. I was kind of hoping she’d convince you to say yes to this.” He pulled out a ring and got down on one knee. “It’s nothin’ fancy. It’s not five carats or however big Palmer was giving you. But it was my grandmother’s, and I’m hoping that counts for something. Plus, I come with it, so...” He grinned.

“It counts for everything.”

“Marry me, Tinsley Wyatt. Go on this crazy journey called life with me. I promise to love you, respect the woman you are, honor your dreams, and push you to achieve whatever your heart desires. I promise we’ll never be bored because we’ll be too busy living life to its fullest.”

“Yes, a thousand times, yes.” Tinsley held her hand out, and he slipped it on. “Wow, a horse, a dream, and a ring. Must be my lucky day.”

Grady chuckled. “I’m hoping it’s gonna be mine later tonight.”

She held the ring out and admired it. “We’re getting married.” Her eyes lifted to his. “I love you, Grady Steele.”

He picked her off her feet and twirled her around until she squealed with laughter.

“I’ve always wanted a boy to twirl me around.”

“You want, pretty girl, I’ll twirl you every day for the rest of your life.”

She had everything she'd ever need. A man who loved her to no end and would make her dizzy, even when he wasn't twirling her around.

"I can't believe you did all this for me." She looked over at the horses that Sal and his son stood holding. "But Grady, where are we going to put them all?"

"Yeah, about that. Got one more thing to show you." He jerked his head. "Come on, boys. This way."

She took Pharaoh, and Grady led the quarter horse. He led her down a path and around some trees and bushes. Sal and his son followed with the other four horses.

"Been hard as hell hiding this from you. Had 'em working overtime to finish it the last two weeks. Luckily, they were able to use the old foundation."

Tinsley's mouth fell open. A brand-new state-of-the-art stable stood where the old metal shed had been, with a riding ring attached to it. They entered, and everything was beautiful.

She loaded Pharaoh into a stall and Grady put the quarter horse into another. Sal and his son led the other horses into some of the remaining stalls. Grady shook their hands, and Tinsley hugged Sal's neck. "Thank you so much."

"My pleasure, Miss Wyatt. You'll be seeing more of me around here. Mr. Steele gave me and my boy a job. Figured you'd need some help with all these rescues."

“I definitely will. Oh, I’m so happy you’ll be working with us!”

He tipped his hat. “I’ll leave you two alone now. Me and my boy will be around tomorrow to start.”

“Wonderful.”

When they left, Tinsley stood in the aisle between the stalls and twirled around, looking at the place. “Oh, Grady, it’s beautiful. It must have cost a fortune.”

“Hell, yeah, it did. But I’ve got to admit, your parents chipped in half of it as an early wedding present.”

“They did?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“That must mean they approve of us.”

“Seems so. Your father gave me his permission to give you that ring.”

“How in the world did you ever talk my father into this?”

“The man loves you and wants you to be happy. Is that so hard to believe?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“You know, I told him about you taking me out to your old lunch spot, Rosa’s. Told him you had fond memories of the place and spending time with him. He actually teared up. Of course, he tried to hide it. Guess what else?”

“What?”

“Heard he took your mom out there for lunch the other day. Seems long before it was your spot with your father, it was their spot. A place they’d go to sneak off to when they wanted to be alone, like they apparently did when they were first dating back in Georgia. Did you know she was forbidden to date your father when they first met? I had no idea they had a Romeo and Juliet love.”

“They came from different statuses. I didn’t know that myself until he told me the other day. I’d have never suspected my father once had nothing.”

“Yeah, people will surprise the hell out of you sometimes. I’ve sure learned that.”

She studied him. “You were a surprise, Grady. A good one, but one I never expected. You’re the best man I’ve ever known. I’m not sure I’m worthy of you.”

“Damn, girl. The things you say. C’mere.” He ambled toward her, and she backed up until she was pressed to the stall slats. He didn’t stop until his mouth settled over hers. He cupped her cheeks and dragged her flush against his hard body.

God, it felt good in his arms. It felt like it was where she belonged, where she’d always belonged. They kissed for a long time.



Finally, he broke apart and dragged in a lungful of air. “We’re building something here, girl. Not talking just about this. Talking about us and the life we’re starting. Gonna make sure the foundation is solid and the walls are strong. What we’re building is gonna last a lifetime.”

“Definitely. I’ve never been happier, Grady.”

“Good. Plan to keep you that way.”

“Oh. Speaking of building, there’s one other thing I’d like.”

He stroked a finger down her nose. “Anything, babe.”

“That house you’re building on the plateau?”

“Yeah?”

“I want our bedroom to face the river with our own private balcony.”

He chuckled. “Sure. Anything else?”

“Five bedrooms.”

He lifted a brow. “Five?”

“You want kids, don’t you?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He hoisted her up, and her legs went around his waist. “Let’s get started right now.”

She wrapped her hands around the back of his neck. “I love when you take control.”

“Get used to it.”

Grady walked her into a vacant stall filled with piles of hay and dropped her into it, following her down. She was the love of his life, and it felt like he'd waited forever for her. Now that she was finally his, he knew he'd never take her for granted. He'd almost lost her to a madman, and he knew how fragile life could be. He'd thank the Lord for every day with her he was given. He gently brushed her hair back from her face. She was laughing, the light in her eyes beautiful. He planned to keep her that way. "You happy, angel?"

