

A man with a beard and sunglasses, wearing a black leather vest over a dark shirt and black pants. He has extensive tattoos on both arms and is wearing black beaded bracelets on his wrists. The background is dark and moody.

**Warrior Breed
Book Two**

Playing With Fire

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USA Today bestselling author

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Dedication

To my granddaughter, who, like the phoenix, will rise from the ashes to be born anew, stronger and more resilient than ever.
May you continue to flourish and grow.

I love you so much!

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Chapter One

Axel grabbed her arms and jerked her against him. With a sinking feeling, Marissa knew this wasn't the dream job she'd hoped for. When she pushed against his shoulders, he only laughed.

God, how could she have thought Axel Powers was attractive? Surfer looks—had that really been her first impression? Light brown hair, tanned, killer smile. The malice shining in his cold, blue eyes pretty much changed her first impression.

“Let go of me,” she hissed through gritted teeth, heart pounding with fear and disgust.

“No, I don't think I will.” His grip tightened on her arms. “I rather like the way you feel.”

Struggling wouldn't faze him. He was at least six feet tall, towering over her five feet, six inches. He had broad shoulders and enough muscles to easily dominate her—which he was proving he could right now.

Desperate to escape his grasp, she attempted to reason with him. “You hired me as your assistant, nothing more.” She hated the pleading note that crept into her voice.

Her words only seemed to fuel his appetite to control her. He slapped her hard. She gasped as burning pain spread over her cheek and down her jaw. Before she could even attempt to fight back, he violently shoved her against the wall, her head slamming against the hard surface with a thud. She

cried out in pain as she ineffectively fought against him, but his grip only tightened.

“Didn’t I tell you? Assistant means you’ll do whatever I want, whenever I want.” His hot breath on her face sent shivers of fear over her. Tears stinging her eyes, Marissa knew she had to get out of there.

“Then I quit!”

Her words only seemed to amuse him. “That’s not an option.” He studied her face. “Damn, I wanted you as soon as I saw your picture. I knew the moment you arrived in town. Yes, I know everything that goes on around here. You’ll do well to remember that.”

What had she gotten herself into? She should’ve run when she’d looked up a few days ago and caught Axel watching her. There’d been something in his eyes, a calculating gleam as if he played a game of cat and mouse, and she was the mouse. She’d wondered if she’d only imagined it. Apparently not.

His gaze raked over her. “I have an important meeting that, unfortunately, can’t be postponed. I expect you to be in my bed waiting for me when I return.”

“And if I’m not?” Marissa asked, hating that her words trembled.

His smile didn’t reach his eyes as he leaned in close, his lips crashing against hers in a brutal, bruising kiss. She tried to move her face away, but he gripped her chin until he finished assaulting her.

He rested his cheek against hers, his lips close to her ear. “Then I’ll make your life a living hell,” he whispered before releasing her and stepping away. “I’ll be back in one hour.” He paused at the door, his gaze locking on her. “And don’t try to run. I’d find you, and I guarantee you won’t like the consequences of your actions.” With his warning hanging over her like a guillotine, he left the room, closing the door behind him.

Any strength left inside her suddenly drained away. If not for the support of the wall, she would’ve collapsed. One hour. She only had one hour to figure out what to do. One thing she knew for sure, she wouldn’t be waiting in Axel’s bed! He could go to hell.

Think! She needed a plan. First, was he serious when he said he would find her and bring her back? From the hard glitter in his eyes, she was pretty sure he meant what he’d said. It hadn’t taken her long to figure out he didn’t like sharing his things, whether it be a bottle of fine brandy or the gold pen on his desk. Marissa had a feeling she was his new toy.

Not if she could help it. She could go to the police. They’d be able to help. She felt a little better now that she knew what she was going to do.

Before she left his office, her gaze fell on his computer. Axel had told her not to bother with his documents. He didn’t want her touching anything inside his office, going so far as to warn her it was off-limits. She only came into his office when he wanted something—like today, except Marissa was what he’d wanted.

Her office was in the adjoining room. What was on his computer he didn't want her to see? It could give her enough leverage so that he would leave her alone. The info might even get him arrested. Her eyes narrowed. Axel had to be dirty. It would serve him right if they put him behind bars. She took a seat at his desk.

She'd seen him enter his password once. Did he think he was invincible? Probably. Well, he didn't know her. She typed it in now, not taking time to read the files as she inserted a flash drive. She just hit the key and started downloading them. Only then did she skim a few. From what she could tell, it looked as though he might be involved in some illegal activities. Not that she could say for sure.

When she heard someone talking outside his door, she quickly pulled the flash drive and came to her feet, not even bothering to shut down the computer. Whoever had been speaking walked past the door without stopping. She breathed a sigh of relief, but her hands were still shaking. When she glanced out the window. Axel was driving away. She had one hour before he returned.

She hurried from his office and went inside hers. She had a room on the estate but didn't think she would have time to pack a bag. All she'd brought with her were clothes. They were replaceable. She grabbed her cell phone off her desk, slipped it into her pocket, and then grabbed her purse, dropping the flash drive inside.

Before she left, she took another deep breath and exhaled, then stepped out of her office. Axel Powers could

screw himself! She pasted a fake smile on her face when the housekeeper came out of one of the other rooms.

“Mr. Powers asked me to run some errands for him in town. I’ll be back soon.”

The housekeeper didn’t return her smile. She only nodded. Marissa had noticed that the people who worked for Axel rarely smiled. She understood why now.

As soon as she reached her car, her pulse began to slow. Okay, that hadn’t been so hard. Her relief was short-lived when she tried to start her car, and the engine refused to turn over. “Damn, damn, damn!” She slammed the palm of her hand against the steering wheel.

Intentional? Maybe. No, more like probably. This wasn’t the end of it. She refused to let Axel win. She got out of the car and hurried to the garage, going to the box on the wall. She grabbed another set of keys with only one objective: get to the police station. From there, she would figure out what she needed to do.

The drive wasn’t long, only about ten minutes, but she kept looking in the rearview mirror, expecting to see someone chasing her. A couple of times, she veered dangerously close to the edge of the road. *Calm down*, she told herself. Yeah, that wasn’t happening. She didn’t breathe easier until she parked the car and went inside.

“I need to speak to someone about Axel Powers,” she told the woman behind the desk, who raised an eyebrow at her request.

“That’s a nasty bruise you have on your face,” the woman whose nametag read Dunn remarked. She was young, maybe early twenties, with red hair and freckles.

Marissa reached up and felt her cheek, then flinched when her fingers touched the tender skin. “He attacked me. I need to file a complaint,” she firmly stated, but tears filled her eyes.

Dunn snorted. “Against Axel Powers? Are you sure that’s what you want to do?”

“Quite sure.” She could feel some of her bravado returning. She was going to make Axel pay. He couldn’t treat her, or any other woman, as if they were put on earth just for his pleasure.

“Follow me. I’ll take you to one of the detectives.”

She followed Dunn down a long hallway noticing the closed doors on both sides. At the end of the hall was a door marked exit. A bland, pale green paint colored the walls, and the place reeked of stale coffee. She would hate to work there every day.

The woman knocked on a door with opaque glass. The name, Detective Baker, was written in bold, black letters. A moment later, a deep voice told them to come in. Dunn opened the door, then quickly explained what was going on.

The detective, a man in his late fifties with gray hair and a mustache, looked surprised. He motioned for her to take a seat, and Dunn left, closing the door behind her.

“I’m Detective Baker. Are you sure you want to file a complaint against Axel?” he asked, with more than a hint of

skepticism.

He was the second person to ask her that, as if Axel was some kind of god or something. It didn't matter. She raised her chin. "What would you do in my situation?" she asked, her voice trembling with anger. "He hit me and told me he wanted me waiting for him in his bed when he returned."

The detective's expression grew serious. "You do know he's a powerful man in this town, don't you?"

"Does that mean you won't help me?" she said, her voice rising in alarm. She started to stand.

He waved her back down with one hand. "Settle down. I just thought I would mention it. If what you say is true, then of course, I'll help you. That's what I'm here for. You'll have to fill out some paperwork, though." His chair squeaked as he came to his feet. He rummaged inside a file cabinet. "Never anything here when I need it. I'll have to get the papers. Would you like a cup of coffee or anything?"

She shook her head. "No, I'm fine." At least, she was now.

Detective Baker left the room, and she finally began to relax. Axel couldn't hurt her here. She didn't care how powerful he thought he was. No one was above the law. She glanced at the clock on the wall. The minutes slowly ticked by. She shifted her position in the chair but didn't breathe easier again until the door finally opened, and the detective returned wearing a grim expression.

"I also have a flash drive," she blurted. "I think he's involved in illegal activities." She reached inside her purse and

brought it out.

He took the flash drive, barely glancing at it before tossing it into a drawer in his desk, then taking a seat once again.

“I spoke with Axel on the phone, and he made some pretty serious allegations against you, young lady,” his tone solemn.

She sat straighter. “About me? What did he say?” Her heart began to race.

“He said you broke into his computer and stole some files. I assume that’s what’s on the flash drive. He said these files contain information about corporate mergers that he’s working on. The information could be worth a lot of money if someone wanted to sell it.”

“That’s not why I took it. It looked like illegal activity to me. You have to open the files,” she insisted.

Detective Baker’s expression remained unreadable. “We will, we will.”

Why didn’t she believe him?

“He also said you stole one of his cars. Is that true?”

Marissa felt the blood drain from her face. “I only took it so I could get away from his estate. I was scared. He was going to force himself on me. He did something to my car so I couldn’t drive it.”

He propped his arms on the desk, lacing his fingers together. “You know, stealing a car is a felony offense. It can send you to prison for a long time. Are you sure you want to

press charges against him? Maybe it was all a misunderstanding. If you apologize, we can forget all about this, and you can probably return to work for him. I'll talk to him, even put in a good word for you."

"You're taking his side? He was going to rape me," she ground out.

He shrugged. "Did anyone else hear him tell you that?"

She slumped down in her chair. "No," she mumbled.

"It'll be his word against yours, and Axel is an upstanding member of this community. He donates a lot of money."

Axel was right. He *was* powerful. Marissa had a feeling she was screwed. She couldn't rely on the local police to help her. Axel had bought and paid for them.

The detective's door was suddenly flung open, and the woman from the front desk began to talk rapidly about an ongoing situation. "You better get up here quick. Jackson is back, and he's threatening to shoot his neighbor. He brought his shotgun with him this time."

"Never a dull moment around here," he grumbled, then looked at Marissa. "Keep your seat, and I'll be back in a few minutes. We'll see if we can get all this straightened out. I'm sure you just let your imagination run wild. I'll have to convince Axel not to press charges against you. He might not if you go back to him. He did say you were a good assistant, just a little dramatic." He closed the door behind him.

"You've got to be kidding me," she said as her thoughts raced. There was no way she would hang around and

then go back to work for Axel. She jumped to her feet and started for the door. At the last minute, she turned around and grabbed the flash drive from the desk drawer.

She eased the door open and heard men arguing up front. She glanced toward the back and made her way to the exit door. Once outside, she scanned the area. All clear. She didn't hesitate but went to Axel's car and got in. If he wanted to accuse her of stealing one of his cars, she might as well use it to get away.

Her heart was still pounding as she passed the city limits sign. She glanced at the dials, making sure she didn't speed. Getting pulled over might be the last straw. "Oh, great," she mumbled when she noticed the car was almost out of gas. She would have to go back into town if she wanted to fill the tank. Not a good idea right now.

She quickly looked around, then pulled down a dirt road. By the time she found a place to pull off, the car was starting to sputter. She barely made it behind a stand of trees in an open pasture, but at least no one would see the car from the road. Now she was stranded. Not only did she have Axel looking for her, but probably the police, too.

What the hell was she going to do? She could walk back to the main road and hitch a ride. The thought of getting into a car with a stranger didn't appeal to her. She couldn't call her parents because they'd gone on a cruise and wouldn't have phone service. She bit her bottom lip and closed her eyes.

She could call Blade. God, she hadn't spoken to him since the funeral. Ten years had passed. Did he still hate her? She already knew the answer. Everyone had said it wasn't her

fault, but the look in his eyes that day had tried, convicted, and condemned her to a hell filled with guilt.

She was still in contact with his aunt. Aunt Peggy once told Marissa that Galen, his Aunt Peggy refused to call him by his nickname, Blade, had joined the Navy, then went on to become a Navy Seal, and then later, that he'd left the Navy.

Marissa did not doubt that he'd made a badass Seal. His intense gaze alone could pin you to the wall. He'd always seemed dark and mysterious, and yes, she'd always been a little attracted to him. There was something about the unknown that intrigued her.

Once, she'd seen him grab a man almost twice his size by the throat for calling a waitress a slut. It had all happened in an instant. One minute he'd been sitting in a booth at the diner, then he was on his feet like a panther attacking. Before all was said and done, the big bully was on his knees apologizing.

But that was a long time ago. Marissa had to hold onto the belief there was something inside Blade that would make him sympathetic toward her predicament.

Besides, he was the only one she knew who could help her. He was also the one man who scared her more than Axel. She hesitated before pulling up his name. Actually, his nickname was the way she had it listed. She'd never learned why everyone called him Blade.

“Here goes nothing.” She said a silent prayer and called him, then jumped when he answered.

“Blade here. Who's this?”

His gravelly voice was the same as she remembered.
“It’s Marissa. Marissa Finch.”

There was just the slightest hesitation. “What the hell do you want?”

“I need your help.”

“And you think *I’m* going to help *you*?”

“He’ll kill me if you don’t.”

There was another hesitation, followed by an exasperated sigh. “Where are you?”

Chapter Two

“You’re an idiot,” Blade grumbled under his breath. He had a death grip on the steering wheel, gripping it so hard his knuckles turned white. With a muttered curse, he loosened his hold, but it didn’t lessen the tension flowing through him. That’s what she did to him. She twisted him all up on the inside.

It had been ten years since he last saw Marissa. The day of the funeral, to be exact. His gut clenched. God, he hadn’t thought about that day in forever. He hadn’t wanted to. It was better to think about happier times. But as hard as he tried, he couldn’t stop his thoughts from drifting back to that day, and the memories flooded in with a force that caught him off guard.

Blade had spotted her after the funeral before she realized he was watching her. She’d worn all black that day. A plain black shift and low heels, but even in a simple dress, she’d looked stunning. Her long black hair cascaded down her back, almost to her waist. There was an air of sadness surrounding her. She’d looked so different from the first time he saw her.

Danny had introduced her to him. Man, his little brother had been crazy proud of her, and with good reason. Hell, Blade had been shocked Danny landed someone like Marissa. Not that Danny hadn’t been good-looking, but he tended to be quieter and more of an introvert who sometimes leaned toward depression. Marissa was the exact opposite. She

was vibrant and full of life. It wasn't hard to see she was special.

Blade remembered her eyes flashing a deep emerald green, but she would blush every time she caught him looking at her. He'd always wondered what she was thinking at that moment.

But what drew his gaze were her long legs. She came across as sweetly innocent—until she walked toward you. She gave off an unintentional sultry vibe with each step. He'd get hard whenever he imagined those legs wrapping around his waist and pulling him in deeper. Even now, just the thought sent a rush of desire through him.

But she hadn't been his then, and she damn sure wasn't his now. That was the very reason he'd stayed away back then. How could he lust after his little brother's girl? That was all kinds of wrong.

He shouldn't have kept his distance. If he'd returned, he might've prevented everything that happened. He might've been able to stop her. Except he hadn't returned. At least, not in time. He sucked in a deep breath, then blew it out. The regret and guilt weighed heavily on him. What was done couldn't be undone.

Dammit! He should've left Marissa to her own devices tonight. He seriously doubted someone wanted to kill her. Aunt Peggy said Marissa did something in business management. A top assistant or something until he'd cut off his aunt. The last person he wanted to talk about was Marissa. He'd only called his aunt out of duty since she was his only living relative.

What had Danny said about Marissa the last night Blade spoke to him? He'd been so upset that his words were confusing, but Blade got the gist of it. That she'd ruined everything. If she'd loved him, then she would've let him explain. She'd ruined all his plans. Yeah, that pretty much summed up what he said right after she broke his heart.

So, why had he agreed to help her? Damned if he knew. Maybe he just needed to see some remorse, a little guilt—something, at least.

As the sun started to set, Blade turned off the main freeway. If her directions were correct, she was somewhere down this road. He grabbed his phone off the console and redialed the number she'd called from. She immediately answered.

“I'm on the road now,” he said gruffly.

“I'll flash the headlights so you can see where I am.”

He drove for another mile until he saw blinking headlights. The car was mostly hidden from the view of the road. “I'm here,” he said. He couldn't stop the cold tone in his voice, not that he even tried. Marissa knew exactly what he thought about her. Why try to change her opinion?

He slowed, leaving the road, then crossed into the open pasture and drove up to the trees. He watched as she stepped out, and despite himself, he was awestruck by her beauty.

This wasn't good. He'd hoped she'd grown a wart on her nose or something. That time and guilt might've claimed her beauty, but she still looked the same and moved with that same sultry walk.

As Marissa approached, Blade noticed her hair was a little shorter—just past her shoulders. He'd always liked her longer tresses. His gaze met hers, and he noted the wariness in her eyes. Yeah, she should be wary of him. He hadn't spoken to her after the funeral, but she knew anger had burned deep inside him.

Then Blade noticed the bruise along her jawline. His eyes narrowed as his anger shifted to a more dangerous form as he considered the possibility that some of what she'd told him about this man might be true.

She opened the pickup door and scooted inside, hesitating for a moment when she saw his expression. Someone had hit her, and right now, he knew she was scared of him doing the same thing, which was probably why she hadn't closed the door. Blade fought to control the adrenaline rushing through him as much as he could.

“Who hit you?” he asked, struggling to keep an even tone.

Marissa looked unsure if she even wanted to stay in his pickup. “Axel. My boss...*was* my boss,” she replied, her voice barely above a whisper.

“Where does he live?” He spoke between gritted teeth. No man should raise his hand to a woman.

“No, we can't go back!” Her words were frantic, and there was a wild look in her eyes. “He owns the town. I went to the police first.” She downed her head in shame. “You're the only one I knew to call. I'm sorry. I probably shouldn't have mixed you up in any of this.”

Okay, so he wouldn't go back and beat the shit out of this Axel guy. At least, not yet. He glanced toward the woods, his gaze landing on the car, partially hidden by the trees, and saw that it was a high-dollar Porsche. Probably low six figures. Hers?

“Are you just going to leave your car? Does it need to be towed or something?” he asked as he turned back to her.

“It's not mine. It's his.”

“You stole it?” he asked, not even trying to hide the disbelief in his voice. Marissa had been a lot of things, but he found it hard to believe she was a car thief.

She raised her head and glared at him, some of the fire he remembered returning in that one look. “I took it so I could get away from him. He'd disabled my car, so I didn't have a choice. But yes, he told the police I'd stolen it. They wouldn't even listen to me, and they didn't believe me. It was his word against mine. I just want you to help me get away from here, and then I'll figure out what I need to do.”

“I can't,” he said and saw her crumble in front of him. “You need to shut your door.”

She drew in a shaky breath and nodded. As soon as she closed it and fastened her seatbelt, he turned the pickup around and returned to the road. As he pulled onto the main highway, he met a dark sedan with tinted windows turning on the road he'd just left. A road that, as far as he'd seen, had no traffic. He glanced in his rearview mirror. Someone looking for Marissa? Possibly.

Damn, what had he gotten himself involved in? He had a feeling this went deeper than he'd first thought. After a few minutes of silence, he finally asked, "How are you connected to Axel?"

"I worked for him. I was his assistant. At least, that was my job description. I didn't realize he only wanted to... use me. He had a meeting, or I might not have been able to escape. He told me he wanted me waiting in his bed when he returned. I knew I had to get out of there. He said I would regret it if I ran. I'm afraid he's going to come looking for me, and I don't know what he'll do if he finds me," she whispered the last words.

His grip tightened on the steering wheel.

Not your problem!

He forced himself to disregard the bruise on her face. Hell, she might have lied about how she got it. Blade was even skeptical of the man's words. Would Axel go so far as to hunt her down? Some men were good at making empty threats, and he couldn't help questioning the sincerity of this one, especially since, according to his last conversation with Danny, Marissa had a history of lying.

"I'll take you to Dallas and drop you off at the bus station. I can't offer you any more than that." He spoke with cold finality, emphasizing his deep-seated anger toward her. Being around her brought up too much of the past. It was a past that he had no desire to revisit. He hoped he'd made it clear enough that he was only willing to do the bare minimum to help her.

"Thank you," she quietly murmured.

Having her in his pickup was bad enough. Her perfume was already wrapping around him, pulling him in. He wanted to lean closer and inhale the heady fragrance. She'd always had the ability to tease his senses. Yeah, he had to get his mind off her.

“Tell me about Axel.”

“What do you want to know?” Marissa asked.

“How did you end up working for him?”

“I was employed by a company managing apartments and handling their finances—in Dallas. It's a fairly large corporation, and this was one of their smaller companies. The new owners brought in their own people when they sold it—which is understandable. Things like that happen a lot. I could've stayed on, but for less pay and a downgrade in position. I didn't want to do that. The owner's assistant mentioned Axel Powers and how he was looking for an assistant. The pay would've been equal to what I was making, if not more. She gave me a phone number, I called, and got the job.”

“Just like that? Over the phone, without an in-person interview?”

“I thought it was odd, too, but Connie had told me she would call and give me a good reference. I assumed Mr. Powers was desperate to find a replacement.”

“So, you just show up on his doorstep?”

“Yes, I guess I did.”

“First impression?”

She was thoughtful for a moment. “His estate is huge. In the Greek revival style, very ornate, with lots of white marble, and the inside is like stepping into a model home. Original paintings on the walls, and everything was ultra-modern, almost sterile. I suppose if you like that style, it was breathtaking.”

“But you didn’t care for it.”

Her nose wrinkled. “Not really.”

“Did you stay in town or on the estate?”

“On the estate. I had my own room in a different area of the main house. Axel told me it was in case he needed me.”

Judging from the Porsche and owning an estate, the guy had money. “And Axel, what about him? What was your first impression?” He glanced across the seat, but when his gaze lingered a little too long, he quickly pulled his eyes back to the road.

“Handsome, late forties, sandy-brown hair, blue eyes, around six feet. Maybe a little too handsome. You know, the kind of man who doesn’t sweat.” She blushed. “The country club sort. I doubt he ever got his hands dirty doing a real job.”

“But something else about him put you on edge,” he guessed.

She glanced across the seat and met his gaze for a moment before looking away. “I couldn’t quite put my finger on it. It was just one of those funny feelings. Connie had highly recommended Axel, though. I figured I was tired from the drive and was seeing things that weren’t there.”

“Always trust your gut,” he told her.

Her smile was wry. “That’s what Daddy constantly tells me. But I didn’t listen to it. I was busy the first week learning how Axel wanted everything done. There was a lot of filing and learning his computer system, which was fairly simple. As soon as I could relax a little, I noticed him looking at me oddly. At first, I thought I imagined it.”

“Until today,” he supplied.

“Yes, until today.” A shiver swept over her. “That’s when he grabbed me and told me about my extra duties.”

“It might’ve been good money. You know, an extra bonus.” At her indrawn breath, Blade wished he could call back the words. He’d wanted to hurt her and pretty much accomplished that.

“Is that what you think of me?” she asked after a moment.

Blade didn’t say anything, then released a breath. “No, that’s not what I think. You might be a lot of things, but you wouldn’t stay with a man just for his money.” Danny had plenty of his own, and she hadn’t seen fit to stay with him. He doubted she’d changed much in that area. “So, you ran out of his house, stole his car, went to the police station, and they wouldn’t help. Why wouldn’t they? That doesn’t make sense.”

“Because he has them in his back pocket. I think he’s involved in something illegal.”

“And you’re sure about that?” Was she angry that Axel made a pass, or was she telling the truth? He hadn’t seen her for ten years. He didn’t know which direction her moral compass pointed. There was one way to find out. He picked up

his phone off the center console and punched a number before bringing it to his ear. It rang twice before it was answered.

“Carter here. What’s up, Blade?”

“I have an...acquaintance with me who ran into some trouble with her boss. She thinks he might be dirty. He warned her if she ran from him, he would hunt her down. Can you see if there’s anything on him? His name is Axel Powers, and he lives between Dallas and Tyler.”

“I’ll call you as soon as I find out anything.”

Blade ended the call and put his phone back on the console.

“What are you, CIA? FBI?” she asked.

“Neither one. Too many rules and regulations.”

“And you don’t have any rules where you work now?”

“A few, but not enough to make me feel like I’m choking.”

“So, what do you do? Go around helping distraught women who make claims against their boss?”

He shrugged. “Sometimes. We’re a team and work well together doing different jobs.”

They didn’t talk after that, which was okay with him. Just having her in the pickup with him was doing damage to his senses. The sooner he got her to the bus station, the better. He would drop her off, then get back to his own life. Yeah, he had a feeling it wouldn’t be that easy to forget about her. They were almost to the bus station when his phone began to ring.

“What do you have?” Blade asked.

“On the surface, Axel Powers comes across aboveboard,” Carter told him. “But I had our guy dig a little deeper, and it looks like he’s got some questionable associates. If he threatened your friend that he would be looking for her if she ran, then you can trust that he’ll make good on his threat.”

Blake clamped his lips together at the news. That wasn’t what he wanted to hear. He’d been hoping Marissa was being overly dramatic. Now what was he going to do? A dozen scenarios came to mind, but he always came back to his only option. As much as it left a sour taste in his mouth, he had to protect Marissa, even if it meant making a difficult decision.

“Okay, we’re headed to Mama Rose’s.”

“Some of us are already here.”

“Good. Once we get there, we can figure out what to do.” He ended the call and put the phone back on the console. He glanced across the seat. This was the last thing he wanted to do. “It would seem you were telling the truth. The guy’s probably dirty.”

“We’re not going to the bus station?”

“No, I’m taking you to Mama Rose’s. It’s one of our headquarters. We’ll see what we need to do from there.”

She twined her fingers together. “I’m sorry you’re stuck with me. If you would rather, just take me to the bus station, and I’ll figure this out on my own.”

Blade wished to God he could, but he refused to throw someone to the wolves, even someone like Marissa, and it

sounded like Axel Powers fit that category. “I’ll get you the help you need, and then we’ll go our separate ways.”

“Thank you. I know you blame me...”

“I don’t want to talk about the past,” he coldly interrupted. She was smart and kept her mouth shut for the rest of the drive.

She sat a little straighter when they turned off the highway, then down an old country road, dodging potholes, until he turned off again down a long private drive. He stopped in front of the old farmhouse and turned off the key.

“This is your headquarters?” She sounded unsure.

He sensed some of her trust wavering in his decision to bring her here as she scanned the property. There was nothing safe looking about the old farmhouse. They didn’t have armed guards. Anyone could drive in. But right now, someone knew they’d come on the property. There were cameras strategically placed, and someone watched the monitors twenty-four hours a day. Plenty of safeguards were in place if needed, and there were always several team members here at any given time.

“This is one of our headquarters,” he told her. “When I first joined the team, we all stayed at the farmhouse, but it got a little crowded, so we built another building farther back on the property. Most of us bunk there because it has a gym where we can train.”

She slowly nodded but still looked unsure. At this point, she should just be glad she was getting help.

Marissa pressed back against the seat when Savage and Wizard walked onto the porch. He almost smiled. Blade could

understand someone being intimidated by those two. Savage was big and all muscle. Wizard, on the other hand, wasn't quite as large, although he still had his fair share of muscles, but he looked scary as hell with ink up both arms, a scraggly beard, and hair that brushed his shoulders.

“You can call this home, at least for a few days,” he told her. He should probably feel bad that she looked uncomfortable, but he didn't.

Chapter Three

Marissa would swear Blade's tone hinted that he was taking some kind of twisted pleasure, placing her in a testosterone-dominated situation. Of course, why wouldn't he be thrilled? She was sure he was aware that the presence of two muscular, rough-looking men would intimidate anyone, and Marissa was no exception.

Her anger momentarily flared. She refused to let him see her discomfort.

Just as quickly as her anger rose to the surface, it dissolved in a puddle at her feet. He had every justification for loathing her. She was the reason Danny died that night.

Not intentionally, damn it. She'd never wanted him to die. If she had known just how unstable Danny was, she would've done... but she hadn't. She'd been seventeen, immature, and so damned confused.

It was water under the bridge. Blade didn't know the whole story, and she highly doubted he would believe her if she tried to tell him.

Did she want him to know the truth? She closed her eyes and pictured the two men when they'd been together. Danny had worshipped his older brother. They'd had a great relationship. She'd never had a brother or sister, and her cousins were a lot older or younger. She'd envied Blade and Danny's relationship.

No, some people needed to live in their bubbles.

She opened her eyes. Bubble or not, Marissa wouldn't let Blade see her cower. When he opened his door, she opened hers. They got out and started walking toward the front porch. Her slight smile wobbled slightly, but she didn't slow her steps. Were all the men here going to be this muscular and tall?

It didn't matter. She could do this. Just put one foot in front of the other—and don't stumble!

“I didn't expect to see you here, Savage,” Blade spoke first. “I figured you would be at home with Willow.”

Savage? What kind of name was Savage? But then, what kind of name was Blade? She glanced over at him and noticed the sheathed knife on his belt. He'd always had it with him back then, as if it was an extension of himself. Nothing had changed.

Savage shook his head. “I escaped. We've been staying at Willow's grandmother's while they're working on the interior of the plantation, but her grandmother's place is even worse. Willow is busy planning a wedding for her grandmother and Wyatt. They're tying the knot next month, and she wants everything to be perfect. That means meetings with the wedding planner, lots of flowers, and open decorating books everywhere. I can't even sit down without sitting on one. The caterers are running around like a bunch of chickens when the fox gets into their pen, and Willow keeps having me taste so much food, I'm afraid I'm going to start getting soft.”

The man beside him snorted. “I doubt that will ever happen.” His gaze turned to Blade. “He took me down on the mat three times yesterday. Didn't even give me a chance.”

His gaze turned to Marissa, narrowing on her bruised face. A flash of anger burned in his eyes briefly before it was gone.

“This is Marissa,” Blade introduced her. “That’s Savage on the left and Wizard on the right.”

Savage nodded. “Carter filled us in on what’s going on. We’re all here to help.”

“I appreciate it.” What the hell was she doing? How did she know for sure they would even help her? This was a mistake. She was about to ask Blade to take her to the nearest bus station when the screen door squeaked and an older woman stepped out.

“I thought I heard someone pull up,” she said with a wide smile, dusting her hands on the flowery apron tied around her waist. Her gray hair was pulled back into a bun at the base of her neck, and her eyes twinkled with warmth. She glanced at Marissa, then frowned when she looked at Blade. “I can’t believe you didn’t bring her inside. She doesn’t want to be around a bunch of men. The three of you together are enough to frighten anyone.”

“And that’s Mama Rose,” Blade told her. He smiled at the older woman. “Yes, I’m doing fine. Thank you for asking.”

She slapped her hands on her wide hips. “Don’t get smart with me, boy. I’ve boxed your ears before, and I can do it again. Besides, it hasn’t been that long since I saw you.”

Marissa was amazed at the change that came over Blade. He downed his head and looked at his feet. “Sorry.”

“Well, are you going to introduce me?”

“This is Marissa,” he said.

“Well, come inside with me, girl. I bet you could use something to drink while I finish getting dinner ready. I hope you’re hungry.”

Savage and Wizard moved out of the way as she stepped up on the porch and went inside with Mama Rose. “Something to drink would be nice, and yes, I’m starved.”

She was immediately surprised when she stepped inside. She didn’t know what she’d expected, but not a room this cozy or comfortable. The furniture was oversized, with crocheted doilies on the backs. There was an Austin stone fireplace with three large logs stacked inside. She imagined it would be comfortable sitting on the sofa with a glass of wine and a fire crackling in the hearth. They continued walking to the back of the house.

A long wooden table dominated one-half of the open-concept, farmhouse-style kitchen. It was a lot like her grandmother’s home, except the appliances were larger. The pleasant aroma of food cooking filled the room. It reminded Marissa that she hadn’t eaten all day. She finally began to feel more relaxed.

“Sweet tea?” Mama Rose asked.

“That sounds perfect, but I can get it if you point me in the right direction. I know you’re busy. I don’t want to be any trouble. Besides, I’ve been sitting for a while. I need to move around.”

Mama Rose studied her for a moment, then nodded. “Oh, honey, you’re not any trouble. But the glasses are in that

cabinet, you can get ice in the door of the refrigerator, and there's a jug inside with tea already made. Those boys can drink several jugs in a day." She picked up the spoon and began to stir something in a pot. "And you can call me Mama Rose, just like the boys."

She smiled at the thought of Blade and the two men on the porch being called boys. Marissa went to the cabinet Mama Rose pointed to and brought down a glass. After filling it with ice, she poured tea from the spout on the jug, took a long drink, and closed her eyes. She hadn't had tea like this since the last time she was home. There was nothing instant about it.

"This is good."

Mama Rose beamed. "I'm glad you like it. Now, tell me how you know Blade."

She was in the middle of taking a drink and choked. Mama Rose waited patiently for her to recover. What if she pretended she didn't hear her question? From the look on Mama Rose's face, Marissa didn't think she'd let the matter drop. Still, she hesitated for a moment before she finally said anything. "I used to date his younger brother."

Mama Rose tapped the spoon against the pot's rim and set it on a spoon holder before opening the oven and looking inside. Satisfied that whatever was cooking was okay, she closed the oven door.

"He only has one brother that I know of, and he passed on a long while back," Mama Rose said.

Marissa leaned her hip against the counter and ran her thumb up and down the condensation forming on the glass. She didn't meet Mama Rose's eyes. "Yes, it was a long time ago. We broke up right before he died." She waited for the barrage of questions that would surely follow and wondered exactly how she should answer. When Mama Rose didn't comment, she looked up.

Mama Rose was watching her but didn't say anything else. She raised the lid on another pot, nodded, then replaced it. "How did you get the bruise on your face?"

Marissa let out the breath she'd been holding, glad Mama Rose didn't continue asking about her relationship with Blade or his brother. At least, this was something she could talk about. "The man I was working for informed me that he wanted to expand my office duties into the bedroom."

She gripped the glass a little tighter. Why hadn't she seen through Axel sooner? Stupid! For that matter, why had he come highly recommended? She took in a breath, then let it out slowly. None of that mattered now.

She met Mama Rose's eyes again. "I didn't agree with him, so he slapped me."

Mama Rose's lips compressed into a thin line. "Someone should take a horsewhip to him. That's what my grandpappy would've done." She opened the oven and slid a sheet of biscuits next to what was already cooking. "Then what happened?"

"He had a meeting. Axel said he wanted me waiting for him in his bed when he returned. So, I ran away."

Mama Rose clicked her tongue and shook her head in disapproval. “Some people can be cruel. I hope you went to the police.”

“I did,” she confirmed.

“And?” Mama Rose prompted.

“They didn’t believe me,” she said, words filled with frustration. Just thinking about it now made her want to scream. “Axel is very powerful. I didn’t realize how much. He bought and paid for the police, a detective, at least, the one I spoke with. He wanted me to go back to Axel and apologize.” She paused for a moment, then decided she might as well tell her everything. “I sort of took Axel’s car. He accused me of stealing it. It boiled down to my word against his.”

“What that horrible man did is unacceptable,” Mama Rose blew out an angry breath. “Then what happened?”

“I rushed out of the police station when there was a commotion up front. I did the only thing I could, I took his car, but I didn’t realize it was almost out of gas. I barely made it out of town and down an old country road just off the main highway. I hid it in a pasture behind some trees.” Her forehead wrinkled. “My parents are out of the country. I was afraid to involve any of my girlfriends. Blade was the only one I knew who might be able to help.” She took a nervous drink of her tea. “I’m afraid he doesn’t like me very much. We have some...issues between us. I doubt they’ll ever be resolved. If I’d known anyone else, I would’ve called them.”

“Don’t you fret none. Blade is a good man. If he says he’ll help you, he will. It doesn’t matter what went on in the past. He won’t let that man hurt you ever again.”

Would Blade be able to protect her? Or would he throw her to the wolves, or in this case, Axel—same thing. She wouldn't blame him if he did. He didn't know the whole truth about what happened between her and Danny.

She doubted he would even believe her if she told him. The few times she was around Blade, she saw how he protected him. Danny didn't have to fight any of his battles. Not when big brother was there to do it for him.

Marissa knew she was at fault to some degree. That was why she still felt guilty about what happened. There were so many things that she could've done differently. Talked to someone. She couldn't change the past, though, and it continued to haunt her.

With everything between them, would Blade still feel the need to protect her? She wasn't sure. She could still feel the anger rolling off him whenever he looked her way. She doubted anything would change what he thought about her.

She looked up and saw Mama Rose watching her. Marissa realized she hadn't commented when Mama Rose tried to reassure her. "Yes, I'm sure he'll help me."

Mama Rose nodded and then turned back to the stove.

It wouldn't be so bad if she didn't have that same awareness of Blade that she had the first time she met him. Marissa had assumed she wouldn't feel the same. She was older now. That had to count for something—right? No more silly infatuations?

She'd been wrong. She couldn't stop her initial reaction when she saw him this time any more than she

could've stopped it back then. Her body had tingled with awareness. She had the same fluttering in her stomach when she looked at him this time.

Not much about him had changed. He was still tall: six feet, three inches. He still had short, dark hair. When she first met Blade, he didn't have a beard or mustache. Now he did but shaved close to his face. He'd always had muscles. Danny said Blade worked out all the time. Now those muscles were more defined, more menacing.

Blade looked a little rougher, in a sexy way. Just like back then, she was drawn to the aura of danger surrounding him. He wasn't supposed to make her feel like this after all these years. She hated that her heart raced every time she looked his way.

No, nothing had changed. He was still as brooding as ever and still rarely smiled. Especially when he looked at her. No, his expression was the total opposite. She hadn't expected him to be overjoyed when he answered the phone, but she had hoped his seething anger toward her might have diminished over the years.

When Danny first introduced her to Blade, a shiver ran down her spine as though he was looking into her soul. There'd been something back then that intrigued her about him. It was as if there was a magnetic pull she couldn't resist. Whenever he'd shift his attention to Danny, she was left with an inexplicable yearning for Blade to focus on her again.

She swirled the ice around in her glass, then took a drink, wishing it could wash away the memories returning in

full force. Dammit, she'd kept them buried for so long. Why couldn't the past stay where it belonged?

The kicker was, if she made a list of things to avoid in a man, all she would have to do was put Blade's name at the top. Back then, he'd always seemed moody to her, almost angry at times—that hadn't changed. But when Blade would turn away and focus his attention on Danny, she saw a different, kinder side of him.

And here she was, thinking about Blade again. He was going to drive her crazy. She straightened, scanning the room, hoping she could do something to take her mind off him. Mama Rose must've noticed her look of desperation.

“If you want, you can bring down some plates.” Mama Rose pointed to another cabinet.

Marissa was grateful for something to do. Anything to get her mind off what happened today. And maybe to get her mind off Blade, too.

She got busy setting the plates on the table, one in front of each chair, then went back for silverware and put utensils at each plate. Next, she filled glasses with ice and tea before taking them to the table.

Having something to do helped a little, but she was still in her own thoughts. “How long have you lived here?” she finally asked.

“All my life. This was my granddad's place and before him, his father's.” She was quiet for a moment as if remembering back. “I married a good man, but he wasn't very smart with the finances. We barely scraped by sometimes, but

it didn't matter. We loved each other. One day, Lester had a heart attack."

"I'm so sorry."

Mama Rose nodded. "We didn't have any kind of insurance. I almost lost it all, but Carter was visiting one of his men, and we were in the waiting room together. We got to talking, and one thing led to another. Lester was in the hospital a week before he died." She stared off into space for a moment. "I still miss his warm smile and the way he laughed. You never really get over losing your best friend, and that's what he was—husband, friend." Her eyes misted a little. She dabbed them with the hem of her apron.

"My parents are like that, best friends."

"It was hard, but Carter made sure I didn't lose the place. I still didn't like being out here all by myself, so when he suggested putting some of his men up here, I jumped at the chance. I've always loved to cook, so it worked well for us both. He even bought bigger appliances. With this bunch, I needed a stove I could cook a lot of food on and a refrigerator to store more food. He even bought me a large freezer and keeps it stocked. You'll find these men that come and go are good people."

"It seems like a lot of work."

"Carter makes sure I have all the help I want. Besides, I never had any kids, even though I wanted them." She paused, stirring, and her gaze looked dreamy and far away. "So many nights I prayed to be blessed with a child, but that never happened. Then God sent me my boys. And a few girls. They're my kids. Sure, sometimes they get a little rowdy, but

it's not hard to calm them down. God works in mysterious ways. We don't always know what He has in store for us. We have to trust Him."

Mama Rose's affection for the team was evident. It wasn't hard to see she was kind-hearted. Perhaps it wouldn't be so bad staying at the farmhouse for a few days, after all. She would stay out of Blade's way. It shouldn't be too difficult. The farmhouse was fairly large. He'd said some of them bunked in another building. That would be even better. She would try to stay optimistic about the whole situation.

"It's about to get rowdy in here," Mama Rose announced. "Don't let them intimidate you. Their rough exterior is just for show. They're all bark and no bite." She went to the doorway and yelled, "Dinner is ready!"

Despite Mama Rose's reassurances, Marissa remained cautious. She still wasn't too sure about Blade. He might just bite.

Heavy footsteps grew louder and closer, and Marissa backed up a few steps. They sounded like a herd of elephants. Their boisterous conversation and playful banter filled the air. They quieted only a little when they filed inside the dining area. Knowing they could joke and cut up with each other didn't lessen her apprehension.

"Smells good," Savage said. "I've missed your biscuits, Mama Rose. No one can make biscuits better than you."

"I can't take all the credit. The recipe has been handed down for generations." Mama Rose studied him for a moment.

“I like the change in you since you met Willow. She’s been good for you.”

At the mention of Willow, a warm smile curved his lips. “I think we needed each other. She’s the best thing that ever happened to me.” His smile slipped and his expression turned solemn. “I’m not sure what I would do if anything ever happened to her.”

Marissa saw a flicker of pain in his eyes and wondered what had happened between them to cause it.

“She’ll be fine with you in her life. No one would dare try to hurt her again. The next time you come here, bring Willow with you. Have you set a wedding date?”

Marissa listened as Savage spoke, a smile playing about her lips. It wasn’t hard to see the happiness and excitement in his eyes as he talked about his upcoming wedding. He was completely enamored with his fiancé.

“She wants a spring wedding, so that’s what we’re going to do. Maybe April or May when the flowers start to bloom. She wants to have one outside. She’ll make a beautiful bride with the sun shining down on her, surrounded by blooming flowers, and...”

One of the men Marissa had yet to be introduced to snorted. “Next thing we know, you’ll be spouting poetry about her.”

Savage glared at the other man, but it didn’t faze him. They would’ve turned and run if he’d cast that look at anyone on the street.

“You boys grab something and carry it over to the table, and Renegade quit teasing Savage. You wait and see, someday, some girl will come along and knock you off your feet.” She turned to Marissa. “That’s Renegade, and coming into the kitchen now is Kanon and Cutter.”

All three nodded toward her and said hello. They were just as muscular and as intimidating as the others. Marissa squared her shoulders and returned their greeting. Mama Rose had said don’t let them scare her, but that wasn’t easy to do.

The kitchen was large and had plenty of room at the long wooden table, but she felt dwarfed around all the men. Blade was the last one to come into the room. Their gazes locked for a second or two before hers skittered away. Heat immediately crawled up her face. Her gaze landed on Mama Rose and the speculative sparkle in her eyes.

Mama Rose needed to stop thinking about whatever she was thinking. That definitely wasn’t happening. Blade hated her. Maybe she was physically attracted to him just a little, but that was as far as it went. As soon as this was over, she would go back to her life and they would never see each other again.

She wondered at the strange feeling of sadness that washed over her. No, it had to be something else. She needed to get out more. That was her problem. She rarely dated. Every time she did, she found something wrong with the man. He was too tall, too short, talked too much, didn’t talk enough. The list went on and on. Her mother once told her that she would know it as soon as she met the right man. That man just hadn’t come along yet.

