



JOSHUA

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KATHY IVAN

JOSHUA

TEXAS BOUDREAU BROTHERHOOD

By

KATHY IVAN

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Antonio

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Lucas

Heath

Shiloh

Chance

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OTHER BOOKS BY KATHY IVAN

Second Chances (Destiny's Desire Book #1)

Losing Cassie (Destiny's Desire Book #2)

Dear Reader,

Welcome to Shiloh Springs, Texas! Don't you just love a small Texas town, where the people are neighborly, the gossip plentiful, and the heroes are ...well, heroic, not to mention easy on the eyes! I love everything about Texas, which is why I've made the great state my home for over thirty years. There's no other place like it. From the delicious Tex-Mex food and downhome barbecue, the majestic scenery, and friendly atmosphere, the people and places of the Lone Star state are as unique and colorful as you'll find anywhere.

The Texas Boudreau Brotherhood series centers around a group of foster brothers, men who would have ended up in the system if not for Douglas and Patricia Boudreau. Instead of being hardened by life and circumstances beyond their control, they found a family who loved and accepted them, and gave them a place to call home. Sometimes brotherhood is more than sharing the same DNA.

If you've read my other romantic suspense books (the New Orleans Connection series and Cajun Connection series), you'll be familiar with the Boudreau name. Turns out there are a whole lot of Boudreaus out there, just itching to have their stories told. (Douglas is the brother of Gator Boudreau, patriarch of the New Orleans branch of the Boudreau family.) And keep your eyes peeled, because you might see more Boudreaus popping up around Shiloh Springs, because Douglas and Gator have another brother—Hank “The Tank” Boudreau.

So, sit back and relax. The pace of small-town living might be less hectic than the big city, but small towns hold secrets, excitement, and heroes to ride to the rescue. And who doesn't love a Texas cowboy?

Kathy Ivan

EDITORIAL REVIEWS

“Kathy Ivan’s books are addictive, you can’t read just one.”

—Susan Stoker, NYT Bestselling Author

“Kathy Ivan’s books give you everything you’re looking for and so much more.”

—Geri Foster, USA Today and NYT Bestselling Author of the
Falcon Securities Series

“In Shiloh Springs, Kathy Ivan has crafted warm, engaging characters that will steal your heart and a mystery that will keep you reading to the very last page.”

—Barb Han, *USA TODAY* and Publisher’s Weekly Bestselling
Author

“This is the first I have read from Kathy Ivan and it won’t be the last.”

—Night Owl Reviews

“I highly recommend *Desperate Choices*. Readers can’t go wrong here!”

—Melissa, Joyfully Reviewed

“I loved how the author wove a very intricate storyline with plenty of intriguing details that led to the final reveal...”

—Night Owl Reviews

Desperate Choices—Winner 2012 International Digital Award
—Suspense

Desperate Choices—Best of Romance 2011 –Joyfully
Reviewed

DEDICATIONS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I always dedicate books to my mother, Betty Sullivan. She bought me my first Nancy Drew stories when I was young, scouring thrift stores and garage sales to add to my collection. Gave me my joy of reading and a love of romance.

A special shout out to all the readers who keep me going. You were there when I had so many personal issues I wanted to give up and go hide in a cave. But you stood by me, letting me know that delaying the book was a better option than quitting writing. If it wasn't for you—my loyal readers—there wouldn't be any more Boudreaus.

More about Kathy and her books can be found at

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JOSHUA

PROLOGUE

“YOU ARE A hard man to find, Mr. Boudreau.”

“I’ve been out of the country on a job. I only got back in the States a few days ago.” *A lie, but did it really matter? His life had spun out of control ever since she died.*

“That explains why it’s been so hard tracking you down. Mr. Boudreau, I didn’t know Ms. Barnes well, but she went to great lengths to make sure you’d know how important a part of her life you’d become. I’m sure you’ll understand more in a few moments, after I’ve explained things.”

Joshua studied the man across from him. Arno Deacon, Attorney at Law, lounged behind his desk, his back to two huge wooden bookcases, every shelf overflowing with books. Though his office was located on the posh and swanky legal row in the heart of downtown Los Angeles where the high-priced sharks went into their feeding frenzies whenever fresh meat strolled through their doors, Arno seemed more down-to-earth. If Joshua were to hazard a guess, he’d bet Arno had a bit of country boy in his background, though he worked hard to not let it show.

“Mr. Boudreau, I understand all of this must come as a tremendous shock. Ms. Barnes asked me to tell you how much she admired you, appreciated your friendship and your trust. She held you in the highest esteem, which is why she left you everything in her will. I’m sorry it’s taken so long to contact you. We’ve been trying for several weeks to no avail.”

Joshua’s sixth sense pinged like a pinball game on steroids. He knew something life-changing was coming. His instincts, intuition, call it what you will, had been gnawing at him for months. Even more so after being contacted by Deacon concerning Sarah Barnes. Hearing that name set off alarm bells. Because there was no Sarah Barnes. It was a name used

by his former partner, the woman who'd been his friend, his confidant. The woman he loved with every fiber of his being.

Her real name was Lauren Wright. And she was dead.

He still couldn't wrap his head around the fact she was gone. Deacon hadn't been able to contact him because he'd been locked in a cell at an underground bunker, placed there for his own protection. When he'd returned from his overseas assignment, Senator Yvette Gonzalez informed him of Lauren's death. Joshua had immediately assumed she'd been killed because of her undercover work trying to gather intel on Winston Brashear to bring down his drug smuggling and human trafficking organization, headquartered in Dubai.

Joshua had disappeared into a bottle, trying to drink away her memory. Heartbroken, he'd gone on a bender, unable to face the thought of a world without Lauren in it. Nothing worked because part of him, the better half, no longer existed on this earth.

Gonzalez informed him Lauren disappeared completely off the grid and became completely incommunicado once she managed to infiltrate Brashear's organization. Then she disappeared. Winston Brashear had people out hunting for her. Gonzalez and their clandestine initiative hadn't heard a single word from her, not until they'd gotten a security alert through one of their secure servers that Sarah Barnes had been killed in an auto accident.

Sarah Barnes, who was really Lauren Wright. Operative. Spy. A woman on a mission—one that got her killed.

He'd tried to go after Brashear. Whatever happened to make her vanish, Brashear was at the center of everything. Which was why he'd spent the last several weeks locked away. Senator Gonzalez and the powers that be at the clandestine initiative needed to keep him in check, keep him from destroying years' worth of work and serious investigation into taking Brashear down. Lauren hadn't been able to send back much information, but she'd intimated that she had nearly enough hidden to bring Brashear down once and for all. If

he'd managed to get to Dubai, to get his hands on Brashear, he would have blown it all apart to get revenge for the woman he'd loved and lost.

Lauren worked for the same clandestine organization as Joshua, an off-the-books group of specialized agents who performed undercover operations for the U.S. government, though most people in positions of power had no clue they even existed. Their group dealt with the worst of the worst; mercenaries, tyrants, guerillas, and insurgents. He'd seen so much ugliness, and Lauren had been the one bright spot in the cesspool of filth he dealt with every day.

How am I supposed to go on without her?

Arno cleared his throat. "Mr. Boudreau?"

Joshua turned his attention back to Deacon, realizing the man had continued talking and he'd missed it.

"Sorry, I was thinking about Sarah. How much I miss her."

"Indeed. Totally understandable." Deacon slid a large manila envelope across the desk. Joshua picked it up and pulled out the sheath of papers inside. A copy of Lauren's will. Her death certificate. A few other papers he'd look at later. And finally, a sealed envelope containing what appeared to be a personal letter.

"Ms. Barnes asked that you read the letter after you leave my office. She was emphatic she didn't want you reading it until you were alone. It was important you understand this, because her final request is contained within those pages. She did not disclose in any way what she wished you to do, other than read the letter when you are alone."

Joshua drew in a deep breath and slid the letter and all the papers back into the manila envelope. Everything felt surreal, like she might walk through the door at any moment and tell him he was having a nightmare. Except this nightmare he'd never wake up from. She was gone—no, not gone. Call it what it was. Lauren was dead. Never coming back.

“I promise I’ll abide by her wishes, Mr. Deacon. Is there anything else?”

“I believe we’ve covered everything. I am sorry for your loss. If there’s anything I can do, or something in the paperwork you don’t understand, please don’t hesitate to contact me.”

“Thank you, Mr. Deacon.”

Joshua climbed behind the wheel of his rented sedan and tapped the manila envelope against his hand. He was tempted to read the letter from Lauren now. Technically, he was alone, and he desperately wanted to hear her voice, hold her in his arms. Instead, he had her will, her death certificate, and a letter. He wished he had something, one tangible thing he could hold onto, to keep her close. It was stupid he knew. He didn’t want her belongings, he just wanted...her.

Within minutes, he’d driven to his hotel and took the elevator to his room. Walking across to the huge windows, he studied the spectacular view of the Los Angeles skyline. The hotel he’d chosen was one of the finer ones in the city, and he hadn’t minded splurging on the cost. Besides, he had the feeling he was going to be staying in this room for the next few days trying to drown Lauren’s memory. He’d never been a big drinker. The occasional beer with his brothers or with the guys after a job was the most he indulged in. Shaking his head, he realized the oblivion alcohol might provide wouldn’t be enough. He wasn’t sure there was anything on this earth that would be enough to help him grieve the woman he’d loved, lost to him now forever.

Spying the envelope he’d tossed onto the dresser as he’d walked in, he picked it up and pulled out the crisp white envelope inside. He had to admit, he was curious what Lauren’s last words to him might be.

Sitting on the corner of the bed, he slid his finger beneath the seal of the envelope, tearing it open, and pulled the pages free.

My Darling Joshua,

Finding the words to tell you how I feel should be simple. I love you. Three little words convey so much and yet never seem quite adequate. Let them flow over you, take them into your heart and believe them, because I mean those words with every part of my being. You are my whole world, and I have never loved anyone the way I love you. Everything we've gone through has simply made my feelings grow stronger with each passing day. Neither of us had the best beginning to life, and yet we managed to not only thrive but shine. And that is what I want for you, my love. I want you to be the bright and shining light I know you to be.

Shine for me. For us. That's the perfect word because you are the sun in my sky. Our love keeps me warm even on the coldest days. Being in your arms—that's the closest to heaven I'll ever get. I only wish we had more time together.

I dreamed all the silly things a woman dreams about. Marriage. A wedding where your family and friends watch us take vows before God to love and cherish one another for as long as we both shall live. A house with a big porch swing out front. A plot of land where I can have a garden, dig in the dirt, and watch things grow. Things I planted with my own hands. You in the barn tending to the horses that I know you love. We're together with kids running around in the yard playing and laughing. Two girls and a boy. I close my eyes and I see it as clearly as if I were standing there. I can hear the laughter. Feel your arms wrapped around me, and everything in the world is perfect.

Except it's not meant to be. We won't have the house or the garden. No white wedding. No marriage that will last for fifty years with us growing old together, sitting side by side on the big porch swing,

holding hands and watching the sunset, surrounded by our kids and grandkids.

Joshua, if you're reading this letter, I'm gone. No coming back from this final goodbye. I have one last request, one I beg you to honor. A secret I've kept from everyone. A secret I pray you'll hold close and never let go. If you ever felt anything for me, if you loved me, please help me. I'm asking a lot, I know. I also know your first instinct is going to be to say no. Please, listen to what I have to say and you'll understand. At least I hope you will.

I am leaving you my most precious possession, something I cannot trust to anyone else. Only you.

His name is Daniel. His birth certificate shows his name is legally Daniel Jacob Boudreau. Please don't jump to conclusions, not until I've explained what I can, though it won't seem like nearly enough.

Daniel is my son. He's the light of my life, and I don't trust anyone to care for him but you. I need you to promise to keep him safe. Because he's in danger as long as I'm alive and drawing breath. I've taken steps to make sure that once I'm out of the picture, Daniel will be safe and the people searching for him won't ever be able to find him. Not if you claim him as your son. I know even though Daniel isn't your biological son, once you meet him, hold him in your arms, you'll understand the bond I have. The same bond you'll have because he's beautiful and loving and deserves to have a happy, healthy and most importantly a long life without fear. You can give him that. You and the rest of your amazing Boudreau family. Please welcome my son into your home and into your heart, Joshua. Love him the way I love you.

Forgive me. I wish I could tell you more but doing that would put you in the crosshairs of a monster, so it's better that you not know. Because knowing you,

you'd want to hunt him down and try to eliminate the problem. But you can't. This is one time where I need you to step back and think about somebody else first. Think about this small innocent boy who deserves everything you can give him. Everything I can't.

Take him into your heart and hold him close. Trust me when I promise that your love has been the one thing that has kept me going and I will always cherish what we had, and every minute that I have loved you. Never doubt you have been and will always be the man I love and will love until the end of eternity and beyond.

All my love,

Lauren

P.S. I know Arno Deacon gave you all the information pertaining to my will, but even he doesn't know about Daniel. He's currently living with a social worker who is a friend, somebody I trust, not only with my secret but with my child. Her contact information is below. Contact her, and she'll bring Daniel to you. Please, Joshua, I know I'm asking a lot, but I know you won't let me down. There is a bank account in your name, so it cannot be traced back to Daniel, which I've set up to see to all his needs. Daniel is your son now. A Boudreau. Love him and teach him to be a good man, like his father.

Unable to believe what she'd written, Joshua read through the letter again, wondering if this was some kind of cosmic joke. No way did Lauren have a child he didn't know about. She'd never have been able to hide something like that, not from him. They told each other everything. No secrets, no lies between them.

Yet she hadn't told him about the Brashear job. She'd allowed Senator Gonzalez to embed her into a human trafficker's den of thieves and murderers, deliberately keeping him in the dark until the deed was done. Gonzalez had gone so

far as to send him on assignment half a world away so he couldn't stop Lauren from going into Brashear's stronghold. They'd been apart for months, and it had eaten at him not being able to see her, hold her. He'd railed at Senator Gonzalez for deliberately misleading him, making him believe Lauren had been going on a simple assignment. She'd obviously known Joshua would have kept it from happening.

Agents weren't allowed to see each other casually and dating was verboten within the agency. More importantly, they weren't allowed to become intimately involved. Senator Gonzalez had turned a blind eye when she'd realized Joshua and Lauren were developing feelings for one another. But Joshua felt betrayed on a gut deep level that Lauren had kept this assignment secret. She'd flat out lied, keeping him in the dark as to the danger she'd be walking into. Winston Brashear was a monster, everybody knew it, but nobody had been able to gather enough evidence to even indict the man, much less bring him to trial, which would include extraditing him, a long and arduous process that could take years. Didn't matter that he was a U.S. citizen, he managed to stay one step ahead of the authorities seeking to toss him in prison.

"Lauren, what have you done?" He tapped the letter against his hand, his mind spinning. What was he going to do with a child? A small baby from the sound of things. He wasn't ready to be a father. He still worked for the agency and was constantly being sent on assignments that took him to hellacious hot spots, sometimes deep inside jungles or villages containing terrorists. How could he raise a child under that kind of pressure? Could he even consider it?

Drawing in a deep breath, he knew what he had to do. He really didn't have a choice. Picking up the phone, he dialed a number he knew by heart. There was only one person whose voice he needed to hear above anyone else.

"Hey, Momma."

CHAPTER ONE

THE FIRST THING Lauren Wright spotted on Main Street when she drove into downtown Shiloh Springs was Gracie's Grounds. Blessed, blessed coffee. Having spent half the night driving, a large infusion of caffeine seemed just the thing. Not only would it jumpstart her sleep-deprived brain, but maybe she could come up with a plan on finding Joshua Boudreau.

Locating Joshua had become priority number one. Because he had something she wanted—needed—and she wouldn't give up until she tracked down her elusive prey. And Daniel. The knot in the middle of her stomach increased tenfold when she thought about that precious baby, so sweet and innocent, with the biggest, brightest blue eyes and engaging smile. His bubbling laughter, where his whole body shook with joy.

“Want a refill on that?”

Startled, Lauren barely refrained from jumping at the voice of the pretty brunette standing by her table.

“Thanks, I'd love one.” Probably not the best idea, since she was already feeling the effects from the large cup she'd just finished. She knew she was simply avoiding the inevitable but felt strangely reluctant to continue her mission of finding Joshua. To heck with the caffeine overload, she'd crash soon enough. Running on empty for the last few weeks, she was afraid to let her guard down, even for a second. Maybe, when she found Joshua, she could let her guard down and sleep through the night.

“Here you go,” the woman stated after topping off her cup. “Can I get you anything else?”

“I'm good, thanks.” Lauren took another sip of the coffee, sighing at the taste. She'd visited dozens of coffee places lately, having been on the road for what seemed like an

eternity, and Gracie's Grounds had some of the best she'd had on her trek.

"New in town or just passing through?"

Lauren glanced up at the question. "Pardon?"

The woman grinned, her dark eyes twinkling in the sunlight streaming through the front window of the coffee shop. "I haven't seen you around Shiloh Springs before, so you're either new to town or simply passing through. If it's the first, I'd be happy to answer any questions you might have about our little town. I'm Gracie, by the way."

"This is your place?"

Gracie nodded. "Best coffee in town, if I do say so myself."

"No argument here, it's delicious."

Gracie gestured with the coffee pot toward the chair across from Lauren, before sliding into the seat. "So, you didn't answer my question."

Lauren considered the best way to answer the question without outright lying. "Kind of a combination of both, I guess."

"Color me intrigued. Let me guess, you're looking for somebody."

Lauren chuckled. "Gee, you're good at this. You moonlight as a detective?"

"Nope, the coffee game keeps me on my toes." Gracie studied her close, and Lauren wasn't sure what the other woman was looking for. Curiosity she could understand, she'd probably wonder the same thing if a stranger showed up in her hometown. On the other hand, if Gracie was a local, she might be the answer to her prayers. Could she possibly know where Joshua Boudreau was, or where she could find him?

"Actually, you might be able to help me." Lauren paused long enough to swallow down a mouthful of coffee, steeling

herself to ask Gracie about Joshua.

“Sure, be happy to help if I can.”

“I’m looking for somebody. You might know him. Joshua Boudreau?”

Gracie’s expression closed, almost like a mask falling in place. Guess that answered one question. She definitely knew Joshua.

“I know Joshua. He’s a...friend.” Lauren heard the slight hesitation in Gracie’s response, and wondered just how well the pretty Hispanic woman knew Joshua. “I haven’t seen him in quite a while. Why are you asking about him?”

“It’s nothing bad, I swear. I know him, we served together, but we’ve kind of lost touch. I need to talk to him. Catch up on old times you might say.” Lauren pasted a smile on her face, hoping that she’d convinced her she was telling the truth. And for the most part, she was. She simply left out a few salient facts.

“Like I said, I haven’t seen Joshua lately. I’d suggest you talk to his family, but today’s not the best time. They’re all busy getting ready for the wedding this afternoon.”

“Wedding?”

“Yeah, it’s a big family affair.” Lauren couldn’t miss the emphasis Gracie placed on the word family.

“I know the Boudreau family is a big deal around Shiloh Springs. Kind of founding family thing, right?” At Gracie’s nod, she continued. “Joshua told me how important his family is to him. About his foster brothers, although he never called them that. They were—are—simply his brothers.”

“That’s right. The Boudreau family holds a special place in the community. You won’t find better folks anywhere.”

Lauren cupped her hands around her coffee. She knew how special Joshua’s family was, she’d heard about them from him. The love in his voice when he spoke about his family, that wasn’t something you could fake. Too bad she’d never

experienced that for herself. Her home life, for lack of a better word, since she'd never considered where she grew up a home, had been fractured and broken for as far back as she could remember.

"I'm looking forward to meeting them. Especially Ms. Patti. I've heard wonderful things about her."

A smile lit Gracie's face at the mention of the Boudreau family matriarch. "She's amazing. When you hear folks talk about somebody being a pillar of the community, they are talking about someone like Ms. Patti. The woman has never met a stranger, if you know what I mean. Everyone to her is a friend or family. As far as the people of Shiloh Springs are concerned, the woman is a candidate for sainthood."

A tiny smile tugged at the corner of Lauren's lips. She couldn't count the number of times Joshua had said the same thing about his mother. The love which filled his voice every time he talked about the woman who'd raised him was evident, and often made her feel envious she hadn't had any kind of relationship with any of the adults in her life that compared. Joshua had been lucky. Well, unlucky in that he'd lost his biological family, because that was a traumatic nightmare for any kid. But he'd hit the karmic lottery because he'd had a real family. One who cared about him, made him feel like he wasn't alone. Helped him adjust and find that biology and a blood connection didn't necessarily make you family. He'd had a choice, and he'd made one that changed his life for the better.

Too bad not everybody got the same chance. She hadn't and look how her life turned out.

"Like I said, the Boudreaus are all tied up with getting ready for the wedding tomorrow. Tonight, they're finishing up decorating the church, and doing the rehearsal. Rehearsal dinner after that. So, unless it's an emergency that you talk to them about Joshua, I'd suggest you cool your jets for a couple days. To be honest, I haven't heard that Joshua's even in town. He hasn't been around a lot recently."

Lauren blinked at the other woman's words. Why hadn't Joshua been back to Shiloh Springs? She'd expected the first thing he'd do after quitting his job was head for home. Especially with the huge change in his situation, one she was entirely responsible for. If she could change things she would, but he was the only person she trusted, though he had no idea why she'd dropped a bombshell in his life without any knowledge or warning. It wasn't like she'd had a choice.

"I don't want to cause any fuss. I'm sure a wedding is a huge event in their family, and I'm not going to do anything to disrupt that." She took another sip of her coffee. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure." Gracie rested the coffee pot on the table. Her dark hair shone in the overhead light, creating a shimmering halo around her face. A sprinkling of freckles across her nose made her appear young, and Lauren wondered again how close Gracie was to Joshua.

Not your business, Wright. You and Joshua aren't a thing anymore. He's got his own life, and you aren't about to shove all your problems into his lap, at least no more than you've already piled on him. In and out, that's your job.

"Is there any place around here you'd recommend for me to stay a couple of nights? I don't need anything fancy, just a roof and a bed will do."

Gracie grinned. "I think we can do a little better than that. I'd suggest the Creekside Inn. It's a bed and breakfast not far from downtown, easy access to Main Street. I'll get you the number. Ms. Edna runs the place. It's an old Victorian, beautiful place. Give me a sec."

Gracie strode away from the table, and Lauren watched her, curious how somebody so vivacious and vibrant ended up in a small town like Shiloh Springs, because she got the impression Gracie wasn't a local, or hadn't been born and raised here. Gracie seemed like she'd fit right in in a big city, and she couldn't help wondering about her story. Hazard of the job, Lauren thought, when she realized she was doing what

she always did. Analyzing everyone and everything in every situation had kept her alive. It was a habit she had no intention of breaking any time soon. Not until Winston Brashear was six feet under or housed in a federal Super Max for the rest of his life. She knew what her personal choice was.

“Here you go. I wrote down directions on how to get there on the back of the card. It’s not far.”

“Thanks so much, Gracie. I appreciate the coffee and the conversation. You kept me from barging into a private family celebration, which is the last thing I want to do.” Tossing several bills onto the table, she gathered her to-go cup and smiled a final time at Gracie before heading out the door.

Time to find a bolt hole for a couple of days. Somewhere she could hunker down and regroup and wait for Joshua Boudreau. Because she wasn’t leaving Shiloh Springs until she found him.

And her son.



JOSHUA STARED OUT the bedroom window, wondering again if he’d made a mistake coming home. Not that spending time with his family was wrong. Far from it. His biggest concern was the thought of bringing any hint of chaos to his family’s front door. For the past few months, his life had been turned upside down, and he still wasn’t sure where life was taking him.

Remembering the surprise on his family’s face when he’d walked into Daisy’s Diner, interrupting the rehearsal dinner, he realized he’d made mistakes, so many he’d lost count. He intended to make things right, not only for his family but also for Daniel. His son deserved to have a life where he didn’t have to wonder where he’d lay his head from one night to the next. Needed to be surrounded by people who loved him, who’d care for him, without question or hesitation, simply because he was part of their family. Like Douglas and Ms. Patti had done for him. They’d opened their home and their

hearts to bring him into their family, never once making him feel anything but loved and accepted.

He wanted that for Daniel. For him to be surrounded by love, to never feel like he wasn't wanted. Never doubt for one second that he had people who would be there for him, no matter what problems arose. That was the true meaning of family.

He'd kept far too many secrets from his family, especially his parents. It wasn't that they wouldn't have understood. There wasn't anybody he'd trust with his secrets more than Douglas and Patti Boudreau. They'd be hurt that he hadn't told them the truth from the beginning, but they'd forgive him. Especially Douglas, who understood working for the military entailed keeping certain truths from the general populace. When he'd been approached about joining an elite covert ops division of the CIA, Joshua had thought long and hard about whether to make the jump. It meant longer spells away from Shiloh Springs and his family. Visits became farther apart. He had barely seen his family over the last two years.

The only thing making the secrecy and subterfuge bearable had been Lauren. She was recruited months before him, so she'd been helpful in showing him the ropes, especially when they'd been assigned to the same clandestine op. Joshua found he thrived on undercover work; working in the shadows felt almost natural. He finally felt like he was making a difference, helping protect American citizens from threats they never realized impacted their freedoms.

Lauren at first had been a sounding board, but before long she became more. He'd fallen for her, losing his heart and soul to the beautiful operative. Senator Gonzalez, the brains behind their elite squad, hadn't been happy with pairing Lauren with him, but she'd been overruled. Gonzalez made it abundantly clear he was to keep their relationship strictly business, with no off-the-books hanky panky.

In the beginning that wasn't a problem because his missions were ugly. He'd been an elite sharpshooter, one of

their finest, and he'd been recruited for highly efficient eliminations, as they called them. Joshua never liked the way the higher ups wanted to make it sound like something it wasn't. He called his assignments exactly what they were—assassinations.

The rehearsal dinner continued for another couple hours before Joshua, Dane, Destiny, and Ridge headed back to the Big House. The others would follow soon enough once they'd dealt with the rest of the guests. Momma would probably want to stop by the church again, because she'd want to make sure everything was perfect for Rafe and Tessa's big day. He doubted he'd see her again before morning. Not much of a reprieve, but he'd take it. After all, he'd shocked them enough for one night.

A soft knock on the door drew him from his morose thoughts, and he glanced at his sleeping son, before walking over to the door and opening it quietly. Dane stood on the other side. Joshua couldn't help but notice his brother looked different. He'd noticed it earlier but hadn't had a chance to spend more than a few moments in passing with all the craziness of the evening. He seemed more content, at peace in his own skin. When he'd talked to Nica earlier, she'd told him Dane had fallen head over heels for his sexy computer geek/hacker. Good for him. After everything his brother had gone through, including recent death threats, he deserved to find some happiness. He'd only met Destiny once, on one of his fly-by visits, and he'd found her quirky and a little bit suspicious, but if she made Dane happy, he'd forgive any attitude. And from what he'd seen tonight at the diner, she was as head over heels for Dane as his brother was about her.

“Wanted to check on you and the little one. See if you need anything.”

“We're good, thanks. Hopefully he'll sleep through the night. He's had quite a day.”

“Haven't we all?” Dane leaned against the doorjamb and glanced toward Daniel, a tiny smile playing across his lips.

“Gotta say, you definitely made an entrance tonight, bro. Almost stole the spotlight away from Rafe and Tessa.”

Joshua grimaced. He’d been afraid of that. “Not my intention. I almost didn’t show up for the rehearsal dinner. Figured I’d come to the Big House and wait for everybody to come home, but I knew Rafe would throw a conniption fit, and we both know we don’t need him upsetting Momma the night before the wedding.”

“Well, your timing couldn’t be better. You missed all the heavy lifting.” Dane grinned. “Momma has been in heaven, finally getting to plan a full-blow wedding. She loves all her daughters-in-law, but she’s missed out on the whole church ceremony with family and friends. Personally, I’m glad I eloped, and I know she’ll never admit it, but I think it broke her heart a little.”

“Well, tomorrow, she’ll finally get to watch the culmination of everything she’s been wishing for. I think she’s been looking forward to us growing up, just so she could marry us off. Our momma has a heart the size of Texas and she wants everybody to be as happy as she and Dad. I have to admit, they’ve been a good example of what true love looks like. Proof it can last a lifetime.”

“Watching them, seeing how much they loved one another, it’s one of the reasons I was willing to take the leap when Destiny fell into my lap. That woman, for all her quirks and wackiness, she’s it for me.”

“Nica told me Destiny saved your life.” Joshua knew he only had the bare bones of the story, but he wasn’t worried. Dane would fill in any gaps. Of all his brothers, they’d been the ones who’d spent hours together, talking about everything from girls to money, to what they wanted out of life. Sometimes they’d simply sit in the loft in the barn and stare out at the open pastures and beyond, marveling that they’d somehow managed to become part of a family like no other.

“My woman has some wicked computer skills. She discovered somebody’d on the Dark Web put a hit on me, and

she decided it was her responsibility to play bodyguard, babysitter, and stop the hit man. How could I not fall in love with her?” Dane grinned and straightened in the doorway. “You know if there’s anything you need, I’m here for you. Destiny too. I know there’s stuff you can’t talk about, I get it. Hazards of the job.”

Joshua narrowed his eyes, studying his brother’s profile. He couldn’t possibly know what he’d been up to for the last few years. Nobody in the family did, not even his dad, and he had connections upon connections through his old buddies in the military. Not to mention his dad’s brother, his Uncle Gator. That man was a walking conspiracy theory.

“Appreciate it, bro. There’s some stuff I’m not ready to talk about yet. Of course, you’ll get a big chunk of what’s been happening tomorrow. I doubt Momma or Dad will let me go longer than that without telling them everything.”

“Yep, especially how they’ve ended up with a grandson they knew nothing about. Gotta admit that one’s a doozy.” Dane gave him a small two-fingered salute and turned toward the hall. “Get some sleep. I’m just across the yard if you need me. I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Thanks, Dane. For everything.”

“We’re brothers. Always have been, always will be, nothing’s going to change that.” Without another word, he was gone, and Joshua closed the bedroom door softly, not wanting to wake Daniel.

Plopping down on the bed, he reclined with his arms behind his head, staring at the ceiling. Too many thoughts raced around in his brain, bouncing from one to the next. Until a beautiful face stopped his racing thoughts, and he drew in a ragged breath. Lauren. He remembered her smile, full and carefree, filled with an unmitigated enthusiasm she shared freely with others. Most people meeting her never knew the truly complex woman beneath the surface. Not the way he did. Lauren was like a puzzle with all the edge pieces missing, but she’d fascinated Joshua from the moment he’d seen her at the

naval air station in Pensacola. He'd been there for a meeting with his commanding officer, as part of the newly formed covert team. One look and he'd known she was special. He just hadn't realized how special.

Closing his eyes, he banished the image of Lauren, because seeing it was too hard, too painful. Knowing she wasn't on this earth any longer, that she'd never lie in his arms again was an unbearable reality. One he didn't want to face tonight. Tomorrow would be soon enough, when he had to explain to his family about the woman he'd loved and lost. And the child she'd left in his care.

A child who was not his biological son.

CHAPTER TWO

THE FRONT OF the church shimmered under the soft golden glow from the overhead lighting, casting an almost ethereal appearance on the people standing before the preacher, ready to recite their vows. Rafe and Tessa's wedding was the biggest social event Shiloh Springs had seen in years, notwithstanding it being postponed a couple of times for family emergencies. Joshua sighed, remembering the various incidents which caused the delays, though he knew the family wouldn't have changed a thing, because it brought some new and wonderful people into the Boudreau fold.

He sat at the back of the church, even though the rest of the family was either seated at the front of the building or standing on either side of the altar with the prospective bride and groom. With his son in tow, he didn't want to disrupt the ceremony if Daniel got cranky. And he hated to admit it, but Daniel seemed to get cranky a lot. Couldn't blame the little tyke, not really. He got stuck with a man who was practically a stranger, nothing tying them together, not even strands of DNA.

He'd managed to dodge a bullet the previous night, showing up at the reception dinner with Daniel in tow. His brothers took the shock in stride, congratulating him on the addition to the family, and hadn't caused a big scene because there'd been people at the party who didn't need to know their intimate family matters. But, Joshua also realized he'd soon enough be on the other side of an interrogation to get all the facts of why he'd shown up without a word, toting an eight-month-old baby.

Glancing toward the altar, he couldn't help but marvel at the love apparent on Rafe's face. Oh, he'd known his brother loved Tessa. There was no doubt about that. His big brother had been gobsmacked from the moment they'd met. Joshua

didn't blame him. In fact, he almost envied him. He couldn't imagine what it might be like to find the one person in the whole world who completed you, the other half of your soul, only to lose them. Glancing down at Daniel, he swallowed past the lump in his throat. He'd come close once, and he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to open his heart again. It hurt too much when everything fell apart.

Daniel slept peacefully, occasionally sucking on the thumb stuck in his mouth. Joshua took a deep breath, wondering how he'd come to love someone so much when he barely knew him. It seemed impossible that a tiny bundle of arms and legs and big blue eyes had stolen into his heart until he couldn't imagine his life without Daniel in it.

I love you, little guy. Nothing and nobody will ever take you away from me.

He watched his sister-in-law, Beth, take the bouquet from the bride before Tessa placed her hand into Rafe's, and realized he'd missed a good chunk of the ceremony, lost in his thoughts. Several of his brothers stood to Rafe's left, each in a dark tux. Under normal circumstances, he'd be up there standing beside his brother, taking part in the solemn ceremony joining Rafe and Tessa together in marriage. He hated that he'd had to say no when Rafe asked, though he had good reasons. Or so he'd thought at the time. Too bad he'd found out everything he'd worked for, everything he'd kept secret from his family, his friends, had all be for nothing. Based on lies and deceit.

Rafe's voice sounded loud and clear, reaching all the way to the back of the church. Joshua had no difficulty hearing his brother say his vows to the woman he loved, the one he wanted to spend eternity with. When Tessa began saying her vows, her voice was a little shaky with tears, but no less sincere. With a deep, gut surety, he knew they'd make it for the long haul. Like his parents. Tessa's parents had a long and happy marriage until their deaths, and they'd been an example of how a marriage could and should be between people who loved each other. Rafe had the example of Douglas and Ms.

Patti. He couldn't think of any two people who'd make a better example of how to make a marriage work.

Within a few minutes, the bride and groom had exchanged rings, and the preacher pronounced them husband and wife. An explosion of applause sounded throughout the church, startling Daniel, who let loose a screeching cry almost loud enough to shake the rafters. Grabbing the handle of the carrier, Joshua quickly rose from the pew and headed toward the side door, as Rafe and Tessa strode down the church's center aisle. He needed to get Daniel away from the crowd before he let loose with more screaming cries. It amazed Joshua that somebody so tiny could produce such loud wails. Kid had a set of lungs on him.

He slid through the door to the men's room and placed the baby carrier on the edge of the sink, before lifting Daniel out.

"Hey, kiddo. Did all the noise wake you up?"

Placing Daniel against his shoulder, he walked back and forth across the limited space, doing a kind of rocking and shimmy movement he'd discovered Daniel loved. Poor kid still cried, but at least the screams had died back to breath-catching gurgling sounds.

"It's gonna be okay. Daddy's here." He stopped walking when he realized what he'd said.

Daddy. Somehow, in the space of a few weeks, he'd gone from a footloose bachelor with no ties and no responsibilities other than to his family, to being a father with an innocent child dependent on him. What crazy act of fate thought he'd make a good father?

Hearing the door open behind him, he turned and met the eyes of his brother, Brody. Figured Brody would be the one to come check on him. He'd always been the Boy Scout, the one who wanted to help others. Didn't matter to his brother whether they deserved it or not, he'd be there with an outstretched hand, ready to assist without question. Reminded him a lot of his momma.

“Everything okay, bro? I saw you sneak out the back.”

“The noise startled Daniel. I wanted to get him out of there before he disrupted things.”

Brody studied the baby against Joshua’s shoulder, a small smile curving his lips. “He’s definitely a cute little thing.” Brody’s gaze met his. “You know once the reception’s over, you’re gonna have to tell Momma and Dad what’s going on, right?”

Joshua drew in a deep breath before nodding. “I plan to tell them everything. It’s...complicated.”

“Bit of an understatement don’t you think, bro? You show up after being gone for the past two years other than an occasional fly-by visit, with barely a phone call or even a text, the night before your brother’s wedding. While I knew you wouldn’t miss Rafe’s big day unless there was a cataclysmic emergency, you brought along a bombshell of a surprise.”

“You weren’t the only ones surprised,” Joshua muttered softly.

“What? Dude, what are you talking about?”

He glanced toward the door, hoping nobody came strolling through, needing to use the bathroom. The urge to tell somebody, anybody, boiled up inside until he felt like he’d explode if he didn’t say something.

“Brody, I—” A heavy banging on the door was followed by Shiloh’s voice. “Guys, Momma wants you to get your backsides to the reception hall. They want some family photos before everybody starts mingling with the guests.”

Joshua shook his head. Looked like he wouldn’t be spilling his guts right now. A quiet rush of relief washed through him, and he realized he’d dodged a bullet. At least for a little while. Body wouldn’t have been happy with hearing the Reader’s Digest condensed version anyway. He’d dig and prod and cajole until he had all the answers that satisfied his need to understand Joshua’s tale.

Brody raised a brow, as if silently asking if he wanted to stay. Joshua shook his head. “Momma will come in and drag us out if she even thinks we’re going to ruin Rafe and Tessa’s big day. That includes the all-out party celebrating one of her boys tying the knot.” He shot Brody a rueful smile. “We’ll talk later...I promise.”

“I’m holding you to that.” Brody ran his hand lightly over Daniel’s head. “Can’t get over you with a kid.”

“Why? You’ve got Jamie, and Beth’s about to pop with your son. Put’s you one up on me.” Joshua smiled at the thought of his brother having his own baby boy on the way. He wanted to be a fly on the wall when Brody was in the delivery room with his wife. Mr. All-American Good Guy, who worked as the town’s fire chief and a paramedic when needed? He’d willingly wager his brother would face plant on the floor before the grand finale.

He nodded his hand toward the door. “Let’s go.”

“Fine, but I’m still going to get answers. Count on it.”

“I’m not going anywhere. Let’s go celebrate big brother’s big day.”

Opening the bathroom door, they joined in the controlled chaos that was a Shiloh Springs Boudreau bash.



