

LILA FERRARI



PROTECTING *Isabelle*



PROTECTING ISABELLE
(SPECIAL FORCES:
OPERATION ALPHA)

BROTHERHOOD ALLIANCE

BOOK FOUR

LILA FERRARI



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Editor: Chris Kridler, Sky Diary Productions

Cover Designer: Dar Albert of Wicked Smart Designs

Dear Readers,

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

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

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

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

READ ON!

Xoxo

Susan Stoker

ABOUT THE BOOK

Soap maker and herbalist Isabelle Zander enjoys a good life in Georgia. She has her best friend, her favorite bar, and a job she loves. Plus, scorching memories of a one-night stand with a man who could very well be her soulmate. A man whose name she doesn't know.

Isabelle's idyllic life is upended by a mix-up with the mob, who thinks she stole a bagful of their money. What's a girl in danger to do but drag her best friend to Haywood Lake, Florida, to live near her former Navy SEAL brother Colt? Surely she'll be safe there.

Will Blake is searching for the perfect place to settle down, farm, and use the skills he acquired as a SEAL to protect the vulnerable. Following a friend's advice, he finds the Brotherhood Alliance in Haywood Lake. Maybe its missions will be enough of a distraction to extinguish the memories of a hot one-night stand with a woman who left him wondering if there is such a thing as "the one."

When fate brings his runaway flame to him, Will starts to think about love and second chances. But first, he'll have to draw upon all of the skills he's honed as a SEAL to keep her safe. Can Will and Isabelle's budding romance survive deadly outside forces, or will they lose each other all over again?

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Protecting Isabelle

A huge thank you to Susan Stoker for allowing me to write in her world. My first foray into Susan's world was reading *Protecting Caroline*. That series is still my favorite, although I love all her other series and characters. I have included John "Tex" Keegan in my story who saves the day as usual.

This was a fun book to write since my husband and I owned a 180-acre farm in Vermont with gardens, sheep, Angus, chickens and an herb garden. I am very familiar with the joys of owning a farm. My first foray into making soap occurred there and while I haven't made soap in a while, the memory is still fresh in my mind.

I hope you enjoy this book.

Lila

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A huge thank you everyone who has read my books, made suggestions, and given me the encouragement to continue writing.

A shout-out to my writing cohorts. You have challenged me to make my books better. The enthusiasm and knowledge this group has shared has been invaluable and an inspiration to me. Also a big thank-you to the members of Florida Star Fiction Writers who have encouraged and applauded my successes. Thank you.

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Thank-you to Chris Kridler of Sky Diary Productions for editing my rough drafts, keeping my story on track, and giving me valuable suggestions to make my books better!

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To Robert Stec, former Bronx battalion chief who helped me visualize the fire and gave me suggestions to make the scene more realistic—thank you.

And a big thank you to everyone who has reviewed my books. I thank you from the bottom of my heart. Reviews are appreciated. It helps new authors get recognized.

Any errors, blunders, or inaccuracies made are all mine.

*For Ray,
Always*

CHAPTER ONE

“This is the last time I’m busting you out of jail, Isabelle,” said Colt.

“Tsk. You exaggerate. This is only the first time,” Isabelle Zander countered. Then wished she hadn’t.

Hoo boy, her brother Colton Zander was pissed. His brown eyes, so much like hers, gave her the stare. The one he mastered as a Navy SEAL, the one that was supposed to scare her.

It didn’t intimidate her when she was younger, nor did it now. Isabelle knew her brother always had a soft spot for her and would always have her back, even if he was angry with her.

It wasn’t even her fault that she’d been arrested. She and her best friend, Felicia, had just met Serena Something at the Twisted Frog, the bar they frequented. It was a small honky-tonk outside Sandy Creek, Georgia, where she lived. Every Friday night they came to dance, relax—let their hair down.

The bar overlooked a river. On cool nights, patrons could sit outside with the heaters going, drinking beer and listening to country music. On warm nights, they were inside with the AC on full blast. The music was hot, and the drinks were cold. *Perfect*. The bar was run-down, the clientele was a little rough around the edges, and bar fights were not uncommon, but she and Felicia loved it there.

Serena had been so much fun that they decided to continue the party at her apartment. She offered to drive them back to

get Felicia's car when they were ready to leave, and that's when they ran into trouble. They didn't have much to drink at her place, but Serena had a lead foot. The cop pulled them over for speeding. Who knew a bag of weed was in the glove compartment?