“Sit here next to me,” Mama Rose said as the men carried platters of food to the table.

Mama Rose had cooked enough to feed an army. Marissa looked around the table and realized a small army was already here. It must cost a fortune to feed all of them. Two more men came in and joined them. They both nodded toward her and she did the same.

“That’s Carter and Rader,” Mama Rose introduced them. “And this is Marissa.”

Marissa didn’t think she would ever get used to this many people at the table. She was an only child and both her parents’ families were small. When they got together every summer, there weren’t many more people at the reunion than was at the table right now. And definitely, none of the male members in her family were this well-built.

The conversation at the table flowed around Marissa. She caught bits and pieces of different topics. The men spoke about workout routines at one end of the table while some of the others talked about helping Mama Rose with her fall garden. Marissa was under the assumption some of the men lived on the property full-time.

No one mentioned Marissa’s predicament. Would she have to explain again that Axel had wanted her in his bed? She was so nervous that she was afraid she didn’t do Mama Rose’s meal the justice it deserved.

Occasionally, Marissa would look at her and Mama Rose would smile comfortingly to let her know everything would be okay. She certainly hoped it would. They ended the meal with the biggest pan of peach cobbler Marissa had ever

seen. She was surprised when one of the men scraped the empty pan to get the last little bit. She didn't realize men ate so much.

They surprised her again when they got up from the table and carried the dishes over to the sink. Everyone pitched in with the cleaning and the banter flowed between them.

One man scraped, one washed, and another loaded the dishwasher. She realized there were two dishwashers, which made sense when she thought about it.

She'd seen her father help her mother clean, but these were big, burly men. She would never have expected them to jump right in and help Mama Rose. Except they did. When she tried to dodge them, they shooed her and Mama Rose over to the table with a fresh glass of tea. Before she knew it, the kitchen was spotless. Each one said goodnight before they left.

"Like I told you, they're good boys." Mama Rose came to her feet, taking their empty glasses to the sink. "If you're ready, I'll show you where you can sleep tonight. Did you bring any luggage?"

"I left so quickly that I didn't bother to pack. I grabbed my purse and cell phone, then ran." She came to her feet.

"Don't worry about it. I'm sure Sophie has something that will fit you. She's one of the girls I was telling you about. A pretty little thing. She has all the guys wrapped around her little finger. But as my daddy used to say, she's a scrapper."

"She goes on assignments, too?"

"Oh yes, all the time. She's on one right now."

“You don’t think she’ll mind me borrowing some of her clothes?”

“Oh Lord, no, not at all. She’s the sweetest person you’d ever meet. That’s why this job suits her so well. People underestimate her. But I do worry about all of them. They don’t tell me everything they do, but I know it can sometimes be dangerous. Carter and Rader trained them well, though.”

She followed Mama Rose out of the kitchen and down a hallway.

“Here you go,” Mama Rose said. She opened a door and then stepped back for Marissa to enter. “We’re the only ones who sleep on this side of the house, so it’s very private.”

Marissa smiled as soon as she stepped inside. There was a white iron bedstead with a log cabin quilt on the bed. White cotton pillowcases trimmed with islet lace covered the fluffy pillows, while embroidered pillows with flowers and redbirds carefully stitched on them completed the picture. A white rocking chair sat in the corner facing the window, and on the white mirrored dresser was a hairbrush with a silver handle.

“I know it’s not modern, but the bed is comfortable.”

“Oh no, I love it. It reminds me of when I go to my Nana’s house. You’re a lot like her.”

Mama Rose beamed. “I knew I liked you. Now, I’ll go get those clothes for you and be right back.” She scurried out of the room as Marissa wandered over to the bed, running her hand lightly over the quilt. It wouldn’t be so bad here if Blade

kept his distance. She still had him to deal with, but maybe they would take care of Axel quickly.

She was sure that once Axel faced some of the men, and they warned him to back off, that would be the end of it. She didn't think he'd want to go up against them. She had no doubt he would drop any trumped-up charges he had on her, and immediately stop making threats.

Mama Rose returned with an armful of clothes. Marissa hoped she didn't have to stay here *that* long. She quickly took everything from her and set the clothes on the bed.

"That's a lot," she said.

"You never know how long these things are going to take. If you need them, use them. If not, I can always put them back. If you need anything else, just let me know in the morning. There's soap and shower products in the bathroom, a new toothbrush, toothpaste, and a few other things you might need. I usually get up early and have coffee ready for the boys, but get up whenever you want. Have a good night."

"Thank you."

Mama Rose turned and gave her a quick hug. "You're quite welcome, sweetie. I love having my boys around, but there's just something about the girls." With those parting words, she left the room, closing the door behind her.

Marissa wondered if Mama Rose included her as one of the girls. She wouldn't mind returning for a visit as long as she knew Blade wouldn't be here. That might be a little awkward. She would miss Mama Rose, though.

She walked over and opened one of the doors. It led to a closet. There were hangers inside, so she hung up most of the clothes. The underthings looked new. She wondered if Mama Rose kept them on hand just in case. She had a feeling she did. Marissa probably wasn't the only female who came here looking for a safe haven.

She put the underthings in one of the dresser drawers, then opened the other door in the room. The bathroom was small, but she didn't need much. There was a shower, a toilet, and a sink—perfect. Just like Mama Rose had told her, there were all sorts of products to see to her needs.

After indulging in a hot shower, she pulled on the borrowed nightgown, then crawled beneath the cover. The bed felt heavenly. The kind of mattress you could snuggle down on, and the pillows were perfect. There was only one problem—she couldn't fall asleep. She lay there watching the red-illuminated numbers on the bedside clock. After forty-five minutes, she was still awake.

Marissa finally shoved the cover to the side and got up. She slipped on the borrowed robe before leaving the bedroom. She remembered there were rockers on the front porch—just like her Nana's front porch. Sitting on Nana's front porch always relaxed her. Maybe Mama Rose's would do the same. It was after midnight, so surely, she'd be the only one up.

She quietly walked through the house, then grimaced when the screen squeaked. She held her breath and waited. Silence. She breathed a sigh of relief. It had been just a little noise, so she doubted anyone had been disturbed. As soon as

she sat on the rocker and pushed with the pad of her foot, she started to relax.

Nana lived in the country. She didn't have a lot of land, only a few acres, but the neighbors were far enough away that you couldn't see them. Her house was smaller than this one but had a wraparound porch. They would come out and sit after dinner and rock in comfortable silence for a few minutes, and then Nana would tell Marissa what it had been like growing up when she was young. Working in the garden, canning, and how her mother sewed all her clothes—every stitch perfect. Those were stories she cherished hearing.

She tensed when the screen squeaked. Before she even looked up, she knew who would be standing there.

Marissa should have stayed in her room, but she wouldn't have felt the light breeze on her face and wouldn't have begun to relax—until she was rudely interrupted. For just a little while, she'd started to feel better. As soon as Blade stepped out onto the porch, relaxed had flown out the window. She started to get up and go back inside but changed her mind at the last minute. She wasn't about to run away. She had nothing to be ashamed of.

Rather than sit on a rocking chair, Blade sat on the rail, leaning against the corner column and staring at her. She shifted in her seat, but stopped as soon as she realized what she was doing. Now, he was pissing her off.

She crossed her arms. “Why did you agree to help me when you hate me so much?”

He didn't say anything, and she wondered if he would even speak to her. Then he began to talk.

“To tell you the truth, I don’t know. I guess I just wanted to see if you felt any kind of remorse or guilt over what you did?”

Was he serious? “Guilt? Yes, I felt guilty, but I’m sure it wasn’t for the same reasons you blame me. And yes, I felt remorse. I still do on both accounts. I could’ve handled things differently, but it wouldn’t have changed anything. I would’ve still left him. It wasn’t a good situation for either one of us.” She ran a trembling hand through her hair. Dammit, she would’ve gone back to him! Not in the same way, but they’d had something special—at least for a little while.

“I spoke to him that night. You didn’t have to break his heart, then rip it out of his chest. Couldn’t you have let him down easy if you were determined to leave him anyway?”

Now she was curious. “What exactly did he tell you?”

“That you wouldn’t listen to him. You’d ruined everything.” He raked his fingers through his hair. “Danny was more sensitive than most men. You tore out his heart when you walked out of his life.”

Yes, Danny would say that. He was right, but there’d been a reason she’d run out of his apartment. He wasn’t good at taking the blame. She closed her eyes briefly and thought back to her relationship with him. It started so differently from how it ended, but weren’t most relationships like that? You expect one thing and get another.

So many things were falling apart toward the end of her relationship with Danny. She drew in a deep breath and opened her eyes. “Is that what he said? Never mind. He was right. I probably did ruin whatever plans he had.”

His eyes narrowed. “Because you left him. Was there another man?”

Blade immediately came to mind. That was crazy, of course. She’d barely known him, except for the stories Danny told her, and there were a lot of them. He constantly talked about Blade. Back then, his older brother had been larger than life. Funny, but he rarely spoke of anyone else. She knew their parents were gone, and they’d had money, which was obvious since Danny always seemed to have money to burn.

When Blade shifted his position, she was brought out of the past and realized she hadn’t answered his question. “No, there wasn’t another man.”

“Then, at least explain to me what happened between you. In the beginning, you both seemed happy.”

She leaned her head back against the rocking chair. “We were. Did he ever tell you how we first met?”

“No, he didn’t tell me much about your relationship, only that he was madly in love with you. He said you were perfect.”

She smiled when she thought about her and Danny’s beginning. “No, I was far from perfect, but I think I was different from what he was used to. He was such an introvert. We met at the library. He loved books and was always reading or sketching. He said every book was a good book for someone. Then he would laugh and say that some books might only be good for one person. He never said a book was bad.”

“Danny was a gentle soul.”

She gripped the arms of the rocking chair. Most of the time, she told herself, he was, but then there were those other times...

She took a breath and continued. "I was only at the library to get a research book for my paper. Danny helped me find it. I'd seen him before, around town, but we'd never really talked to each other. He asked if I wanted to go out for coffee."

"And you said yes."

She smiled as she remembered back. "I did. We found we had a lot in common."

"You and Danny?" He snorted. "What did you two have in common?"

"We liked walking in the park and discussing books. He liked mysteries, and I like romances."

Blake shook his head. "I can't see the connection between the two."

Her brow wrinkled. "Romances can have mysteries, but we liked to discuss the plot and how an author would bring everything together."

"Okay, so you like walking in the park and books. What else?"

"He liked good food. He introduced me to different dishes and restaurants I wouldn't normally choose. They were out of my budget."

"And what did you bring to the relationship? If anything."

She grimaced at the harsh tone of his words. “I was his friend. He didn’t have very many. I was someone he could talk to.”

“Is that what friends do? Break up in a way that sent Danny over the edge?”

Oh God, Danny. Look at the mess you left behind.

She raised her chin and glared at him. “You wanted to know more about our relationship, so I told you. Please don’t push for answers. Keep your memories of Danny the way you want to remember him and leave it at that. You can go ahead and continue to blame me. I don’t care anymore.”

“What are you not telling me?” he guessed.

They both stood at the same time. He seemed taller, bigger than he had a moment ago. Fear swept over her.

She didn’t want to talk about Danny anymore. That night, she’d lost her best friend. Even after all was said and done, she still missed him. She had to get out of there. “I’m... I’m going to bed.”

Blade sauntered toward her, closing the distance between them and giving her nowhere to run. Marissa backed up as far as she could until she felt the wall against her back, but he didn’t stop until there were only a few inches between them, their bodies almost touching. His hot breath fanned across her face sending ripples of desire over her. She was acutely aware she was naked beneath the thin gown and robe.

His gaze locked with hers. For a moment, she thought he was going to kiss her. She knew deep down inside she

wouldn't be able to push him away as all the emotions she'd been holding in resurfaced.

“You're right,” he said softly. “I'll always blame you for Danny's death.”

His cold words were meant to hurt her. He'd accomplished his goal.

Chapter Four

Marissa ducked around him and hurried back into the house. Blade slammed his fist against the wall. In that one moment, he'd wanted to kiss her and strangle her at the same time. Why the hell did he let her push him to the edge?

Is that what she'd done to Danny? Apparently, since Danny was dead. He blew out a frustrated breath.

Why did he feel the need to punish her?

Or maybe, he was punishing himself. His stomach knotted. He'd known there was chemistry between him and Marissa the moment Danny introduced them. She would sneak looks at him, then blush every time their gazes locked.

Blade had forced himself to concentrate on his little brother, but he'd noticed the way she'd tucked her hair behind one ear, the way her hands would move when she talked, her light, airy laugh, but damn, he'd almost lost it the first time she walked across a room. Her moves were sinful, sultry, and every sway of her hips heated his blood and filled him with a need to take her into his arms. He'd wanted to feel her body crushed against his, her mouth begging for more.

He raked his fingers through his hair, noticing they shook. Dammit! He turned and walked to the edge of the porch. There was no way in hell he could go to sleep now. Not when he'd inhaled her fragrance and come so close to tasting her. He stepped off the porch and marched toward the barn.

In a few minutes, he rode one of the four-wheelers to the far side of the property. In less than five minutes, he was in front of the gym. Maybe if he worked out, he'd be able to put Marissa out of his mind for a little while.

As soon as he walked inside the private gym, he began to relax. The equipment was state-of-the-art. Designed for high-intensity training. The spacious building had high ceilings, giving them enough room for an obstacle course, ropes, weights, power racks, punching bags, and a fighting ring.

All the equipment focused on discipline with a strong emphasis on working with other team members and building trust within the group. They handled the workouts fine. Learning to work with a team was a little more difficult. They were used to working alone. That presented a problem. You either learned to work with the team, or you were out.

The punching bag was exactly what he needed. He wrapped his hands, then got started, grunting every time he connected with the sand-filled leather bag. He'd been working out for about an hour and was sweating like a sinner in church when Wizard came in.

Blade frowned when he walked closer but didn't say anything. Finally, he grabbed the bag to keep it from swinging and looked at him. "What?"

Wizard strolled over, then reached up and pulled a cold bottle of beer from thin air. He handed it to Blade. "I saw you when you came in. I thought you could use a break." He brought his beer to his mouth and took a long draw.

“How the hell do you do that?” He moved the towel off his neck and wiped at the sweat rolling down his face.

Wizard’s smile was secretive. “A wizard never gives away his secrets. Let’s sit.”

He hesitated for a moment, then walked over to the bench. The beer was cold and tasted good. It was exactly what he needed.

“You’ve let her get under your skin,” Wizard said. “What the hell did she do to you?”

Blade took another drink, then leaned his forearms on his legs, dangling the bottle between them. For a long moment, he didn’t say anything. But this was Wizard, and he’d known him for a few years. If he could talk to anyone, it was the men he called brothers. They wouldn’t make judgments. They all had histories, some worse than others.

He blew out a breath. “She’s the reason my little brother is dead.”

“Man, that’s heavy. What’d she do?”

“She broke up with him.”

His brows drew together. “That’s it? I think I’ll need a little more to go on before I condemn her.”

“You had to know Danny. He was quiet and shy, an introvert.” He swiped at the sweat rolling down his face before he continued. “The night he died, he called me. He said Marissa ruined his plans. I’m pretty sure he might’ve been going to ask her to marry him. I told him to hang in there and that I was on my way, but he got into the car anyway. I don’t know whether he was going to try to talk to her or what. He

took a corner too fast, went off the road, and plowed into a tree. They said his blood alcohol was over the limit.” His voice hitched. “He died on impact.” He gripped the bottle a little tighter, then raised it to his lips and took another drink, wishing it could take away his pain.

Wizard didn't say anything for a long time. Blade finally looked over at him.

Wizard shook his head. “I don't know, man. You and I have both broken up with girls before. You try to let them down easy, but sometimes that doesn't work. You can't blame Marissa for doing the same thing. I hate to say it, but your little brother chose to drink and drive. Marissa didn't make him.”

He clamped his lips together. “No, I don't buy it. There's more going on that she's not telling. I plan to find out what it is.”

They sat there for a long moment without talking, each lost in their thoughts until Wizard began to speak again.

“I thought about going down to the coast for a while. After you take care of this matter, you should think about coming down with me. There's nothing like sitting on the beach and getting your head on straight.”

“Yeah, maybe.” Getting away sounded nice right now. He frowned. “Since we're getting all personnel and everything, how did you get the name Wizard?”

The silence was deafening. You could've heard a pin drop. One of the unspoken cardinal rules was that you didn't

ask one of your brothers about their past. They only talked if they wanted to.

“Hey, you don’t have to say anything,” Blade told him. “I shouldn’t have asked.”

“No, it’s okay.” He set his bottle on the floor. “I was living in an orphanage. I was around four when I was sent there. An older boy heard one of the nuns talking about how my family had just dumped me at the diner. The waitress said we were a family of four, and they just left without me. Never came back.”

From the faraway look in Wizard’s eyes, Blade knew his friend was thinking back. The one thing they all had in common was that they didn’t like remembering. Blade knew he shouldn’t have asked.

Wizard continued after a moment. “I was dressed kind of ragged, so they assumed my parents couldn’t afford two kids. When one of the older boys told the others, he was laughing. He said I must be a wizard because I made my whole family disappear. After that, everyone started calling me, Wizard. I guess I sort of adopted the name and ran with it. I figured if they were going to call me that, I would learn a little magic. After I turned seventeen, I joined the military. I went overseas for a while, the middle east and the Orient. Crazy shit goes on over there. I picked up a few tricks here and there.”

Damn, being dumped by his family must’ve been hard. “I’m sorry that happened to you. You still have no idea where they went?”

“Not a clue. All I can recall is that I had a younger brother. I think his name was Ezra. I called him Raz or Razy, something like that.” He shook his head. “I remember a man, I think he was my father, telling me to forget who I am and, for some strange reason, I did.”

“And the tat on your chest? I mean it’s pretty cool. What is it? A phoenix with a sword and shield rising up from a cloud?”

He shrugged. “I’ve had it for as long as I can remember. Your guess is as good as mine.”

He nodded. “I’m sorry that happened. I mean about your parents and all.”

He shrugged. “We’ve all got our pasts that we’ve learned to deal with, or we wouldn’t be here. It doesn’t bother me anymore. It was a long time ago. I came to terms with it.” He came to his feet. “I think I’ll head on to bed now. See you in the morning.”

“Yeah, see you in the morning.”

That was the problem with all of them. They were misfits that Carter had brought together and given a home. They were brothers now.

Blade brought the beer to his lips and tilted his head back, draining the contents before coming to his feet. He tossed the empty bottle into the trashcan and went outside. The night breeze felt good on his damp skin.

For just a moment, he wondered if Wizard was right. Was he placing too much of the blame on Marissa? He knew

damned well he was just as guilty. He should've been more active in Danny's life. Danny was more sensitive about things.

Blade had been so damned busy with the Seals, going on one mission after another—volunteering most of the time, until they forced him to take leave. Long hours and putting himself in harm's way hadn't kept him from thinking about his past or Marissa.

He'd finally decided to go home for a while. He'd just stopped off at his apartment in the city when Danny called. He'd planned to go down the next day.

It was funny, he and Danny were as different as night and day. Blade had always felt as if they were total opposites. He supposed they were. That didn't mean he didn't love his little brother any less. He'd tried to protect Danny all his life. Especially when his father yelled at their mother, which was almost constant toward the end. Blade would take Danny to another part of the house, where they couldn't hear their parents.

Maybe he shouldn't have shielded him so much. When everything came to a head, it seemed as if Danny had gone deeper inside himself. He wasn't even sure therapy had helped. Yeah, he should've done more, and he knew what Wizard said made sense.

He ran a weary hand across his forehead. Old habits were hard to change. Blade had been blaming Marissa, and himself, for so long that he wasn't sure he could even stop. Maybe he just wasn't ready. She was still to blame, the catalyst in all of this. The ball had begun to roll when she decided to break up with Danny.

He'd stayed away, dammit! Danny deserved whatever happiness he could find. Blade had made sure he wouldn't be tempted to act on his feelings toward Marissa. Had Danny suspected that was why Blade kept his distance? Had he added fuel to the flame? Blade just didn't know, and it twisted him up on the inside when he thought about everything that happened.

This would all be over soon, though. He would talk to Carter in the morning. All he had to do was send a few of the team to meet with this Axel guy. He might own the town, but he didn't own them. They'd warn him away from Marissa and explain to him what would happen if he contacted her in any way, form, or fashion.

Blade suddenly relaxed, the tension easing inside him. They could send Wizard. He could be scary as fuck with his cold, dark eyes staring a person down. Let him pull a gun or something out of thin air. That should probably take care of the whole thing. Marissa could leave, and he could go back to his life—end of story.

He climbed on the four-wheeler and started it, feeling the rumble of the engine beneath him. He was already beginning to feel better. It wouldn't be long before Marissa was out of his life completely. His memories would slowly fade, and he could think about better times.

When he got back to the barn, he put the four-wheeler up and hung the key on one of the hooks. He went inside the farmhouse and straight to his room.

His nose wrinkled as soon as he sat on the side of the bed. He raised his arm, and his eyes immediately began to

burn. Damn, he stunk to high heaven. He jumped to his feet, grabbed clean briefs from the dresser, and headed for the shower. By the time he crawled under the cover, he felt better about everything. He'd give Marissa one day, two tops, and then she'd be gone.

He closed his eyes and fell into a deep sleep.

Blade didn't know anything until the next morning. The aroma of coffee beckoned to him like a feather tickling his nose. He glanced at the clock on his bedside table. Nearly seven. He'd slept late this morning. He pushed the cover away and sat on the side of the bed for a moment, rubbing his eyes.

Not one dream. That was a first. He yawned as he reached for the jeans he'd laid out the night before, pulled them on, then came to his feet. He sauntered to the dresser and pulled out a red T-shirt, tugging it over his head before padding barefoot to the bathroom and using the facilities.

When he finished, he splashed cold water on his face and dried it with a hand towel. At least he felt a little more alive. He still didn't bother with any shoes as he headed toward the kitchen. He needed coffee more than anything.

Mama Rose was already at the table with a cup. He stood in the middle of the kitchen for a moment and inhaled all the wonderful aromas. He knew there would be a sheet of biscuits already in the oven and probably a breakfast casserole.

They knew her routine. She would get everything started, then drink her coffee—lots of cream and sugar. The men would start coming in at different times. Once everything was almost ready, she would make a big iron skillet of gravy.

It was a good thing they had a gym where they could work out.

He poured himself a cup of black coffee and took it to the table, sitting next to her. He closed his eyes and savored the first drink. This was his favorite time of day. Then he looked at Mama Rose and smiled.

“Do you know how much we love you?” he told her.

Her smile was soft and made her eyes twinkle. “About as much as I love you boys.” She took a drink of coffee, then stared down into the creamy brown liquid. “You slept in this morning. Late night?”

He took another drink. “I couldn’t sleep, so I went to the gym.”

“Marissa wouldn’t have anything to do with why you couldn’t go to sleep, would she?”

“Marissa?” he scoffed. “If anything, she would give me nightmares. I’ll be glad when she’s gone.”

“Then why help her at all?” Mama Rose crossed her arms and stared at him as she patiently waited for him to answer.

“It’s too early in the morning for twenty questions,” he told her.

“It’s okay if you don’t want to talk about it,” she stated nonchalantly as her thumb traced the rim of the cup.

He took a drink of coffee, then set his cup on the table. If he didn’t say anything, she would probably read more into the relationship than was there. “I don’t know why I agreed to

help Marissa if you want to know the truth. I blame her for my little brother's death.”

Her brow wrinkled with concern and worry. “What did she do?”

He rubbed a weary hand across his forehead. When he said it out loud, he knew it didn't sound as bad as what he'd built up in his mind. “She broke up with him. When I talked to him on the phone, he said Marissa ruined everything. I think he was going to ask her to marry him. I told him to stay at home. I was only about an hour away and on my way to his place. He'd been drinking, though. I don't know if he thought maybe he could talk to her or what, but he got into the car. He made a corner too fast and ran off the road, slamming into a tree. He died instantly.”

His hand tightened into a fist. Dammit, there were no skid marks. He didn't even try to stop. Whatever Marissa had said to Danny was bad enough that he felt his life was over. Why had he even been drinking? Blade only knew about Danny getting drunk once, and he swore never to drink that much again.

“And that's why you blame Marissa? Because he made bad decisions after she ended the relationship?”

He shook his head. “No, there's more to it, but she's not talking.” He blew out a breath.

“Nothing will bring back your little brother. Maybe you're just looking for someone to blame?”

Blade got up from the table, his movements stiff and jerky, as he carried his cup to the sink. He couldn't do this. He

couldn't talk about how he'd felt about Marissa back then.

“What have you got in the oven that smells so good,” he said, hoping to change the subject. He couldn't talk about any of it anymore. Danny was gone. He'd been the only person left in Blade's life who meant something to him. There were so many things he still wanted to say to Danny.

“I love you, little brother. If you ever want to talk, I'm here for you. I'm sorry for anything I might've said that hurt you.”

Oh, God. He sucked in a breath.

“I'm sorry I lusted after Marissa.”

Blade grabbed the counter as a sharp pain reached down into his core and threatened to rip him in two.

Breathe in, breathe out, he told himself as the world slowly came back into focus.

Calmer, better. His grip on the counter loosened.

Mama Rose smiled when he glanced her way. The gentleness in her expression washed over him, filling him with peace. That's what she did for all of them. She made them feel as if they were no longer alone.

“Homemade biscuits, my famous breakfast casserole, and I'm about to put on some hashbrowns and a skillet of gravy. My Mama always said gravy could cure anything. I remember how she used to set me on the counter while she put a little bit of flour in the hot grease and let it turn light brown. Then she would pour in the milk real slow while she stirred. It was fresh milk, too. None of that store-bought stuff that's watered down. Daddy would've milked the cow that morning.

Mama would stir in the milk until she had the right amount, never measuring, then she would keep stirring until it got thick. That's when she would add the salt and pepper, then pour it into a big bowl. I still remember how it smelled. Sometimes, when I'm making my own gravy, I smell hers cooking, and it brings back lots of memories. Mama has been gone for a long time now, but that's something no one can ever take from me, my memories. You hold them tight so you don't ever lose them. They might be gone from this earth, but you keep them alive in your heart."

Blade was pretty sure she was teaching him another lesson. Mama Rose was good about that. She was also usually right. If that's all he had left of Danny, then he would hold his memories close. When he glanced toward the doorway, his gut clenched. He wondered how long Marissa had been standing there. Their gazes locked.

He tried not to notice how tempting she was this morning. She'd pulled her hair back from her face into a low ponytail. Even without makeup, her skin was flawlessly beautiful. Mama Rose must've loaned her some of Sophie's clothes because Marissa was wearing jeans and a yellow T-shirt. He noticed she hadn't bothered with shoes either.

"Good morning," she said.

Mama Rose smiled her way. "Good morning. I hope you slept well. The coffee pot is on the counter, cups in the cabinet."

"I slept wonderful. It must be the country air. I always sleep better at my Nana's house. I could almost hear the coffee calling my name, though."

As she breezed past him, he caught her scent again. He could understand how Danny had been so infatuated with her. There was something about her that tempted men. Yeah, tempted was right. She was like a mythical siren, leading unsuspecting sailors to their death.

“I think I’ll just step outside and get some fresh air,” he said, his words harsh. Before anyone could say anything, he stepped out the back door.

Everything was closing in on him. How could he stop blaming Marissa when he’d been blaming her for ten years? He walked to the barn on a narrow path stamped out years ago by Mama Rose’s ancestors.

When he got inside, he reached for a set of keys on one of the hooks. He’d take one of the four-wheelers down to the gym. At the last minute, he changed his mind. He could work out until he fell over from exhaustion, and it wouldn’t change a damn thing. Besides, Carter would decide what needed to be done this morning. He wanted to be present when he did.

He slowly walked back to the farmhouse but went in through the front door, bypassing the kitchen and going down to his room. He would get with Carter this morning and see how he wanted to handle Marissa’s problem. By tomorrow, he could be taking Marissa home, and then maybe he would take Wizard up on his offer to go to the coast. He needed a vacation. He slipped on his shoes and headed back to the kitchen.

Some of the guys were already at the table eating. He knew the rest would show eventually. No one intentionally missed one of Mama Rose’s meals. He nodded to them, took

his seat, and began filling his plate. He ate in silence, letting the talk flow around him. When they finished, he, Carter, Rader, and Marissa went to Carter's office.

"I'm afraid I don't have good news. Our guy went deeper checking on Axel and couldn't come up with any conclusive evidence that he's dirty," Carter began. "Axel may or may not listen if we tell him to back off."

Blade's heart sank. That meant Marissa might be here a few more days. "We have nothing concrete on the man?"

"Nothing...yet. If we warned him away, he would probably laugh in our faces. He has plenty of muscle working for him."

Marissa cleared her throat. "It may not mean anything, but I downloaded some of his files onto a flash drive before I ran away. It might help."

Everyone looked at her. Blade breathed a sigh of relief. This might just be the leverage they needed.

Chapter Five

Axel looked up when someone knocked on the door of his office. “Come in,” he growled.

“We found the car,” Rex told him. “It was almost out of gas. We had her phone signal, but it just got us to the general area. She was smart and hid it behind some trees in someone’s pasture. That’s why it took us a while to locate it.”

Axel tightened his strangling grip on the pencil he held. “I’m assuming she wasn’t with it.”

Rex shook his head. “No trace of her. She must’ve made it back to the road and maybe hitched a ride. It’s either that or she called someone to come get her.”

“No, she wouldn’t hitch a ride. She had to call someone to pick her up. But who?” His cell began to ring. He glanced at the caller ID and froze. “Dammit, how the hell did he find out so soon?”

“Declan?” Rex asked with a question in his eyes.

“Who the hell else would it be? Yes, it’s Declan.” He picked up the phone and answered.

The smooth as silk voice came over the line. “I heard you’re having some trouble. Something about your assistant running away? She went to the police. I don’t like this much attention on my...company.”

His gut churned. “No worries. I’ve got it all under control. I pay the police to look the other way, and that’s exactly what they did.”

“But she still got away.”

“The girl is nothing.”

“Except for the files she downloaded off your computer.”

“How did you know...”

“I know everything that goes on in my organization. It’s what keeps it running smoothly. What exactly did she take?”

“I can’t be sure,” he finally admitted. “When I returned to my office, the files from recent transactions were open. There’s nothing that will connect you, though.”

“Of course not. You’re still alive, aren’t you?”

Axel swallowed hard. Declan might come across as easy-going, but he was the exact opposite. One look from his steely gray eyes could freeze a man’s balls. He had no problem putting his enemies down, or someone who’d screwed up.

“I want this girl found and whatever she took returned. You have forty-eight hours to clean up your mess.”

The line went dead.

Axel was trembling when he set his cell phone back on the desk. Looking up, he saw that Rex was still in the room. Dammit, he’d seen how nervous Declan made him. It wasn’t good to show any weakness in this business.

“I take it your cousin wasn’t happy,” Rex said.

He snorted. “Believe me, there’s no love lost between us. He was an asshole growing up, and he hasn’t changed.

He's gotten worse since his father was murdered, and he took over the organization."

"He knows the woman downloaded files? How did he find out?"

"How the fuck would I know? The man has spies everywhere." His eyes narrowed on Rex. Could he be the one who'd told Declan?

Rex held up his hands. "You've known me a long time, boss. I'd never betray you. Did you tell anyone else?"

That was the problem. He had talked. Son of a bitch, he had to watch what he said from now on. "Yeah, maybe I did. I don't know." Just as quickly, he dismissed the notion he might be to blame and focused on another possible traitor. "Detective Baker knew about the flash drive. He might've been the leak." His lips clamped together. "It doesn't matter. I want that bitch found."

"We still have a tracker on her phone, but she must've turned it off. If she uses it, we'll get a ping, and we'll be able to see her general location."

"I want to know as soon as you do. Now, get out of here. I need to think."

As soon as the door closed, he leaned back in his chair. Someone in his circle had betrayed him to his cousin. But who? Unless it was the detective. Whoever it was, when he found out their name, he'd make sure they had an accident.

No, that wouldn't work. Declan would send someone else to spy on him. He could keep them on but feed them misinformation to make himself look good. Yeah, that would

be better. Before all this was over, he would outsmart Declan, and then he would be in control of the family business.

His younger cousin had been a pain in the ass for as long as he could remember. He could get any woman he wanted. Then he'd throw them away when he tired of them. It was because he didn't have a heart. In its place was a block of ice. He was rich, too. He had it all: money, looks, power.

There was another thing about him that people could count on. He always kept his word. If he said forty-eight hours, he meant forty-eight hours. The repercussions wouldn't be good. A shiver ran down Axel's spine. Declan was a cruel bastard. He'd had Axel's older brother stripped naked and chained outside in cold weather. Every hour, he would wet him down with a water hose.

Axel's brother, Warren, had almost frozen to death. Yeah, he'd gotten someone killed when he fell asleep while guarding an informant. What difference did it make? The informant had been someone of little importance. The owner of a bar who overheard a couple of men talking about a raid they were planning against Declan's operation.

When the plot failed, they put two and two together. They made Warren watch as they tore half the skin from the bartender's body, then set him on fire. They sent Declan a video of everything, then let Axel's brother go.

Dammit! It didn't matter what his brother had done. He was still family. The bartender had been nothing! His brother hadn't been right since he'd been tortured. Axel gritted his teeth. He knew Declan wouldn't hesitate to torture him if he wanted to make an example of him.

“Where the hell did that bitch go?” he ground out.

He was going to make her pay for putting him through this. He fantasized about exactly what he would do, then got an erection just thinking about it.

Damn, Marissa was beautiful. And the way she walked with that sexy sway of her hips. When he'd kissed her, he tasted the fire inside her. He'd had so many plans for them. The thought she might run never even crossed his mind. No one betrayed him.

He slammed his fist down on the desk. He would still have her. She would regret running away from him, as would the person who helped her. If it was a man, he'd kill him, but slowly, and he'd make her watch. If it was a woman, well, he had other uses for her. She would regret causing him this much trouble.

Chapter Six

Carter, Rader, Marissa, and Blade gathered in Carter's office again a few hours later, after he and his computer guru went through the flash drive Marissa had given him.

Marissa had taken a seat on one end of the leather sofa, while Blade sat on the other end. Probably not the best seat. Her scent had already reached toward him, caressing his face.

Rader sat in the matching leather chair, and Carter sat behind the desk, so he hadn't really had a choice. Blade was hoping Carter would have good news after his guy went through the flash drive, but right now, he didn't look happy.

Carter leaned back in his chair with a frown on his face. "From everything we can tell, Axel is dirty, but someone else is calling all the shots. That's what has us worried. We're not going to be able to just send down men to warn Axel off. He would probably laugh in our faces. He has a lot of muscle working for him."

"What do we do?" Marissa asked as she shifted on the sofa. "I can't hide from him forever."

Blade thought she looked a little desperate, maybe trying to figure out what her next move might be. She was right to think she couldn't hide forever, but if someone else was calling all the shots, then she might be in even more danger.

When Carter's phone began to ring, he answered, then frowned. As soon as he ended the call, he looked at everyone

in the room. “This is worse than we thought. Our contact found out who’s above Axel.”

“From the look on your face, I don’t think we’re going to like it,” Blade interjected.

“You’re not. Ever hear of Declan DiNardo?” Carter asked.

Blade looked at Rader, but he was shaking his head.

“No, who is he?”

“He’s Italian Mafia. Someone you wouldn’t want to mess with. I can almost guarantee you he knows exactly what’s going on right now inside his organization.”

Marissa was shaking her head. “I shouldn’t have involved any of you. I think I need to leave.”

Carter suddenly smiled. “You’ve got to have a little faith. We’re not going to give up this easy.”

When Marissa’s phone began to ring, she reached into her pocket and brought it out. She answered, bringing it to her ear, then frowned. “I’ve been getting these calls all morning but when I answer, no one says anything.”

The men all looked at each other.

Aw, damn, he should’ve thought about this sooner. “Can I see your phone?” Blade asked.

She handed it to him. “I don’t understand.”

He opened the back and removed the tracker. “They’ve been tracking you. Every time you’ve answered your phone, it hit a cell tower. They probably have a good idea where you are right now.”

“I screwed up,” she said, downing her head.

She had definitely screwed up, but from the utter look of misery on her face, Blade knew he wasn't going to agree with her, even though she had messed up.

“You couldn't have known,” he told her. He looked at Carter. “Suggestions?”

“It will be too dangerous for Marissa to stay here. Besides, I don't want to bring a fight to Mama Rose and I'm afraid it will land in our lap if we're not careful. We'll have to take her somewhere else that will be safe.”

“We don't have any safehouses yet,” Rader said. “We might be able to take her to Savage's plantation.”

“That won't work,” Carter said, shaking his head. “Savage said the interior was still under construction. There will be too many workers running around for his place to be safe.”

Blade's stomach began to churn. He knew of a place. God, he hadn't been there in over ten years. Too many ghosts, too many horrific memories, but Marissa would be safe if he took her there.

He looked up. As the seconds ticked by, Marissa looked even more nervous. So far, Carter and Rader hadn't come up with a solution. He didn't think they would. He drew in a deep breath, then blew it out.

“I can take her to my place,” he finally said.

Rader's forehead wrinkled. “Your apartment? Do you really think she'll be safe there?”

Blade looked at Carter. He was the only one who knew the whole story or that he came from money. Carter raised an eyebrow in question, as if asking if he was sure about this. No, he wasn't sure at all.

He turned and looked at Rader. "Not my apartment. My family has an estate. I have a company that takes care of the upkeep, but no one has lived there in a very long time. If someone makes a connection between me and Marissa, they would still need to connect me with the estate. It would give us time to get her away, if we don't end this before then."

When he glanced toward Marissa, he knew she had no idea about his family home. He doubted Danny would have mentioned what happened before they went to live with their aunt. Neither one of them ever spoke about that night, even when they were alone together.

If they didn't talk about that night, then maybe it didn't really happen. But it did happen, and maybe Danny had needed to talk about it. His hands rested on his knees. His grip tightened. He knew on the outside, he looked calm, but he was anything but calm on the inside.

"Are you sure?" Carter asked.

He nodded. "She'll be safe there. You can keep us updated until all this is settled."

Carter didn't say anything for a moment. "I'll try to contact Declan. Who knows, maybe we can negotiate a deal."

Soon, he hoped. He didn't know how long he could take living in that house with all the bad memories it would bring.

“Then it’s settled,” Rader said, but he didn’t look quite so sure about everything as he looked around the room. He knew there was more to the story, but he wouldn’t ask. “When will you leave?”

“This morning. The sooner the better.” He ran his thumb over the tracker. “I think I’ll take their little gadget with us. Maybe drop it off somewhere that will lead them in the opposite direction.”

Carter smiled. “Good idea.”

They were on the road in less than an hour. They’d each taken a bag. Mama Rose insisted Marissa take the clothes she’d loaned her. Since Blade had no sisters, that was a good idea.

“Danny never talked about his parents or the estate. Is it far?”

Blade gripped the steering wheel a little tighter. “About four hours from the farmhouse. It’s closer to San Antonio.” The rolling hill country. He almost smiled when he remembered him and Danny stalking deer as they clomped through the cedar and oak trees. Deer were plentiful in their area.

“San Antonio is beautiful. I’ve been to the River Walk.” When he didn’t offer any comments, she didn’t say anything for a few minutes. “Thank you for letting me stay there,” she finally said.

“There weren’t a lot of choices.”

He was grateful when she turned and looked out the window. He couldn’t stop his mind from dredging up old

memories, though. His mother had been beautiful, with porcelain skin and long blonde hair. Danny had taken after her more. They both had the same gentle nature. That's why it made everything that happened so difficult to bear. No, he didn't want to think about the memories.

He leaned over and turned on the radio, hoping it would drown out his thoughts. About an hour and a half down the road, Blade pulled in at a convenience store to gas up. As Marissa started out of the pickup to go inside, Blade stopped her.

“Let me have your phone,” he said.

She didn't hesitate but handed it to him. Good, she knew how to follow orders. If they got into a tough situation, he didn't want her to think before she acted on anything he told her to do. After she handed it to him, she went inside.

He inserted the tracker back in the phone and turned it on, then walked over to a young man filling up his car. “Mind if I ask you which direction you're headed?”

His eyes narrowed, but after a moment, he began to speak. “East,” he said. “A couple of hours from here.”

That was perfect. “How would you like to earn a fast hundred?”

The young man didn't look so sure about him anymore. “I won't do anything illegal,” he finally said.

“Nothing illegal about it. The woman I'm with has an abusive ex-husband that she's running from. Her husband put a tracker on her phone. I'm trying to get her somewhere safe where he can't hurt her. All I want you to do is drive for about

an hour, then toss the phone out the window. Leave it on, though.”

He slowly nodded, watching as Marissa walked out of the store. “Keep your hundred. No man should ever raise his hand to a woman. I’ll do it for free.”

“We’d really appreciate it,” Blade told him and handed him the phone.

Blade finished putting gas in the pickup and got back inside. Marissa was already buckled in.

“Did you just give that man my phone?”

He grinned. “I did.”

Her forehead creased. “At least you don’t have to look so happy about it.”

He didn’t apologize. “He’s going to take it East. In about an hour he’ll toss it out the window. That should throw Axel and his men off your trail.”

“Then I guess I’ll forgive you for taking it.”

They didn’t stop again until around one. She let him choose the restaurant where they would eat lunch. They both ordered burgers and sodas with a side of fries.

“Is your place out in the country?” she asked, breaking the silence.

“It sits in the middle of five hundred acres. There used to be more land, but some of my ancestors sold off a few acres here and there.”

Her eyes widened. “So, it’s been in your family a long time.”

“I guess you could say that. What about you?”
Anything to get her talking about something else. “Have you ever traced your family tree?”

She laughed, then shook her head. “Only from the stories my nana has always told me. She still remembers her grandparents. We’d sit on her front porch. She has rocking chairs like Mama Rose. We’d go out right before the sun would go down when there’s a nice breeze and the air is warm. She’d tell me about the past. Wonderful stories about how her grandmother had her own garden and she canned fruit and vegetables every year, then take them down to the cellar. The cellar is still there. She says it’s too dangerous to go down now. Once, I got up enough nerve to go down, though. It scared the bejeebies out of me. It was dark and musty.”

“But you went down anyway.”

She sat a little straighter. “Yes, I did.” She suddenly frowned. “I think she might’ve suspected that I went into the cellar because she casually mentioned how she once saw a snake. If it was a warning, it worked. I never went back down there again.”

He laughed. He couldn’t help it.

She turned and looked at him with rounded eyes. “Oh, you can laugh and smile. I was beginning to wonder.”

He immediately frowned.

“Oh, there it is, back again. Would it be so very bad if you didn’t hate me as much as you think you do?”

“We’re almost there,” he said, rather than answer, as he turned down a country road. Marissa didn’t understand. He

had to hate her. If he didn't, he was being disloyal to his brother. He couldn't let Marissa worm her way into his life as she had done his brother. While she was at the estate, he would keep her at arms-length.

She looked out the window. "The countryside is beautiful."

He glanced around. That, he couldn't deny. He'd always loved the hill country.

"Oh, look," she said. "There's a small herd of deer. "

"You'll see a lot of them out here." He turned onto the property. "This is it," he told her. On either side of the road were oaks hundreds of years old and cedar majestically standing together. When they would come home, he always felt as if they were returning to a magical place because of all the trees. His lips pressed together in a tight line. Only thing was, the estate was guarded by an ogre. He pulled to a stop in front of the house.

Marissa's mouth dropped open. He supposed it was a little overwhelming when you were seeing it for the first time.

"This is your home?" she asked.

Yeah, this was his home. If you could call it that.

Chapter Seven

This was where she was going to be staying? Marissa could not believe the size of the house looming before her. No, it wasn't a house, it was a mansion—a freaking huge mansion with vines growing up one side of the exterior stone wall, and turrets reaching toward the sky. It was dark and mysterious, the very air around it thick with the weight of secrets and unspoken stories.

Marissa silently reassured herself that the grounds looked meticulously maintained. She reminded herself there were no such things as ghosts or vampires. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad. The interior of the house was probably warm and inviting.