JOSHUA WATCHED THE family, holding Daniel against his shoulder. Poor little guy was plum tuckered out. He’d been the center of attention. Every person attending the wedding had stopped by, oohing and ahing over his son. He knew most of them were dying of curiosity to find out how he’d shown back up in Shiloh Springs with a baby in tow, but were discreet enough to not ask.

Tessa looked beautiful in her wedding gown, and Rafe couldn’t seem to keep his eyes off his new bride. Joshua couldn’t be happier that his brother had found the one person who made him happy. Looking down at his son, he sighed

softly. He'd thought he'd found that special someone, but it hadn't been meant to be. Now the only thing he had that was a part of her was the baby in his arms.

"Joshua, good to see you." His friend, Gracie, slid onto the seat beside him. "I wondered if you'd make it back in time for you brother's wedding."

"Wouldn't have missed it."

She nodded toward Daniel. "Looks like you brought a plus one."

He'd always loved her sense of humor. They'd become friends when she'd moved to Shiloh Springs and opened her coffee shop. Whenever he was in town, which hadn't been all that much lately, he made it a point to stop in and catch up on all the local shenanigans, and Gracie knew everything about everybody, and kept the gossip fresh and always accurate. She wasn't one to tell tales out of school, and never to deliberately hurt anybody. Gracie was a lover, not a fighter, and she valued her friendships in Shiloh Springs. Having found out about some of Gracie's troubled past, Joshua understood. It was another reason they'd become friends.

"And who's this cutie pie?" She ran her fingertip softly against Daniel's cheek, careful not to wake his son.

"This is Daniel. My son."

Her eyes widened in shock. "Son? Whoa, buddy, you've been busy since the last time we chatted. You never mentioned a special woman in your life, and now here you are with a kiddo? I hope you're sticking around so we can talk, because it looks like we've got a lot of catching up to do."

"I'm not sure how long I'll be around. Kind of depends on a lot of things."

"Will I get to meet the woman who managed to snare the great and powerful Joshua Boudreau? She must be somebody special indeed, especially if she managed to gift you with this little guy."

Gracie's words felt like a knife in Joshua's soul. How could he explain the woman he'd love, who'd captured his heart, no longer existed? She'd been snuffed out like a candle in the night, and her light would never shine again.

"Daniel's mother is no longer in the picture. It's just me and the big guy now."

Gracie reached and grasped his hand, squeezing it tight. "I'm sorry, Joshua. I had no idea. You know I'm here for you. Anything you need, don't hesitate to ask."

"I appreciate it, Gracie. I promise I'll keep that in mind. Might be calling for babysitting duties, if we end up sticking around Shiloh Springs."

"Seriously, dude? You've got a new grandbaby for Ms. Patti, and you think she's going to allow you to take him away from her? Did you bump your head? Maybe you've got a concussion. That'd be the only excuse I can come up with for you saying something so lamebrained."

Joshua grinned at her words. "I know, right? I think my time living away from Shiloh Springs is about to come to an end. Not that I'm all that upset about it. Truthfully, I've missed the place. Missed all my friends."

Gracie started to stand, then slid back onto the chair. "I almost forgot what I came to tell you. Somebody was asking about you at the shop yesterday. Wanted to know where they could find you. Seemed kind of anxious to see you, though I couldn't get her to tell me why."

"She?"

Gracie nodded. "Yeah. Said she knew you, that you'd served together or something. Since I didn't know if you were in town or not, I told her to talk to your family. But I suggested she wait until after the wedding. I gave her the address to the B&B, so I think she's planning to stick around until she talks with you. Just wanted to give you a head's up, you know, so you're not blindsided by somebody from your past you'd rather not see."

“Thanks, Gracie. We’ll catch up in a couple of days, I promise. I won’t disappear without saying goodbye if I do have to take off.”

“I’m holding you to that, Boudreau. Now I’m gonna go and talk to the bride and groom and grab a piece of the wedding cake Jill baked. I’ve been looking forward to it for weeks.”

He wasn’t prepared when Gracie leaned forward, and pressed a quick kiss against his cheek, before turning and walking toward the lead table, where Rafe, Tessa, and his parents were gathered.

Easing gently from his chair, he wandered through the front door into the cool evening air. His mind raced, thinking about Gracie’s words, trying to imagine anybody tracking him down, wanting to talk to him. After he’d resigned following his last op, and then finding out about Lauren, he’d severed all ties to Senator Gonzales and the company. Made it clear he’d have nothing to do with the organization or future jobs. Signed all the necessary forms, nondisclosure agreements, and everything else she’d insisted upon, but he was out. Free and clear.

The powers that be hadn’t been happy with his decision to stop working for the covert agency. Heck, they didn’t even have an official name. The FBI had a name. The CIA had a name. ATF, DEA, everybody who was officially sanctioned by the U.S. government had a handle, and designation. The only handle Joshua held in his organization was assassin. And he’d been exceptional at his job, even while hating every minute. Because he’d thought he was doing something good. Preserving freedom and eliminating evil.

That all changed on a Thursday night—the night Senator Gonzalez informed him Lauren had been killed on her last assignment. Joshua hadn’t even known she’d been placed in deep undercover, and knew he’d been screwed with over and over. They’d kept him in the dark, knowing he’d never have

allowed her to get in any kind of close proximity to Winston Brashear.

He'd been in a bad place, dealing with Lauren's death. For a couple weeks, he'd disappeared into a whisky bottle, drowning out everything except his next drink.

That had all changed when he'd been contacted by Lauren's attorney. He hadn't even known she had a personal attorney. As far as he knew, she had all her legal documents and paperwork, including her will, dealt with by the team of lawyers provided by their organization.

Turned out there'd been a reason for her secrecy. And he held him in his arms, determined to protect him no matter the cost.

CHAPTER THREE

HAVING TOSSED AND turned most of the night, Lauren rose with the dawn, walking into the sunroom at the back of the bed and breakfast, a coffee cup clasped in her hand. The lightening sky behind the beautiful old house seemed painted with gorgeous pinks and oranges and purple hues, and she watched in awe as the sunshine banished the night's darkness. If only it was that easy to banish the blackness in her soul, though she doubted there was anything that could erase the horrors she'd seen. The things she'd done. There wasn't enough soap to cleanse the evilness she'd encountered. Or to erase the stain on her own soul.

But she had to try. Try to make amends to the one person she hurt the most. The man she'd lied to. Hidden things from. Joshua Boudreau once meant everything to her, though she'd never told him how she felt. When the darkest times came, and she'd been conflicted between duty and honor and love—she'd made the wrong choice—destroying any chance of Joshua forgiving her.

Regrets ate at her, even though she knew she'd done the right thing at the time—or so she'd thought. Followed orders. Listened to the very people who'd led her on a path of destruction she still hadn't fully recovered from. Maybe she never would.

But there was one thing she needed to do, one final act to maybe salvage the tiny piece of her soul that hadn't been corrupted beyond the point of no return.

“Good morning, Miss Wright. Looks like it's going to be a beautiful morning. Hope you slept well.”

The B&B's owner, an older woman, deceptively small and frail-appearing, stood in the doorway between the kitchen and the sunroom, an apron tied around her waist. She'd been

surprised when she'd arrived two nights ago, needing a place. Even she wasn't crass or rude enough to disrupt the Boudreau family reception dinner or the big wedding. Not after Gracie told her how important it was not only to the Boudreaus but to the town as a whole. Apparently they'd been anticipating the wedding of Joshua's brother for quite some time. Waiting one or maybe two more days wouldn't change anything, and though she felt like the biggest coward alive, she'd felt relieved to have one more day's reprieve before having to confront Joshua.

"Good morning, Edna." The proprietor had insisted Lauren call her by her first name. She smiled softly, hiding it behind her cup. Every time the tiny woman spoke, the voice coming from her sounded like it should be coming out of the mouth of a longshoreman, not a sexagenarian who singlehandedly ran the town's favorite bed and breakfast. She might get used to the gruff way Edna spoke, if she stuck around long enough. Not that she planned to spend any more time in Shiloh Springs than she needed to because once she talked with Joshua, she doubted she'd be welcomed with open arms.

"You got plans for today? I can point you to a couple of places, if you're looking to see the sights." Edna's chuckle turned into a cough, and Lauren took a step forward, wondering if the older woman was going to choke. Edna held up a hand, freezing her in place. "I'm okay. Just one of my spells. It'll pass, always does."

"Is there somebody I can call? That cough doesn't sound good."

"Forgot to take my meds this morning. I'll be right as rain after another cup of coffee."

Lauren wrapped an arm around Edna's shoulders and guided her into the kitchen, easing her onto the chair at the small table off to the side, situated in the corner and flanked by two windows. She quickly poured her a cup of coffee and brought it to the table, and wrapped Edna's hand around the cup.

“Thank you, love. You’re a good one, you are.”

Lauren slid onto the banquet-style seating opposite Edna and studied her face. Though her complexion was pale, her eyes appeared clear, and she was definitely alert. Maybe it had simply been a coughing spell.

“Would you like some breakfast? I can whip something up quick,” Edna’s husky voice cracked at the end, and Lauren shook her head.

“I’m fine. I’ve got someplace I need to be, and if I get hungry, I’ll pick up something in town.”

“So, you do have a reason for being in Shiloh Springs. I figured as much, since we don’t tend to get a lot of tourists passing through.” A smug smile flashed across Edna’s face, there and gone so fast Lauren almost missed it.

“I’m here to see an old...friend.” She hesitated before the last word, wondering if there was any truth to the statement. Would Joshua even consider her a friend anymore? Guilt clawed at her and tempted her to turn tail and run. He’d never know she’d been here, never find out what she’d done. But she couldn’t leave. Not without seeing Daniel.

“Good.” Edna took a sip of her coffee, then stood. “Means you’re sticking around another day or two, right?”

Lauren shook her head. “I’m not sure. I...it depends on a lot of things.”

“Well, you’re more than welcome. Your room will be waiting when you get back.”

“Thank you, Edna. You’ve made me feel very welcome.”

“Guess that means I’m doing my job right then.” She patted Lauren’s shoulder gently. “Hope your meet up with your friend goes well. If not, I got a couple bottles of the good stuff that’ll take the edge off, if you catch my drift.”

Lauren watched her walk away, heading through a doorway that led who knows where, and headed upstairs. Quickly changing, she headed out the front door and climbed

behind the wheel of her car. Drawing in a ragged breath, she pulled out of the parking space and headed toward the Boudreau ranch.



JOSHUA HEADED TOWARD the kitchen, knowing anybody awake in the house would be gathered there. It was the unofficial gathering place most mornings, where they'd eat breakfast around the table, drinking coffee and eating whatever delicious meal his momma had fixed. He already knew Daniel was downstairs, because his makeshift bed in the portable playpen in his room was empty. Nothing to worry about, he knew. He had a sneaking suspicion his little sister had absconded with his son. Not that he blamed Nica, Daniel was irresistible, and he'd noticed his sister spending a good chunk of the reception the previous night oohing and cooing at her new nephew.

At the bottom of the stairs, he inhaled deeply, mentally bracing himself for the onslaught he faced, knowing the time had come to face the music. The prior evening, the wedding reception kept him from having to undergo the third degree, but this morning all bets were off. His parents, especially his momma, had been beyond patient, and he owed them an explanation. About Daniel. About his frequent absences from Shiloh Springs. It didn't matter he'd been under strict orders not to tell anyone what he did or who he worked for. Including his family. Didn't matter how much he trusted them, and he never doubted for a single instant he wouldn't be able to tell them anything. But, if they knew the truth it would have put them in the crosshairs of some very dangerous people. So, he'd followed orders and kept his mouth shut.

It took a moment for him to realize the kitchen was suspiciously quiet. No murmur of voices, no shuffling of feet across the worn hardwoods. Instead, only silence reigned. The scent of coffee lingered, which meant somebody besides him was awake, but where were they?

He caught movement through the window over the kitchen sink, noting Dane in his ever-present cowboy hat. This one

that'd seen better days, but he refused to give it up. He seemed to have an unnatural attachment to the blasted thing. Joshua had offered more than once to replace it, but Dane had stubbornly refused. The back door was yanked open, and Rafe strode through, a coffee carafe clenched in one hand. He stopped for a second when he spotted Joshua, then gave a brief huff before walking the rest of the way inside.

“Morning, bro. Everybody’s outside. Decided some fresh air and sunshine was the perfect start to the day. I’m just refilling the pot. After last night, one cup of coffee definitely isn’t enough.”

Joshua watched his brother refill the carafe from the larger coffee maker on the counter. Though his mother had one of the fancy makers that used those little pod things whenever somebody needed a single cup, she still kept the big monstrosity that had been around forever for when the whole family got together.

“I thought you’d have left for your honeymoon already.”

“We’re leaving tomorrow afternoon,” Rafe answered with a grin. “Two weeks of nothing but me and my new bride in paradise. Beachfront condo on Maui, all expenses paid, thanks to Uncle Gator. Talk about one sweet wedding present. Tessa is over-the-moon excited because she’s never been to Hawaii before.”

“Nice. Wonder how Uncle Gator managed to swing a setup like—never mind, I have a pretty good idea.” Their uncle worked for one of the richest men in the U.S., who ran an elite security service out of New Orleans. Samuel Carpenter had been a friend of the family for more years than Joshua could remember. His Uncle Gator was a good man with a good heart. He remembered times he’d visit his Cajun cousins, who’d been friends with Carpenter. Remembered a young teen, a couple years older than him, a bit withdrawn and tended to stay to himself, though his cousin Jean-Luc seemed to be able to draw out the enigmatic teenager.

“Family’s on the back patio. Expect you’ve got a few things to get off your chest today.”

Joshua chuckled at Rafe’s dry tone. “Bit of an understatement.”

Rafe sat the coffee carafe on the countertop and faced Joshua. “If you’ve got a problem, bro, I can stick around. Dates are open-ended for the trip, and Tessa would understand if—”

“You and Tessa will get on that plane tomorrow afternoon. Things have been difficult, but I’ve made some changes, and I’ll be sticking around Shiloh Springs for the foreseeable future. Me and Daniel.”

A huge grin spread across Rafe’s face. “I can’t believe you’ve got a kid. Tessa’s already smitten with the little bugger.”

“He’s kind of hard to resist.” There was a moment of quiet between them before Joshua glanced toward the door. “Guess I need to get out there and face the music. Is everybody here?”

Rafe shook his head. “Most of the ladies are in town with Tessa. They’re helping her do all her last minute stuff before we leave tomorrow. Plus, they are pretty savvy, and figured you’d want a little family time to bring us up to speed on what you’ve been doing and why you showed up with a son nobody knew about. They know we’ll fill them in on everything you say anyway, just so you know.”

Rafe patted Joshua’s shoulder as he walked past, and Joshua appreciated the show of support. From the corner of his gaze, he spotted Rafe pick up the carafe and start for the back door, following behind him. He was kind of glad his big brother had stuck around for an extra day, because he knew Rafe would have his back, no matter what.

And he was going to need all the support he could get, because sometimes the truth is ugly and hurtful.

Thankfully, he knew his family would forgive him—eventually.

Climbing down the back steps, he headed for the crowded back patio. The first thing he spotted was Nica, seated on the loveseat with the baby carrier beside her, though it was empty. Daniel lay ensconced in her arms, a strand of her long blonde hair clenched in his chubby fist. Glad to know his instincts held true. Nica had been the one who'd snuck into his room and absconded with his son. The look on her face reflected nothing but the truest love he'd ever seen, and his heart swelled at the sight. It might not be the typical picture you'd expected for the Madonna and child; this was the South Texas version and for that reason alone it was perfect.

Momma sat across from her, a secretive smile curving her lips as she watched Nica coo softly to Daniel. He'd bet his last dime his momma had already gotten in her brand new grandma time with Daniel.

Most of his brothers stood between the area where all the family barbecues happened, the enormous grill currently cold, though it didn't matter. There was a table loaded with multiple platters of food across a long table, mostly leftovers from the wedding reception the night before.

“Morning, son.”

Joshua spun toward the sound of his father's voice and found himself clasped in a bear hug. He wrapped his arms around his dad's shoulder, feeling the unspoken love and acceptance. Felt the easing of the tension he hadn't realized he'd been holding loosen its stranglehold, and for the first time in the last several years, felt like everything was going to be okay.

“Why don't you grab something to eat, then we'll talk.”

“Thanks, Dad, but all I need is some coffee.”

Within seconds a mug filled to the brim was held in front of Joshua's face, and he took it, nodding thanks to Rafe. Strong and black, exactly what he needed this morning to finish clearing his head. Watched Rafe slowly walk away to join his brothers, leaving him alone with his dad.

“Your momma thought she’d let you sleep in this morning.”

Joshua took a sip of his coffee before responding. “I thought she’d be pounding on the door at the crack of dawn, if we’re being honest.”

Douglas grinned. “Oh, she wanted to. You’re lucky last night things went so late, or you’d have found her at the foot of your bed. It hasn’t been easy, because patience isn’t your momma’s strong suit. When she wants something, she gets it.” He leaned in and spoke softly. “She wants the answers you promised, and she intends to get them today. Just a head’s up, son.”

“I know. I intend to tell her—and y’all—everything.”

“Good. I’m here, just so you know. Always will be. No matter what.”

Tears pricked behind Joshua’s lids at his father’s words. Somehow they sounded more like a solemn vow, stronger than a simple promise. Once again, the man who’d accepted him into his home became the father he needed, stood beside him without question, without doubt. What had he ever done to deserve the family he’d been given?

Glancing across the patio again, he met his mother’s stare and knew time was up. No more stalling. Each step toward her seemed easier, like the enormous boulder he’d carried around shifted the closer he got to the one woman on earth he adored above any other. Before he’d made it halfway across the patio area, she was on her feet, closing the distance between them.

“Momma.” He barely got the word out, struggling to speak past the huge lump in his throat, clogged with emotion. Even though he’d been back to Shiloh Springs and to the Big House several times over the past couple of years, the heavy weight of the secrets he’d kept hadn’t made them easy visits. He’d done what he’d had to, to keep people safe, to protect others from harm, all for the good of this country, and for that reason alone he didn’t regret his actions. But there were other things,

life altering decisions, he regretted every single day. And now he could finally face the truths he'd kept hidden. Explain why he'd been aloof and distant and out of touch when all he'd wanted was to do his duty and then come home.

Home, he'd finally realized, was the small town in Texas where he'd grown up. Where the people who mattered welcomed him with open arms.

“Did you sleep well?” She clasped his face between her hands, though she had to reach a ways, because she was a little bit of a thing, and he was over six feet. Studying him, she finally nodded, her expression smoothing out and she smiled, before reaching a hand toward him. “Come on over here. Sit. I’ll have Nica fix you a plate. Do her good to turn loose of the little one for five seconds. I swear my daughter has baby fever. And I, for one, am not ready for her thoughts to head in that direction.”

“I talked with her a couple of days ago, and she didn’t mention seeing anybody serious. Is there something I need to know? Somebody I need to have an up close and personal chat with?”

His momma laughed and patted his arm. “No, I think she’s realizing everybody’s growing up and starting their own lives, their own families, and she’s feeling a bit unsettled. Remember, she’s the baby, the youngest. Probably expected y’all to stick around forever.”

“I don’t plan on going anywhere. I’m happy to be home.”

He eased down onto the love seat beside his mother, Daniel’s baby carrier on the patio floor at his feet. Nica had shot him a look when Momma asked her to fix him some food, one that clearly said she’d be back, and reclaiming Daniel. He’d let her—for now. But he had no intention of turning over responsibility of his son to anyone. From the moment he’d found out about the boy, he’d felt an overwhelming sense of protectiveness toward the little kiddo.

He'd missed most of his first months, never knew he'd existed until Lauren's letter revealed her final request—to take care of her son. Shaking his head, he didn't bother replaying the contents of the letter in his head again. Wouldn't change anything. Those months would still be missing. Lauren would still be dead.

“I've missed you, Momma.” The words flowed from him without conscious thought, as though he couldn't wait another second to tell her. It was true. He loved his family. His dad. His brothers. But Patricia Boudreau held a special place in his heart, one that belonged solely to her. Any time he'd been unsure or disheartened, and the last couple of years those feelings came more and more frequently, he'd think *what would Momma do*, and the answer became clear.

“I've missed you too, son. But you're home now. Things are going to change, but you know you've always got your family by your side. At your back. And we'll protect Daniel with every breath. I know something's wrong, something's bothering you. Has been for a while.”

“You've always been perceptive. Yeah, there are a lot of things you and Dad don't know. Changes I wasn't allowed to talk about. Probably still can't, truth be told. But I'm not hiding anything from y'all anymore. I—” His voice cracked, and he swallowed. “I'm not sure where to start.”

“Start with what's important, son. Fill in the rest later.” His father's voice sounded from behind him, and he felt his big hand squeeze his shoulder, before he walked around and took a seat on the sofa across from where Joshua sat with his momma. “If you're finally ready to talk, we're ready to listen.”

Joshua nodded and blew out a sigh between parted lips. As though some silent signal passed between his father and the rest of the family, all his brothers gathered around, filling the empty seats or plopping onto the ground, facing him. Yet it wasn't an uncomfortable feeling. He didn't feel like he was under a microscope, not when he read the concern and compassion on his brothers' faces. Nica seated cross-legged at

his feet, played with Daniel's toes, pretending disinterest in her surroundings, though from the tense set of her shoulder, Joshua knew she was focused on every single word.

"I know the first thing everybody wants to know about is where Daniel came from. It's like this, a huge white stork swooped in with this little bundle of joy held in its mouth inside a giant diaper." He grinned at the loud groans from his brothers and rubbed at the area on his upper arm where his momma had swatted him.

"Bro, everybody knows babies are found under cabbage leaves in the garden." Ridge tossed a grape at Joshua, who promptly caught it and popped it into his mouth.

"Nuh uh," Nica never looked up from playing with Daniel's tiny toes. "I checked. A lot. No babies in our garden." She followed up her words with a quick grin.

The small moment of levity did exactly what Joshua intended. Lightened the moment because the upcoming discussion wasn't going to be happy, fun times. Some of it would be rough and dark, but he'd promised himself no more secrets. There were things he couldn't talk about, because of his former job and because of nondisclosure agreements with the organization, but what he could talk about he'd share. If they wanted to listen.

Before he could speak, the sound of car tires crunching against the new gravel parking pad could be heard. It was an odd sound, one Joshua wasn't used to hearing. The newly formed parking space was brand new, large enough for multiple cars to park at once. With all the family showing up at the Big House more and more lately, he could only imagine the wear and tear the ground and dirt suffered. The new space solved that issue.

Ridge rose and started for the kitchen door. "I'll see who it is and send 'em on their way. This is family business and if they aren't family, they aren't sticking around."

“Thanks, bro.” Joshua glanced at his dad, saw his barely-there nod. “Y’all know I joined the Army a little over six years ago. Followed in Dad’s footsteps.” His father had proudly served his country as part of the Special Forces, and Joshua had been inspired to follow his dad’s path in the military. Growing up, all he’d wanted, talked about, was joining the military, serving and defending his country.

“And we’re proud of you, son.”

“I loved the military life. Felt like I was finally doing something worthwhile, something I chose. It felt right, and fulfilled something deep inside me, a path I could follow without any outside influences. I worked hard. My CO was especially impressed with my marksmanship skills. Highest he’d ever seen. I quickly caught the interest of...someone high up in the government.” He watched a couple of his brothers sit a little straighter at his words. His gaze caught Heath’s and held for a long enough moment he knew his brother had a good idea where his story was headed.

“This individual met with me on several occasions, outlining for me an opportunity she felt I’d be a good fit for—a brand new branch of the military, more specifically a hush-hush assignment. I’d work clandestine cases. The ones the public rarely hears about.”

“You’re talking black ops stuff?” Trust Lucas to have caught his not-so-subtle clues. His instincts were what made him such a good investigative reporter, and why Joshua had been forced to be extra careful around his brother. Things would have gotten dicey if he’d caught a whiff of what Joshua was really doing.

“Yeah. I was reassigned from the Army Special Forces and commissioned into this new unit. Like I said, very hush-hush. As far as the rest of the world was concerned, including y’all, I was in the United States Army, stationed at U.S. Army Garrison Stuttgart. That was a lie. A cover designed and maintained to give me freedom to pursue assignments, domestic and international, for my new employers.”

“Dude, are you saying you’re a spy? Like an honest-to-goodness James Bond?” Shiloh high-fived Heath, and Joshua rolled his eyes. Trust the terrible twosome to go straight to fiction.

“Not exactly. I get sent in to handle the...higher profile...eliminations. Deep threats to national security. Special cases where the options for peaceful resolution have been exhausted.” He watched the light of understanding fill his father’s eyes and drew in a ragged breath. When his mother squeezed his hand gently, he jumped slightly, not expecting the movement.

“Doesn’t sound like James Bond. More like Mission Impossible. Will your agency disavow any knowledge of your actions if you’re caught, my brother?”

Joshua chuckled, appreciating Heath’s injection of a moment of levity, though he wasn’t far from the truth. “Pretty much. Look, there’s lots I can’t talk about because it’s a matter of national security. But I’m out of that now, especially since I have other responsibilities. Ones that take priority over everything else.”

Everybody started talking at once, and Joshua listened as his brothers bantered back and forth, speculating about his secretive past, his mysterious absences over the past years. He’d barely scratched the surface, but the truth was a whole lot uglier than anything their imaginations could come up with. Although they were grown men, some of whom had seen the uglier side of life before coming to the Boudreaus, he still felt a compulsion to shield them. His family didn’t need to know how truly ugly people could be, how their evil sometimes ate at him in the dark of night. The depravity and cruelty men visited upon their own kind woke him in the depths of the night, the darkness seeming to creep into his soul. He often wondered if the stench of evil would ever fade.

Then he looked at the bundle of innocence lying at his feet, and knew he’d do anything to shield him and keep him safe. Daniel was his touchstone, his reason for walking away from

everyone and everything to come home. He'd give his life to keep his son from harm.

Ridge walked through the kitchen door and strode purposefully toward the patio, coming to stop beside the love seat. Leaning toward Joshua, he whispered, "Somebody here to see you. Told her she'd have to come back or leave a number for you to call her, but she refused. Said she wasn't leaving until she talked to you. I got the feeling she wasn't taking no for an answer."

Whoever it was, their timing couldn't be worse. "Where is she?" Joshua planned to get rid of them quickly. Now that he'd started telling his family the truth, unburdening the weight of guilt he'd been living under, he wanted to get it all out. He didn't have the time or the patience to deal with some trivial nonsense.

"Left her in the living room. Won't hurt to let her cool her heels for a bit." Ridge shot a glance toward the back door.

Momma squeezed his knee gently. "Go ahead and find out what she wants. It'll give you brothers and Nica time to think about what you've said. I'll keep an eye on Daniel until you get back."

With a final glance at his son, Joshua rose and walked into the Big House. Whoever it was, they'd better have something pretty dang important to say, because he wasn't in the mood to deal with anybody who wasn't part of the Boudreau clan. He still needed to discuss his plans for moving back to Shiloh Springs permanently, and beg for their help in protecting a helpless infant. And beg for their help in protecting a helpless infant.

Oh, and he had to find a way to tell them about Lauren. The woman he'd loved and lost.

CHAPTER FOUR

PACING AROUND THE Boudreau living room, Lauren tried to wrap her mind around the fact she was standing in Joshua's childhood home. She knew about his past, just as he knew hers. They'd both grown up hard, but he'd been lucky. He'd ended up with two parents and a passel of brothers who loved him. Sure beat ending up on the streets. Unlike her, who at thirteen was hiding in abandoned buildings and trying to stay one step ahead of social services and the cops. Shaking her head, she shoved the thoughts back into the little mental box where she hid them away, refusing to dwell on her dark, toxic past.

Standing in front of the large fireplace mantle, she studied the array of photos lined haphazardly along it. There were no matching frames, no lining up the photos according to height or any other semblance of a pattern. Instead, they seemed to be a random collection of childhood memories, each containing single pictures or group photos, candid, unscripted moments captured with a single click of a camera. Moments filled with laughter, but more importantly, love. It was easy to see this family shared a bond, a tangible link that bound them. It made her a bit envious.

At the sound of footsteps, Lauren drew in a ragged breath, knowing in mere moments, she'd come face to face with the man who held everything she cared about in the palm of his hand. The man she'd come to know, to care about more than she'd ever imagined possible. Her partner, first at work, and then in a forbidden relationship. One she'd risked everything to keep hidden from the prying eyes of her superiors. Senator Yvette Gonzalez, head of the clandestine organization operating with the unofficial auspices of the United States government suspected but turned a blind eye to Lauren and Joshua's relationship.

Her whole body sizzled to life the moment Joshua stepped into the living room. She heard his unintentional gasp when he caught sight of her, and tried to imagine the thoughts rolling through his head. Watching his face, she knew the exact moment he realized she'd lied to him. Now she'd have to pay the price.

“Lauren.”

The sight of his hand starting to lift toward her caused a tiny shiver to skitter across her skin. She swallowed back a groan when his hand dropped back to his side, though she couldn't miss the way it fisted until the knuckles were white. Maybe he was as affected by seeing her as she was seeing him.

“Hello, Joshua. You look good.”

“Really? That's where you're going? Banal pleasantries and inane conversation? Lauren, how is this possible? How are you here? Gonzalez told me you died. Do you have any idea what that did to me?” He scrubbed a hand across his face. “I mourned you. I totally freaked out. Senator Gonzalez had me tossed into a cell for weeks because I booked a flight to Dubai. I wouldn't have stopped until I killed Brashear.” Joshua turned his back to her as though the sight of her unnerved him. She didn't blame him. She knew he was shocked by her sudden return from the dead.

“Joshua, I didn't have a choice. Getting the chance to go undercover in Brashear's organization was an opportunity we couldn't afford to pass up. It was a million to one shot he'd even notice me, much less let me into the inner sanctum. You know what the man is capable of. He's a monster, and that he's still drawing breath is an affront to every decent person. Tell me you would have turned down the chance to take him down if it had been your call.”

Joshua's glare made her feel an inch tall, and she found her shoulders slumping. “I'm not talking about Brashear, and you know it. Don't try to make this about work or a case or anything except what it is. A betrayal of everything we built

together. Everything we talked about, all the plans for a life together. Instead, you chose death.”

Lauren winced. He was right and he was wrong.

“Can I explain?”

“Why? I think your lawyer was pretty darn thorough. I read your letter, did everything you asked of me. Right up to the point where the social worker placed my son into my arms.” Lauren winced at the anger radiating off Joshua. In all the time she’d known him, she could count on one hand the number of times she’d seen him lose his temper. Always directed at others, villains who deserved every ounce of his fury. But the rage pouring from him had her taking a step back.

“Daniel.” It was the only word she could get out.

“Daniel Jacob Boudreau. The name on the birth certificate, the one listing me as his father. Funny, I don’t remember being told I had a child. Or you being pregnant.”

“My lawyer gave you the information I left, didn’t he?”

Joshua closed his eyes, and she finally saw a crack in the angry façade. “He did. Why didn’t you come to me, Lauren? Explain what you’d done. I would have helped you. There had to be another way to keep Daniel safe.”

Lauren moved to the couch and lowered herself onto the edge. He didn’t understand the weeks of agony she’d gone through, debating whether to pull him into her personal nightmare. But in the end, when she finally realized there would be no escaping Winston Brashear’s reach, she’d reached out to the one person she trusted to keep not only her secret but protect the child. And though Daniel wasn’t Joshua’s biological son, he became legally his the moment she’d falsified the birth certificate.

“The letter I left explained everything. You know I had no choice. Unless Winston Brashear believes Daniel and I died, he’ll never stop looking. Hunting people is like a thrill sport for him. From the moment I held Daniel in my arms, I fell

hopelessly in love. Didn't you? Can you say you don't love that little boy with all your heart?"

"Of course I love him. He's my son."

The stranglehold around Lauren's heart eased for the first time since she'd arrived in Shiloh Springs. Every instinct, every hope, every belief she held in Joshua had convinced her he would love and care for Daniel like he was his own biological child. He wouldn't turn his back on Daniel, no matter how he'd been obtained, or the circumstances of his birth.

"Daniel's biological mother begged me to take him, protect him, to keep him away from that monster. She was young, but in spite of her lack of experience as a parent, she knew her son needed to be protected, even if it meant giving him up. Could I have done less?"

Joshua dropped down on the couch beside her, and she couldn't help noting that he sat far enough away he wouldn't accidentally touch her. So different from their past, where they'd find any excuse to touch. A secret brush of hands as they passed in the hall. Brushing the hair off her cheek when she bent over her desk.

"I still say we could have come up with a better plan than you dying." He paused and she could almost see the lightbulb illuminate over his head like one of those kid's cartoons. "Who else knows you're alive—besides me. Senator Gonzalez? General Mansfield?"

"No! Only one person and I trust her with my life. And she proved my loyalty in her was justified, because she's the one who brought Daniel to you."

"The social worker." She nodded, knowing he still had a million questions, and right now she didn't have time to answer them all. It was imperative she get out of Shiloh Springs. If Brashear was close, and he always seemed to be one step behind her—how she didn't know—drawing attention

to the town might lead him straight to Joshua. To Daniel. She couldn't let that happen.

“I couldn't take the risk of anybody finding out about Daniel. I don't know who his biological father is or why it's so important nobody figure it out, but I couldn't trust anybody. Brashear wouldn't continue hunting for Daniel unless having control of him meant adding to his power base or his wealth. Brashear is already a powerful man, but he can still be brought down if enough information is gathered. But there's something about Daniel which makes Brashear think having the boy makes him invincible. I refuse to let him use a child as part of his megalomaniacal plan for total and utter domination. He already has politicians and business giants in his pocket. Can you imagine what he'd be capable of he controlled even more power?”

Joshua ran a hand through his hair, and she watched an unruly lock fall back across his forehead. She loved when it got a little long on the top, where she could run her fingers through it, play with the untamed waves. Her fingers itched to reach out and do it now, and she clenched her hands into fists to keep from giving in to her desire.

“How'd you do it? Make everyone believe you died? Today with the internet and access to every website including the illegal ones, it's nearly impossible to remain off the grid. Everybody slips up.”

“My first step was to contact an attorney I could trust. Somebody who would be incorruptible if Brashear's men got to him before he got Daniel to you. Arno Deacon has a reputation of being honest and steadfast, and that he can't be bought off. He's represented people who I investigated as part of my job, people who others would have turned their backs on, convinced they were guilty without a shred of evidence. Arno Deacon doesn't bow to political or monetary pressure when it comes to his clients. When I approached him to write my will, I admit he hesitated. He isn't a fan of the government, and especially hates conspiracy theories and thought I was smack dab in the middle of that stuff. I convinced him I would

not put him in any danger. I was simply covering all my bases, that I didn't trust my company to have my best interest at heart when and if I was killed in the line of duty."

"On that we agree. I've had all my personal papers drawn up by somebody I trust, and they're being held in his office with copies in a safe deposit box only my family has access to. Specifically, Dane or my father."

"I knew we thought alike." She gave him a small smile. "You know I'm pretty good with a computer. Not the best hacker around, but I'm good enough I can get in and out without leaving a footprint. I got all the paperwork together—my will, my dental records, my DNA, medical records, falsified work history. Anything I thought I'd need, including false identification. Driver's license, passport, credit cards, social security card. That stuff cost a bloody fortune, because I needed things that would pass the closest scrutiny. Every single piece under the name Sarah Barnes."

"The name you used working for Brashear. Smart. Once the news reached him, he'd have his computer people check to make sure, to verify that you were dead. I suspect he sent people to check with the morgue and the medical examiner, to verify the bodies were yours and Daniel's. I follow you so far. But that doesn't explain how nobody at work questioned the fact you died."

She twisted her hands in her lap. Rehashing all she'd done ramped up the anxiety inside her. The fear of losing Daniel. Wondering if someone where she worked was a traitor who'd sell her out in a heartbeat to Brashear. But mostly she knew hurting Joshua would haunt her. It had every day since she'd *died*.

"Daniel and I holed up in motels, only staying a couple of days before moving to the next. I bought a piece of junk car and put phony plates on it. I prayed every time I turned the key it would start. Watched the news, followed local papers online wherever I was, looking for the perfect opportunity. I never wanted anybody else to die, but I knew I needed to take

advantage of the situation if someone who fit my profile did. Morbid but practical. It took longer than I expected, but finally a woman of approximately my build and age was killed in a car accident.”

“You saw your chance and you took it.”

She nodded, again twisting her hands in her lap. Telling Joshua, watching his face as he processed the fact that he’d be lied to—a lie that had changed his whole life—hurt more than she’d imagined. But it would all be worth it, if he’d allow her to see Daniel. One last, final goodbye. A chance to hold him, kiss his baby-smooth cheeks. Hold him against her heart and breathe in his scent. Her arms had felt empty seconds after she’d passed him to Elaine Coffman, the social worker and friend who’d kept Daniel safe and well-cared for until Joshua had been found by Arno Deacon.

Seeing his anger, the rage boiling beneath the surface, Lauren knew she’d made a mistake coming here. She’d known he’d take Daniel, love him, and protect him, but she hadn’t anticipated the unforgiving stare he shot her. She’d been a fool coming here, and she needed to leave before she did something even more foolish—like throw herself at his feet and beg forgiveness. But there couldn’t be any kind of reconciliation between them, she’d gone too far, done too much that was unforgivable. No, she needed to leave. Leave the Boudreau ranch and Shiloh Springs before it was too late.



JOSHUA HAD NEVER been one to believe in second chances. Yet here stood the one woman he’d have given everything to have one more day with. When his superiors told him she’d died in the line of duty, he’d been heartbroken, lost and floundering without his anchor. Until the moment he’d had a small dark-haired reason to keep going placed in his arms. The instantaneous love and protectiveness kicked in, and Joshua knew he’d regained his reason for living.

He and Lauren had been partners for the past few years, working undercover for the government on some of the most

dangerous missions imaginable. But he'd been sent out on a solo mission, one that appeared out of thin air, and between one day and the next he was on assignment. He'd been gone for several weeks, trailing a mercenary through the jungles of South America, a man who'd been responsible for the slaughter of innocent women and children in a small village, all for money. Once he'd been apprehended, Joshua had headed home, exhilarated to be with Lauren again.