Probably Serena, but it didn't matter. Serena gave the cop attitude. Her license was expired. Turned out, she was also under twenty-one and had been served in a bar. They were all thrown in the pokey. Since it was too late to wake the judge, they had to spend the night.

And what an experience that was. One she never wanted to repeat. They shared the cell block with a man who sang at the top of his lungs, had a small bladder and peed all night. The town drunk was there too. He vomited continuously, so the place smelled like vomit and piss. They didn't sleep a wink.

Lucky for her, the judge was an old friend of Colt's. Colt just happened to be in town after visiting their parents in Atlanta before heading off to Haywood Lake, Florida, for God only knew what. He'd been searching for something ever since leaving the SEALs.

Since she and Felicia had no prior police record and confessed that they didn't really know Serena, they were let go with a stern lecture from the judge and Colt.

Isabelle loved seeing her brother but not when he was getting her out of jail. He was always the golden child who followed the rules and made something of himself. She was the baby of the family and a wild child. So what if she couldn't settle down or that she hadn't found what she really loved in life or, for that matter, someone to love?

Thoughts of a tall, muscular drink of sexiness she met a couple of months ago filled her mind. She'd fallen into his arms like a wanton hussy. He made her feel like a queen, and he was the perfect one-night stand. Digger! She didn't know his real name, just that he had ten magic fingers that made her body sing. All night long. By early morning, Isabelle snuck out while he slept. She took one last look at his perfect body, black hair, and chin scruff, before she put on her clothes, blew

him a kiss, and slinked out of the motel. She hated to do it, but he was passing through and probably a lot more mature than she was.

No man deserved her brand of craziness.

“Isabelle, when are you going to do more with your business?” Colt’s voice brought her back to reality. He stood beside her car as she unloaded the soaps and lotions she sold at the farmers’ market. He was leaving today, and she’d miss him.

“Hey, look at me. I’m doing great.” She handed him a crate of soap. The scent of lavender and rose petals wafted up through the box. Her soap and lotions were fun to make, but she didn’t do it full-time, just when she wanted to or needed money.

He shook his head. “You work part-time and don’t make enough money to afford a decent apartment.” Colt pursed his lips. “I worry about you.”

“Don’t worry, big brother.” She patted him on the shoulder. “One of these days, I’ll have it figured out, and you’ll be proud of me.”

“Isabelle, I am proud of you.” Colt gave her a small smile. “I only worry because I love you. But one of these days, I might not be around if you get into real trouble.”

“Pffft. I can handle myself.” She waved him off with a reassuring smile.

Her brother sighed but helped her and Felicia move the rest of the boxes. After the boxes were unpacked and in her stall, Colt kissed her on the cheek, made her promise not to get into any more trouble and left. She would miss him but hopefully would see him soon.

The morning went well. They sold out of all the soaps and lotions. Isabelle thought about making more for the following weekend. Rent was due on their modest two-bedroom apartment, and they were short.

She packed the empty boxes into her van and closed it when she sensed a presence behind her. Isabelle turned quickly

and almost bumped into a tall, dark-haired, bulky man. His face was pleasant enough, but his eyes were ice-cold arctic blue and staring at her.

“Um? Hi?”

“Isabelle?”

Isabelle cocked her head. “Yeah? Can I help you?” She looked at the boxes. “I’m sorry, I’m all sold out.”

“Don’t want soaps. You owe us something.”

What? Isabelle searched her mind. Yeah, she owed a little on a credit card, but she was up to date on payments. Besides, credit card companies didn’t send thuggy-looking guys to collect payment.

Did they?

“You stole some things from Serena, a big something that we want back.”

Felicia gulped.

Serena? “I don’t have anything of hers.” Isabelle turned away from him. “Besides, I don’t really know Serena. We only met once.”

He grabbed her shoulder and roughly spun her around to face him. The clip in her hair fell out, and she was sure her shoulder would have bruises. The man’s eyes were now a dark blue and just as menacing.

“Oh, but you do.” His cold stare made her shiver and not in a good way. “Fifty thousand dollars. The money she claims you and your friend stole from her apartment along with the drugs.”