She suddenly frowned. So why didn't Blade live here? Why was he even working when he obviously had money? It was a puzzle that she couldn't quite piece together.

She'd known Danny had an extravagant lifestyle. That was pretty obvious. He drove an expensive car, ate at upscale restaurants. If he wanted something, no matter how ridiculous, he bought it.

Yet, he opted for a modest apartment. More puzzles. It was almost as though he tried to live in two different worlds. Still, she'd never suspected that he'd grown up in a place like this. She had questions, lots of questions, but she bit her tongue to keep from asking them.

“Uh, nice place,” she said instead, but she knew it came off a little shaky and unsure.

He drove around to the side of the house, then pulled the visor down and pushed a button. One of six garage doors began to slowly raise. As soon as it was up, Blade drove inside, then turned off the key. Marissa was certain the garage had been added on because it looked more modern than the actual house. They grabbed their bags and got out.

“While you were packing, I called the manager,” he said. “Everything should be ready for us, including a stocked refrigerator.”

She nodded. As if he sensed some of her discomfort, he relented and continued.

“Carter is pretty good at negotiating. I don’t think we’ll be here that long, but if there’s anything else you should need, let me know and I’ll make sure it’s delivered. The manager is very discreet. They only clean the house periodically, so no one will know we’re even here.” He opened the door, and they stepped into the kitchen. He continued talking. “Follow me and I’ll show you where you’ll be sleeping.”

It was all Marissa could do to keep up with him. She wanted to explore, especially the kitchen. She’d love to cook here. The room was bright and airy, unlike the exterior of the home. It was spacious with plenty of counter space and a massive center island. All of the appliances looked top of the line. There was even an upright freezer.

She immediately began to relax. The walls were painted pale yellow with white curtains on the windows. They were closed, but the lights were on. Even so, enough light would come inside to keep the room bright during the daytime without the lights being on.

The butler's pantry off to the right, with its polished silver and crystal decanters, reminded her of the classic movies she used to watch with her mother. Her mother had always been entranced with Clark Gable, Jimmy Stewart...all the old movie stars. She said they didn't make men like them anymore—except for Marissa's father, of course. Her mother was a romantic at heart.

But as they stepped into the dining room, her unease returned. It felt as if she'd stepped back in time again. The room was dominated by a massive, wooden table, its intricate carvings and clawed feet seeming almost alive in the flickering light of the black, wrought iron chandelier. The heavy drapes, their dark green fabric thick as velvet, hung like a shroud, cloaking the room in a gloomy half-light. A shiver ran down her spine.

But the dining room was nothing compared to the staircase that awaited her in the foyer. The wide, curving steps were covered in a dark, rose-patterned carpet that seemed to swallow up the light. The maple wood of the rail gleamed, but it was a small comfort in the face of the eerie atmosphere that surrounded her.

Marissa hesitated, then took a deep breath, and followed Blade. As they climbed the stairs, she couldn't help but feel as though the portraits on the wall watched her every move. The stern expressions of generations past stared down at her as though she shouldn't be there.

A warning, perhaps? What secrets were they hiding? It would seem she had no other choice except to stay here as she

followed Blade down the long hallway, heart pounding with every step she took.

“All I ask is that you don’t go into any of the other rooms upstairs,” Blade told her, breaking the silence. “They belonged to my family, and I ask that you respect our privacy.”

“Of course,” she muttered as she glanced at more family portraits on the wall. Yeah, that wouldn’t be a problem at all. She wasn’t about to stir up any angry ghosts.

“This is your room,” he stopped at the door, then opened it.

She followed him inside and was pretty sure her mouth dropped open again. It wasn’t at all what she expected. A palette of soothing pastels greeted her: light pink, soft rose, beige, and pale blue colors all blended together. The lightweight curtains reached from ceiling to floor in a creamy white with faded blue flowers.

There was a mirrored vanity with a cushioned stool, a lounging sofa sat in front of a fireplace, but the canopied bed dominated the room. It was white with soft netting embracing it. The bedroom was fit for a princess.

“It’s beautiful,” she whispered as if the sound of her voice might break something.

His gaze moved around the room. “The guestroom and kitchen are the only rooms my father let my mother change. She decorated this one for her younger sister, my Aunt Peggy, who would occasionally come to visit.” He walked to the door. “I’m at the end of the hall. Feel free to wander around, but I’d suggest you don’t go far from the house since there are

dangerous men looking for you.” With those parting words, he closed the door behind him and left.

Staying here might not be so bad if she never left this room, or maybe the kitchen. She shivered. It was just a house. She was pretty sure it wasn't haunted. Not certain, just pretty sure. She shook her head, trying to clear it of nonsense and unpacked the clothes she'd brought. There was a nice size, walk-in closet with wooden hangers.

When that was done, she opened another door and was pleasantly surprised to see she had a private bathroom. Like the bedroom, Blade's mother had used a muted color scheme of pale yellow, rose, and beige. She could see herself soaking in the tub, Blade washing her back...

Really? That's where her thoughts were going? She'd watched too many romantic movies with her mother. Blade didn't even like her. She leaned her head against the doorframe and sighed. If she'd met him before Danny, everything might have turned out differently. Sometimes she thought she saw a flicker of desire in Blade's eyes.

She straightened. That was doubtful. She wasn't sure Blade had ever cared much for her. After Danny introduced them, she rarely saw him. She once asked Danny if she might be the reason Blade didn't come around. Danny had laughed. Blade was in college and busy all the time, he told her.

She glanced around. Her thoughts were going every which way. Too many memories resurfacing. She needed to get out of the room. Maybe breathe in some fresh air. She turned and left, closing the door behind her.

As she walked down the staircase, she couldn't help but run her fingers lightly over the smooth surface of the wooden rail. The curtains were drawn, casting gloomy shadows about the mansion. She felt as though she was on the set of a Gothic romance. As soon as the thought came to her, she frowned. Gothic, she could understand, but romance? No, that was a joke. Where was the hero?

As she stepped to the landing, she glanced up the stairs. Yeah, right. Blade was no hero. Okay, maybe he was a little bit of a hero because he was helping her get away from Axel. But he wasn't a hero in the true sense of the word. He was argumentative, brooding, dark...handsome, sexy...

She nibbled her bottom lip. This wasn't good. Not good at all. She would have to keep her distance from him. It had been too long since she'd been with a man, and she longed for someone to hold her close, to rest her head against his chest, to hear the steady beat of his heart, and for him to tell her everything would be alright.

She definitely needed fresh air. She continued through the foyer. The house seemed closed off, confining. On one side, was a wide space with small sitting areas, dark furniture, or just windows covered in the same heavy, dark green curtains, but the wide hallway seemed separate from the rest of the rooms.

Double doors were open on both sides, but she only gave a cursory glance into those rooms. No, the French doors at the back drew all her attention. What she saw almost looked like a dark fairytale come to life and she was curious enough

to want to explore, so she stepped closer and stared through the panes of glass.

The trees loomed before her, their twisted limbs reaching out like bony fingers as if beckoning her to explore their mysterious home. Despite the ominous atmosphere, Marissa's curiosity outweighed her practical side that warned her not to go any farther.

The garden was kind of like Nana's cellar. She needed to see what was hidden behind the doors. The knob easily turned, no ominous creaking or anything. That meant it must be safe. She chuckled as she stepped outside, but left the door open just in case a ghost might be lurking about.

The walkway was cleared of leaves and debris, but the deep red of the brick was muted by the thick canopy of trees that blocked out most of the light. She went deeper into the garden, turning a corner. She came to a jarring stop, slapping a hand to her chest as her heart pounded like a hundred beating drums.

Good Lord, she hadn't expected that!

The statue of a woman gazed upward. For a moment, Marissa had thought she was real. She stepped nearer, drawn to her, wondering who the artist had used as a subject. One of Blade's ancestors? Possibly. Something about her eyes looked so sad. As if the woman posing for the artist had suddenly remembered something incredibly painful.

She grimaced. Either that or she was forced to live in a gloomy, possibly haunted—because she hadn't ruled that out yet—home. Then Marissa could understand her sadness.

Despite the darkness and the gloom, there was something undeniably alluring about the garden. It had a secret, hidden feel, as if there were mysteries waiting to be uncovered within its walls.

She was thoughtful for a moment. With a few changes, the garden could be transformed into a place of beauty and wonder, a hidden oasis in the midst of darkness, but still keeping a hint of mystery. Her love of decorating rose to the surface. She'd even taken a few courses in college.

Why had no one had attempted to change it? Maybe add a few flowering plants and a lighter pathway. It would be fun to add a few whimsical fairies.

Blade had said his father only let his mother redecorate the kitchen and the guestroom, which was why the garden remained gloomy. Had his father been trying to preserve what his ancestors had bequeathed to him? Maybe.

She kept walking along the pathway until it eventually opened into a breathtaking view of the rolling hills. She paused, taking it all in. To think all this was blocked from view. She wanted to walk around the property, but she would heed Blade's warning not to wander off. She turned and went back inside.

After she closed the doors behind her, she wandered into one of the rooms. It was a library filled with books. She ran her hand across the spines, then pulled one out. It was old, a first edition, and dated back to 1897. Her heart beat a little faster when she read the title: Dracula. Figured. She returned the book. Even though she loved books, the library had a dark feel to it.

She went down to the next room, hesitating in the doorway. Blade stood in front of a large stone fireplace staring up at the portrait that hung above it. This must be the sitting room, where the family probably gathered after dinner.

She followed his gaze, then stepped farther inside the room. Their family portrait. Blade was probably around ten, which would have made Danny seven. It was hard to imagine Blade as a boy, or Danny for that matter. They looked so young.

When she studied it a little, she noticed there was a sadness in Blade's deep blue eyes. On closer inspection, maybe he didn't look that young—an old soul in a boy's body.

His mother was beautiful, with long blonde hair, but her eyes were the same color as her sons. That was where the resemblance ended with Blade, except she had that same sad look as her sons.

There was a sternness in the way his father stood behind his wife and children. His shoulders were squared and even in the picture, his dark brown eyes were grim. She had a feeling he didn't even want to be in the portrait. Maybe he thought it was his duty since there were other family portraits dating back over the years. She studied his father.

“You look a lot like him,” she said.

Blade whirled around. “I didn't hear you come in,” he barked.

Her eyebrows drew together. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you.”

He relaxed a little. “No, it's okay. What did you say?”

She had to think about what she'd said, then she remembered. "I said you look a lot like your father."

Blade's eyes narrowed. He turned and looked back at the portrait. "I hated him with every fiber of my being," he said, fisting and unfisting his hands. "And yes, I know I look like him. Every day I have to face myself in the mirror and see him staring back at me." He turned on his heel and strode from the room.

Chapter Eight

Marissa watched Blade's retreating back. She didn't know what to think. Danny had never spoken about his family. Once, she asked about his parents, and he'd said something nonspecific, and quickly changed the subject.

She'd gotten the feeling that he didn't want to talk about them, so she never pushed the issue. From Blade's reaction, she had to wonder if there might have been some abuse. Maybe his parents fought all the time or something.

What had their father done? He was definitely the source of Blade's anger.

She glanced at the portrait again and studied his father. There was nothing relaxed about him. He looked rigid and uncompromising. But once again, her gaze was drawn to his eyes. Cold chills ran down her spine. He had cruel eyes.

It was strange that when she'd first looked at the portrait, she'd only seen a beautiful family. The father clean-shaven, wearing a tailor-made suit, and looking as if he came from old money—one of the privileged class.

Was that why Blade had grown a beard and mustache? Because it made him look a little rough around the edges? With the close-shaved beard and mustache, the resemblance wasn't quite as pronounced. The tattoos on both arms added to his rough exterior. Was he distancing himself from his obvious wealth? Running away from it?

Her gaze moved from the father to Blade. He stood close to Danny, as if he were protecting the younger boy. Marissa noticed the two boys and the mother leaned a little away from the father, as though they were isolating themselves from him, with Blade almost shielding his mother and Danny. Even as young as he was, Blade was a protector. That was why he'd helped her. He was still protecting people.

There was only one difference with him helping her. He still blamed her for Danny's death.

She closed her eyes, then squared her shoulders as she opened them and glanced at the portrait again. She didn't know what they had gone through in this house, and couldn't even imagine what they might have suffered. Mental abuse? Physical? She shuddered at the thought.

Her own upbringing had been totally different. Her father and mother adored her. Maybe because she was an only child. They'd wanted more children, but it hadn't been possible. They weren't rich, but they still managed to spoil her. Even Nana showered her with affection and love. She couldn't imagine living any differently.

She hugged her middle, then turned and left the room. As soon as she stepped out, she looked around. Everything was so gloomy and dismal. Another shiver ran down her spine. She hurried toward the kitchen, needing to be in a happier place.

Marissa didn't breathe easier until she stepped inside the kitchen, then immediately began to relax. She even smiled when her stomach rumbled. Since it was getting close to

dinnertime, she opened the refrigerator to see what was inside that she could fix.

She was pleasantly surprised to find a casserole ready to put in the oven with the directions written on the foil top. She peeled the foil back to find it was lasagna—one of her favorites. There was a bowl filled with salad greens, and beside it, salad dressings.

When she opened the freezer, she found garlic bread and several more casseroles. This was going to make cooking easier. There was even a wine refrigerator stocked with different wines. She was a pretty good cook, but she had no idea about wine selections. Maybe Blade would know.

She removed the casserole and set it on the center island, then set the temperature on the stove, and turned it on. While she waited for it to get to the right degree, she casually glanced around before walking to the butler's pantry, immediately noting the coffee maker, and breathing a sigh of relief. Coffee was a must.

The dining room was still just as dark and dismal. If she was going to have to eat in here, at least she could let some light inside. She pushed the curtains open wide.

Marissa was pretty sure her mouth dropped open in surprise. It wasn't just a window, it was another set of French doors, but these opened onto a patio. Sunshine flooded inside the room. She turned around and looked behind her. The difference was immediate and stunning. It brightened the whole room. Not that she liked the heavy furniture any better.

Why did they keep all the curtains drawn? She opened the doors and stepped outside. It was mid-October, so the air

was still warm, even though the nights would get a little chilly. This would be the perfect place to eat their dinner. There was even a patio table and eight chairs. The area around the patio had fewer trees, so she was able to look out at the rolling hills. She watched as a herd of deer grazed contentedly at the edge of the trees.

She couldn't help but wonder if the family ever ate out here. She couldn't really see his father, but she would almost bet the boys and their mother would be out here if the father wasn't home. At least, she liked to think that was what happened.

She left the doors open and went back inside. The oven had already heated, so she put the casserole in and then began to hunt for plates and silverware. She had a feeling she wouldn't find any paper plates. She did find several patterns of China and chose one in a pretty rose pattern and brought down two of them.

There was silverware in one of the drawers, but even that had an intricate design. "Only the best," she murmured.

It was as though everything had been bought with a certain purpose in mind. There were crystal glasses in different shapes and sizes in another cabinet. She tapped her nail against the glass and it pinged, like a bell. The lingering, clear ring lasted for a moment.

Her mother said that was how you could tell if it was quality crystal. Now, whether that was true or not, she didn't know. It sounded a lot better than when she'd done the same thing to her glasses from the discount store.

Marissa haunted discount stores. Hmm, maybe haunted wasn't a good word to use while she stayed here. She did love bargain hunting, though. She'd gotten it from her mother and Nana. She couldn't wait to tell them about everything at the estate. They probably wouldn't believe her.

Her forehead suddenly wrinkled. She would have to see if she could use Blade's cell phone to call Nana to let her know what was going on. She wouldn't want Nana to try to call, and be worried when she couldn't get through. Her parents were still on their cruise. Her father would be furious when he found out what happened. Maybe all of this would be over before they returned home.

Since there was little that she could do right now except wait for the casserole to cook, she went back outside. It was absolutely beautiful here, well, except for the gloomy, Gothic look of the interior of the estate, and that Axel wanted to hunt her down and do bodily harm, and Blade blaming her for Danny's death. Other than those *minor* details, it was perfect.

So, why didn't Blade move back home? It was obvious he could afford the upkeep, and have a manager stock the kitchen with food before they arrived. For that matter, why did he even work? Unless of course, he had to work to pay for the upkeep.

Ugh, why was she thinking about Blade again? He was helping her because that was what he did, and nothing more. As soon as this was over, she would be out of here. She took a deep breath, then exhaled. Calmness stole over her. That was

better. At least, she felt calm until she started thinking about how long she would be forced to put up with Blade.

Heavy steps sounded behind her. She jumped and turned around, only relaxing when she saw Blade. Had she conjured him up?

“I’m sorry if I startled you,” he apologized but didn’t sound very apologetic.

Apparently, he was going to keep the same attitude he’d had from the moment she climbed into his pickup. “No problem,” she said with very little sincerity in her words. If he could dish it out, then he could take it. Just as quickly as her anger surfaced, it was gone. She had to remember that he was helping her, even though he hated her. “It’s beautiful out here,” she finally said.

He walked closer, standing beside her. “I’ve always thought so. Danny and I stayed outside a lot. There’s something peaceful here. Danny, my mother, and I used to take our meals on the patio when our father couldn’t join us. It seemed less...strained.”

Again, she couldn’t help wondering about what kind of life he had growing up. The more she resolved to stay distant, the harder it was. But hadn’t Danny seemed like a lost soul, too? Later, she realized that was what drew her to Danny. He needed someone to talk to, even though he never spoke about his parents.

Marissa only knew that after their parents’ death, they went to live with their mother’s sister. Even their Aunt Peggy never spoke about them when they would go to her home, then after the accident, Marissa continued to keep in touch with her.

Maybe Danny had just needed someone to stand beside him, someone who shared some of the same interests that he enjoyed. There'd been so many unanswered questions.

Now she had to deal with Blade and the anger she knew hadn't diminished over the years. It would almost be easier to face Axel—almost. “Do you think we can at least call a truce for a little while?” she asked. She didn't do turmoil very well.

He didn't say anything for a long moment, and she began to wonder if he would even answer. Maybe he was incapable of ever tolerating her.

“I'm sure I'll only be here for a few days,” she continued. “Would it be so very hard? I hated what happened to Danny. And yes, I could've handled it differently, and I'll forever regret that. The guilt wasn't all on me, though. Danny wasn't a saint.”

His sigh was audible. “I know he wasn't perfect, but his life didn't have to end like that.”

“I know,” she softly spoke.

“What happened that night that you're not telling me?”

Cold chills ran over her body. Maybe she shouldn't have brought any of this up again. She should've left well enough alone and stayed as far away from Blade as possible. What did she tell him? The truth? It would destroy his image of Danny. No, she couldn't do that.

“Can't we just leave it as being a series of bad judgment calls?” she finally asked. “Please.”

Again, silence filled their space.

“I’m sure Randy has something in the refrigerator or freezer that we can put in the oven for dinner,” he finally spoke.

Her shoulders relaxed. “He did. I’ve already put it in the oven.” She glanced at her watch. “It should be about done. I hope you like lasagna. There’s also a salad. I need to put some garlic bread in to toast, and dinner will be ready.”

“I don’t intend for you to do all the cooking,” he said, but his words weren’t as harsh as they’d been.

Maybe this was his way of agreeing to a temporary peace agreement.

She studied him, wondering if that’s what he meant. He met her gaze, and a shiver ran down her spine, but it wasn’t from fear this time. She quickly shook off the feeling.

His words sank in. “You can cook?” Now he’d surprised her.

For about a half second, one side of his lips curved upward. Could she even call it a smile? At least he’d relaxed his normally stiff stance. That was a step in the right direction.

“Not exactly, but I can put a casserole in the oven. And I can toast garlic bread. I’m pretty good at breakfast if it’s not too complicated.”

“But you live alone most of the time, right? Danny told me you had your own apartment about an hour from him, closer to the college.” Coldness shuttered his eyes. She could’ve kicked herself for even mentioning Danny’s name again. For just a moment, she thought they might’ve called a temporary truce, now she wasn’t so sure.

“I buy a lot of precooked meals and stick them in the microwave, or I go out to eat.”

He didn't seem as relaxed, but at least he wasn't shutting her out again. “Good to know,” she said.

“How so?”

“I enjoy eating, and I'm a pretty good cook. My grandmother taught me. If anything needs to be cooked from scratch, I'll make sure I'm the one doing it.”

His eyebrows drew together. “I'm not that bad.”

For just a moment, she thought she saw a twinkle in his eyes. No, she had to be mistaken. There was no way he was teasing her.

“I'll just go in and check the lasagna.”

He followed her inside. As soon as she stepped into the dining room, a cold chill ran down her spine. She wondered for a moment if the house *was* haunted. Blade had said it had been in his family for generations. Were the ghosts of his ancestors angry with her as well? Probably.

As soon as she got to the kitchen, she went to the oven and opened the door. She carefully pulled back a corner and let the steam out. The lasagna was bubbling, and the aroma of Italian sausage, garlic and other spices filled the room.

When she straightened, Marissa noticed that Blade was looking around with a confused expression on his face. She had a feeling he'd never spent much time in the kitchen, even if he could cook breakfast.

She, on the other hand, had already gone on an exploring expedition, so she knew where the baking sheets were kept. She brought out one, and then put one slice of garlic bread on it for her and two for Blade before putting it inside the hot oven.

“I wasn’t sure what wine to choose,” she said.

He leaned against the counter and crossed his arms. “Do you even like wine?”

“Yes, if it’s not too dry. I like a sweeter wine. Like Moscato.” She started to say more, but stopped herself just in time. She’d been about to say Danny was the one who introduced her to wine, even though she’d been underage, but she bit her tongue at the last minute. She’d already figured out bringing up Danny’s name brought back bad memories for Blade. Besides, Danny had only let her have half a glass. That certainly didn’t make her a connoisseur of fine wines.

Blade nodded, then moved to the wine refrigerator. She couldn’t help but stare as he bent over in front of it. The man had a seriously great looking ass. She quickly busied herself as he chose a wine, then filled her glass. She tried to act as if she hadn’t just been ogling his butt, and took the glass when he handed it to her, thankful the wine didn’t slosh over the side.

She took a sip, then closed her eyes as her taste buds exploded with flavor. The wine was fruity and light. When she opened her eyes, Blade was watching her. Her face began to grow warm. She quickly turned away. “The wine you chose has a very good flavor,” she said.

When he didn’t say anything, she looked up. “What?”

He shook his head. “No, it’s nothing.”

What had he been about to say? She’d had a feeling he wanted to say more, but for some reason, he held back. That was the problem with her and Blade, there were too many unspoken words between them.

She turned and removed the garlic bread from the oven. Neither one spoke as they filled their plates. She grabbed her glass of wine and went to the patio. Darkness had swept over the sky while she’d been finishing dinner.

Blade hit a switch and muted lights cast a warm glow over the patio. If she’d been here with anyone else, she would say it was romantic. But she was with Blade, and she still felt a distinct chill coming from him. He might have agreed to a temporary truce, but she wasn’t sure how long it would last.

At least the chill didn’t extend to the outside. The night air only held a hint that the temperatures would be getting cooler. That was the thing about Texas. You never knew what the weather was going to be like from one day to the next. But for now, it was pleasant.

She took a bite of the lasagna and sighed with pleasure. “Whoever made this is a very good cook,” she told him, then took another drink of wine.

“I’ve spoken to Randy over the years, but never actually met the man. He keeps me updated on anything that might need my attention. He came highly recommended.”

When her eyebrows drew together, he continued as if he knew she was wondering why he’d never met the man who

managed his estate. He'd be right because that was exactly what she was wondering.

"I haven't been back since my parents... died, and we went to live with Aunt Peggy."

"It's hard to imagine you haven't been back in that length of time."

She glanced around at the beauty of the rolling hills, even though they were mostly in shadows with only the light from the half-moon. Yes, the house was dreary and dark, but he could always redecorate.

"I'm afraid if I lived here, I don't think I would ever want to leave," she admitted.

His eyes took on a faraway look, but just as quickly, he looked at her. "You don't think it's kind of dismal looking, on the inside at least?"

"Oh, I agree with you there. It gives off a very haunted mansion type vibe."

He laughed outright, a deep, throaty laugh. Had she ever heard him laugh? She thought back. Other than earlier, no, she didn't think so. At least, not at something she'd ever said.

"You're right, but I'm pretty sure it's not haunted." He hesitated for a moment, then continued. "You know, inside there are a lot of nooks and crannies. There's even a secret passageway."

She took another drink of her wine. "Now I'm intrigued."

“Danny and I found it one day. We were pretty young. I think I was twelve and he was nine. If you push on one of the panels in the library there’s a staircase that leads downward. I actually think it’s part of the basement.”

Goosebumps popped up on her arms. She set her empty glass on the table and leaned forward. “Tell me more.”

“It’s quite an exciting story,” he began as he reached for the bottle of wine. He refilled her glass and then set the bottle back down. “We were playing hide and seek. I ran to the library, but I could hear Danny getting closer. I kept backing up farther and farther until I was against one of the panels. When I heard him laughing and saying he was going to find me, I guess I jumped because my elbow hit a hidden lever, and the panel swung open.”

Yes, she read too many mysteries. No, it was more like she devoured them. She was enthralled with the story, though. “Then what happened?”

He stopped talking long enough to get a drink, so she did the same. She loved a good tale, especially one with a secret passageway.

“I knew Danny was getting close by then.”

“You went inside the secret passageway? Weren’t you scared?” She realized she was gripping her wine glass, she took a big gulp, and set the glass back on the table.

“Scared? Hell, I was terrified. I wasn’t about to go down there by myself.”

She laughed at his admission. “I thought you were going to tell me you went alone, and Danny couldn’t find you.

You led me on.”

His eyes twinkled and he laughed. “I did. I guess I got caught up in the story.”

She reached for her glass and saw that it was full again. She would have to be careful how much she drank. She already felt a little woozy. It was really good wine, though. She would make sure this was her last glass. “So, what happened? Did you find a treasure chest overflowing with golden doubloons?”

“Well, Danny came into the library. I called him over, and showed him the secret passageway.”

“And then you went down,” she supplied.

“Well, we got a flashlight and shone it down the dark staircase.”

“What did you see?”

“Cobwebs. A lot of them.”

She took a drink of wine. Now he was just frustrating her. “But you did go down, right?”

“Are you kidding? We weren’t about to go down there. It smelled musty. What if there would’ve been a dead relative or something? We did make up a lot of stories about what might be down there. That was a lot more interesting.”

She straightened. “You never explored?”

He shook his head. “Not even one time.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I think you’ve been lying to me.”

“I would never lie about something like that. There is a secret passage, and we never went down to see if there might be a treasure chest of gold or something.”

“Then show it to me.”

He opened up his arms in supplication. “You still don’t believe me?”

She raised her chin. “Not one iota. You’ll have to prove it.”

“Okay, I will. As soon as we get the kitchen cleaned, I’ll take you to the library and show you the secret passageway.”

“And I’ll hold you to your word.” As soon as she came to her feet, her head began to swim. She grabbed the edge of the table. “That wine was stronger than I thought. I think I might be a little tipsy.”

“No, it can’t be the wine. The alcohol content for this one is low. You’re probably just exhausted from everything that has happened. I’ve seen it in my line of work. A victim of a crime will be fine, and then the next day, they fall apart. It’s not that unusual. Actually, the wine will help relax you, and it’s probably better than taking a pill.”

She nodded. “Oh, okay.” It sounded plausible. Besides, she hated taking pills.

They carried the dishes into the kitchen, and she started toward the sink when he stopped her and took her plate and glass away from her. In one swift movement he put his hands on her waist and lifted her to the center island. She gasped when she rose in the air, and grabbed onto his shoulders for

support. She only thought she was dizzy before. He made the room spin. Or maybe it was just her proximity to him.

“What are you doing?”

He refilled her glass and handed it to her. She automatically took it.

“You’re going to sit there while I clean the kitchen. It’s only fair, you cooked the meal.”

She giggled, then slapped a hand over her mouth. She had no idea why she thought him cleaning the kitchen was so funny. Maybe because even in this enormous kitchen, he still looked muscular and tall, and sexy and...

She took a quick drink of her wine. Nope, she wasn’t going there no matter that he’d agreed to a truce.

“I didn’t actually cook the meal. I took the pan out of the refrigerator and turned the oven on. The salad was already made so all I had to do was put everything into the oven. I wouldn’t call that cooking.”

“It doesn’t matter, I’m cleaning the kitchen and you can sit and watch me.”

She had no problem watching him.

A strange heat flooded her body as he moved around the kitchen. It must be the wine, she thought as she took another drink. This was absolutely going to be her last glass. She took another drink, then had to put her hand on the counter so she didn’t start swaying. He’d chosen a really good wine, though. Danny was good at choosing wine, too. Her eyes filled with tears and she sniffed.

He looked her way. “What’s the matter?”

She shook her head. “It’s nothing.” Damned wine. She was more emotional than usual.

He put the last of the dishes into the dishwasher, then closed it before sauntering over to her. He moved so that he was standing between her legs. The heat that flooded her a moment ago was getting a lot warmer. Only a few inches separated them. He rested his palms on her thighs.

“I want you to tell me why your eyes are filled with tears,” he said.

She started to tell him it was nothing, but there was something warm in his voice that begged her to confide in him. “I don’t think you like when I talk about Danny.”

He slowly shook his head. “Maybe that’s exactly what I need. I don’t want to bury his memory.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. Here, take another drink. It’ll make you feel better.” When he aimed her glass toward her mouth, she dutifully took a drink. “Now, what memory made you feel sad?”

“Danny used to pick out the wine. I’d never had any until I met him. I guess this wine reminded me of him. He showed me so many things.”

His smile was tender, enveloping her in a warm cocoon. “Like what?”

For a moment, her brain quit functioning as he fingers lightly made circles on her thighs. It didn’t matter that she was

still wearing the jeans she'd put on this morning. She could feel the heat of his touch through them. She took another drink of wine to clear her mind.

“He was always sketching something,” she tentatively began. “A park bench with an old man sitting on it. A butterfly floating on air. He was very talented.”

“I know. What else?”

It was so long ago that sometimes it was hard to remember everything. She smiled. “Did you know he wouldn't let any of the food touch on his plate? Like if he had mashed potatoes, he didn't want his corn to touch it. I used to tease him about it all the time. And once, I ordered a bone in steak and I thought he was going to be sick. He told me that for some reason he could almost see the animal as I cut into the meat. He didn't get angry or anything, though. Afterward, we would laugh about his funny quirks.” She was enveloped in a second wave of sadness and had to suck back a sob. “I miss him so much.”

Blades thumbs stopped moving in circles on her thighs. “Then why did you break up with him that night?” he softly asked.

She set her glass on the counter, it tilted, but Blade quickly kept it from tipping over. She swiped at her eyes. “I went to his apartment earlier than usual. I thought we could go to the park and have a picnic dinner. We loved the park at night. I had a basket in my car all packed with sandwiches and potato salad.” She met his eyes. “Did you know he loved potato salad. Especially mine. He said it was even better than his Aunt Peggy's.”

“What happened?” he urged.

“I had a key to his apartment, so I could let myself in.” She closed her eyes and thought back to that moment. She’d been so happy. She’d had big plans for their evening together.

She opened her eyes and for a moment it wasn’t Blade standing in front of her, but Danny. She reached out and ran her hand down his cheek, felt his hard jaw.

“Why?” Her words trembled.

“Why what? Just tell me what happened that night. Why did you break up with Danny?”

She blinked. But it wasn’t Danny in front of her. It was Blade, and he was seducing her with his eyes, with his words, with his touch. She reached for the wineglass to take a drink, and realized what he’d done. Why had she drunk so damned much? It made her vulnerable and that was a dangerous state to be in around Blade.

A small measure of sanity returned. “Let me down.” Her words slurred a little as she pushed on his shoulders. He didn’t move.

“I only want answers,” he said.

She opened her mouth, then snapped it closed. For a moment, she could see Danny again, as if he was standing right beside his brother. She’d always thought his eyes looked sad. As if he’d buried painful memories deep inside himself where no one could reach them, not even her. It was as if he was looking right at her. The little half smile he used to give her lifting one side.

Marissa sucked in a sob as she turned back to Blade.
“Please, don’t do this.”

His lips compressed into a thin line. “I just want answers, dammit!”

“Answers I can’t give you! Paint me as the bad person in the relationship. I don’t care. Have you ever thought that I might have used Danny? That whatever he told you was the truth? Maybe I don’t want to dredge it up again. Maybe my guilt comes from how I treated him. Did you ever stop to think about it that way? Now, let me down. I have nothing else to say to you.”

He helped her off the counter, then moved out of her way. “Okay, fine. I already had you pegged as using Danny anyway. Why change my image of you now?”

But when she stumbled just a little, he grabbed her elbow to steady her. She jerked away from him. “I don’t care what you think about me.”

Except she was lying, and she knew it. She’d always cared what Blade thought about her. Heaven help her, she still did. She hurried out of the room as best she could.

Dammit, why had she fallen for the oldest trick in the book? Blade got her drunk so she would tell him what happened that night, but she would never tell him, no matter what. She’d made a promise, even if it was just to herself.

“Oh, Danny, look at the mess you left behind,” she whispered.

Chapter Nine

Blade knew that was uncalled for. He'd only wanted answers. That's all he'd ever wanted. It was still no excuse to get Marissa drunk. Fuck, he was an ass. He scraped his fingers through his hair, then leaned against the center island.

Memories of the past flooded his mind. Like the first time he'd met Marissa. He'd been at Danny's apartment. Danny's excitement rolled off him in waves as he waited for her to get there. It had amused Blade. He doubted the girl would be anything special, but he would hang around and wait for her to drop by so Danny could introduce her.

There was a soft knock on his door. Danny almost tripped over himself hurrying to answer it. Then there she was, standing in the open doorway with a shy smile on her face. Shy? No, that wasn't the first thought that entered his mind, especially as she walked into the room. It was one of those slow, sultry walks. The kind of walk that made his heart beat faster.

It had been the middle of summer, and she wore white shorts and a blue tank top. Most girls her age dressed the same way, but on her, the clothes looked sexy as hell. She'd had the longest, dark hair—like black velvet, reaching the middle of her back. He remembered having a sudden urge to run his fingers through it. He thought she was the most beautiful creature he'd ever seen.

Then her gaze had traveled over him, touching him everywhere it landed. Heating his blood to almost boiling.

When she reached a hand toward him, he automatically took it. She must've felt the same jolt because she jumped just a little, then looked at him with confusion.

Danny had said something, and the spell broke, but Blade felt like a ton of bricks had fallen on him. Marissa was bubbly, vivacious, the total opposite of Danny. Always skeptical, he wondered if she was dating him for his money.

Later, Danny said she refused to take any gifts from him. Maybe she wanted it all, including a ring on her finger. But the more he was around her, he didn't get that feeling.

Blade had been attracted to her back then. Hell, he still was. That was the crutch of his dilemma. Even now, he wanted Marissa, but in his mind, she would forever be Danny's girlfriend.

"Son of a bitch." This was ripping out his heart. How could he call himself a man and still lust after her?

Their relationship had been going great, according to Danny. Blade knew that couples argued from time to time, at least in most normal relationships. When he spoke with Danny on the phone, he never mentioned any problems, only that he wanted Blade to visit.

He'd always been able to read Danny. He'd missed every sign there might be trouble.

That was his fault, and he knew it. He'd stayed away as much as he could because he had a feeling Marissa was attracted to him as much as he was attracted to her. Had that been why she broke up with Danny? He wouldn't be able to live with himself if he was the reason. He needed answers.

He left the kitchen and went upstairs. He didn't go to his room, though. He stopped in front of the door to Danny's room, hesitated, then went inside. For half a second, it felt like all the air had been knocked out of him. Danny was everywhere in the room, and so were the memories.

He took a breath and slowly exhaled as he walked over to Danny's desk. Blade ran his finger lightly over the model car. He couldn't stop the smile from forming on his face. It was a red Porsche. They'd worked on it together. Danny told him that was the kind of car he would buy someday.

There was a baseball glove—his first. Blade laughed. Danny sucked at sports. But at least he tried. His hand lingered on the sketchbook. Danny was very rarely without pencils and something to draw on. He opened it and paused. The first picture was of their mother. A timeless picture where she would never grow old.

He held his breath as he turned the page but then relaxed when he didn't see a picture of their father. If Danny would've drawn him, it would probably have been with horns. No, this one was a deer with big sad eyes. A raccoon on the next page, then someone he didn't recognize. A friend from school? Danny didn't have many friends. At least he didn't talk about them if he did. He flipped through the pages but froze on the last one.

Marissa? It was a beautiful sketch of her. Danny was talented as...

His gaze quickly scanned the room. Everything looked the same as when they'd left. They'd been kids back then. He wouldn't have known Marissa. Every scenario spun across his

mind, making him dizzy. He grabbed the edge of the desk and looked toward her room.

Had she been here before? She acted like this was the first time. Was it deliberate? Maybe she was more devious than he'd thought. What if Danny had realized her true nature and confronted her? If she'd only used him, the knowledge would have killed Danny.

Had she decided he was a better catch than Danny?

His lips pressed into a tight line. Blade stormed out of Danny's room, marching down to Marissa's. He opened the door and strode inside. For a moment, he couldn't breathe. He could only stare at the woman in bed.

As if his feet had a mind of their own, he walked closer to the bed. She'd opened the curtains in her room, and moonlight shone down on her. The light and shadows danced across her pale skin.

She hadn't bothered to put on a gown. She'd stripped out of all her clothes except for her panties. She'd also kicked the cover down to her feet. She lay on her side with her hand tucked under her face, shielding her breasts from his view. His gaze swept over her, then slowly made its way down her body again.

A smile played around the corners of her mouth. Blade wondered where her dreams were taking her. She suddenly moved, stretching her arm above her head, and sighed. He was able to see one perfect breast. He'd never wanted a woman as much as he wanted her right now. He was getting hard just thinking of what he would do, how he would make her cry his name in ecstasy.

Damn, he was a sick bastard. He reached down and pulled the cover over her. She sighed. He turned on his heel and left the room, quietly closing the door behind him. He didn't stop walking until he was inside his room. He closed the door firmly behind him as if that could stop temptation.

Didn't work.

Breathe in, breathe out. He'd learned techniques to calm the adrenaline rush as a Seal. He grimaced. It didn't work that well with sexual desire. Man, he had to get himself under control. Marissa wasn't his, she still belonged to Danny in his mind, and she always would.

He walked over to the double French doors and opened them before stepping out to the balcony as he tried to get his mind straight. Had she manipulated his little brother? Dammit, he didn't know.

Blade closed his eyes briefly, then opened them, looking around. Even in shadows, the landscape was beautiful. He didn't think he'd appreciated it enough as a kid. Hell, he'd only been fourteen when they whisked him and Danny off to Aunt Peggy's. He hadn't been back since.

The inside of the house was another story. He planted his hands on the stone rail. His mother and Danny had hated it just as much as Blade. He gave a short laugh. His father wouldn't let his mother decorate any room besides the guest room.

“This house has been in my family for generations, and if it was good enough for them, then it's good enough for us.”

He'd lost count of how often his father had spoken those words. Marissa was right to think it might be haunted. He'd always wondered the same thing. So why didn't he just come back and have it completely remodeled? It wasn't as though he didn't have the money. It had been piling up for years. For that matter, why hadn't he come back to the estate to live?

No, he swore he would never return when he walked out the front door. He'd hated this house.

That wasn't entirely true. He'd hated what happened in the house, but there'd been good memories, too. He was afraid if he sold it, he might lose them. It was a crazy thought that didn't make one bit of sense.

He leaned against the railing and stared out at the rolling hills. His mother had wanted to redecorate all of it. Maybe he would as a tribute to her. Wipe away every bit of his father's mark on the place. A total remodel from top to bottom. He could do it in-between missions.

He loved working with the team. The friends he'd made as a Seal were great, too. There were too many rules and regulations, though, so he'd walked away. It felt as if he was always looking for something. That's when Carter came to him.

Carter had probably watched him more closely than all the other men he'd recruited on a trial basis. Blade had a feeling Carter didn't think he would stick around. When Carter did a background check, it was always thorough. He'd asked Blade why he wanted to go on missions, sometimes risking his

life, when he could easily live off his wealth. Blade countered with his own question. Why did Carter do the same thing?

They'd formed a mutual understanding that day. Both men had more money than they would ever spend. The funny thing about money was when you had enough of it, you always accumulated more without really trying.

Blade went through his financial holdings once or twice a year. He had good, honest financial advisors who did the heavy lifting, and the money kept piling up year after year, even after donating to charities.

He had other problems now. He glanced toward Marissa's bedroom, then at his watch. He doubted Carter was still up. He would call him first thing in the morning to find out what was going on with Axel. Maybe he'd been able to reach Declan and warn him to back off, not that he thought he would just because Carter asked him to. If he felt he had a score to settle with Marissa, Declan might not back off. This was turning out to be a major clusterfuck.

He went back inside, closing the French doors and locking them. But once he was in bed, all he could think about was Marissa lying in her bed, almost naked.

She's Danny's girl, he reminded himself. Not his. It took a while, but he finally fell asleep. His dreams were filled with her pressing her naked body against his, him tasting her luscious lips, caressing her smooth skin, cupping her breasts, teasing the nipples until she moaned...

He woke up feeling worse than he did when he went to bed.

Bleary-eyed, he headed in the direction of the bathroom, then leaned against the counter and stared at his reflection. He looked like death warmed over. This wasn't going to work. As large as the house was, Marissa was still too damned close. He blew out an exasperated breath.

Damn, this had to be over soon. But even that thought didn't make him feel better. He turned the shower on, then stripped out of his briefs. He felt a little better when he stepped out of the shower and dried off. Now, he just needed coffee.

He quickly dressed in jeans and a black T-shirt, then slipped on a pair of sneakers before going downstairs. He figured Marissa must already be up because the closer he got to the kitchen, the more he could smell coffee.

Except she wasn't in the kitchen. He looked around but didn't see a coffee pot. Anyone would think he knew this house better than he did. Their father had hired the staff. The cook always scared the hell out of him and Danny.

Mr. Renfro was small, maybe five feet, seven inches, with a slender build and beady little eyes. Whenever they came into the kitchen, he watched them like a hawk. They expected him to swoop toward them at any minute and bite their heads off. And you better not ask him for a snack. The one time they had, he'd gone off on a tangent.

So no, Blade didn't know where anything was in the kitchen. He took a wild guess and walked to the small room off the kitchen. Of course, the butler's pantry. He poured himself a cup and inhaled the aroma before taking a drink. His mood began to lift.

Until he moved into the dining room. He grimaced. There was no way he was going to drink his coffee in here. The open curtains only made it seem a little less dark and dreary. He glanced toward the head of the table and froze. For just a moment, he saw his grim-faced father sitting there, glaring at his mother, then Blade, and finally Danny. His mother and Danny seemed to shrink inside themselves, but he always met his father's anger without backing down.

The scene vanished before his eyes, but the image left him shaken. He closed his eyes and drew in a breath, then exhaled. It was only a memory, he told himself.

Blade glanced out the French doors and saw Marissa sitting at the patio table. Anything was better than staying here. Besides, he wanted to talk to her. He wanted to find out why her picture was in Danny's room. Some of his anger from last night returned.

When he stepped outside, she looked up, blushed, then focused on drinking her coffee. He joined her at the table. Neither one of them spoke for the next few minutes.

"Don't ever try to get me drunk again," she said. Her words were hard and cold.

"Fair enough." Blade still wasn't about to let the matter drop. "I know something else happened that night. Something that you're not telling. You say it wasn't all your fault. Okay, I know Danny wasn't a saint. What did you do? Did you catch him in bed with another woman?"

Her head jerked up, but just as quickly, she focused on her coffee again.

“Or maybe he caught you in bed with another man?”

Yeah, he was fishing. If looks could kill, he would be dead right now. Rather than answer him, she changed the subject.

“Do you think Carter will be able to convince Axel to leave me alone?”

Okay, he’d drop that line of questioning—for now. “I’m going to call him this morning to see if he’s made any progress.”

“Good. I want to return to my life as soon as possible.”

“I went to Danny’s room last night.”

She looked up, one eyebrow raised. “And?”

“I looked through one of his sketchbooks and saw a picture of you that he’d drawn.”