Everything changed the moment he walked through the door. Lauren wasn't there. She'd never be there again. Official word came straight from Senator Gonzalez: She'd died in the line of duty.

"I'm having a hard time with this. Senator Gonzalez told me you were dead. Said they had validated and certified your death. She showed me the death certificate." Try as he might, he couldn't keep the accusation out of his voice.

"I faked my own death. I had no choice once Daniel was born," she said, her voice shaking. "The Brashear operation was a total screw up. I barely made it out of Dubai. I didn't know who to trust. I had to disappear."

"Me." He slammed his hand against his chest. "You were supposed to trust me. I've had your back from day one, our first assignment, just like you had mine. Or so I thought."

Joshua stood and walked a few feet away, trying to process the fact she stood before him, alive and whole and as beautiful as she'd ever been. If he reached out, he could touch her, prove that she wasn't a hallucination, some kind of delusion he'd created, because he wanted her there so much. Yet there was something different about her. She seemed more guarded, more wary. Jumpy. Lauren wasn't the skittish type. The woman he knew had nerves of steel, which had saved his hide on more than one op.

"I only need one thing from you, Joshua," she said, her voice pleading. "One single request and I'll be gone, out of your life for good this time." He watched her straighten, as if gathering her strength around her like donning armor for an

onerous task, and he met her gaze straight on. As strong willed as Lauren was, he'd never been cowed by her attitude.

“What do you want, Lauren?”

“I need to see my son. When everything fell apart, and I ran for my life, I didn't get to say a proper goodbye to Daniel.” He watched tears well in her eyes, and almost felt sorry for her. *Almost*. Until he remembered the boy outside with his family, the one she'd left behind when she'd allowed good old Uncle Sam to declare her legally and truly dead.

“No. Absolutely not. I finally managed to get him to Shiloh Springs, to my family. You of all people should realize it wasn't easy. I'm not about to allow anybody or anything to disrupt my son's life. Especially not his lying, worthless mother.”

Lauren grabbed onto the back of a chair before sliding onto the seat, almost like her legs couldn't hold her up. From the shocked look on her face, she hadn't expected him to refuse her request. It didn't matter. He couldn't, wouldn't back down. She'd made her decision, made the choices to place Daniel in his care, to ensure no one would ever harm the child. As far as he was concerned, that included her.

“I...I hadn't expected you to say no.” She gave a hard-edged laugh. “It's my fault, I should have known better. You're a good man, Joshua, an honorable man. I knew this. It's why I gave Daniel into your care.”

She drew in a ragged breath and struggled to her feet. “I'll go. This was a mistake, and I'm only hurting myself. Please, take care of Daniel because I can't. You'll never see me again, never hear from me. I give you my word. All I ask is that you never let anybody know where you got Daniel. If anyone finds out I gave him to you—”

“Lauren, stop.”

Joshua knew someone had slipped into the kitchen and was listening to their conversation. Partly out of curiosity, he knew, but more than that his family had a sixth sense when trouble

raised its head around a Boudreau, and right now alarm bells were clanging with every word out of Lauren's mouth. Combined with the instructions provided by her attorney, he realized there was a big gap in the information he had regarding his son.

“Hey, Joshua, thought I'd better check and see if you needed a hand with your...guest.”

Didn't it figure it was big brother Rafe? It was a good thing he was a sheriff, because he was one of the nosiest people Joshua ever met. He was surprised it had taken this long for him to stick his nose into Joshua's business. Probably would have been sooner if he hadn't been distracted by his own wedding preparations.

“Everything's fine. Simply an old—colleague—stopping by on her way through town.”

“Gonna introduce us?”

Joshua shot Lauren a glare, daring her to say anything. He knew she got the message at her imperceptible nod. He needed to get her out of here before anybody else decided to come and investigate the pretty woman stopping by to visit Joshua when he'd barely been back in town a few days. Small towns lived on gossip, and his family was no exception.

“Lauren Wright, this is my brother Rafe. Rafe, meet Lauren. We served together at the naval air station in Pensacola. Different jobs, but a bit of crossover. We became friends. She was passing through the area and decided to stop by.”

Watching his brother's face, he knew Rafe wasn't buying it, but he'd never admit that in front of Lauren. Nope, Joshua would get his interrogation hat on the minute she left, but Rafe would have his back until then.

“A pleasure, Ms. Wright. We haven't had a chance to meet many of the people Joshua served with. Would you like to join us? We're having breakfast and coffee out back on the patio.”

Lauren shook her head, though she'd pasted on what Joshua called her professional smile. *The one that never quite reached her eyes.* "Thank you for the offer, but I'm afraid I have to go. Joshua, I...it was good seeing you."

"Lauren," he started, but she cut him off.

"It's okay, Joshua. I understand, truly. It's been wonderful seeing you again. I hope you have a wonderful life."

Joshua stood frozen in place as she rushed past him and out the front door. Rafe watched her go, his gaze switching between the closed front door and Joshua.

"Pretty girl."

"Don't start, Rafe. Not now."

Rafe placed his hand on Joshua's shoulder. "Do you need me to stop her? It didn't seem like you finished with your conversation. Not that I was listening."

Joshua chuckled, because he knew his brother had totally been eavesdropping. "Yeah, right."

"I'm going to stick my nose in here and guess that she's Daniel's mother. Why was she here?"

"She wanted to see him."

"You refused." Rafe's neutral tone didn't surprise Joshua. His brother wasn't one to jump to conclusions, which was part of what made him a good sheriff. He gathered facts, studied all the sides of a situation.

"It's complicated and I don't want to talk about it. Not now, not with the family sitting outside, waiting for me to spill my guts."

"You're right, probably not the best time to deal with your ex."

Joshua winced at the word. He'd never considered Lauren his ex. Being an "ex" indicated a breakup, a separation. He hadn't had that luxury. Instead, he had an urn filled with ashes and an infant depending on him.

“Like I said, it’s a long story and we can talk later.” *Like when you get back from your honeymoon. Maybe I’ll be able to handle telling you the truth then, bro.*

“Why don’t you take a couple of minutes before heading back outside? Give yourself a chance to clear your thoughts because it’s going to be a long morning.” Right as Rafe finished his sentence, his phone rang. Glancing at the caller ID, he grimaced. “It’s the office. They wouldn’t call unless it was an emergency because I’m officially out of the office for the next two weeks. Guess I gotta take it.”

Rafe walked back toward the kitchen, the phone pressed against his ear. Joshua hoped it wasn’t anything too serious. His brother deserved the time off. Deserved to have a wonderful honeymoon with his brand-new bride. But something deep in his gut told him this morning’s events weren’t over.

He hadn’t seen the last of Lauren, and the thought both terrified and exhilarated him. Because no matter how bad things got, there was one shining fact to this whole debacle—Lauren was alive.

CHAPTER FIVE

“HELLO?” LAUREN ANSWERED, not recognizing the number. After her meeting with Joshua, she was still reeling, and apparently not firing on all cylinders, because she never answered calls where she didn’t know who was on the other end. Too many times it had ended with her neck deep in alligators, and right now she couldn’t afford to have her focus split. Not until she made Joshua realize she was right, and the only way to keep him safe—heck, to keep everyone she cared about safe—was to disappear permanently.

“Is this Lauren?” The gruff, almost masculine-sounding voice immediately made Lauren freeze, car keys in her hand. Instantly alert, Lauren gazed scanned the Boudreau’s front yard, taking in each car and pickup truck. Threat assessment was second nature to her after all her years working undercover, yet being here, around Joshua, she’d let her guard down. Big mistake.

“Yes, it’s me.” Lauren replied, sensing the tension in the air. She recognized the voice as the B&B owner.

“I’m probably being a paranoid old fool, but I can’t shake the feeling something’s going on with you. More than meets the eye.” The sound of a rough cough, the hacking noise, reminding Lauren of the choking spell the B&B’s owner had that morning. “I ain’t gonna lie, I tend to stick my nose in everybody’s business. Shoot, that’s pretty much the only entertainment I get ’round these parts nowadays. Anyway, I’m getting off topic.” There was a long pause, and Lauren started to check if the connection had been lost, and then Miss Edna continued. “Somebody showed up here asking about you.”

“Looking for me?” Lauren leaned against the side of her sedan, feeling the world tilt on its axis. It wasn’t possible. She’d been too careful, covering her tracks to the smallest

detail, knowing she wouldn't be able to stay in Shiloh Springs long. It was too dangerous, and she'd never, ever, put Daniel at risk. They couldn't possibly have found her yet. "Who was it?"

"They claim to be FBI, but I don't believe them," the woman said in a hushed tone. "Showed me IDs, but I'm not buying it. Looked phony to me. I told them you weren't here, and I'd never heard of Lauren Wright. Don't think they bought it though because I caught them trying to sneak into your room. I chased 'em off. Told 'em I knew a couple of real FBI agents, and I was gonna call them and check out their story. They hightailed it out of here after that with their tails tucked between their legs."

Lauren's heartbeat raced as she realized the gravity of the situation. Seemed like somehow Brashear's goons had found her, which meant she had to leave. Now. Before they got a hint Daniel was anywhere near Shiloh Springs. She could lead them somewhere, anywhere, far away from her son.

"What am I going to do?" Lauren asked softly, her voice shaking. She hadn't realized she'd spoken aloud, until the other woman answered.

"I think it might be best if you don't come back to the B&B. I don't know who these folks are or what they want, but it's clear that they're not who they say they are. Any chance you can find another place to stay while you're in Shiloh Springs?"

Lauren took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. She needed to stay calm and think rationally. *Come on, focus. If they're working for Brashear, they'll lay low, waiting for me to show up, at least to get my stuff. If they're Senator Gonzalez's men, hopefully they're smart enough to know better than to show up here.*

Straightening, she yanked open the driver's door, knowing she had to leave, before anybody noticed she was still parked out front. The last thing she needed was for one of Joshua's brothers to think she was trying to cause trouble.

“Thank you for letting me know,” she said, her mind racing to come up with a plan to stay one step ahead. “I’ll find somewhere safe to go. If it’s not too much trouble, could you hang onto my things? I’ll make arrangements to get them as soon as I can.”

“No problem, Lauren. Like I said, I didn’t trust those fake FBI folks, especially the woman. She had crazy eyes.” Without another word, she hung up, leaving Lauren feeling more befuddled than she had at the start of the call.

Lauren realized she couldn’t stay in Shiloh Springs any longer. As much as she wanted—needed—to hold Daniel one last time, it was too late. She needed to leave, find somewhere safe to hide until she could put her plan into action. Running from Brashear and his goons for the rest of her life couldn’t happen. Sooner or later he’d dig deep enough, uncover someone or something that would lead him to Daniel or Joshua. She’d kill him before she’d let him hurt the people she loved. And whether he believed it or not, she loved Joshua Boudreau.

“Everything okay, Lauren?”

She whirled toward the sound of the deep voice, her hand gripping the keys in a stranglehold. The breath caught in her throat eased when she recognized Joshua’s brother, Rafe, standing not far from the back end of her sedan.

“I...everything’s fine.”

She watched as his lean stride ate up the short distance between them, until he stood in front of her. Though they looked nothing alike, he reminded her of Joshua. The same intense stare. The same compassion in his eyes. And the same ability to read her because he simply shook his head and peeled her fingers from around her key fob.

“You’re not a very good liar, but I’ll let that pass. I admit I overheard part of your conversation with Miss Edna from the B&B. Sounds like you’ve got a bit of a situation. Anything I can help with?”

Oops, how had she forgotten he was the local sheriff? Probably knew everything that happened in Shiloh Springs within minutes of it happening. Small towns were like that. Which was why sticking around here, especially if Brashear's men had found her, would be a mistake of epic proportions.

“Just a little hiccup, nothing to worry about. I'll be out of Shiloh Springs before nightfall.”

When he remained silent, simply studying her, she knew she'd said or done something wrong. He seemed to have the same sixth sense Joshua had. The one that made him one of the best agents she'd ever worked with. It also made it hard to put one over on him, because he could always tell when she wasn't telling the whole truth. Wondered if he learned it from big brother Rafe?

“What's the rush? Seems like you and Joshua still have things to resolve. The tension between you? I'd say there's more than a bit of history there.”

She tensed, wondering how much he actually knew and how much he was guessing. “I'm sorry, but that's none of your business, sheriff. I have places to go, people to see. Joshua's back in the heart of his family. I think we've resolved everything we have to.”

Rafe chuckled. “I can't believe you said all that with a straight face.” Reaching for her, he threaded his arm through hers, patting her hand gently, before tucking it into the crook of his elbow. “I'm glad I caught you before you left, because I have a couple of questions I'm hoping you can answer for me.”

“What kind of questions?”

“The kind where a couple of FBI agents show up at my sheriff station asking questions about a person of interest they believe is in my town. Want to guess who that might be?”

The whole time he spoke, he gently steered her back toward the front door of the Boudreau home, and with each step Lauren felt like a condemned prisoner headed toward the

gallows. Seemed fitting. If Brashear had found her, she'd be dead before the dust cleared.

As she climbed the steps to the front porch, Joshua pushed open the screen door and stepped through. "What's going on?"

"Seems I have a couple of questions for Lauren before she heads out of town. Figured it might be easier to talk to her here, rather than at the station."

Joshua's gaze narrowed and he studied Rafe before turning his attention toward her.

"What's he talking about?"

She shrugged. "I'm really not sure. Seems some people showed up at the sheriff's station with questions, and your brother immediately assumed they were looking for me."

"Lauren, my brother isn't stupid, and he doesn't jump to conclusions. Now you can tell me what's going on or he will."

She heard a door open and voices heading in their direction, and she looked around, panicked. Joshua's family was about to walk into the living room, and she wasn't ready to meet them. She'd lied to Gracie at the coffee shop when she'd said she wanted to meet Ms. Patti. The woman wasn't a pushover and having raised eleven boys and a daughter, she wasn't likely to fall for any subterfuge no matter how subtle. Besides, she was Joshua's mother. The woman who'd shown him the truest love he'd ever known. The thought of standing before this larger-than-life paragon scared her half to death.

"Boys, what's going on? We've been waiting for y'all to come back out so we can finally figure out what's going on." The older woman's words trailed off, and she looked between Rafe and Joshua before stepping forward. Her eyes widened for a split second when she spotted Lauren standing between them.

"Good morning. I don't believe we've met. I'm Patti Boudreau. Is there something we can help you with? I'm afraid it really isn't a good time. We're dealing with a bit of a family thing at the moment."

Joshua reached and grabbed Lauren's hand, wrapping it securely in his. "Momma, this is Lauren Wright. She and I served together, worked on a few missions. When she found herself in Shiloh Springs, she thought she'd drop by and say hello."

"I'm sorry for showing up at an inopportune time, Mrs. Boudreau. I didn't mean to interrupt family time. I'll go. Joshua and I can catch up another time."

"I don't think so," Rafe whispered low, so the rest of the family didn't hear. "We have unfinished business. Take a second, make small talk with the family, and then we'll head into town, and you'll answer my questions, Lauren. Understand?"

She gave a barely perceptible nod. Rafe took a step back, and she took her first deep breath since reentering the house. Nothing had gone right since the moment she'd driven up to the Boudreau ranch. No, that wasn't right. From the moment she'd arrived in Shiloh Springs, she'd known nothing was ever going to be the same again.

"Why don't you join us on the patio, Ms. Wright? I'd love to hear about some of Joshua's adventures. He's been very close-mouthed about his time in the military. I bet you've got some stories to share."

"I don't want to interrupt your family time."

"Nonsense." Ms. Patti looped her arm through Lauren's and began guiding her toward the kitchen. "Joshua, you and Rafe grab another pot of coffee on your way out." Lauren found herself gently but forcibly accompanying the Boudreau matriarch, and glanced over her shoulder as she was led away, silently pleading for Joshua to do something. He watched as his mother led her away.

Within moments, Lauren found herself surrounded by Boudreaus on their back patio. Clustered seating areas overflowed with tall, handsome men who Lauren knew were Joshua's brothers. She recognized them from the pictures

Joshua had shown her of his family. The family he was so proud of, so thrilled he had people he cared about and who cared about him. The pretty blonde had to be his sister, Veronica, though Joshua said everybody called her Nica. She was the youngest, the baby of the family, and the only one of the Boudreau clan to actually have been born to Ms. Patti and Douglas. All of that faded into the background, though, when she noted the baby carrier at the woman's feet.

Daniel.

It had to be him. Joshua refused to let her see him, but this might be her one and only chance to say her final goodbye. Maybe fate had looked at her kindly, had taken mercy on her and decided to give her a break. One last good thing before her life became a series of moving from one place to another, living as a nomad, doing everything she could to stay one step ahead of Brashear, because there was nothing more important than keeping Daniel safe. Keeping her promise to Lily Brashear to protect the tiny life she'd carried and given to Lauren, sacrificing her own happiness to keep her father from harming, abusing, and using an innocent baby for his own despicable purposes.

She fully comprehended she was lying to herself. As many times as she insisted she could stay one step ahead of Brashear, she knew it for the lie it was. She'd be lucky to last another month before her fake death became all too real.

"Everybody, this is Lauren, a friend of Joshua's. Lauren, these are Joshua's brothers and his sister. And the good-looking man over there is my husband, Douglas." She met his eyes, and he gave her a single nod.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your family time. I...it's good to meet everyone. I've heard nothing but wonderful things about you all."

Laughter met her words. "Somehow I doubt everything Joshua said about us was all sweetness and light."

“Don’t worry though, we know all his secrets, and we’re not afraid to tell ’em to anybody willing to listen.”

Lauren heard the chatter, the friendly family camaraderie, but she couldn’t take her eyes off the baby carrier. Was he sleeping? Had he been looking around, learning the new faces, the different people who surrounded him, keeping him safe?

“That’s Daniel, Joshua’s son.” Nica turned the baby carrier around, and Lauren got her first look at Daniel since she’d surrendered him to the social worker. The one who’d broken every rule, put not only her job but her very life on the line, to help out a friend. Lauren had made sure there was no evidence, no trail that could lead back to Elaine.

“He’s gorgeous.” She bent forward and got her first good look at Daniel. Her heart filled with joy at the sight of her little man. He’d grown so much since the last time she’d seen him, wrapped in the blanket with airplanes and trains on it. How was it possible that he’d gotten so big?

A cup of hot chocolate was placed into her hands, and she looked up to see Joshua’s face.

“Thank you.”

“I figured you didn’t need any more caffeine.”

“Lauren, please, come and sit.” Ms. Patti indicated the empty space beside her on the loveseat. Lauren shot Joshua a *help me* glare, and he silently shook his head, a tiny smile tugging at the corners of his lips. Dirty rat, leaving her to the mercies of his mother and the rest of his family. It would serve him right if she told them all his secrets. But he knew she wouldn’t do that, because it would expose too much of their lives together. And from the way Joshua had introduced her, his family had no idea that she was Daniel’s mother.



JOSHUA STOOD ACROSS the patio talking with his dad and a couple of his brothers, but his gaze never left Lauren. Seeing her seated with his mother and sister made the breath catch in

the back of his throat, because it was a scene he'd always imagined. Torn between loving her and hating her, he missed what Rafe said.

“Bro, you keep glaring at her like that, she’s going to burst into flames.”

“What?”

Rafe chuckled and patted Joshua’s shoulder. “Dude, I know Momma’s got interrogation skills to rival a CIA agent, but she’s not going to grill Lauren about Daniel. She doesn’t have a clue Lauren’s in any way connected to you, other than as a former work buddy. But if you don’t relax, you’re going to arouse her momma bear suspicious side, and then Lauren will be grilled until she breaks. I don’t care what kind of training y’all had, everybody breaks when Momma’s the one asking the questions.”

“Didn’t you say you needed to get her into town to do some interrogating of your own?” Joshua still hadn’t taken his eyes off Lauren. He couldn’t help feeling that if he did, she’d disappear like a puff of smoke, and this would all have been a dream. Or maybe a nightmare, because he wished so badly for her to be alive. Every emotion was a jumbled mess. He needed to get her alone and ask her a few hard questions.

But it looked like she’d gotten her wish, because Nica was handing Daniel to her. He stiffened, ready to race across the patio if she made one wrong move. Instead, he watched a look of pure yearning cross her face, followed by the love only a mother shows their child, and he knew no matter how many times she’d lied to him—to everyone—she’d done it for a good reason. Because she’d never have left her son otherwise.

When she looked at him, holding his son in her arms, he saw a single tear wend down her cheek and knew he’d have to at least give her the chance to explain. Maybe he’d be able to find a way to forgive her for her manipulation and her lies.

Maybe.

CHAPTER SIX

LAUREN WRIGHT SAT in the passenger seat of her sedan while Joshua drove, staring out the window as he headed down the winding country road toward Shiloh Springs. She had been in town for only a couple days, wanting only to see her son one final time before she disappeared off the grid. If she went deep enough outside official and unofficial channels, she could keep her precious Daniel safe. There wasn't anything she wouldn't do for that precious baby, as evidenced by the fact she'd given him to the one person who could protect him, keep him safe and provide him with the love and support he'd need. Help her keep her promise to Lily Brashear to keep her baby out of her father's hands.

Growing up without a mother scarred a person's psyche, no matter how much they denied it. She should know, she'd experienced firsthand what it was like to be unloved, shuttled from one place to the next whether she liked it or not, whether she wanted to stay. Never given a choice about anything in her life.

Joshua drove like he did everything else, with confidence and surety and she wasn't concerned about their safety. He'd get them to Shiloh Springs, she'd grab the stuff Miss Edna had packed up, and hit the road, putting her plan in place. Though she'd hoped for a little more time, she should have known that for a pipe dream. Nothing good happened to a street rat like her. Except for Daniel. Her precious son was the one bright spot in her life. It didn't matter that she hadn't physically given birth to him. Daniel was hers, had been from the first moment she'd held him in her arms, and she'd do anything to make sure Daniel had the kind of life he deserved or die trying.

The final straw had been the phony FBI agents showing up. Without a doubt, they worked for Winston Brashear.

Unfortunately, they'd found her faster than she'd anticipated, but that was okay. She had backup plans in place, bolt holes where she could disappear at a moment's notice. If there was one thing she'd learned working for a covert branch of the government, it was to have contingencies in place to make sure she could vanish without a trace.

As they approached a bend in the road, a dark SUV pulled up alongside them, and her stomach knotted in anticipation. That sixth sense she depended on to keep her safe immediately kicked in high gear the second the car drew even with her rented sedan. Lauren's heart raced when she noticed the tinted windows obscuring the driver's and passenger's faces. The SUV's passenger window lowered, and gunshots rang out, shattering the peaceful afternoon.

"Get down!" Joshua shouted, swerving to avoid the bullets.

Lauren ducked, cursing inwardly that she didn't have her weapon accessible. Stupid, stupid. She hadn't thought she'd need it at the Boudreau ranch. Heart pounding in her chest, her eyes swept the interior of the car, looking for something she might use as a weapon. Not that anything would be of much use against a semiautomatic. Brashear was ruthless. She'd seen up close and personally how he treated those who betrayed him. Knew she was a target, but she'd expected to be isolated and taken out without collateral damage. She should have known Brashear would hire thugs who wouldn't care who else might get caught in the crosshairs, as long as they got the job done and collected their bounty.

Joshua maneuvered the car like a professional driver, managing to speed up and swerve, keeping the SUV's driver off kilter. He'd definitely had experience with defensive driving somewhere in his past, because he never broke a sweat, simply drilled his laser focus on keeping them maneuvering the occasional passing car on the two-lane street as well utilizing the terrain on either side, grassy lanes and tall pine trees.

“Joshua—”

Before she could say more, the sound of sirens sounded from behind them. A cruiser pulled up behind them, its flashing lights illuminating the road. The dark SUV put on a sudden burst of speed, drawing away from them. Lauren let out a sigh of relief as Joshua pulled the sedan over to the side of the road and put it in park.

“You okay?”

She nodded, folding her hands in her lap to keep him from seeing them shaking. It wouldn't do to let him know how much the sneak attack affected her. A uniformed deputy jumped out of the squad car and ran toward them.

“Are you guys alright?”

“We're fine, Dusty,” Joshua's voice was steady despite the fear-inducing attack moments before. “Thanks to you.”

Dusty nodded, looking around their car for signs of damage. “Looks like they peppered the back half, but nothing too serious. Let me take a look, make sure you're not leaking fuel, and radio this in. There's no telling if they'll come back.”

Joshua stepped out of the car and walked around the back with Dusty, their conversation low and serious. Without a doubt, by the time they hit Shiloh Springs, Rafe would have a whole new list of questions for her, ones she had no intention of answering. At least not truthfully. Hopefully he'd buy some half-truths and evasive answers because she refused to pull the Boudreaus any further into her unholy mess. No, it was imperative she get as far away from Shiloh Springs as fast as possible, because the longer she lingered, the harder it would be to walk away from Daniel. She refused to admit that walking away from Joshua would tear her soul apart. Again.

She jumped when Joshua climbed behind the steering wheel, so lost in her thoughts she allowed herself to be distracted. *Stupid move, Wright. You can't afford to let your guard down, especially now. If Joshua believes for one second you're hiding something, he'll never turn it loose.*

As the adrenaline rush waned, the trembling got worse. Wrapping her arms across her chest, she struggled to take deep, even breaths. She'd been trained to handle stuff like this. Only today felt different. Joshua was here. Because he sat at her side, he might have died. She couldn't shake the image of his bullet-riddled and bloody body slumped over the steering wheel as Brashear's hired killers pulled her from the car. It was precisely why she'd debated so long and hard about coming to Shiloh Springs. Instead of using her brain, and doing what she knew was the best thing, the smart thing, she'd let her heart rule over her head.

And look what happened.

“Dusty called Rafe and gave him a report on what happened. He got the plate number, and they're going to run it, but I doubt they'll get far. It's likely either stolen or a rental and they'll ditch it within the hour. Wouldn't be surprised if they didn't have somebody waiting for exactly that reason.”

“That's what we'd do.”

Joshua's sympathetic gaze almost made her want to tell him everything. He knew some because they'd worked together, and their cases had been those outside the regular government purview, but he hadn't been privy to everything about Brashear. Senator Gonzalez had deliberately pointed Joshua in a different direction, assigned him to another case, and made sure he was fully invested and undercover, embedded deep enough he couldn't just disappear, before she disclosed exactly what she wanted Lauren to do on her new assignment. It had been dirty and ugly, and if she had any other choice she'd—who was she kidding, she'd do exactly the same thing. Sometimes the worst moments, the horrendous decisions no single person should have to make, resulted in something miraculous.

Dusty tapped on the driver's side window. “Car looks drive-worthy, so let's get to town and we'll have Sally Anne get in touch with the rental company. It'll probably cost a pretty penny to get it repaired.”

“I took out insurance.” Lauren didn’t need Rafe or Joshua to find out the car had been rented under the name of a dummy corporation, one that couldn’t be traced back to her. Not without an extremely talented hacker, and if they did manage to do a deep enough dive, it would raise all kinds of alarms and Senator Gonzalez would be immediately notified. Lauren didn’t want the woman to know anything about where she was or what she was doing. She’d hidden far too much information from her alleged superior, and she wasn’t ready to try and come up with a plausible excuse or explanation for what she’d done. The last few months of her life felt like one giant lie. *Because it was.*

“I’ll handle it,” she answered, her voice barely above a whisper.

Joshua reached and turned on the ignition. “You always do.” The disappointment in his voice slammed into her, but she wouldn’t allow herself to give in to the urge to let him close. That way led to disaster.

The rest of the drive to town was silent. Joshua pulled into a parking spot a few spaces from the sheriff department’s front door, and Lauren drew in a deep calming breath, prepared to lie to Rafe about why phony FBI agents had shown up asking about her. If she was lucky and told her carefully constructed fabrication with just enough believability, she could be out of Shiloh Springs before Brashear managed to get any more goons on her tail. She already had a name change and new fake ID ready to go.

Before she’d taken more than a couple of steps, she looked up and spotted Rafe standing in the open doorway of the sheriff’s department. His intense study made her wish she could grab Joshua’s hand and beg him to protect her from the bogeyman, which was ridiculous. Rafe Boudreau was no more a fictional monster than Winston Brashear was Santa Claus. At least with Rafe, she knew where she stood. Knew from everything Joshua had told her that his brother was an honorable man, who deeply cared about his family and the people of their community.

She could only hope she might be included in that intimate circle.

“Looks like you’ve had an eventful day, haven’t you, Lauren?”

She gave a watery chuckle. “Seems like there’s never a dull moment in Shiloh Springs, Sheriff.”

“Come on inside and get comfortable. I understand you need to head over to the B&B to pick up your things.” He shot her a smug look. “I talked with Ms. Edna, told her you’d be a little late getting back.”

I wonder if she told him about the FBI agents asking questions at the B&B about me?

Rafe led her and Joshua into an office dominated by a large desk with stacks of file folders and papers piled high enough she wondered how they didn’t topple over when the air conditioner kicked on. Two chairs sat cattycorner in front of the desk, and a leather office chair occupied the space behind the desk. She wondered how many hours Rafe sat there, dealing with all the paperwork of running the legal side of a county the size of Shiloh Springs. Usually positions like his were a thankless profession, and she didn’t envy him having to deal with all the legal minutia the city and state required.

“I’ll try not to keep you too long. Can you tell me what happened on your way here? I got the gist of things from Dusty, but I’d like to hear it from your point of view, Lauren. Joshua can fill in any details that might need clarification.”

She signed softly. “I’m not sure what happened. Since you’d asked me to come here to answer a few questions, Joshua insisted on driving. We left the ranch and headed toward town. I’d say we’d been on the road for maybe twenty, twenty-five minutes when a black SUV pulled alongside the car. I thought they were trying to pass because they’d sped up.” She glanced toward Joshua. “Your brother did an amazing job, avoiding the shots.”

“Bro?”

Joshua leaned back in his chair. “Pretty much like she said. I noticed the black SUV following for a couple of miles. They stayed far enough back I couldn’t get a clear look at the plates. They sped up, and I noticed the dark tint on the passenger window. I slowed to allow them to pass. Passenger window lowered and somebody started shooting.”

“Shots only from the passenger window, front?” Rafe sat on the corner of the desk, after pushing a stack of the papers back about six inches. Though he appeared relaxed, Lauren knew he wasn’t missing a single word. Maybe there was more to the small-town sheriff than met the eye.

“That’s right. Driver performed some precise driving maneuvers, and managed to keep the SUV on the road.”

“Joshua was no slouch in the driving department, Sheriff. He kept the car from being rammed by the SUV, and they tried to run us off the road more than once. The back half of the car took some hits, but none of the bullets managed to hit the front, where we were sitting. The SUV managed to hit one of the ditches on the side of the road, which I think caused some undercarriage damage, though I can’t be sure. That’s when I heard the sirens, and your deputy showed up.”

“Dusty mentioned he only saw one shooter, passenger side. He relayed the plate number from his dash cam, and we’ve relayed a BOLO to the next several counties. The plate came back as a rental.”

Joshua shot her a look. “That’s what we suspected. I don’t think these guys were amateurs. The driver had training.”

“Which brings me to the purpose of our original meeting.” Rafe stood and walked around his desk, sliding onto the big leather chair like it was a comfortable old friend. “Right before Lauren left the Big House, I got a call from Sally Anne, telling me two FBI agents were here, asking about her.”

Yay, we’re finally getting to the big fat liar part of the story. This ought to be fun.

“I have no clue why the FBI would be looking for me, Sheriff. I haven’t had dealings with the feds in months.” Which was true. She rarely dealt with them since her work wasn’t legally sanctioned by the United States government. Anything that needed to be passed along through more legitimate channels was handled by an entirely different division of their organization.

“Well, they seemed extremely interested in speaking with you. Not only did they show up here, but they also dropped by the Creekside Inn looking for you.”

Which she already knew since Ms. Edna had called her. “Did they? Now you’ve got me curious. How would the FBI know I was staying at the B&B? I certainly didn’t tell them. Did they happen to mention why they were looking for me? And if it’s so important, where are they? Why didn’t they stick around?”

“All good questions, Lauren. Ones I intend to ask them. They told Sally Anne they would be back this afternoon. I find it interesting that you’re barely in town two days and you’ve already got government officials looking for you. Raises all kinds of red flags, especially after finding out that you and my brother here used to work together.”

Lauren shot a glare at Joshua, wondering exactly how much he’d told his brother about their work.

Joshua shook his head. “He knows the bare bones. You showed up this morning before I had a chance to tell them much. I simply mentioned I’d gone from working in Special Forces to a higher clearance level occupation, and that we’d worked several ops together.”

Rafe chuckled at his brother’s simplification. “Yeah, he’s a real-life James Bond. Does that make you the female equivalent of a spy chick?”

“Shut it, bro.”

Rafe steepled his fingers in front of him, studying Lauren over the top of his hands. “When I spoke with Miss Edna

earlier, she had an interesting observation.”

Uh oh. Had Miss Edna told Rafe her suspicions that the FBI agents were phony? This could open a whole new can of worms.

“What’s that, Sheriff?”

“Keep in mind, Edna’s a pretty good judge of character. Don’t let her diminutive stature fool you, she’s a fierce warrior wrapped in a delicate package. And she’s got good instincts.”

She watched Joshua straighten subtly in his seat, his attention riveted to his brother. It was almost like some kind of silent communication between the two, because though they didn’t speak, they seemed to be on the same wavelength.

Lauren sighed. “She told you she didn’t think they were real FBI agents.”

“Bingo. Now, it’s one thing for fake FBI agents to try to fool a B&B owner. It’s a whole different story when they try to pass themselves off to actual law enforcement. We may be a small town, and people tend to think we’re a bunch of backwoods yokels, but I happen to have a healthy respect for the men and women who work in law enforcement, regardless of what branch they might serve.”

“As do I, Sheriff.” Lauren knew she wasn’t leaving his office without giving him an explanation. One that he’d buy, because he was turning out to be sharper than she’d anticipated, which shouldn’t have surprised her. All the Boudreaus seemed to be multilayered and multifaceted and weren’t afraid to step up when they wanted answers.

Rafe leaned forward and met her gaze directly. “I don’t care how close you are with my brother, I want answers, and I want them now. I’ve got far too many loose ends flying around, and I do not like loose ends. They tend to cause all sorts of problems if they aren’t knotted off.”

“Bro, let me talk with Lauren—”

“Sorry, but I can’t do that. I’d planned to keep this low key, off the record, but it’s too late for that now. We’ve got fraudulent government officials running around Shiloh Springs. We’ve had a drive-by shooting within my jurisdiction. And everything points to Lauren.”

Joshua and Rafe both looked at her, and she knew any reprieve she’d hoped for disappeared like a puff of smoke. Especially if Brashear had figured out where she was, though she would have thought that possibility impossible.

Not that it mattered. None of it mattered except keeping Daniel safe. Because if Brashear got his hands on Daniel, he’d make sure Lauren was a dead woman.

“It’s a long story, one that concerns my last assignment. Confidential and so high above your pay grade, Sheriff, it would shock you.”

“This has to do with your work? It’s followed you to Shiloh Springs?” Rafe crossed his arms over his chest, before straightening and offering her a hand. “Probably best not to talk here.”

“You’re right. We need someplace secure yet off the grid. I’ll need access to a computer. Something powerful enough to access the dark web, but untraceable. Know where we might find something like that?”

Rafe looked at Joshua and grinned. “I think we can manage something.”

Joshua stood and shoved past Rafe, out the office door. “You’re driving since Lauren’s rental car is toast. I’ll call and tell Destiny we’re on the way.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

JOSHUA SAT BESIDE Lauren in the back seat of the cruiser, knowing in his gut something big hovered on the horizon. His whole world had been rocked in the past few hours. The woman he'd thought dead currently sat beside him, being chased by allegedly phony FBI agents she claimed worked for Winston Brashear.

He was familiar with Winston Brashear and the underground network he allegedly facilitated. Brashear had his fingers into just about every illegal activity, every perversion and addiction that could turn a profit, and he'd built an empire where he was pretty much untouchable. One of the smartest things the man did was locate his illegal enterprises outside the United States. It didn't make him untouchable, but definitely muddied the waters when it came to making charges stick. And the man had deep pockets. Drug smuggling and human trafficking tended to bring high dollar dividends, and Brashear had the wherewithal and connections to own officials in high places in governments that were friendly and turned a blind eye to what he did within their borders. All that mattered were the profits that poured into their pockets.

More than once he'd wondered why Senator Gonzalez and the powers that be hadn't ordered Brashear eliminated. It wouldn't stop the pipeline of drugs flowing freely across the U.S. borders, but it would slow things down while new leadership fought to be top dog. And the good senator hated that Brashear managed to traffic women and children through a pipeline no one seemed able to plug. Whenever they got close, the whole network simply vanished, only to reappear within a few weeks or months.

"We'll be at Ridge and Maggie's place in a couple minutes. They've got a state-of-the-art security and computer system. Dane and Destiny are meeting us there. Destiny

suggested it might be safer to start doing our online digging there.”

“Sheriff, it isn’t smart to pull too many people into this. I can handle—”

“Lauren, you might be good with a computer, but trust me, if you need something off the web and want it without anybody being the wiser, Destiny is who you need. She’s got an extraordinary track record. If what you’re looking for is anywhere accessible to a computer, she’ll find it.”

Joshua reached over and squeezed Lauren’s hand. He might be hiding it well, but he was still reeling from finding out she wasn’t dead. Knowing he’d been lied to, deliberately misled by his employer, the woman he’d thought if not a friend, at least somebody he could trust, still made him see red. Questions raced through his head, each one faster than the next. He knew he’d get answers, because he wasn’t about to let Lauren out of his sight until he did, but right now they had bigger concerns.

Namely, finding out where Brashear was, and why he was determined to find Lauren.

“Where’s Daniel?” He barely heard her whispered question.

“He’s at the Big House. Momma and Nica are spoiling him rotten.”

If he hadn’t been sitting close beside her, he wouldn’t have felt the whole body shudder that rocked through her.

“Joshua, we must make sure he’s safe. No matter what happens to me, promise you’ll protect him. He’s innocent and deserves to have a life filled with love and joy.”

Glancing toward Rafe, he caught his brother’s gaze in the rearview mirror, and he nodded once, indicating he’d overheard Lauren’s words.

“What’s going on, sweetheart? Daniel’s safe at the ranch. The security system is top notch. The ranch hands and my

family will protect him.”

“I promise I’ll tell you everything. You deserve to know why I faked my death and went underground. But it’s a long story, and I have to get online and check a few things first. Please, bear with me.”