Oh, no. No, no, no. This can’t be happening. “We’ve never stolen anything from her.”

The man puffed up his chest and pulled back his jacket to show her his gun.

Isabelle gulped. This was not good. Not good at all.

And where was Colt when she needed him?

On his way to Florida. *Great.*

“You have a week to get it to me.” He lowered his jacket. “I’ll be here next Saturday. Have it or else.”

The two women stared at each other. When Isabelle glanced around to look at the thug, he was gone. Gone like a shadow which probably meant he could appear again at any time. What the hell were they going to do? She couldn’t go to the cops. After all, they just released her from jail.

She could try to talk to Serena. No, that was a bad idea. Someone might be watching her place. Besides, Serena was a liar.

Felicia was wringing her hands. “Oh God. Oh God. What are we going to do?”

The only thing that made sense was to pack up their belongings and get out of town. The man would be back, and the next time, he wouldn’t be so nice. Nice? She shook her head.

They’d drive to Florida and find Colt. She didn’t have to tell him what happened, but they would be safe with him.

CHAPTER TWO

Will Blake looked down at the long row of broccoli he'd just planted and wiped his brow. It was the end of October, and the seedlings he started in the greenhouse a couple of months ago were tough enough to stand outside on their own. There was nothing better than getting his hands in the dirt, planting for the future.

He'd grown up in New England, where most vegetable growers put their plants into the ground in late May after the last frost, so a southern planting schedule took some getting used to.

Truth be told, the closest he ever got to gardening growing up was pulling dandelions in a deserted lot filled with discarded beer cans and rubbish. The foster homes he lived in never had enough food for him to eat, let alone money or the resources for a garden.

He'd been in Florida for two months, and there were some things he was still getting accustomed to. Will's former home base of San Diego had near-perfect weather, although it occasionally got uncomfortably warm or cold, especially at night.

While Haywood Lake was located closer to the top of the state and slightly cooler than the southern part, it still had plenty of humid days. He'd had enough humidity on some of the deployments he was on that it didn't bother him much. However, he'd seen enough snow and ice growing up in the north that he didn't want to deal with it when he settled down.

The shoveling, the layers of warmth, the bitter cold—not for him anymore.

“Hey, I’ve got to head out soon,” said Zach Rogers. Zach was a member of the Brotherhood Alliance and had a free morning to help Will.

John “Tex” Keegan, a former SEAL and computer whiz, had recommended Haywood Lake and the Brotherhood Alliance when he learned Will was ready to put down roots and was searching for the perfect place to use his particular skills. Tex was famous in the SEAL community for having his fingers in lots of pots. Last Will heard, Tex was up north, living with the woman he loved, and had two girls.

Zach ran his fingers through his black hair and retrieved his shirt from the pole he’d thrown it over and pulled it over his head.

“What are you going to do with all the vegetables we planted?” he asked Will. “No way in hell you can eat all this by yourself.”

Will chuckled. “True. I’m toying with the idea of offering a basket to people of whatever was in season. CSA or community supported agriculture baskets are popular these days.”

Zach cocked his head. “How does a CSA work?”

“People pay a monthly fee and in return receive a box of whatever crops are producing that week.”

“Having extra money would sure help support the farm,” Zach replied.

Will nodded. “For sure the money would help support the farm, but I’m not ready to do that just yet.”

“Probably more work than you need right now, especially starting out,” said Zach. He pulled his keys from his pocket. “Glad I could help, but I have to get back to the center.”

Will reached out and shook Zach’s hand. “Appreciate the help.”

The gardening was done for now. They walked in comfortable silence back to the house, and Zach left. The guys at the Brotherhood Alliance came by occasionally to dig up a garden or build a shed.

This was his chance to fulfill a lifelong dream of owning a farm.

The CSA wasn't Will's only plan. He also planned on giving free, fresh vegetables to a couple of homeless shelters in town. Depending upon food banks when he was younger, he didn't mind sometimes getting expired food even though it was still good or generic brands instead of the popular brands his friends ate. But it was disappointing not to get fresh vegetables and fruit, which were perishable.

Will had enough of rations, IEDs, mangled flesh, death, and sand to last a lifetime. He just wanted to feed people and protect the vulnerable. However, he didn't need to be reminded that gardening was a different war, physically and emotionally. Crops could be destroyed by unknown insects; predators like deer, raccoons, woodchucks and even cute rabbits could ravish a garden in no time; the weather could devastate crops in minutes; but a garden connected a person to his humanity.