Now she just looked confused. “I don’t understand. What are you getting at?”

“I haven’t been back to the estate since I was fourteen. I thought Danny had stayed away as well. Did he bring you here? Maybe you were trying to cash in on the older brother, and he figured it out. What happened? Did Danny not satisfy you sexually?”

“How dare you!” She half rose out of her seat, then settled back into it. “I know what your game is, but no, I’ve never been here before. Sometimes, Danny would disappear for a few days and not tell me where he was going. He could be very secretive. And as far as not satisfyingly me sexually, Danny was a gentleman. We never slept together. We wanted

to wait until the time was right. We were both happy with that decision. Now, if you don't mind... Oh hell, I don't care if you mind or not. I don't want to be in your company any longer. It's too damn early for twenty questions. You need to give it a rest. I'll be somewhere in the house." With those parting words, she got up and went inside.

His eyebrows drew together in thought. She'd never slept with Danny? No, he wasn't sure he believed that. She was probably lying to him.

When his phone rang, he put thoughts of Marissa out of his head. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and looked at the caller ID. Carter. This call couldn't come soon enough.

"Yeah, what's up? Please tell me Axel is going to back off."

"Sorry. I wish I had better news. I finally got in touch with him, though. The man is a jerk. He said he wouldn't back off until Marissa came back to work for him and returned what she took. So far, I haven't been able to contact Declan. This man is a ghost, and he has enough men around him that it will be difficult to speak with him."

Blade's jaw clenched. This wasn't what he wanted to hear.

"Are you doing okay?" Carter asked. "I know your history with this woman, and it can't be easy for you."

"I just want this over soon as possible. This is a big house. I'm hoping we won't run into each other that often."

"Are you sure you have reason to hate her? I did a background check on her. I can't find anything pointing to her

being a bad person. When she's not working, she does volunteer work in the community."

"Yeah, I'm sure she's a regular saint." His words dripped with sarcasm.

"Hey, I'm just the messenger."

"Yeah, I'm sorry. I had a rough night last night. I don't have very many good memories of this house. I'd rather not stay here any longer than I have to."

"I'll keep trying to get in touch with Declan. He might be more reasonable than Axel." He ended the call on that note.

Blade took a drink of coffee, then spit it out. There was nothing worse than cold coffee. He might not know exactly what happened that night, but he'd discovered a few things. He could piece together the rest of the story while they were here.

His lips clamped together. He thought he knew Danny, but he had no idea why he came back to the estate, to a home that only held tormented memories. Pain ripped through him.

They'd been friends. He thought Danny knew they would always have each other. Why hadn't his brother been able to talk to him? What secrets did he hide?

There was one thing he had to do, as much as he hated the idea. With Marissa pissed off at him, he wouldn't be able to learn anything.

He had to make peace with her.

Chapter Ten

Mannix hadn't spoken a word about Axel, but Declan knew he was thinking about him as they sat in the back of the limo on the way to Axel's estate. Declan doubted he would wait much longer to speak. He knew when his right-hand man was pissed. Mannix wasn't very good at hiding his emotions. Not that he ever tried.

Their relationship was strange when he thought about it. He'd been born into money, while Mannix had grown up on skid row and joined a gang at twelve.

They'd had a little too much to drink one night not long after he came to work for Declan, and Mannix admitted that he'd killed a man when he was fourteen, then said the man was molesting little girls. He never regretted what he'd done. Yeah, Declan might've done the same thing.

Mannix left the gang not long after that. Family, he'd scoffed. They'd no more been his family than the last man who'd moved in with his mother.

Mannix moved around the country, not settling in one place very long. When he was twenty-eight, Mannix saved Declan's life. That was the night his father had been murdered. Declan had to take over the business. He made Mannix his right-hand man.

The funny thing was, the guy was smart as hell. If Mannix had the opportunities Declan had growing up, they might've been rivals rather than friends—no, they were more like brothers.

“Your cousin is an idiot,” Mannix said, finally voicing his thoughts and interrupting Declan’s.

“You’re not telling me anything I don’t already know.”

Axel was just like his brother, Warren. They only thought of themselves. It wasn’t the first time he’d gotten reports about Axel and the women he hired. They were usually young and beautiful.

“If you agree with me, why haven’t you done anything about him yet?”

Declan scowled when he looked at Mannix, but his expression didn’t seem to faze the other man. It was funny, Mannix had never been intimidated by him, maybe because Mannix was big and looked mean.

He always wore a frown, and when he spoke, his words were rough, gravelly. That was one of the reasons he’d hired him. He didn’t want a yes man. He wanted someone who would tell him like it was and wasn’t afraid of anything or anyone. Sometimes, though, Declan thought he might prefer a yes man.

“Why do you think I’m going to his home?”

“You need to do something about him this time. The man treats women like shit. I don’t like bullies. His hands aren’t clean. When he goes down, make sure you’re not caught in the net.”

“I can handle this.”

Mannix studied him for a moment. “Good. You might be into some shady stuff, but at least you have ethics. That’s why I agreed to work for you.”

Declan raised an eyebrow. “*You* agreed to work for *me*?”

His expression turned to puzzlement. “Yeah, I thought you knew that.”

Declan shook his head. Maybe Mannix was right. Whatever the case, he always toed the line between infuriating him, to being irreplaceable. Right now, he was getting damned close to infuriating him.

“What do you think this girl downloaded?” Mannix asked.

“Nothing that should hurt us,” he said.

“But it has caused you problems.”

“More like an irritating gnat that keeps buzzing around my face. It will just take a little time to fix everything back the way it was.”

“You’re a good man, but what are you going to do about Axel?”

He sighed deeply. So, they were back to that. “I’m not sure yet. I’ll see what he has to say for himself.” He closed his eyes for a moment. His cousin was troublesome, and if the truth were known, he still wasn’t sure what he would do about him.

If he fired him, he had a feeling Axel would become a liability. He had some ventures that he was looking into, and Axel was aware of them. He couldn’t afford to have the authorities sniffing around. But he also knew he had to do something.

That whole side of his family were idiots. He still wondered how his parents and their siblings were even related. They were the ones you didn't introduce to anyone, but you still have to help them out because they're blood-related. He'd always wondered why that even mattered. He was closer to Mannix than any of his cousins.

He didn't particularly care for Axel. He was a lot like Warren—only out for himself and what he could take from others. Declan had a man on the inside watching Axel. He'd reported back to him that Axel was a womanizer and treated women horribly. He also drank too much and had started using cocaine. Yes, he knew it was time to cut him loose. He just wasn't sure how he was going to go about it.

The driver pulled through the gates of Axel's estate. Declan's lip curled with distaste. It was the ugliest house he'd ever seen. The inside was even worse. Did he think he was some kind of Greek God or what?

“Ugliest damn house I've ever seen,” Mannix said, echoing Declan's thoughts.

“Agreed,” he said.

“Does he know you're coming?” Mannix asked.

“No, I wanted to surprise him.”

Mannix chuckled. “He's probably shitting peach seeds right now. I'll guarantee that he knows you're here now. Probably as soon we started up the driveway.”

“I'm sure you're right.”

The driver stopped and turned off the key before getting out and coming around to open his door. Mannix didn't

wait but was already getting out of the car. The front door opened as Declan got out.

Every expression crossed Axel's face. From surprise to anger to a sickening shade of green as he realized he was fucked. Declan never showed up unannounced. Unless, of course, that person was in big trouble.

Leaving the door open, Axel came out onto the landing. "Declan, I wasn't expecting you."

"I know," he said.

Axel didn't even acknowledge Mannix, not that he ever would. He would consider Mannix beneath him. That was Axel's problem. He thought he was better than everyone else. When Declan gave him this job, he didn't have two nickels to rub together.

He'd only offered him the job as a favor to Axel's mother. He had a feeling it was so she could get him out of the house. Rachel was the kind of mother who put herself first. She was always trying to look younger than she was. It didn't do her image any good to have a grown son hanging around.

He'd felt sorry for Axel. Their parents were divorced, and their father wouldn't have anything to do with his sons. He should've learned his lesson after taking Axel's brother under his wing. Warren had screwed up and gotten someone tortured and killed.

Declan glanced around. He'd only been here once before but remembered where everything was. He walked through the house, noting that none of the employees looked him directly in the eye, and they all looked depressed. He

could understand why. He went straight to the study and then sat behind Axel's desk.

Axel didn't look as if he knew what he was supposed to do. Declan waved his hand in front of him. "Have a seat." Mannix closed the door behind them but chose to stand. Declan thought he probably did it to intimidate Axel. Mannix had a wicked sense of humor.

Axel frowned. "Does he have to be in here? It's not like he's family or anything."

It was funny how his relatives always mentioned they were family when they knew they were in trouble. It wouldn't do him any good.

"Mannix stays."

Axel didn't say anything else, but he kept eyeing Mannix as if Axel thought he would do him harm, and, right now, Mannix looked as though he might. He often wondered if there was anything that didn't piss off Mannix.

"Do you know where the girl is yet?"

"No, but she has someone helping her. This man called and tried to warn me to back off. Of course, I laughed in his face."

One eyebrow arched. "You saw him?"

Axel frowned. "No, it was a figure speech. We talked on the phone."

Idiot. He looked at Mannix and knew that he was thinking the same thing.

"What was his name?"

“His name?”

“Yes, he did tell you his name, didn’t he?”

“Yes, he did.”

He was going to kill him. Right now. “Do you remember what it was?”

“Oh, yeah. He said his name was Carter James.”

Declan rested his hands on the desk, clasping them together for a moment. He recognized that name, but where had he heard it? He turned to Axel’s computer.

“What’s your password?”

“I changed it.” Axel’s face turned red.

“And?”

“Stud 38.”

God save him. He quickly typed in the password, then pulled up the Internet and typed in Carter James. The first picture that came up showed a man who looked familiar. A younger man stood beside him. He read the caption, then cursed beneath his breath.

“He’s the son of the senator who happens to be on the intelligence committee.”

“How was I supposed to know any of that?”

He quickly skimmed a couple of articles, then looked up. “According to the articles, Carter James is someone you don’t want to mess with.”

“He’s a senator’s son,” Axel scoffed. “How bad could he be?”

Declan pushed the keyboard out of the way. “I’ll tell you how bad. He provides a private service to people who need security work done.”

“So?” Axel wore a stupid expression.

“I thought I recognized the name. The men he has working for him are badass. They’re the ones who are protecting your secretary. And you laughed in his face?”

“But we have men, too,” Axel said.

“Are you ready for an all-out war?”

Axel squared his shoulders. “I’m not afraid of them.”

“As long as you’re not in front leading the troops, right?” Mannix said.

“Are you going to let him talk to me like that?”

“He’s only speaking the truth.”

“Except we’re blood, and he’s nothing.”

Declan’s eyes narrowed. “Watch your step. Mannix is closer to me than any brother could be. Now, leave us. I need to try to figure out what our next step will be.”

As soon as Axel stomped out of the room, Mannix shoved the door closed behind him. “You want me to kill him now, boss?”

He thought about it for a moment. “Not yet. I need to see if I can cut a deal with this Carter James.” He closed his eyes momentarily and massaged his temples, wondering what he would have to give up to make this right.

He moved to the computer again and began hitting the keys. As far as he could tell, there was no way to contact Carter James.

“Let’s go back to the hotel. I want you to get me a phone number for him. I can’t find anything listed. Call Axel in here.”

Axel came shuffling back inside the office.

“If he calls again, do not laugh in his face. Give him my number and tell him I’m in charge. Do you understand?”

“I can get her back. I have men working on this.”

Declan slammed his fist on the desk as he came to his feet. “Then pull them off. I said, I’m in charge.”

“Okay, okay, anything you say.”

“We’ll be staying at a hotel in Dallas.”

“You’re welcome to stay here.”

As Declan walked to the door, he threw over his shoulder, “I’m afraid it would give me a headache to stay here.” Without another word, he left the house and walked out to the car. The chauffeur opened the back door, and he and Mannix climbed in.

“You should’ve let me kill him. The guy’s an idiot.”

Yeah, he should have.

Chapter Eleven

Blade stood next to her in the dark garden. That's how Marissa had come to think of the garden that seemed closed off from the rest of the world. She glanced his way, then continued walking down the path. Why had he even come out once he realized she was already here? She had nothing else to say to him. But he didn't go away.

She finally turned and faced him. "I thought we were going to keep our distance."

"This is a big house, but we'll run into each other occasionally. We'll also be eating our meals together. That, and I needed to apologize for last night."

She raised an eyebrow. "What you did was despicable. You got me drunk, and then you tried to..." Heat rose up her cheeks. "Then tried to seduce me."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"I'm not sure I believe you," she told him.

"You just have to trust me."

"Trust you?" she scoffed. "I don't think so." Why did he have to look so...so...damned apologetic? In some ways, he reminded her of Danny. It was the eyes. They were the same shade of blue. Danny was good at convincing her he was sincere if she was mad at him, which didn't happen often. They certainly had been cut from the same mold.

"Give me another chance. We'll call another truce. I swear, I won't break this one."

She didn't believe him, but she was tired of fighting.
"Okay, one more chance. Don't blow it this time."

"I won't. Besides, we may be stuck here for a while longer. Carter was able to get hold of Axel, but he wouldn't make a deal. Axel wants you and the flash drive. Carter's trying to contact Declan to see if he'll have better luck."

She'd been afraid he wouldn't. Axel wanted to be in control of everything. She thought of something else, though.
"I need to use your phone. I want to call my grandmother to tell her I'm okay. I don't want her to worry."

He reached into his pocket, pulled out his phone, unlocked it, and handed it to her. "I'll give you some privacy." He turned and walked back into the house.

She punched in the numbers to her grandmother. Nana answered after a moment.

"Hello?"

"Nana, this is Marissa."

"Did you lose your phone? I don't recognize this number."

"Sort of. I ran into a little trouble with my boss." She quickly explained everything that had happened.

"Are you sure you're okay, sweetie?"

"Yes, I'm fine." They spoke for a few more minutes until Nana was reassured Marissa would be okay and would keep her updated on what was happening, and then she ended the call.

A low rumble of thunder vibrated across the sky. She glanced up, but it was hard to see through the canopy of limbs. There was a distinct drop in the temperature, though. A cold chill rippled down her spine as she turned and hurried back inside before it started to rain.

Blade wasn't around, but she heard a noise coming from the library, so she headed in that direction. She found him running his fingers lightly over the spines of books on the shelves.

"Have you read any of them?" she asked.

"A few." He didn't elaborate.

Maybe it was time she started asking questions. "How did you get the name Blade?"

He flinched, and she almost regretted asking, but then he began to talk.

"You probably can't imagine anyone who lives on such a large estate without picturing anything but a home filled with happiness. Servants to do our bidding. Old money." He waved his arm around the room. "That wasn't the case. My father ruined our family. Maybe he's the real reason Danny is dead," he quietly admitted.

"What did he do that was so bad?" Marissa couldn't fathom someone not loving their father. She adored hers and had a great relationship with her parents.

"What did he do?" He shook his head. "Everything he shouldn't have. It doesn't matter. Not anymore."

"I think it matters to you," she spoke softly.

“You really want to know what happened in our family?”

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

He continued as if she hadn’t said anything. “I’ll tell you what he did. He used to beat my mother almost unconscious for no reason except that she was alive. I always thought about her as a delicate flower that he kept grinding beneath the heel of his boot over and over again. When I was thirteen, I’d had enough. I grabbed a knife from the kitchen. By then, I was almost as tall as my father. I put the knife to his neck. I wanted to slice him open, but my mother yelled for me to stop, and then she started crying. God, I hated when she cried. It was like someone ripping my heart out.”

“What happened?”

His lips pressed into a thin line as if the memory was too painful to bear, but then he continued. “That one little hesitation, and he grabbed the knife from me. He asked me what I was going to do now and laughed. Then he called me Blade. He pushed me down on the floor to show me he was still stronger. After that day, that’s all he called me—Blade.”

So, that was how he got his nickname. She cringed when she thought about how hard that must’ve been for him—for Danny and their mother to live with an abusive man.

“I think I pissed him off when I smiled every time he called me Blade rather than my real name. I watched every video I could on handling a knife. I practiced throwing one until I had blisters on my hand, but every time I wanted to stop, I embraced the pain and kept at it. One time, I happened to be holding a knife, and he said something that pissed me

off. I threw the knife, and it embedded in the door beside his head. He didn't do anything. Just turned around and walked away. It was the first time I felt good about something."

She couldn't imagine living in a household with so much hate and anger. She wondered if Blade had ever talked to anyone about what had happened in his life.

"Hey, don't look so sad. It was a long time ago, and he's dead." He looked around. "Danny and I used to lose ourselves in the books here. At least some of them. He leaned more toward the poetic."

She knew Blade didn't want to talk about his father anymore. Not that she could blame him. "And what did you like to read?"

He laughed. "Huckleberry Finn, of course."

"Yet, you never explored the secret passage?" She cocked an eyebrow. "That is, if it even exists."

He walked nearer. She held her breath as he closed the distance between them.

"Are you saying that I lied?"

Marissa slowly shook her head as she tried to gather her thoughts. She found herself momentarily speechless as the familiar scent of Blade's cologne wafted toward her. It was an earthy fragrance, like him. It reminded her of the forest, and as she took a deep breath, she was immediately enveloped in the scent of crisp air, pine needles crushing beneath her feet and surrounded by cedar.

For just a moment, Marissa was lost in the sensation, feeling the weight of the air around her shift as the heady

aroma wrapped around her. Her mind wandered, and she wondered what it would be like if he took her into his arms and pulled her close, to feel the warmth of his lips on hers. To finally be able to taste him.

Just as suddenly as the fantasy filled her mind, it was gone as he turned right before he got to her and walked over to one of the panels. She blinked as a flush of embarrassment flooded her cheeks.

What had just happened? She felt as if an electric current had passed between them.

Before she could dwell on it for very long, he knelt down and felt along the ridges on the left-hand side. He looked at her and smiled again. Her heart skipped a beat. It wasn't right that someone could look as devastatingly attractive as Blade did right now.

The panel suddenly opened. "You were telling the truth," she said with surprise.

"Told you so."

"And you've never been down there?"

"Never, but I'm feeling adventurous today. Want to explore? Maybe we'll find a trunk filled with gold doubloons."

She smiled. "Absolutely."

He held out his hand. "My phone, please."

She handed it to him, and he turned the flashlight on.

"Are you sure you don't want to back out?"

"Are you?" She countered. "I mean, if you're afraid, I guess you can stay up here, and I'll tell you what's down

there.”

He chuckled as he leaned down and went through the opening. She followed right behind him, her nose wrinkling as she caught the distinct odor of mustiness.

As soon as Marissa stepped through the opening onto a landing, memories of Nana’s cellar came back to haunt her. It had been dark inside the day she went down the crumbling stone steps. At least these steps were solid.

He shined the light around the space. “Stairs,” he said. “Are you ready?”

“Let’s go.” Excitement had already started coursing through her veins. Maybe they would find a pirate’s treasure. How cool would that be? She grimaced. Or a snake, rats...

“You’re okay back there?”

“Did you think I would get scared and go back up?”

“I did. Not many girls like the dark.”

She couldn’t help smiling. She liked this a lot better than fighting with Blade. “I didn’t say I liked the dark. I do like exploring, though.”

When he chuckled, ripples of pleasure swept over her. She mentally shook her head. She was so pathetic. She and Blade were like oil and water. They didn’t mix. They’d called a temporary truce. That was all. It was nice, though.

The darkness, not so much. The light on his phone didn’t give off much illumination. She kept her hand on the wall as she descended the stairs to help steady her balance. The last thing she wanted to do was fall and hurt herself.

When he suddenly turned, she realized they were at the bottom. The light suddenly shifted, and she misjudged the next step. She gave a little scream and fell forward. The next thing she knew, she'd landed in Blade's arms.

For a moment, she couldn't breathe. When she did, she inhaled his intoxicating fragrance again. This wasn't good.

"I'm sorry. The light shifted, and I guess I lost my balance." She noticed he didn't make a move to drop his arms from around her. He was still holding his phone, so when she looked up at him, she saw shadows dancing on his face—dark and dangerous.

"Maybe I'm not sorry," he muttered, lowering his lips to hers.

A shudder of need rippled over her. He tasted like cinnamon and heat. He pulled her in closer, and she felt how much he wanted her. It was no more than how much she wanted him. She wrapped her arms around his neck, pressing against him, her breasts crushed against his chest, his pounding heartbeat a reflection of her own. How long had she wanted this man? But she knew the answer. Since the first moment she'd seen him.

He suddenly ended the kiss, stepping back, and she had to grab the wall to keep her balance. Oh God, she didn't want it to end. A whimper escaped past her lips.

"Fuck, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that.

"I wanted you, too," she admitted. She found it easier to talk to him in the dark.

"It doesn't make it right, though. You're Danny's girl."

She closed her eyes tight for a moment as pain flashed through her. “Danny’s gone,” she whispered. She opened her eyes, trying to see his face, but couldn’t.

“It doesn’t make it any less wrong. In my mind, you will always be his girl.”

“I don’t think I was ever his girl.”

“What do you mean?” His words hardened.

Marissa took a deep breath. Danny’s face floated in front of her. His smile, the sadness in his eyes, the horror on his face. God, she still felt his pain that night. She could feel Blade’s, too.

She drew in a deep breath. “I think we were closer to being good friends.”

“I can’t believe you would say something like that. He loved you.”

“No, he didn’t love me. Not like a man loves a woman. But yes, he did love me, and I loved him, but again, I don’t think either of us knew what real love was.”

“That’s not what Danny thought about you.”

She closed her eyes tight. Danny’s words returned as if he was standing before her.

“Please, don’t do this. Don’t leave me. Let me explain.”

She drew in a shuddering breath. “I was only seventeen years old when we dated. Danny was eighteen. What did either one of us know about love? We lived in a fantasy world that we created, but it wasn’t real. It never was. Then I... I realized

we could never be together like that. Danny would have seen the same thing eventually. I still wanted to be his friend. I miss him as much as you do. You were right. We did have something special, but again, it wasn't the kind of love a man has for a woman."

"I don't know what to believe anymore." The weariness was evident in his words. "He said you ruined everything—all his plans."

"You know as well as I do that Danny wasn't thinking straight after I left him. According to the blood alcohol report, he'd also started drinking. Sometimes... Sometimes he would blame everyone but himself. He never wanted to look bad in your eyes."

He was silent for a moment.

"Did I have anything to do with the breakup?" he asked.

Now Blade was confusing her. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You know as well as I do that there's been something between us from the beginning. Did he suspect I had feelings for you?"

Oh my God, was that what he thought? Had he been tormented all these years because of what he thought happened? "No, absolutely not. It had nothing to do with you."

"Then what did it have to do with? I need to know."

"Please, leave it alone," she finally told him.

He was quiet for a moment. She wondered if he *would* let it go. She couldn't destroy what was between Blade and Danny. Not even to save herself.

“Okay, I guess you're probably right,” he finally said, and she breathed a sigh of relief.

He shined the flashlight around the empty room and then gave a dry laugh. “There's nothing down here,” he said. “It figures. Maybe we should go back up.”

“Yes, I think we should.” She was shaking as she went up the steps. Once he closed the panel, she said, “I'm going to my room for a while.” She barely looked at him, then hurried out of the library. She needed time to think. To digest what had happened between them.

Once in her room, Marissa was immediately drawn to the balcony. She stared at the darkening sky as rumbles of thunder echoed in the distance. A moment later, a streak of jagged lightning cut across the sky. She stepped closer, captivated by the storm's raw power, mesmerized by nature's sheer energy and unpredictability.

There was something about storms that always drew her toward them. Sometimes, she thought she was in the wrong line of work. She should have been a storm chaser.

Danny had always encouraged her to follow her dreams when she told him she liked to decorate. That's what he'd done when he passed on college, but he didn't have to work, and her dreams were only dreams. She reminded him that she still had to pay bills on more than one occasion.

He said he would still find a way to follow his dreams even if he was poor. He didn't like rules or regulations. She had a feeling Danny and Blade were a lot alike in that department. Except Blade had gone to college, until he dropped out, according to his Aunt Peggy.

Danny wanted to be an artist and travel the world. He'd told her that he wanted her to go with him. She had a feeling it was more so that she could hold his hand. He didn't do new situations very well. She gave him confidence. She was his muse. A smile curved her lips. Maybe he was hers as well. He made her believe that she could be or do anything, including a storm chaser or an interior designer. She hadn't lied to Blade when she told him how much she missed Danny.

She swiped at the tear that ran down her face. "Danny, what did you do? You know we would've talked about it the next day. I was your friend, but you didn't trust me."

She stepped away from the window and went to the bathroom, splashing cold water on her face, then patting it dry. For a moment, she stared at her reflection in the mirror. Not a day went by that she didn't think about him. She knew in her heart if Danny had guessed the turmoil he would be leaving behind, he would have made better decisions.

He had a bad habit of not thinking before he acted. Rather than feeling guilty, she should be angry with him. Her shoulders slumped. How could she ever be angry with him? At least, never for very long.

And now she had to deal with Blade. He'd admitted to having feelings for her from the very beginning. Until he

stopped thinking about her as if she was still Danny's girl, she knew he wouldn't act on his feelings again.

She'd been with other men since Danny's death, but she'd only been trying to erase her memory of Blade. It hadn't worked. It had the opposite effect. She'd compared every man to him, and they never came close.

She could enter a convent. Forget about men and all the problems they created. She would probably be better off.

Blade immediately came to mind. His smile, when he did smile. The way she would catch him looking at her. She'd seen the heat of passion in his eyes on more than one occasion. She knew that was why he'd stayed away and didn't come as often to see Danny. But he was wrong. Danny never accused them of having feelings for each other. No, he'd been too caught up in his secrets.

"I need coffee," she mumbled. And maybe some breakfast. It was too early in the morning to start the day like this. She glanced at her watch, then frowned. It was nearly noon. Where had the morning gone?

She stepped out of the room, closing the door behind her, and started down the stairs. She tried not to look at the portraits on the wall. If they hadn't been condemning her yesterday, they certainly would be today.

The closer she got to the kitchen, the more the delicious aroma of food wafted to her nostrils. She inhaled deeply. Whatever Blade was cooking smelled delicious. She'd only had coffee for breakfast, and she was starving. As soon as she stepped inside the kitchen, he looked up.

“I thought I would start lunch. I hope you’re hungry.”

“Always,” she said.

He smiled. “Not many women would admit that.”

“I’m not many women, and I enjoy food. What are we having?” She looked around at the different lunch meats and condiments on the center island.

“Soup and sandwiches. I thought it sounded appropriate for a rainy day.”

It seemed as if they would at least continue with their truce. She was glad about that. She couldn’t take any more arguing with him. “What can I do?”

“We can fix our sandwiches while the soup is heating,” he said.

Good, she needed to do something. There was a rumble of thunder overhead, and she stopped and looked upward.

“Do storms scare you?”

She shook her head. “On the contrary, I love them. Danny...” Dammit, everything had been going so well. Why did she have to mention his name again? She bit her bottom lip.

“No, I want to talk about him. What were you going to say?”

She only hesitated for a moment. “Danny said I should’ve been a storm chaser.” She stopped in the middle of spreading mayo on a slice of bread. “Once, when it was just starting to rain, more like a heavy mist than actual drops falling, I stepped outside and raised my arms to the sky. He

laughed at me and said I was crazy. I tried to get him to come out with me, but he only laughed harder. He said sugar dissolved too easily when it got wet.”

When she looked at Blade, he was studying her again. She shifted from one foot to the other.

“What?” she finally asked.

“I knew from the beginning that you two had a special relationship,” he said. “I don’t think I ever realized how special it was.”

“Sometimes I don’t think we did either. Friends like Danny don’t often come around.”

“Ham or turkey?” he asked when silence followed her words.

Her eyebrows drew together. Then she realized what he’d asked and was relieved he’d changed the subject. “Ham.”

When everything was ready, they carried their food into the dining room since it started raining outside. She caught the grimace on his face.

“If you don’t like the rooms, why don’t you redecorate?”

His grimace turned to a frown. “I haven’t been back since Danny, and I left, so there was no need.”

She didn’t say anything as she concentrated on her food. They were almost through eating when curiosity got the better of her. “Why didn’t you return? It’s your house. All it needs are a few changes, and it wouldn’t be nearly as dark and dreary.”

“I’m not sure anything would help,” he finally said.

She set her spoon down and folded her hands on the table. “It really could be a beautiful home.”

“Except for one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“This is the house where my father murdered my mother.”

Chapter Twelve

Marissa didn't say a word. Blade knew he couldn't just leave his words hanging in the air without some kind of explanation.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know," she quietly told him. "Danny never mentioned his parents."

Blade glanced toward the patio doors. He could almost see Danny laughing when he tossed him the ball, and he missed it. Danny reminded him that he would never be good at sports. Blade had laughingly agreed with him.

It was a beautiful day, early afternoon, and the sun was shining. They'd been trying to think of a plan to outsmart the cook and steal a couple of cookies.

Everything began unfolding before him, memories and scenes flooding his mind. He began to talk.

"Danny and I were outside tossing the ball around. I was seventeen, and Danny was fourteen. Things had been fairly quiet up until then. I still wouldn't call it normal, but Dad didn't beat our mother very often. I was big for my age. I think he knew I wouldn't let him hurt her." He was quiet for a moment. "We heard her scream. At first, we were frozen to the spot. It wasn't the first time she'd screamed when our father would hit her. There was something different about it this time, though. More desperate, more afraid." He was silent for a moment, then began to speak again. "We ran inside. Our parents were in the foyer. My mother was lying on the floor,

drenched in her blood. My father was holding a bloodied knife.”

“Oh my God, I’m so sorry,” she whispered.

He continued as if she hadn’t spoken, reliving the horror of that day. “Some of the servants came running into the room, then stopped as if they were in shock. I snapped out of my daze and told Danny to call 911, then I ran over to my father, pushing him out of the way. My mother’s eyes were wide open, staring lifelessly into nothing.” He closed his eyes, his fingers curling into fists. After a few deep breaths, he began to speak again. “I knew she was gone, but I started CPR anyway. When Danny didn’t move, I yelled at him again. Like a robot, he called the police. They had to pull me away from my mother when the cops and paramedics arrived.”

“What happened to your father?”

“I think he’d finally gone off the deep end. There was a trial. We had to get on the stand and talk about the abuse. It was harder on Danny. I didn’t care. He’d taken the one good thing in all our lives and destroyed it. The judge sentenced him to life in prison. We went to live with Aunt Peggy, and Danny went into therapy.”

“Is your father still in prison?”

He laughed. “That’s the only good thing that came out of all this. I guess he got too cocky with some of the other inmates because one of them stabbed him with a homemade knife. He died a few days later.”

“We don’t have to stay here.” Her eyes were troubled. “If I’d known…”

He shook his head. “No, the memories are still there, no matter where I live. I tried to outrun them for years, but then realized they would never go away, and I’d have to learn to live with them,” he said, then realized that he had just told Marissa his life story. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to bother you with our family drama.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m glad you told me. It helps me to understand so much about what Danny was going through.”

He watched her for a moment. “I think I know why Danny was so drawn to you. You’re easy to talk to.”

She grimaced. “Apparently, not easy enough. He still kept things bottled up inside him. I wish I could’ve been more help.”

“As you said before, you were only seventeen when you and Danny dated. He was eighteen.”

“Danny and I used to go to your aunt’s for dinner. She adored him.”

“Because he favored our mother. Aunt Peggy adored her big sister, and she hated our father. Not that I blamed her for that, but I looked more like him. She transferred her anger from my father to me.”

“That was wrong of her.”

“I’m sure she asked God for forgiveness. She was, and is, a devout Christian. She probably prayed for my soul.”

Her laughter was light and airy and washed over him. Damn, she was so beautiful.

“Peggy was certainly religious. She used to tell me we all have to be the Lord’s watchdogs. I loved her because she adored Danny, but she could be a bit of a fanatic.”

“I think she kind of went off the deep end when our father murdered Mom.” He let out a short laugh and looked around. “The conversation took a dark turn. So, what would you do to brighten up the home? You’re right when you said the interior of the house is dark and dismal. Maybe it keeps all the bad memories inside and won’t let go of them.”

They’d tried to put Blade in therapy after his father killed their mother, but he was having nothing to do with counseling. His father was a sick bastard, and that was the end of it. He couldn’t talk about the past anymore without feeling as if he was drowning in it. It was time he made a lot of changes.

Marissa only hesitated briefly and then began to talk. “I wanted to be an interior decorator at one time.”

“Really?”

One side of her mouth turned upward. “And a storm chaser, a chef...” She laughed.

“Fair enough. I wanted to be a pirate at one time. So, how would you go about making changes?”

“The first thing I would do is get rid of those god-awful, dark green curtains. I might not even do any drapes in here. It’s nice to look out onto the patio.” She looked around the room. “And I’d get rid of that chandelier. Maybe do something that’s not quite so dark and heavy—the same with

the table. I'd probably paint the walls a soft beige or pale gray. That would lighten up the room a lot."

He glanced around. She was right. He came to his feet and walked over to the curtains. "They are pretty ugly, aren't they?" He got a good grip on them and jerked. They immediately came tumbling down to puddle at his feet. He turned and looked at her. "That's a lot better. What do you think?"

Her mouth dropped open, and she stared at him as if she thought he'd lost his mind. Then she suddenly began to laugh. "I think it's a lot better, but you might want to speak with a decorator before you start ripping out everything. My expertise in that field is not reliable."

When he smiled, he knew it was the first genuine smile he'd had in a long time. "Maybe you're right. I won't go through the house ripping down all the curtains, but I will make some changes."

"I think that's a great idea," she said.

Blade finally felt at peace for the first time in a long time. They cleaned the kitchen and started going through the house, each commenting about what they would change. Even the storm had blown over. It felt like a new day and a new beginning for him.

The more he was around Marissa, the more he realized they had a lot in common. It was almost as though they were playing twenty questions.

"What about travel?" he asked.

“At one time, I thought I wanted to travel to Europe. I had big plans. Danny wanted to go overseas and draw some of the buildings. He was fascinated with them. I think he wanted me to go with him because he didn’t want to go alone. He didn’t like making decisions about anything. It was always spur of the moment with Danny, and then he would take forever to decide if his idea might work.”

“I remember that about him. He also changed his mind a lot.”

She laughed. “He did do that. One minute he was going to design an apartment complex, and in the next breath, all he wanted to do was sketch a butterfly.”

The day slipped past, and before they knew it, it was evening, and they were sitting in front of the fireplace in the living room. The fireplace had been converted to gas years ago, so all he had to do was flip the switch, making the room a little less dismal.

“This is nice,” she said as she leaned back against the sofa with her glass of wine.

He took a seat in the chair opposite her. “And what would you do in here?” he asked. He tried not to look at the portrait above the fireplace. He wondered if anything would brighten it up. One of his ancestors had chosen to paint the walls a dark rose, and the floor was dark hickory. The sofa and chair were both dark leather. The room felt cold and uninviting.

“The furniture is comfortable enough,” she said, looking around the room. “But I would add pillows and maybe a throw blanket. The wall color is beautiful but too dark for

such a small, intimate space. The drapes are too heavy as well. I would add a brightly colored rug. Something thick so you could kick off your shoes and scrunch your toes in it.”

She turned and met his gaze, and for just a moment, a flood of warmth ran through him. God, she was beautiful.

“The house isn’t that bad.” She cleared her throat and continued talking. “The woodwork is gorgeous. It only needs a few cosmetic changes to showcase the beautiful pieces your family collected over the years.”

Blade lost himself in the animated twinkle in her eyes. The way she moved her hands when she talked, her smile, her light, musical laugh. She was captivating him once again, just as she had when she was seventeen. There was something mesmerizing about Marissa. But when she started to yawn, he knew it was time to end their evening.

He walked her to her room, almost leaning down and kissing her goodnight, but at the last minute, he stopped himself. What the hell was he doing? Had he fallen under her spell so quickly? He took a step back.

She opened her door, but she turned back to him before closing it. “I enjoyed today. Goodnight.” This time she closed the door.

He shook his head. Had she cast a spell over him? Who knows? Maybe she had. Whatever had transpired between them, he was too wired to go to sleep. Maybe he would go for a run around the property, but as he started toward the staircase, a loud clap of thunder rattled the house.

Going for a run was out of the question. He stopped, then realized he stood outside Danny's door. He hesitated for a second, then turned and went inside, flipping on the light.

"I think I know why you fell so hard for Marissa," he told the empty room. "She's a beautiful woman, and there's something that pulls me toward her."

It was crazy that he was talking to himself. He walked over and sat down in front of the desk. Danny loved the desk. He remembered it had been in the attic. They found it when they were exploring one day. Danny had been enthralled with all the little cubbyholes and secret drawers. He smiled when he remembered his excitement.

They'd convinced their mother that Danny needed it in his room. Their father had been out of town, so their mother had a couple of the servants bring it down.

He opened the top drawer and reached inside. There was a false back that only the two of them knew existed. He pushed the button, and the back disappeared. He didn't know what he was looking for. Anything that might bring Danny back to life for him. He knew it was crazy to think that way, but he couldn't stop himself.

His hand stilled when he felt something. He was barely breathing as he pulled the journal out. He lightly ran his fingers over the smooth cover. When he fanned the pages, he saw writing on each one. There were a lot of pages. Danny must've been writing in the journal for a very long time. He opened it to page one and began to read.

Galen, if you're reading this, stop right now. This is my journal, and you're not supposed to look at it, but thanks for

convincing Mom that I really, really needed the desk in my room. Now, go away.

Blade smiled as he flipped back and looked at the date of the first entry. Danny would have been about nine years old at the time. It was before his father nicknamed him Blade. It was strange seeing his given name. It had been a long time since he'd used it.

He skimmed through the pages, then slowed down when the words jumped out at him.

Mom and Dad are fighting again. Why does he have to hurt her? She does everything he asks her to do. I know Galen doesn't want me to see, but I do. He's always trying to protect me, but I don't think he can protect me from what Dad does to Mom. He's so mean. I hate him!

Blade drew in a deep breath. He tried to keep his parents fighting away from Danny, but it wasn't always easy. Maybe he hadn't done as well as he'd thought he had. He skimmed through some more pages, only stopping to read a passage here and there.

So many memories. Tromping through the woods, the fort they built, and wading in the creek behind the house. He chuckled at that memory. They got into trouble when their mother found out. She didn't like either one of them going down to the water. She was afraid they would drown. He slowed again when he got to another passage.

Dad was beating her up again. None of the servants helped. I don't like them either! Especially the cook. Galen tried to help. I was so scared I was crying, but Galen was brave. I wish I was more like him.

Galen kept pushing at Dad, hitting him with his fists. Dad would shove him away, but Galen only got up and went after him again. Galen told me to run to my room, but I hid around the corner and watched.

And cried like a big baby. I'm not good for anything.

Blade closed the journal and returned it to its hiding place. "I'm sorry little brother. I should've done more."

He ran his hand lightly over the desk before he came to his feet. "Good night, little brother." He closed the door quietly and made his way down to his room. The thunder was still rumbling overhead as he went inside. He stripped and crawled beneath the cover.

Waves of exhaustion washed over him. Drained of all emotion, he closed his eyes and let sleep take him away.

It didn't take long for the nightmares to consume him.

His father raised a bloody knife. "I'll kill all of you," he growled. "I never wanted a family. I never wanted any of you. I killed your mother, and now I'll kill you."

Blade thrashed around in the bed. "No! No! Leave him alone. I won't let you hurt him!"

A voice began to break through the dark curtain of his dreams.

"Blade, wake up. You're having a nightmare. It's only a bad dream."

He grabbed her shoulders and flipped her to her back. What the hell was happening? He quickly looked around. Only

dim light came into the room from the opened curtains. His father had been there...and Danny.

He blinked past the sleep, his eyes finally focusing on Marissa. “What happened?”

“I think you were having a nightmare. I heard you yelling. I didn’t know what was happening, so I ran in here.”

The cover was off the bed, and he realized he wasn’t wearing any clothes. Her gown had bunched around her waist, and their bodies were intimately pressed against each other. When he started to move away, she reached out and touched his shoulder. It was his undoing. He leaned closer toward her, his lips pressing against hers.

It should’ve been wrong, but it didn’t feel that way. Nothing had felt more right in his life than kissing Marissa.

She tasted sweet and hot. He wanted her like he’d never wanted any other woman. His hand automatically sought her breast and rubbed his thumb across the nipple. He caught her gasp, deepening the kiss. It only took a moment to realize she wasn’t pushing him away, but pulling him closer. He groaned. When he started to move between her legs, Blade quickly stopped himself, coming to his senses. He moved to sit on the side of the bed.

“I’m sorry.” He scraped his fingers through his hair.

The bed shifted slightly. The whisper of her gown floated to the floor beside his feet. All he could do was stare at it.

“I’m not sorry. We’ve both wanted this from the moment we met. “Please, make love to me.” Her naked breasts

pressed against his back.

He couldn't stop himself even if he'd tried—and he didn't.

Chapter Thirteen

Marissa wondered if Blade was going to turn around. What if he rejected her? God, she didn't know what she would do.

But then he was taking her in his arms. Her body shuddered with the need she'd held at bay for so long. They laid back on the bed, and his lips lowered to hers. His naked body pressed intimately against her.

His heat enveloped her. Their tongues sparred, then caressed. Then he was looking down at her. Shadows played across his face. She was glad the light in his room only came from the window. She wasn't sure she could face him otherwise. It had taken all her courage to throw herself at him.

She'd always wanted him, though. From the moment their gazes had met the day Danny introduced them. They had both denied each other because of Danny.

"If we go any further, I won't be able to stop," Blade told her.

She shook her head. "I don't want you to stop. Make love to me."

He cupped her breasts, squeezing the nipple. She gasped as a fiery warmth spread quickly downward to pool between her legs. When she would've reached down and grasped him in her hand, he grabbed her wrists and pulled them above her head.

“If you touch me, I’ll explode. I’ve wanted you way too long.”

“What do you think you’re doing to me?”

He didn’t say anything. He just leaned down and sucked her nipple into his mouth. Her back arched toward him. Oh God, yes. This was what she’d been needing. He stroked her with one hand, caressing her. He slid his hand over her hip, her thigh, ever closer.

She whimpered. “Please, Blade.”

His lips moved along her neck, his tongue licking, tasting, teasing. Then he stroked between her legs, touching, caressing, bringing her to the cliff’s edge before stepping back. She was to the point where she couldn’t think, only feel as the heat swirled around her.

“I need you now,” she pleaded. She couldn’t wait any longer. He must’ve felt the same way because he suddenly moved off her and reached for his jeans on the floor beside the bed. He pulled out a condom and quickly rolled it on.

As he joined her on the bed again, she was already opening her legs, inviting him to make love to her—to make her whole. She clung to his back when he entered her. Her eyes drifted closed as she lost herself in the ecstasy of passion.

She wrapped her legs around his waist, pulling him in farther. He groaned as he sank deeper inside her. His strokes were slow. Then he was moving faster, plunging inside her. She contracted her inner muscles, massaging, giving them both pleasure.

Their breathing became more ragged. She met him thrust for thrust. The room suddenly seemed to explode in a multitude of colors as she reached orgasm. His body tightened, and she thought Blade might've groaned, but she was so lost in the moment she couldn't be sure.

Then she slowly floated back to earth. Neither of them moved as they tried to process what had happened. Then his body slowly sank to hers, and he rolled to his side and took her with him. His hand absently caressed her back as everything around them returned to normal.

Normal? Was there even such a thing now?

Neither one of them spoke. She wondered if he was as afraid as she was that if either of them broke the silence, it might steal away what they'd just shared. Their emotions were too fragile, too raw, right now.

Instead of speaking, she rested her head against his chest and listened to the steady beat of his heart. With a sigh of contentment, she closed her eyes and, at some point, she must've fallen asleep. She remembered him moving away from her and feeling cold, even though he pulled the cover over her, but after a while, he returned and pulled her against him again. She drifted into a deep sleep where everything was finally right in her world.

Marissa woke up the next morning and stretched like a contented cat. Something was different. What? Last night came back to her in a rush. Her eyes flew open. She quickly glanced around the room, but it was empty. Blade must've already gone downstairs. She quickly pushed the cover away and jumped out of bed.