Before he could answer, Rafe spoke. “We’re here.” He drove down a long stretch of blacktop leading toward a circular drive that fronted a substantial-sized home. Though his brother lived here on and off with his fiancée, Maggie White, Joshua had been gone enough he’d never actually seen the place. The two-story house wasn’t huge, probably a little over three thousand square feet, but it had an understated elegance that blended well with the rustic scenery. Texas limestone covered most of the outer walls, its pale color helping the structure blend into its surroundings. He knew Maggie’s property extended for several thousand acres, and the house didn’t detract from the magnificence of the surrounding landscape. The building was more than wood and stone. It appeared warm and comforting, more than a simple structure. It was well loved, well cared for. A home.

The house suited laid-back Maggie’s personality. Double doors in a rich mahogany stood as a majestic entrance to the home, the one concession he noted to the understated opulence of the home. He’d also noted two pickups and a four-wheeler parked on the circular drive. Looked like Dane and Destiny beat them there.

The front door opened before Rafe could knock, and Ridge grinned, motioning them inside. “Sounds like we’ve got a bit of a mystery. I love a good whodunit. Please tell me you don’t already know who the bad guy is. And if you do, at least tell me I get to be in on the takedown.”

“I will tell you, brother of mine, that you’re an idiot.” Joshua nudged Ridge’s shoulder with his own as he passed him, guiding Lauren toward the open living room. Maggie, Dane, and Destiny were gathered around a peninsula that

fronted the kitchen area, where Maggie was pouring lemonade and what looked like sweet tea into ice-filled glasses.

“Non-alcoholic drinks here,” Maggie pointed. “You need something stronger, help yourself, it’s under the counter.”

“Nothing for me, thanks.” Lauren had her arms crossed over her chest, looking strangely alone even in the midst of his brothers and their ladies. She looked like the slightest breeze would shatter her into a million little pieces. This wasn’t the Lauren he knew. The woman who’d faced down a room full of armed kidnappers without flinching. He’d seen her handle any situation Senator Gonzalez threw her way without hesitating, and yet standing here among people who’d help her without question, she looked lost and almost...frightened.

He led her over to an overstuffed sofa and eased her down onto the cushions before taking a seat beside her. She was going to have to open herself up, tell them information that under other circumstances could get her tossed into a federal prison—or worse. This was a non-sanctioned sit-rep, and he had the feeling they were about to learn privileged information that could put them in the crosshairs of one of the most dangerous and ruthless men in the world.

He didn’t care. He’d protect her and Daniel until his last breath. Because he loved that little boy already, and it didn’t matter he wasn’t his biological son. Daniel belonged to Lauren, and that made him his.



LAUREN SAT BESIDE Joshua in the brightly lit room, the only sound filling the space the soft hum of the air conditioning. Joshua had been silent for some time, waiting patiently for everyone to settle. For her to begin. She wasn’t ready, but then would she ever be ready to disclose what she’d done? All those she’d betrayed? It didn’t matter she’d done the right thing, all that mattered was the current and present danger. Taking a deep breath, she began to speak.

“This whole situation began with my undercover investigation into Winston Brashear’s illicit activities.” She picked up Joshua’s hand and squeezed it tight, willing him to understand she’d been following orders. “The big bosses sent you overseas on the Erickson case to keep you from learning I’d been embedded inside Brashear’s compound. If you found out, you’d have stormed in and ruined everything. Don’t deny it. We both know you’d never have left me defenseless to Brashear. Tireless months of undercover work paved the way for my incursion into the ranks of his organization. Gaining not only access, but his trust. It wasn’t easy, and I’m ashamed of some of the things I had to do. But, if we could get a foothold, a chance to end his stranglehold of evil, I felt it was worth it.”

She stopped and accepted the glass of ice water Dane handed her, taking a swallow. She didn’t dare risk looking at Joshua, didn’t want to read the anger or worse the disappointment she’d see. After working together on numerous jobs for their consortium, she knew how he felt about men like Brashear. Joshua was a straight arrow, a man of integrity, and he’d honestly cared about her. It wouldn’t have mattered what Senator Gonzalez or anybody else wanted, he’d have gotten her out of Brashear’s compound. And it would have ruined everything.

“Brashear’s been involved in human trafficking for years, but we’ve never been able to officially or legally connect him to the abductions or the sales. I went undercover, was inserted into his organization through a contact at one of his clubs, and I managed to get close to him. Started gaining his trust.” She glanced at Rafe and Dane, who seemed riveted by her account. “It wasn’t easy because Brashear isn’t a man who trusts easily. He has maybe two or three people in his entire upper echelon who know the inner workings and the contacts to keep his organization running beneath the government and police radar. I worked my way up from the lowest level position in one of his underground clubs because I was efficient, and stayed mostly invisible. Any job they assigned, I got it done. Didn’t

matter how, they never asked, and I never said. But my methods finally started paying dividends. One of Brashear's lieutenants noted that I had a head for numbers, and an above average skill set with computers. I managed to divert money into accounts where it was basically untraceable, and that caught Brashear's attention. Hiding money from multiple governments made him a very happy camper. It also impressed the people Brashear did business with." Remembering the despicable men she'd had to deal with, the lowest of the low, still made her skin crawl.

"The love of money seems to be at the rotten core of most evil men and their deeds." Dane shot a look at Joshua, who shrugged, and Lauren wondered what their silent communication meant. There was a story there, and she hoped she'd be around long enough to hear it.

"Go on, Lauren. We know how hard it is to talk about this, but the more we know, the easier it will be to help you." Lauren glanced at the dark-haired woman who'd spoken, and realized she looked familiar. She couldn't place where she'd seen her face before, but she'd figure it out eventually. Right now, she wanted to get through telling Joshua and his brothers about Brashear, to make them understand why it was so important to keep Daniel safe and out of the monster's hands.

"I'd been working for Brashear for almost four months when I met his daughter, Lily." A pained expression crossing her face. "Lily lived in the penthouse suites above the club where Brashear handled his business. When I met her, she was pregnant, I mean big enough she looked ready to pop. She was scared and alone, except for her guards, and they rarely let her leave her room. Brashear kept her under lock and key, like she was a commodity, and honestly, she was one. A valuable one. I kind of got the same treatment, because to Brashear I was an asset, one he pulled out when he needed information or when he took me with him to a meeting. A forced camaraderie developed between us, and Lily and I got to know each other. Grew close. She confided in me her father planned to take her child away once he was born. I had no idea why he was

fascinated with her unborn baby, but Brashear made sure Lily had the best of everything. Medical staff, physician specialists from around the world. If she even sneezed, she was surrounded by medical personnel.”

“Sounds like the child was simply another pawn in her father’s schemes.” Joshua’s voice was barely above a whisper, yet it was emotionless and that scared Lauren far more than if it had been filled with rage.

“As her due date grew closer, Lily begged me to find a way to take her baby and get out of the country. Pleaded with me to protect him from the monster she called Father.”

Lauren’s voice grew tight with emotion. “I knew the risks, knew I’d be blowing any chance of getting the evidence I’d accumulated about Brashear to Senator Gonzalez and the organization, but I couldn’t let an innocent child suffer at the hands of that man. In the months I’d been undercover, gathering evidence, I’d seen the fate of the children who fell beneath Brashear’s gaze. But what choice did I have? That child was a physical tie to Brashear, yet to him the innocent baby was little more than a bargaining chip for something big. Lily swore her father wouldn’t hurt her son, because of who the baby’s father is. But that was the one secret I couldn’t pry from her—the father’s name.”

“You have no idea?”

Lauren shook her head. “I begged Lily to tell me, let me contact him, to protect the child. She refused, simply pleading with me to keep the child away from her father at all costs. I couldn’t convince her to come with us. It was more important for her child to be safe, and she meant to keep her father from finding him. Which meant she had to stay behind, give up her freedom to ensure her child had a life away from the evil that permeated Brashear’s home.”

“You’re talking about Daniel.” Joshua’s words were a statement, not a question. Lauren nodded, knowing he’d figured out her secret.

“Wait, wait! I thought Daniel was Joshua’s son,” Ridge protested.

“I knew Daniel wasn’t my biological son. It didn’t matter. Lauren left him in my care, and I thought he was the last tie I had with her. In every way that counts, he is my son.”

Lauren held out her hand. “Guys, let me finish and then I’ll answer your questions.”

“Okay, fine. But trust me, I’ve got a lot of questions.” Ridge folded his arms over his chest, and Lauren wanted to roll her eyes. Yep, with that attitude he was definitely Joshua’s brother.

“I agreed to take the baby. I had no idea what I was going to do or how I was going to raise a newborn, but I had one goal and only one goal. Keep Daniel away from Winston Brashear.”

Rafe’s eyes widened in shock that quickly morphed to understanding. “Which explains why you disappeared and faked your death. Daniel isn’t your biological son, but you already loved him like he was your own, didn’t you?”

Lauren nodded. “He’s my son in every other way that matters. And if Brashear’s sending assassins after me, he knows I’m the one who took him. I set up fake trails, had Brashear’s men following ghosts, and made sure there was no way Brashear could be certain I still had the child. If he’s still tracking me, that means he either didn’t believe the report of my death, or he simply hasn’t stopped looking, even with all the evidence. Either way, he won’t stop until he has Daniel back or concrete proof of our bodies. I’m not sure I can protect Daniel by myself.”

“You’re not alone, Lauren. You never had to be if you’d only talked to me.” Joshua’s hushed words were barely above a whisper, but she heard them clearly.

She shook her head, the hair brushing against her cheek, shocked when Joshua reached up and brushed it back, the way he had when they’d been involved.

“At this point it doesn’t matter one way or the other. The man isn’t giving up. He must have a good idea you’re alive and in Texas because of the two FBI cronies looking for you. Plus, he’s got your real name somehow. Think there is a leak at your old organization?” Rafe posed the question she’d wondered about herself lately.

Lauren shrugged. “Before all this, I would have said a definitive no. But now? I know it would take a world class hacker to get through all the layers of protection our initiative has, but it’s probably doable.”

“Honey, with the little bit that you and Joshua shared, I already breached the sacred walls of your initiative. Took me less than fifteen minutes.”

“What?” Joshua jumped up and moved to stand behind Destiny, who had her laptop in front of her. “Show me.”

Destiny typed a couple of keystrokes before handing the laptop to Joshua. His eyes widened at whatever he was reading. He turned to Lauren. “It’s all here. Names, dates, mission information.” He balanced the laptop against the back of the sofa and began typing, a frown across his face. His frown deepened with whatever he read.

“Hey, Destiny, how deep can you go into the company files? I mean, this is pretty innocuous stuff. Dangerous in the wrong hands, but...”

She shot him a look as if to say *you’re a jackass*, before taking the laptop back. “How deep do you need me to go?”

Lauren watched him take a deep breath before answering. “Can you access Senator Gonzalez’s private files? See if she has anything on Lauren? Stuff not contained within her common working file. Anything that might be related to Brashear and the case Lauren was working?”

A strange tingle ran across Lauren’s spine at Joshua’s words. Where exactly was he going with this? Did he suspect their boss of colluding with Brashear?

“I know that look,” Ridge grinned, watching Joshua like he was a proud papa. “He’s got a whiff of something, and he’s gonna be like a bloodhound on the hunt now that he’s caught the scent.”

“The scent of what though?”

“Not sure, but I’m telling you he’s gonna be like a dog with a bone. Sometimes it can be the tiniest thing that he catches a glimpse of, or something he hears, but he’s always been like that. He zeroes in and doesn’t give up until he’s got the answers he wants. Guess he spotted something in those files that’s got him twitchy.”

“Just for the record,” Rafe announced, “y’all do know that you’re breaking the law? I should be putting the lot of you in cuffs and taking you in.” The smile that accompanied his words made Lauren relax, because she knew although the tough lawman was a strict by-the-books enforcer of the rules, he was as invested in getting answers as the rest of them.

“Voila! Senator Gonzalez’s personal files. She’s got some decent encryption on these puppies, but she didn’t know she was going to be dealing with me.” Destiny polished her fingertips against her shoulder. “I’ve decrypted these. But it looks like she’s got one folder here,” she moved the cursor to indicate the file she was talking about, “this one will take me longer. Let me know if you need me to work on opening it.”

Lauren moved to stand beside Joshua, looking over Destiny’s shoulder. She couldn’t help seeing the folders labeled with not only her name, but Joshua’s name. Additional folders showed Brashear as well as somebody named Assad, and the final file was Lily’s. But the file Destiny pointed out, the one she hadn’t been able to open, it bore no name, simply the folder icon. It was important, that was a given, but what was Senator Gonzalez hiding?

“Why does she have a file about Brashear’s daughter? Nobody outside a select few knew that the girl Brashear had in the penthouse was his daughter. Everybody who worked there thought she was simply one of the women who’d been brought

in and found to be pregnant after the fact. Senator Gonzalez shouldn't have that information."

"I'm more interested in why she has separate files about the Brashear operation containing information that didn't go into the regular classified files. What does it mean that she's got information about me going to Jakarta?"

"Jakarta? She told me she was sending you undercover into a cell in Afghanistan, that you'd be working with Erickson. Why Jakarta?" Lauren placed her hand on Joshua's back, feeling the tightening of his muscles beneath her touch.

"Plans changed at the last minute. That's what she told me. Claimed there was reliable intel an American industrialist was being held hostage, though there had been no demand for money. She wanted confirmation, a negotiator or someone who could execute a rescue mission. I went in with O'Connor."

"I don't remember hearing anything about that in the news." Ridge was busily reading over Joshua's shoulder and Lauren couldn't bring herself to tell him to stop. If the good senator kept secret files, she ran the risk of them being discovered. She wanted to read those files herself.

"Destiny, is there a way to download those files without leaving a footprint? I don't want any of this traced back to you." Lauren picked up the laptop over Joshua and Ridge's protests and handed it back to Destiny.

"Gimme a sec. Depending on their configuration, it'll be possible. Just might take a little longer." She watched Destiny's fingers flying across the keyboard, like a dancer moving to music only she could hear.

"Huh." Destiny let out a frustrated sigh. "I should be able to download them, but it's going to take a while. There's some sort of firewall with a fairly well-hidden trapdoor. I don't want to spring it, because all our hard work getting to the files will be evident. I'll need to take my time. Probably can have it for you later tonight. Tomorrow at the latest. Should have access

to that safe-guarded file by then too. The good senator has me curious why she has such high-level security available and only uses it on one file.”

“Good question, sweetheart.” Dane leaned forward and brushed a kiss against the top of his wife’s head.

“Anything else you need to tell us, Lauren?” Rafe’s quiet voice drew her thoughts away from Senator Gonzalez’s secret files and back to the present dilemma surrounding Daniel.

“I have forged documents, a set for me and a set for Daniel. Clean ones that have never been used. If it appears that Brashear is going to get his hands on Daniel, I’ll take him and disappear. With the passports, we’ll leave the country, and—”

“Nuh-uh.” Ridge’s voice was overridden by others.

“Absolutely not.” Maggie added her two cents, though she’d been fairly quiet up to this point. “Running won’t solve the problem.”

“You’re not going anywhere.” Joshua leaned in closer, before whispering in her ear. “You pulled me into this and you’re getting away that easily. You go anywhere, I’m right there with you.”

Lauren knew the others hadn’t heard his words, but she had, and a warmth suffused her, one she hadn’t realized had been missing. The trust and love she’d always felt from Joshua, the absolute assurance she was cared for and cherished, was back.

She knew that somehow, some way, they’d figure out a way to defeat Winston Brashear and make a family for Daniel.

CHAPTER EIGHT

JOSHUA TOOK HIS momma's hand and didn't say a word, simply started walking, guiding her from the kitchen and out the front door. He didn't have to have eyes in the back of his head to know his dad followed silently behind them. Between his father's health scare and his momma going missing not long ago, his father had become extra-vigilant when it came to protecting his wife. Of course, the rest of the family did the same, so both his parents were rarely out of touch with at least one of their large family.

As soon as he and Lauren had gotten back to the Big House, he'd taken her to his mother's gazebo. After having bared her soul to the assembled crew at Maggie's house, he figured she needed a few minutes to regroup. The story she'd told them was a lot to take in. A secret baby, a faked death, and a criminal mastermind employing assassins to take her out and bring back the child—the whole thing felt like a bad telenovela. Except he knew she was telling the truth.

“Son, why are you taking your momma to the gazebo?”

“Lauren's there. I figured the calm and serenity would be a good place for her to tell you why she's here and to tell you about Daniel.”

“Good, because I've got questions.” His mother shot him her patented *and I'd better get some answers* look, and he wondered if Lauren would be able to withstand his momma's unique brand of digging for answers. Lauren was a strong woman, one of the strongest he'd ever met. But his money was on his mother.

Lauren stood in the opening to the gazebo, the white paint glistening in the dappled sunlight filtering through the tall pines surrounding the structure. Built in a circular shape, the gazebo sat in the center of a small clearing, the bottom ringed

with lattice, and trailing roses climbed along the sides. It was a beautiful place, surrounded by nature, and Joshua always made time when he was home to come out here. It helped center him, kept him grounded not only to the land, but to his family. It was a place of serenity, designed by his mother with help from Rafe, and somehow this small conical structure had been imbued with love. It was the place where his brothers told the women they loved about their pasts, shared their feelings, and sometimes—or so he'd heard—their first kisses with the women they loved.

“This is beautiful.” Lauren waved her hand at the white open walls. “I could spend hours here, just sitting and thinking.”

Lauren took a step back as Joshua walked up to the entrance. Reaching inside the opening, he flicked a switch and the lights turned on, illuminating the entire structure with tiny white lights. The effect always made him think about a winter wonderland, even when it was a hundred plus degrees in the Texas summer heat.

His momma pushed past him, stepping up into the gazebo. “Glad you like it. We spent a lot of time making it just right. And I do spend time sitting here. There’s a tranquility I don’t find anyplace else.”

Lauren ran her hand along the edge of the well that filled the center of the gazebo floor. Made of stone and wood, there was an old-fashioned crank handle with a rope and bucket attached. Joshua would never admit it, but he'd spent his childhood tossing nickels and dimes and quarters into the well, making wishes, trying to find the impossible. Searching for something he finally realized he already had.

“Momma, Dad, we need to talk. There’s a lot going on, things you should know about Lauren and Daniel. I started to tell you this morning, but things got out of hand, and now we’ve got a—situation—and you need to know everything. Because it will change everything that you think you know

about me. Once you've heard everything, if you want me—us—to leave, I'll understand.”

“Baby, we've got all the time in the world to listen to what you need to tell us, but let me make one thing clear. There is nothing on this earth you could tell us that would make us turn you away. This is and will always be your home. This woman and your son are a part of your life. That means they are part of ours too. So, don't try and hand us some nonsense about us not wanting you. That will never, ever happen. Not in this lifetime or beyond.”

“What your momma said.” The corners of his dad's lips curved up. “I never argue with my woman when she's right.”

“I hope you feel the same when I've explained everything. Why I turned Joshua's life upside down. I thought I was doing the right thing. Instead, I've put everyone's lives at risk and ___”

Ms. Patti took Lauren by the hand and led her to the bench that ringed the inside of the gazebo. Urging her onto the seat, she sat beside her and patted her hand. “I know one thing, honey, and it's that you apparently love that little boy. Whatever you're doing, it's to protect him, right?”

Lauren nodded. “Yes, ma'am. Daniel's the most important thing in my life, and I will give my last breath to keep my son safe.”

Joshua held his breath at Lauren's last words, because his gut told him that his parents had already figured out what had taken him hours.

“Your son? He doesn't resemble you at all. Strangely, he doesn't resemble Joshua either.”

Joshua moved to sit on Lauren's other side, close enough their legs touched, and he picked up her hand. “That's part of the story, Momma. Daniel is not my biological son or Lauren's. But I love that boy. He's mine in every way except blood, and I will move heaven and earth to keep him healthy

and happy.” He glanced at his dad. “DNA and a blood tie doesn’t make a family, isn’t that what you always tell us?”

“And I mean it. There’s not one of you boys who shares blood with me and your momma, but you’re ours as sure as if you’d been born to us. It won’t matter one lick to us if Daniel is yours by blood. If you say he’s your son, then he’s your son. Makes him a Boudreau.” He stared at Lauren for a long time, taking in Joshua’s hand wrapped around hers, and the way his momma had her arm around Lauren’s shoulders. He chuckled softly and perched on the edge of the well. “I have the feeling the family’s about to get bigger, so let’s hear this story, figure out what’s going on, and come up with a plan to fix things. I’m not about to have anybody here hanging in limbo, waiting for fake FBI agents to show up on our doorstep trying to hurt what belongs to us.”

“You already know about the FBI agents after Lauren?” Joshua couldn’t keep the incredulity out of his voice. Why was he surprised? His mother had her finger on the pulse of everything that happened in Shiloh Springs. Nobody stepped one foot over the county line wrong without Ms. Patti Boudreau hearing about it and taking action if needed. Of course, his dad wasn’t far behind in the info gathering department. He ran the biggest construction company in Shiloh Springs and the surrounding counties. Joshua had worked construction jobs all throughout his teen years. He knew what a bunch of gossipy old biddies those hard hat-wearing tattletales became when a good piece of news floated through town.

“Rafe called and gave us a head’s up, said y’all were meeting at Maggie’s to strategize, and for us to keep a sharp eye on your son.”

“Thank you, Dad.”

“Faster you tell us what’s going on, son, the quicker we can come up with a solution.” The sharp-eyed look his momma shot him had him sitting up a little straighter.

“I know, Momma, but it might be better for Lauren to tell you. She’s lived with this secret for the past several months, ever since Daniel was born. There are still lots of holes in what I know and don’t know, so it’s going to take a while.”

“Joshua, maybe it would be best if I leave.” Lauren’s head was bowed, and he couldn’t see her face, but he knew it would be covered in guilt and remorse. She’d lived with the consequences of her actions, events that changed every aspect of the life she’d planned. The life they’d planned to have together. Maybe he could finally get answers to why she’d done the things she had, the choices she’d struggled with, starting with faking her own death, and leading to leaving an infant to his unprepared care.

“I guess I should start at the beginning. Growing up, my childhood wasn’t what anybody would call stable. I had no idea who my father was, neither did my mom. She simply said he was somebody she hooked up with when he was passing through town and knocked her up. Nine months later, surprise!”

Momma patted her knee gently. “I’m sorry, hon. I wish things could’ve been different, but the world we live in can be an ugly place. We do the best we can to make it a little nicer for those around us. Sometimes we’re able to do good, other times people don’t want help.”

“I know. Joshua told me how you changed his life when he was young, made him into a good, honest man. One who’d do anything to protect those he cared about. Honestly, hearing the stories he told about his brothers and this ranch, I almost felt like they were fairytales, too good to be true, because I’d never seen anything like that in real life.”

“And that’s a shame. There are good people out there, ones who want to help make a difference. I’m sorry you didn’t have anyone in your life before.” Dad glanced at him, and Joshua read his unspoken words *until now*.

“I managed to make it through. Graduated from high school, but I couldn’t afford college. Heck, working at fast

food joints was the height of luxury after I graduated. After a lot of soul searching, I figured out if I wanted any chance to do something with my life besides turn out like my mother, I needed to change. I joined the military.” She let out an ugly laugh. “I thought the structure, the discipline would help, maybe set me on a path to changing my life. Didn’t work. The one thing I did find out was I don’t do well in a structured environment. I don’t like authority and I’m not a team player.”

She rammed her elbow into Joshua’s side when he laughed, and he held his hands up, though he didn’t stop laughing. More than once he’d see her butt heads with Senator Gonzalez, stand her ground when needed, but she’d learned to compromise. Sometimes.

“I’d served for just over two years in the navy. Started in San Diego, and then transferred to the Naval Air Station in Pensacola. It wasn’t a bad gig. Lots of sunshine, beautiful beaches, and my commanders weren’t jackasses.” She grinned, and Joshua’s breath caught at the joyful beauty in her face. It never failed to amaze him that somebody who’d grown up the way she had, somebody who’d seen the worst the world had to offer in her personal and professional life, could still find joy in the simplicity of life.

“Sweetheart, I think we need to fast forward or we’ll be here all night.”

“Let her tell her story the way she wants. We don’t care how long it takes.” Joshua knew better than to argue with his momma when she used that particular tone and he backed off. He’d never admit he was trying to spare Lauren from having to tell them everything. There were some things even his parents didn’t need to know.



LAUREN FOUGHT THE urge to stand and pace. She always thought better when moving, and right now she needed all her wits about her to keep from spilling everything to the Boudreaus. Joshua’s parents were wonderful, exactly how she’d pictured them from all the times they’d talked. He adored his whole

family, all his foster brothers, though he never referred to them as such. Every single one of the Boudreau brothers, the boys who'd come to live at the Boudreau ranch, or the Big House, as they lovingly referred to it, considered themselves to be true brothers. Didn't matter they didn't share DNA, that there wasn't a single drop of blood that connected them to each other or to their parents. The only thing that mattered was their respect and loyalty to each other.

“Joshua's right. I need to fast forward to when I was recruited. I was approached by a representative of a United States senator. Said they'd been watching me, that I'd been referred by my C.O. because I was good at thinking on my feet, could work independently, that kind of thing. I personally think a good part of why they looked at me was because I didn't have ties to anybody. Mom passed away. I don't have a lot of friends. The job was my life.”

“Which made you a perfect candidate for undercover work.” Douglas shrugged when she looked at him. “I'm quite familiar with how our government recruits. Call it firsthand knowledge.”

Lauren quirked a brow, but since he didn't elaborate, she wasn't about to ask questions. This kind of thing was on a need-to-know basis, and if Douglas had been part of a government-sanctioned operation, the info was probably above her pay grade. Though she had the feeling Douglas Boudreau would have been a darned good agent.

“I was recruited and accepted a position with a newly established covert division of the military. It doesn't have an official name or classification. Our assignments were ones which were strictly off the books. The United States military not only didn't sanction our missions, but would not provide any assistance if things went sideways. For all intents and purposes, our organization, our division, did not exist.” She took a deep breath, wrapping her arms across her chest. People outside of the government didn't really get the nuances or the undertones, the realities of what people like her faced every day. Putting their careers, their lives, their freedom on the line

to keep them safe. And up until the time she'd met Lily, until she'd held Daniel in her arms, she'd have said it was all worth it.

“The assignments I’m talking about weren’t military per se. Some were, like when we took out a warlord terrorizing a village in Africa. Or thwarted a military coup in Central America.”

She watched a light of understanding appear in Douglas’ eyes, and hoped she wouldn’t have to elaborate for Ms. Patti. The sweet woman didn’t need to know all the things she—and Joshua—saw and did. The possibility of seeing disappointment or worse when Ms. Patti looked at her? She wasn’t sure she could handle that on top of everything else going on around her.

“For the first year and a half, Joshua and I served on the same team, covered many of the same ops. We grew...close. Knew we had to keep our feelings hidden, because fraternization wasn’t only frowned upon by the powers that be, we could be tossed out of the program, out of the military and at the very least, they’d find a way to toss us into prison. It was a good way to make us keep our mouths shut.”

Ms. Patti shifted on the bench and looked between Lauren and her son. “I’m confused. Last I heard, my son was serving in the army. Special Forces, not some clandestine, off-the-books, not-sanctioned by our government black ops nonsense. Are you telling me my son—*my son*—has been lying to me for the past few years?”

“Momma, I planned to tell you this morning, about everything. Things went cockeyed when Lauren showed up.”

“I agree with you, darlin’, it’s a discussion long overdue, and one we’ll be having soon. But let’s table that until we figure out how much danger’s heading our way, and what we’re gonna need to do to keep our young’uns safe.” Douglas crossed his arms over his massive chest, and Lauren couldn’t help but be impressed. He was a big man, and if he intended to intimidate her, it wouldn’t take much. But the only thing she

felt when studying the older man was compassion, tinged with a strength she admired.

“Lauren, go ahead,” Joshua urged.

She gave in to her need to move and stood, beginning to pace. A few steps forward, spin, and a few more steps. There wasn't a lot of space with four grown adults in the gazebo, yet she felt restless. Couldn't sit still. Too much running through her mind, making her antsy.

“My superior had an undercover job she wanted me assigned to. It wasn't an ordinary assignment because the way these jobs work, sometimes it's a long game. Sometimes we were gone for a week or two, but for this job I'd be gone for months, maybe longer. I knew Joshua would get suspicious if I didn't say anything, especially because I'd never been on a long-term assignment. I think the longest one I'd done solo was two and a half, maybe three weeks. But this job, if I took it, would get me a place within Brashear's organization. There was a chance we could take down one of the biggest human trafficking organizations in the world.”

“I know that name,” Douglas muttered softly. “Venture capitalist, entrepreneur—”

“Drug smuggler, human trafficker, money launderer,” Joshua added. “You name it, Winston Brashear has his fingerprints all over it, including a number of illegal activities. He's big enough and well-respected in most official circles as to make him almost unapproachable. Trust me, the man's despicable. And so far, we haven't been able to get enough evidence to bring charges, much less anything that would stick. Brashear has friends in very high places, and frequently calls in favors owed.”

“Joshua's right. Everyone we tried to embed within his organization was caught almost immediately,” Lauren confirmed.

“Which is why you knew I wouldn't approve of you're going in deep cover. If anything happened to you—”

She reached out and placed her hand gently on his chest, letting it rest lightly against his heart. “Which was why you were sent on assignment in a different country, something that would keep you gone long enough for me to be embedded deep undercover. It worked. I started out as a lowly grunt, doing menial stuff. But one of Brashear’s people noticed me and pointed me out to the big boss. I have a head for numbers. It’s kind of a gift. Figuring out patterns and schedules is a piece of cake. I got moved into a...I wouldn’t call it a management position, but I did work in the managerial offices in the club in Dubai where Brashear did his dirty work. His penthouse suites were above the club, and whenever he was there, that’s where he stayed. Which made it ideal when I got assigned one of the apartments at the club.”

Lauren noted that Ms. Patti and Douglas hadn’t spoken for a bit, though they exchanged several looks, and she knew they were dying to ask questions. She was glad they waited, because it was easier to get the story out without too many interruptions. Even now, rehashing in her head all the things she’d done, the mistakes she’d made, filled her with regret.

“I met Lily, Brashear’s daughter. She was sweet, kind, and totally innocent. I know it seems strange somebody with Brashear for a father could be those things, but she was. She was also eight months pregnant. Lily was given everything she wanted or needed. The best medical care. Staff on call twenty-four/seven. If she stubbed her toe, she was seen immediately. At first I chalked it up to the fact that this would be Brashear’s first grandchild. While Lily wanted for nothing, had every tangible thing she needed, the one thing she didn’t have was a father who was affectionate, kind, or loving. He treated his daughter like he treated everyone else. Like a commodity, something to be utilized for gain. I didn’t understand it. Why was it so important the child be born healthy, provided with every material or medial thing needed? It was Lily herself didn’t matter.”

“All that mattered was the child.” Joshua’s flat, unemotional tone spoke volumes. He understood because

living and working the way they had for the past couple of years, they'd seen enough of the ugly underbelly of society to know everyone and everything was a commodity, came with a price tag attached.

“Lily loved her baby. As young as she was, only eighteen, she adored her unborn child. She'd talk to him every day, telling him about the wonderful life he'd have. Telling him about the plans she had to show him the world. Things changed when she began her ninth month. I don't know exactly what happened, but Lily's whole attitude changed. Where before she'd been looking forward to bringing her child into the world, suddenly she refused to talk about her plans for after the baby was born. I know it had something to do with her father, because he became almost smug. Gloating about his new family.”

“You said Lily never gave any indication of who the child's father was? Could Brashear have discovered the father's identity?” At Douglas' quiet question, Lauren nodded, understanding that somehow, in some way, Daniel's paternity was the answer to why Brashear wouldn't give up until he got his hands on Daniel.

“I tried to get her to tell me about Daniel's father. She talked about him, idealized him, like he was the most important person she'd ever known. I think she was star struck because he was her first love. The first male to pay attention to her. Lily was pretty in her own way but wouldn't be considered a classic beauty. I guess you'd say she hadn't grown into her looks yet. Her mother died when she was young, ten or eleven, I think. Her father barely paid attention to her, so she craved affection.”

“She was awfully young to be pregnant.” Lauren shot Joshua a look and he held up his hands, surrendering the point. “What I mean is I can't see Brashear allowing his daughter to run wild, hooking up with teenage boys. Where'd she meet this love of her life? Were they openly dating with her father's blessing, or did they sneak around behind her father's back?”

“All legitimate questions, ones I don’t have answers to. She did mention that before her father brought her to Dubai, she’d been in California, attending an exclusive private school. I know she had bodyguards who went everywhere with her. She never left the penthouse without several people accompanying her. I never went with her, I wasn’t in that kind of position within the family. I was simply an employee to Brashear. Lily and I spent time together in the evenings. It gave me a chance to do a little subtle sleuthing, and it gave her somebody to talk to who was female. Trust me, Brashear didn’t have a lot of women around him, at least not in a working capacity. He was too busy selling them for top dollar.”

Lauren knew she sounded bitter, but she couldn’t help it. Doing her job meant she’d discovered Brashear was about more than money. He was all about the game. Manipulation and one-upmanship, anything to bring him money and power. If it destroyed others in the process, so be it.

“I think we need to figure out how Brashear tracked you. Obviously, you didn’t infiltrate his organization under your real name. Of course, with his money he’d be able to afford the best computer hackers in the world. They probably got into the government servers without too much trouble, maybe got your fingerprints.”

Lauren was impressed with the way Douglas’ mind worked. It reminded her of the way Joshua approached a job. Methodical and precise, examining every angle, looking for patterns and clues. She glanced at Ms. Patti, who’d thus far remained fairly silent, saw the smile curving her lips as she looked at her husband. Lauren’s breath caught in her throat as she realized this was what she wanted. The kind of connection Ms. Patti and Douglas Boudreau shared. Like they were the only two people in the world, and yet content to share their lives with all the other people they loved. There was a genuine sweetness to the affection, a familiarity that bordered on contentment. Like they honestly wanted to share every moment with each other. She envied them, because she’d

never experienced anything even remotely like the connection they shared, hadn't even realized it existed outside the pages of a romance novel.

I want that with Joshua. I want him to be a part of my life, a part of me I only share with him. I want him to be Daniel's father for real, not simply for protection. I love Joshua more than I ever thought possible, and I can't imagine my life without him. I don't want to. If I live a hundred more years, or only one more day, I want it to be with him, knowing I couldn't love him more.

She realized they were waiting for her answer and answered Douglas' question. "When I worked for Brashear, he knew me as Sarah Barnes, a girl with pretty decent computer skills, a knack for numbers, and questionable moral values. Sarah didn't mind bending or even breaking the rules if it meant dollars in her bank account. She was exactly the kind of person Brashear looked for, because it's the kind of personality he understands. I was careful not to overplay my hand, but we had an entire profile online, so if he looked, he might find the fingerprints because Sarah had a record. Nothing major, no felonies, but she sat squarely in the gray area bordering on the darker stuff. I do know those records were accessed at least once, according to Senator Gonzalez."

"Let's focus on Daniel for a moment. Brashear's pulled out all the stops to find him. It had to be hard for you to smuggle him out right after he was born."

Lauren nodded. "It was terrifying. There wasn't a single soul I could trust, because in that area of the world everybody is in Brashear's back pocket. He's the main source of the economy for a whole lot of people, and anybody who caught me would have turned me over without a single qualm." She drew in a ragged breath, remembering how close she'd come to getting caught more than once. "Hiding with a newborn was probably one of the hardest things I've ever done. Though Daniel was an angel, he was also a baby who cried when he was hungry or needed changing. I didn't have a lot of

experience with babies, much less brand-new ones, so I was winging it.”

“I can’t imagine how hard that must have been,” Ms. Patti said. “I remember when Nica was a baby, crying all the time. I wasn’t used to that myself. I dealt with rowdy preteen and teenage boys, not a tiny human who couldn’t tell me what was wrong or if they were hurt.”

Lauren bowed her head, struck anew by the compassion in Ms. Patti’s voice. The woman truly did have a heart as big as Texas if she was willing to give Lauren even the benefit of the doubt after all the lies she’d told Joshua.

“I was lucky or blessed. I managed to get across the border due to a fluke in their recordkeeping. My Arabic isn’t great and the guard at the border didn’t speak or understand English. I thought he was going to detain me and Daniel until he could find a translator, but a huge group of students rushed up to our gate, and the man became so entangled with getting them settled that he let me pass. I bought a plane ticket to the Maldives, and hopscotched around from country to country, and if anybody asked Daniel was my son. I managed to make my way to Paris, and contacted an old friend, who got me papers to get me into the U.S.”

Joshua knelt down in front of her, making her heartbeat race at his closeness. “Why didn’t you contact Senator Gonzalez? I’m sure she would have found a way to get you and Daniel into the country. Put you both into witness protection. Shoot, she could have set up a brand-new identity for you with the resources she’s got in play.”

Lauren nodded before she answered quietly. “I thought about contacting her. It would have been the right thing, the easy thing, to do. Except I was afraid. Like Douglas said, Brashear can hire the best hackers in the world, and eventually he’d have gotten through all the layers of security, found Lauren Wright and Sarah Barnes were the same person. Plus, it would have put Daniel’s identity into the system. Up to that point, he was invisible, off the grid. I checked and there wasn’t

any record of his birth registered with the UAE or Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which means Brashear kept the whole thing quiet. The only ones who would have known about Daniel's birth were those in Brashear's employ, and if he said to keep their mouths shut, they'd superglue them closed before they'd say a word."

"You managed to keep him off everyone's radar for several months. That's impressive." Douglas moved to stand beside his wife, placing his hand lovingly on her shoulder.

"It wasn't easy," Lauren admitted. "I did everything I could to provide Daniel with all the love and care I could. Some days it never seemed enough. I knew he should be in a loving home, with people who would take care of him, surround him with everything a growing baby needed...but I couldn't give him up. I'd promised Lily, but I could have kept that promise by placing him in a good adoptive home, some place where Brashear could never find him. But I was selfish. I love him so much, the thought of him living with somebody else..." Her voice broke and she fought back tears. No, she needed to be strong. Later, when she was alone, she could give in to the heartbreak and despair of losing her child. Right now, she needed to finish answering their questions. She owed them that much.