Chase Maddox, the leader of the Brotherhood Alliance, and the other guys who worked for him were welcoming. None of the men in the Brotherhood wanted to work for a structured company or go into law enforcement. Most had issues from the war that had to be addressed and just needed unstructured peace.

He and Titus "Ghost" Finch had arrived in Florida about the same time. He knew Titus from the teams, although not well. The other thing he learned was that the Brotherhood didn't use nicknames.

It'd been a while since he'd heard "Digger," but that was okay. It was a silly nickname given once his friends found out he wanted to farm. Besides, they weren't in a war zone anymore. He didn't have to worry about bad guys finding him,

and most of all, as Chase explained, the townspeople needed to believe they were just ordinary men doing their jobs.

The Brotherhood was the perfect environment to use his skills, and Haywood Lake was the idyllic town to settle in. It was a bustling small city surrounded by lakes, parks and trees. If he wanted anything, it was available. One could call the downtown a chichi area. There were lots of restaurants, interesting shops, and lots of available farmland, as well as many rich people who holed up in their mansions surrounding the banks of Lake Haywood.

The money Will saved all his years in the service purchased thirty acres of prime farmland outside of town. Land that had never seen chemicals. A small farmhouse, barn, and chicken coop were already on the property, basically old but all in good shape.

Oh, and in front of the five acres he intended to garden, there was a new greenhouse. His pride and joy. He bought a thirty-foot greenhouse that was state of the art with a furnace and rows upon rows of planting shelves. Florida got cold occasionally, and after spending hours encouraging small seeds to sprout, he couldn't let them freeze and die. It had automatic window openers for those humid days and was wind-resistant to one hundred fifty miles per hour because Florida was prone to hurricanes. The greenhouse came in pieces, and guys at the Brotherhood helped him build it. They weren't into planting, but give a guy a hammer or drill and he was happy.

Will also bought assorted fruit trees: avocado, mango, lemon, lime, and fig. They wouldn't produce for several years at best, but Will was a patient man.

He had laying hens in the coop and all the fresh eggs he could eat. The only thing left to be done was to install fencing on the property for some cattle and sheep, but that was down the line. At some point in time, he'd renovate the house, but since it was only he who lived in it, renovating wasn't on the top of his list. Will had enough on his plate right now.

Will walked into the kitchen, washed the dirt from his hands, grabbed a cup of coffee, then headed out to the porch. He leaned gently against the back of his rocking chair, taking in the peaceful silence. A light wind was blowing, and the fresh scent of the pine trees surrounding the property wafted by. A sense of accomplishment washed over him. He was content, finally.

The only thing missing was a loving woman. Someone who could make him laugh, spark joy in his heart, and dance in the rain. He thought he'd found his soulmate, but she was miles away in Georgia.

He fingered the sticker with the logo she'd dropped as she snuck out of his bed before the sun came up. The design consisted of two blue fish intertwined. No name, nothing to identify where it came from or what it meant. It was as mysterious as the woman.

CHAPTER THREE

“Isabelle, remind me again why we’re doing this,” asked Felicia Montgomery as she placed a bar of soap in a wooden box. Felicia was Isabelle’s best friend from childhood, the friend who participated in all Isabelle’s silly schemes, stood up for her even when she was wrong, and who Isabelle loved unconditionally.

Felicia hovered over Isabelle, wringing her hands. It was sad that anyone over five foot two could hover over her. Being short was both a blessing and a curse. A blessing because people mistook her for helpless—she was anything but. Well, most of the time. It was a curse because she could never reach that high shelf.

“What we’re doing is running, hmmm, relocating because we value our lives,” Isabelle replied. “Felicia, if we stay here, whoever that guy was is going to bring friends, probably hurt us and try to make us pay fifty thousand dollars. Do you have that kind of money?”

“You know I don’t.” Felicia rubbed her arms. “Crap, why did we ever think Serena was fun or get involved with her?”

“Well, that’s spilt milk. What we need to do is get out of town. I think moving to Haywood Lake, Florida, and living closer to Colt will be safe,” Isabelle replied. She stared at her best friend. “You have to promise not to mention this little problem to Colt. He’ll go all ballistic on me, and I really don’t want him involved. We can handle this on our own.”