A flash of embarrassment swept over her when she realized she was naked. She couldn't very well run back to her room, not wearing any clothes. What if she met Blade along the way? A delicious tingle ran down her spine.

Coffee first. She found her gown under the bed and quickly pulled it on, then hurried out of the room and down to hers.

She didn't let herself think about last night until she was standing beneath the warm spray of the shower. Had they really made love? She smiled. They definitely had, and then she'd gone to sleep with her head resting against his chest.

It wasn't until she was drying off that she began to have doubts. Would he regret making love with her? He'd told her he still thought of her as Danny's girl. But she wasn't, and she never had been. They'd only been good friends who believed there was more to the relationship. At least, she had.

She hung up the towel and went to the other room. As she pulled on her clothes, she realized things could've worked out so much differently if Danny had only opened up to her instead of living with his secrets.

As she went downstairs, she tried not to think about the past. She and Blade could make a future together. At least, she was hoping he would feel the same way. They needed to see if what they had was more than lust.

He'd admitted there'd been something between them from the beginning, so apparently, he felt the same about her that she thought about him. Why shouldn't they put the past behind them?

She shook her head. Don't think about it, she told herself. Just go to the kitchen and act natural. Yeah, right, like that was going to happen. She'd had the best sex last night that she'd ever had. It wasn't going to be easy acting as if nothing had happened.

Except Blade wasn't in the kitchen. The patio, maybe? The sun was out, so he'd probably took his coffee outside. She quickly fixed herself a cup and went in that direction, relaxing as soon as she saw him. She stared at him for a moment. He had his back to her. Just looking at him took her breath away. He'd always been able to do that. Her pulse quickened just a little.

As if he sensed her presence, he turned. She waited for his reaction and saw the half smile that lifted one side of his mouth. Marissa released the breath she'd been holding and opened the door, joining him.

"I love coming outside the day after a storm. Everything smells so fresh and clean," he said.

She stood beside him, taking a drink of her coffee. "I agree. Whether it has rained or not, early morning is my favorite time of day. When I was younger, I would go to the golf course with my father on his day off." She laughed. "Neither of us was very good at golf, but we enjoyed being together. Sometimes, my mother would go with us. She was even worse at the game than we were. But we liked being out on the course early in the morning. There was always something about it that made me feel renewed."

"It sounds as if you have a good family."

“I do.” She grimaced as she thought about his own family. “I’m sorry that your childhood wasn’t good.”

“I think that’s why I took the job Carter offered. I like knowing I’m stopping some of the abuses in this world. That, and I’ve made some good friends.” He was thoughtful for a moment. “No, they’re more like my brothers.”

“What exactly do you do?”

He shrugged. “A little of everything. Sometimes providing security for a company or acting as a bodyguard when someone is in danger. We’ve broken up a few human trafficking rings and worked with border patrol on the drugs coming into our country. Wherever we’re needed the most, that’s where we go.”

A cold chill rippled over her. “It sounds dangerous.” She was sure he’d glossed over a lot of what they did. She didn’t want Blade to put himself in danger.

“Sometimes it can be.”

“Is that how you got the scar on your arm?”

He raised the sleeve of his black T-shirt and looked at the puckered area on his arm. “Bullet wound. Could’ve been worse, but Savage pushed me out of the way.”

“Why would you want to risk your life?” She wished she could call back her words. He probably worked so that he could pay for the upkeep on this place. It couldn’t be cheap to maintain an estate this large, even if he had inherited some money. It wouldn’t last forever.

“I like knowing that I made the world a little safer place to live,” he said.

He paused, and she wondered what he was about to say. She didn't have long to find out.

“About last night...”

“Please, don't apologize.” She would hate it if he regretted it. “I'm glad we made love. You're right. There's been chemistry between us from the very beginning. I don't regret anything we did last night.”

He smiled—a genuine smile. “Oh, I'm not going to apologize for what we did. Not when I enjoyed it so damned much.”

She relaxed and returned his smile. “I enjoyed it, too.” She suddenly frowned. “If you want to leave, we can. I don't want you to have nightmares because you're staying in this house.”

“No, it wasn't the house. Not directly, anyway.”

“Good.”

He took a drink of coffee. “I found Danny's journal and started reading it. He continued to write in it for many years.”

She could feel the color draining from her face. “And?”

“Stuff that happened when we were kids.” He shook his head. “There were good times, but there were times when our father abused our mom. You know, I thought I'd protected him more than I did. I guess I was foolish to think that.”

“No, you did the best you could.”

“I suppose, but sometimes I think I could’ve done more. Our father was always yelling at our mother. She could never do anything to suit him. He had a miserable life and wanted everyone around him to be miserable. Anyway, Danny hated our father as much as I did. He wrote about the fighting. When I went to bed last night, I was thinking about that.

She was hesitant at first but then decided to spit it out. “I don’t think you should read his journal.”

One eyebrow rose. “Why do you say that?”

She refused to meet his eyes. “I just think a journal is personal. It’s bringing back a lot of bad memories for you. I’m not sure Danny would want you to read it.”

“It’s bringing back good memories, too—the stuff we used to do. Our childhood wasn’t all bad. We had each other. And when our father wasn’t home, everything seemed normal. I like visiting those times.”

“I just don’t think you need to read any more of it,” she hedged.

His eyes narrowed. “What aren’t you telling me?”

“Nothing! I don’t think Danny would want you to read it. It’s no big deal.”

“I’m glad you don’t think it’s a big deal because I don’t plan on stopping.”

She gripped her coffee cup. “You might not like what you read,” she warned.

“Then tell me now.” His words were hard. The closeness they shared a moment ago disappeared.

“I can’t,” she whispered, then turned and hurried back inside the house. Blade would be devastated if Danny wrote anything about his secrets. She would have to hope that Danny had kept everything to himself. She wouldn’t be the one to destroy his image.

She rinsed her cup and put it in the dishwasher, then left the kitchen. She didn’t know where she was going, but she needed time alone. She didn’t want Blade grilling her about Danny. Her feet took her to the dark garden. She opened the French doors and stepped out. It was almost funny that she’d come to think of it as the dark garden, but something about it gave her peace. She stopped in front of the statue, staring at her.

“What would you do?” The statue looked as sad as she felt.

Would he even believe her? Maybe. She didn’t know. For a little while, though, their relationship had turned a corner. For the first time, she felt close to Blade. She had a feeling their relationship was doomed from the start. Maybe the moment they shared last night would be the only one they ever had.

She ran her fingers through her hair, feeling frustrated. It couldn’t end like this, but she was afraid it might. Could she move on? Looking back over the last ten years, she knew that she’d only been going through the motions of living. It was as if a piece of her was missing.

Her laughter was bitter. Blade had always been the part of her that was missing from her life. If it ended here, there

was nothing she could do about it. If Blade continued reading Danny's journal, it could destroy him.

She had a feeling he wouldn't stop.

She left the garden feeling more depressed than when she went outside. She listened for a moment but didn't hear any movement. Was he reading the journal now? She wasn't sure. She wandered into the library, chose a book, and then made herself comfortable in one of the high-back, overstuffed chairs.

The words on the page soon blurred, and before she knew it, she was yawning. She realized she hadn't gotten much sleep last night as her eyes drifted closed.

Chapter Fourteen

Blade opened the journal and began to read.

I don't like school. The teacher asked me how I got the bruise on my arm. I knew I couldn't tell her the truth. I doubt she would've believed me anyway. I lied and told her I fell when I was outside playing. I don't care if she believed me or not. It wasn't as if they would put Dad in jail. The teacher is a bitch. I don't think she likes rich kids.

Blade looked up from the journal. He'd never heard Danny say a curse word or even talk like this. He quickly flipped back a few pages. Danny would have been about ten years old.

He was thoughtful for a moment, remembering how Danny got the bruise. Their father grabbed him by the arm and began jerking back and forth.

It all happened so fast, Blade hadn't moved for a moment. Their father rarely hurt Danny. Mainly because Blade was always protecting his little brother, but this time, he caught both boys unaware.

When Danny started crying and screaming, Blade moved into action. He ran at his father with all he had and pushed as hard as he could against his chest, knocking him momentarily off balance. It was enough that Danny could break free. Danny immediately ran out of the room, screaming and crying.

Blade had stood in front of his father, his fingers clenched into fists. He was practically daring him to come at

him. His father only burst out laughing.

“What do you think you’re going to do, boy? Fight me? You’re not there yet. Until then, this is my house, and I treat the people in it as I see fit. Do you understand?”

“I hate you,” he screamed.

Yeah, he remembered that day. His father got a strange look on his face, and then he said something that didn’t make much sense to Blade. He thought hard to remember his exact words.

“At least I know I’ll have one son who is a man.”

Blade raised his chin and glared at his father. “I’ll never be like you.”

He looked confused for a moment. “No, you’ll be better than me. Unlike your little brother,” he mumbled.

It was crazy that he still remembered the conversation word for word. He still didn’t understand what his father was getting at. It could be that Danny was more of a dreamer, an artistic type. Sure, he had a temper, too. Most kids did. That was okay by Blade. As long as neither one of them were like their father.

It didn’t matter to him that Danny liked to draw and dream. His kid brother was a fucking genius. He had a high IQ, but he always played it down. Blade was never sure why.

Blade had gotten a lot of things wrong. He thought that Danny might have felt more comfortable acting in a school play than sports, but he never tried out for any, as far as he knew, or sports, for that matter. He always seemed content to

stay in his own little world, occasionally coming out to interact with others.

He went back to reading, skimming through a lot of the pages. He only slowed when he got to the part where he put the knife to his father's neck. Danny would have been almost eleven and Blade thirteen. He was surprised by the thoughts running through Danny's head.

Dad was beating Mom again. I wonder why she doesn't take up for herself. She lets him hit her. Sometimes I think she likes it.

Blade gripped the journal a little tighter. How could Danny have thought that? His father threatened to kill their mother if she ever left him. He warned her that he would get custody of the boys if she ever took off.

Blade and Danny had overheard him say that. She only stayed with him to give them at least some protection. He shook his head and continued to read.

Galen stepped in again. Always the hero. Sometimes I wish I could be more like him. I'm the invisible child. No one looks at me. Dad doesn't even bother to slap me around anymore. Not since the day Galen went after him. I'm okay with that. But since Galen stepped in that time, I don't think that Dad even knows I'm alive. At least when he was hitting me, I knew he felt something. I guess I'm nothing now.

Galen certainly got his attention today when he was hitting Mom. He ran to the kitchen, grabbed a knife, and then put it to my father's throat. I wanted him to slice Dad open. Would his blood be red? I've heard people call Dad a blueblood. Not that it mattered. I wanted to see it dripping

down his chest. But Mom started screaming again like she always does, and Dad grabbed the knife away.

I thought Dad might cut Galen. I was pretty sure his blood would be red. I like Galen a lot, but I kind of wanted to see how red it would be.

Dad started laughing because he knew he'd won again. He always won. He gave Galen a nickname. Dad says everyone has to call him Blade now, which sounds pretty cool to me. They only call me Danny or The Baby. I hate it.

Blade closed the journal and rubbed a weary hand over his brow. "I thought I knew you, little brother. I don't think I did. I don't think anyone did."

He tried to tell himself Danny hadn't been very old at the time. But there was a different tone in his writing. It was as if Danny were two different people. On the one hand, the little boy. On the other was something else that he didn't understand. For the first time, he wasn't sure he wanted to finish reading Danny's journal.

He put the journal back in the cubbyhole and closed the drawer before coming to his feet. He left the room, shutting the door behind him, and went downstairs. He listened for a moment but didn't hear anything that might alert him to where he would find Marissa. He looked in the living room, but it was empty. He moved down to the library, stopping in the doorway when he saw Marissa curled up in a chair asleep. Her hand was lying against her cheek, and her feet were tucked under her. She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. He closed his eyes for a moment and thought about last night.

He'd tried to do the right thing and send her away. As soon as she touched him, then her gown had floated to the floor, any good intentions flew out the window. He'd wanted her too much for too long.

Making love to her had been everything he'd dreamed about. Even now, he wanted to walk over and kiss her awake. Her eyes suddenly opened, and they were staring at each other. He should've left before she awakened. He was looking at way too much temptation.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bother you," he said.

She raised her arms above her head and stretched. Her shirt tightened across her breasts. It was almost his undoing.

"What time is it?" she asked, words still heavy from sleep.

He glanced at his watch. "Nearly one."

She studied him for a moment. "You've been reading his journal again," she guessed.

"He was my brother." He frowned. "But I don't think I really knew him. At least, not like I thought I did." He knew she was watching him. He still wondered what she wasn't telling him, but maybe now, he wasn't as anxious to know. "Are you hungry?" They hadn't eaten breakfast. Only drank coffee this morning.

She only hesitated a moment. "I'm starved. Let's see what we can find in the kitchen." She came to her feet and walked over to him. "I guess this means we're calling another truce," she said.

He couldn't stop his smile from forming. She was funny. "Yeah, I think we're calling another truce. Do you mind?"

"Only if we can kiss and make up later." She stopped in front of him, her eyes wide. "I don't know why I said that. I didn't mean it like that."

He couldn't help it. Hell, he didn't even try. "How about if we kiss and make up now?" He pulled her into his arms and lowered his lips to hers. A deep sigh rippled over her, and then she wrapped her arms around his neck. He deepened the kiss, pulling her tighter against him. This felt so good, so right.

Some of his common sense returned, and he ended the kiss, then put just a little space between them. He sucked back a groan as he looked into her eyes, heavy-lidded with passion.

"Are you sure? I didn't mean to pounce on you like that."

"I've wanted you since the moment we were introduced. I'm tired of holding back." She reached for the hem of her shirt and pulled it over her head, then reached behind her back and unsnapped her bra.

Blade could only stare at her full breasts. He stepped closer, taking them in his hands and brushing his thumbs across the nipples. They immediately hardened. She was right. They'd waited too damn long.

He jerked his shirt over his head and tossed it to the side. She reached forward, caressing, touching. He pulled at

the waistband of her slacks, pushing the button through, then tugging the zipper down before shoving them over her hips.

Marissa wiggled out of them the rest of the way, then kicked them away. She stood before him, wearing only lacy blue bikini panties.

“Damn, you’re sexy as hell.”

“You’re not so bad yourself,” she said and reached for the waistband of his jeans. As soon as she stuck her fingers inside, she brushed against his hard cock. He sucked in a breath.

“I’m sorry. Did I hurt you?” she asked, looking anything but innocent.

He raised an eyebrow, then stroked between her legs. Her body quivered. “You tell me.”

She visibly swallowed. “No, you didn’t hurt me,” she managed to say. Her hands resting on his hips. “Could you please get naked now?”

He grinned, undid his jeans, and shoved them downward, kicking them out of the way. He knelt in front of her and peeled her panties down, uncovering what he wanted more than anything. He scraped his fingers through her curls. She moaned, dropping to her knees, hands resting on his shoulders.

“I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to let you go,” he said. “I’ve wanted you so long and denied myself from even thinking about you. You’re like an addiction that I don’t want to stop.”

“I know. I’ve felt the same way for too many years. I don’t want this to end.”

He lowered his lips to hers. She tasted sweet and hot. Their hands caressed and touched as they got to know the other’s bodies and what pleased them the most. He couldn’t seem to get enough of her.

Their ragged breathing filled the room. He couldn’t stand not being inside her for another minute. He grabbed a condom out of his jeans and rolled it on. She laid back, opening for him. For a moment, he stared at her, realizing he’d been a fool to let her slip away from him.

He entered her slowly. She sucked in a breath and then wrapped her legs around him, pulling him deeper. For a moment, his vision blurred, then he began to move, looking down at her. It was a hell of a turn-on watching the passion build on a woman’s face, but no woman had ever fulfilled him so completely as this one.

He thrust inside her. She met him. He slowed his movements, teasing her. She wiggled against him. “What do you want?” he whispered near her ear, then raised and looked into her face.

“I want you. It’s always been you. Make love to me, Blade.”

He drove into her. Saw her passion building. He kept the pace, holding himself back from release until her body began to quiver. Only then did he let go. He growled from low in his throat as he reached his peak.

His world seemed to explode around him into bright lights, and then he slowly returned to earth. He collapsed on top of Marissa, then rolled to the side, taking her with him. He didn't want to break the connection. Not yet.

Their breathing slowed.

Blade opened his eyes and looked at her. She was beautiful, perfect. He caressed her breast and felt the trembles sweeping over her. "You are so damned beautiful," he said. She blushed, and he laughed. "How can you be embarrassed after what we just did?"

She shook her head. "I don't know, I just am."

"Regrets?"

"Never. You?"

He was thoughtful for a moment. "No, I have no regrets. I think it was inevitable that we meet again."

She leaned back and looked at him. "There's something else that you're not telling me. What are you thinking? You can say it."

She'd guessed he needed to say more, and she was right.

"I'm sorry I blamed you for Danny's death all these years. I know it wasn't all your fault. I'm starting to wonder if any of it was your fault."

"I could've handled it differently."

"Tell me what happened."

"I can't. I swore I wouldn't."

His eyebrows drew together. “Who did you promise?”

“I don’t want to fight or talk about it anymore. Please.”

She was right. If he wanted to know more, he had to read the journal and not keep getting angry at Marissa or let it go altogether. “You’re right.” When his phone rang, she quickly grabbed her shirt and pulled it against her. He laughed. “It’s my phone, not the doorbell,” he told her.

“It doesn’t matter. I’ll meet you in the kitchen.”

When he laughed, she rolled her eyes. He let his phone ring as he watched her scoop up her clothes and hurry out of the room. Even after just having sex, he wanted her again. He looked at the caller ID and quickly answered.

“Yeah, Carter, what do you have?”

Chapter Fifteen

Marissa raced up the stairs and down to her room. Once she closed the door, she leaned against it laughing. She never imagined making love with Blade could be so fantastic. She pushed against the door, dumped her clothes on the bed, and hurried to the shower. Her body still tingled, and she couldn't stop smiling. Everything about her life seemed perfect.

She suddenly frowned. There was still a dark cloud hanging over her—Axel. She grimaced. How could she have forgotten about him? No, she wouldn't let him ruin her happiness. Maybe the phone call was from Carter saying that everything was okay now. She didn't doubt for one second he would be able to convince Alex to back off.

That thought brought more problems than solutions. What would happen to her and Blade? Would he want to continue their relationship? A flash of life without him swept across her mind. It left her feeling cold and vulnerable.

She grit her teeth. No, nothing would ruin what they had. Somehow, they would find a way to be together and explore their feelings for each other. She couldn't imagine a day without him.

She stepped into the shower and washed, then dried off. She didn't want to spend more time away from Blade than she had to. It was a crazy feeling, but she liked it. No other man had made her feel like he did.

She quickly dressed and left her room, listening for a moment, and heard his shower running. Apparently, he'd had the same idea. She nibbled her bottom lip, wondering if he would mind someone washing his back.

Just as quickly as the thought came, her stomach began to rumble. She glanced at her watch and saw it was almost two in the afternoon. Maybe food first. Man could not live on sex alone. She giggled. Neither could woman.

When she was into the kitchen, she glanced in the freezer and found a frozen pizza. She brought it out, then turned the oven on. While it was coming to the right temperature, she located a pizza pan, then opened the box. As soon as the oven beeped, she put the pizza in.

Would pizza be enough? She'd noticed the whole team ate a lot. Maybe she could find something to go with it. She looked around in the refrigerator again and found a prepackaged Caesar salad and opened it, pouring the contents into a bowl.

She glanced up when Blade came into the kitchen. Her heart skipped a beat. His hair was still damp from his shower. Her gaze slowly made its way over him. He wore a red T-shirt, and his jeans rode low on his hips. He had a slight swagger when he walked as if telling the world he wasn't afraid of anyone. She had a feeling he wasn't.

“If you keep looking at me like that, I'll have to do something about it.”

His words sent a thrill over her. She sauntered around the center island, not stopping until she was a few inches away

from him. “Oh yeah, what are you going to do? Or are you all talk?”

He grabbed her around the waist and hoisted her up to the counter. She laughed and grabbed his shoulders, loving the feel of his muscles as they bunched and tightened beneath her fingers.

Blade moved between her knees. “I can think of a few things I’d like to do.” He put his hands on her butt and scooted her closer to him.

She drew in a sharp breath. “Is that right?”

He grinned. “Yes, that’s right.”

Her stomach chose that moment to rumble. He laughed outright. She could feel the heat creeping up her face.

“We’d better eat first. I don’t want you passing out later.”

She liked knowing there would be a later, which reminded her that he’d gotten a call earlier. “Who called you?”

“Carter. He has a meeting with Declan, Axel’s boss. He had a difficult time getting in touch with the man. Carter said at least Declan was reasonable sounding. He’s sure they can take care of everything with this one meeting. The flash drive you downloaded had nothing that would implicate Declan, but Axel has a few enterprises that could land him in jail.”

She grimaced. “Axel won’t be happy about that.”

“Do you think he might want revenge?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. He owns the town. At least some of it. He has the God syndrome. I don’t think he

believed anyone could touch him, then I came along and fought back.”

“But Declan is his boss, and I don’t think he’ll want to go over him. From everything Carter said about him, Declan would make Axel pay dearly for going against his orders.”

“You’re probably right.” She didn’t meet his gaze. “I guess I’ll have to look for another job. I’m not sure where that will take me.” She felt the warmth traveling up her face. “I’d like to keep seeing you. I don’t think I’m ready for what we have to end.”

“Me, either.” He hurried on. “Work for me. You can redecorate this place.”

She laughed. “Are you hiring me as a decorator or for sex?”

His grin was sexy as hell. “As a decorator, but it could be a job with benefits.”

His fingers had started drawing circles along her bottom, sending all kinds of sensations to her lower regions. “And who would benefit?”

“The both of us. Say you’ll do it.”

“I hate to tell you this, but I’m not a decorator. And yes, I told you it would be fun to change the estate into something not quite so gloomy, but I don’t have any real training. I’m afraid I wouldn’t know where to start.”

“Then work with a decorator. You’d have free reign over the whole project.”

“What if you don’t like my style?”

“I don’t have a style, so that’s okay.” His eyebrows drew together. “Except I’m not fond of dark and gloomy.”

“We’re in total agreement there.”

“When we talked about redecorating the place, you had some great ideas that I liked. I’m serious that about wanting you to come to work for me. I won’t always be here to oversee everything if Carter sends us out. I’ll need someone I can trust. At least, think about it.”

The timer for the pizza buzzed, saving her from answering. She wouldn’t lie to herself and say she wasn’t tempted because she was. The idea of decorating the whole estate had intriguing possibilities, especially if she got to work with a professional decorator. It would be a monumental task, though. She wasn’t sure she would be up for the challenge.

He helped her off the counter, and she grabbed some oven mittens out of a drawer, then brought the pizza out. The aroma wafted up to her nose, and she inhaled a little deeper as she set it on the island. Blade had grabbed a pizza cutter and plates.

Once they were seated at the bar, she asked, “What *are* you going to do when all this is over? I mean, does Carter need you somewhere else?” Marissa practically held her breath while she waited for his answer. She took a bite of pizza and slowly chewed.

“Wizard asked if I wanted to go to the coast with him.”

Her heart sank. He hadn’t *said* he didn’t want their relationship to go further. She wasn’t sure what she wanted,

but she liked the idea of finding out. Apparently, he didn't feel the same way.

“But I'd rather hang around here and watch the progress on the estate. It wouldn't bother you, would it?”

Her eyes narrowed. “You did that on purpose.”

He laughed. “Yes, I did.”

“Well, it was cruel.”

“I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you later.”

“I'll hold you to that.” She grinned. She glanced around the kitchen. “I thought I would totally revamp the kitchen,” she commented, keeping her tone light. “Maybe a deep pink color on the cabinets to go with the yellow on the walls, ruffles on the curtains, a chandelier above the island, and maybe a border with dancing fairies where the ceiling meets the wall. You know, something whimsical.” She looked at him. His mouth dropped open, and his eyes were wide. “What do you think?”

“Are you serious?”

She laughed. “No.”

His eyes narrowed. “That was cruel.”

“I know.” She took another bite of pizza. He would soon learn she could give as good as she got.

They finished eating, then cleaned the kitchen before wandering through the estate. She still hadn't been in every one of the rooms. The place was huge. She knew the job of redecorating would be intimidating. Still, as long as she had a professional decorator to work with, she was confident she

could make it look like a happier place—one where you could raise a family.

She stumbled.

“You okay?”

She swallowed hard. “Yes, I’m fine. Just being klutzy.” She laughed the moment off. She was not thinking about marriage, and certainly not babies. She wanted children someday, but her biological clock still had plenty of time left. As far as marriage, she adored every moment spent with Blade, but she wasn’t sure if she was ready for anything permanent.

Not that he’d asked.

She walked beside Blade until he stopped at a set of double doors, opened them, and flipped on a switch. Light flooded the room from two crystal chandeliers. The enormous floor was white marble with floor-to-ceiling windows at the back of the room. She drew in a deep breath and stepped farther inside.

“Wow,” was the first word that came out of her mouth. “I didn’t know people had ballrooms.”

“Mom once told me that my father’s great-grandfather used to have a ball twice a year. The whole county would come. Some of the most important people in Texas would be at the ball—senators, governors, and business people. It was considered a gala event that couldn’t be missed if you were lucky enough to receive an invitation. He was a very important person in the political and business world.”

“Did your father ever use it?”

“Never. He said he didn’t want peasants in his home. He always considered himself above everyone else. You know, it’s funny because he had an extremely high IQ, as did Danny. It was almost as if our father was too smart for his own good.” He grimaced. “I’m not sure Danny wasn’t in the same boat.”

“But your mother had a good influence on both of you.”

“Our saving grace. My mother was a good woman. She put up with a lot to protect her sons. I wish I could’ve done more. My father went completely off the deep end. He was a crazy son of a bitch.”

She put a hand on his arm. “I’m sorry,” she said.

“The conversation took a dark turn. I didn’t mean to bring up the past again.”

“No, it’s okay. I’m sure being home again brings back a lot of memories.”

“Not all bad,” he admitted, then looked around the room. “Did you know, if you start on one side of the ballroom and get a good enough run, you can jump on a towel and slide across the rest of the room? The maids used to get mad at me and Danny for stealing their clean towels.”

She looked at him with raised eyebrows. “Are you kidding?”

“Nope. We were quite the daredevils.”

She slowly looked around the ballroom. “You do realize I’m going to have to try that myself. I mean, I can’t take your word for it.”

He laughed and pulled her close, wrapping his arms around her. “Or not. Danny dislocated his shoulder doing that once. We got into some major trouble that day.”

“But I know the owner. I doubt that he would reprimand me. Especially if he was doing it with me.”

“Have I told you how much I enjoy being with you?”

She shook her head. “No, but I like hearing it.”

“Well, I do love being here with you.”

She felt warm from the inside out as they left the ballroom and wandered down to some more rooms. There was a beautiful sunroom, probably the brightest, other than the kitchen. The cushions on the furniture could be a lot perkier, and the room could use some plants. When they finished the tour, ending in the dark garden, she turned to Blade. “You have a beautiful home.”

“I think it will be.”

There was one subject she wasn't sure about broaching. It made her a little uncomfortable. “I'm sure you'll want to stick within a budget. I'll need to know what it is so I can start writing up some notes and figures.”

For the first time, Blade looked uncomfortable, and she wondered if maybe he didn't have the financial means to redecorate. She immediately felt terrible.

“I can work with a minimal budget,” she told him. “I'm the Queen of thrift shopping. You'd be surprised what I can find, and I love going to secondhand stores.”

When he laughed, she frowned. She didn't think it was *that* funny. Maybe she'd only made him nervous.

“Blade, you don't have to redecorate. We could open up all the curtains and let the light in and that would help tremendously.”

He suddenly pulled her into his arms. “I don't think you'll have to worry about spending my money. I donate the money Carter pays me to charity. I don't need to work. I do it because I want to help people.”

She leaned back and looked at him. He wasn't teasing her again, was he?

“It's true. My ancestors made a lot of money. Each one doubling it down the line. I have great financial advisors who keep making me more money.

Her mouth dropped open, then snapped shut. “Are you telling me you're a millionaire?”

“No.”

She breathed a sigh of relief. She didn't know whether she could handle Blade being that wealthy.

“It's closer to a billion.”

She began to laugh until she looked into his eyes again. “Oh my God, you're serious.”

“Just think about it. You don't have to worry about working with a budget anymore.”

“You're laughing at me again,” she accused him.

“Only a little. You should see the look on your face.” He turned serious. “It's funny. I haven't laughed this much in a

long time.”

She wiggled out of his arms and glared at him. “Well, I’m glad I’m a source of amusement to you.”

His eyes roamed over her. “Oh, you’re more than a source of amusement.” He stepped closer to her and tugged the hem of her T-shirt up. “Raise your arms,” he said.

She didn’t think of refusing. Not when she wanted him so much. Trembles of desire were already sweeping over her.

There was nothing slow about making love this time. It was as if they both needed the other one too much. They quickly stripped out of their clothes. Hands caressed, fondled. He straddled a stone bench, then pulled her down so that she straddled it in front of him. She sucked in a breath as her bare bottom sat on the cold stone.

“Too cold?” he asked.

She started to tell him it was a little cool, but then he was brushing his fingers between her legs. She drew in a sharp breath, grabbing his shoulders as flames of heat licked her body.

“No, not too cold.”

He reached for a condom, but she took it from him before he could open it. He looked at her with a question in his eyes but didn’t say anything as she brought the foil packet to her mouth and slowly licked across it before tearing it open with her teeth.

He groaned.

She only smiled as she brought the condom out. He jerked when her fingers brushed over his cock. His breathing grew ragged as she slowly rolled it down his thick length. To say she wasn't getting hotter by the second would be a gross understatement. She loved touching him, feeling the velvety softness of the tip and the hard thickness that would soon be buried deep inside her.

He opened his eyes and looked at her when she had it on. "You did that on purpose."

"Yes," she said in her most sultry voice.

"Paybacks can be hell," he warned.

"I'm counting on it."

In one swift motion, he raised her, then lowered her onto him. She drew in a breath as she began to tremble. Then he laid back on the bench, taking the cold as she straddled the bench and him.

"Make love to me," he said.

He was giving her full rein to do what she wanted. She raised, then lowered herself back on him. The bench was low to the ground, which made it easier. There was something incredibly sensual about being the one in control. All her thoughts began to jumble up inside her head as the sensations flowed over her.

He raised his hips, meeting her. Their gazes locked in passion as they both strained toward the same goal of finding release from the building tension.

Blade suddenly groaned. Her body tightened at the same time, squeezing around him as she dropped over the

cliff, arms spread wide. Then she was flying toward the heavens as everything opened all at once.

She was still trying to catch her breath as she drifted down to lie against his chest. “Making love has never been like this.”

“For me, either,” he admitted.

“Are we going to make love in every room of the house and outside?” she asked after she caught her breath.

“That’s a good idea,” he said, lightly tracing his finger over her back. “Of course, we’ll have to initiate them all again after the redecorating. I also thought about adding on more rooms.”

She began to laugh. She couldn’t help herself.

“You are going to stay and redecorate the estate, aren’t you?” he asked.

She released a deep sigh. “Yes, I’ll stay.” She knew it wasn’t just the redecorating that would keep her here. No, it was much more than that.

Chapter Sixteen

Blade couldn't sleep. He lay there for a while, watching Marissa. Only a sliver of moon slipped past the window panes, but it was enough for him to admire just how beautiful the woman was who lay next to him.

He'd scooped her into his arms and carried her to his room. Man, she'd been wild in bed. He began to get hard just thinking about it. Making love with Marissa was a new experience for him. She was like no other woman. One minute she was shy, and then in the very next moment, she was crazy passionate.

And if he didn't get out of bed right now, he would be tempted to wake her up and make love again. He slipped out of bed and pulled on his jeans as quietly as he could. He didn't think twice about where he was going as he left the room, closing the door behind him.

He went straight to Danny's old room. He sat down at the desk but didn't move to open the drawer. Marissa hadn't wanted him to read Danny's journal when she discovered he'd found it.

Blade wanted to keep his memory of Danny as it had always been. But what if he'd been part of the reason Danny killed himself—and that's all it could've been. He always came back to the fact Danny hadn't applied the brakes when he made the corner too fast.

Blade knew that he'd only been living in a fantasy. As Danny had gotten older, he'd changed. Did he have anything

to do with it? He didn't know. Not for sure.

He paused with his hand on the drawer knob, then opened it. As he brought out the journal, he leaned back in the chair. He thumbed through the pages until he found where he'd stopped reading and then turned the page.

Today was my twelfth birthday. Dad was out of town, so it was nice. Mom gave the cook the day off, then made a cake all by herself. Blade even helped her decorate it. They lit the candles and carried it out to the patio, but a gust of wind blew them all out. It was okay. We all laughed.

I like it when Dad's not here.

Blade looks just like Dad, so I pretended he was my father, and we were one happy family. Sometimes Blade gets mad, though. Then he reminds me more of Dad. I don't like that.

"I wasn't him, though, Danny," Blade said as he gripped the edges of the journal. He was never like his father. Blade wouldn't have dreamt of hurting anyone, even if he did get angry.

He skimmed past more entries. Danny wrote about how much he enjoyed sketching. He'd even doodled little pictures in the margins of the journal. He smiled when he saw the butterfly.

I saw a butterfly today. They're such fascinating creatures. They work hard to be born and then burst out of their cocoon beautifully magnificent, only to live for less than a month. I wish I'd been born a butterfly.

It wouldn't bother me if I only lived a few weeks. My life would be perfect. Isn't twenty-nine days of perfection much better than suffering the pain and heartache of growing up? Especially with a father like ours.

Or even better, maybe our father would be killed and wouldn't come home. Life would be so much better without him. Everyone would be happier. Sometimes I think about killing him while he's asleep. Does that make me a bad son? I have to be careful and not let anyone see that side of me. They might think I'm as crazy as my father.

Blade closed his eyes for a moment. He'd never realized how much pain Danny had been going through. He should've come to him and talked about his feelings. He could've told Danny that he felt the same way sometimes. It was okay to feel that way if you didn't act out those feelings. Not that Danny ever had. Blade could see that it ate away at him, though.

He skimmed through some more of the entries. Danny turned thirteen. He couldn't help but smile when he got to the part about the changes Danny was going through and the sexual thoughts he was starting to have.

Blade remembered telling him that was all natural and part of growing up. There was no way their father would ever have that talk with them. He'd never had it with Blade.

He continued to read.

I saw Jessie again today. So beautiful with red hair and sparkling green eyes. Is it wrong to want someone so badly that it twists your gut and almost makes you sick to your

stomach? What's worse, I know I won't act on my feelings. I wish I was brave, but I can only dream. I'm a coward.

Blade shook his head. He hadn't even known Danny was interested in a girl. It must've been hard on him. He skipped a few grades, so he was only a grade behind Blade. Danny would've been younger than all the girls.

He thought he remembered a Jessie and, if it was the same girl he was thinking about, she was definitely out of Danny's league. Poor Danny.

He thumbed through more entries. Danny had another birthday.

Blade went camping with some of his friends this weekend. I wish I could've gone. I'm almost fourteen, but Blade said I was too young. Sometimes I don't like him. I don't see why I couldn't have gone.

*There were going to be some girls there. I see him at school sometimes talking to them. They're always hanging around him, giggling. They're so silly, but he eats it all up. They act as if he's some god or something. *rolling my eyes**

The guys are almost as bad. They think he's so cool. Everyone calls him Blade. He likes his nickname. He even learned how to throw a knife. He's pretty good at it, too. I know Dad thinks twice before he tries anything with him.

Blade has a lot of muscles, too, so Dad might be a little afraid of him. Now that's hilarious. Only one problem, I'm a skinny runt, and when Blade isn't looking, Dad has started picking on me. Then he taunts me and tells me to run and tell on him. I don't. I can take care of myself.

Blade told me that he's getting older now and will want to do different things. He's not that much older than me, only three years. He's just barely seventeen. He thinks he's hot shit because he has a car and everything.

I'll be fifteen in a few months and can get my learner's permit. Then he's going to have to spend more time with me because Dad will make him teach me how to drive. I miss how we used to be friends. He's always so busy now.

Blade cringed from the guilt that swept over him. Yeah, he remembered how he'd begun gravitating toward his friends. He'd just turned seventeen, full of piss and vinegar. The girls started noticing his muscles, and his ego was pretty inflated.

He and the guys met at the gym every day and worked out. He should've paid more attention to Danny, but he felt free of what happened at home for the first time.

He began reading again.

Dad came back home after Blade left. His meeting ended sooner than expected, he'd said. I was hoping he would be gone all weekend. Mom and I could've gone to the art store. I'm going to try to stay out of his way. He's been watching me, and I don't like it. It's almost as if he can see all my secrets. What would he do if he knew everything about me? But no, I'm smart, so I hide it from him and the rest of the family.

What secrets? He shook his head. There was no telling with Danny. He usually leaned toward being a little dramatic at times.

Blade thought back to that weekend. He might not have gone camping if he'd known his father was coming home. But he also wanted to be with the rest of his friends. Alisha was going to be there as well, and he liked her. His hormones had been running hot back then. He was like every boy his age.

His brow furrowed. But when he got back home, it seemed as if Danny had changed. He was quieter and more withdrawn. When Blade tried to talk to him, he just shook his head and said he was fine. Blade didn't think he was okay but couldn't get anything else out of him.

His father smiled a lot, as if he knew something that no one else did. Then everything seemed to settle down into a regular routine. His father went back to being an asshole.

He returned to reading the journal.

This morning Dad came to my room. He told me to get dressed in jeans and a T-shirt and to wear my boots. We were going out. I don't like the way he looks. I'm not sure what he'll do if I don't go. I'll write more later.

Blade's eyes narrowed. What the hell had their father done? It must've been bad enough that Danny wouldn't tell him. He quickly turned the page.

Oh my God, oh my God. At first, everything was okay. We climbed into the pickup, and Dad took the old road deep into the back pasture. It was nice. Dad was even joking. I'd never seen him like this. I started to relax. This was the way our family was supposed to be.

But then he stopped the pickup, and as he got out, he grabbed both guns from the rack behind us. He told me we were going to do a little hunting and shoved the gun into my hands. I tried to tell him I'd never shot a gun before, but he said all I had to do was point and shoot.

I was shaking on the inside. I couldn't imagine killing anything. But I followed him deeper into the woods. Then he stopped suddenly. There was an eight-point buck not far from us. The animal was magnificent. So beautiful he brought tears to my eyes. Dad whispered for me to shoot him. I shook my head.

Dad raised his gun and put it against my temple. He told me he would shoot me if I didn't shoot the buck. Hunting accidents happened all the time, and everyone would believe him because he was rich. I think I knew he would. His eyes had a crazed look as if he could already smell blood. I didn't think it mattered if it was the deer's blood—or mine.

I raised my gun, praying the buck would run away, but he stood there. The deer almost seemed to be looking straight at me. I felt like I was in a fog as I put my finger on the trigger. Please run away, I silently begged as I closed my eyes tight and fired. I opened my eyes as the deer stumbled once, then twice before it fell to the ground.

Dad slapped me on the back and told me I was a real man now. Funny, I didn't feel like one. I only felt sick. He left the buck lying there and returned to the pickup with me staggering through the brush like a drunk person behind him.

As soon as we got home, I went straight to my room. I think Mom said something to me, and I might have answered,

but I can't remember. I kept seeing the buck's beautiful black eyes staring at me. I sat down at my desk and drew his picture. I never wanted to forget what I did. I don't care what Dad does to me, but I'll never kill another living thing.

Blade closed the journal, put it back in the cubbyhole, and reached for Danny's sketch pad. He flipped through it until he came to a picture of a buck. Right below the picture were the words, I'm sorry.

He came to his feet and went downstairs, stopping in the living room and staring at the family portrait. "I'd kill you myself if you were still alive. How could you? You knew he was a gentle soul and you stole that innocence away from him. I hope you're rotting in hell, you bastard."

Chapter Seventeen

“I don’t like this boss,” Mannix said. “We don’t have any backup with us. What if he comes out with guns blazing? You said this Carter was a badass and had a lot of muscle working for him.”

Sometimes Mannix could be a drama king, Declan thought to himself. “I told you, we spoke on the phone. I think everything will be fine.”

“Yeah, but you don’t know for sure.”

“No, I don’t know for sure.”

“So why don’t we have backup?”

Now he was just being tiresome. “We won’t be alone,” he said.

“What do you mean?” Mannix looked skeptical.

“A couple of the men will be at the park where we’re meeting. They should already be there and in place.”

His lips pressed into a thin line. “And you couldn’t tell me this before?”

“I’m telling you now. Did you seriously think I would go in without backup?”

“Yeah, I did. Hell, I never know what you’ll do from one day to the next.”

“It keeps you on your toes.”

“What the fuck am I? A ballerina?”

Declan laughed. He probably shouldn't tease Mannix, but he needed to lighten up.

"You're overdressed," Mannix told him. "You'll stand out at a park wearing a suit. You look like you're in the Mafia or something."

It wasn't far from the truth.

"Pull in here," he told the driver after he let the partition down. Carter had said to turn in at the west entrance. The driver pulled into a parking space. Mannix got out, looking around, hand hovering near his gun. The driver got out and opened Declan's door.

Declan wasn't in any hurry to exit the car. He'd already spotted Carter and another man by one of the picnic tables.

"I told you that you were overdressed."

Carter wore jeans and a button-up shirt. His boots were worn around the edges as if he wore them a lot. It was funny because Declan had researched Carter and discovered he had more than enough money that he didn't have to work another day in his life. Yet, here he was with one of his men. He'd bet there were more hanging out nearby.

He straightened his dark suit jacket. It was tailor-made for his tall frame and broad shoulders. He only wore the best. That was one thing his father had drilled into him. His father had been wearing a suit the day he was murdered. At least he went out looking good.

Declan casually walked toward Carter and his man. Mannix stayed right beside him. He knew without a doubt that

Mannix would take a bullet for him. The guy was loyal to the bone. He shouldn't have pissed him off earlier.

“Declan?” Carter asked as he stepped toward him with his hand outstretched.

His grip was firm. There was nothing soft about this man.

“This is Wizard,” Carter continued, then looked at Mannix.

“This is Mannix, my second in charge.”

Carter nodded toward him, recognizing him as being a part of this discussion. Declan could tell Mannix appreciated that Carter put him in a position of respect.

“Let's walk,” Declan told Carter. “Wait here, Mannix.”

After they'd walked a short distance, Carter began to speak.

“What are we going to do about this? When I spoke with Axel, he blew me off. I don't think he took me seriously. But I'm dead serious. This woman is not to be harmed.”

“She downloaded some files,” Declan told him.

“And Axel is crossing the line with his business dealings. We found enough evidence against him. I have connections who would bring him down in a heartbeat. I don't know what kind of business you're running. Whether it's legal or illegal, you might not want to get caught up in Axel's projects.”

Straight to the point. “I think you know how my family made their money,” Declan admitted.

He didn't come right out and say that his father had been part of the Mafia. They had made most of their fortune illegally, though. One of the reasons his father was murdered, and another reason for him to get out. He'd never wanted to be a part of it in the first place.

"My business is legit, but some of my family members think it would be better if we ran things the old way."

"Then you should take care of your family. Set them straight about this matter."

"I don't want what was on the flash drive to go any further. Even though I'm legit, it could hurt future ventures I'm trying to implement. The men I work with wouldn't want anything to taint their reputations."

"Then I presume you'll take care of this matter."

"You have my word." He glanced around. "Mannix tends to get a little edgy, we'd better head back. I'll talk with Axel and make sure nothing happens to this woman. Do you have the flash drive?"

"I think I'll hang on to it for a while. Just to make sure."

Smart move. "Of course."

As soon as they joined the other two men, Mannix studied him. Declan gave him an imperceptible nod to let him know everything was good.

Carter whistled, and two men seemed to come out of nowhere, walking toward him. They nodded to him and Mannix, then all four men walked to a white van and got in.

Mannix's eyes narrowed. "I thought you were only supposed to bring one man to the meeting."