"I have another question, hon." Douglas' level gaze caught hers. "Something's been bugging me. How and when did you realize Winston Brashear knew out you weren't dead? I mean, you covered your tracks well, right down to producing death certificates for you and the child. What tipped him off?"

"I screwed up. Used an old alias to contact an old colleague and asked him to spread the word about Sarah Barnes and her son's deaths within the intelligence circuit. To make sure that Senator Gonzalez heard the news, and to provide the documentation I supplied to keep her from digging further. I knew it meant she wouldn't be getting any of the intelligence I'd gathered on Brashear, but it didn't matter as long as it kept Daniel safe." Lauren shook her head, and wrapped her arms across her chest, remembering the night she

was betrayed by somebody she thought was a friend. “She did exactly what I asked, though she had questions. Ones I couldn’t answer. It took less than twenty-four hours before Brashear’s men contacted her and got her to admit I was alive and well. She gave them every bit of information she knew about me, including the name I was using at the time, my real name. The police found her body two days later.”

“We’ll figure out a way to stop him, sweetheart.” Joshua slid an arm around her shoulders and pulled her close against his chest. She laid her head against his shoulder, and rubbed her cheek against him, drawing in his scent.

“We have to, Joshua. If we don’t, he’ll take Daniel and kill me. He can’t allow me to live, not after I stole his grandchild.”

“You didn’t steal Daniel,” Ms. Patti stood and allowed Douglas to put his arms around her. “Lily Brashear gave him to you. You gave your solemn vow to protect Daniel and you have. You’re not alone anymore, Lauren. Winston Brashear will not lay a finger on you.”

“We’ll protect you with everything we have, Lauren. That’s a promise.” The words Douglas spoke touched her to the depths of her very soul. He sounded so much like Joshua at that moment, she knew his influences were the ones who’d made Joshua special.

Lauren looked from Ms. Patti to Douglas, before finally meeting Joshua’s gaze and knew they would do whatever they could to keep her and Daniel safe.

She just hoped it would be enough.

CHAPTER NINE

WINSTON BRASHEAR LEANED against the balcony railing, taking in the panoramic view of the ocean from his penthouse. Sunlight glinted off the shimmering surface making the water appear like shining glass, a mirror reflecting the vastness of the world before him. A world that belonged to him. A world he'd spent his entire life manipulating for power and control, and he was finally on the precipice of having everything he'd ever desired within his grasp.

All the stars had aligned, and he was about to receive his reward. A glorious future played out before him. Or it had until that traitorous, faithless woman stole his prize from under his nose.

The beep of a text notification sounded, and he pulled his phone from his pocket, scowling as he read the message.

THE WOMAN MANAGED TO ESCAPE. NO SIGN OF THE INFANT. WILL FIND THEM.

Idiots. It seemed no matter how much he paid, he ended up dealing with morons and incompetents. Without turning, he raised his hand and within moments Assad, his bodyguard and right hand, stepped onto the balcony. Nearly six feet five inches tall, with deep black hair and the coldest, deadest eyes he'd ever seen, Winston marveled again that he had someone like Assad in his pocket. He remembered the day he'd encountered the stoic giant. It was a momentous afternoon in more ways than one. He'd eliminated a powerful rival who'd dare encroach on his territory, and he'd gained a loyal employee. One he often considered, if not a friend, as close as he allowed himself to having one.

“Sir.”

“Assad, we have a problem.”

“How may I be of assistance?”

“I may have to send you to America. Our problem has yet to be resolved, and my patience is at an end.”

Assad simply stood silent as an evergreen, tall and regal. Anyone seeing him on the street would never realize he could break their neck in a matter of seconds and toss the body away without a backward glance. The man had no conscience, and Winston considered that an asset. If only more of the people around him could be like Assad, he wouldn't have lost control of his ultimate prize. The child was the key to everything, and the longer he was outside of Winston's control, the harder it would be to keep a lid on his identity.

“Whatever you need, sir. May I ask, will I be returning with the infant?”

Winston grabbed the railing on the edge of the balcony, his knuckles white. How he wished he could go to the States himself, handle the woman who had caused him so much trouble. The idea of having her throat between his hands, and squeezing tighter and tighter, watching the life bleed from her eyes. He smiled at the image. It was rare he got to do the dirty work himself anymore. Glancing at Assad, he knew his number one would get the job done. He never failed.

“Make arrangements for the jet to take you to Texas. You'll be going to a small town called Shiloh Springs. Lauren was last seen there. I want the child recovered and returned to me. If you get the opportunity to bring Lauren also, that'll earn you a bonus. But if you can't, feel free to dispose of her as you see fit, as long as it doesn't lead back to me.”

“I understand, sir. As you wish it, it shall be done.” Assad gave a head nod and left. Winston had no doubt he would do precisely what he'd been assigned, and knowing Assad as well as anybody knew the man, he'd enjoy every moment.

With a sigh he left the balcony, knowing it was time for what he referred to as his daily trial. Talking to his daughter. Though he cared for the girl, he didn't love her. Hadn't loved

her mother either, especially when she'd given birth to a girl instead of the son he desired. Of course, he didn't love anybody. He doubted he'd ever felt that particular emotion. Though he occasionally wondered if that was a deficit to his personality, he quickly dismissed the idea. He could do without love. Without affection. He didn't care if everyone hated him, as long as he was in control. He'd never answer anyone ever again.

Everything he'd worked for, sacrificed for, was within his grasp. Soon he would be unstoppable, and he wasn't about to let some worthless woman rip away the world he'd built. No, Lauren Wright must die.



AFTER SPENDING NEARLY half an hour trying to find parking in downtown Austin, Joshua was tired, aggravated, and ready to take his frustrations out on the nearest target. He'd already been in a lousy mood, and the call from Antonio asking him to meet them at the FBI office where he worked hadn't made him a happy camper. Apparently Antonio and his boss, Derrick Williamson, had turned up a couple of things about Brashear and wanted to discuss them with him away from Shiloh Springs. That in itself was odd enough, because both Antonio and Williamson lived in Shiloh Springs, so meeting there would have been a no-brainer.

Taking the elevator upstairs, he was directed toward Williamson's office. He glanced around, curious at where his brother spent his working days. Working undercover, most of his dealings with his C.O. or with Senator Gonzalez had taken place outside of official office space, though they did have a building where they maintained a corporate front. All of this looked so normal.

"Joshua, glad you're here. We've got quite a bit to talk about." Williamson's serious face immediately alerted Joshua that things had gone from bad to worse. Thus far, their search for anything connecting Daniel to Winston Brashear had come up with a big fat goose egg. Other than the fact Brashear was

his biological grandfather, they'd been batting zero on finding out why the international big baddie desperately wanted to get his hands back on the kid.

He followed Williamson back to his office, where Antonio waited, a clutch of papers in his hands. The serious expression on his face let him know everything he needed. Whatever they'd uncovered, it couldn't be good news.

“Hey, bro.”

“Tell me you found something.”

Antonio handed him a sheaf of papers. The top sheet contained a photo. Tall, dark-haired man. At least six foot four, maybe six foot five, muscular, built like a walking mountain. Something about his appearance tickled at the back of his mind, but Joshua couldn't put his finger on it. It was like he'd seen the guy before, but couldn't place the where or the when, or even the who.

“His name's Assad. No last name we've been able to find. Right hand man for Winston Brashear, he's been working with the man for the last three years. Viciously loyal to an almost fervent fanaticism. Anything Brashear asks of him, he does without question. Without hesitation.”

“Interesting. Which means chances are good this Assad knows Lauren and vice versa. Any idea where Assad is? If he's that close to Brashear, we might be able to pinpoint Brashear's location by following him.” Joshua studied the face in the photo closer. Something about the man's eyes bothered him, but he couldn't put his finger on why they disturbed him. Where the man appeared of Middle Eastern descent, which tracked with the locals Brashear did business, Joshua couldn't help wondering if there wasn't a bit of Anglo Saxon ancestry tossed into Mr. Assad's background somewhere.

“That's where we get to the interesting part. Assad traveled via a private jet belonging to one of Brashear's holding companies. It landed at a small airstrip outside DFW six hours ago.”

“There’s only one reason Brashear’s right-hand man would show up in Texas.” Joshua met Antonio’s eyes, already dreading the answer.

“They’ve figured out Lauren is here. Whether they know it’s Shiloh Springs, that’s a toss-up. Lauren covered her tracks, but it wouldn’t take much to find her if you’ve got a good computer guy. Plus, too many people have seen her here. Gracie, Miss Edna. Who knows how many others she talked with while in town? We know two people impersonating FBI agents were already poking around, asking questions about her. They were bold enough to stroll right into Rafe’s office. My best guess? Assad’s heading toward Shiloh Springs.”

Joshua wasn’t surprised by Williamson’s assessment. Assad being in Texas could only have one meaning. Brashear wouldn’t give up, wouldn’t back off. Not without Daniel.

“Can you come up with a reason to hold Assad, maybe bring him in for questioning? Buy me enough time to get Lauren and Daniel out of Shiloh Springs? I know a couple of places we can hole up until we have time to come up with a plan.”

Antonio shook his head. “If he hasn’t done anything wrong, we won’t be able to hold him, even for a short time. Especially if he’s savvy about his rights, and working internationally for Brashear, you can bet he’ll know to ask for a lawyer the minute we walk him through the doors.”

“We might be grasping at straws here. We don’t know if Assad will head to Shiloh Springs. Maybe he’s in Texas on something totally unrelated to Lauren and Daniel.” Joshua knew the minute he said the words they rang false. Having Brashear’s right-hand man arriving in Texas within days of Lauren showing up? Somehow, some way, they not only knew she was alive, but seemed to have a laser-focused track on exactly where she was. Somebody was playing games, and Joshua didn’t know the rules.

“Okay, we need to get guards out at the Big House, keeping watch on Lauren and Daniel twenty-four seven. If the

FBI can't assign anybody, I'll hire some. Uncle Gator and our cousins work for Carpenter Security, and Samuel Carpenter is a friend. I doubt he'd have any trouble assigning a few of his men to stand watch. Heck, if Uncle Gator knew what was going on at the ranch, he'd be there now, wanting to know what took us so long to call him in.

Antonio laughed. "You are so right, bro. And I like the thought of Uncle Gator, Jean-Luc, and Ranger showing up. Between them, they'd keep a close watch on Lauren. Nobody would get a chance to get close, not with them guarding her. Worse case, if we have to move her, we might use one of the cabins out in the bayou. Nobody in their right mind wants to try and get to Gator Boudreau's cabin, especially after dark."

"Since this is a case involving a known human trafficker working internationally, it's above my pay grade. Problem is, Joshua, if I turn this over to the higher ups, it's going to become a three-ring circus and I can't guarantee the media won't get hold of it. Everything you and Lauren are trying to do, to keep that baby boy safe, will be for naught." Derrick pointed to the papers spread across the desk. "I'm worried that Brashear has sent two people who tried to pose as FBI agents to try and find Lauren. Now his right-hand goon has shown up in Texas? This whole set-up stinks like fresh skunk spray."

Joshua picked up the photo of Assad. "Can I take this? I want to show it to Lauren, see what she can tell us about him that might not be part of the official record. I also need to let her know that he's in Texas—though he's not in Shiloh Springs. If she thinks for a second Assad might show up here, she's going to grab Daniel and hightail it to anyplace she thinks might be safe. And I'm not letting her take my son."

"Agreed. You call me the minute you've talked to her, update me on anything she might know that can help us catch this guy. He might be the key to nailing Brashear, and sticking his backside into solitary in the deepest, darkest hole in a Super-Max prison."

“And doesn’t that paint a pretty picture? A world where Brashear can’t get his hands on any more drugs or children.” Joshua flinched at the cynicism in his brother’s voice. He hoped the ugliness of the job wasn’t getting to Antonio. He knew firsthand how ugly the underbelly of the world could change a person, color their views of right and wrong, and he didn’t want that for his brother. He had a clean soul and Joshua wanted it to stay that way.

“Unless you need me for anything else, I’m gonna head back home, make sure nobody’s been skulking around the ranch. Dane’s security system has been an excellent addition, but I’d feel better keeping an eye out myself.”

“Understood, bro. If we hear anything about Assad and where he is, I’ll shoot you a text.”

“Thanks.” Joshua tapped the photo against his hand once and headed out the door, wanting—no, needing—to get home. Back to Lauren and Daniel. Along the way, he had a couple of calls to make.

Climbing into the cabin of his truck, he tapped his phone’s Bluetooth. “Hey, Uncle Gator. Got a minute? We’ve got a bit of a situation here, and I could use your help.”



ASSAD SLOWED HIS speed slightly as he drew closer to Shiloh Springs. Within an hour of touching down in Dallas Fort-Worth, he’d connected with the two idiots Brashear thought competent enough to deal with Lauren Wright. There were times he wondered whether the man he worked for had the intellect necessary to run an organization the size of the one he controlled. Every day Assad performed his duties, onerous as they’d become, because he had an end goal. One known only to him, and once he accomplished what he’d set out to do, he’d have fulfilled his karmic debt, and he could go home. He drew in a deep breath when he thought about home, a place he hadn’t seen in far too long.

He chuckled at the unbidden thought. More and more he'd found his thoughts focused on that single goal. Home. It had become his touchstone, his reason for getting up every morning. With each passing day, disgust for his employer grew. Yet he remained because it was his duty. A trait he'd once scorned, felt it belittled him to kowtow to anybody else. It was funny how life had a way of changing a man's thinking. He was living proof.

Shiloh Springs. An insignificant speck in the middle of nowhere. A place called Texas. Looking around, he spotted things unique to the American landscape, so-called small town life. A bakery. A hometown diner. A flower shop. A store selling coffee. And the bastion of them all—an honest-to-goodness sheriff's department.

Brashear's employees made the mistake of waltzing in there, asking about Lauren Wright. An error in judgement or complete stupidity he wasn't sure, but their ineptitude cost them the element of surprise. It alerted the target Brashear was closer than she imagined. At least he was closing in and would soon have her back within his control.

Assad remembered Lauren from her time in Dubai. She wasn't like most of the women who tended to flock around Brashear and his crowd. Personally, he tended to keep to himself instead of mingling with the opposite sex, though women were plentiful around the compound, and he'd often wondered if his true soul mate resided within its depths. Yet he refrained. Too much temptation, diverting his focus from the supreme goal, and he couldn't afford the distraction. But Lauren had been nice to him. Always polite. Courteous. She even said please and thank you if she asked for anything. So very different from the other women who felt that they were due his servitude. If only they knew how wrong they were.

Brashear had trusted Lauren enough to get close to his daughter. Encouraged it even. Assad hadn't understood the man's motive, admitted he hadn't foreseen the events that were coming. Ever since teenage Lily Brashear turned up pregnant and alone, Brashear had sheltered her, isolated her, allowed no

one too close except for the bodyguards assigned to keep her safe on the few occasions he allowed her to leave the penthouse. Brashear's obsession with the unborn child grew with every passing day, and while he confided many things to Assad, he refused to talk about the baby or why it was so important. But there was something big there, something important. He felt it, knew it was the key to taking down the monster once and for all.

Assad had been the one to hire the midwife, along with two local women to assist her when the time of Lily's delivery drew near, vetted them to make sure they wouldn't betray Brashear. Of course, most people knew better than to try to deceive or trick their employer. It never ended well. Nobody double-crossed Winston Brashear. Between the money Brashear paid and the threat to them and their families, people tended to stay loyal to his employer.

Slowing down as he drove past the sheriff's office, he took note of the cruisers parked on the street. Noted the single door entrance, the number of windows for emergency egress if necessary. He was a thorough man, didn't allow leaving things to chance. In the unlikely event he ended up at the building of law enforcement, he needed to know he had options for escape.

But for now, he had to focus on his object. Find Lauren Wright and the baby. He needed this job finished, needed to gain his freedom. He could only hope he didn't blacken his soul beyond redemption in the process.

CHAPTER TEN

HOLDING DANIEL AGAINST her chest, Lauren smiled at the sound of his childish giggles. He'd just awakened from a nap and was ready to play. Watching his eyes sparkle, his chubby cheeks with the tiny dimples peeking out when he smiled, it stole her breath away. No matter the reason, she was happy for a chance to spend a little more time with her son before she had to leave him forever.

Because it was inevitable. Walking away was the only way Brashear would be unable to find him. She'd realized that when she'd taken Daniel in the first place. Knowing it would be hard to outrun and outmaneuver somebody with the unlimited funds of Brashear, add in the fact he had no scruples, and didn't care whether laws were broken when he wanted something, she'd barely been able to stay one step ahead of him.

It had taken her weeks to realize the only way to outplay him had been to trick him. Make him think she and Daniel had died. Perished in a fiery blaze in the aftermath of a car wreck. Death had been her solution. Leaving a false trail proved easy. She'd made sure details about the car crash made local papers, headlines about the tragedy were sprinkled throughout cyberspace. Death certificates had been issued for Sarah Barnes and her son, Edward. No surviving relatives. Every detail she planted aligned perfectly with the information Brashear had on her from the time she'd worked for him.

“Hey, honey bun, are you hungry?”

“He had a bottle right before I put him down for his nap.” Nica smiled and slid onto the sofa beside Lauren, wiggling her fingers in front of Daniel's face. He gurgled as he reached for them, immediately drawing them toward his mouth. Laughing, she pulled them away, and handed him the blue plastic

teething ring he adored. He immediately started shaking it, and Lauren chuckled when the next second he tried to stick the whole thing into his mouth. Apparently, he was going through the baby stage where anything in their hands immediately went into their mouths.

“He’s a good baby. You should be proud of him.”

“I am. Every time I look at him, I’m amazed this precious little life is a part of mine. I only wish I didn’t have to leave him.” She ran her thumb across his cheek, marveling at the softness of his skin. Looking at him, she tried to picture him ten years from now. Twenty. She imagined he’d be a handsome man, and it broke her heart that she wouldn’t be around to see him. Every minute with him was borrowed time, and she planned to make the most of every second.

“I think you did the right thing. I know everybody’s giving you a hard time about faking your death and breaking Joshua’s heart, blah, blah, blah. But I look at it as you’re trying to do something right. Something good. Protecting a child is never wrong. I hate that you hurt my brother, and that’s something we will probably talk about. A lot. But when I look into the eyes of this innocent little guy, I know I’d do the same thing. Because we’re adults. We have the ability to make decisions, right or wrong. Daniel needs to have everybody watching out for him, making sure he gets the chance to grow up without being used as a pawn in somebody else’s senseless power struggle.”

Nica’s words resonated deep within Lauren, giving her hope that maybe someday she might be forgiven for the choice she’d made.

“Alright, now that’s out of the way, I do have a question. I didn’t want to talk about it in front of the family, because I could be off base here, but here goes.” Nica drew a deep breath and spoke so fast all her words seemed to run together. “Are you planning on taking Daniel and running?”

Lauren was startled by Nica’s question. Despite not knowing the young woman well, she liked her. And apparently

she had an insight and understanding beyond her years.

“No. The reason I placed Daniel in Joshua’s care hasn’t changed. If Daniel stayed with me, he’d constantly be on the run, having to move from place to place. I love my son, and I will do whatever it takes to keep him safe—even if that means never seeing him again.”

“But what happens when Brashear is taken down, because he will be. What happens then?”

“Do you mean have I thought about coming back, being a real mother to Daniel?” How many times had she played that scenario out in her mind? If the danger was gone, would she be able to stay away from the child she loved with all her heart?

“It has to have crossed your mind. What if Brashear’s out of the picture in six months? Or a year? Then what? Does Joshua simply hand Daniel over to you and all is forgiven?”

Daniel wiggled in her arms, the teething ring falling onto the couch cushion, and he released a frustrated scream loud enough Lauren wondered if they heard it all the way into town. She cooed to him, picking up the fallen ring, and placing it in his hand, and his wail cut off mid-cry. The innocent grin he gave her tore at her heartstrings, and combined with Nica’s question, made her wonder if everything she was trying to do was wrong. Could she realistically walk away from her child? She’d made a promise to Lily to keep Brashear from ever finding Daniel. Thought she was doing the right thing by placing him in Joshua’s care. There was no way Brashear could connect Joshua to her. Not even the deepest dive on the web would show any ties, not a single thread. Even if he somehow managed to hack the governmental records of the minute amount of time they spent on the same naval air station, it would take a miracle to connect them amidst the hundreds of other people stationed there.

Their work together for Senator Gonzalez and their organization was completely off the books, never using their real names. Their identities weren’t even in the official or

unofficial records, only kept in paper files and stored in an impenetrable safe with eyes-only access. Authorized personnel only.

“Lauren?”

“Sorry. I was trying to picture a time when I might not be running from Brashear. Looking over my shoulder, afraid my next breath might be my last. I made my peace with my decision, and I didn’t do it without examining every angle, looking at any and every way I could keep my son safe. You don’t know Winston Brashear. You’ve only heard what we’ve discussed here. I doubt you’d even heard his name before, right?”

Nica refused to meet her gaze, which had the little hairs on the back of Lauren’s neck standing at attention. The other woman was hiding something. Knew more than she’d let on, which made Lauren suspicious. Following her instincts had kept her alive more than once in the field, and she had the feeling she needed to follow her gut now.

“Nica, what do you know about Winston Brashear?”

She rubbed her hands across her face, pushing the long blonde hair back, and took a deep breath. “I had a friend at school. Well, I mean she’s still my friend, but she left A&M because of a tragedy in her family. Her younger sister disappeared. Without a trace. She’d been visiting a couple of school friends and planned to spend the night. Well, that’s what she told her parents. She was fifteen and testing her boundaries.”

Lauren closed her eyes because the story was beginning to sound all too familiar. “Let me guess. She met a guy online.”

Nica nodded. “You guessed it. A chat room for gamers. Lisa was a total nerd, loved everything about being online, challenging others. She was good, at least that’s what Shannon said. Shannon’s my friend from school. Anyway, Lisa told her parents she was going to the movies with two classmates and then they were all spending the night at one of the girls’

houses. It was a Friday night, and there wasn't anything about it to draw suspicion."

"Only she never showed up for the movie?"

"Actually, she did," Nica answered. "Lisa and her friends started the evening like they'd planned. Did the whole movie thing. Went for ice cream after. Headed back to the house for the sleepover. Apparently, Lisa snuck out some time during the night, and nobody knew she wasn't there until the next morning."

"The guy online." Lauren had seen it a hundred times or more working for Brashear. The monster had a whole subset of men and women who targeted young girls and boys on the internet. It was a tried-and-true method, befriending somebody who spent all their free time online, because they were more likely to be lonely, have few friends. Earn their trust. Find out where they lived—which was easier than most people thought—and surveil them in real life. They'd make the victim feel like they were the most important person in the world. Tell them they loved them. They should be together. Nobody understood them, cared about them. Wanted to be with them forever. Convince them to meet in person. The victim would then disappear into a vast network set up to whisk the young people out of the country, where they'd end up sold to private individuals or end up part of auctions like the ones Lauren had seen at Brashear's private compound. And those were the lucky ones. Far too many ended up in underground prostitution rings where their lifespans rarely lasted more than a year or two.

"Shannon said her parents were devastated. Called in the police, the FBI, even hired private investigators. Waited for a ransom demand which never came. Months went by without a single lead. Her family offered a huge reward, more than they could afford, but they didn't care. The only thing that mattered was getting their child back alive."

"I'm sorry, Nica. It's the most horrible thing to lose a child. Especially when there's so much uncertainty. Feeling

helpless to do anything. But I'm still waiting to hear how you know about Winston Brashear. Obviously there was some type of connection to your friend's sister."

"Not much of one. Almost a year after Lisa disappeared, a friend of their family was traveling in California on business. San Francisco specifically. She had a meeting with her clients, and they decided to dine near the West End. They dropped into the bar area while waiting for their reservation, and their friend swore she saw Lisa, though she wasn't a hundred percent positive at the time because she looked so different."

Lauren already knew where the story was headed, because she'd heard similar ones more times than she could count, both before and during her time on the case, preparing to go undercover with Brashear's organization. Unfortunately, it sounded like Lisa ended up with somebody who'd thrust her into the ugly world of prostitution.

"Was it her?"

Nica stared down and her hands, silent for a moment before nodding. "Yeah. It took almost three weeks for the private investigators to track her down, because she didn't come back to the same hotel during that time. She was moved around the city, but they did finally find her and the man who was pimping her out. That's where the name Brashear showed up. Unfortunately, there was nothing the feds or local law enforcement could pin on him because there was nothing directly connecting him to Lisa's disappearance. They couldn't even get enough to prosecute the guy who groomed her and took her across state lines, because he left the country before they could arrest him."

"But Brashear's name came up during the investigation?" Interesting, because his name rarely got brought into any investigation, at least on a local level. There were too many layers, too many people between him and the ranks of people who kidnapped and trafficked the people, they didn't know who was at the top. It might bear investigating, to see who'd brought Brashear's name into the equation, a loose thread that

should be followed. She made a mental note to anonymously get the information back to her former employer. Couldn't do it personally, since she was supposedly in an urn full of ashes.

“Shannon said it was mentioned once. Nobody seemed interested in pursuing it, too busy trying to get Lisa to believe she was finally free. That she could come home.” Nica twisted her hands together before reaching out and touching the top of Daniel's head. “I haven't heard much from Shannon since then. From what she said, Lisa's had a hard time re-acclimating to normal life. Living with her parents is a nightmare, not just for her but for them. I hate even imagining what she went through. Just the little I knew about human trafficking, from reading articles Lucas wrote, gave me nightmares.”

“I know it sounds odd to say this, but even with the trauma, Lisa's one of the lucky ones. She is still alive. She can heal. Most of the ones I know about haven't been so lucky.”

Lauren looked down at Daniel, his eyes closed in sleep. Such innocence, purity of mind and spirit. She reminded herself that everything she was doing was for him. For Lily. And selfishly partly for herself.

“I love him.” She rubbed her knuckle softly against his cheek, watched as his lips puckered and made a sucking movement. “I didn't expect it to happen, at least not this fast. Smuggling him out of Dubai, hiding him, disguising us to stay under the radar kept all my focus. I had one goal, get him back to the U.S. If I was on familiar grounds, I had a better chance of protecting him. I couldn't trust anybody, not even the company I worked for. If Daniel was so important to Brashear because of who his father is, I wasn't about to take a chance that somebody else wouldn't attempt to take him from me.”

“I can't imagine trying to fly beneath the surface with a newborn infant. People tend to notice that. Women always want to coo over the babies.”

“True. Although that did help a couple of times, especially once I got into Europe. If I needed to disappear into a crowd, it

was easy. But when there weren't a lot of people around, I tended to be more visible. A mother and a baby, that's what Brashear and his men would be looking for, and I had to improvise. If I felt anybody was getting too close, I would insinuate that I was running from an abusive ex-partner and needed to hide. People, especially other women, tend to be extremely helpful if they feel someone is a victim of domestic violence."

"Wow, that's actually kind of genius. I know if somebody came up to me and said she was running from an abusive ex and thought he was close, I'd certainly do my best to give them aid."

"I...can you take him? I have a couple of things I need to deal with if I'm going to head out soon." She gave Nica a wry smile. "Besides, I need to get used to not having him in my arms. If I don't, it's going to be impossible to leave him with Joshua. And I must. There's no other option."

Nica sighed and held out her arms. "I understand. I don't agree, because I think there's always another choice, another option, we just have to figure it out. Call me a cockeyed optimist, but I think you belong with Daniel. And you belong with Joshua."

"Nica—"

"Don't Nica me. I'm not blind and I'm not deaf. The two of you practically start a forest fire when you're in the same room. I've overheard enough to know you were together, at least before you went undercover on your last assignment. You've both got a lot of baggage, but if you're willing to take a risk, maybe the biggest risk you've ever taken in your life, you might come out the other side with everything you've ever dreamed of."

"I love your optimism. Don't ever lose that. It makes you special." Leaning over, she impulsively hugged Nica, wishing some of Nica's bright outlook would rub off on her. She'd lost the ability to look for the good in life a long time ago.

With a final look at her son, Lauren turned and walked out the door.



JOSHUA ROLLED TO a stop in front of the Big House as Lauren was walking out onto the big porch. In the unguarded moment before she spotted him, she looked forlorn, almost defeated, and he felt the urge to spring from the truck, take her in his arms, and promise her everything was going to be okay. Unfortunately, he couldn't do that. Everything wasn't okay, and until Brashear was out of the picture once and for all, nobody was safe.

Uncle Gator promised he'd round up his sons, Jean-Luc and Ranger, and he'd try to get hold of Sebastian, too, and they'd head for Texas ASAP. It made him feel a little better knowing that not only would Lauren and Daniel be protected, but Uncle Gator would make sure nobody got a chance to get near his family. Like his dad, Uncle Gator was all about family, and he treated all of his brother Douglas' kids like they were his own. Lauren couldn't be protected by a finer group of men when he wasn't around.

Of course, he planned on sticking to Lauren's side like he'd been glued there, whether she liked it or not.

When she turned and made her way to the porch swing, he climbed from the truck's cab and made his way over, sitting beside her. Lifting her hand, he brought it to his lips, placing a gentle kiss against her knuckles.

"You doing okay?"

She nodded, though she didn't try to pull her hand free, and he laced his fingers with hers, leaning back and simply breathing in the air of the ranch. It didn't matter how far he'd gone, all over the world, this plot of land where he'd been raised would always be home.

"I have a couple of things to talk with you about."

“About Brashear?” Though she tried to hide it, he heard the slight catch in her voice, and wondered how many times she’d had to run in fear from the monster, all while watching over their son. As much as he’d grown to love Daniel, he’d only had him for so short a time. Lauren had cared for him, sheltered him, and loved him for far longer. How had she ever had the strength to let him go, even knowing Joshua would take care of him? It took a deeper strength than he possessed.

“Indirectly. First, I want to let you know that my dad’s brother and a couple of his sons are going to be heading here in the next day or so. Jean-Luc and Ranger work for a company called Carpenter Security Services.”

Lauren leaned back and asked, “Samuel Carpenter’s company, out of Louisiana?”

“Yeah. They have some of the best bodyguards in the business. They’ve done security for countless entertainers, politicians, etc. You name it, they’ve probably done security work for them. Jean-Luc and Ranger both currently work for Samuel. My cousin, Sebastian, who everybody calls Bas, might tag along. They’re going to help keep an eye on you and Daniel.”

“If you’re calling in reinforcements, that means Brashear or his men are closer than we thought.”

“That’s the second thing.” He pulled the folded picture of Assad from his jeans pocket and showed it to her. “Do you recognize him?”

“Yes. His name is Assad. He’s Brashear’s right hand. His enforcer. If he’s sending Assad, he knows I’m here.” She struggled to stand, but he kept a hand on her shoulder until she stilled.

“You’re safe. Daniel is safe. Assad isn’t in Shiloh Springs. Yes, he’s in Texas, but it could simply be a coincidence.”

“If you believe that, you’re a fool, Joshua. Assad wouldn’t just show up in Texas without a reason. If he’s here, it’s because Brashear has figured out I’m here. So, unless I run

now, you and your whole family are in danger, because Assad will simply consider you collateral damage when he takes me out.”

“You can’t run anymore, Lauren. You can’t hide. Brashear knows you’re alive and he’s already made the connection to Shiloh Springs. To me. We know that because of the two phony FBI agents. Derrick Williamson and Antonio are on the hunt for them now, because they are in big trouble for impersonating federal agents.”

“Maybe if I leave, they’ll follow me and that can give you a chance to get Daniel someplace safe.”

Joshua put his arm around her shoulder, felt the tremble in her body, and wished he could make everything go away. Whisk the danger away until all that was left was happiness. But until they took down Brashear, it was a pipedream.

“It’s time to take a stand, sweetheart. Time to let Brashear know he won’t win this time.”

“Joshua, he never loses. Anything he’s ever gone after, he’s gotten through money or force or...” She trailed off, but Joshua knew what else Brashear used to get what he wanted, and it wasn’t pretty.

He stood and held out his hand to Lauren and she took it. Slowly, giving her a chance to say no, he pulled her into his arms. It seemed like forever since he’d held her close, whispered that he loved her. Somehow the world had interfered and ripped her out of his arms once before. He’d thought her dead, and now he’d been given a second chance, and he’d move heaven and earth to keep her by his side. To protect her and the child he loved.

“Joshua.” His name was a raspy whisper and desire flared at the sound. Without a word he leaned forward, and his mouth took hers in a ravaging kiss. He demanded her response, and she gave it willingly. A swell of emotion coursed through him when her lips moved over his. She opened to him, and he surged deeper, his tongue moving with hers in a fierce dance

of desire. He took her lips, possessing every inch of her mouth.

His arms held her up, as her knees trembled and he rumbled out a strained laugh, because darned if his knees weren't a bit shaky too. Not surprising, she'd also had the ability to make him feel weak as a newborn foal and strong as Hercules.

"I promise you this, Lauren. Nobody, not Assad, not Brashear, nobody is going to take you or Daniel from me. You're mine, both of you, and I'll protect you until my last breath. I love you, Lauren. I never stopped. Even when they told me you were dead, even though my heart kept beating, I loved you. Nothing will ever change that."

"Joshua, I—"

"No, don't say anything. I wanted you to know how I feel. Now let's go see our son."

Holding out his hand, she placed hers into his with a tentative smile, and he led her into the house, praying he'd be able to keep his promise.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

ASSAD STUDIED THE large window that fronted the town's local diner. Place called Daisy's Diner. He nearly rolled his eyes at the cuteness of the moniker. He'd bet the woman owner, because it had to be a woman, called herself Daisy too. Probably wouldn't be her real name, but places like this thrived on that down-home hokey pleasantness.

Most of the lunchtime crowd had thinned out, leaving only a handful of customers inside. Perfect. He'd order a to-go order and be in and out before anybody had the chance to spot him. Not that they'd recognize him. He kept a low profile, since working for Winston Brashear could put him in the spotlight with a lot of organizations trying to take his employer down. Regardless, he'd come to Shiloh Springs to do a job, and he intended to fulfill the directives he'd received. Which meant a lot of people might be hurt if it was discovered he was there looking for a woman who'd crossed his boss and the infant child she'd stolen right out of his hands.

Assad smirked, remembering the moment Brashear learned that the lovely Ms. Barnes had managed to vanish with his most valuable asset. As close as Assad had gotten to Brashear since beginning to work with the man, he hadn't been privy to the reason Brashear felt the newborn was the key to strengthening his power base, but he intended to find out.

He allowed his gaze to drift down each side of the street, noting the residents of Shiloh Springs. Men and women going about their day-to-day lives without a seeming care in the world. If only they knew how the real world worked, with power brokers and schemers running their uncomplicated little lives, never realizing they were being manipulated. Probably better that way, he mused. Sometimes reality was easier to swallow when cloaked with a dash of normalcy.

Not seeing anybody or anything which raised alarm bells, he pushed open the door to the diner, inhaling the aroma of foods he hadn't eaten in decades. His mouth was already watering when he slid onto a seat at the counter, keeping his head lowered, though he still managed to surveil the entire diner. Noted every person seated as well as those behind the open window preparing the food. Again, nothing raised any alarm bells, and he allowed himself to relax. Well, as much as he ever allowed himself to relax.

A pretty woman stepped up to the counter in front of him, her apron proclaiming she worked there. Her blonde hair was highlighted with bright pink bangs and dark black chunky streaks interspersed throughout. The combination should have looked atrocious, yet on her she made the color combination work. The highlighted colors framed her face, and he found himself responding to her welcoming smile.

"Welcome to Daisy's." She handed him a laminated menu. "Today's specials are chicken-fried steak with mashed potatoes and gravy and homemade meatloaf with garlic mashed potatoes and green beans."

"I'd like the chicken-fried steak, please."

"Awesome. That comes with homemade yeast rolls or cornbread." She leaned forward and added, "I'd suggest the cornbread. The cook makes some of the best I've ever tasted."

Assad smiled. "With that kind of recommendation, how can I refuse?"

"Alright, that's one chicken-fried steak with cornbread. What can I get you to drink?"

"Just water, please."

"Okay, I'll get that right out for you." With a quick grin, the woman whose name tag had proclaimed her to be Daisy headed to the window opening between the kitchen and the front of the diner, and placed his order before heading toward the cash register to check out one of the customers who'd finished and was ready to leave.

Assad couldn't help wondering how long it had been since he'd been inside an establishment like Daisy's place. Brashear wouldn't be caught dead inside an establishment as low brow as a diner. Nothing less than five-star cuisine would do for his employer, which meant wherever Brashear went, Assad accompanied him. He kind of missed eating at a joint where he could pick up a greasy hamburger with an order of loaded fries.

Lifting his head, he tried to get the waitress' attention, realizing he'd forgotten to tell her the order was to go. He couldn't afford to sit around eating, not when Brashear was riding his back to get results. When she headed toward him, he froze because he spotted a familiar figure walking through the diner's front door behind Daisy. The sole person in all of Shiloh Springs that he desired to see more than his next breath and was terrified to come face-to-face with because she could and would change his entire world with a single word.

"What can I help you with?" Daisy interrupted his near panicked state. "Your meal will be ready in a jiff."

"I need to change it to a to-go order." He knew he sounded abrupt, because Daisy's expression instantly became guarded and closed off.

"Of course, sir. I'll let the kitchen know to box it up."

Assad kept his head turned away from the front of the diner, staring at the wall in front of him, a chalkboard proclaiming the daily specials along with a list of pies and cake available. His sweet tooth shouted to get the sweet potato pie, but his strict discipline quashed the thought. Not today, and especially not with the woman who'd taken a seat at a table not five feet away.

He drew in a ragged breath, his hand automatically going to his right ear and tugging on the lobe, a mannerism he'd thought he'd broken, yet only being in Shiloh Springs for a short time and it was back. He prayed his order would get there fast. If not, he'd simply have to leave without it. A prickling sensation slid up his spine, the tiny hairs along the

back of his neck seeming to stand at attention. He could practically feel the eyes focused on him. It wasn't a feeling he was unused to; being a large man, he tended to attract attention in a crowd, much less a small-town diner.

Stopping in here was a mistake. He'd thought so from the outset, but he'd been stupid. Wanted even the tiniest connection to a past he'd long ago lost. Now that impulsive act might blow his entire life, his purpose, out of the water.

At that moment, Daisy walked up with a white cardboard box, and he let out the breath he'd been holding.

"Here you go. I added a couple extra pieces of cornbread to the order. Is there anything else I can get for you?"