“Little problem?” Felicia snorted but finally sighed in resignation and nodded.

The morning air was chilly and smelled of autumn. The trees were a kaleidoscope of bright oranges, yellows, and reds, with the occasional green pines sprinkled amidst them. The two had had their fill of sweet and crunchy apples and collected a basket of apples for Colt. Isabelle thought she might make him an apple pie—his favorite—so that he wouldn’t question things too much.

Because if her ex-SEAL brother was anything, he was persistent, and Isabelle didn’t know how long she could hold out before spilling the beans. And then look out. After Colt took a piece out of her hide, he would do anything to protect her.

Isabelle was tired of him protecting her. She was a grown-ass woman now, not the little girl he protected when she was younger.

They finished putting the last of the soaps and herbal concoctions in the van. The drive would take them a couple of days, and Felicia would follow in her car. Isabelle hoped this unpleasantness would all be behind them when they settled in Florida and life could return to normal.

It helped that they’d rented a two-bedroom house on the outskirts of town. It was far enough away to make the rental affordable but close enough to the farmers’ market and stores to sell their products. Isabelle hoped someday to have some land and even better, a storefront of her own. She already imagined how the shop would look. She would sell fresh herbs, handmade pots, her special soaps and herbal blends for cooking and bathing. Soft music would play in the background, and people would visit from all over. Maybe she’d put on monthly dinners featuring herbs—oh, the possibilities.

First, though, they had to get to Haywood Lake alive, work hard to save money and go from there.

Because right now all she and Felicia had between them was one old car and an even older van, the clothes on their

backs, a small savings account, her box of herbal recipes and a thug looking for fifty thousand dollars or worse.

CHAPTER FOUR

Will locked his car door and was assaulted by music from the country band wafting through the parking lot of Lucky's Bar. It was Saturday night, and the lot was packed. The renovated warehouse was the perfect spot for a bar. Several small businesses shared the space but closed early. He'd been here once before on a Sunday night when it was much quieter.

He walked into the bar and looked for his friends. Colt Zander said he'd meet him here. The others would come later. Will heard his name called and saw Colt at the end of the long wooden bar. A yell came from the pool area, followed by a clack of balls. He hoped to get some pool-playing in.

"Hey, man." Colt stood and shook his hand. "I've been watching for an empty table. The place is packed tonight."

Will took a seat next to him and ordered a beer. The bar hadn't changed since the last time he was there.

The stage was off to his right, with a small dance floor. The four-piece band was backlit with red and blue lights. Right now, there were so many people dancing that they pushed the tables back to make more room. A huge glass-front refrigerator was behind the bar, where three bartenders were hustling. Shelves above and around it held various liquor bottles. TVs at either end of the bar played sports.

"Hey, I see a table," said Colt. "Let's go." He led the way to a corner table away from the dance floor.

Will pulled out a chair and sat. He glanced around. "This is good. Away from people, and the music isn't so loud." He

took a slug of beer. “Who else is coming tonight?”

“Hmmm.” Colt tapped his fingers on the table. “Let’s see. Finn and Zach said they’d drive over. Cody and Linc are coming.” He cocked his head. “Have you met them?”

“No, I don’t believe so.”

“Cody Miller and Shawn Lincoln are with the sheriff’s department.”

That was great. It was helpful to be connected with law enforcement. You never knew when you’d need them. Having been a SEAL, he didn’t need help defending himself, but crime wasn’t always of a personal nature.

He’d met Colt and Finn Ryder at the Brotherhood meetings.

He knew Zach lived in a cabin at the Paws for Caring campus. Finn and Dexter Drum had also lived in cabins there but recently moved to a house next door to another member, Ryker Barlow; Ryker just got engaged to Dani Ward, who had a young son. He’d heard that Ryker and the Brotherhood had stepped in to protect her from a deranged man taking bribes to get kids into good colleges.

The group was expanding. Chase Maddox, the director of the Brotherhood Alliance, mentioned a couple more men were expected to arrive in the next couple of months.

Chase and the Brotherhood Alliance differed from what Will expected.