Declan chuckled. "I like him. He reminds me of myself." He whistled, and his other two men stopped what they were doing and came forward. One had been dressed as a groundskeeper, and the other had been strolling through the park.

Once Declan and Mannix were driving back to the hotel, he pulled out his phone and punched a number. Axel immediately answered. It was good that he didn't keep him waiting.

He put him on speaker, then set his phone on the tray in front of him. "The matter is taken care of," he told him.

"You have that bitch? And the flash drive? Bring her here, and I'll make sure she learns her place."

Declan pinched his nose. "No, you're going to back off."

Silence.

"I don't want her touched."

"You're not going to do a damn thing? Are you serious? She stole from us."

"No, she stole from you." He happened to glance across the seat. Mannix had raised an eyebrow as though asking, was that all he planned to do about his cousin? "I've learned you've got some side businesses that could hurt the company," he continued.

“Your father would’ve approved of them,” Axel sneered.

“But I’m not my father,” he said his words deadly quiet. “Pack your things. I want you out of the house by the end of the week.”

“You’re firing me!”

“You should be happy that’s all I’m doing.” He ended the call.

“You should’ve let me kill him,” Mannix said.

“When did you get so bloodthirsty?”

“Since I came to work for you. You have idiot relatives.”

Declan couldn’t argue with him there. Mannix still might get his chance to get rid of Axel. He didn’t trust him as far as he could throw him.

“What are you going to do with the house?” Mannix asked.

“Why, do you want it?”

He scowled. “Hell no.”

“Sell it, maybe.”

“It’s still damned ugly. You won’t get much for the place.”

“True.”

He wondered if it was insured in case of a fire. Maybe he was more like his father than he thought.

Chapter Eighteen

Blade found Marissa out on the patio. She turned and smiled when he walked outside to join her. With the sunlight streaming in her hair, she had to be the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. He couldn't imagine spending a day without her.

That thought shook him to the core. When had she come to mean so much to him? It hadn't been long since he blamed her for Danny's death. He knew now that she would never intentionally hurt his brother. It just wasn't in her to do so.

"What?" she asked. He must've had a look of confusion on his face because she continued. "You were looking at me strangely."

He shook his head. "I was admiring how beautiful you are." It was funny how he could still make her blush after they'd made love.

"I know we've grown closer, but you were sort of forced to help me. You're the type of man who can't walk away from a fight. Once this is all over, you might feel differently about me. I would understand. I won't hold you to anything."

"Is that right?" He stepped closer and wrapped her in his arms, pulling her against him. "Well, I still don't want you to leave, and the problems with Axel is over."

She raised her head and met his gaze, her eyes wide with surprise. "It's over?"

“I just got off the phone with Carter. He and Declan finished their meeting. He’s going to take care of Axel, so he won’t ever bother you again.”

“So, it really is over?”

Marissa still looked unsure.

“Yes, it’s over, and I want you to work with a decorator and bring light into the estate once and for all. It’s been in the dark far too long.”

“As a tribute to Danny and your mother.”

And this was why she was starting to mean so much to him. “Yeah, I like that idea.”

She nibbled her bottom lip. “I need to take some more notes. I want to do justice to the beautiful woodwork and the antique pieces.”

“And no pink kitchen with fairies dancing across the wall?”

She laughed. “Absolutely not.” She was thoughtful for a moment. “Do you want to go around the estate with me?”

“Absolutely not,” he repeated her words, then smiled. “I have something of my own I need to finish.”

Her expression turned serious. “The journal?”

“Yes, I need to be able to move on.”

She slowly nodded. “I understand.”

He kissed her forehead, knowing it would be much later before he went upstairs if he touched her lips. He

watched as she blushed again and wondered where her thoughts had gone. Later, he silently told her.

Before he went upstairs, he fixed a mug of coffee and carried it with him. He wanted to finish the journal and put it behind him. Until he did, he knew his life was still in limbo.

He stepped inside Danny's old room, closing the door behind him. He could almost feel Danny's essence in the room.

“Little brother, what happened to us? You could come to me with anything. I would've still loved you. Hell, look at the mistakes I've made in my life. I should never have blamed Marissa for being the one to cause your death. I know she didn't, but I need to understand more. I hope you'll help me.”

He sat in front of the desk, opened the drawer, then reached back to the cubbyhole and brought out the journal.

Sometimes when it's quiet, I wonder if a storm is brewing inside Dad. I'm worried. I sense something is going to happen, but what? Mom seems more withdrawn. Blade is caught up with all his friends. I don't think he sees the change. Blade's trying to pretend that he has a normal home life. Then he comes home and has to face reality. We all do.

The following passage looked as though Danny had quickly scribbled it in.

Blade knocked on my door, asking if I wanted to toss the ball around. It feels like old times. More later.

When he looked at the entry date, it felt like a shaft of cold air washed over Blade. For a moment, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then slowly released it. Did he want to

read the next passage? He opened his eyes and turned the page. Danny had drawn a monster that looked a lot like their father.

He killed her! Blade and I were outside throwing the ball. It was a beautiful day, and the sun was shining. Nothing is supposed to happen when the sun is shining!

We heard her scream. I immediately knew what was happening. He was hitting her again. But this time, there was something different. There was more fear. I felt as if someone punched me in the throat. I couldn't take in a breath.

For a moment, we didn't move. Then Blade took off like a streak of lightning. I followed, but slower. I had a bad feeling something wasn't right this time.

Blade yelled and ran toward Dad just as I stepped into the living room. He knocked him away from Mom. Nothing seemed real. Dad was holding a bloody knife. Mom lay on the floor in a puddle of blood. Her eyes were wide open, and she was staring at the ceiling.

I closed my eyes tight and backed up until I was against the wall. I was shaking so badly I could barely stand. I wanted to throw up.

Dad wore a blank look as he sat back on his heels. Our gazes met, and he seemed to snap out of it. He started laughing but kept looking at me as if he wanted to kill me, too.

Blade started CPR.

I couldn't stop crying.

I never thought Dad would go this far. I silently prayed for Mom to blink and smile at Blade, but her eyes were still

wide open.

Then Blade yelled at me to call 911. I couldn't move. I think he might've yelled at me again. I turned and ran to the phone. Some of the servants were behind me. Why hadn't they done anything? They wore stupid looks on their faces.

Then the cops came and pulled Blade off Mom. They said it was too late. They took Dad away. They covered Mom with a sheet one of the servants brought them. She was crying. I felt terrible that I'd thought they didn't care when they'd only been in shock.

I didn't know what to do, so I came to my room and started writing. I wanted to get it all down. Maybe then, I'll know it happened and wasn't a nightmare. I'm scared.

I hear Aunt Peggy talking to Blade, so I will stop here for now.

Blade remembered Aunt Peggy coming to the house. Her face blotchy, and her nose red from crying. She kept saying over and over that she knew he would kill her someday, but she wouldn't leave him. Then she looked at him, and a shudder swept over her. Yeah, he knew that he looked like his father. He didn't blame her for feeling as she did. Blade knew she tried to like him. Most of the time, she never looked directly at him.

He returned to Danny's journal.

We're going to live with Aunt Peggy. I don't want to leave. It feels as though I'm abandoning Mom. Aunt Peggy mentioned therapy. They can't help me. No one can.

Poor Danny. He'd always been Mom's baby. She'd had a tendency to coddle him. They'd had a much closer relationship than he did with their mother. It never bothered him that she showed Danny more attention.

Blade glanced at the date on the next entry. Danny would have been sixteen. Blade was still shocked and surprised that he'd come back home.

This is my first time back. Walking through the front door, I felt a sense of being home. I walked through every room in the house, stopping in the room where he killed her. I'm glad he's dead. I hope he rots in hell. Not that I believe in all that stuff.

Jessie said there is a God.

Now Danny had surprised him again. Apparently, at some point, he'd hooked up with Jessie after all. Good, because Blade knew that he hadn't been around a lot. He was already in college when Danny turned sixteen. He smiled. But Danny would be right behind him. He'd taken accelerated courses and graduated high school early. The kid was smart. That was the reason Danny had a car now. Even though Aunt Peggy had protested, Blade bought Danny the car of his dreams when he graduated. The trust fund they were getting gave him more than enough money.

He went back to reading.

I don't know why we can't live here now. We just need to redecorate. It's so dark and gloomy. Mom and I had talked about changing up some of the rooms, but Dad quickly vetoed that idea.

Mom once told me she would leave him when I graduated high school. She refused to talk about leaving Dad before then. If he hadn't killed her...

But it's too late for that. He did kill her.

I miss Blade. He got an apartment near the college, so I hardly see him anymore. He said I could stay with him when I started college, but I didn't want to go. I've always disliked school, except for Jessie.

I know Jesse is older, but I don't care. We love each other.

Blade wondered if Jessie might've had something to do with Danny's death. It was a possibility. He shook his head. By then, Danny had met Marissa. He should quit blaming everyone Danny had ever encountered. The last time it had kept him twisted up on the inside. He realized now since Danny's death, he'd stopped living. He'd only been going through the motions.

Blade looked at the following entries. Danny talked mostly about Jessie and everyday life. He never brought her to the estate, though. It was almost as if Danny was pretending that his life was perfect. When he was at the estate, he lived in a make-believe world—reliving the good memories. He would talk about their mother and what he and Blade used to do.

He scraped his fingers through his hair. Danny had gone to therapy, but apparently, it hadn't helped. There was a desperation in his writing.

Blade glanced at the date of the next entry. Danny was eighteen. He gripped the journal, knowing the following

entries would tell him more about what was going on in Danny's head.

I met a girl in the library. Her name is Marissa. She's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. I helped her find a research book. We started talking, then went for coffee. I think she likes me.

Even now, as I write, I can't stop my hands from shaking. I think she's going to be the one.

There were pages and pages filled with Marissa as he got to know her better. The days flew past. Blade smiled, knowing he saw what Danny had seen in her.

I wonder if she would like me if she knew everything about me. She's so pure and innocent. I don't think she would, so I don't plan on telling her. Eventually, I will have to tell her and Blade. I need a little more time.

The more I'm around Marissa, the more I enjoy her company. I can't wait for Blade to meet her. She's the perfect choice.

Blade hasn't acted the same since father killed mother. I can see the haunted look in his eyes. I've been so scared for him. He'll always be my hero, big brother, and best friend. This is the least I can do. He always does so much for me.

He pressed his fingers to his eyes. Wow, he didn't know Danny felt that way about him. He thought he'd stopped being his hero the day Dad killed Mom. He skimmed through the following entries. They were mainly about Marissa.

He smiled when he read some of the things. She still moved her hands when she talked, and her laugh was still like

musical notes. Her smile would still light up a room.

I think Jessie is jealous. Why, I don't know. He'll always be my one and only true love.

Blade froze. *He'll* always be my one and only true love? Danny was gay?

God, why didn't he see that? How could he not have seen it? The past flashed before him. The time Danny and his friends had gone skinny-dipping, and how Danny had blushed. How he didn't seem that interested in girls. So many little instances that should've clued him in.

Was being gay the reason he killed himself? Did Danny think he could love him any less? His brother could've come to him and talked about anything. He would've still felt the same about him either way.

He began to read again.

I told Jessie that Blade was cool. He would be okay with our relationship.

Blade breathed a sigh of relief.

I haven't told Jessie my big plans, though. I saw how Blade and Marissa looked at each other when I introduced them. I wanted to say something then, but I held back. I need to make sure they're suitable for each other. As soon as I know, I'll tell Jessie what I'm going to do. How can I tell Jessie that I want to marry him until I make sure Blade is taken care of?

Blade turned the page, but that was the last entry. He couldn't believe that Danny was setting him and Marissa up.

He smiled. That was Danny. He was a fixer. He always wanted to make everything better.

But what had gone wrong?

His head jerked up when he heard a noise downstairs. He glanced at his watch. Was Marissa still up? He closed the journal and put it away, then left the room. The downstairs was dark, so Marissa was probably already in bed. He put his hand on his knife as he stepped onto the landing.

The explosion of the gun reverberated through the house. Blade dropped to his knees as a burning pain in his shoulder blurred his vision.

“You must be Blade. I’m Axel.” The voice came out of the darkness.

He pulled the knife and threw it in the general direction, but with the gunshot wound, he knew his aim was off. Still, he heard a grunt and a body dropping to the floor.

Dammit, he should’ve been prepared in case Axel decided not to follow Declan’s orders.

Chapter Nineteen

Marissa immediately sat up in bed.

What the hell?

It took her a moment to orientate herself to her surroundings, and then she heard the voices downstairs. They sounded angry. She flung the cover to the side and jumped out of bed, pulling on her jeans and jerking a T-shirt over her head, then running out the door.

There was no moonlight coming inside, and the lights were off. She caught her breath when she almost plowed into a shadowy figure. What the hell was happening?

“Get to my room,” he hissed under his breath.

Marissa didn't hesitate. She turned and went back up the stairs, then ran down the hall. Blade came inside, right behind her.

“Get me the gun, bedside drawer,” he said without turning on the light.

She stumbled over to his side of the bed and opened the drawer. The nine mm was heavy in the palm of her hand.

“I have it,” she said. “What's going on?” She kept her voice low, but she'd already guessed what was happening. She still prayed she was wrong.

“Declan might have said it was over, but I don't think Axel got the message.”

“Axel is downstairs?”

“And he brought men with him.”

“What are we going to do?”

“I’m going to call Carter, but I’m not sure we can hold them off for the time it would take them to get here. Do you know how to shoot a gun?”

“Yes, why...” Her blood turned cold. “I heard an explosion. That’s what woke me.” It grew so silent that she could’ve heard a pin drop.

“It’s just a flesh wound,” he finally said.

He grabbed her hand when she reached toward the light switch as if he knew what she was about to do.

“No lights. I don’t want them to know which room we’re in.” She ran to the bedside table and got her phone.

“They won’t be able to see the light from my phone,” she said, turning it on. She drew in a sharp breath when she saw the blood running down his arm and the front of his shirt. “That’s more than a flesh wound.”

“I’ve had worse. Burns like a son of a bitch, though,” he told her as he pulled his phone out of his pocket and punched in a number. “We have company,” he spoke into the phone, then slipped the phone back into his pocket. “They’ll get here as fast as they can.”

“Call 911.”

“This is a small town. I can’t call the Sheriff. They’re not trained for this and would be walking into an ambush.”

“Then we’ll do the best we can, but we have to stop the bleeding.” She hurried back to her side of the bed, where she’d

dropped her gown on the floor. She scooped it up. "I'll see if I can make a bandage." She put her phone in his good hand so he could hold the light, but she noticed his hand shook. She tried not to think about it and tied a makeshift bandage around his shoulder, padding the wound with one of her T-shirts. She prayed it would stop the bleeding. When she looked back up, her heart skipped a beat. His face was pale, and a drop of sweat ran down his face.

She raised her chin. "I know how to aim and pull a trigger. We'll be fine."

His grin wobbled. "When you talk about guns and shooting bad guys, it's sexy as hell."

She cocked an eyebrow. "Really? You're thinking about sex right now?"

He pulled her against him and lowered his mouth to hers. His kiss was hot, and despite their situation, a spiral of heat shot over her, pooling between her legs. They couldn't do this, not now. When she stepped back, they were both breathing hard. She didn't think it was all because of his bullet wound.

"Hold that thought," she said.

"You might as well come out. I'll let you live if you do," Axel called from downstairs.

"He's a coward," she said. "He won't come up the stairs."

"I'm not worried about him. It's his men that concern me."

She cringed. Yeah, she hadn't thought about that. He moved her back and opened the door a crack.

"I'm hurt. I don't think I can make it downstairs. Come up and get me."

"If I come up, you won't have to worry about hurting anymore," he growled.

"How's that knife wound?" Blade called down.

"You took out one of my best men. I owe you for that."

"You must've been standing behind him. I thought a leader stood in front of his troops. How does that make your men feel knowing you'd risk their lives but not yours?"

"Send Marissa downstairs. I only want the girl. You can go free."

"Call Declan," Marissa told him. "He said this is over."

"You stupid bitch, I owe you for what you did to me. Declan told me to clear out. He's my fucking cousin. You're nothing to him. You stole from us."

Marissa looked at Blade even though she couldn't see him that well in the dark. This made everything worse. It meant Axel had lost everything. He had nothing else to lose.

"What are we going to do now?"

"We need a distraction. It won't be long before Axel decides to send someone up. I don't want to take the chance they'll make it."

"We could fire the gun. Let them know we're armed." She knew her idea was lame, but she couldn't come up with anything else.

“Or we can make them think we’re firing a lot of guns.”

“What do you have in mind?”

“Danny used to keep a box of firecrackers under his bed. They should still be there. I’ll check and be right back.”

“You’re not in any shape to go anywhere. I can get there faster and return before you even reach his room.”

“Are you calling into question my ability to protect you?”

She smiled despite the gravity of the situation. “I would never question that. But *I* haven’t been shot.” Before he could stop her, she hurried down to Danny’s room.

It was strange, but almost the moment she stepped inside his old room, it was as if she felt his presence. It was an odd feeling.

One that she didn’t have time to dwell on. She hurried over to his bed, tripping through the darkness, and knelt beside it. She immediately found a box and felt inside. Sure enough, just like Blade had said, there were firecrackers. The box was only the size of a small shoebox, but it might buy them a little time. She hurried back to his room.

“Now what?” She asked.

“I’ll keep him talking. I’ve already figured out he likes to hear himself speak. Tie the sheets together.”

“You think we can climb over the side without breaking our necks?”

“I think you can. I want you to run as fast as you can. Go for the trees. That will give you the coverage that you’ll need. Stay low until Carter gets here.”

“Excuse me? And just what are you going to do?”

“I’ll light the fireworks and throw the box over the railing. It’ll take them a few minutes to realize they’re not being shot at. It should give you enough time to climb down and get to the trees. Even if they storm the staircase, I can pick a few of them off.”

“And what happens when you run out of bullets?”

“We don’t have much time. Stop arguing,” he ground out.

“Not happening. I’m not leaving you here alone. We’re in this together, mister.”

He muttered something under his breath. “I’m going to have to teach you to stop arguing with me.”

“It won’t do any good. Now, give me the box of fireworks, and I’ll light them.” He grumbled but handed her the fireworks and his lighter.

“Don’t get too close to the railing,” he warned.

“This isn’t my first rodeo,” she muttered, then realized it was when it came to defending herself against bad guys. She could do this, though. At heart, she was a country girl, and Nana had taught her a few tricks.

She crouched low as she made her way to the railing. She didn’t want to toss the whole box over in case they didn’t all go off. She found several rows of fireworks strung together.

She lit one end, then tossed it over the rail. After only a few seconds, loud explosions echoed throughout the house. Because of the acoustics, it sounded like a whole force of men were attacking Axel's group.

She smiled. If it wasn't for the fact she could die tonight, this might be fun. She began lighting the others and tossing them over. Axel's men fired back, but they didn't know what they were shooting toward.

"Stop shooting!" Axel yelled. "It's only fireworks, you fucking idiots."

She hurried back into the room when a bullet whizzed past her ear.

"Now what?"

"I'm pretty sure we pissed him off. Maybe he'll get careless and make a mistake."

"Do you think you're being funny!" Axel called out. "You can play games, but I'll still win when it's all said and done. Then we'll see who gets the last laugh, and I don't think I'll let either of you live. How would you feel about watching your lover die, Marissa?"

Cold chills ran up and down her arms. She knew he was serious. If he caught them now, he probably would kill them. There was no way Carter would arrive in time to save the day.

"I'm sorry I dragged you into all of this. I shouldn't have called you."

"I'm glad you did," he said, then hesitated.

“What?”

“I finished reading the journal. I didn’t realize Danny was gay. It wouldn’t have made any difference to me. He was still my little brother, and I loved him.

“He was my best friend. I loved him, too. I walked in that afternoon. He was in the bedroom with another man. At first, I was shocked. I was only seventeen. I turned and started to leave. Danny called out for me not to go. Then he begged me not to tell you. I didn’t say anything. Then after the crash, Aunt Peggy begged me not to tell you. She was so distraught over people finding out, I agreed.”

“There’s something else I have to tell you.”

The balcony door behind him squeaked. He whirled around and fired the gun. The door flew open, and there was another shot. Blade grunted and dropped to the floor.

Oh my God, this couldn’t be happening. “Blade, are you okay?”

He didn’t answer. Her eyes filled with tears as she felt around on the floor for the gun. She grabbed it with both hands and raised it. She’d kill the bastard! She’d fucking kill him!

Before she could fire, a fist connected with her jaw. The gun fell from her hands, and she crumpled to the floor.

Chapter Twenty

Marissa's head pounded, and her jaw was on fire. She was slung over some man's shoulder. It didn't help that whoever was carrying her down the stairs bounced her up and down with each step, and her chin kept hitting his boney spine.

So, this was it. She doubted Axel would let her live. She closed her eyes tight as pain gripped her so tightly that she thought she would suffocate. He'd already killed Blade. Damn him! If she got the chance, she would take him out.

Life was damned cruel. First Danny, and now Blade. A tear slipped from the corner of her eye. If she hadn't called him for help, Blade would still be alive.

No, she couldn't think about any of that right now. She had to concentrate on escaping. Then she would make sure Axel was locked away for so long he would never see the light of day outside prison walls.

God, would this man ever get to where he was going? Every bone in her body felt bruised.

She was taken to the living room and unceremoniously dumped on the sofa. She landed on her side with her feet hanging over the sofa. She kept her eyes closed, only peeking from lowered lids.

Her gaze landed on the man sitting across from her. She could tell from his slacks and shoes that he wore a suit but could only see from his knees down. It had to be Axel. She couldn't stop the fear from spreading over her.

“You might as well open your eyes,” he told her. “I know you’re not still unconscious.” His words were condescending.

She opened her eyes and glared at him as she pushed to a sitting position. “The team will come after you, and they’ll kill you. I hope they do it slowly.”

He laughed, waving his arm in front of him. “Look around you. Who’s in charge? Me. No one would dare come after me.”

“What about Declan?” She saw the way he stiffened. Declan must be his kryptonite. She would remember that in case she wanted to use it again.

“Declan is my cousin. He won’t do a damn thing to me. We have an understanding, you see. He stays out of my business, and I stay out of his.”

“And does he go back on his word? He made a promise to Carter that I wouldn’t be touched. What will he do to you when he finds out what you’ve done?”

Axel jumped to his feet. “He won’t do a damn thing. Not when I hand him the flash drive you stole after downloading files from my computer.”

She raised an eyebrow. “I don’t have the flash drive. Carter does. At least, he did have. Declan probably has it now. I think that means you’ve lost your leverage with Declan. He’s not going to be happy with you.”

He marched over to the sofa and drew his arm back. She braced for the pain to come, but then he laughed.

“No, I don’t think I want to hit you. Not yet, anyway.”

He grabbed her by her hair and yanked her head back. His lips crashed down on hers. She tried to turn her head, but he held her in a viselike grip. She did the only thing she could do. She bit his lip.

He released her hair and jumped back, grabbing his lip and yelping. She couldn't help it. She started to laugh. Then he did slap her. Fiery pain shot down her already sore jaw and all the way to her ear. Her vision blurred. She blinked her eyes rapidly to clear them.

“You stupid bitch. Don't you realize I hold your life in my hands?”

“You're going to kill me anyway. There's no way you're going to let me live after this. We both know that. Why not just kill me now and get it over with?”

“You'd like that, wouldn't you? No, I have other plans for you.”

Cold chills of dread ran down her spine. She knew there were far worse things than death.

“You're going to become my pet. I'll be able to do whatever I want to you.” As if to prove his point, he grabbed her breast and squeezed hard.

She cried out and tried to push his hand away, but he was stronger than her. “I'll kill you the first chance I get.”

He laughed. “I won't give you that chance. If I have to, I'll keep you tied up, but I think I'll be able to break you within a month. What do you think? Will you do whatever I want, whenever I want?”

“Never!”

He squeezed her breast even harder, and she cried out. “Please, stop.” She hated herself for begging.

“Do you still think I can’t break you?”

“I’ll kill myself then.”

“I won’t give you the opportunity. But don’t worry. I’ll eventually get tired of playing with you. Even used, I’ll be able to get a good price for you. Then you’ll become someone else’s toy.”

She shuddered when she thought about what was going to happen. She knew there was no way she would be able to stop him. Maybe he would lose his temper and accidentally kill her.

There was something inside her, a spark of the fight still there. She couldn’t give up. Not this easily. She had to make sure he paid for what he’d done.

Axel had walked back over and stood right in front of her, feet spread slightly apart, laughing down at her. She put her hands flat on the sofa cushions. With every ounce of strength inside her, she brought her leg between his as hard as she could. He doubled over, crying out in pain as he grabbed his crotch. She came to her feet and pushed hard against him. Off balance, he fell to the floor and curled up, coughing and spitting as he tried to catch his breath.

She ran to the doorway, but it was suddenly blocked by one of his men, who smiled evilly at her.

“You’re not going anywhere,” he told her with a stupid grin.

He laughed and put his legs together when she started to bring her knee up. She doubled her fist and hit him in the crotch as hard as possible. He coughed and leaned against the doorframe. She pushed past him. An adrenaline rush flooded her bloodstream. She was going to escape.

She rounded the corner into the foyer and came to a grinding stop. They had Blade tied in a chair, and a man stood over him. He looked confused and unsure of what to do when their gazes locked.

Her eyes widened. Blade was still alive.

“Keep running,” he mumbled.

Relief flooded her. One eye was swollen where they’d hit him, and the wound on his shoulder still bled. There was more blood on his side where the second bullet had struck him. But he was still alive. That’s all that mattered right now.

“Go!” he said as if it had taken all his strength to get that one word out.

Indecision filled her. Marissa didn’t want to leave him, but she could get help. She made a quick decision and rushed toward the door just as it opened. She staggering back as more men came inside. A sob broke past her lips as one of the men grabbed her by the shoulders, but his hands weren’t bruising. She was surprised at how gentle they were.

“Axel’s been beating on her,” the man said. He looked at the other man wearing the suit. “Now are you going to do something?”

“Will you let me handle this, Mannix?”

Axel came flying around the corner. “You stupid bitch. I’m going to make you wish you were dead.” He came to a quick stop when he saw the man in the suit. His face drained of color.

Marissa’s eyes narrowed as she looked between the two men. Whoever he was, Axel hadn’t been expecting him, and he wasn’t happy.

“Declan, what are you doing here?”

“Carter called me. He told me what you were up to.”

Axel’s eyes narrowed, and his lips pursed. “Do you blame me? She stole from me. She cost me my job. I’m going to teach her a lesson.”

“No, you’re not. I told you to stand down. You disobeyed me.”

A shiver ran down Marissa’s spine. His words were cold and hard, and his eyes were like gray chunks of ice. She had a feeling she and Blade weren’t out of the woods yet. Declan might do something about Axel, but what would he do with them?

Axel suddenly pulled a gun and put it against Blade’s head. Marissa drew in a sharp breath. *Oh God, please don’t kill him.*

“My men and I are going to walk out of here, and you won’t do a damn thing about it. I’ve always hated you. You thought you were better than everyone else. This time I’m on the winning...”

Everything happened so fast that it was a blur. One minute Axel was talking, and in the next, he had a hole in the

middle of his forehead. A drop of blood appeared and slid slowly down his nose. His eyes were wide open as if he wasn't sure what had just happened.

Marissa looked at Declan. He was holding a gun and looking relatively calm for a man who had just killed someone.

Five of Axel's men came running into the room, guns drawn, but as soon as they saw Declan, they holstered their weapons and nodded to him.

"There, are you satisfied now, Mannix?" Declan said. "I took care of the problem."

"It's about time," he gruffly replied.

Declan turned to her. "Are you okay?"

She nodded. "Blade is hurt."

"I'm sorry for that," he apologized. "We'll get him to the hospital."

She breathed a sigh of relief, and as Mannix released her, she hurried over to Blade. "Everything will be okay now," she reassured him.

Except his eyes were closed, and he wasn't talking. Was he still alive? Oh God, please, no. She reached for his wrist and breathed a sigh of relief when she felt a faint, irregular beat. It wasn't much, but it was there.

"We need to go." She turned to Declan, her eyes pleading.

Declan looked at two of the men. "Carry him to my car, and put him in the back seat— gently. Do you understand?"

They quickly nodded. “Yes, sir.”

Declan turned to Mannix. “Will you clean up this mess?”

“Gladly. Next time, don’t wait so long to take care of business.”

Declan frowned but didn’t say anything. Apparently, he respected the man enough that he didn’t do anything when Mannix reprimanded him.

Marissa stayed with Blade as they carried him to the car. He moaned but didn’t open his eyes. She silently prayed that he would be okay. The two men motioned for her to get into the car, then eased Blade in next with his head on her lap.

They apparently were scared of what Declan might do because they were very careful about putting him inside the car. Declan got into the passenger side of the front seat. As the car started, he turned and looked at her.

“I can see why Axel was obsessed with you,” he said.

Blade’s eyelids fluttered open. “Just remember, she’s mine,” he mumbled, but his words were clear enough that they understood.

Declan laughed. “Then you better not die. I’m good at consoling beautiful women.”

She could feel the heat rising up her cheeks. “Excuse me. I’m right here.”

Declan’s smile was almost predatory, his gaze roaming slowly over her. “We definitely haven’t forgotten.”

“You’re going to be okay now,” she told Blade.

“When we get to the hospital, let me do the talking,” Declan told her. “I’d rather not have a bunch of cops roaming around asking questions.”

“Don’t they have to report gunshot wounds?”

“Yes, but I’d rather not have any attention brought to Axel. From what I’ve discovered, he’d started a few illegal ventures. I don’t want any connection to him.”

The man had saved their lives. If not for him, Axel would’ve tortured and killed Blade, and she would’ve ended up being sold to someone after he tired of her. “I’ll let you do the talking.”

“Good. And I’m sorry for whatever harm Axel caused you.” He turned around in the seat, and the rest of the drive to the hospital was quiet. When the limo pulled under the awning, a male nurse hurried out.

Declan opened his door. “We have an injured man in the back seat. You’ll need assistance getting him out.”

The man took one look at Declan and decided not to argue. He hurried back inside and brought two more men out with him and a stretcher. He lowered the stretcher to the ground as Declan opened the back door.

“What happened?” the nurse asked.

“He has two gunshot wounds.”

“Gunshot wounds? Where’s the shooter?”

“It was an accident,” Declan dryly replied. “He was bringing a gun downstairs to show us and tripped and fell. The gun discharged—twice.”

As they brought Blade out of the car and placed him on the stretcher, the nurse looked at her for confirmation. “That’s exactly what happened,” she lied.

“And the bruise on your face?”

Damn, she’d forgotten about that. She glanced at Declan.

“She tried to catch him, and he fell on top of her,” he smoothly replied.

“That’s exactly what happened. Now, can we see to his injuries?”

“Of course.”

They were sent to an empty waiting room while Blade was taken in the opposite direction. The town wasn’t large, and it was the middle of the week, so nothing was happening, and they were the only ones there.

The chauffeur parked the car and then came in a few minutes later. Declan sent him to find coffee. Time seemed to pass in slow motion.

A nurse came out and began asking questions. She answered the best that she could. His name, next of kin, and what had happened. She made sure she followed Declan’s original story.

More time passed. Her mind wandered as she tried not to worry if Blade was okay and tried to think about something else.

Marissa wondered what would happen to Axel’s body. She frowned. She probably didn’t want to know. At least, it

was truly over now as long as Blade made it through all of this. She rubbed her temples.

The nurse left, and the chauffeur brought in coffee, then whispered something that only Declan heard. At this point, she didn't care what they were talking about.

They waited.

She jumped to her feet when the doctor came in. He was an older man with gray in his hair and beard.

“I was told the gun discharged twice as he fell coming down the stairs. That's not consistent with his wounds. Does anyone want to tell me the truth?”

Declan came to his feet. “It's exactly as we said.” He looked around. “I have no doubt you'll be able to fix our friend. This is a nice hospital.” He suddenly frowned. “You could use a CAT scan machine, and some other equipment is outdated that I'm sure we can come to an arrangement on having it replaced since I've been thinking of donating to a charity. Your hospital would be a good choice.” Their gazes met and locked.

The doctor studied him, noting his tailor-made suit and Rolex. “That would be very generous of you.” He grimaced. “I had to call the Sheriff's office and report this. I can't put my license in jeopardy. I hope you understand.”

“Of course. I wouldn't want you to do anything illegal.”

His hesitation was brief, and then he sighed as if he was coming to a decision. “The officers will be here as soon as they can. Their cars are...old and not that reliable.”

There was just the slightest smile on Declan's face. "I understand completely. Thank you."

"How's Blade?" Marissa asked. She wasn't concerned with who was getting paid off. She only wanted to know Blade's condition.

"We're about to take him into surgery. The wound on his side went straight through, but the one on his shoulder is still lodged there. I need to remove it. He's lost some blood, but I expect him to recover."

She sighed with relief.

"I'll have a nurse keep you updated." He turned and left.

Marissa only hoped he was right about Blade's condition and that he would improve. She couldn't imagine a day without him. Once again, the minutes ticked slowly by on the wall clock.

A couple of deputies came to the waiting room. Declan went outside to speak with them. He wasn't out there very long when he came back inside.

"Everything has been taken care of. No more questions will be asked. I appreciate your help."

"You're welcome," she said, unsure how to respond.

Carter and Renegade came to the ER waiting room a few minutes later. They both wore concerned expressions.

"How is he?" Carter asked.

"He's in surgery," she told him. "The doctor expects him to recover, though."

“Thank goodness.” Carter looked toward Declan, who came to his feet. “It’s over now?”

“Completely over. You’ll hear nothing more from Axel.”

Carter reached into his pocket and pulled out the flash drive. He handed it to Declan, and the other man slipped it into his pocket. He told them the story he’d given the doctor and the deputies. Along with a small donation to stop any more questions they might have, then he was gone.

“How are you doing?” Carter asked her. “It seems every time I see you, you have a bruise on your face.”

When she tried to smile, she flinched. “I’ll survive.”

“I think you will.”

The waiting was horrible, but Carter and Renegade tried to help the time pass by telling her stories about the team. She finally managed to relax until the doctor came in the waiting hours later. His expression was grave.

Her heart skipped a beat.

“He’s going to be fine, but there was an unexpected complication.”

Chapter Twenty-one

Blade blinked a couple of times. His eyes narrowed. Where the hell was he? The steady beep of a machine above his head drew his attention. He watched as the lines went across the screen at a steady pace—bedrails up.

Hospital then. Okay, he had that part figured out. Why? Had he been on a mission and something had gone wrong?

Maybe. His gaze moved to the window. The sun was just starting to rise above the horizon. It was a burst of orange, red, and yellow. It was the most beautiful sunrise he'd ever seen.

Or it could be that he'd died and gone to heaven? If he had, he better enjoy the moment because as soon as they realized their mistake, they'd kick him out.

He shifted in the bed and sucked in a breath. Fuck! He hurt all over. When he tried to raise his hand, it was like lifting an anvil. He finally quit trying. He felt like death warmed over, but at least he was still alive.

Blade wracked his brain as he tried to think. He vaguely remembered Marissa holding his hand at some point. How long had he been out? His back was killing him, an indication that he'd been out longer than a day.

More memories flooded back. Her lips had been warm against his. He closed his eyes briefly and let the feeling wash over him again.

Damn, she'd tasted sweet...and hot... He frowned and looked down at the sheet covering him.

At least some things were still working.

His head pounded when he tried to think what had happened, but he forced himself through the fog. Axel has shown up at the estate.

Marissa! Was she okay? His head pounded even more, but he remembered his head lying in her lap as she whispered soothing words to him. Probably okay then. He relaxed until he remembered more.

Son of a bitch shot him—twice. A couple of guys had dragged him down the stairs, then tied him in a chair. When he asked about Marissa, a fist plowed into his jaw.

He wiggled his mouth. Hurt like a son of a bitch, but at least he could still move it. They told him not to worry about Marissa. The boss was taking care of her. Had Axel hurt her? If he had, he would kill him.

A young nurse came to his room. She looked surprised when she saw his eyes were open. “Oh, you’re awake. We expected you to be out for at least another twenty-four hours.”

“Marissa...is just fine. We like her, but we still sent her home to get some sleep. There’s a man here, though. His name is Carter.”

“What happened?” He wanted to make sure his memories were correct.

“Your gun discharged when you fell going down the stairs. At least, that’s the story we were told. Yeah, right.” She cocked an eyebrow. “Nurses weren’t born yesterday. We’re

getting a CAT scan machine and some other equipment. I heard the sheriff's office is getting a new fleet of cars, so make of it what you will. I'll get your friend."

That wasn't quite how he remembered it, but he kept his mouth shut. The nurse left, returning a short time later with Carter. Blade had never seen him look so haggard.

"You look like death warmed over."

Carter's forehead bunched. "So do you." He took a seat, stretching his legs out in front of him. "Axel is dead."

"It's over then."

He nodded.

"Axel didn't hurt Marissa, did he?"

He shook his head. "No, she said it was the man who climbed over the balcony. He punched her."

"Is he still alive?" Blade growled.

Carter chuckled. "You can't go around killing people."

"Why not?"

"If he's still alive, Declan will handle it. I called him as soon as you let me know that Axel was at your place. He was closer, so he headed your way. From what I understand, he saved your life, Marissa's, too."

"I owe him one."

"Don't tell him. He might hold you to it."

"Mafia?"

Carter shook his head. "Not anymore, from what I understand. His father was, but he's been trying to go legit

since he died. Axel got in his way. Declan's a cold son of a bitch, but I liked him."

"As long as he took care of Axel, he's good in my book."

"We'll head back today—business. If there's anything you need, let us know. Some of the team will be dropping in."

"Thanks."

There was another knock on his door, and Renegade came in. "Hey, bro." He grimaced. "Damn, you look like you were hit in the face by a two-by-four." He grinned. "It's an improvement."

"Not funny."

They talked for a while, then headed out.

They were barely out the door when the doctor came in.

"I'm surprised you're awake," he said.

"How long have I been out?"

He shrugged. "On and off for about forty-eight hours. We kept you sedated so that you would have more time to heal. We were told you wouldn't stay in bed very long once you woke up."

He frowned. "Who told you that?"

"A man by the name of Carter."

Figured. "What's the verdict?"

"Your jaw will be sore for a while, but no broken bones there. The swelling around your eye will continue to lessen.

You took two bullets—one to the shoulder and one to your side. The one to your side didn't hit anything vital and went straight through, but we had to do surgery on your shoulder. That bullet was lodged in the muscle. The wound on your side will be sore, but it will heal without a problem.”

He opened and closed his right hand. His fingers didn't move as well as they had. “My shoulder?”

“I'm afraid that we will take longer to heal.”

“How long?”

“Six months, maybe a year. I'm not sure you'll regain the full use of that arm.”

He nodded and gritted his teeth. “So, are you saying I'll be a cripple?”

“Not at all. I'm saying you'll lose some sensation and strength in that arm. I was told that your line of work required you to use a gun. That might not be possible anymore, at least not to the degree you would need to use it. Sometimes change can be hard, but you're better off than most.”

“How do you figure that, Doc?” he practically growled, then immediately regretted his tone. The man had saved his life. He seemed unfazed by the harshness of his words. Blade figured he'd heard it a lot when he delivered not so great news.

“Because you *are* still alive. You also have a woman who cares for you and friends who are concerned about you. Count your blessings. Some people don't have that much. Now, do you have any more questions?”

The doctor was right. “You’re right. I do have more than most. Thanks for saving my life.”

“I was told it was worth saving. Now, anything else?”

“Can I have some coffee?”

The doctor smiled. “I think I can manage that.” He turned and started to leave but stopped at the door. “And you might want to be careful in the future when you carry a gun down the stairs.”

He cleared his throat. “Yeah, that was damned clumsy of me.” He closed his eyes and tried not to think about anything until the young nurse returned, bringing his coffee.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t bring you any cream. The doctor has you on clear liquids right now.”

“That’s okay. I don’t use cream.”

She pushed a button to raise him in bed, then let down the rail and brought the bedside table across his lap. He reached for the coffee cup with his right hand but had a problem raising it as far as the table.

“You might want to use your left hand until you regain some of the strength in your other one.”

“Will I get the strength back?”

“Maybe, maybe not,” she answered truthfully. “But I bet you’ll be raising a coffee cup before too long. Sometimes we have to be thankful for the little things.”

“Are you always this optimistic?” He took a drink of coffee and inwardly cringed. It was awful.

She smiled. “Not always, but most of the time. As a nurse, I’ve seen a lot of miracles.”

“You don’t look that old.”

Her smile widened. “You just made my day. I’m older than you think.”

“I kind of doubt that.”

“Are you in any pain?” she asked, changing the subject.

“Only when I try to swallow down this coffee. It’s pretty awful.”

She laughed. “We’re in total agreement there.”

“How long will I be in here?”

“It all depends on your recovery. If you do well, maybe a week or even less. From what Marissa told us, I doubt you’ll be here long.”

“What did she tell you?”

“That you’re stubborn.” Her smile widened. “As soon as you finish your coffee, we’ll get you up in a chair.”

“That sounds good.” He was ready to get out of there as soon as possible.

He’d only been sitting in the chair for a few minutes when someone tapped on his door. He told whoever was on the other side to come in, and the door opened. He immediately relaxed when he saw Marissa. Then he frowned.

“You have a bruise on your face.” Damn, it looked terrible. Carter hadn’t told him that it looked *that* bad.

“Do you want me to leave and come back in again?”

“Sorry. I’m glad you’re here. Have you been doing okay? I still don’t like that bruise on your face.”

She grinned, then grimaced. “Don’t make me smile. It’s still tender.” She came inside and pulled a chair beside his, but before she sat down, she kissed him lightly. It was almost over before it began and left him wanting more. There were definitely places on him that worked perfectly well. He shifted in his chair.

“The doctor said I fell down the stairs, but Carter told me what happened. What’s your version?”

“Declan told them you fell, then made some donations.”

“And you’re okay with his story?”

“The new equipment might help people who need helping, so yes, I’m fine with it.”

“Carter told me what he knew. Everything is still a little foggy. Do you mind catching me up?”

“I was already in bed. I guess you were still reading Danny’s journal. There was an explosion, and when I came running out of my room, you were coming back up the stairs. Axel and his men had stormed the house.”

“I remember fireworks. Is that right?”

“It is. You’d been shot. I bandaged your shoulder the best I could. You said there were fireworks under Danny’s bed, so I ran down to his room and grabbed them. After I lit some of them, I threw them over the railing. Axel’s men thought

they were surrounded by an army. You tried to create a diversion and wanted me to climb over the balcony with sheets tied together, but I refused. I wasn't about to leave without you."

"I think I remember that."

"Someone else had an idea about the balcony as well. One of Axel's men came up that way. He shot you again, and I thought you were dead. I tried to get the gun." She frowned. "I swear if I'd had enough time to pull the trigger, I'd have blown his head off."

"I didn't realize you were so bloodthirsty," he said.

"I was pissed off, is what I was. Before I could shoot him, he punched me in the face. We were both carried downstairs, and they tied you in a chair. I was taken to the living room. Axel informed me of everything that he planned to do. I didn't like his ideas, so when I had the chance, I kicked him in the nuts."

He grinned, then grimaced again.

"I made a mad dash out of the room and ended up in the foyer where you were tied in the chair. I couldn't believe you were still alive. You told me to run. I decided you were right, and I needed to find help. I got as far as the door when it opened."

"I take it that was Declan?"

"It was. He is one scary man and as cold as ice. Axel came sliding around the corner, all pissed off. I could tell Declan scared the hell out of him, but then he made the mistake of telling him exactly what he was going to do."

“I doubt Declan liked that.”

“He didn’t. Then everything happened so fast that it was a blur for me, too. Axel had a gun to your head, but Declan pulled his and, without hesitating, shot Axel center forehead. Then he brought you to the hospital. He didn’t want his name connected to Axel, so he convinced everyone you had been walking down the stairs, tripped, then fell.”

“And what did he say about the bruise on your face?”

“Declan told him that you fell on top of me.”

“And they bought that?”

“He made some *very* sizable donations to the hospital and the Sheriff’s office.

“Apparently.”

She fiddled with the hem of her shirt, and he wondered what she was thinking. “You might as well just tell me what you’re thinking.”