"Thank you, but no." Handing her two twenties, he added, "Keep the change."

Starting to stand, he hesitated when he spotted several more people he didn't want to cross paths with at this juncture. It was too soon. Any one of them could ruin all his carefully laid plans. As he watched, Rafe and Antonio Boudreau walked into the diner. Rafe's laughter was deep and throaty, the sound genuine and he slapped his brother on the back. A third man, one Assad didn't recognize, joined them. There was a look of authority about him, as though he was used to being in charge. *Definitely a fed of some type.* He'd been around them enough to recognize their stance, the way they held themselves. Hopefully the fed wasn't here about him.

That thought dissolved when his gaze met Rafe's. Nope, the fed wasn't here for him. Rafe was. His long powerful strides headed straight for Assad, and with a long-suffering sigh, he placed his to-go box on the table. Looked like he wasn't about to get to eat anytime soon.

Casting a final glance toward the blonde woman at the table a few feet away, his eyes met hers. Again, his hand raised and he tugged on his earlobe. And cursed when recognition lit her face.

Things were about to go south in a big way, and it was all his fault.



JOSHUA PRESSED HIS foot against the accelerator a little harder, and watched the speedometer climb another five, and then ten, miles an hour. Already doing well past the posted limit, he gripped the steering wheel and shook his head, wondering who he was going to annihilate first, his nosy brothers, or Brashear's latest henchman, currently sitting in Rafe's jail. Or he'd better be in a cell when he got to the sheriff's department, otherwise Joshua wasn't sure he'd be able to control his temper. He'd had just about enough of Brashear and his attempts to take Daniel. His son wasn't going anywhere, and he'd move heaven and earth to make sure Daniel stayed safe on the Boudreau ranch. That little boy needed to be raised the same way Joshua and his brothers had been—with a family who loved and cared about him and would always have his back.

When his phone rang, he tapped the Bluetooth, putting it on speaker. He didn't bother checking the caller ID, figuring it was probably one of his brothers, calling to update him on what was happening with Brashear's goon. Rafe and Antonio better get all the answers they needed before he got there, because he couldn't guarantee he'd be able to rein in his temper enough to ask pertinent questions. Nope, he was more than likely going to hit first and ask questions later.

"Hello."

"Joshua, good to hear your voice."

"Senator, this is a surprise." It was, too, because there wasn't a reason for Senator Gonzalez to be contacting him. He'd cut all ties with the off-the-books organization the minute Daniel had come into his life, when he'd thought he'd lost Laurel.

"I've been planning to touch base with you, see how you're adjusting to civilian life, but time got away from me.

Dealing with lowlifes can take a toll on any kind of plans we make. You haven't changed your mind, by any chance, and want to come back? There's always a place here for you."

"I'm afraid not, Senator. I'm a country boy through and through, and plan to keep it that way. The hardest job I want right now is riding the fence line at the ranch and fixing barbed wire."

"That's too bad. I was hoping I could lure you back, but I understand wanting a bit of peace and quiet. You certainly would never find that here." There was a long pause, before she continued. "Joshua, I've been hearing a few rumors floating around, and wanted to give you a head's up. There can't be any truth to them, but..."

When her voice trailed off slowly, the little hairs on the back of Joshua's neck stood at attention. He pressed his foot down harder on the accelerator, watching the needle climb higher. A sense of impending danger suffused him. Something in her voice felt off. It was more than the words, a foreboding sense of menace filled him.

"Tell me."

She sighed. "Somebody, and I don't know who, has leaked information on the dark web about Lauren. They've posted a link between her Sarah Barnes alias and even listed her real name."

"Who'd have access to that information? Your computers are locked up with the tightest security I've ever seen." He didn't mention that Destiny had been able to crack them in a matter of minutes. Right now, he didn't need them amping up their security and keeping him out of the system if he needed access again. And his gut told him that he probably was gonna need it.

"Believe me, I've got everybody working to find out if we've had a breach and plug that sucker up fast. Like ASAP. But that's not the part that's troubling me. It's more what they're saying. I know it's impossible, but whoever is

spreading the information knows everything about Lauren. About her working here. About her alias with Brashear's organization." She paused for a moment, then added. "They also know about her involvement with you. That you were involved not only professionally but...personally."

A sense of déjà vu crawled across Joshua's thoughts. He'd been wondering how Brashear's two goons had shown up in Shiloh Springs right after Lauren hit town. If they knew about him, about their personal involvement? That ticked a lot of the boxes.

"I'm sensing there's more, Senator. I'd rather you simply spit it out. What aren't you telling me?"

She sighed. "There are rumors, ones I haven't been able to substantiate, that Lauren is still alive—and that she took something valuable from Brashear. Something that he's desperate to get back."

And there it was. The other shoe dropping. He didn't like the caginess in the senator's voice. On a gut deep level, he knew she was keeping something from him—or hiding bits of the truth. Did she know about Daniel?

"Any idea what they're talking about? I mean, if Lauren's alive—and that's a big if—what could she have taken from Brashear that was important enough for her to fake her own death?"

The minute the words left his mouth, he knew he'd made a big mistake. Nobody knew about Lauren staging her own demise except him and his family, and now he handed the information over to their former boss on a silver platter. Didn't matter how much he tried to backtrack or deflect, Senator Gonzalez was a smart woman. She had to be to hold the position that she did, not only as a United States senator, but as one of the leaders of their organization.

"Joshua, is Lauren alive? Don't lie to me. Have you seen her? Talked to her?" The steely undertone in the senator's voice had Joshua's teeth clenching. He didn't want to tell her,

but he knew how her mind worked. She'd have agents swarming Shiloh Springs within hours if she suspected one iota of a lie.

“Senator, I’m not comfortable having this conversation right now. Anyone might be listening in.”

“Joshua, if it’s true, Brashear’s actions make a lot more sense than him searching for a dead woman. When you talk to her, tell her she needs to contact me. I can get her into a safe house where none of Brashear’s people can get to her. You can come with her. I know you want to protect her, but you can’t do it alone. Not against the kind of reach Winston Brashear has.”

“Senator—”

“Joshua, do you know what she took from Brashear? If you do, you have a responsibility to tell me right now.”

Joshua sat up straighter in the driver’s seat, her words stoking his anger. He’d had enough of people ordering him around, which had been a huge part of why he’d left the job in the first place. Lauren’s supposed death had only been the catalyst of something that had been brewing for a long time. If Senator Gonzalez thought he was going to betray Lauren’s trust, she really didn’t know him at all. And he’d never turn an innocent child like Daniel over to the government—not for any reason. Daniel was his son and nothing and nobody was taking him away from his family.

“If Lauren took anything from Brashear, she obviously had a good reason, Senator.”

“Whatever Lauren took should be turned over to us immediately. She should never have taken him and run away. Don’t you understand, Joshua? Brashear will never stop hunting Lauren until he has back what she’s stolen from him.”

Joshua had stopped listening because he realized Senator Gonzalez had slipped up. She’d said Lauren should never have taken him. The woman knew exactly what Lauren had stolen from Brashear. That simple statement confirmed he couldn’t

trust her anymore. His gut clenched, thinking about the fact that not only was Brashear determined to find Lauren and the baby, but their former boss, Senator Gonzalez, could bring their whole organization down on their heads too. Daniel was in far more danger than he'd realized, and he started praying he and his family would be strong enough to keep him and Lauren safe.

"If I hear from Lauren, I'll be sure and put her in touch with you, ma'am. Right now, I've got a meeting in town and I'm almost there. It was nice hearing from you, Senator. Gotta go." He disconnected the Bluetooth before she could utter another word, though he knew she wasn't finished. Shiloh Springs would probably be inundated with clandestine agents crawling all over the place before long. Might be a good idea to give his brothers a head's up.

But first, he had a meeting with somebody who'd already made it clear he was after the woman he loved. Brashear's latest flunky was about to discover one man was no match for the combined forces of his family. Because Boudreaus protected their own, and Lauren and Daniel belonged to him, and he wasn't about to lose the best thing that ever happened to him.

When his phone rang again, he practically growled, irritation making him ready to swear. Until he looked at the caller ID. The name made his eyes widen.

"Hey, man. This is a surprise."

"Been a while, right? I've missed seeing you the last couple of times I was in Shiloh Springs. Heard you haven't been around much, which made Ms. Patti sad. I also heard that you're back in town for good. True?"

"Yeah." Joshua drew in a deep breath, relaxing his shoulders and trying to calm his racing heartbeat. The conversation with Senator Gonzalez still bothered him, and now to have Gage calling him out of the blue? This day kept getting weirder and weirder.

“Good. Glad you got out of the business. Especially with the monkey business going on at the agency you previously worked for.” Gage’s voice had taken on a serious tone, making Joshua wonder how much the former Lost Boy actually knew about the clandestine organization Joshua had just departed. And why the heck was he calling him anyway? He knew Gage had reconnected with the family, having popped up during a couple of interactions with his brothers, but he hadn’t spoken to Gage in far too many years to be totally at ease with the man.

“How do you know who I worked for, Gage? I haven’t even told my parents everything about the past couple of years.” Joshua heard the hardness in his voice, but he didn’t completely trust the man. Not yet anyway. Of course, Momma was thrilled that two of her Lost Boys had come back into the fold, with Brian and then Gage reconnecting with the Boudreaus and spending more and more time in Shiloh Springs. She’d tell him to trust Gage. He wanted to, but he’d learned a long time ago that trust could be broken in a heartbeat, and Joshua never trusted easily. Except Lauren. He’d trusted her from the minute he’d met her.

“Let’s just say I have...sources familiar with your former employer.”

Wouldn’t that burn Senator Gonzalez’s biscuit if she knew somebody in her secret organization had loose lips and was spilling secrets? Joshua bit back a grin.

“Friends in high places, Gage?”

Gage laughed. “More like low places, but they’re solid.”

“Why are you calling me? It’s really not a good time, man. I’m on my way to town to deal with—”

“You’ve got bigger problems to deal with than whatever’s going on in Shiloh Springs at the moment. I’ve had my ear to the ground because the case I’m currently working overlapped one your former employers were trying desperately to cover up. You know about Winston Brashear, I’m guessing?”

“You might say that.” Joshua didn’t bother hiding the sarcasm that colored his words. “Bane of my life. What have you heard?”

“First, I’m not going to pretend that I haven’t heard all about Lauren Wright and her son. Your son, right?”

“Daniel.”

“I know he’s not your biological son. He’s Lily Brashear’s son, making him Winston’s grandbaby, the one he’s got everybody scrambling to find.”

Joshua tightened his grip on the steering wheel, glancing down at the speedometer. He was getting closer to town and would have to slow down soon. “You’re not telling me anything I don’t already know.”

“Well, I bet you didn’t know who Lily Brashear was secretly seeing when she was visiting the United States? A visit that coincided with the time she would have gotten pregnant?”

This was it. The final piece to the puzzle of why Brashear wanted the child so desperately. He knew deep in his gut that whoever Gage named, the ramifications to everyone involved would come full circle.

“Tell me.” The two-word demand came out gruffer sounding than he’d intended, but the time for pleasantries was past. If the name Gage provided proved true, this might be the key to ending Brashear’s reign of terror against Lauren, and they’d finally be free.

“You understand nothing is assured, not until a DNA test is performed. You need definitive proof to stop Brashear. Something you can take to the kid’s biological family—and I’m not talking about Lily Brashear.”

A fist-tight grip squeezed in Joshua’s chest. If Daniel had biological family, it was entirely possible, if not likely, they would want Daniel. Did they even know he existed? Or were they in the dark about his sweet son?

“I understand. Just give me the name.”

Shock raced through him at Gage’s answer. First because Daniel’s biological father—if he was proven to be such—was dead. Secondly because he understood why Brashear was desperate to get his hands on the kid.

“Joshua, are you there?”

“Yeah. Just trying to wrap my head around what you’ve told me. Are you sure he’s the father?”

“As sure as I can be without actually having seen the two of them actually creating the kid. You’ve got to understand, I was working on a completely unrelated case when this information dropped into my lap. When I saw your name linked with Lauren and Winston Brashear, I started digging deeper from a direction and connection you were unaware of and uncovered the baby daddy connection.”

“Can you send me everything you’ve got? I need as much ammunition as I can get to cut the legs off the beast.” Joshua rattled off a secure e-mail, one he’d had Destiny set up as soon as they’d started looking into the information Lauren had given them.

“Good luck. I’m planning on being in Shiloh Springs soon. I’m shooting everything to your e-mail and I’ll also bring you everything I’ve found on Brashear from my investigation. Maybe between the two of us, we might be able to take him down for good.”

“Thanks. It’ll be good to see you again.”

“You, too. Take care of your son, because Brashear won’t give up. Get that DNA test done ASAP so you’ve got a bargaining chip and you’ll have proof to take to his biological grandfather.”

“Gotta go. Thanks again.” Disconnecting the call, Joshua eased his foot off the accelerator. His brain raced with all the information he’d just been given. Knew he couldn’t tell anybody. Not yet. Not until he confirmed what Gage told him. If and when the information became public, the tabloids and

mainstream media would have a field day. But he didn't care about that. None of that mattered.

When the news became public, he'd lose Daniel forever. And when that happened, he might lose Lauren too.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ASSAD DIDN'T STRUGGLE when the Boudreau men led him through the doors of the sheriff's station. He'd made a mistake, one he was paying for now. He'd allowed his focus to be distracted when he'd spotted the one person he'd actively avoided since arriving in Shiloh Springs. Seeing her so close, meeting her startled gaze, he'd been caught like a deer in headlights. He didn't dare give in to his first instinct, which was to go to her, speak with her. Hear her voice, the slight Texas twang that appeared whenever she was emotional.

The handcuffs behind his back bit into his wrists. Rafe Boudreau wasn't taking any chances of his prisoner escaping, and obviously the other men didn't trust him. Assad lowered his head to hide his smile. If the sheriff only knew how easy it was for him to get out of cuffs, Rafe would have made sure to secure him better. Shackles at the very least, though even those wouldn't hold him for long.

"Antonio, take him to the conference room. We've got questions, and it's about time we get some answers."

Antonio Boudreau ushered him through a doorway on the left of the long hall. Inside a large table with several chairs dominated the space. A large white board graced one wall, currently bare. Assad automatically surveyed the room, scanning for things he could utilize as weapons. Several were readily apparent and within easy reach. Normal ordinary objects, deadly in the hands of someone who knew how to use them, and he did. Somebody needed to school the good sheriff on securing rooms where he planned to interrogate prisoners.

Three other men stalked into the room, and Assad studied them closely. One he didn't recognize, but the other two faces were as familiar as Rafe and Antonio's. They were Boudreaus. Of course, it was a bit confusing since they looked exactly

alike except for the hair, which meant these were the twins, Shiloh and Ridge. He wondered how many other Boudreaus would show up before the questioning even started.

Silently Antonio stepped behind him and unlocked the handcuffs, tossing them onto the conference table. He refused to rub his wrists, not willing to give them the satisfaction of knowing they'd caused him discomfort.

A commotion from the hall diverted Assad's attention from the men in the room. A feeling of dread pooled in the pit of his gut, a sensation he was intimately familiar with, since it was one he lived with constantly while working for Brashear. Time was running out, it had been ever since he'd begun the hunt for Lauren Wright and her path led straight to Shiloh Springs. Still, he wasn't ready to face the one woman in Shiloh Springs who could destroy everything he'd worked over a decade to accomplish.

When he heard *her* voice from the hall, he closed his eyes. Looked like time was up.

"I want to see him, Rafe."

"Momma, you can't go in there. This is an official investigation. We need to question him, find out what he knows. We already know he's here for Lauren and the baby. I need to find out how much he's told Brashear, and if Brashear is on his way to get her. Or if he's sending more people to take her. We don't have time—"

"Make the time. There's something I need..."

"Momma—"

"Move."

Even from where he stood, Assad could hear the icy tone underlying Patricia Boudreau's next words.

"You can't see him."

"Rafe Boudreau, you will step aside and allow me to see that man. I am not leaving this spot until I see him." Her voice dropped down to almost a whisper, "It's important."

Rafe's sigh was audible, tinged with frustration. "Two minutes, Momma. Two minutes and then you've got to leave. I hope I don't get handed my head for this."

Assad's heart raced like it wanted to jump straight out of his chest, and he swallowed back the sudden lump in his throat. This couldn't be happening. Not now. He'd imagined this meeting a thousand times, so many different scenarios it made his head spin. Unfortunately, each outcome was the same.

Rejection.

Disappointment.

Heartache.

Back ramrod straight, he refused to look at her. Patricia Boudreau. The one woman in the entire world who could break him. Reduce him to an insecure boy with a simple glance—the way she had all those years ago. He'd never forgotten her, not for one instant. Douglas either. The man was indelibly imprinted in his memory.

"I'd like to speak with you." Her voice rolled across him, soft yet with an underlying steely strength which belied her petite stature. There would be no backing down from this woman, though he had to try. Had to make her think she was mistaken—that she didn't know him. It was impossible to think she remembered him.

"I will not speak with you." Assad deepened his accent, knowing he had to try and throw her off track. Maybe he was blowing this all out of proportion and she hadn't recognized him. Could be she only wanted to ask him about why he'd acted weird when he'd seen her.

Without hesitating, she walked forward, stopping less than a foot away from him. He drew in a deep breath, trying to ignore the gigantic T-Rex trying to climb out of his chest. Thump, thump, thump. Was this what an anxiety attack felt like? He'd never had one, but he'd also never been this nervous.

Not surprisingly, all the Boudreau men took a menacing step forward. Guess they didn't like him refusing to speak to their mother. The lone man who wasn't a Boudreau remained leaning against the wall, arms crossed over his chest, though Assad doubted he'd missed a single second of what transpired. The man was one cool customer.

Assad towered over the Boudreau matriarch by more than a foot, and he used every inch of his height, attempting to intimidate her. Refusing to bend or give in to the desire to drop to his knees before her, beg her to remember him, to say she still loved him. The way she had when he'd lived at the Big House. Been a part of their miraculous family, before he'd been ripped away and thrust into the unforgiving real world.

Ms. Patti refused to back down. Instead she took a step closer and reached out her hand, lightly placing it against his chest. That small touch almost broke him. It was soft and loving, the way he remembered. How was it possible something he hadn't felt in almost fifteen years felt exactly the same? When he'd been younger and had gotten into scrapes or tussles with his brothers, she'd pat his chest and tell him she loved him. That everything was okay. Ms. Patti always knew the right thing to say, because he had lived in constant fear he'd be snatched away from this place he loved, the people he cared about like family, and tossed back into another horrible foster home or worse. And there were worse things than bad foster homes. Those were the memories he ran from in his nightmares, the fear choking him when he woke covered in sweat. And it had happened, exactly like he'd known it would.

"The hair color threw me for a second, I have to admit." Her gaze met his directly, unwavering. He almost smiled because it was so like the woman he remembered. That woman never backed down from anything. Faced any fight without flinching, without showing weakness, and here she stood, doing the same by confronting him. It didn't matter, he needed to stand firm. If he refused to corroborate her suspicions, maybe he could bluff his way through.

“I don’t know why you’ve changed your appearance. I don’t care.” Assad froze as her voice broke at the end. If a nuclear bomb exploded, he wouldn’t have been able to budge a single inch. A look so full of compassion and love filled her face, he was terrified his shaky knees wouldn’t hold him upright.

“I can’t—”

“Momma, what’s going on? Do you know him?”

Ms. Patti’s gaze never left his, their eyes locked—hers filled with hope and affection, and he knew his would reflect his sadness at the life he’d lost. The one he’d almost shared with her. “Yes, I know him. So do you. Shiloh and Ridge do too.”

Assad might not have been the center of attention before, but now every single eye in the room stared at him, trying to figure out what Ms. Patti had somehow deduced. Looked like the gig was up, and he was pretty much screwed.

“I don’t get it. Never seen the guy before.” Shiloh shook his head and took a couple of steps forward, trying to get a better look, but Ms. Patti wouldn’t move. Raising both hands in surrender, he stepped back.

“That’s not his natural hair color, that’s for sure.” Ridge pointed. “It’s faint, but the roots are starting to show, and they’re much lighter.”

“I honestly don’t care about his hair or anything else. I need to know who he is and why he’s in Shiloh Springs and how much of a danger he is to Lauren, Daniel, and Joshua.” Rafe gently tugged on Ms. Patti’s arm, and she shrugged him off, grabbing Assad’s hand.

Assad ignored the chatter going on around him, his focus zeroed in on Ms. Patti. “What gave me away?”

Her eyes filled with tears, though she didn’t shed them. “I saw you tug on your ear—in the diner. Whenever you got nervous or upset, you always tugged on your right earlobe. It took me a minute, because you look so different.” He watched

her draw in a shuddering breath. “We looked for you. Douglas pulled every string he had, called in every favor trying to find out what happened to you. It was like you’d disappeared off the face of the earth.” She closed her eyes for a second, before adding, “They told us you ran away. CPS couldn’t find you. The police couldn’t find you. I never lost hope you were alive and well.”

The tightness in his chest resumed, the loud thumping in his ears beating like a war drum, and he blinked rapidly, not wanting anybody to see the wetness on his lashes. For so many years, he hadn’t believed anybody cared he’d disappeared. To hear Douglas and Ms. Patti tried to find him? It felt like a veil lifting, revealing the world around him clearly for the first time.

He breathed a long sigh before finally giving in. “Ms. Patti, it’s a very long story, and one we don’t have time for now. Rafe’s right, we need to make sure Lauren and the baby are safe. Brashear’s got others besides me looking. I’ve managed to send them on a couple of wild goose chases, but they won’t be distracted forever.”

She reached up and cupped his cheek, and he found himself leaning into her show of affection, like a plant turning toward the sunshine. “You’re wearing contact lenses. I think that’s why I initially doubted myself when I saw you. You had the most beautiful blue eyes.”

Before he could answer, Rafe wrapped his arm around Ms. Patti’s waist and physically moved her, swiftly passing his mother toward Shiloh. Ridge stepped in front of them, ready to defend his mother. Little did they realize Ms. Patti was the one person on this earth who he would protect with his very last breath.

Before Assad could react, Antonio was behind him, sliding his arm around Assad’s neck, tight enough for him to recognize the threat, but not enough to make him black out.

“We don’t have time for this. You said Brashear sent or will send others to find Lauren and Daniel. I want you to tell

me—us—everything you know. Lauren and Daniel aren't going with you, let's make that clear from the get-go. They are and will continue to be protected. From you and Brashear and anybody else. Am I clear?"

Assad started to nod and felt Antonio's arm tighten around his neck. "I have no intention of harming Lauren Wright or Daniel. I take it they are now part of the Boudreau *clan*?" He placed the slightest emphasis on the last word.

He watched Rafe's eyes widen the smallest bit and smirked at the other's reaction. Assad was well aware the Boudreaus referred to themselves and those they cared about as their clan.

"Okay, that's it. Momma acts like we should know who you are. You act like being pulled into the sheriff's office is a big joke. There's nothing humorous about a madman hunting down and trying to kidnap a mother and her child. I think you'd better start talking, or I'll turn you over to the FBI and let them get answers from you."

Assad sighed. "I assure you that won't be necessary. I already know Antonio Boudreau works for the Bureau. I'm assuming the gentleman leaning against the wall is also an agent."

"Special Agent in Charge, Derrick Williamson." The other man spoke for the first time, his tone low and controlled. From his recent research on the Boudreaus, he realized this man was Antonio's superior at the Austin FBI office.

"Can we at least sit down and talk like civilized gentleman?"

"Man, he reminds of somebody. I can't put my finger on who it is though. It's driving me crazy." Ridge relaxed his protective stance in front of Ms. Patti, and Assad allowed himself to relax a little as well. Even though he knew these men, at least by reputation since it had been far too many years to claim any kind of first-hand knowledge of how they'd changed, Assad never allowed himself to completely let his

guard down. Growing careless would end up in him getting killed. And he wasn't ready to die yet.

"I'm staying." Ms. Patti marched past Rafe and sat down in the seat beside the one Assad had just filled and crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm part of this, and I need to know what's happening with Lauren and Daniel. He's my grandson, and I will protect him from everyone." She shifted in her chair to stare at him. "Even you."

"Understood, ma'am." He should have known Ms. Patti would immediately adopt the child as one of her own. Especially since Lauren's relationship with Joshua Boudreau appeared to be more than mere friendship. It seemed quick, though. He hadn't been able to find a connection between Joshua and Lauren before her unexpected arrival in Shiloh Springs recently, but Lauren had always been exceptionally good at covering her tracks.

"Okay, I'll bite," Antonio took the seat directly across from Assad. "Who are you?"

"That is a long story. When you run my fingerprints, which I know you will, it will show my name is Assad. No last name. A resident of Dubai, United Arab Emirates. An employee of Winston Brashear, although it will probably pop as one of his shell companies, for the last two and a half years. All that information, however, is false. Planted by an extremely good hacker."

Antonio lightly tapped his fingertips against the table before speaking. "Good to know, it'll keep us from wasting time discrediting the information. But I'm really more interested in who you are. Momma recognizes you or thinks she does. You're treating her with kid gloves and affection, like you know her too. Who...are...you?"

"My real name? I haven't used it since I was thirteen years old and living at the Big House."

The silence that filled the conference room at his words was a palpable living thing. He could hear them breathing, but

no one spoke, while every eye stared at him in shock. Well, all except for Agent Williamson, since he didn't realize the magnitude of his announcement.

"Name. Now." Rafe's words landed like bullets, and he knew it was time for the truth.

"Nick. Nicholas Allan Vincent to be precise. Long time, no see, Rafe."

"Nick? I don't believe it. Nick Vincent's been missing for over fifteen years." Rafe ran a hand through his dark hair, anguish written on his face. "I know because I looked. It was one of the first things I did when I was elected sheriff of Shiloh Springs. I remember how much it broke Momma's heart when CPS took him away from the Big House and then he disappeared."

"It wasn't my choice to leave. Nobody knew better than me what would happen. The same thing happened each time I was put into a foster home. Custody would be returned to my biological mother, and I'd be given back to her. That would last all of two to three weeks. I think the longest was a month. And I'd end up back in another home, with another set of foster parents that couldn't care less about me except for the check I brought in every month."

A soft feminine hand slid into his and squeezed gently. He'd almost forgotten Ms. Patti was there. He refused to let her know what happened to him after he'd been pulled from his life of security and love at the Boudreau ranch. With her compassionate heart, and learning she and Douglas had looked for him, they didn't need to know the depths of depravity and desolation his life had degenerated into. He didn't think about those two years where he hadn't been living, merely surviving, and wondering if he might still be around to meet the morning.

"Nick—" Ms. Patti started before being cut off.

"Bro, look at him. Really look. It *is* Nick." Shiloh shook his head. "Change the black hair to dirty dark blond. Take away the contact lenses and the fact that he's no longer the

scrawny, underfed runt he was when he lived here, and it's him. Older, definitely rougher around the edges." Nick ducked his head after Shiloh's unwavering stare met his gaze. Wouldn't give him the satisfaction of knowing his words struck a chord deep within. "Unfortunately, we don't have time to find out about his life story now, although we will. That's a promise. When we brought him in, I called Joshua to let him know. I'd say you've got about ten minutes, maybe less, before he gets here. He was driving from the Big House."

Rafe turned to Assad. "We'll play catch up later. Right now, you need to start talking about Brashear. How much does he know about where Lauren is, her connection to the Boudreaus, and what are his plans once he finds Lauren and Daniel?"

Assad glanced around the room, taking in the solemn expression on each man's face. He didn't dare look at Ms. Patti. His cover was officially blown, and he had nothing to lose. This would have been his last big case anyway.

"Brashear plans to take Daniel and return to his compound in the Middle East. He is determined to have the child and will stop at nothing to bring the child under his control. As for Lauren," he paused, wishing he didn't have to say the words. "He has given me two options. If I can bring them in alive, he wants her, too. Wants his revenge on the woman who thwarted him, bested him, and has gotten away with it for months. If that's not a viable option, he wants me to kill her."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

LAUREN PICKED UP the small stuffed rabbit Daniel had thrown on the floor and handed it back to him. He tossed it again with a giggle, the dimples in his chubby cheeks making her smile. It took so little to keep him happy. She loved watching him bounce in his seat, making it rock up and down with the movement. Her heart ached for all the time she'd lost with him. From the moment of his birth, he'd managed to burrow his way deep inside her heart, and though she hadn't physically given birth to him, in every way that mattered, he was her son.

Reaching into her pocket, she touched the burner phone she'd purchased a few weeks earlier. She hadn't used it, not once, because she'd been afraid. The promise she'd made to Lily still burned deep inside her, and she intended to keep it. Brashear's people still hunted her. She'd done what she'd thought best by giving Daniel to Joshua, because there wasn't anyone on the face of the earth she trusted more. It had nearly broken her when she'd placed Daniel into the hands of her friend, even knowing she'd make sure he got to Joshua safely.

She'd made a mistake coming to Shiloh Springs. The plan to see Daniel one last time, then disappear from his life forever had been a foolish one. He was too small to remember her and the thought of that stung. That didn't matter, all that mattered was keeping him safe and out of Brashear's hands.

"He loves that bunny. I swear I've caught that silly thing a million times already. It's the perfect size for his little hands." Nica leaned forward and brushed her knuckle against Daniel's cheek. "He's an amazing kid. You should be proud of him."

"I am. He's everything. I can't explain it, because it makes no sense, but I have to protect him. He's important. I know it here," Lauren pointed to her heart. "When I promised Lily I

would keep him safe and that I would love him, it seemed like a weight lifted off her shoulders. A burden she carried which shifted from her to me. His grandfather is a monster, Nica. The man will stop at nothing to achieve whatever he wants, and right now he wants Daniel. I just wish I knew why the man is so obsessed with him, other than the fact he's his flesh and blood. He certainly doesn't care that Lily is his flesh and blood too. For most of her life he ignored her, especially after her mother died. He allowed her to run free, do what she wanted. When she turned up pregnant, his first response was for her to get rid of it. Those were his exact words to her. Get rid of it. If she'd listened, there'd be no Daniel. I cannot imagine a world without him."

"What about Daniel's father?"

"Joshua is Daniel's father." Lauren shot Nica a look that brooked no argument. "But I know what you mean. Lily wouldn't tell me anything, other than she had to keep Daniel out of her father's hands. I tried over and over to get her to tell me about his father, but every time I tried, she'd get emotional and burst into tears. She did admit one time that Daniel's biological father was dead."

Nica shook her head. "That complicates things. With Lily being the sole parent, Brashear might be able to exert enough pressure on her to get her to turn over custody to him."

"I thought about that. I have a signed and witnessed statement from Lily, relinquishing complete and total custody of Daniel to me."

Nica placed her hand on Lauren's arm and gave it a gentle squeeze. "I hope that's enough. Lily wants you to have and raise Daniel, but Winston Brashear is a powerful man and has a lot of powerful friends. Unless we find out why he's trying so hard to get possession and custody of Daniel, there's always a chance he might be able to get him."

"I covered my tracks so well. I have legal documents that prove Daniel is my son. I have records from a midwife

attesting she was present at his birth. And all of my documents are perfect.”

“But they’re still fake. Like it or not, Brashear tosses enough money around people will betray you.”

Lauren felt the tears welling in her eyes. It was the one thing she was afraid of, because while she’d chosen people who’d stand by her, have her back, everybody had a breaking point, a weakness. And Brashear was smart enough to know how to manipulate people and find the one desire that would topple her house of cards.

“Nica, I can’t lose him. I gave up everything for this little boy. I lost my job. I lost my name. I even lost Joshua. I can’t let Brashear win.”

“You need to have a little faith. You’ve got my family backing you up now, and trust me, when my momma and dad and the boys set their minds to something, there’s no stopping ’em.”

Daniel let out a loud wail, tired of being ignored, and Lauren reached forward and tickled his toes. Simply looking at him made her smile. She watched Nica frown at something on her phone, before she stood and grabbed the handle to Daniel’s carrier.

“We’ve got to move. Now. There are cars coming up the drive I don’t recognize, and we aren’t expecting anybody.”

“How do you know that?”

“Whole ranch has computer and camera surveillance. The entire system was upgraded when Jamie’s dad kidnapped her. Long story, and we don’t have time for me to explain. Unless you want to stand around and wait and see if they are Brashear’s people?”

Lauren glared at Nica, letting her know she didn’t appreciate the sarcasm. “Where can we go? You know your way around better than I do.”

Nica stared at her phone. “We don’t have much time; they’re almost to the house. Looks like three cars, don’t know how many in each.” When Lauren started to interrupt, Nica shook her head. “I need to get Daniel and Lauren someplace safe.”

Lauren realized Nica had her Bluetooth connected and was talking to somebody, probably one of her brothers or her parents. At least somebody was thinking straight, because she’d apparently let her guard down, and now everybody was in danger.

“Sounds like a plan. We’ll leave out the back, and skirt inside the tree line. Just get somebody here ASAP and pick us up. Oh, and deal with whoever’s in the cars. Yeah, I understand, big brother. I’ll keep them both safe.”

Nica took a deep breath and seemed to physically center herself, as if readying for battle. Which Lauren guessed she probably was, because who knew how many people were about to descend on the Boudreau homestead, looking for her and Daniel.

“Tell me your plan, Nica.”

“No time. You have to trust me, Lauren. Right now, I need you to follow me. I’ll take Daniel, you try and keep up.”

“You have my son, you can bet I’ll be right on your heels.”

Nica took off for the kitchen and headed straight to the back door, pausing only long enough to look out the window overlooking the back of the house. She gave a quick nod to Lauren, and opened the door slowly, then climbed down the steps and began sprinting across the back patio. Lauren did her best to keep up with the younger woman, managing to stay within a few feet of her. She realized Nica was heading toward the tree line behind the house, tall pines and oaks which would provide at least some coverage to hide—if these were Brashear’s goons showing up.

Making it into the heavily forested area, Lauren spared a moment to glance behind her and spotted three men, all in

dark-colored suits. Her chest rose and fell with each breath, her heart rate climbing because she knew in her gut these weren't friendly neighbors dropping by to borrow a cup of sugar. Nope, somehow Brashear had found her. More importantly, he'd found Daniel.

"Come on, we've gotta keep moving. Put some space between us and them. Help's on the way. Dane's the closest, but he's out at the north pasture, so it'll take a little while for him and the ranch hands to get here, so we have to keep moving."

"Gotcha. Any particular direction you have in mind?"

"Yeah, there's an old lineman's cabin about half a mile away. We don't use it much, but it'll provide shelter and hopefully those guys will be too busy searching the house and the barn looking for us, it'll buy us some time for Dane and the others to get here. Knowing Dane, he called in the cavalry the minute we hung up."

"That's good." Lauren kept her voice to a whisper. "It's a good plan. You think fast on your feet, Nica."

She laughed, keeping up the light jogging pace. "I've got eleven big brothers. I had to learn to be fast and smart in order to survive. I know everybody thinks I'm the pampered Boudreau princess, and I guess in some ways I am, but my brothers treated me like all brothers treat their little sister. I was a nuisance, a pest, somebody to be teased and taunted. Thus is the life of a little sister. But, yeah, I learned a thing or two about how to stay one step ahead. Believe me, it's come in handy more than once."

Lauren kept up with Nica stride-for-stride, but it wasn't as easy as it should have been. Somehow over the last several months, she'd allowed herself to forego her exercise regimen and now her body was screaming at the extra effort it took to keep up with Nica. Guess this was the kick in the pants she needed, a reminder that she had to be ever vigilant about all things if she was going to help keep Daniel safe.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, Nica slowed down to a brisk walk, and Lauren's calves and thighs appreciated the reprieve. Holding up the hand that wasn't clutched around Daniel's carrier, Nica halted, a frown crossing her face. Lauren knew something was wrong, just by her worried expression.

"What's wrong?" she whispered, her eyes scanning her surroundings. The essence of danger still hung heavy in the air, and she knew she had to figure out a way to keep not only Daniel safe, but Nica as well. Nica hadn't asked to be dragged into her problems, and she'd bloody well keep her safe.

"The lineman's cabin is just past that line of trees, but I'm hearing movement that shouldn't be there. Dane hasn't had enough time to get here. I'm going to check it out, make sure the coast is clear." She passed Daniel's carrier to Lauren. "Here, you take him. If I'm not back in three minutes, take him and head that way." She gestured toward the west, and Lauren felt her anxiety kick into high gear.

"No, you should stay with Daniel. I'm trained and can take out anybody there. Plus, I'm not about to let you get hurt. Ms. Patti would never let me hear the end of it. I'll be back." Lauren shoved Daniel's carrier into Nica's hands over her objection and motioned for her to stay back. Now that her son was in good hands, Lauren went into action mode. When she was out in the field working a case, she had to be prepared for anything, emotional or physical. That part of her brain seemed to automatically kick in and she slid silently between the trees, watching her footfalls to keep her movements silent.

It took just over a minute to reach the back of the lineman's cabin. It wasn't much, probably no more than a couple hundred square feet covered with weathered wood siding. The grayish-brown patina blended almost seamlessly into the wooded area, and if Nica hadn't pointed it out, she might have missed it. Greenhorn that she was, she'd expected a cabin to be in a clearing with lots of space around it, like she'd seen in the movies and on television. This was almost hidden from view, making it an excellent place to hide once she made sure Brashear's men weren't lying in wait for her.

She eased her way around the side of the building slowly, listening to every sound. The only thing she heard was her own heartbeat pounding in her ears. Surely Brashear's men wouldn't have found this place. She doubted they'd have been able to get onto the property, not with the security systems Nica told her were in place. No doubt Douglas and Ms. Patti got the highest grade system possible, especially if their grandchild had been snatched from their ranch before. And since Dane and Destiny lived on the ranch too, she'd wager Destiny had tweaked whatever system they'd installed, making it foolproof. Of course, nothing is really foolproof if you've got enough money and resources and the right people. And Brashear had all three.

She froze when she heard a snapping sound, like a boot heel stepping on dry leaves or twigs. The ground was littered with fallen debris from the pines and oaks, so much so they were unavoidable. Every step she took she placed with exquisite care, making sure not to make a sound. When she got close enough, she placed her back against the wall, holding her breath. Somebody definitely stood at the front of the cabin. She just didn't know how many people there were, and whether she could take them all out before she got caught.