Sure, it had structure, and their work was serious, but Chase was easygoing and totally in love with his fiancée, Naomi. The guys were invited to their house on the campus for cookouts and, he suspected, to bond with one another. He’d met Chase’s sister Joy and her fiancé, Liam McBride, who worked for the police department. They lived at the end of the Paws for Caring driveway. Joy was a hoot. She reminded him of someone else. Someone who snuck out of his bed early morning a couple of months ago before he woke up. After she rocked his world. Before he got her name.

Will had been assigned two easy jobs since he arrived. He had helped a woman escape her abusive spouse and move into a shelter. He had also assisted an older veteran settling into his new apartment. Will was the liaison between the man and social services. Sometimes people needed an advocate and couldn't find or pay for one. Will was able to set up and organize Meals on Wheels, a cleaning service, and a nurse to monitor the veteran's medications. It had been a satisfying assignment. These two jobs were paid for by funds from the sponsor of the Brotherhood Alliance, while other assignments were commercially based, and clients would foot the bill. It was a win-win for all involved.

Two dark-haired men walked over to their table in T-shirts and shorts. Will guessed it was Cody and Lincoln.

Colt made introductions, and Lincoln said to call him Linc as they shook hands. Both were about six feet tall and strong, if their handshakes were any indication.

They pulled up chairs.

"Zach and Finn pulled in after we parked. They're in the parking lot fending off badge bunnies," said Linc. He looked at Cody and shook his head.

Cody laughed. "I have to give those two credit. They find trouble wherever they go."

"Call me curious. But what the hell is a badge bunny?" Will asked.

Cody stared at him like he had two heads. "Buckle bunny, badge bunny, bunker bunny, tag chasers, frog hog." He cocked his head. "You've never heard of these."

"I guess I never thought about it. We had frog hogs in Coronado. Frankly, that kind of woman never turned me on," Will replied.

That wasn't totally true. When he became a SEAL, having all that attention from beautiful women was a turn-on, and more than a few times, he had taken a woman home for a night to fuck—one and done. But that was then. Now he was looking for stability and a different type of woman. One that

he could love and who loved him back. One he could build a future with, have babies with, and—he closed his eyes for a second—one he could make love to all night.

“Well, they’re fun for a quick lay but not long-term,” said Linc. “Me, I’m looking for a woman who can put up with my hours, who’s beautiful and sexy as hell in the bedroom.”

“Pffft, I think anyone who could put up with you would be fair game,” said Cody.

Linc playfully punched him in the arm. “Who’s in your bed?”

Cody opened his mouth to reply but was interrupted.

“What do you mean, who’s in whose bed?” asked Finn. He and Zach had just arrived and taken seats.

“We were just discussing Linc’s ideal woman,” answered Cody.

Finn arched an eyebrow at Linc. “Yeah? How’s that working out for you?”

Linc took a swig of beer. “Better than what you all have.”

Cody sniggered.

“Guys, settle down. We’re here to have a good time, not talk about a woman who isn’t in your bed,” said Zach. Tonight, he looked rested. Usually he had dark circles under his eyes. Will wondered what kept Zach awake at night. Zach never talked about himself. He didn’t smile much either except when he was talking to Melissa.

Will, Finn, and Colt shared a knowing look and a smirk.

Will hadn’t been in Haywood Lake long, but he already knew that Zach was head over heels for Melissa Doherty, the Paws for Caring training coordinator. Zach had yet to progress from the gawking and small-talk stage. Will got the impression that Melissa would love to go out with Zach if he ever made his move, but he sure wasn’t getting involved in someone else’s love life when he had none of his own. Not that it was any of his business, but he thought Zach was suffering from

some form of PTSD since he'd never moved out of the cabins and avoided most people.

“How was your trip up north?” Finn asked Colt.

Colt had left for a few days to visit family. Will got the impression there were problems with family, but Colt was tight-lipped about it.

Colt ran a hand through his dirty-blond hair and sighed. “Everything with my sister is dramatic.” He didn't elaborate.

Okay then. Colt wasn't talking about it, and Will wasn't asking. Although there were still times when Will would have given his left nut to elaborate about his sister or his family, that was all in the past.

Thankfully, their discussion paused when a server came over to take their orders.

Memories flashed through his mind of a sprite who rocked his world in bed not so long ago and made him laugh. A woman he could see himself with forever.

A woman who left before he got her name. Why did she leave?

CHAPTER FIVE

“Hey,” shouted Colt. “Some help here.”