She looked at him with surprise. “Do you remember what you told me about the journal?” she asked, still hedging.

He closed his eyes to gather his thoughts and think back. He didn’t know what he felt right now. A sense of loss. One that didn’t have to happen. “Yes, I remember. Danny was gay, but he was too afraid to tell anyone. He thought we’d think less of him, but that’s not true.”

“I feel the same way. He should’ve known I only needed time to digest everything. He still would’ve been my best friend. It was just a shock to walk in on him and Jessie. I knew the two hung out together, but I never thought anything

about it because they weren't together that often. As I ran from the apartment, he shouted for me not to go and that he loved me, but I didn't stop. I wish I would have."

"I'm not sure I wouldn't have done the same thing. It wasn't something that you could spring on someone out of the blue. I'm sure it was worse for you. I'm just sorry his life ended as it did."

"Me, too" She came to her feet, then walked to the window.

"You probably didn't know he was setting us up either."

Her eyes widened. "What do you mean?"

"Danny is what I call a fixer. He thought I was haunted by the past, and maybe I was. He didn't want to put any more on my plate. He wrote about it in his journal. He was worried about me. When he ran into you at the library, he knew immediately we would be perfect for each other." He chuckled. "He was matchmaking."

"Was he right about us being perfect for each other? No, don't answer that. I shouldn't have asked." She cleared her throat. "I've spoken with your Aunt Peggy. She wants to visit if that's okay."

He'd let her off the hook for now. "Yeah, sure, it'll be okay. I'm just surprised she wants to check on me. We've never been that close. Danny was always her favorite, and I was okay with that. It was hard for her to look at me since I took after my father. She never did like him, not that I blamed her. We didn't like him, either. Tell her I'll be fine with it."

“Carter and Renegade ended up at the hospital not long after you were brought in.”

“They made good time getting here. They must’ve flown all the way.” He shook his head. “They probably did fly. I saw them not long before you came in. They were heading back.”

She turned from the window and smiled at him. With the light shining down on her, sunlight cast a warm glow over Marissa. Again, he couldn’t help marveling over her beauty, even with one side of her face bruised. But things had changed. He might not regain the use of his right arm.

Her smile slipped. “What’s bothering you?”

“The doctor said I may never go back to work. I don’t know how strong my right arm will be when all this is over. I may never regain complete function.” He couldn’t meet her eyes.

She walked back over to him and knelt at his chair. “Will you still be able to hold me?”

“Of course.”

“Caress me? Make love to me?”

“I’m pretty sure that’s a distinct possibility.”

“Then I don’t see a problem.”

How the hell had he gotten so lucky? “You’re still going to stay and decorate, right?”

“Since it’s my only job offer, then yes.”

“Is that the only reason you’re staying?”

She leaned forward and pressed her lips against his, deepening the kiss. With his good hand, he brought it to the back of her head. The kiss didn't end until someone cleared their throat. Even then, they slowly parted.

“It's time for your medicine,” the young nurse told him.

“I'm guessing conjugal visits are out of the question,” he calmly stated.

Marissa blushed, and the nurse giggled. He had a feeling he would pay for that later.

Chapter Twenty-two

“You’re not a very good patient.” Marissa gave Blade her most fierce glare as he attempted to navigate the stairs without her help. He was still weak—sort of. It was bad enough that he’d talked the doctor into letting him leave the hospital early.

His expression reminded her of a little boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar, but he made it to the landing without any problem. When he grinned and sauntered toward her, her heart pounded inside her chest. He pulled her against him with his good arm. She sighed.

The first touch of his lips against hers sent trembles of desire over her. This was the only place she ever wanted to be, right here in his arms. When someone cleared their throat, heat rushed to her face. She went to step away, but Blade kept her at his side.

“The door was unlocked. I don’t think anyone heard the doorbell ring.” Aunt Peggy smiled. “Now I see why.”

“Aunt Peggy, it’s good to see you,” Blade told her. He released Marissa and went to his aunt, giving her a quick hug.

She looked a little nervous when she stepped back. “I’m glad to see that you’re doing well,” her words were strained.

Marissa thought they both looked a little bit uncomfortable. She hurried forward and embraced Aunt

Peggy. They had kept in touch over the years. “How was your drive?”

“Long. I think the older I get, the less I like going anywhere.” She glanced around. “The house still looks the same. I would’ve thought that you’d have changed the decor. I always thought it was way too dark. So did Lillian. Your father wouldn’t let my sister change anything.”

“As a matter of fact, I hired Marissa to work with a decorator. I’m going to do a complete remodel.”

“That’s wonderful.”

She nervously glanced around, expecting his father to jump out at her any second. Marissa figured she better do something fast.

“I just made a fresh pot of coffee. Why don’t we go outside to the patio. It’s a beautiful day.”

When Aunt Peggy agreed, Marissa didn’t waste any time gathering the cream, sugar, and coffee, along with extra cups, all on a tray. She knew Aunt Peggy only tolerated Blade. She didn’t want one of them to say something that might offend the other. This was the only relative Blade had.

As she stepped to the patio, Blade came to his feet.

“Don’t get up. I’ve got it.” She set the tray in the middle of the table and poured the coffee.

“It’s beautiful out here. I remember Lillian telling me this was her favorite spot. She would be so happy that you’re redecorating. She loved when he let her change the guest room.” She frowned. “You know, I tried to get her to leave so many times.”

“She was planning to, but she wanted to wait until Danny finished high school.”

Her expression turned dark. “She was lying. She adored your father. I don’t mean when he was hitting her. At those times, she would call me crying, and I’d tell her to leave him, but she wouldn’t do it. She kept telling me that he would change. She said he was the perfect husband when he wasn’t in one of his moods.”

“He was anything but perfect,” Blade said. “He thought only of himself. He was cruel, and I never saw him treat her like he should. He only wanted to control her.”

Aunt Peggy was thoughtful for a moment. “I don’t think I ever gave you enough credit.” She ran her finger over the rim of her cup. “I had a hard time getting past how much you looked like him. I prayed many nights about it. That was wrong of me, and I know it now.”

“I understand. Besides, Danny needed you more than I did. I was older.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Yes, Danny,” she sneered.

Marissa and Blake both looked at her. She could almost see Blade’s hackles rising.

“What do you mean by that?” he casually asked.

“I didn’t want to talk ill of the dead. It’s just that he had his secrets. I’ll leave it at that.”

“You mean because he was gay?”

Marissa closed her eyes for a moment. She had a feeling this wasn’t going to turn out well. As always, Blade

was protecting his little brother.

Aunt Peggy raised an eyebrow, her eyes wide. “You knew?”

“I found his journal. He returned to the estate once he got a car. How did you know? I mean, he was good about not telling people.”

“I went over to the apartment. I saw Marissa leaving, and she looked quite upset. I didn’t get a chance to ask what happened, so I went up. That man was just leaving—all upset and angry at Danny. I knew what they’d been doing. When I asked Danny, he admitted they were lovers.” She rolled her eyes and shook her head. “My sister probably rolled over in her grave. To think, the son she adored liked other men. His lifestyle was an abomination against God.”

Marissa could see Blade’s temper rising. “Danny was a good man,” she quickly said.

“I brought that child into my home.” She gritted her teeth. “Him and his sinful thoughts. May God forgive me for not seeing his wicked ways sooner.”

“There wasn’t a wicked bone in Danny’s body,” Marissa said, having listened to more than enough.

“Then why did you run away from him?” Aunt Peggy squared her shoulders.

“I was only seventeen and confused. We would’ve talked it out the next day if Danny hadn’t died. He was still my friend.”

“Maybe it’s a good thing he did die.” Her voice was cold.

“I think you’d better leave.” Blade’s words sliced through the thick silence that followed her statement.

She swiveled in her chair and stared at Blade. “You condone such behavior? You, of all people, I would’ve thought would side with me. People like Danny should be wiped off the face of the earth.”

“Leave. Now.”

“You’re serious?”

“Deadly serious. I wouldn’t have cared what Danny wanted to be or do. I would have accepted him for who he was. It’s called unconditional love. He wasn’t hurting anyone, especially you. Did you tell him what you thought of his lifestyle?”

“Of course. What they were doing was wrong.”

“Now, I know you need to leave.”

She came to her feet. “That’s fine by me. I only came out of duty to my sister’s child. You’re just like your father.”

“That’s where you’re wrong. I may resemble my father, but I’m not him.”

She turned on her heel and left. A few minutes later, they heard the front door slam shut.

“That was unexpected,” Marissa said. “I never thought she would feel like that.”

He was shaking his head. “You and me both. I don’t know what her words would have done to Danny. He always thought a lot of her.”

“Everything must’ve hit him all at once,” Marissa said. “First, I come in and break up with him. That must’ve devastated him by itself.”

“No, only your friendship. Remember, he didn’t think of you as his girlfriend, only as a girl who was a very good friend. But Aunt Peggy said Jessie was upset and angry, as well. As far as I know, he hadn’t told Jessie his plans to bring me and you together. Jessie might have had enough and ended their relationship. That might be why he started drinking that night.”

“Other than an occasional glass of wine at dinner, I don’t think he ever drank.”

“But they found a nearly empty bottle of whiskey in the car. When he called me that night, he was upset. I could barely understand him.”

“None of it makes sense. Have you ever put two and two together?” She only hoped she was wrong about what she was thinking.

“What do you mean?”

“He never drank, yet, he got drunk that night. I don’t think he would ever drive if he’d been drinking. Do you think he was that upset over the breakup, Jessie leaving him, and then his aunt finding out he was gay?”

“I guess I never thought about it. Most of the time I just blamed...well, you. Back then, I didn’t know he was gay.” He picked up his cup of coffee and took a drink, then grimaced and set the cup down when he realized the coffee was cold. “There’s something else that has always bothered me.”

“What?”

“There were no skid marks.”

“I don’t understand,” she said.

“It means he didn’t even put his foot on the brake when he left the road and hit the tree. The Sheriff’s office saw the alcohol bottle on the floorboard, and the lab report returned with a high blood alcohol level and didn’t go any further with their investigation. They put it down as a drunk driver who lost control. It was either that or he committed suicide. I was always afraid of discovering it might be the latter, so I never pushed the matter.”

“I know for a fact Danny wouldn’t have committed suicide. He had too much to live for. He always laughed and said he wouldn’t have enough time to do everything he wanted to do and that he wanted to live forever.” She nibbled her bottom lip. “You don’t think your aunt had anything to do with this, do you? She seemed pretty angry, and Danny had been her favorite. She might have felt betrayed and did something crazy.”

“Except he called me. He said you ruined everything. At the time, I thought he meant he was going to ask you to marry him, but you broke up with him. I think he was talking about his plans for the two of us.”

“He might also have been afraid I would tell you he was gay?”

“I don’t know what to think anymore. None of it makes sense, but I plan on looking into it more. That’s the least Danny deserves. His car and all his things have been in storage

all these years. It was his dream car, and I wasn't sure what to do with it. I only knew I couldn't junk it."

"How far away is the storage building?"

"It's right here on the property."

Chapter Twenty-three

Blade unlocked the storage shed, then went inside and flipped on the light. The mustiness of a room that had been closed up for over ten years wafted up to his nose. Did he really want to do this? Yeah, it wasn't a want as much as a need. He had to end it, even if he didn't like knowing the truth.

He braced himself, then scanned the room. Several boxes were stacked against the far wall—the accumulation of Danny's hopes and dreams for the future.

Then he had nowhere else to look. He couldn't move, could barely breathe, as he stared at Danny's car, his pride and joy. The front of the car was crumpled where it had slammed into the tree, and the windshield shattered.

When he moved forward, Marissa came in behind him. Her soft gasp broke the silence in the enclosed space.

"I never saw the car," she whispered.

He squeezed her hand with his good one. "It's hard seeing his car. I try to remember seeing it the day I bought it. He loved it so damned much. I bought it for him when he graduated high school." He looked at her and smiled. "He was only sixteen but already had his driver's license. He was brilliant, but he never wanted to go to college. Not that I blamed him. We had enough money to do what he wanted anyway, so I never pushed the issue."

"Danny was a dreamer," she said.

“He was that.” He looked around. “There’s a lot of stuff to go through.”

“Are you sure you’re up for this? I can go through it for you if you’d like.”

“No, I’ll help.”

He walked to the back and reached for a box, but when he went to pick it up, his bad arm gave away and the box tilted. He cursed under his breath as he braced it against another box. How long before he could use it again? If ever?

“It’ll just take time to heal completely. But you’re getting better,” Marissa said as she walked over and picked up the box, placing it on a long table at the back of the small building.

“I guess I’m not a very patient man.”

She cocked an eyebrow. “Really? I hadn’t noticed that about you.”

The mood lightened. “Smartass.”

She chuckled.

While he opened that box, she brought another one to the table, and they began to go through them. He’d hired a company to box everything up and bring it to the storage building. He wasn’t even sure what was in the boxes.

Travel magazines, he quickly discovered—lots of travel magazines.

“You were right. He wanted to travel. I think he subscribed to every travel magazine that was ever published.”

She looked over his shoulder, then thumbed through some of them, looking at the covers. “France, Italy, Greece. He constantly talked about backpacking across Europe. I told him he could go by himself if he wanted to backpack. If I went to Europe, I was going first class. Damn, I miss him.” She brushed away a tear that escaped and ran down her cheek, then cleared her throat and began going through her box again. “I don’t know why he saved this baseball glove. He hated sports. He said he was never any good at them, then finished up with it being your department. You know, he always thought of you as his hero.”

“I’m no hero,” he murmured, taking the glove from her and running his fingers over the worn leather.

“Don’t throw it too hard,” Danny complained.

“I never throw too hard,” Blade told him.

“Yes, you do. My hand is always sore for a week.”

“Okay, okay. I promise not to throw it hard.”

He wondered if Danny had had good memories, and that’s why he’d kept the glove. He hoped so. He set it to the side and dug deeper into his box. He found the model car they had put together. Danny’s dream car. He tried not to look at the crumpled Porsche behind them.

Danny’s eyes had been as round as saucers when he came outside. Blade had put a great big red ribbon on top of it. Then he made Danny swear he wouldn’t drive too fast.

“This is a good picture of the two of you,” Marissa said as she handed it to him.

He took it from her outstretched hand and stared at it. He had his arm around Danny's shoulders, and they were both grinning like idiots. Tears misted his eyes, and, for a moment, he couldn't speak. "Yes, it's a good picture." He laid it to the side. He would take it inside with him.

They went through more boxes and found more memories. It was almost as if Danny was right there with them. They laughed over some of the things they saw and cringed at others.

They were going through the last two boxes when he moved a shirt out of the way, then froze. He brought the journal out and opened it, looking at the date. Danny had kept up with his journaling.

"Oh, look. I found another sketchbook." She smiled. "There's pages and pages of butterflies. I think he was obsessed with them."

"He was."

She turned the pages, then stopped.

"What did you find? More butterflies?"

She shook her head. "A picture of Jessie."

"Let me see."

Blades studied the picture of the man. He was nice looking—definitely Danny's type, sophisticated and put together. Danny had always been very particular about what he wore. It took Blade a moment to figure out what it was about him that seemed off.

"He looks quite a bit older than Danny," he said.

Marissa turned the picture back to her a little. “You’re right, he does. I only had a glimpse of him at Danny’s apartment, so I never noticed.” She looked at him. “What do you have there?”

“His journal. He continued with his writing. I don’t see anything else that might give us a better clue about what was happening in Danny’s head.”

“Maybe you’ll find something in the journal.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

They went back up to the house and ate lunch. He put the journal in his room to look at later. The rest of the day was a whirlwind of activity. The decorator came and went around the house with Marissa. Blade decided to stay out of their way, and since his physical therapist had shown up, he was busy with Jake anyway.

Blade had set up a temporary workout room with weights and pulleys at the back of the house. He gritted his teeth as he lifted a three-pound weight with his bad arm. Anger fueled him to keep lifting.

“It’ll get better, Blade,” Jake told him. “You don’t have to push yourself so hard.”

Blade paused, then continued lifting. “I need to push myself. I don’t like not being able to use my arm.”

Jake was built like a bulldozer. Blade figured he worked out every day. He’d already realized the man was a softy. But right now, he had one eyebrow cocked, giving Blade a stern look. “If you push too hard, you’ll do more damage

than good. The way your improving, if you don't hurt yourself, you'll be back to normal in no time."

"Will I?"

"You might not be back to how you were, but I think you'll regain at least eighty percent."

"You're saying I won't be able to return to work." Jake knew a little about what he did for a living.

"If you're asking me if you'll be able to protect that beautiful woman that looks as though she adores you, then yes. Can you volunteer and help those less fortunate? Probably. Can you go on missions and put away the bad guys? Doubtful."

He drew in a sharp breath. "Well, I wanted to know the truth."

"I'll never lie to you, and I won't blow smoke up your ass." He shook his head. "Man, you're lucky. You didn't mess up your face—too much."

"Thanks," Blade said with a scowl.

Jake chuckled. "You got the girl, man. You probably have plenty of money. The team you're always talking about, well, they're not going to forget you. As you said, they're your brothers. There are other things you can do, and it's not like you'll never be able to use that arm. You're lifting three-pound weights now. Next week, it'll be five. I'm not giving up on you, and you damn well better not give up on yourself."

He was right. He'd never been one to give up. If something blocked his path, he always found a different route.

That was what he had to do this time, too. “I guess I can live with that.”

“That’s the spirit. Now, tell me again how you tripped and fell down those stairs.”

Blade laughed, knowing Jake still didn’t buy his story.

By the time they finished the workout, his arm had begun to ache. Before Jake left, he gave him some ointment to ease the ache. Marissa was still busy with a decorator, so he went upstairs and showered. When he came back downstairs, the decorator had left.

Marissa looked up as he came into the kitchen. “Did you have a good workout?”

“Yeah, I like Jake. He tells me like it is.” He came closer and started to put his arms around her, but she quickly backed away. He must’ve looked confused because she laughed.

“What do you have on? If it’s a new cologne, it’s not working.”

Blade realized what she was talking about. “It’s this ointment that Jake gave me. It’s supposed to soothe my muscles. I guess it has a pretty strong smell.”

“That’s an understatement. Is it working?”

“Kind of.”

“Hmm, I need to talk with Jake. Do you want a cup of coffee? I just made a fresh pot.”

“That sounds perfect.”

“We can take it to the patio. I’ll show you the designs Barbara came up with, and you can let me know if everything looks okay.”

“You mean if I sit down wind.”

“That was my idea.”

He laughed as he pulled her close. “I promise not to put so much on next time.” But before he let her escape his arms, he lowered his lips to hers in a heated kiss. Damn, she tasted sweet. He couldn’t think of any other place he would rather be. She was blushing when the kiss ended. She still surprised him around every corner.

Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad not going on missions and risking his life anymore. He would miss hanging out with the team, though. But as Jake said, it wasn’t like he would never see them again.

“I’ll get that coffee for you.” Marissa scurried away. “I’ll meet you on the patio.”

As soon as he stepped outside, he took a deep breath of the fresh air. He looked toward the woods. His gaze narrowed when Blade thought he saw Danny stepping out of them and walking toward him.

He couldn’t breathe for a moment. When he blinked again, the image was gone. It was only a memory. He had a lot of good ones with Danny and his mom. It wouldn’t be so bad living here full time.

Marissa joined him, setting their coffees on the table, then went back inside for the sketchbook the decorator had left her. They went over the ideas for the living room. The room

was more comfortable with new furniture, a plush patterned rug, and muted throw pillows. It retained some of the old-world feel but leaned toward comfort.

“I like it.” Blade knew she wanted to talk about something when she nibbled her lip. “You can tell me anything, Marissa.”

“The family portrait above the fireplace. I thought we could change it to a portrait of your mother. We can do another one of you and Danny for the library.”

“And my father?”

“He’s a bad memory. We could hang the family portrait somewhere else, so you wouldn’t have to look at it every day.”

“Have I told you how magnificent you are?”

Her smile grew wide. “You did just now. I take it you like that idea?”

“I love it.”

“Good, Barbara knows an artist who can paint portraits from pictures. Let’s go through them and find one of your mother, so he can start working on it.”

“I already know which one I want. Danny took it. She was standing just off the patio and wearing a long sundress. She held her sun hat in her hand, and just as she turned, a gust of wind blew, sweeping her hair to the side. She turned and smiled. That was who my mother was. She wasn’t the formal lady in the family portrait. She was more down to earth.”

“I think that one will be perfect. We could do the same with you and Danny. Something that’s less posed, more

natural.”

That was when he realized how much he loved Marissa. It was a strange feeling. He'd only loved two people his whole life, his mother and Danny. Sure, he loved the team, but it was a different kind of caring, born out of respect.

Even that was different from the way he felt about Marissa. He felt cold and hot all over. When he looked at her, his heart would skip a beat, and he would have to remind himself to breathe. He wondered if she felt the same way about him.

Before he could ask, her phone began to ring. She bought the phone when he was in the hospital so that she could keep in touch with her parents, who were back from their cruise, and her grandmother.

“I'm sorry. It's my mother,” she said as she answered it.

“It's okay. I have some work to do,” he said before going inside. He needed to work in his study for a while. Now that he was living full-time on the estate, he needed to go over some things with his manager.

Marissa brought him a sandwich, chips, and a glass of tea and set it near him. He hadn't realized it had gotten so late. By the time he finished, it was nearly ten. Marissa had probably already gone to bed. He returned his plate and glass to the kitchen, then went up the stairs.

Except she wasn't in his room. He frowned. She'd been staying in here with him.

Then he heard a splash coming from the bathroom. He smiled and began pulling his shirt over his head as he walked toward the bathroom. By the time he got to the door, he only wore his jeans and briefs. He pushed the door open with his foot. She jumped, then looked his way and smiled.

“You look as though you could use a bath,” she said in a sultry voice.

Bubbles filled the tub, hiding her from his view. She’d pinned her hair up on top of her head but a few loose curls had escaped, curling tenderly on her cheek. She’d lit candles rather than turn on the light, so shadows teased across her bare shoulders. He pushed the button through on his jeans and slid the zipper down.

“The water is still warm,” she said as she pushed the bubbles out of the way. Her breasts were clearly visible.

He was sure he groaned as he shoved his jeans and briefs down, then kicked out of them. “I didn’t know you were into torture.”

She wiggled her eyebrows. “That sounds like it might be fun.”

Now he was positive Marissa was trying to kill him. He crawled into the tub, then scooped her toward him with his good arm until she straddled him. He closed his eyes for a moment until his breathing slowed.

“I’m sorry. Am I hurting you?” She wiggled against his lap.

“No, you’re killing me.”

She leaned forward until her breasts brushed across his chest. Her tongue trailed up his neck until her teeth nibbled his earlobe. She swirled her tongue inside his ear.

That's all it took. Hell, it didn't take that much. With one hand, he caressed between her legs. She nibbled her bottom lip and closed her eyes but then surprised him by moving around and raising up. Before he knew what to say, she slid down his length. She took all of him, then leaned forward.

"I didn't think you'd ever finish work. All I could think about was making love."

"I like how you think," he said, barely moving as the water gently lapped against their skin. "This is nice."

She raised, then lowered herself. When he started to move, she shook her head and lightly pushed against his chest.

"No, let me," she said in a soft whisper.

"Okay." He laid his head back against the rim of the tub as her breasts gently bounced with her movement. She nibbled her bottom lip, her hand tangling in her hair as her eyes drifted closed.

She kept her movements slow. Raising, then lowering, contracting her inner muscles, squeezing him until he couldn't take it anymore. His injured arm was working pretty damned good. He grabbed her hips and increased the rhythm. She gasped, eyes flying open, but she didn't try to stop him.

She met him thrust for thrust.

Water sloshed over the side.

Their ragged breathing filled the room.

“Damn, this is good,” he muttered.

She bit her bottom lip, thighs clenching as she reached her peak. She cried out. He followed right behind her.

Then she sank down to him, resting her head against his chest. It took a few minutes for them to get their breathing under control. Then they were laughing about the wet floor as they climbed out of the tub and half-heartedly attempted to clean it up before climbing into bed.

“Will it always be like this between us?” she asked, snuggling against him. “I mean, it’s like we’re making love for the first time, every time.”

He absently drew circles on her back with his finger. “I don’t know. All I know is that I enjoy making love with you.”

“Me, too.” She yawned, and it wasn’t long before he knew she’d gone to sleep.

“I think I love you,” he whispered.

A ripple of cold fear ran down his spine. It seemed everyone he’d ever loved left him. He was afraid if he even by whispering the words, Marissa might break into a thousand tiny pieces, but she didn’t.

He’d always been afraid to get too close to anyone. It had nearly destroyed him when his father murdered his mother, but then to lose Danny a few years later was almost his undoing.

When Carter offered him the job, Blade didn’t plan on taking it. Then he realized it wasn’t a big deal if he risked his

life. After all, what did he have to lose? At least this way, he might help someone else. He didn't realize working with the team would give him his life back.

He needed to talk to someone. He quietly got out of bed, then pulled on his jeans and T-shirt. Before he left the room, he grabbed Danny's journal and took it downstairs with him. He didn't know how long he would be down there.

He grabbed a beer from the refrigerator and went to the living room. Once there, he pulled his phone out of his pocket and made himself comfortable. He hesitated only a moment before calling Carter. He answered on the second ring.

"Everything okay?"

"Sort of."

"You haven't had a setback, have you?"

"No, it's nothing like that. It's about Marissa."

"What happened?"

"No, you're missing the point. Everyone is okay."

"Then what's the matter?"

"How did you know you were in love with Alana?" he blurted.

Carter began to laugh.

Blade frowned. "There's nothing funny about it. I feel like I'm tied up in knots. I can't sleep, and all I can think about is her. I don't know what to do. I mean, I think I love her."

"Renegade and I were talking about it on the way back. We wondered how long it would take to figure out you loved

her. If I remember correctly... Just a minute, let me look at the paper.” There was the rustle of paper, and then he came back on the phone. “Dammit, Cutter won.”

Carter was confusing the hell out of him. “What are you talking about?”

“We had a pool going. You know, like a football pool. Everyone chose a day when you would call to ask me for advice. Cutter won.”

“Y’all are a bunch of sick bastards.” But he smiled. “Did all of you know I was falling in love with her? Or are you making this shit up?”

Carter laughed. “It’s the truth. Now, how is everything else going?”

“Okay. Marissa and I went through some of Danny’s things that I had in storage. I found another journal. I need to know what he was thinking about before the wreck. Some things don’t add up. He didn’t even try to stop the car when it went off the road.”

“You never told me this. Danny didn’t try, or nothing happened when he did?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’m going to send Rader and some other guys down there. You still have the car there on the estate, right?”

“Yes.”

“Rader is damn good with cars. If there was anything fishy going on, I think you can find it.”

“I need this to be over.”

“I know. We’ll make it happen.”

They hung up after a few minutes, and Blade took a long drink of his beer. He was about to head to bed when he changed his mind and reached for the journal. He pulled a cushion under his bad arm to prop it and began to read.

I’m going to tell Blade and Marissa what I did this weekend. Blade said he was getting leave, which would be a perfect time.

Everything is working out exactly as I planned. I can tell there’s chemistry between Blade and Marissa. They try not to look at each other. Love is definitely in the air.

On that note, Jessie is acting so jealous. I plan to clear everything up with him this weekend, as well. Why does he feel so threatened by Marissa? Sometimes I wonder if we’re the right match. He loves when I spend money on him. I wonder if he only likes me because I’m rich. He’s getting more needy every day. Maybe we should step back for a while. I could take that trip to Europe I’m always dreaming about. Get my head screwed on straight.

Blade flipped through to the last page.

I fucked everything up. Jessie came over because I wanted to talk to him. I told him I needed to say something to him, and it was important. We were in the bedroom when Marissa surprised us. Oh my God, it was horrible. I begged her not to leave. I told her I loved her, but she ran out of the apartment.

Could my life get any worse? Aunt Peggy must’ve been right behind Marissa. She barged into my apartment and took

one look. I tried to tell her it wasn't what it looked like, but she called me an abomination and hoped I burned in hell.

Jessie started crying and said I didn't deserve him because I wouldn't admit our relationship, then he ran out. Aunt Peggy was right behind him.

Now I'm sitting here trying to decide how to fix everything. I should get drunk and let everyone fix their own lives, take off for Europe, and forget about it all.

But I can't, so I won't. Blade and Marissa have to come first. I'll go to her place to see if I can explain everything. She's my very best friend, and I do love her. I can make this all right. Then I can talk to Jessie and explain everything. I think that's why he's so needy.

Damn, I love that man so much.

When I talked to Blade, I was blubbering like a baby, and he couldn't understand me. As soon as he gets here, I'll explain everything.

What a fucking mess!

He hadn't taken a drink that night? But what about his blood alcohol? It was time he found out the truth. He had a bad feeling about all of this.

Chapter Twenty-four

“Okay, what’s going on?” Marissa watched him closely. Did he flinch just a little? She wasn’t sure.

“What do you mean?” He hedged.

“Three of your team members are here. Something is going on. I want to know what?”

His lips pressed together in a grim line. “Rader is pretty good with cars. Cutter and Renegade came along for moral support, I guess.”

“I don’t think I’m following you.”

“I read Danny’s journal. The one we found in storage. He didn’t have anything to drink that night.”

“That doesn’t make sense. Everyone said that he’d been drinking. There was a whiskey bottle in the car.”

“And the sheriff told me the lab report said he was over the legal limit. That’s why they didn’t go any further with the investigation.”

“Maybe he decided to drink anyway,” she quietly pointed out. She was afraid Blade was grasping at straws. He couldn’t let go of protecting his little brother. “You know Danny. He was always changing his mind. He was like a bee flitting from flower to flower. He would decide one thing, then do something else.”

“I have to go with my hunch.”

She walked closer to him, wrapping her arms around his neck. “But can you accept the results? Even if they’re not what you want them to be. Are you willing to let this go if you discover he was at fault? You have to live your life.”

“I have to find out the truth, either way.”

She stepped away from him. “Then what do we need to do?”

“I’m waiting to see what Rader finds on Danny’s car. If anything.”

Cold chills wrapped around her like a wet blanket on a winter’s day. “What are you thinking?”

“If he wasn’t drinking and went off the road, he would have applied the brakes, but that didn’t happen.”

“Do you think someone tampered with his car?”

Before he could answer, Rader, Cutter, and Renegade came into the house. They were talking but stopped as soon as they saw them. Rader always seemed so serious. Cutter was younger and quieter, but now he appeared pensive as well. Every time she’d been around Renegade, he’d been smiling, but he wasn’t smiling now. Something was going on.

“Verdict?” Blade asked.

“Someone cut the brake line,” Rader told him, his words grim.

Blade seemed to deflate right before her eyes. “You’re sure?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I’m sure.”

“Are you saying someone murdered Danny?” Marissa looked around the room.

“It looks like it,” Rader said. “It was a clean cut. If it had been damaged in the accident, the edges would’ve been ragged. We need to do some investigating.”

“I think so, too.”

Marissa was trying to put two and two together, but it wasn’t happening. She looked at Blade and knew she had to be strong for him.

He changed before her eyes and became the Blade she remembered when she was with Danny. The anger was back.

“When I find out who did this, I’ll kill them. I don’t care who the hell they are.”

She slowly shook her head. “No, that would be too good for them. They need to have everything taken away from them just like they took everything from you and Danny. They need to rot in a prison cell for the rest of their lives.”

She glanced toward Rader, saw his imperceptible nod, and knew that she had said the right thing.

“You’re probably right, but I’m still going to at least beat the crap out of them. We need to make a plan. I can think of two people who might have harmed Danny, but we need to return to where it happened.”

“Isn’t that a small town?” Renegade asked. “They’ll know the minute we get a hotel room.”

“Except you don’t have to get one,” Marissa said. “My grandmother lives in the country, and she has a farmhouse.

Everyone can stay there. I can move around the town without anyone suspecting what I'm doing." She frowned when Blade began to shake his head. "What?"

"I won't have you put in any danger."

"Puleeze, you were shot twice because of me."

"You want to get shot so we'll be even?"

"Of course, I don't want to get shot. I don't want anyone to get shot. People won't suspect me of snooping around, and I'll stay in contact with the team the whole time."

"It's a solid idea," Cutter said, nodding.

"Shut the hell up." Blade glared at him.

"She's right," Rader injected. "We can make sure she doesn't get hurt. If things get dicey, we'll have her pull back, and we can take over."

"I don't like it," Blade said.

"You don't have to like it," Marissa told him. "You only have to agree to it."

His eyes narrowed as he glared at her.

"You might as well give in because this is happening whether you agree or not. I understand Danny was your brother, but dammit, I loved him, too. He was my best friend, and I'm pissed," she told him. "You want to find out the truth, don't you?"

"Okay, but if there's any hint of trouble, you're to back away. Understand?"

Marissa kept her expression neutral. “I’ll make some calls so my grandmother and parents know we’ll be coming in.”

The next few hours were a flurry of activity. They had the use of Carter’s airplane. She’d never flown in a small plane before, especially one that was all decked out. It was quite the experience, but soon she forgot about the private plane as they began to plan.

By the time they landed, rented two vehicles, and drove to her grandmother’s, Marissa was starting to get nervous.

“Are you sure you’ll be okay with this?” Blade asked.

The other three men were in the second car, so it was just the two of them. She glanced across the seat, then returned her attention to the road.

“I’ll be okay. Why wouldn’t I? I’m just going to hunt for information. That’s all.”

“Then why are you gripping the steering wheel so tightly that your knuckles are white?”

She frowned when she noticed he was only stating a fact. “Maybe I am a little nervous. I would be stupid not to be. I promise I’ll walk away if there’s even a hint of danger.”

“You better walk away before there’s a hint.”

“How would I know I’m in danger if there’s no hint of it?”

Blade looked more nervous than she felt. She took pity on him. He was going through a lot.

“I’ll be careful. You have to trust me.” She pulled across a cattle guard and began to relax. “We’re here.”

Her grandmother stepped onto the porch as Marissa stopped in front of the house. Nana was five feet, four inches, with soft white hair and a trim figure. She was like a little whirlwind, constantly moving around. She was also always happy.

Everyone got out of the cars and started toward the house.

“I hope you don’t mind all of us barging in on you,” Blade said.

“Absolutely not. It’s been too quiet around here with Marissa gone.” While she spoke, her gaze was moving slowly over Marissa, narrowing on the bruises on her face that weren’t entirely faded, then looking around at the men.

Marissa decided an explanation was in order. “The man I told you about, Axel, one of his men bruised my face, but I’ll never have to worry about him, or Axel, hurting me again.” She kept her explanation brief. There is no sense in telling her everything that had happened.

“Good. Now come in, and you can tell me exactly what’s happening.”

After all the introductions, they sat at the table with a glass of sweet tea. Between her and Blade, they told Nana what was happening and why they needed to stay at her house, not a hotel. By the time they finished the story about what happened to Danny, there were tears in her eyes.

“You stay as long as you need to. I put the men in the two guestrooms, and you can stay in your old room, Marissa.”

She covertly glanced toward Blade. They had talked about the sleeping arrangements. There was no way they could share a room at her grandmother’s. They’d better figure out what happened quickly.

She didn’t sleep well that night. Every time she turned over, she reached toward Blade, but he wasn’t there. By the time the sun began to rise, she had crawled out of bed and pulled on a robe to search for coffee. Nana was already up and already had a pot of coffee made.

“It’s good to have you here. I’ve missed you.” Nana took her hand as they sat at the table, squeezing it lightly. “And I’m glad you’re okay.”

“I’ve missed you, too.”

“I like that young man who came with you. You seem very close to him.”

“I like him, too. He’s a very special man.” She was inwardly smiling as she took a drink of coffee.

“Is he going to make an honest woman out of you?”

She choked as she swallowed. When she finally got her breath, she looked at her grandmother accusingly. “You did that on purpose.”

She daintily took a drink of coffee. “Well, is he?”

“Our relationship hasn’t gotten to the point where we’re talking about marriage or anything.”

She glanced toward the doorway and saw Blade. Damn, he looked good in the morning. She felt the heat rising up her face when she saw Nana's knowing look. He quickly hid his smile as he went to the coffee pot.

“Coffee smells good.”

“Cups, sugar, and cream are all set out. Make yourself at home.”

A few minutes later, the other three joined them. They worked out exactly what she would be doing today. After finishing her coffee, she showered and got ready for the day. She had clothes at Nana's that she could wear.

They'd already looked online to see what staff was needed at the hospital. They'd gotten lucky when the lab needed a new assistant supervisor. She had an interview for the job this morning. That would bring them closer to finding out who signed the paperwork on Danny's lab that night without alerting anyone to what she was doing.

Her resume was perfect, and if they called her references, they would get someone from the team who would tell them she was an exemplary employee, and anyone would be lucky to hire her.

Still, when she went in for the interview, she found the palms of her hands were sweating just a little. She shouldn't have worried because she got the job. Maybe it was a good thing everyone was shorthanded nowadays. She would start immediately. The first hurdle had been jumped. Now she only needed to gain access to Danny's records.

The supervisor showed her around the lab and told her about her duties. It seemed to drag out forever.

“I hope it’s not too overwhelming,” Ben said.

She smiled. He was probably mid-thirties and single. He’d also been flirting with her, which didn’t hurt her chances of getting the job. But he hadn’t been obnoxious. It was more like friendly banter.

“Not at all,” she said. “I’m curious, though. How do we store the old records? Say from ten years ago.”

“Well, legally, we don’t have to keep them that long, but we’re so far behind, and since they’re all stored in files on the computer, they’re not taking up any space. We haven’t bothered removing them.”

She exhaled a sigh of relief. She needed a name.

“This will be your office,” he said, then frowned. “I’m sorry, it’s not very big.”

“No, it’s fine.”

He smiled, then apparently realized he might’ve been staring too long because he cleared his throat just about the time he got a phone call.

“The password to unlock the computer is generalhospital #1.” He glanced at his phone. “Sorry, I need to take this.”

She waved him off, then went to the computer as casually as she could act and pulled up Danny’s file on the night of the accident. She was surprised when it took her only

a few minutes to find the report and even more surprised when she saw the lab technician's name.

At first, she was confused. Then she got pissed off.

Chapter Twenty-five

“I don’t know why I couldn’t pick a lock and break into one of the computers,” Blade said.

“Because you don’t know shit about computers?” Renegade laughed. “Marissa struck me as being pretty smart. Let her handle this. Stay cool.”

The others might’ve looked relaxed, but everyone jumped just a little when Blade’s phone rang. When Marissa’s picture popped up on the screen, he answered it. “What do you have?”

The more she talked about what she found, the angrier he became. She was about to leave the hospital when she ended the call.

Blade jumped to his feet and stepped out onto the porch. “I’ll be back,” he said and started walking across the pasture. He needed to blow off some steam. He tried to tell himself that he still might not have the right person, but in his heart, he knew.

Dammit!

He walked about a mile before he finally stopped. He screamed at the top of his lungs at the injustice of it all, then dropped to his knees, spent. The one person Danny should’ve been able to trust was the one person who betrayed him.

By the time he returned to the house, he knew what had to be done. The first thing he did was to contact the Sheriff’s office. Marissa came in, but she didn’t say anything.

He had a feeling she instinctively knew that he had to stay busy right now.

When the Sheriff got to the farmhouse, Blade quickly explained everything that was going on. The sheriff just happened to be a former Navy Seal. He also met Carter once when he went to a fundraiser for his father.

After he checked out Blade's credentials, he agreed to his plan. Although, he still wasn't sure about letting a civilian walk into this kind of situation. Blade assured him they would have plenty of backup. Now he just had to set everything into motion.

"I don't want you involved anymore," Blade told Marissa. It was bad enough that he'd let her snoop around the hospital.

"I'm your best bet," she told him. "We have to get a confession of some kind. A signature on a lab slip won't be enough. I'll wear a wire. I'll be okay. Do you want to catch Danny's killer or not."

"Yes, but not at the expense of you possibly getting hurt. I should just let everything go. It's not worth it anymore."

"I'll go in whether you want me to or not. This is personal for me. I'm mad as hell. I lost my best friend. So yes, I'm doing this whether you're involved or not."

"Have you always been this stubborn?"

She relaxed and smiled. "Yes, I got it from you."

He stepped closer and took her into his arms, holding her tight. "You'll be careful, won't you?"

“You know I will. Besides, most of your team will be there.”

But the next day, when they were going to meet, he asked her again. She assured him that she was ready for this. It didn't stop the sick feeling in the pit of his stomach as she walked into the restaurant.

Rader and Cutter were inside the restaurant sitting a few tables away. It was him and Renegade in the van.

He adjusted his earpiece when Marissa began to talk a few minutes later. God, he only hoped this went as planned. All Marissa had to do was follow the script they'd discussed.

Yeah, she could do that. Then why did he feel as if there was a dark cloud hanging over them?

“I'm so glad you could meet with me. I was afraid that you wouldn't want to see me ever again.”

“Why would you ever think that?” Aunt Peggy said as Marissa sat down across from her. “I've always thought of you as my daughter.”

“And you were always a second mother to me.”

“And Blade?”

She folded her hands in her lap and looked down. “I left him.” When she looked up, her eyes pleaded with Aunt Peggy. “I really tried. I hope you won't think too badly of me. I didn't know Danny was gay, and I'm afraid it was quite a shock. I said I would still be Danny's friend, but I only said that because of Blade. But Blade was too accepting of that

kind of lifestyle. You know my parents. I was raised right, in the church.”

Marissa could only hope that Aunt Peggy believed her lies. She tried not to cringe at each word out of her mouth. She silently prayed that Danny to forgive her.

Aunt Peggy eyed her with more than a little skepticism. “Do you really feel that way?”

“I was shocked that Blade already knew, or I might’ve left with you that day. For a year, Danny lied to me. I thought I was his girlfriend, but then I walked in on him and his...his lover. I thought I was going to be sick.”

“It was disgusting,” Aunt Peggy said. “I went into the apartment right after you left. I knew you were upset, but I couldn’t understand why.”

“I caught them kissing.” She brought her hand up to her mouth as though she were going to be sick. She only hoped she wasn’t overdoing acting. “I’m sorry I didn’t see you, or I would have spared you from walking into Danny’s apartment.”

Aunt Peggy squared her shoulders. “No, I needed to see that. I knew from the very beginning that was something odd about Danny, but his resemblance to my sister clouded my vision.”

The waitress came and got their order. They only wanted something to drink and ordered a glass of tea each. As soon as she left, Marissa began to talk again.

“After I left his apartment, I drove around town. I was so angry, and I couldn’t calm down. I wanted to kill Danny.”

She bit her bottom lip, then looked up. “I know, that was wrong of me. The feeling was so strong it was all I could do to keep from following through. I still wish I had been instrumental in his death.”

Aunt Peggy opened her mouth, and Marissa thought that this was it. She was going to confess. Their drinks arrived at that moment, and she almost screamed her frustration.

“Yes,” Aunt Peggy said. “But it’s over now.”

This was it? Nope, not going to happen. She just needed to nudge her a little bit more.

“I have a confession to make,” she said. “I lost my job. My boss was a stupendous jerk, so I moved back home a few days ago and got a job at the hospital. I don’t know why I did it, but I pulled up Danny’s file.”

Aunt Peggy’s face lost some of its color. She didn’t meet Marissa’s gaze. “And?”

“I know you volunteered at the hospital. You’re such a good person. I wondered why your name would be on the lab work as the tech who checked Danny’s alcohol blood levels.”

“What are you planning to do with this information?” Aunt Peggy’s voice had grown quiet.

“Nothing. I want to applaud you for doing something I didn’t dare to do.”

Aunt Peggy studied her.

“I’m just not sure how you got him to crash into a tree. I mean, you are just a woman.”

She squared her shoulders and looked down her nose at Marissa. “Just a woman? My dear, I thought you were smarter than that. All I had to do was cut the brake line. I was raised in a mechanic’s garage and always carry a few tools. Of course, I didn’t expect him to take the corner so fast, but he always did drive like a maniac. That was just luck on my part that he would take the corner too fast and slam into the tree. It was God’s will.”

“And you made it look like he’d been driving drunk. It was genius on your part.”