"No sign of them." The man's voice carried, and she clearly heard his words. Lauren wondered who he was talking to. Somebody close by or was he on a radio or the phone? She held her breath, listening intently. If there was just one person, she could easily take them out and drag them inside the cabin.

"So far, it's been quiet. Doubt they'll head this way. I know, I know. I'm gonna sit tight here until I hear back from Gibson. I just want this assignment over. If it wasn't for how well the boss pays, I'd already have left for my vacation. Two weeks in Aruba, just me and my baby. Instead, I'm standing watch over a field of cow pies."

Lauren let out her breath when she realized she couldn't hear whoever the man was talking with. Which meant either a phone or radio, which was good news. Meant he might actually be the only one here. Made her job easier.

“Gimme a call when you’ve got her and the kid handled. I want to get out of this Podunk town today. There’s something about it that gives me the heebie-jeebies. I mean, all the people are friendly, but I’ve had more than one of those old biddies give me the stink eye. I thought small towns were supposed to be quaint, like you see in the old TV shows. You know, like Mayberry, only in living color.” The guy laughed at his own joke, and Lauren could hear his footsteps getting closer. Did she dare stay where she was, hoping to get the jump on the lone guy or make her way around the cabin and attack him from behind?

The choice was taken from her when she felt arms wrap around her from behind, pulling her backwards and lifting her off her feet. She kicked out, felt her heel contact her assailant’s knee, but he didn’t make a sound, simply tightened his hold, keeping her aloft. With her arms incapacitated, she could do little more than struggle in his grip. Flinging her head back, she heard him swear when she made contact, and she closed her eyes against the pain in the back of her own skull.

“Do that again and you’ll be dead before you hit the ground.” The heavily accented voice held an edge of cruelty Lauren recognized. Not the individual, she couldn’t see his face, but it didn’t matter. He worked for Brashear, that fact alone meant her life was forfeit.

Please, Nica, run. Get Daniel to safety. Don’t wait for me. I’m as good as dead once Brashear gets his hands on me. Nica, you’ve got to get Daniel to Joshua. He’ll know what to do.

“Where’s the kid?” When she shook her head, keeping her lips sealed, the behemoth holding her squeezed tighter, and Lauren could barely breathe. Good, she thought, if I pass out I can’t answer questions.

A second man, obviously the one who’d been on the phone, rounded the corner of the cabin, halting when he spotted Lauren hanging in the other man’s bear hug. A

sarcastic chuckle passed his lips, and he raised the phone to his ear.

“Forget what I said earlier. Tell the boss we’ve caught his runaway woman. She doesn’t have the kid with her, but it won’t take long to figure out where he is. We’ll get her to talk. Yeah, yeah, there won’t be a mark on her—at least none you can see outside her clothes.” The grin that accompanied his words made Lauren’s skin crawl, and she knew things had gone from bad to worse. Her only hope was Nica getting Daniel as far as possible, some place where Lauren wouldn’t know about. If she didn’t know where they were, she couldn’t tell them a darn thing.

“Ms. Wright, you’ve been a very bad girl. Lucky for you, I happen to like bad girls.” The man before her wore a cockeyed grin, and for all his good humor, Lauren could see the darkness behind his eyes. Oh, yeah, he was looking forward to causing her pain. The man holding her hadn’t spoken another word, though his vicelike grip hadn’t loosened, either.

“You can tell Winston Brashear to go to—” The rest of her curse was cut off by the slap to the side of her face. The shock of the hit startled her, the swiftness of the blow coming before she’d seen the evil man move. He grabbed her chin in a pincer-type grip, squeezing tightly. The pain was excruciating, and Lauren bit back the scream threatening to explode. Nope, not happening, she wasn’t about to give Brashear’s hitman the pleasure of making a sound. It was what he wanted. She could tell; she’d dealt with his type before. On the plus side, she knew he wouldn’t kill her. Not yet anyway. They had a job to do, and she was the key to completing that job. Brashear wanted his grandson back at any cost, and Lauren was the stumbling block standing in his way.

“You know, I don’t have to hurt you. All you need to do is tell me where the child is. Make things easier for everyone and tell me where to find him. I will let you go free. Even give you a head start. You can find a bolt hole to hide in. Perhaps Mr. Brashear will forget about you if he has his grandson back.”

Lauren lifted her head and spat on the ground, feeling the trickle of blood running down her chin. The coppery taste coated her tongue.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t have any kid. If Brashear told you that, he’s crazy. I mean, do I look like I have a kid here? In the middle of freaking Texas? Brashear won’t listen when I tell him I don’t know anything about his missing grandchild. He’s been hunting for me for months, accusing me of something I didn’t do. Of course I ran, wouldn’t you? I mean, we’re talking about Winston Brashear here. He’s not exactly known for being a nice guy.”

“Stop, Ms. Wright. Mr. Brashear knows you took his grandson. He has video footage showing you with the child in your arms leaving the compound. There’s closed circuit footage of you all over Europe and the United States.”

Lauren tried to take a deep breath, made impossible by the immovable giant behind her, his arms still wrapped around her. At least he’d loosened his hold a tiny bit, but nowhere near enough for her to try an escape. Not yet anyway.

Where was Dane Boudreau? The rest of the ranch hands who were supposed to be descending on the lineman’s cabin to help protect her and Nica and Daniel? Surely they should have gotten here by now.

“We need to move. I don’t want to stick around here. Too many of those Boudreaus, one of ’em might show up any minute.”

Without warning, the big baddie holding her switched up his grip, shifting her into a fireman’s carry with ease. Lauren grunted when her midsection landed against his enormous shoulder. Struggling would be useless, she knew. Besides, if they took her to a different location, that meant Nica and Daniel were safe.

Raising her head, she searched the wooded area behind the lineman’s shack, and couldn’t find any sign of either. She released her breath, allowing herself to relax, though not too

much because she didn't want the big goon carrying her to think she'd given up too easily. Bunching up a fist, she smacked him in the kidney. He grunted and pinched her side, and she gasped at the pain. That was definitely going to leave a bruise.

It didn't matter though, as long as Daniel was safe. She'd take a thousand bruises if it meant letting him grow up with Joshua and around the Boudreaus. Closing her eyes, she said a silent goodbye to the child of her heart, knowing once Brashear got his hands on her, she'd never see him again. But she'd have the sweet peace of knowing she'd done the right thing. She'd honored her word to Lily and kept her son safe from a monster.

And in the process, she'd lost the only man she'd ever loved. Her only regret was she didn't have a chance to say goodbye to Joshua. Didn't get an opportunity to kiss him one last time. To tell him that she loved him with all her heart. She could only pray he knew.

Twisting and squirming against the bad dude's shoulder, she fought, kicking her legs until he stood her on her feet in front of him, a scowl across his face. Before she could open her mouth to scream, his fist raced toward her, and when it connected, she literally saw stars followed by blackness.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

JOSHUA BURST THROUGH the doors to the sheriff's station, his mind still reeling from his call with Gage. The information Gage had provided was solid, if a little unbelievable. Add in the fact it looked like Senator Gonzalez was involved in things up to her pretty little eyeballs, and he felt like everything was topsy-turvy, and he'd fallen down the rabbit hole.

Loud voices from the back of the station had him racing down the hall. He knew he'd find big brother Rafe back there, interrogating the man named Assad. A man far too interested in Lauren. Who just happened to work for Brashear. He cracked his knuckles as he proceeded down the hall, knowing he only needed five minutes alone in the room with Brashear's muscle man and he'd not only get the answers they needed, but they'd take away one of Brashear's assets, because he'd make darn sure the guy wouldn't be going after Lauren again. Ever.

As he closed in on the door, he heard his mother's voice. What in the world? Why would Rafe let his mother sit in on an interrogation? Especially one involving a dangerous man. Joshua knew he had to be ruthless, because Brashear sent him, and he wouldn't waste his time on anybody who wasn't the best at what they did.

Racing through the open doorway, he froze at the tableau that met his gaze. Things seemed way too calm. Throw in the fact Assad was sitting at the table without handcuffs and Joshua got a twitchy feeling in the middle of his gut. Something big was happening, something that would throw everything into a tailspin if his instincts were right—and they usually were—and it all revolved around the dark-haired man currently holding hands with his mother. He did a double take. Yep, Brashear's big bad enforcer was holding hands with Joshua's mother. Had the whole world gone crazy?

Ridge was the first one to spot him. “Bro, you aren’t gonna believe what’s happened. I’m still having trouble wrapping my head around everything that’s transpired in the last fifteen minutes.” He jerked his thumb toward the man who had to be Assad. “Do you have any idea who this guy is?”

“Brashear’s goon.” Joshua spit out the answer, now convinced more than ever that his entire family had lost their collective minds. Was it something in the water? “One who’s about to tell me everything he knows about Lauren and Daniel before he disappears.” He took a step toward Assad, clenching and unclenching his fists.

“Can’t let you do that,” Ridge stood up from his slouch against the wall and walked over to put a hand on Joshua’s shoulder. “For one thing, Momma would have our hides if we harmed a hair on his head. Two, it’s true he’s working for Brashear, but it’s not what you think.”

“I think anybody working for Brashear needs to be sitting in a Super-Max prison.” *Or buried underneath one.*

Joshua wrenched away from Ridge, determined to get to Assad, get the answers he needed. Adrenaline still raged through him, mostly stemming from the calls from Senator Gonzalez, Gage, and now the man seated in front of him. He lunged forward again, reaching for Brashear and Shiloh joined Ridge, stepping in front of Joshua.

“Listen, bro, the situation has changed. Well, not really changed per se, but that man right there,” Shiloh gestured toward Assad, “isn’t who we thought he was. You need to listen to him.”

“Why?” Joshua studied his brother’s face, wondering what kind of spell Assad seemed to have put everybody under. They should have tossed him into a cell. Instead, he walks in and finds him holding his mother’s hand like he’s a treasured friend, not somebody who’s been sent to take the woman he loves and his son and hand them over to a madman.

“Have y’all lost your minds? He’s here to get Lauren and Daniel and take them to Brashear. You should be interrogating him, trying to find out what he knows and what his plans are. Instead, I walk in and y’all are acting like this is some kind of family reunion.”

“Joshua, please, I need you to listen to me.” He stared at his mother, who’d finally stopped holding hands with the enemy and moved over to stand in front of him. Try as he might, he couldn’t read her, couldn’t figure out why she was acting so casual around this stranger. Wait, maybe he’d crashed his truck on the way to town, and he was unconscious. This was all a fantasy, an illusion. He’d wake up and the whole world would be right again, because here and now, things were so upside down he couldn’t think straight.

“Momma, you might want to leave, because things are about to get mighty ugly in here.”

“Son, I said I need you to listen to me. He isn’t the bad guy. Yes, he works for Winston Brashear, but you need to let him explain why, and what he knows. And, Joshua, you need to realize who he really is.”

“What do you mean who he really is? He’s another thick-necked goon who works for one of the biggest traffickers in the United States, that’s who he is.”

When his momma put her hands on her hips, Joshua stopped his tirade, and drew in a deep, shuddering breath. For whatever reason, his mother wasn’t thinking this whole thing through clearly. Instead of allowing his emotions to hold sway, he needed to take a moment and explain logically and precisely why they needed to get answers from Assad.

“Momma, I—”

Before he got any further, Sally Anne burst into the room, headset askew, face pale. She was breathing hard, like she’d been running for blocks instead of down the hall.

“Rafe, you’ve got a call. The man says it’s important and to interrupt whatever you’re doing because you’re gonna want

to talk to him. Says he's with the Australian Secret Intelligence Service and he's got information about...him." She gestured wildly in Assad's direction.

"ASIS?" Rafe directed his question toward Assad, who simply smirked.

"I hadn't gotten to that part yet. You might not want to keep Calvin waiting. He can get a bit testy." Assad leaned back in his chair, arms crossed over his chest like he hadn't a care in the world.

"Somebody catch Joshua up on what's happened so far. Nobody questions that jackass until I get back." He pointed toward Assad. "Understand?" He directed that last part at Joshua, who barely refrained from giving his brother his happy middle finger, but his momma stood there, and he had the feeling he was in enough trouble already.

"Got it," he muttered reluctantly.

"Joshua, I know it's going to be hard for you to believe, but the man that you've been calling Assad is really Nick." His momma paused for a moment, and Joshua watched the emotions sweeping across her face. He knew how much finding Nick meant to her.

"Nick Vincent? I'm sorry, Momma, but he can't be Nick. Nick Vincent died fifteen years ago. He was killed in a gang-related shooting. I'm so sorry, but we found the proof. Once I got clearance, I made it a point to look for him because I know how much you and Dad wanted to find him."

"Son, it really is Nick. Your information was wrong."

Assad, or Nick as his mother was insisting, chuckled. "You bet his information was wrong. We planted that fake trail years ago, in case somebody came looking for me. Officially, I needed to disappear. A few keystrokes, and *viola*, Nicholas Vincent technically became deceased. He was killed in a drive-by shooting in a rundown section of San Antonio, a casualty of the growing gang violence in our society. We made

bloody sure that the story was airtight and couldn't be broken."

"We?"

"Yeah, Grant Calvin, the man Rafe's on the phone with right now. He took me under his wing when I found myself in," Nick paused as if searching for the right words, before he continued, "a bad situation and became a sort of mentor slash unofficial father figure. The man's the best friend I've ever had, and he's saved my life more times than you can imagine."

"Bad situation?" Joshua heard the slight crack in his mother's voice, colored with guilt. She had nothing to feel guilty about, everything that happened with Nick being taken from the Boudreau ranch had been out of her control, but his momma's heart had a hard time accepting that. Even though he'd been a kid when the state took Nick away, he remembered how hard his momma and dad had searched for Nick, wanting to bring him home.

Nick gave his momma a sad smile. "It's a long story, one we don't have time for right now. Joshua, I don't care if you believe I'm Nick Vincent or Genghis Khan. The only thing important now is protecting Lauren and the kid from Brashear."

"On that we agree."

"Brashear is obsessed with getting his grandson back and doesn't care what it takes. And before you ask, I don't know why he wants the kid so badly. I'd guess it has something to do with gaining more power."

Joshua pinched the bridge of his nose, feeling the beginnings of a headache forming. Of course, this entire day had been one giant headache, and it wasn't close to being over. Especially since he knew why Brashear desperately wanted the child within his grasp, and Assad/Nick was right. It had everything to do with gaining power—and a political advantage within the highest reaches of the U.S. government.

“It’s because of who Daniel’s real father is. His biological father.”

“But we don’t know who his dad is. Even Lauren doesn’t know,” Shiloh stated the obvious. “Said Lily would never reveal tell her, no matter how many times she asked.”

Joshua moved to an empty chair and flung himself into it. “Y’all sit down, because what I’m about to tell you is gonna blow your minds. I know who Daniel’s biological father is, and it explains everything.”

There were a few low murmured grumbles from his brothers, but they slid into the empty seats. Joshua patted the seat beside him and his momma moved to sit next to him.

“Should we wait for Rafe?” Her softly-worded question didn’t surprise Joshua. It made sense to wait for him, so he wouldn’t have to explain things more than once. It ended up not mattering, because Rafe walked through the door then, his face pale, and he shot an accusing glare at Nick.

“We are going to have a long talk when this is over. You get me?”

Nick simply nodded, and Joshua wondered what exactly Grant Calvin had told Rafe to get that kind of reaction. It would have to wait, though, because right now they had bigger fish to fry, namely taking down Winston Brashear and keeping Lauren and Daniel out of his hands.

“Rafe, Joshua says he knows who Daniel’s biological father is.” His mother’s voice was firm and steady, even though Joshua knew she had to be reeling inside from all the day’s revelations. And now there would be one more, and it was a biggie.

“What? How?” Rafe’s gaze pierced Joshua.

“Believe it or not, Gage told me.” He motioned for his brothers to quiet down because they all started talking at once. “Apparently one of the cases he’s working on derailed but not before he obtained some interesting information. Apparently

Lily Brashear visited the U.S. in the two months before she got pregnant. Specifically the West Coast.”

“Where she met Daniel’s biologically daddy. Got it. Now, spill the rest. Who did she do the mattress tango with?”

“Such a way with words, Shiloh. But she did hang around with one person in particular. Somebody who apparently found it fairly easy to slip away from his bodyguards.”

“Bodyguards?” Joshua nodded at Rafe’s question.

“To be specific, Secret Service bodyguards.”

Joshua watched Nick closely, saw the minute two and two added up for him.

“Are you sure,” he asked, though from Nick’s expression Joshua knew he’d deduced the truth.

“Not one hundred percent without a DNA test, but yeah, it makes sense. And explains why Brashear is so hot to get his hands on the biggest bargaining chip he’s ever had.”

“Wait a minute, are you seriously talking about Vice President Blanchard’s son? He’s Daniel’s biological father?” Derrick Williamson placed both hands atop the conference room table and pushed himself up from his chair. “This is bad, people. Gregory Blanchard is dead. He had a rare heart condition and passed away over a year ago. Leland Blanchard and his family went into mourning, publicly and privately. You’re telling me the vice president has a grandson he knows nothing about?”

“From what Gage was able to glean from the crossover case, Gregory and Lily used to sneak out and meet several nights a week over a period of almost two months, before Gregory got rushed back to Washington. Looks like he left behind more than a girl with a broken heart.” Joshua held up his hand when Ridge started to speak. “We can’t confirm anything without DNA to compare to Daniel’s. Which means we either figure out a way to get a sample from Leland Blanchard, who’s surrounded by the Secret Service every time he steps out the door—”

“Or we get a court order to exhume Gregory’s body, which I can tell you right now is never going to be approved by a judge. Not if he wants to keep his seat on the bench.” Derrick ran a hand through his hair, and Joshua noted the frustration written on his face. He was probably right.

“We can always send a couple of yahoos up to Washington to follow Blanchard around, maybe grab something out of the trash that’ll have his DNA on it.” Rafe looked straight at Ridge.

“Wait, who are you calling yahoos?”

“If the shoe fits...”

Ridge chuckled. “Shiloh, you game for a trip to the capital?”

“Yay, we get to dig through garbage. Just the kind of vacation I enjoy.” Shiloh punched Ridge in the arm, laughing when he winced and started rubbing it. “Don’t worry, Joshua, we’re in. You need us in Washington, we’ll be on the next plane.”

“Thanks, guys.”

“Joshua, how are you going to tell Leland Blanchard he has a grandson? You know he can’t be left in the dark—not if Daniel is still a target for Brashear.” His momma patted his arm softly. “And what about Lauren? She’s fought so hard to keep Daniel safe, going so far as to leave him with you, even though it broke her heart. How’s she going to take it when she finds out she might actually lose him all over again to a stranger?”

“Lauren...I need to find her, tell her what we know.” Joshua stood, everything else forgotten over the driving need to find the woman he loved and tell her what they’d discovered. He knew it would break her heart, giving up Daniel, but once Leland Blanchard found out about his grandson, there was no chance he wouldn’t want the child. Daniel was the last living relative for the sitting vice president. He couldn’t imagine a scenario where Blanchard wouldn’t

fight tooth and nail to get and keep his grandson. And the courts would side with him, being the biological grandparent. Of course, that hinged on Brashear being out of the picture, because he had an equal right to Daniel, at least in the eyes of the law. Since he'd never been convicted of a felony, he had as much right to Daniel as Leland Blanchard. Add in Brashear having Lily in his back pocket, because he couldn't imagine Brashear not somehow convincing Lily to side with him in a court of law, and things could turn ugly fast.

“Call her. She and Daniel are with Nica.”

“It's okay, Momma. I'd rather tell her this face-to-face.” And he wanted to hold Daniel close, knowing his time with the child of his heart looked like it was coming to a close.



NICA WATCHED LAUREN'S every move, her lungs so tight she could barely breathe. She couldn't believe how brave Lauren was, putting herself in the path of danger, to keep her and Daniel safe. Holding her breath, she watched Lauren skirt along the outside of the lineman's shack, her gaze focused on the front. The place where she and Nica had seen the man with the gun patrolling while talking on the phone.

She whispered a quick prayer, her hold on Daniel's carrier tightening, and couldn't help being amazed at how quiet he'd been the entire time they'd been running, keeping on the move through the trees along the north side of the ranch. His tiny dimples showed as he smiled at her, and placed the carrier on the ground, lifting him into her arms. She rubbed her chin against the top of his head, holding him close against her heart. Whatever happened, she would give her very life to keep him safe. While he might not be her brother's biological son, it didn't matter. None of her brothers were related to her by blood, but she adored each and every one of them, and Daniel had become her nephew the minute she'd held him in her arms.

When he stretched in her arms, rearing back, Nica placed a finger against his lips, fearing he was about to let loose a

scream.

Not now, little guy. Your mom's neck deep in rattlers and we can't make a sound.

Placing Daniel against her shoulder, she began a gentle rocking motion, her hand patting his back, and she sighed when he laid his head on her shoulder. Crisis averted hopefully. She watched Lauren edge closer to the front of the shack, and her breath caught in her throat when Nica spotted a second man sneaking up on Lauren. She couldn't yell and warn her because that would expose Daniel. It became eerily quiet. The insects and bird sounds disappeared, as though they too sensed the presence of predators in their midst.

A gasp escaped her lips when the second man attacked Lauren from behind, coming up on her blind side and wrapping his arms around her. She fought, kicking out at him, slamming her head backward and connecting with his, but his grip never loosened, at least from Nica's vantage point. When the first of the bad guys confronted Lauren about Daniel, Nica glanced down at the infant in her arms. He was blissfully sleeping, his two middle fingers in his mouth. Please stay asleep, little man, she prayed.

While it seemed an eternity passed, Nica knew it had been mere moments before the second bad guy hoisted Lauren over his shoulder, and though she struggled, she couldn't overcome his size and the awkward hold he had on her. She ducked her head, trying to hold back a wince when he coldcocked Lauren, and within moments they were out of view.

Reaching into her pocket, she grabbed her phone, quickly dialing Dane's number.

"What?" He snarled his response.

"Where are you? You were supposed to meet us here. Dane, they took her. They took Lauren!"

She heard a string of expletives, words she rarely heard her strait-laced brother use. "Any idea which direction they're headed? What they were driving?"

“I don’t know. I didn’t dare follow them—I’ve got Daniel.”

“That’s a relief. Okay, I’ll try to pick up their trail. You call Rafe and let him know what happened and have him round up the family posse. I want you to stay at the lineman’s shack. Since they’ve already been there, I doubt they’ll be coming back. I’ll have Jake and Smitty head your way. They can stand guard until it’s safe to go home.”

“Alright. Be careful, at least one of them was armed.”

“Watch your back, sis. And take care of the kid.”

Nica smiled down at the child cuddled in her arms. “Like he was my own.”

“Aw, girl, don’t put that image in my head. You are way too young to even be thinking about babies.”

“Right, big brother. I’ll just put my hair up in pigtails and get out my lollipop. Oh, wait, you forget I am a college graduate with not one, but two masters.”

Dane chuckled. “You are always going to be my annoying little sister. Go, get yourself inside the lineman’s shack and call Rafe, Joshua, and any of the rest of the family you can get hold of. Let them know Brashear’s got Lauren.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

JOSHUA HADN'T EVEN made it to the front door before Ridge raced up behind him, latching onto his shoulder. He spun around with a muffled curse, ready to take out his brother if need be, because the sense that Lauren was in danger grew with every second that passed.

“Wait. Rafe’s on the phone with Nica.” Ridge paused for a second, his look filled with sympathy. “Something’s happened with Lauren.”

Joshua’s steps ate up the distance back to the conference room, and one look at Rafe’s face told him everything he needed to know. The news wasn’t good. He’d waited too long, screwing around with the whole Assad is Nick situation, and trying to figure out Brashear’s next move, all the while his hired guns were already here.

Rafe ended the call and turned to Joshua. “That was Nica. Apparently, some folks showed up at the Big House, and she and Lauren headed to the old lineman’s shack with Daniel. Two men took Lauren, but Daniel’s safe. He’s with Nica. Dane’s trying to pick up their trail, figure out where they’re headed.”

“Honey, you know Dane’s a good tracker. He’ll figure out where they’ve taken Lauren and we’ll get her back.” His momma wrapped her arms around him, and Joshua hugged her back, his mind filled with horrific pictures of what they’d do to Lauren. Brashear didn’t hire amateurs, and if the goal was to find Daniel, they wouldn’t stop until they got the answers they wanted. He knew Lauren wouldn’t tell them where Daniel was, she’d give her life to protect their son.

“Daniel and Nica? They’re safe?” He could barely get the words out, and his momma patted his chest, right above his heart. As much as he wanted to bask in her comfort, he

couldn't. There wasn't time for anything except finding the woman he loved.

“Yeah. Dane's got Jake and Smitty watching over them at the shack.”

Joshua walked into the conference room straight to Assad, who had remained seated at the table. “Where would they take her? I doubt they're local boys, so if it was you, where would you go to get answers?”

“I'd have a house picked out. Someplace isolated enough sounds wouldn't carry, but not too far out that strangers would be immediately noticed. A rental would be good, but if I was desperate enough and looking to get the answers and get out, I might settle on a place that was occupied. Incapacitate the residents. Zip ties and gags work well to keep the homeowners quiet.”

Joshua raked a hand through his hair, trying to figure out where the two strangers could have taken Lauren. She'd have fought like a wildcat, he knew, plus she was trained in self-defense. Hopefully she'd gotten in a few good licks.

“Any rentals available locally, Momma, which have been rented in the last couple of days? Or maybe places that are unoccupied that fit what Assad's describing?” If anybody would know, she would, since she ran the biggest real estate office in Shiloh Springs.

“I'm sorry, hon, but nothing in the past couple days.”

He watched Rafe having an in-depth discussion, while Ridge, Shiloh and Antonio were busy texting. At least everybody seemed to be doing something to find Lauren. Except Nick. He simply sat with his hands on his thighs, like he was ready to spring from his chair at a moment's notice, yet there was something about his eyes that said he was furious. Somehow he doubted that anger was directed at him or his family, and more than likely at Brashear. Probably because his erstwhile boss had sent others to do the same job he'd sanctioned Nick for.

“What can you do, Nick? Think if you talked to Brashear, he might point you toward the goons who have Lauren?”

“I can try.” The deep timbre of his voice lacked emotion, though Joshua had the feeling Nick was seething inside, like a volcano ready to erupt. Good thing all that anger wasn’t directed his way. He had enough on his plate right now, he didn’t need to deal with a long-lost foster brother.

“Do it.” The command came from an unexpected source. Derrick Williamson moved to flank Joshua. “Getting the info from Brashear directly saves wasted hours spent trying to track them down through official channels. And I don’t mind bending the rules, not when Lauren’s life is in danger.”

Rafe handed Assad back his phone, the one he’d confiscated when they’d brought him in. Joshua knew most interrogations didn’t involve taking away a person’s belongings, so Rafe must have planned on arresting the big man, before the revelation that Nick, under the persona of Assad, wasn’t actually working for Brashear.

Nick hit a couple of buttons on his phone, one for turning on the speaker and one for speed dial. Within a matter of seconds, Brashear was on the line.

“Sir, I have arrived in Shiloh Springs. There is much unrest as the woman, Lauren Wright, has been taken.”

Brashear’s laugh was ugly. “I know, Assad. We have her.”

“I do not understand, sir. I thought it was my job to bring both her and the child to you.”

“I decided to send the two Brits we hired a few months ago. They both do a passable American accent, and they are ruthless when it comes to getting answers.” Brashear laughed again, before adding, “Nearly as ruthless as you, my friend.”

“Did they retrieve the child?” Joshua watched Nick place a finger against his lips while they waited for Brashear’s response.

“No. She didn’t have a child with her when they captured her. But I’m sure it won’t take them long to get the boy’s location from her.”

“Perhaps I can be of assistance, sir.” Nick rolled his eyes as he tacked on the ubiquitous title.

“No, no. I’ve got a much better use for you, my friend. Lauren Wright was staying with a family called Boudreau. Apparently they are some big muckety-mucks there in Shiloh Springs. If she was there, you can bet the child’s probably on their property. Go there and find him. Use whatever means are necessary but bring him to me.”

“I thought you wished me to return both the boy and Ms. Wright. Have your plans changed? Or do you no longer wish revenge against your enemy? I thought you wanted the pleasure of killing Ms. Wright with your bare hands.”

Joshua nearly jumped at the sound of a loud bang through the phone. “The duplicitous traitor needs to pay. You’re right, as always, my friend. I cannot be shown as being merciful to my enemies. And the thought of her neck beneath my fingers as I squeeze the life from her—we can only hope the Brits haven’t gone too far...yet. Go, verify that these Boudreaus have the boy, and make arrangements to bring him and Ms. Wright to me. I’ll have a plane waiting to bring you home.”

“Where do the Brits have Ms. Wright, sir? I’m driving through Shiloh Springs now and can head there immediately.”

Brashear rattled off an address and Joshua and Rafe both nodded. It was a place Joshua was familiar with, and thankfully not far out of town. Nick kept Brashear talking for another minute or two, letting him spew vitriol about Lauren and how he would make her pay once she was back under his control, but Joshua tuned it out. Turning, he headed for the door, but Rafe grabbed his arm and mouthed the word “wait.”

“I will see you soon, sir, and you will get everything you deserve in this life.” Nick disconnected the call, shuddering

visibly after hanging up. “If he gets his hands on her—well, let’s just say she’ll be joining her ancestors.”

“Rafe, call Dane back. Tell him to turn around and go back to the Big House, get Nica and Daniel and keep them secure. Ridge, you and Shiloh head to the big house. Help Dane protect my son.”

“You’ve got it.” They both left together, and Joshua knew they’d guard his sister and his son with their very lives. He only hoped it didn’t come to that.

“Let me go with you, Joshua. If the Brits see me, they’ll think Brashear sent me to help question Lauren. If the two of you show up, they’ll simply execute her and try to escape.”

“Joshua, let Nick help.” In all the chaos of the last few minutes, he’d forgotten his momma was still in the room.

“Momma—”

“I know you don’t trust him, and I understand. I really do. I’m not stupid. But my gut, my heart, tells me he won’t betray you.” Standing on her tiptoes, she pulled Joshua’s head closer and whispered in his ear, “I think he wants to come home.”

Joshua stared at him for a long moment before nodding. “You, come with Rafe and me. We rescue Lauren. Then we figure out a way to take down Brashear once and for all.”

“Well, Nick’s phone call with him is a good start.” Derrick held up his own phone. “Since it was on speaker, there’s no assurance of privacy. If an interested third party happened to record said call, well...” He grinned. “Well, would you look at that, my phone seems to have been in record mode.”

“I know Lauren, and she’ll have kept everything she gathered from the time she worked for him. She didn’t turn anything over to Senator Gonzalez, which means she’s got it stashed someplace safe. Even when she faked her death, she wouldn’t have destroyed it beforehand. If we can get our hands on it, maybe we’ll find enough to take him down for good.”

“Come on, bro, let’s go rescue the woman you love.”



LAUREN CAME SLOWLY awake, the pounding in her head a dull throb behind her eyes. Everything came flooding back, every memory of what had happened prior to the two hired thugs carting her off. The only bright spot was Daniel was with Nica and he was safe. Protected by Joshua’s sister, Lauren knew Nica wouldn’t let anything happen to her little guy.

She gasped as a foot kicked into her side, not hard enough to break anything, but it would definitely cause bruising. Opening her eyes, she took in her surroundings, noting the taste yet old-fashioned furnishings. She couldn’t help wondering if the place was a rental they’d picked up before snatching her off the Boudreau property, or if the home’s owners were tied up in another room. She really hoped for the former.

“Where is the boy?”

“He’s dead.” She screamed when he pulled her upright by her hair. The training she’d gone through, both in the military as well as working for the clandestine branch of the government kicked in, and she slammed her lips closed. Listening intently, she noted the second man walk into the room, cell phone to his ear. Funny how when he’d talked to her earlier he’d sounded American, yet now he had a distinct British accent. Cockney if she had to guess. At least concentrating on the other man gave her a brief respite from the pain in her scalp.

“Yes, sir, she’s still claiming the boy is dead.”

Was he talking to Brashear? Or maybe Assad? It didn’t matter, because either way she knew she’d never leave this house alive.

“He is? But I thought...of course, sir. We’ll hold off further questioning until he gets here. Yes, sir. Understood.” Hanging up the phone, he glared at Lauren. “Mr. Brashear is sending Assad. You think you’re feeling pain now? Wait until

he gets here. You don't know what real pain is until you've been tortured by a master."

"Assad?" She barely got the words out through her dry mouth. "He's here in Texas?"

A brittle laugh emerged from the guy. "Better. He's in Shiloh Springs. Should be here any minute."

"Noooo." Lauren struggled against the bigger man's hold, using moves she'd been taught in self-defense and her martial arts courses. Nothing seemed to break his hold. Guess he'd taken the same classes.

"Boss thinks you'll sing like a canary before Assad gets here. I would. He's one of the quiet ones. Have you ever seen him work?"

"Please, let me go. I'm telling you the truth. The baby died. There was a car accident, and he was killed. It seemed like the perfect opportunity for me to disappear, too, so I faked my death, changed my name and prayed Brashear would never know."

"Girl, the man knows everything. I've only known him a couple of months, but he dug deep into my background, uncovering stuff I didn't even remember doing." He cocked his head, reminding Lauren of a curious bird. "You didn't really think you'd get away with stealing his grandkid, did ya? Gotta say, that takes some big brass ones."

"I didn't steal him! Lily, his daughter, signed over custody to me. She even gave me money to keep him away from his grandfather. Lots of money." Lauren watched as her words resonated with the guy with the phone. Money always talked to people like him and his partner. "I still have a bunch of it left. I—I'll split it with you."

"You won't be around to split anything with once Assad gets here." This was accompanied by a laugh. "Why don't you go ahead and tell me where the money is, because otherwise it's gonna go to waste."

“Wait, wait! I’ll give it all to you. Cash. It’s all in cash. I… I can take you to it, if you’ll let me go. You can tell Brashear you killed me. You work for him, he’ll believe you. You and your friend, you can take the money and disappear.”

“That ain’t gonna happen. Once you work for Brashear, you can never leave. He’ll track us down, and then we’ll be dead alongside you. I doubt you’ve got enough money for me to hide the rest of my life from him.”

The sound of a car door slamming outside caused her to flinch. Assad was here. Though he’d always been nice to her, she knew he was fiercely loyal to Brashear and would do anything the man asked. Though he’d never been cold and heartless to her, she’d heard stories and rumors, the ones circulating around Brashear’s compound about the lengths Assad went to in order to fulfill Brashear’s requests.

A soft, polite-sounding knock on the front door caused Lauren to stiffen. She tried to keep her movements subtle, not wanting to draw attention to herself. All she needed was a moment, one single chance to make a break for it, and she’d take it. Well, that or a miracle. Might be nice to finally get one of those too.

“Ms. Wright, I wish I could say it’s nice to see you again, but I’m sure you understand why I’m here.”

Even the spit in Lauren’s mouth dried up at Assad’s words, though they’d been spoken without any hint of malice or danger. He might as well be saying good morning for all the inflection in his voice.

“I told these two the kid died, but they won’t believe me. He died in the car crash, and I had the remains cremated. I spread his ashes along the California coast, right off the Pacific Ocean. That’s when I faked my death and ran, because I knew Mr. Brashear wouldn’t stop hunting for me.”

“You’re right. I am aware the child is dead.”

Lauren forced her mouth closed at his shocking statement. Wait, what? Did he believe the lie she’d posted on the

internet? Would he be able to convince Winston Brashear of the falsehood? Or was he trying to lull her into a false sense of security only to yank the rug out from beneath her? A trick interrogators used all the time, make the victim believe you. That you're their friend, that you buy their story and then, pow, toss a hand grenade into the conversation and see what blows up. She wouldn't be fooled. The lie was too important—especially since it kept Daniel safe from a monster.

“However, I am here to accompany you back to Mr. Brashear's compound. He has many questions, for which only you have the answers.” Assad glanced toward the man still holding her by the hair, frowning at the sight. “Please release Ms. Wright. She's no longer going to try to leave, are you?”

“Umm...no?”

“Excellent. I do have a question, Ms. Wright. Tell me about Joshua Boudreau.”

Her heart skipped a beat at his question. If she didn't cooperate, would he go after Joshua next? If he did, he might discover that Daniel was very much alive. It would also place Joshua directly in Brashear's crosshairs, and she couldn't—wouldn't—allow anyone to hurt the man she loved.

“What do you want to know? Joshua and I trained together in Pensacola, Florida, when we were in the military. We had an affair. One that burned bright and fast. I fell in love with him. Heck, I loved him from the moment we met, though I didn't want to admit it.”

“Yet here you are in the same town at this Joshua Boudreau. Is this a coincidence?”

Lauren shook her head, wincing at the pain. “Not really. I came here to see if there was anything still between us. I've never stopped loving him, not for a single minute we've been apart. I wondered if he felt the same way, or if he'd moved on, found somebody else to love.”

A tiny smile tugged at the corners of Assad's lips, and she wondered why he found her response amusing. “And what did

you find? Has Mr. Boudreau moved on? Given his heart to another?"

"Mr. Assad, what does her love life have to do with anything? If the kid's really dead, we need to get out of Shiloh Springs. We need to get out of this bloody state, head back to Dubai."

"Oh, I'm afraid going to Dubai is out of the question, Mr. Smith." Suddenly Assad's face broke into a huge smile as he looked past her. "Certainly took you long enough."

Lauren almost fell when the bad guy holding her was yanked aside, and a set of strong arms wrapped around her. Without looking, she knew it was Joshua.

"I don't understand. How did you know where to find me?" She turned in his embrace, sliding her arms around him, her whole body shaking now the adrenaline rush had passed.

"Him." Joshua nodded toward Assad, and Lauren gave him a shaky smile. Honestly, she didn't care how he'd found her, for now she was safe and so was Joshua.

"Thank you, Assad."

"Since you are Joshua's woman, I think it's okay for you to call me Nick." He jerked his chin toward the two men currently in handcuffs, with Rafe, Antonio, and Derrick Williamson standing by while Rafe read them their rights.

"Are you hurt?" Joshua's gaze skimmed over every inch of her, gently touching the bruise on her cheek where the one Assad had called Mr. Smith had struck her.

"I'm fine. A few bruises, nothing serious."

"I still want a doctor to check you, make sure everything's okay."

She cupped his face between her hands and stared into his eyes. "Joshua, I'm fine, I promise. You got here in time, and you saved me."