"So happy, baby."

"I love you, Tinsley Wyatt."

"I love you, too, Grady Steele."

He dipped his head and kissed her. When he pulled back, he grinned. "You look good in the hay."

She threw a handful at him and rolled until she was on top. He let her have her way. He'd always let her have her way.

"You look good in the hay, too, cowboy."

He chuckled. He'd be her cowboy. He'd be her everything.



## EPILOGUE

Tinsley stepped onto the patio of their newly built home, the train of her wedding dress dragging behind her. Her cowgirl boots clicked and her messy ponytail bounced as she walked.

It had been a beautiful wedding. They'd set up a tent right beside the stables. Twinkly lights hung from above like cascading rain drops, and wildflowers covered the tables. The wedding took place only a few feet away from the tent, where chairs were set up and a twisted branch arch stood as the altar, with the scenic view giving a gorgeous backdrop.

That had been two weeks ago now. They'd honeymooned in Europe, stopping one night in Tinsley's beloved Paris, then going on to Rome, Venice, Lake Cuomo, and finally ending at the Amalfi Coast.

"What is this we're doing again?" Grady asked as he walked beside her.

"A *Trash the Dress* photoshoot. Everyone's doing them."

"Why the hell did we spend so much money on this dress just to ruin it?"

Tinsley put her hand on her hip. "What else am I going to do with it? Wear it out on the town?"

Grady dragged his hand through his hair, looking sexier than ever in his frustration. “I don’t know. Sell it, donate it, save it for our girl someday?”

Tinsley looked appalled. “I will do no such thing. I’m not forcing our child to wear something I chose. She’d hate that.”

He shook his head in defeat. “All right, I guess let’s go watch you ruin a dress.”

The photographer waited near a big muddy puddle in the field.

Grady stood with his arms crossed and watched as Tinsley kicked off her boots and ran into the puddle, dancing and kicking up the mud, while the photographer moved around, getting shots and giving direction.

“That’s it. Really get in there.”

Grady shook his head and grinned. God love her, she was having the time of her life.

When the photographer finally said he had enough great shots, Tinsley stood in the middle of the puddle and crooked her finger at Grady.

“No way,” he replied.

Then, as he watched, Tinsley tucked her hand down her bodice and pulled something out. He frowned, wondering what in the hell she was doing.

She held the item up, dangling it from her index finger. It took Grady a second to realize it was a tiny pair of knitted baby boots. It took him another moment to realize what she was trying to tell him.

His mouth parted, and he just stared at her. She could have hit him in the head with a sledgehammer.

Finally, he walked into the puddle, boots and all, and settled his hands on her waist. “Does that mean what I think it means?”

She nodded.

He let out a whoop and swung her around in a twirl, until his boots caught in the mud and they both went down. He landed on his back, and she landed on top of him.

“I’m gonna be a daddy?”

She nodded again.

“How long have you known?”

“Since right after we got back from our honeymoon.”

He pulled her down for a kiss, and the photographer snapped the picture.

Grady knew exactly where that picture was going. Right over the head of their bed.

\*\*\*

*Three years later—*

Grady stood in the stands of the arena, his two-year-old daughter in his arms.

The bell rang, and a horse and rider rode at top speed into the arena, racing around one barrel and then another. The crowd around him exploded into cheers. Chris and Lani and their daughter were in the stands. So was Stan and Big Al and his wife, and Kiley, even JD and Loretta and Tinsley's brothers.

She had her own cheering section as she literally chased her dream.

“There's your mama, little bit. Isn't she something?”

\*\*\*

Thank you for reading HIGH VALUE TARGET. I hope you loved Grady and Tinsley's story.

There's more to come in the third book in the series,  
HOSTILE EXTRACTION.

*Definition–*

Hostile Extraction: The subject involved is unwilling and is being transferred by forceful coercion with the possibility or likelihood of engaging enemy personnel in any area either in or around the extraction zone.

***I was going to be placed in a virgin auction.***

That’s what the rescue team who came to “save me” told me.

I think they’ve lost their minds.

Nico, my new, rich fiance loves me. He told me so.

He would never put me in an auction. He couldn’t possibly be as vile as they claim.

I’ve finally found someone to take me away from my overbearing family and repressive life.

So, when Nico offered me a ring and a proposal of marriage, I jumped at the chance.

Why should I believe my brother’s best friend–Dusty Jones, the ex-Navy SEAL, and my first love when he says



Nico is a bad guy. We haven't seen each other since the day he walked out on me, leaving me heart-broken.

Now Dusty is back to ruin everything; him and his ex-military rescue team buddies.

He claims he's rescuing me; I claim he's abducting me. And now he's keeping me in some safe house, determined to brainwash me with his nonsense until I "come to my senses."

But being trapped alone together with the man who broke my heart?

Hell no! I'll fight him at every turn, and I'll never give in.

Nico will come for me.

I know he will.

*Dusty—*

That's exactly what I'm afraid will happen.

Asia knows too much. I'm sure Nico will want to shut her up, and that means taking her out. Permanently.

Now all I have to do is keep Asia alive long enough to give us a second chance at our happily ever after.

**[One-click HOSTILE EXTRACTION now!](#)**

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