“I know. Then all I had to do was go to the hospital and volunteer in the lab. Since it wasn’t my first time, no one thought anything about it. I even convinced Gladys to take the rest of the evening off.”

The anger inside Marissa had been building all day. She had thought of Aunt Peggy as a second mother. Danny had adored her. Marissa knew she was supposed to get up and walk out, and they would arrest her, but she couldn’t leave it at that.

“I hope you rot in prison.”

Aunt Peggy’s eyes rounded. “What?”

“I’m wearing a wire, you bitch. Danny was my best friend, and I loved him. You took that away from Blade and me.”

“I knew this was a setup,” Aunt Peggy screamed. Before anyone could react, she reached into her purse, pulled out a small gun, and fired.

Marissa felt a hard thump against her chest. Rader and Cutter were on Aunt Peggy as she fired the second time. The bullet hit the ceiling that time. People around her began to scream, and chairs fell over as they rushed toward the door. Everything around Marissa moved in slow motion. She looked down at her shirt and saw the red stain spreading across the front of it.

“You can join your precious Danny,” Aunt Peggy sneered as she fought to break the men’s hold, but they were too strong.

Marissa heard people yelling and was sure she heard Blade’s voice—strong arms wrapped around her. Oh God, she hurt so much.

“Don’t you dare fucking die on me,” he said, his words seeming to come from a distance as he jerked off his shirt and tried to staunch the flow of blood.

“Can’t die,” she mumbled. “Love you.” Her eyes drifted closed.

Chapter Twenty-six

“Sir, you need to back off now so we can take care of her,” the paramedic said.

Blade felt arms pulling him back, then Rader’s voice.

“They need to take care of her wound,” he said.

He backed away. God, there was so much blood. When he turned, he stared into the face of Aunt Peggy. The officers had her arms behind her and were putting her in handcuffs. She was whimpering, tears running down her face. Their gazes locked.

“I had to cut his brake line. Danny didn’t know what he was doing. He became an abomination and went against God.”

“I don’t know about your God, but mine loved Danny. Tell me this, what does your God say about murder? I hope you burn in the fires of hell for all eternity,” he ground out.

She looked confused. “But I was doing God’s work,” she mumbled.

“What does the Bible say about murder?” he pressed.

Her eyes widened.

“As I said, you’ll rot in hell!”

The officers dragged her away, screaming and crying.

The paramedics were already wheeling the stretcher out. He jumped in the back of the ambulance when they loaded her. The paramedic looked at him, then frowned.

“I’m going to be starting an IV, and I’ll be doing other things. Just stay out of my way.”

He nodded. Damn, she looked so pale. Please, don’t die, he silently prayed. He should’ve never let her do this. Yes, he’d wanted to get Danny’s killer, but it wasn’t worth losing Marissa. Nothing was worth that.

Once they arrived at the hospital, they made him go to the waiting area. Rader, Cutter, and Renegade convinced him that he would only be in the way and might do more harm than good.

Her parents and grandmother hurried into the ER.

“Oh, no,” her grandmother said after taking one look at Blade. “How bad is she?”

Blade tried to talk, but his throat clogged with unshed tears. Rader quickly came to his feet, and as they took a seat, he began to explain what had happened.

“She would have done this with or without you,” Cutter quietly told him.

He shook his head. “I shouldn’t have let her go. Anger fueled my desire to get Danny’s killer. I should’ve dropped it years ago.”

“You did the right thing,” Renegade said. “As Cutter said, Marissa would have confronted your aunt no matter what you said. From everything I’ve seen, Marissa can be pretty stubborn.”

Everyone looked up when the doctor hurried in.

“Are you the family of Marissa Finch?”

“We’re her parents,” her father said. “How is she?”

Blade held his breath as he waited for the doctor to answer.

“We’re taking her to surgery now. I have to say that it doesn’t look good. I’ll do everything I can to save her life. You might want to pray.” He turned and left before anyone could question him further.

Blade’s heart stopped for a moment, then began to slowly beat again. He wondered how it could still be functioning. He couldn’t lose her, not after just finding her. He stumbled to his feet. “I need to be alone.”

He stepped into the hallway and looked to the right. He started walking, not knowing where he was going. He passed the snack room, but he kept walking. He still didn’t know what he was searching for. Answers, maybe. Then he saw a small sign. He walked to the door, opened it, then went inside. He didn’t stop until he was at the first pew, then dropped onto the bench.

“Please, don’t take her. I need to tell her how much I love her. I swear, I’ll protect Marissa for the rest of her life. I won’t let anything else happen to her. Just don’t take her from me.” He bowed his head, swiping at the tears on his face.

He didn’t know how long he sat there begging, pleading, then arguing with God.

“Don’t you dare take her away from me. She’s all I have got. You know I can’t live without her.” He sucked in a ragged breath when he was finally spent.

He felt defeated.

There was a crackle overhead from the speaker in the hallway, and someone began talking. “Code blue to the operating room. Code blue.”

Chapter Twenty-seven

A warm light surrounded Marissa. She'd never felt so at peace until this very moment. When she looked down, she saw herself on an operating table.

“She’s in V-fib.”

“Paddles. Clear.”

She saw her body bounce and felt a sucking sensation, but her attention was drawn to what was before her as she seemed to move through space. One second, she felt as if she was floating, then in the next, as though she rushed forward.

The most beautiful kaleidoscope of colors in vibrant shades flashed past. She drew in a breath. It was like inhaling a burst of spring flowers after it rains. Everything was so beautiful it brought tears to her eyes.

Then she began to slow until she finally stopped. The soft light filled her space again. She reached her hands forward, but nothing seemed to be there. As if it had no substance.

She began to make out forms. There was an older couple who smiled at her. Even though they didn't move, Marissa could feel them embracing her, and there was so much love. She knew they were Nana's parents even though she'd never seen them except in pictures.

“Tell our little cutie-pie she’s done real good keeping our memory alive.”

Even though they didn't actually speak, she heard their thoughts. Then they faded away.

"Marissa." Her name was soft, angelic, on the lips of whoever had spoken.

She turned in a circle. "Who's there?"

The light seemed to fade just a little, and in the next instant, she saw Danny. An incredible feeling of love flowed through and around her. Then she realized her great-grandparents were dead, and so was Danny. "Am I dead?"

"You were shot," he said.

"Aunt Peggy." She frowned as her memories returned. "She cut your brake line. You couldn't step on the brakes when you made the corner too fast. You died. I'm so sorry. I miss you."

"I know. I should've explained what I was doing sooner. I didn't think you two would ever find each other."

She looked around. "Where's Blade?"

He waved his arm, and an opening in the light appeared. She saw Blade in the chapel. He was crying and praying. Her heart felt as though it was going to break in two. But then, when she looked at Danny, she felt such warmth and peace.

As if sensing how she felt, he began to speak. "You have to go back and make it right. You love each other. It's time for you both to be happy."

"I've always loved you," she said as she felt her body sucked back down.

“I know. You were and forever will be my best friend. Tell Blade to look inside the box.”

The doctor sighed deeply. “Time of death six forty-five pm. It’s a shame. She was too damned young.”

Marissa felt a whoosh. The heart monitor began to beat.

“Doctor!”

Time passed.

The voices around her were soft and encouraging.

Someone gave her a bed bath.

They turned her, propping pillows all around her.

More time passed.

She heard her parents talking to her.

Nana kept telling her to keep fighting.

And always, Blade was there.

“Please, wake up, don’t leave me. I can’t live without you,” Blade begged.

“Where am I going,” she mumbled.

“Marissa?”

She grimaced. Was there someone else in the bed with her? Her eyes fluttered open. Blade was leaning over the rail of the bed, holding her hand. It took a moment for his face to come completely into focus. She studied each worried line.

“You look terrible,” she said.

His smile wobbled. “You’ve had us worried sick.”

She looked around, but the room was empty. “Did Danny leave?”

“Who?”

She yawned. “It doesn’t matter. I’m going to take a nap.” She closed her eyes.

When Marissa woke again, Nana was at her bedside.

Marissa smiled. “Good morning.”

Nana grinned. “It’s late afternoon.”

“Have I been asleep long?”

She nodded. “About two and a half weeks.”

Her eyes widened. “That long? What happened...” She grimaced. “Aunt Peggy shot me. She cut the brake line on Danny’s car.”

“She’s in jail. Once they have her trial, I doubt she’ll ever get out.”

Her head began to pound. There was something else, but what... Then she remembered, and it was almost as though she could feel the warmth again.

“I died, didn’t I?”

“But now you’re alive. It wasn’t your time.”

“I saw great grandma and grandpa. I’m supposed to tell you something.” What, though? Then she remembered. “They said something about how proud they are that you’re keeping their memories alive. I guess they meant when we sit on the front porch, and you tell me stories about them.”

She wasn't sure if Nana believed her or not. Then she remembered something else.

"They called you cutie-pie."

When Nana began to cry softly, Marissa felt terrible.

"Are you okay? I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything."

She shook her head as she dug inside her pocket for a tissue. "No, I'm glad you told me. It just means we'll be together someday."

"Not anytime soon, I hope."

She smiled warmly. "No, not until it's my time."

"I breathed a sigh of relief."

The door opened, and Blade came into the room. Our gazes met, then I began to smile.

"I'll leave you two alone. I'm tired, and these old bones need a soft chair and a glass of sweet tea. I'll see you in the morning, dear girl."

Then it was just the two of them.

"I've missed you," he said.

"My great sense of humor?"

"No, your sarcasm."

She laughed, then scowled. "Remind me not to laugh. Catch me up on what happened."

"Aunt Peggy shot you."

She nodded. “I was supposed to walk away, but she made me so damned angry. If she hadn’t...” I could feel my anger about to boil over.

“It’s done. She’ll never hurt anyone else.” He looked around the room, avoiding making eye contact.

“I know I died.” She guessed he was reluctant to say anything. “I saw Nana’s parents...and I saw Danny.”

“I’m not sure I believe in that...”

“And I saw you in the hospital chapel praying and crying.”

His head jerked toward her.

“I saw them when they shocked me and when the doctor called my time of death—six forty-five. Danny told me he messed up by not telling us and that it took us too long to find each other again. He was right.”

“That’s a lot to take in.”

“You don’t have to believe me. Just know he’s okay. There was something else, too. Something about looking in a box?”

He shook his head. “I don’t know that he ever had a special box.”

“Maybe I’m wrong about that.”

The door opened, and her parents came rushing in.

“Mom said you were awake,” her mother said.

Marissa met Blade’s gaze. He smiled and mouthed that he would talk to her later, then he was gone.

It was still a week before they released Marissa. Blade invited everyone to his estate for a visit. They promised to come out later that month when Marissa was settled in better.

“Are you sure that you’re up for the drive back?”
Blade asked.

“I’m more than ready. I’ve never been so tired of hospital food in my entire life. Do they intentionally make it bland?”

He laughed. “Ugh, don’t remind me.”

She realized how much she missed hearing him laugh and how close she came to never hearing it again. She glanced out the window, her thoughts going back to her experience while she was in surgery. It had all seemed so real. But maybe she’d heard Nana mention her parents calling her cutie pie.

It had been such a strange experience. She felt as though she’d had an out of body experience, but Blade said as far as he knew, Danny didn’t have a special box where he kept things. Danny had said it was in the box. If Danny had had a special box where he kept mementos, wouldn’t Blade know where it would be?

“You’re worrying about it again, aren’t you?” Blade asked.

She looked across the seat at him. “Am I getting that easy to read?”

“Not really. I just know something is troubling you. You and my aunt were talking about Danny before she went berserk. Naturally, you might have a dream with him in it.”

“I suppose you’re right, but it seemed so real.”

“I spoke with your anesthesiologist, and he said it wasn’t unusual for people who went under to have visions of sorts. One of his patients once said he was certain there was a dinosaur in the operating room. Come to find out, he had been watching a children’s movie about a dinosaur with his young son the night before.”

Now she just felt silly. She shouldn’t have even brought it up.

When Blade’s phone began to read, he reached into his pocket and brought it out.

“Yeah, Renegade, what’s up?”

“After we figured out the brake line had been cut, everything got a little crazy. I found something in your brother’s car that I was going to tell you about, but I guess I forgot.”

“What did you find?”

“There was an envelope with your name on it.”

Marissa looked at Blade and saw the confusion on his face.

“What was in the envelope?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t open it since it wasn’t addressed to me. I just wanted to tell you it was there.”

“Where exactly is it?”

“In the glovebox.”

Chapter Twenty-eight

“This is crazy,” Blade said.

“You want to go back to the house?” Marissa asked him.

“No, I don’t want to return.”

She held onto his arm as they made their way to the storage unit where Danny’s car was kept.

“Should you even be walking this far?” It wasn’t far to the storage building, and she wasn’t leaning on him that heavily. Yeah, he was procrastinating.

“Oh, that’s right, I left my wheelchair at the hospital,” she sarcastically replied. “It’s right next to yours. By the way, how’s your gunshot wound?”

“Did anyone ever tell you that you have a smart mouth?”

She smiled up at him. “You, many times.”

Damn, she was beautiful, and he couldn’t help stopping and kissing her. She tasted sweet, like cinnamon. And heat, lots of heat. He didn’t mean for the kiss to be so intense. It took all he had in him to back off.

“You don’t have to stop. I won’t break.”

“The doctor said no exercise for at least a month.”

“And you believed him?”

He laughed. “Yes, and I’m marking the days on my calendar.”

She laughed.

But they both turned serious when he opened the door to the storage building and flipped on the light. For a moment, he stood there looking at the car. Not for the first time, he wanted to wrap his hands around his aunt’s throat and choke the life out of her. She’d caused so much pain.

“Do you want me to get it? You can wait outside. I don’t mind.”

“No, I can do it.”

The passenger side wasn’t quite as difficult to open as the driver’s, which took the brunt of the impact. One of the guys would’ve already pried it open anyway. Blade slid onto the seat, took a breath, then opened it. The envelope was still inside. He pulled it out and saw that it was addressed to him with the stamp already on it. Now he was just confused. He opened it.

Hey, bro,

Are you ever going to take leave? I have some big news I need to tell you. I think you’ve got a few things wrong, though. I’m pretty sure that’s why you’re staying away from home. I’m going to tell you now, so I know you’ll get your ass home.

I don’t love Marissa.

Yes, you read that right. I don’t love her. Not like that anyway, and I never have.

By the way, I'm gay. I hope you're sitting down for all of this. I'm in love with a man named Jessie. I'm going to ask him to marry me. I know Jessie and I have had our arguments and differences, mainly because Jessie thinks I'm ashamed of him, and I'm not. I've just been waiting for the right time to tell him. He says that time will never come. Well, it has.

I'm a coward. I know it. But I'm going to ask him to marry me this weekend. I have the ring and everything. It's black with diamonds on both sides. It's flashy, but he loves diamonds. It will be perfect.

I do love him so very much. He makes me feel whole. As I know, you and Marissa will make each other feel complete. I was hoping you could come home because I haven't mentioned this to Marissa, and she will need you beside her. I can see the way you look at each other. I know you have feelings for her and her, too.

So, come home.

Your loving gay brother,

Danny

When Blade looked up, he was the only one inside the building. Marissa must've given him some privacy.

“Yeah, I know how special she is, little brother. You chose right. I just couldn't see through the pain of losing you.” He carefully folded the letter and put it back in the envelope. He wanted Marissa to read it later.

He was thoughtful for a minute, then dug around in the glovebox more. As soon as he felt the velvet box, he brought it

out and opened it. The diamonds winked back at him. Danny was right. It was a beautiful ring.

I knew what I had to do. I had to make everything right for Danny. I needed to meet Jessie and explain everything. It was as though Danny was telling me what to do.

Even so, it was a couple of days before Jessie had a day off and could meet with me. I discovered I was nervous as hell.

“Maybe it would’ve been better if I just left everything as it was. It’s been over ten years. I’m not sure resurrecting the past will do anyone any good and might even make it worse,” Blade said.

“I know you still aren’t sure if you believe what I saw when I was in surgery might’ve been real, but Danny wanted me to tell you about the box, then Renegade called to tell you about the letter he saw. Danny wants Jessie to have closure and to know he was loved. You’re doing the right thing. This is what Danny wants.”

He closed the distance between them and wrapped her gently in his arms, pressing his lips to her forehead. “You’re right, I’m still not sure I believe any of it, but I like to think that Danny is happy where he is. Maybe this will give Jessie closure, too.”

When the doorbell rang, he stepped aside and went to answer it. Eventually, he would hire more help, but right now, he only had the cleaning service come once every couple of weeks. He liked having this time with just him and Marissa on the estate.

He opened the door. Jessie didn't look quite sure of himself as he shifted from one foot to the other. He looked exactly like the sketches that Danny had drawn.

"Jessie, it's good to meet you." They shook hands, and then he stepped to the side. "Please, come in."

"You said you had something to give me?"

"I know you're probably confused, but I'll explain everything. Come into the sitting room where we can be more comfortable."

As soon as he stepped into the newly decorated room in brighter colors, he began to relax. Funny, but this felt right.

Marissa stood as they came inside. He thought he saw a flicker of anger in Jessie's eyes for just a moment, but it was quickly gone, replaced by sadness.

Marissa's smile was warm as she stepped forward and offered her hand. Jessie hesitated before he took it.

"It's about time we were formally introduced," she said. "Have a seat."

"Again, what's this all about? Why am I here?"

As soon as they were seated, Blade leaned forward. "You could say Danny brought us all together."

Jesse's eyes narrowed. "Danny?"

"You see, I died," Marissa said.

Jesse's eyes widened. "You did what?"

"My aunt shot her after we got her on tape admitting to cutting Danny's brake line. He couldn't stop when he made the

corner too fast, and that's when he died."

Jessie sucked in a breath, his lips pressing tightly together. "Why are you bringing this up now? Danny never loved me. I'm assuming you discovered he was gay. If you think I corrupted him, you're wrong." He glared at Marissa. "He loved someone else."

"I think you need to read this." Blade handed him the letter.

Jessie hesitantly took it, then began to read. Before he was finished, he was sniffing. "Did he really write this?"

Blade nodded, then handed him the black velvet box. Jessie slowly opened it, then began to cry in earnest.

"He did love me. Maybe if he'd..."

"No, you can't think like that," Marissa said. "Just know that he did love you. When my heart stopped beating during my surgery, Danny came to me. He wanted you to know that you must move on with your life. We all do. We've been stuck in limbo for way too long."

"I've never let myself love anyone else. I've always been too afraid of rejection," Jessie said. He looked at it. "Thank you for this."

The three of them talked long into the afternoon. He took Jessie to see Danny's room and gave him one of the sketchbooks. They went downstairs, where Marissa had dinner ready. As they ate, they shared stories of Danny. When it was time for Jessie to leave, Blade felt more relaxed than he had in years. He walked Jessie to the door and then shook his hand.

“I feel as if we’re family, and we would have been if Danny hadn’t been killed. I want you to be a part of our life.”

“I think I’d like that.”

Blade stood at the door, watching Jessie drive away. For just a moment, he felt the strangest warmth flowing over him. Like someone had poured a pitcher of warmth over his head, and a feeling of intense love made its way down his body. He closed his eyes, relishing the feeling and knowing Danny was with him.

“I like him,” Marissa said as she came up to stand beside him.

“I think Danny made a good choice with Jessie.”

Blade knew there was only one other thing that he needed to do, but it was late, so it would have to wait until morning. He didn’t have a good feeling about it. How would Marissa react?

Chapter Twenty-nine

Marissa hated waking up in her bed. Blade had been so afraid that he would roll over or fling his arm out and possibly injure her more, he'd insisted she sleep in her room. She smiled. She noticed the calendar in his office and that he was marking off the days just as he said.

She was, too.

Thirty days and she could resume light activity. She paused for a moment. Now that everything had been cleared up, what if Blade finally realized he could move on with his life? Hate and love were such strong emotions, and he'd replaced one with the other. What if he realized he didn't love her, and that was the only reason he kept his distance?

She flopped down on the side of the bed. Was it thirty days before he could comfortably tell her to leave?

No, she wasn't going to think like that at all!

Today was exactly thirty days since she'd been released from the hospital. She felt great. The bullet had nicked an artery, which had caused her to lose a lot of blood, sending her into cardiac arrest. But her recovery had been quick.

Her parents had even come for a visit, bringing Nana with them. Marissa had so much fun showing them the estate and what she and the decorator were doing. The sitting and dining rooms were already finished and looked much brighter.

Of course, everyone had fussed over her, even with her telling them that she felt fine.

Right now, she needed a shower, to get dressed, and a cup of coffee. She was in desperate need of caffeine. She wouldn't worry about her relationship with Blade. It would quite possibly drive her crazy if she did.

It wasn't much later when she went downstairs, inhaling the aroma of freshly brewed coffee. That meant Blade was already up.

She quickly fixed herself a cup and carried it out to the patio. They were lucky that the days were still relatively warm, but she knew that wouldn't last long. Colder temperatures were definitely on the way, but it never got too cold this close to San Antonio. He looked up when she stepped outside.

"It's going to be a beautiful day," she said.

"What are your plans?" he asked.

She shook her head. "Nothing, really. The decorator won't be coming again until Monday."

He nodded. "I thought we could do something with the secret room," he said.

"What did you have in mind?"

"I wanted to fill it with booty. What do you think?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Booty?"

"Yes, you know, a pirate's treasure. A chest filled with gold doubloons, a couple of crowns and tiaras, a golden goblet or two, and necklaces. Of course, none of that will be real."

“And why are you doing this?”

“I thought it would be fun for future generations to be able to find something when they discover the secret panel. Someday I’d like to have kids.”

She quickly looked away. “Yes, I think I can come up with something.” She’d never really thought about Blade getting married and having children. They’d never talked about marriage or children. Not that she was even sure she wanted to settle down. She was still young—plenty of time.

“Great.” He cleared his throat. “I guess you’ll want to get married and have kids someday.”

“Someday.” She needed to change the subject, or she would start crying. Marissa was sure he was trying to tell her goodbye, but she couldn’t handle it right now. “Do you have PT today?” she asked.

“No, I’ve got the day off as well. Jake said I surprised everyone, and I should have full use of my arm without limitations by the end of the year.”

“That’s...fantastic.” She was happy for him.

“Let’s go for a drive later. Get away for a while. We could go into town and have lunch.”

“Yes, that sounds good.”

Blade wanted to get some work done in his office first, so she busied herself in the kitchen making a couple of pies. Nana always said cooking was the best way to keep your mind occupied so you wouldn’t dwell on anything. She supposed that she was more like Nana than she thought. Cooking always brought her peace.

By the time Blade had finished, the pies were done and cooling on the counter. She looked up when he came into the kitchen. He stopped and inhaled.

“I’m glad I convinced you to stay at the estate,” he said.

Oh, great. He hadn’t fallen in love with her. He’d fallen in love with her cooking. She should’ve known things wouldn’t continue as they were. Sometimes, she saw a faraway look in his eyes and knew he missed the rest of the team. Would he return to them and go on dangerous missions?

“Are you ready?” he asked, breaking into her thoughts.

She quickly blinked her tears away, then faced him. “As ready as I’ll ever be.”

He chuckled as he stepped nearer. For a moment, she wondered if he was about to kiss her, but he only brushed the flour off her face. He turned and started walking toward the garage. Was he beginning to pull away from her? She wasn’t sure.

“Where are we going?” she finally asked after they were on the road for a few minutes.

“I need to finish something,” was all he said.

She didn’t ask for more information. If he didn’t want to tell her, that was fine with her. She mentally calculated how long it would take her to finish remodeling the rooms on the estate. Marissa probably wasn’t even needed if the decorator had her ideas.

She would have to look for another job. She had a small savings account. She could go back to college. She liked

the idea of becoming an interior decorator. Take some night classes even.

When he turned into a cemetery, she set up a little straighter. “What are we doing here?”

“The cemetery is on the back part of our land. I have a caretaker who makes sure everything is kept up to my preferences.”

“It’s beautiful,” she said as he stopped.

There were tall trees and benches nestled among the gravestones. The grass was green and smelled as if it had been recently mowed. A couple of statues, angels with open wings, watched over Blade’s family and ancestors. They got out, and he took her hand as they walked over to one of the stones.

“I didn’t have a graveside service for Danny. This is my first time here since he was laid to rest. I thought it would be appropriate to come here today.”

She didn’t know why but thought he might want to say his goodbye here. Did he feel as if she might be in the way? “Do you want me to wait in the pickup?”

He shook his head. “I can’t do this without you.”

She smiled when she saw the two butterfly bushes behind the headstone and the smaller bushes in bloom with tiny blue flowers at the sides of Danny’s grave. He would like that Blade had added these touches.

Blade stopped and turned toward her. “I thought it was appropriate that I do this here since Danny is the one who brought us together.” He reached into his pocket and brought out a small box, then dropped down to one knee. “I’ve loved

you for a very long time, Marissa. I've been going crazy thinking you might say no, but please, put me out of my misery and say that you will marry me." He opened the box, and nestled inside was a beautiful diamond ring.

Her heart soared inside her chest as she nodded. Her throat clogged with unshed tears as she nodded. "Yes, of course, I'll marry you." She began to laugh as he came to his feet and, still being very gentle, pulled her against him. They both turned when they heard the fluttering of wings. About twenty butterflies flew out of the bushes.

She smiled. Some people would say it was just a coincidence. That the butterflies were nestled amongst the flowers so they could drink the sweet nectar. There could be a dozen explanations for why they had flown at that very moment.

She chose to believe that Danny was finally happy knowing they were together.

I hope you enjoyed *Playing with Fire*. Continue reading for a sneak peek at book three, *Dark Illusions*.

Dark Illusions

Chapter One

Wizard glanced around at the elegance of the Chateau Clarice, taking in the details of the ornate decor: the plush velvet chairs, shimmering crystal chandeliers, and polished silverware laid out on the table. Man, he felt out of place here.

He grimaced and shifted in his chair. The high-end restaurant was different from the kind of establishments he usually frequented. He'd take the back corner of a dimly lit, gritty bar any day. When he'd ordered a beer, they brought it to him in a glass. A damn glass! He almost sent it back and ordered one in a bottle but changed his mind at the last minute.

Why the hell had Carter even sent him to the upscale restaurant to meet with a client? Fancy places always made him uncomfortable. No, it was more than that. They made him uneasy, but he'd never figured out why.

Yeah, he could probably guess the real reason Carter had wanted him to meet with the client. Carter's excuse for sending him was that it was part of the job. He didn't buy it. Anyone else on the team would've been better than him. Wizard thought it was so he'd shave his scraggly beard—which he'd compromised and trimmed close to his face. Not that it mattered how much better he might look. He still didn't want to be here.

He turned in his seat suddenly and caught a flash of a woman in a sparkling evening dress. A man in a dark tux smiled down at her. A chandelier dripping with crystals hung

above them as the vaguely familiar man took the woman in his arms, and they began to dance.

Wizard blinked, and the image vanished.

He grabbed the edge of the table, suddenly feeling off balance as he was left staring at an older couple sitting at one of the other tables. Sometimes, he thought he might be losing his mind. After all these years, you'd think he would get used to the brief flashes of... Of what? Memories? He didn't know what the hell they were.

He rubbed his temples to ease the pounding in his head. The headache usually went away after a moment or two. Maybe he should talk to Carter about them. Would he think he was crazy? Probably.

He raised his glass and took a drink. Most of the team thought he might be a little crazy anyway. Hell, they all were. Misfits Carter had brought together to do odd jobs, some riskier than others: breaking up human trafficking rings, busting drug cartels, providing security for companies, or even acting as a bodyguard.

He grinned, something he rarely did. It had been kind of funny when Savage had to babysit a wealthy heiress. She'd caused him all sorts of headaches. His grin faded. Someone had tried to kill her, though. The team would help anyone that had been exploited or even just bullied.

Then why the hell was he wearing a suit, sitting in a posh restaurant, waiting for a client—he glanced at his watch—who was now twenty minutes late? The suit had cost Carter a fortune. *That* was damned funny. Not that Carter even

blinked an eye at what he'd spent. The man had more money than Midas.

Wizard was already reaching for his phone to let Carter know the client was a no-show when the man in question walked in, Mr. Nash Bumford. He'd already researched him. Now, he studied him. He was tall and slender with light brown hair. Their gazes locked across the room as they took each other's measure. An immediate feeling of dislike washed over him. There was something about Nash that felt off.

Wizard's gaze shifted to the woman with him. She kept her eyes downcast and leaned away from Nash. At first glance, he thought she was merely pretty, but his opinion drastically changed when she lifted her face, and those big luminous green eyes stared back at him.

The lady wasn't just pretty. She was captivatingly beautiful with delicate features. Her hair was swept on top of her head, with a few coal-black tendrils curling softly around her face. Her lemon-yellow dress complimented her pale skin, hugging her tiny waist before billowing into a cloud around her.

Wizard straightened in his chair, then came to his feet as they approached his table in a back corner of the restaurant, sizing up the other man with Nash. He guessed him to be around six feet, two inches, and he was all muscle and broad shoulders. A deep scar ran down one side of his face, and from the bulge under his jacket, Wizard guessed him to be a bodyguard. Even he wouldn't want to come up on this guy in a dark alleyway. And they said *he* scared people? Yeah, well, they hadn't met this man.

He stuck out his hand. “Mr. Nash.”

Nash ignored his outstretched hand. The bodyguard pulled out a chair, and Nash took it. The woman sat when the bodyguard pulled hers out, and then he moved to stand in the corner. Wizard made himself comfortable in his chair again. He was okay with not shaking Nash’s hand.

A waiter hurried over and gave them a menu. When he started to give one to the woman, Nash waved him away from her and began to order.

“I’ll have a glass of Pinot Noir. The lady will have sparkling water.” He looked across the table when the waiter left. “I was expecting to meet with Carter,” Nash said in a nasal voice. “I don’t normally do business with the hired help.”

He shrugged. “We can end the meeting right now. It doesn’t matter to me one way or the other, but this will also end the transaction. Carter wouldn’t have sent me if he didn’t think I could do the job.” He knew he wouldn’t like Nash.

Nash’s lip curled, but then he continued. “I want a complete overhaul of my security system. Do you think your company can handle the job?”

Wizard leaned back in his chair. “I was under the impression you owned Nash Enterprises.”

Not that Nash ran the company. No, he had someone else doing that. He only supervised when he wanted to throw his weight around.

His chest bowed out a little as his ego inflated. “Yes, it’s my company, and I want the security completely updated,

along with my home.”

“Is that the family estate you inherited from your parents?”

The man hadn't worked a day in his life. He'd been a spoiled only child, and now he was a rich snob who still didn't work.

Nash's lips pursed just a little. “Yes.”

Nash didn't like that someone might know he'd inherited all his wealth rather than earning it.

“No problem. We handle smaller projects all the time. We could have everything up and running in a weekend.” It was a dig, and he knew it. He didn't think Carter would care.

Nash scowled. “I assure you, this will not be a small project. I've gotten some threats lately and want to ensure I'm protected.”

“And your wife as well, I'm sure.”

He frowned. “Of course.”

What could possibly have possessed her to want this poor excuse for a man as her husband? He had to be in his forties. He guessed her to be somewhere around her mid-twenties.

When she looked up, he smiled at her, then reached into the air, twisted his hand, and, in the next instant, presented her with a red rose.

“It's nice to meet you,” he said.

She took the rose and returned his smile with a shy one of her own. That's when he noticed the bruise on her face that

cosmetics hadn't quite covered.

"Remember your place," Nash barked at her.

She quickly downed her head and laid the rose on the table.

"I'm not impressed with amateur magicians," Nash said. "Can you handle the job or not?"

"May I go to the ladies' room?" she timidly asked.

Nash frowned. He waved a hand as if her request irritated him. "Yes, go, but don't dawdle."

Wizard noticed the bodyguard stayed with Nash. He apparently wasn't concerned about his wife's safety as much as he was about his own.

"Do you always treat her like that?" he couldn't help asking.

Nash gave Wizard his full attention. "I don't believe I asked you to express your opinion on my relationship with Lorelei. She's quite happy."

"It didn't look that way to me."

"There's nothing you can do about it, even if she wasn't," he smirked.

"You don't have to worry about me. I never interfere in domestic problems. If you'll excuse me, I need to use the men's room," he excused himself. Men like Nash disgusted him.

He drew in a frustrated breath. Maybe that's all it was, an argument between them, and he was reading too much into this. She might've fallen and gotten the bruise on her face.

Then why did his gut tell him Lorelei was being abused?

He turned into the hall where the restrooms were located and waited for Lorelei to come out. He had to be sure. As she stepped out of the ladies' room, she looked up, then quickly downed her head when she saw him.

“Why are you with him?” he asked bluntly.

She raised her head, eyes wide, seemingly startled by his question.

“Is he what you want?” he continued.

She slowly shook her head. “I don't have a choice,” she whispered, then quickly looked around as if Nash or the bodyguard might appear.

“You always have a choice,” he continued.

“I don't.”

“Would you leave if you had the opportunity?” For a moment, he saw a flicker of hope, but it quickly died.

Her smile was fearful. “No, don't try to help. He's a powerful man. He'll kill you.” She closed her eyes and drew in a breath. “Yes, I want to be with him.”

Her words were robotic, as if someone had drilled them into her. Before he could question her further, she walked away, shoulders slumped. He slammed his hand against the men's restroom door, almost running into a man exiting. Some of the color drained from the other man's face when he met Wizard's cold eyes. He quickly backed up and apologized.

It was strange how he had that effect on people. They would take one look at him and back away. Blade said he was scary as fuck when he looked at someone, especially if he was pissed off.

He'd studied his reflection in the mirror once. He didn't think he was scary at all. Nash's wife didn't act like she had a problem with how he looked. Maybe it was because he'd trimmed his beard. Yeah, that could be it.

There was one thing he did know. Lorelei was scared of Nash. He should walk away. Their problems were none of his business. Yeah, he should, but he probably wouldn't. He finished and washed his hands before leaving the men's room, joining the others at the table, and taking his seat again.

“When can you start?” Nash asked as he picked up his glass of wine and took a drink.

“I think we'll pass on this job. You're not the kind of man we normally do business with.” He downed the rest of his beer, then set his glass on the table.

Nash gripped the stem of his wineglass so tightly the tips of his fingers turned white. “And what kind of man am I?”

“A bully. Real men don't treat a woman like you're treating Lorelei. Normally, men like you have the same business ethics as they do morals. She also doesn't want to be with you. We're going to walk out of here together, and you'll never bother her again. Do I make myself clear?”

Nash grabbed her arm in a painful grip. “Have you asked this man for help?”

She flinched. “No, I didn't say anything.”

Wizard came to his feet. “Let go of her. Now,” he growled but weaved when the room spun, and he had to grab the back of the chair to steady himself. What the hell?

“We’re leaving now,” Nash said, dragging Lorelei to her feet as he stood.

The bodyguard stepped closer to Nash. “Not here, you fool. We never make a scene.”

“You better let her go right now, or you’re going to have a damned big one. It’ll be all over the Internet. People are already watching us. Do you want them to know what kind of bastard you are?”

Nash’s smile didn’t reach his eyes. “I think you’ve had too much to drink. Maybe you should sit before you fall over. I was correct when I pegged you as the hero type. While you were gone, I added a little something to your drink. Don’t worry, it won’t kill you, but I wouldn’t try to save the damsel in distress. That *will* get you killed.” They turned and left.

Wizard did the only thing he could before he fell over. He sat down in the chair. He fumbled inside his pocket when his phone rang and brought it out. Carter’s face blurred on the screen. He blinked a few times, then slid his finger across the bar.

“The son of a bitch slipped something in my drink.” He motioned to the waiter, who hurried over. “Get me a tall glass of water.” The waiter looked confused but quickly left. Wizard began digging in his pockets for the pills that would counteract whatever drug he’d been given and only hoped they would work.

“Are you okay?” Carter sounded concerned.

“I will be. I don’t think they were that strong. I’m just woozy. He didn’t want to cause a scene.”

“Why the hell would he drug you?”

“Because he’s an asshole.” His words slurred. He found the pills and put them in his mouth just as the waiter returned, then swallowed them with the water. He drank every drop, then motioned for more.

“I take it we’re not doing security for him.”

“Hell no. I don’t know exactly what’s going on with Mr. Nash, but his wife looked scared. She doesn’t want to be with him but has no choice. I’m going to give her one.”

“Give me a few days, and I’ll send some men down to help.”

“She might not have a few days. She has a bruise on her face, and he was angry when they left. I’ll keep you posted on what’s happening.”

“Nothing I say will make you change your mind, will it?”

“Nope,” he said as his head began to clear.

“Okay, just be careful. I’ve looked at a layout of the place. It’s like a fortress, but nothing should alert him if you go in with the security system down. I wouldn’t linger too long in the area, though.”

“I never planned to.”

“Are you going in tonight?”

“Yes, if my head clears enough.”

“I should never have sent you to meet him. I didn’t have a good feeling about Nash.”

“Always trust your gut.”

“So I’m told.” He hesitated briefly. “Be careful. If you run into any problems, get the hell out of there.”

“You know me. I never take any chances.”

“Yeah, right.”

By the time they ended the conversation, Wizard was feeling more clearheaded. He dropped some bills on the table and left. At least he didn’t sway as long as he concentrated on where he was going.

He knew the layout of Nash’s estate, and that it was out in the country, just from his research before the meeting.

He left the restaurant, returned to his hotel, and changed into black pants and a black shirt, then gathered the rest of his things. He didn’t think he would be sticking around town very long once he got Lorelei to safety. He wasn’t sure exactly what he would do after that. Maybe take her to Mama Rose’s. She would take her under her wing until they could figure out their next step.

It only took half an hour to get to Nash’s estate. Most of the property had a tall, wrought-iron fence around it, but before that, it was only a barbed wire and cedar post fence. He grabbed a pair of wire cutters from his bag and quickly cut the barbed wire, pulling it out of the way before driving through. It was another mile over rough pasture before he got to the wrought-iron fence. He walked the perimeter until he found a

gate. It took less than a minute to pick the lock. Nash was right, he needed to upgrade his security system. This one sucked.

He pulled on his night goggles as he got closer to the house. It was a massive three-story structure that looked intimidating unless you looked closer. Years of poor upkeep were starting to show. It needed a new roof, which would cost a fortune. The trim around the windows should've been sanded years ago and a fresh coat of paint applied, and there was a crack in the foundation.

Wizard figured Nash had made several enemies over the years, especially with his arrogance. That was probably why he was focusing on updating his security first.

An armed man making rounds walked into his line of vision. Wizard waited until he was out of sight before he crept closer to the house. He knew what room Nash was in but wasn't sure about Lorelei. He had a feeling she didn't sleep in the same room as him. He guessed it would be close to Nash, though, so he could keep an eye on her. The upstairs rooms had balconies. He didn't think it would be too difficult to find her. Getting her out might be another story. He wouldn't worry about that right now.

He aimed the grappling hook at one of the balconies and fired the gun, sending it silently over the rail. In less than three minutes, he was standing on the balcony. He slipped off his night vision glasses, quickly picked the lock, and then slipped inside.

As soon as he quietly closed the door behind him and turned, the overhead light came on, momentarily blinding him.

“I thought you would be here sooner,” Nash said.

There was a whistle and then a thud against his chest. He looked down at the dart.

Nash laughed. “A mild sedative.”

“You bastard.” He took a step toward him but dropped to his knees.

“Don’t worry, the drug isn’t that powerful. I didn’t want to knock you out completely. I want you to be aware of what’s going to happen tonight. It makes everything more exciting.” He laughed as two men grabbed under his arms and dragged him out of the room.

What happened next was a blur, even as he tried to stay focused. He knew they took him down to the main floor, another hall, and then to a door leading down into the basement. He glanced at the stone walls and what looked like cells off to the side. It resembled more of a dungeon’s torture chamber.

He should’ve waited for Carter to send backup. Hindsight was a bitch.

Someone looped chains around his wrist, locking them in place, and then his arms were pulled above his head. He groggily glanced around the musty room, then froze when he saw Lorelei hanging the same way. Anger built inside him.

“What the hell are you doing? Let her go. She has nothing to do with you and me. She’s innocent in all of this.”

“She would’ve left with you if given the chance,” Nash said. “I told you, you’re not her hero. Now, I’ll make sure you understand.”

“Lorelei, are you okay?”

She looked at him with pity in her eyes. “You shouldn’t have come. I was okay.”

“But you’re not okay. Nash is a monster.”

“Silence!” Nash screamed.

The bodyguard cut away his shirt until he was bare from the waist up.

“Interesting tattoo.” Nash stepped closer. “I pride myself in collecting unusual or beautiful artifacts. I don’t believe I’ve ever seen one quite like this, though. It’s almost like a phoenix rising from a cloud but with a shield and sword. Very interesting. Where did you get it?”

“Your guess is as good as mine, but if you release me, we can discuss it.”

“No matter.” He took the whip from his bodyguard and walked around behind Wizard. The first whistle echoed in the otherwise silent room. He fisted his hands but didn’t make a sound when the lash made contact with his skin.

He tried not to think about the pain as he worried about what Nash had done to Lorelei. Had he whipped her in the same manner? He’d kill the bastard. He gritted his teeth as the whip connected with his flesh again.

Nash came around to stand in front of him after five lashes. “That’s enough for now. Not that I even broke the skin. No, I always start slow and build to the part where I rip the skin off your body. It’s more fun this way.” He smiled easily. “Before I’m done, you’ll be screaming for mercy, and she’ll see the coward that you are.” He turned to the bodyguard.

“Leave them both hanging for now. Put a guard outside the door. Where’s Zeke? I need some of his special lotion for my hands. It’s difficult wielding a whip. Get him down here.” He walked over to Lorelei.

“Leave her alone,” Wizard warned him.

He laughed without mirth. “What are you going to do? I’ll tell you. You’re not going to do anything.” He gripped her chin, and she cried out. “Is he, my love?”

Lorelei whimpered.

Nash turned back to Wizard. “You know, I purchased her when she was six years old and groomed her to be the perfect wife. Did you actually think I would have let you take that away from me? My most prized possession?” He lowered his lips to hers in a bruising kiss that she tried to pull away from to no avail. He laughed again when he stepped back. “I do as I please with her, and there’s nothing you can do about it.”

The door opened, and a servant hurried in, head bowed. “I purchased Zeke as well, but I have to admit, it took longer to train him because he was older.”

The servant opened the jar of lotion, and Nash dipped his fingers into it. When the servant happened to glance up, their gazes met, then the servant’s eyes widened. He quickly downed his head. Wizard wondered what had just happened between them. It was almost as if the servant knew who he was. Maybe he just felt sorry for him.

“You may leave now,” he told the servant, then turned back to Wizard. “I’ll give you one hour to think about what

you had planned to do. Of course, I'm still going to beat you, but it will give you time to think about the error of your ways." He laughed as he left the room.

As soon as the door closed, Lorelei turned to him as much as she could, which wasn't much. "I'm sorry that I involved you."

"You didn't do anything except warn me away. I didn't take enough precautions. I should've known he would be waiting for me. That was my fault, not yours. Did he hurt you?"

"Not like he did you. After the first time, when I was seven, he made sure he used a lash that wouldn't leave any marks."

While she talked, he tried to work his wrists through the loops, but that wasn't going to happen. Next, he tried raising his legs and putting all his weight on the chain, but it didn't break. He didn't give up but kept working to free himself. When the door opened again, he almost cursed at not having enough time to get loose.

The servant came inside. Zeke quickly bowed his head when their gazes met, then hurried over to the wall where the chain was attached. Wizard's arms were suddenly lowered, and he wondered if this was the start of a new kind of torture.

"What's happening?"

"I will release you, Your Highness, so that you can escape this madman. We have to hurry, though." He brought a key over and unfastened the loops on his wrist.

Your Highness? He didn't know who Zeke thought he was, but he was way off base. Not that he was going to point that out to him right now. As soon as he was free, he hurried to Lorelei and removed her chains.

“And the guard?” Wizard asked.

“I brought him coffee that would make him sleep. I can show you a way out that will be safe. Mr. Bumford will return soon, though. He will not like you taking his woman.”

“I'm not leaving her behind.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

He wanted to tell him to stop with the Your Highness business but decided to let it ride for now. He looked at Lorelei. “Can you walk?”

She nodded.

“Then let's get the hell out of here.”

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