He drew in a deep breath and blew it out slowly. “Sweetheart, when I heard Brashear’s men had you...I was scared. All I could think was I’d already lost you once for what I thought was forever. I couldn’t lose you again. Not when I just got you back.”

“Darling, I promise you’ll never lose me again. I’m not going anywhere.”

“That’s a promise I’m going to hold you to. Rafe and Antonio are going to handle booking Mr. Smith and Mr. Jones. He’ll call in Chance to make sure everything is done by the book, because we aren’t about to let these two walk away without charges.”

“Good. But what about...” She pointed to Assad. “He works for Brashear too.”

Joshua cupped her chin and brushed a soft kiss against her lips. “That’s a long story and I don’t have all the details yet, but Nick’s on your side. He’s been working to keep Brashear from catching up with you from behind the scenes. We’ll get it all sorted out, but for now, how about we go home and get our son?”

“I love that idea.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

JOSHUA ANSWERED HIS phone while watching Lauren holding their son close against her chest. Still spooked by the whole kidnapping of the woman he loved, he'd found it hard to let her out of his sight for even a minute. It didn't matter that seventy-two hours had passed since the rescue, the thought of her in danger still scared him. Especially after hearing her confess her love while being questioned by Nick. It was the only thing keeping him sane through this whole crazy ordeal.

"Hello."

"I hear things came to a satisfying conclusion for you and your gal."

"Hey, Gage. Yeah, she's safe and so is Daniel. *At least for now.* Got a few things straightened out with regards to Brashear and turned everything over to the higher ups. I don't do that kind of work anymore, but Chance is overseeing the legal ramifications from our end, and Senator Gonzalez is pushing through warrants for Brashear's arrest and extradition. In the meantime, he's in custody, under round-the-clock surveillance with our people and Interpol along with MI-6 keeping him under lock and key. I'm worried he's going to find a way to wriggle free of the charges or bribe somebody to help him escape."

"That's not going to happen. The people watching him aren't about to let one of the world's biggest human traffickers loose, man. Oh, and a little birdie told me Lauren kept all the dirt she dug up on him? I know Senator Gonzalez was royally pissed when she disappeared and didn't give them the goods to lock up Brashear."

Joshua pulled his phone away from his ear and stared at it for a second. "How do you know that? I swear, you've got

more sources than anybody I know, and I've been around a lot of people in the intelligence field.”

“You're not the only one who's been deep undercover. At least you got out. And you are going to get your happily ever after—that's what I hear.”

“Okay, who's feeding you all this information?”

Joshua jerked at the knock on the screen door. Spinning around, he saw Gage standing on the other side, grinning. “It's not hard to hear things in Shiloh Springs if you listen close enough. A Boudreau showing up with a baby and a girlfriend? Even I can see the writing on that particular wall. Congratulations.”

He opened the door and walked through, though Joshua noted he stayed far enough back the family gathered in the living room couldn't see him. Remembering what Momma said about Gage slowly coming back into the family, though she had the feeling he felt he didn't belong, Joshua grabbed his upper arm and pulled him into the opening.

“Hey, guys, look who's here.” He didn't fight his grin at the deer-in-the-headlights expression on Gage's face when everybody turned and spotted him.

“Gage!” His momma was the first to close the distance, wrapping her arms around Gage and pulling him close. “When did you get here? Are you hungry? Jill made brunch. Brought a bunch of stuff from her bakery. Come on into the kitchen and let me fix you a plate.”

Joshua grinned bigger, because Gage wasn't able to get a word in edgewise. Not when Momma was going to feed him and pamper him. She'd make sure he felt welcomed back into the family, whether he liked it or not. Judging from the look on Gage's face, he most definitely liked it. The guy seemed starved for affection, and that was something his momma had in abundance and didn't mind sharing. Especially with one of her “Lost Boys.”

“That was Gage?” Lauren took the last couple of steps, bringing her to his side, and he wrapped his arm around her shoulder. He loved knowing she was close, and that she didn’t shy away from his public displays of affection around his family.

“Yeah. He’s the one who told me about Daniel’s biological father.”

“What? You know who Daniel’s father is and you didn’t tell me?” The look she gave him told him he had a lot of explaining to do to stay out of the doghouse.

“A lot happened in the past couple of days. Let’s go sit on the porch and I’ll explain.” He didn’t want to explain, had been dreading it actually, because how do you tell the woman you love that she might lose the child of her heart? The thought of having to give Daniel to somebody else was tearing him up, and he couldn’t imagine how she’d handle it, because she’d had him longer, though he doubted she could love him any stronger than Joshua himself did.

Sitting on the porch swing, she angled to face him, one leg curled up beneath her. Her posture stated she was calm and relaxed, but Joshua knew she was anything but. The clenching of her hands into fists was the first indicator that she was bracing for bad news. Was he that obvious, that easy to read?

“Honey, the day Smith and Jones grabbed you, I had a talk with Gage. I was on my way to the sheriff’s station to confront Nick.”

“I bet it’s hard to think of him as Nick, one of the boys you knew as a kid. I only ever knew him as Assad, and then mostly by his reputation. I’m glad he got a chance to reconnect with your mom and dad.”

Joshua remembered the look on his dad’s face when he saw Nick for the first time. They’d been in the sheriff’s station, having brought the Brits in and Rafe was in the middle of booking them, with them screaming about their rights being violated, and demanding lawyers. Antonio and Derrick were

dealing with things from a federal standpoint, and Chance was dealing with the fallout and trying to prevent some sort of international incident.

In all the craziness, Momma had called Dad and told him she'd found Nick, like he was some lost puppy she'd been searching for. Maybe he was, because his father, that big, strong man that he admired more than any other man he'd ever met, looked like he'd been poleaxed when he'd seen Nick. Ever so slowly, he'd reached forward, his hand touching the darkened hair, skimmed along his jawline, and he'd nodded once before pulling Nick into his arms. Though the other man towered over his dad by several inches, but Joshua noted that his dad was the one holding Nick upright.

“Rafe said Nick had to go to Australia to deal with a bunch of stuff there with Brashear and his operation, but he'd be back in a few weeks. He wants a chance to really talk with Momma and Dad. I have the feeling there's a lot of bad stuff in his past, but he's never forgotten them or this place.”

“It's definitely unlike any place I've ever seen before. You're family, you're all part of a bigger whole. Every one of you has had your own trials and tribulations, but if one of you has a problem or needs something, you're all there to do whatever's necessary. Do you have any idea how rare that is, to know you have people to watch your back? Looking at it from the outside, I envy that connection. It's like you click, interlocking pieces of a puzzle that show the true meaning of what a family should be, though you don't share blood or DNA. It's rare and it's beautiful.” Reaching for his hand, she squeezed it gently. “You haven't been yourself since Brashear was picked up. I know whatever you have to tell me, it's big. I can handle it, Joshua, I promise. Just tell me.”

Joshua drew in a deep breath and rolled his neck to ease the tension. “When I talked to Gage, he told me he had a good idea who Lily had been seeing during the time she got pregnant.”

“Who?” Her question was softly whispered.

“Gregory Blanchard.”

“Gregory...you mean Leland Blanchard’s son?”

Joshua nodded. “It happened when they were both in California.”

“But he’s dead.”

“Yeah. Makes things a little more complicated. Vice President Blanchard has lost everybody. His wife, his son. If Daniel turns out to be his grandson...” Joshua didn’t finish the sentence, knowing Lauren understood his unspoken words.

“Are you sure?” Lauren closed her eyes, and he watched her struggle to control her emotions. He’d had time to process, to know they might be losing Daniel after all. But he was hitting her with this without giving her time to realize the child she loved might be ripped away from her again.

“Can’t be one hundred percent positive without a DNA test, even if Lily confirms it. I suspect even if she swears to it, Blanchard will want a DNA test to confirm. Gregory was his only son, and he was devastated when he passed away. Some type of congenital heart defect is what the media reported.” He picked up her hands, unfurling the fists and holding them both tight. “You realize if Gregory Blanchard is Daniel’s father, Leland has every right to try for custody, and with the clout and the money he’s got backing him, he’ll probably win.”

“What about Brashear? He’s got just as much right to Daniel as Blanchard.” The fear in her voice ate at Joshua. He felt the same, because he was terrified about losing the kiddo. But he knew if they tried for custody against somebody with Leland Blanchard’s credentials, they’d lose. Didn’t matter that Lauren had signed documentation from Lily Brashear giving her sole custody of Daniel. With the things she’d done to protect Daniel, though well intentioned, would be frowned upon by the courts. Especially since she’d faked her death and had been using illegal identification for both her and Daniel. She’d be lucky if she didn’t wind up in jail or on probation.

Chances were good she wouldn't get away without some kind of repercussions.

"The feds are pushing for Brashear to be placed in the Super Max in Colorado. Solitary confinement, no communication with the outside world. He might be able to speak with his attorneys, but from what Chance and Derrick have gleaned, Brashear is going to make a deal in order to avoid the death penalty. Nobody in their right mind would award custody to a convicted felon who deals in drugs and human trafficking. Those charges are serious, but Assad, I mean Nick, also has evidence of several bodies that can be linked directly to Brashear. He's going to be locked away for the rest of his life. He can't hurt you or Daniel ever again."

"How soon are do you think we'll be able to find out the truth, whether Daniel is or isn't the grandson of Leland Blanchard?"

"I can answer that, or at least assist in getting the answer." Gage stepped onto the porch and reached into his back pocket, pulling out a folded piece of paper and handed it to Joshua.

"What's this?"

Gage knelt in front of Lauren and picked up her hand. "You don't know me, but I want to help. I'm Gage, and for a while I lived here with this motley crew. Sometimes I'm able to help out when trouble shows up, like it has now. That" he pointed to the paper Joshua held, "is Leland Blanchard's DNA."

"What?" Lauren's voice was barely above a whisper, and she grabbed the paper out of Joshua's hand, looking at the numbers and the graphs. "I don't understand. How did you get this?"

It was Gage's turn to look uncomfortable, being put under the spotlight. "Let's just say I have friends who owe me favors. Vice President Leland Blanchard just had his annual physical. I was able to obtain enough genetic material to have

a DNA test run. It won't hold up in court, but it'll do to see if you get a familial match."

"Gage—"

"Look, Joshua, just get the kid tested and you'll know one way or another. No sense telling Blanchard anything, not until you know for sure. Could be the info I got wasn't reliable, and the VP's kid isn't the father. If you haven't told him anything, no harm, no foul. Right?"

"Thank you, Gage." Lauren leaned forward and hugged Gage, and Joshua almost laughed at the startled look on the other man's face before he tentatively hugged her back, clumsily patting her back.

"You're welcome. Okay, I gotta go say goodbye to Ms. Patti. I really only stopped by long enough to drop that off." He pointed to the paper Joshua held. "Good luck, whatever happens."

"You ever need anything, Gage, don't hesitate. I'll help out any way I can."

"I'm gonna hold you to that, man." With a jaunty salute, Gage strolled back inside the Big House, and Joshua leaned back on the porch swing, tapping the paper against his leg.

"Do you think that's really Leland Blanchard's DNA?"

Joshua nodded. "Yeah, Gage wouldn't give us a fake report. I'll make arrangements to have Daniel tested first thing in the morning. A quick cheek swab and we'll know for certain. I know somebody we can trust to do the test."

"I can't believe this nightmare is almost over. There've been so many twists and turns in the past few weeks, it's hard to keep up."

"Yeah, let's see. You died. I inherited a baby I knew nothing about. Quit my job. Came back home to Shiloh Springs, to my family. You showed up alive and kicking and wanting to see my son."

"Our son."

Joshua smiled. “Our son. You got snatched by two of Brashear’s hired killers. Then Brashear’s right-hand man turned out to be one of Momma’s “Lost Boys,” and we had to stage a rescue for you. Have I forgotten anything?”

“Only the part where you told me you still love me.” Lauren faced him and he stared at her beautiful face, and a feeling of peace came over him.

“I do love you, Lauren. I never stopped. When I lost you, it was like I lost a part of myself I’d never get back. You’re my everything, Lauren. The air I breathe. Promise me you’ll be here always.”

“I never wanted to leave you, Joshua. Not for a single instance. And no matter what happens, now and in the future, I’ll be here. I love you, my darling, more than life itself. I came back from the dead for you,” she cupped his face between her hands, and stared into his eyes. “Marry me. I know it’ll be hard, and we’ll always have more questions than answers, but we can make it work. I promise I’ll never leave. Let me show you we can have the life I wrote about in my letter to you. Fifty years or more together. Kids. The white picket fence. I want it all and I want it with you. Marry me, Joshua Boudreau.”

“I think we’ve lived through more in the last week than some people do in their entire lifetimes.” He reached forward and brushed back the tears running down her cheek with his thumb. “We can make a fresh start, here in Shiloh Springs. You’ll be part of a family, and they’ll shower you with the kind of love you never had as a kid. But I promise I will always be there for you, too.”

“Sounds perfect.”

“One thing, though?” He tenderly brushed the hair off her face and peppered kisses along her jaw and cheek.

“What’s that?”

“You’re in charge of potty training.”

Lauren's laugh made his heart lighter. He knew they had a lot of trials in front of them they'd have to face. Brashear, even in prison, could cause problems. They'd have to deal with Blanchard and the paternity issue, and the possibility of having to give up Daniel, but he had faith that through it all, no matter what, they'd make it.

Because there was one thing Douglas and Patti Boudreau had taught him—love and family were everything, and he had an abundance of both. He was a happy man.

He brushed a kiss across her lips, and stood, holding out his hand. "Let's go tell Momma we're getting married."

Lauren placed her hand in his. "I can't wait. I used to dream about being a Boudreau when you told me stories about your family. It's like my every wish is finally coming true. I honestly love you, Joshua Boudreau.

"And I love you, Lauren Wright, soon to be Lauren Boudreau."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

JOSHUA HELD LAUREN'S hand within his as they waited to confront the one man who had the power to disrupt their collective worlds. Gage had been instrumental in arranging the meeting with Leland Blanchard, the Vice President of the United States, but more importantly, Daniel's biological grandfather. At the moment, he felt like he wanted to throw up. The prior night at the hotel he hadn't slept a wink, every possible scenario running through his head over and over like a vicious montage, with the worst-case outcomes always seeming to rise to the forefront. At one point he'd heard Lauren sobbing, though she'd tried to muffle the sound. Unfortunately, this was one instance where he couldn't make everything better. Couldn't make the problem go away or disappear.

They'd flown to the capital the day before at the behest of the vice president. He'd been unable to drop everything and come to Shiloh Springs. Joshua understood that, since the country was in the midst of numerous crises, like always, and it had been easier for him and Lauren to head to Washington, D.C. His momma and dad had accompanied them, and they had stayed back at the hotel with Daniel. It would take less than half an hour for them to get to Blanchard's office if needed.

A side door leading into large office space opened and two men in dark suits entered, followed by Leland Blanchard. Joshua recognized him immediately, though he'd never met the man in person. He felt Lauren's hand tremble in his, and they both stood when he entered. With a wave of his hand, he motioned for them to sit, and he moved behind the desk and lowered himself into the large padded chair.

The two men who'd come in with him, who Joshua knew had to be Secret Service, moved to stand behind the vice

president, flanking him on either side. Though they were just doing their jobs, he wondered if Blanchard would want them staying to hear what they had to discuss.

“Mr. Boudreau, Ms. Wright, thank you for agreeing to meet with me here at my office. I understand from Gage Newsome you’ve got some information that he deemed was crucial for me to hear. Something not directly related to my position, but personal.”

Joshua took a deep breath before answering. “That’s right, sir. It has to do with your son, Gregory.”

If he hadn’t been watching closely, Joshua would have missed the barest flinch by the older man. Apparently, the loss of his only son still pained Blanchard. Not that he blamed the man. He couldn’t imagine the loss of a child, one you’ve raised from birth. Yet here he stood on the brink of that same dilemma, because it was more than possible Blanchard would demand Daniel be given to him. After all, the DNA test they performed, though it hadn’t been exactly on the up-and-up, had shown that Leland Blanchard was a direct familiar relation to Daniel. Gage’s information had proven accurate, and Lily Brashear had confirmed to Lauren that the vice president’s son was Daniel’s father. The only bright spot had been Lily wasn’t asking for Daniel’s return now that her father was headed toward a Super Max prison and would be safe if she wanted to raise him. She’d insisted she wanted Daniel raised by Lauren, had even sent a notarized affidavit stating her wishes.

While that might hold sway in a court, chances were good if Leland Blanchard sued for custody, he’d win. Joshua knew it, Lauren knew it, and it was tearing them up inside. But Leland Blanchard had a right to know he had a living relative, an heir to his son’s legacy.

“Did you know my son, Mr. Boudreau?”

“No, sir. But your son was intimately involved with a young lady—”

“You’re talking about Brashear’s daughter? What was her name again?”

“Lily.” Lauren answered Blanchard. “Her name is Lily, and she’s the mother of your grandson.”

Joshua watched all color drain from the vice president’s face at Lauren’s blunt announcement. He’d planned to ease the man into the news. Guess Lauren had other ideas.

“What? If Gregory got the Brashear girl pregnant, he would have told me.” Blanchard stood and leaned braced both palms against his desk, his posture both aggressive and one stating he wasn’t about to give in to their story. “Gregory never kept secrets from me.”

“Sir, he didn’t know. When he left California and came back to Washington, Lily was devastated. Her father took her home to Dubai. That’s when she realized she was pregnant. Her father wouldn’t allow her to contact anybody, and by the time she could have gotten a message to your son, he’d...” Lauren’s voice trailed off. Nobody needed reminding that Blanchard’s son was dead.

“She’s lying.”

“No, she’s not, sir.” Joshua stood, looking Blanchard in the eye. “We had Daniel’s DNA tested before we contacted you. And we know you’ll want another test done. The sample we used came from you, and it shows a familial link. Other than Gregory, there is no other person who could be Daniel’s biological father.”

“Daniel?”

Joshua nodded. “His name is Daniel...Boudreau.” He watched the older man slump down into his chair again, and one of the Secret Service agents leaned down and whispered something. Blanchard simply waved him aside, not bothering to answer. Joshua had the feeling the agent was more than willing to toss him out of the vice president’s office. But he couldn’t leave, not until he knew Daniel would be well cared for and happy. The squeezing sensation in the center of his

chest got tighter at the thought of giving up his son. He'd only had him for such a short time, and yet that little boy had made a place in his life and in his heart that would never be filled. It didn't matter if he had other children, biological offspring. Daniel would always be his son.

"I won't ask how you got my DNA. Seems like it's too easy to snatch it from anywhere these days. Nobody even bothers to get warrants anymore. It's easier to dig through the trash. I take it the tests were one hundred percent conclusive?"

"We wouldn't be here if they weren't. Lauren has raised Daniel from the time he was born. She risked her life getting him away from Brashear. They lived on the run, trying to stay one step ahead of his hired men because she made a promise to Daniel's mother she wouldn't let Brashear get his hands on Daniel. Lily knows her own father better than anyone, knows what he's capable of and trust me, sir, he wouldn't have had a single qualm about using the child as a bargaining chip to get you to use your influence to gain him whatever he wanted. Brashear knew your only son died. Having your grandson, your one and only tie to the child you lost—he was and still is convinced he could get you to do anything."

Blanchard shook his head. It was a lot to process, Joshua knew, remembering how he'd felt when he'd first been handed a child to raise, one he'd claimed as his own. Of course, he'd had a family who had his back. Parents like Douglas and Patricia Boudreau who'd never once made him feel unwelcome or unloved, who had raised him to do what was right and what was honorable. Which was the whole reason they sat before the vice president now, instead of being safely ensconced at the Big House in Shiloh Springs. It would have been easier and less heartbreaking to simply keep the secret of Daniel's birth, his biological paternity, and raise the child as his own.

"It's my understanding that Brashear plans to take a plea deal to avoid the death penalty." Blanchard's direct gaze bored into Joshua, leaving him more confused than ever. There was something about the look, more assessing than questioning. He

didn't have all the answers. Blanchard probably knew more about Brashear's case at this point than he did. Chance and Antonio kept him in the loop, but Brashear's legal battles with the federal government were way above their pay grades.

"I don't have details, but that's my understanding as well, sir. If he wants to take his case to trial, Lauren will have to testify about everything she learned while working undercover in his organization. Information that would definitely net a death sentence if it came to light. Even taking a plea, he's looking at spending the rest of his life in a Super Max facility with no chance for parole. I heard the attorneys are suggesting Brashear have no contact with the outside world. Specifically, solitary confinement for the remainder of his life with no contact with fellow inmates to ensure he has no contact with anyone from the outside."

"Good. Makes him less of a threat to the child...Daniel." Blanchard glanced at the two Secret Service agents flanking his chair and sighed. "I'd send these two out of the room for the rest of our conversation, but they wouldn't go. I assure you everything we discuss in this room will remain strictly confidential. I need assurances from both you and Ms. Wright of the same."

Joshua glanced at Lauren, noted her posture, the slight leaning forward in the chair like she'd been anticipating something and it was about to unfold. His own intuition was working overtime, and he had the feeling the next few minutes were crucial. And whatever it was, Daniel was at the heart of the matter.

"You have our word, sir. Anything discussed here will remain between us and no one else."

"Good." Blanchard rose and walked around his desk until he was in front of them, and perched on the edge. For all his posture was casual, Joshua noted the rigidity of his spine, the fact his jaw was clenched, the muscles taut. "I first have to ask you, do you love the child?"

“With all my heart.” Lauren didn’t hesitate to answer, her voice strong and steady.

“I have loved Daniel from the moment he was placed in my arms. He may not be my blood, carry my DNA, but he’s my son.”

Blanchard smiled for the first time since their meeting started. “Good, good. That’s what I needed to hear. I believe you, which makes my decision both harder and easier. What I’m about to tell you must remain in the strictest confidence. Other than the two men standing behind me, only a handful of people know what I’m about to tell you.” Blanchard paused, drawing in a deep breath. “I’m dying.”

Lauren gasped. “I’m sorry, sir.”

Blanchard waved a hand toward her. “It’s fine. I’ve had time to come to grips with my diagnosis and the short amount of time I’ve got left. Cancer. Inoperable the doctors tell me. I’m going to have to step down from office soon. But with the news you’ve brought me today, it cause quite a dilemma. I thought my family line was finished, would end when I die. Yet now you’ve given me a lifeline, hope that it can continue for another generation. Can you understand how that feels? It gives me...hope.”

“Sir—”

Blanchard cut off the agent who’d started to interrupt. “They aren’t going to rush out to the press and blast the news that I’m dying. I did my homework, guys. Both of these people are trustworthy and got the highest recommendations. Especially from Senator Yvonne Gonzalez, though she wasn’t happy with Ms. Wright faking her own death. Gave the senator a few headache with that, young lady.” Blanchard shot a teasing smile at Lauren.

“I did what I thought best to protect Daniel. At the time, I wasn’t sure who I could trust and who Brashear’s money might have bought. I’m glad she’s forgiven me.”

“Not only has she forgiven you, she asked me to extend offers for both of you to come back to work for her. Yes, yes, I know all about Senator Gonzalez’s pet project. You’ve both done excellent work and supported your government, for which I thank you.”

Lauren’s eyes met Joshua’s and he clearly read the decision in hers. It was the same as his. Neither of them would be returning to the former occupations. Whatever the future held, they’d be facing it together, outside of the unofficial government auspices.

“I...do you have any pictures of Daniel? I’d like to see what he looks like.”

Joshua pulled his phone free and touched a few buttons, bringing up the most recent picture he had of Daniel, taken the prior evening. Turning it around, he handed the phone to Blanchard. It was easy to see the anguish on the older man’s face as he studied the picture of the grandchild he’d never met. In the photo, Daniel had been sitting on a blanket on the hotel room’s floor, reaching for his stuffed bunny. In the next picture he grinned, his dimples on full display, his blue eyes sparkling with joy. Blanchard ran his fingertip across the screen.

“Those pictures were taken last night. Right now he’s with my parents at the hotel. Until...” Joshua trailed off, because he couldn’t force himself to say the words reverberating around in his head...*until we give him to you.*

“He looks like Gregory. The same smile, the same blue eyes. His hair is darker, though. He is a beautiful child.”

“Well-behaved too.” Joshua saw the wetness on Lauren’s lashes as she blinked, fighting back tears. Yeah, he felt like crying too, because losing their child was killing him inside.

Blanchard handed the phone back to Joshua. “You said Daniel is here with your parents? They’re aware of his biological paternity?”

“Yes, sir. My family knows. Only one other person outside our clan knows and he’s a well-respected FBI agent. He won’t

say anything.”

Blanchard blew out a sigh. “Good. Because things are about to get complicated, at least for the two of you. I told you I have cancer. I have very little time left according to my doctors. I plan on turning in my resignation at the end of this week.”

“We’re sorry to hear that, sir. Is there any chance of a new treatment, anything that might help?”

Blanchard shook his head. “We’ve tried everything. There’s nothing left but waiting it out. The biggest question is what do we do about Daniel? If I had more time, I’d take him in a heartbeat. But then what would happen to him in two months, three? He’d be alone with no family.” A sad smile crossed Blanchard’s lips. “Doesn’t seem fair to the little tyke, to rip him from the arms of the two parents he’s already got. Ones who love and cherish him for the bright light he is.”

Joshua felt Lauren’s hand slip into his, and he latched onto her like she was a lifeline thrown to a drowning man. The implications were clear. Leland Blanchard was talking about letting them keep Daniel. But that’s all they were—implications. Joshua needed to hear the words, plain and simple.

“What are you saying, Mr. Vice President?”

“Mr. Boudreau—Joshua—I’m asking if you and Ms. Wright would be willing to raise my grandson as your own. It’s obvious you are a couple, that you’re together, and you love each other. Can I assume that you’re planning a wedding?”

“Yes, we are.” Lauren’s quiet voice answered Blanchard. “We’ve loved each other for a long time, even when I did stupid things.” Joshua knew she was talking about faking her death, and he had forgiven her for that, though it hadn’t been easy accepting the lie. Daniel made it worthwhile. “We love Daniel with our whole hearts.” She hesitated for a moment. “I’m sure you’ve looked into both of our backgrounds. You

know Joshua got lucky and landed with the Boudreau family. I...didn't have the kind of examples of what a family should be, not the way he did. I didn't understand the importance or how it would change my way of thinking, change everything in my life. Not until a tiny little boy was placed into my arms and he became my son. Now, I would do anything for him. Anything."

Blanchard moved around to retake his seat on the big oversized leather chair, and leaned back, hands steeped in front of him. When the silence extended on, Joshua wanted to shake the older man, make him spit out whatever he was thinking. Because it was clear he was devising a plan in his head. Something momentous, if his previous words were anything to go by.

"Lily Brashear already signed away all rights to the child, is that correct?" There was a speculative gleam in Blanchard's eyes. Joshua knew the vice president had been a practicing lawyer for many years prior to entering politics. He doubted the other man was given to spontaneity when it came to major decisions, and Daniel's custody was the biggest life-changing decision they'd ever make.

"Yes. I have notarized, signed and witnessed documents from Lily stating that she relinquished custody of her newborn male child to me. I also have a signed letter from her stating she wanted her father to never be able to gain custody of Daniel, though I'm not sure that would hold up in a court of law if he contested my claim, my rights, to Daniel."

"You never moved to formally adopt Daniel?"

Lauren shook her head. "I couldn't. That would have immediately put me on Brashear's radar, since he was actively looking for me and Daniel."

"You would have to legally adopt him if I relinquish custody. It can be a closed adoption with the file sealed. I know an attorney who can set it up as a private adoption, make sure all the paperwork is ironclad. Plus, I know a few judges who owe me, and I have no problem calling in my markers for

something this important. I don't want a monster like Winston Brashear to have any claim to my grandson." Blanchard shook his head, before adding. "I can't even claim him as my own."

"Sir, we'd never keep you a secret from Daniel. You are his flesh and blood."

"Daniel will have a loving family with you and your Boudreau clan, I believe you called it? He'll know that he was loved and accepted and wanted. You can't tell him about me. To do so might bring others like Brashear out of the woodwork, trying to stake a claim on him because he's my grandson. We all know there are unscrupulous people who'd think nothing of exploiting or hurting a child, especially when it comes to money. And I have a lot of it. I'll be leaving the bulk of my estate to him in a blind trust which you will turn over to him when he turns twenty-one. Then you can explain to him he had a grandfather who would have moved heaven and earth to keep him if it was possible. That I gave him to the best parents to raise him and love him."

"Joshua?" Lauren's voice was barely above a whisper. "We get to keep him?"

Joshua drew in a deep breath and slowly let it out, unable to believe the turn of events. In the last two hours he'd gone from despondent at having to give up his son, to ecstatic because he'd get to not only have the woman he loved, but the son who taken a special place in his heart.

"Yes, sweetheart, we get to keep him." Turning to Blanchard, Joshua added, "You don't have to leave him anything. We'll make sure he's well provided for financially, and he'll know he's loved and has a whole family who will always be there for him, no matter what."

Blanchard chuckled. "Who else am I going to leave my estate to? A huge chunk of it will be dispersed to various charities, but the share that would have gone to Gregory had he lived, now will go to Daniel. Between your family and mine, we can set up a trust in Daniel's name so he'll be well taken care of after I'm gone."

“Would you like to meet him, sir? My parents can bring him here, or you could come to the hotel.”

“No. As much as I want to, if I see him, hold him, I won’t be able to give him up. And I know giving him to you is the right thing. You’ve both risked your lives to protect my grandson, and he’s where he belongs. Take care of him and raise him with love and let him know how special he is, that’s all I ask.”

“We will, sir. That’s a promise.”

After a few more minutes, setting up appointments to meet with Blanchard’s lawyer, Joshua and Lauren left the Vice President’s office. They rode the elevator in silence, her hand squeezing his, like she couldn’t quite believe everything that had happened. He didn’t quite believe it either, but he wasn’t about to rock the boat. Not when he’d just been handed the keys to the kingdom.

“Tell me I’m not dreaming, Joshua. We really get to keep Daniel? He’s ours?”

Joshua pulled her into his arms and hit the emergency stop button on the elevator. “He’s ours, baby. It’s over, all the worry and the anguish and fear. We’re going to be a family, just like the one we’ve always talked about. Might be a little unorthodox, but it’s ours and it’s perfect.”

Pulling her hand free, she slid her arms around his neck and smiled. “You’re right. It’s absolutely perfect. Let’s go home and hug our son.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

EPILOGUE

NICK PULLED HIS rental car onto the parking area in front of the Big House and cut the engine. If only it was as easy as hitting a button to turn off the emotions churning inside him. He'd had to leave almost immediately after the confrontation at the Sheriff's station, needing to meet up with his boss, Grant Calvin. They'd headed straight to Dubai, ready to coordinate with the U.S. contingent working the Brashear case and take down the monster.

And hadn't that felt good?

He'd spent almost three years bowing and scraping to the imbecile, and Brashear had never once suspected the man doing his dirty work might be gathering information to take him down. The timetable got moved up precipitously after Lauren Wright absconded with Brashear's grandson. She'd nearly set back everything he'd worked for with that stunt, but while it had been a blow to his investigation, he understood her motives were pure. He'd probably have done the same thing, if he'd been in her position. Fortunately, everything worked out in the end and Brashear would spend the rest of his evil life behind bars at a maximum security prison facility. Of course, his boss, Calvin, wasn't happy about that turn of events. He'd wanted Brashear hauled back to Australia to answer for his crimes there. The monster's reach had been long and ugly, but because of the terms of his incarceration and plea deal, he'd have no communication with the outside world, and would remain in solitary confinement for the first twenty-five years of his stay. With any luck he'd be old and senile before that time frame elapsed.

Which meant Lauren and Daniel Boudreau was safe. Nick wasn't privy to all the details, but he knew the baby was now

living with Joshua and Lauren at the Big House. They were engaged, with the wedding coming up quickly. However they'd managed to retain custody of Daniel, good for them, because that meant Ms. Patti was happy.

He uncurled his fingers from the steering wheel, admitting he was stalling. He hadn't seen her since that day in Rafe's office, when she'd recognized him. That fact alone still floored him. Nobody had ever recognized and connected Nick Vincent with Assad, hired killer working for one of the biggest facilitators of human trafficking.

Yet she hadn't hesitated. Even with the black hair and contact lens, and the passage of more than fifteen years, she'd known him. She'd lovingly told him she recognized him with her heart. And to learn she and Douglas had looked for him after he'd been removed from their home? Unbelievable.

He'd given his word he'd return back to Shiloh Springs when he'd been called by his boss. They had needed to finish the job they'd started, which was to put away the monster preying on young girls and boys and selling them to the highest bidder. Those who didn't sell, well he didn't like thinking about the tens of thousands that had disappeared without a trace. He knew what that felt like on a very personal level—he'd been one of those who'd fallen between the cracks—until Grant Calvin rescued him and put him on the road to redemption.

He nearly jumped at the hard rap on the driver's side window. "You gonna sit out here all day or come in and join the party?"

Party? Nope, he wasn't ready for a Boudreau family celebration. He'd only planned to see Ms. Patti one final time, get the chance to speak with Douglas, and then hightail it out of Shiloh Springs before it managed to draw him back in with its charm and down-home goodness. Somehow, he doubted Antonio would let him start the car and leave without anybody the wiser.

Climbing from the rental, he stood to his full height and looked around, taking in the expanse of green lawn surrounding the front of the house. The two story home with its dark green shutters and white columns looked the same, though it had the appearance of being freshly painted. Large live oak trees flanked it on both sides, providing not only shade on hot days, he remembered, but it gave the place a stately Southern charm.

“I did not realize you were celebrating. I don’t wish to intrude. I will come back another time to see Ms. Patti and Douglas.”

Antonio made a scoffing sound. “Seriously, you think I’m going back in there and tell Momma and Dad I let you leave without coming inside? Nuh-uh, not happening. Besides, in a roundabout way you’re part of this celebration. You probably heard Joshua and Lauren get to keep Daniel. He is officially their son.”

Nick smiled. “I heard. Don’t have any details; just they had legally adopted the boy. After what Brashear put them through, I’m glad they are finding happiness.”

“Yep, they are so sickly sweet together, it’s enough to make your teeth rot. Good thing they’re getting hitched soon, so they can move out and get their own place. I swear between Jamie, Daniel, and with Brody and Beth’s newest little one due any day, it’s getting as crowded as the Houston Rodeo around here.”

Standing with Antonio, Nick felt overwhelmed by nostalgia for the short time he’d spent here on the Boudreau ranch. Though he hadn’t been here long, he remembered every second of it. Even the stuff he didn’t like invaded his thoughts. Like chores. And being the smallest kid—though that didn’t apply anymore. He’d had a major growth spurt in his teens and shot up to over six feet tall. The Boudreau ranch had become ingrained in his memories as the epitome of home. It was the place he clung to when his world turned into a cesspool of despair and he thought he couldn’t live another minute. He’d

remember the love of Ms. Patti, the way she'd pull him close, ruffle his hair, and tell him how much she loved him. Which seemed impossible because he knew he'd been an unlovable child. He'd remember Douglas taking him out to the barn and showing him how to work with leather, repair bridles, or brush the horses. Douglas hadn't been one to show his emotions, didn't wear his heart on his sleeve, but every night he'd hug Nick and tell him he was glad he was part of their family.

“Listen, man, I can't do this. I thought I could simply drop in, visit for a few minutes, say hello to you guys, and take off, putting Shiloh Springs and the Big House in my rearview. Except I know if I walk through those doors, everything's gonna change. And I'm not ready to have my life turn upside down. Give the family my apologies. Tell them I got called away.”

Antonio shook his head. “You're making a big mistake. Momma has talked about you almost every day since you came back to Shiloh Springs. You leave without seeing her and it's gonna break her heart. Dad's too.”

Nick closed his eyes and took a deep breath before admitting, “I'm afraid. Not that they won't accept me, because I remember how loving and forgiving they are. I'm afraid I'll bring danger to their front door if I get involved with this family again. My life hasn't been a bed of roses and I've made a lot of enemies. I do not want that part of my life ever coming close to touching any of you.”

“You do realize almost every one of us at one point or another has been involved in dangerous situations up to our eyeballs, right? Or maybe not, since you've been out of the loop. None of us has a pristine past, we've all got secrets. I get it, not wanting to bring somebody from your past that might be out for revenge anywhere near Momma and Dad. That's a choice you and only you can make. But think long and hard before you cut them out of your life. Or the rest of us. We call ourselves a clan for a reason. We take care of each other, not because we have to, but because we want to. But if you're going to walk away, do it now, before Momma gets her hopes

up that you'll come home to stay. The front door is open. It's up to you whether you walk through or turn your back on the possibilities that Momma and Dad's love offers. Your choice."

Antonio clapped him on the shoulder and turned, taking a step toward the Big House. The silence was broken by the echoing retort of a gunshot, and Antonio stumbled, brilliant red blossoming across his chest. Nick grabbed him as he started to slump, and the front door flew open, men spilling out onto the front porch. Rafe reached them first, his phone already to his ear, calling for an ambulance.

Nick feverishly scanned the homestead, searching for any sign of the shooter. One thing he was certain of though.

The bullet had been meant for him.

Thank you for reading Joshua, Book #13 in the Texas Boudreau Brotherhood series. I hope you enjoyed Joshua and Lauren's story and learning a little more about one of Ms. Patti's 'Lost Boys.' Next up is Nick, and he has a big secret he's bringing with him to Shiloh Springs, along with a ton of danger that follows him to our favorite small town. Want to find out more about *Nick and the thrill ride he's about to plunge headfirst into?*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA TODAY Bestselling author Kathy Ivan spent most of her life with her nose between the pages of a book. It didn't matter if the book was a paranormal romance, romantic suspense, action, and adventure thrillers, sweet & spicy, or a sexy novella. Kathy turned her obsession with reading into the next logical step, writing.

Her books transport you to the sultry splendor of the French Quarter in New Orleans in her award-winning romantic suspense, or to Las Vegas in her contemporary romantic comedies. Kathy's new romantic suspense series features, Texas Boudreau Brotherhood, features alpha heroes in small town Texas. Gotta love those cowboys!

Kathy tells stories people can't get enough of, reuniting old loves, betrayal of trust, finding kidnapped children, psychics and sometimes even a ghost or two. But one thing they all have in common – love with a happily ever after).

More about Kathy and her books can be found at

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