Isabelle’s heart raced as she watched her brother attempt to move Felicia’s dresser out of the rental van. He had it balanced on the edge of the truck. It looked deceptively light, but Isabelle knew better. Looks could be deceiving, just like Felicia herself.

Her friend looked innocent, like she’d be a pushover, but she had hidden strength and resilience that surprised people. And her brother was too optimistic about his abilities to move a solid mahogany dresser by himself.

Chase Maddox, Colt’s boss, leisurely strolled over to help Colt. “Need to work on those muscles,” Chase teased. “You’re getting weak.”

Her brother Colt was big, but Chase was even bigger. Colt had mentioned they worked occasionally for a security group in town, and there were about ten employees now, all ex-military. If they all looked like Colt and Chase, she and Felicia had a lot of ogling to do.

“Fuck you,” Colt replied. He looked around the yard and spotted Felicia. “How the hell did you two women move this?”

Felicia smirked. “Carefully.”

Isabelle did a mic drop. Colt rolled his eyes—typical big-brother stuff.

She, Joy Maddox, and Naomi Fields—Chase’s sister, and his fiancée—were helping them set up the kitchen. They all

had boxes in their arms and turned when Colt called out. The four women shared a knowing glance.

Isabelle sure wasn't telling him they had unpacked the drawers and taken them out of the dresser before moving it. Yes, it was heavy, but did Colt feel he had to show off and try to carry the dresser with the drawers still in it? The male ego always mystified her.

The rain had stopped a few hours ago, and the air was sweet and clean.

The little house she and Felicia rented outside of town was perfect for them—a modest two-bedroom, two-bath, no-frills tin-roofed ranch. Isabelle imagined herself sitting on a rocking chair on the huge front porch, watching life go by while having a cup of coffee or a drink. The house had a big backyard with a shed, one reason they were drawn to it. That, and the rent wouldn't break them, at least not for a while. Not until they got Two Fishes Soap Works up and running. And profitable—couldn't forget profitable.

Chase and Colt struggled up the path and into the house with the dresser. The drawers were still in it. “Where does this go?” Colt huffed as sweat poured down his face.

“First bedroom on the right,” said Felicia. They watched as Colt and Chase cursed and struggled to get the dresser down the narrow hall.

Felicia lifted a brow towards Isabelle and shook her head. “I'm not saying a word.”

Isabelle snorted. Men!

It took less than two hours for the truck to be unloaded and the bedrooms and kitchen to be set up. Isabelle made lemonade and wished she had some mint or another herb to go in it—soon though. There was a perfect patch of lawn where they could put raised beds. The landlord was okay with them gardening as long as they didn't destroy the whole backyard.

“Come on, guys,” Isabelle called out and reached into the kitchen cabinet to bring out four glasses. “I have lemonade and cookies. Store-bought.” She shrugged. “But they'll do.”

Joy grabbed a cookie and a glass of lemonade. “Works for me.”

Isabelle was happy that Colt had some time off and brought Chase.

Sure, they could have moved the truck contents themselves, but this was a treat. She was thrilled that Joy and Naomi came as well. She and Felicia had bonded with them. Joy was the bubbly optimist, and Naomi, the seriously observant type, and they made for an interesting dynamic, not unlike her and Felicia. Besides, the women were interesting and fun. Joy had invited her and Felicia to join some friends for dinner one night.

“I love your soaps, and this logo is terrific.” Joy reached into a box of soap on the kitchen counter, picked one up, and sniffed it. “Yum! Do the fish have a significance?” she asked.

“Yes. We didn’t know what to name the business.” Isabelle took a sip of lemonade and placed the glass down. “I’m a Pisces, and the astrological symbol is two fish going in opposite directions, representing the contrasting facets of life—fantasy and reality.” Isabelle sure wasn’t telling Joy that it also represented her life. They’d find out soon enough.

“Oh, what a terrific idea!” Naomi exclaimed.

Joy had some great suggestions for selling the soaps. She mentioned that she wanted to talk to her friend about one idea and also suggested selling at the bustling farmers’ market held downtown on Saturday mornings. Isabelle couldn’t wait to walk around the market and scope out where they might fit in. That would have to wait until the weekend.

Chase and Colt walked into the kitchen, brushing dust off their clothes.

She stifled a giggle. The guys looked like they’d gone ten rounds with Godzilla. They were covered in dust, sweat, and dirt. “I can’t thank you enough for helping, especially on the heavier items.”

“You’re welcome,” Colt said. “Try not to move anytime soon, though.”

Felicia handed Colt a glass of lemonade. Isabelle noticed Colt brushing her hand as she was giving it to him. Felicia turned a bright red and glanced away. Colt's eyes followed her. They had been dancing around each other since high school. Isabelle hadn't said anything to either of them, not sure that they were really into each other, but one of these days ... one of these days, she was going to find out for sure. And they were perfect for each other. Felicia liked order and stability, as did Colt. They were both loyal, trustworthy and deserved happiness and love in their lives.

"So, what's next?" asked Naomi. She had pulled out a chair from the table and sat. Chase was seated next to her.

"Hmmm." Isabelle gave it some thought. What was next? The first thing was getting the house in order. As Felicia always pointed out, "Mess makes stress." While Isabelle wasn't the neatest person, she tried to pick things up and put them away.

"We'll check out the farmers' market in Haywood Lake and maybe some of the others in the surrounding area. The town will probably demand we get a permit." She touched her cheek, "Although we aren't selling food items, so maybe not. I'll call on the specialty stores in town to see if they'll take our soaps on consignment."

"Let's not forget we have to set up the shed," said Felicia.

"Are you going to make your soap out there?" asked Naomi.

Isabelle nodded. "The only thing we need is electricity, and the owner said we could run it as long as we paid for the installation. Hopefully, it won't cost too much."

"I know an electrician in town who will give you a fair price," said Colt.

Isabelle figured he knew a lot of tradespeople since he operated a garage in town.

"That would be great." Her stomach rumbled. "We have bread and peanut butter. Can I make anyone a sandwich?"

"Nah. I need to get back to the garage," said Colt.

“We’re good,” said Joy. “I have some paperwork to do for school.” Joy was a middle-school teacher. Isabelle thought she must have the patience of a saint to deal with teenagers and was glad she didn’t have to.

Naomi nodded and said, “I have a test to study for, and I know Chase has a few things to do.” Naomi was studying to be a therapist focusing on women’s issues, and Isabelle resisted asking her if there was a particular reason she went into that field, but since they had just met, she’d hold off on the questions.

She and Felicia said goodbye and waved to the group as they drove off, then collapsed in rocking chairs on the porch. “Well, that didn’t take long. I’m so glad for the help,” said Felicia, and laughed. “If we had to move that stupid dresser a second time, I would have cut it into firewood first. Damn, that was heavy.”

They burst into giggles. No way was she ever telling Colt that she and Felicia wore themselves out just getting it into the truck.

Felicia leaned and rocked slowly. “Well, we made it.” She raised her glass. “Here’s to never seeing Serena or the mob again.”

“Here, here.” Isabelle raised hers.

She knew eventually the mob would find them and demand their money, or worse. However, Felicia had had enough terror in her life; Isabelle was not going to say anything to break her fragile peace or happiness.

CHAPTER SIX

Joy kept her promise and invited Isabelle and Felicia to meet some of her friends at the Red Rooster Diner for homemade pie and coffee.

The diner was a throwback to the 1950s. Isabelle loved it—from the red-leather-covered booth seats, the knickknacks from defunct diners the owner collected that adorned the walls, the tiered pie holders displaying various pies—and didn't the pies look delicious?—to the round-topped barstools that lined the counter. Owners Margie and Walter Jones hugged Naomi warmly and greeted the women. Naomi had waitressed here before she met Chase and pursued her education.

The booth was large enough for six people. So besides her, Felicia, and Naomi, Joy invited Mallory Chapman, who owned a yoga studio, and Nicki Vanderdorf, who owned a floral shop. If Isabelle was a betting woman, which she was, she appreciated the fact that Joy invited two women who owned shops in town where Two Fishes Soap Works could be sold.

As they indulged in the sweet treats, Joy recounted the tale of Colt trying to move a heavy dresser by himself. “So, there Colt was ...” Joy was telling Nicki and Mallory. She finished the story with Felicia’s perfectly timed answer of “carefully” and Isabelle’s mic drop when he asked how she and Isabelle had moved it.

The women laughed. The memory of Colt trying to move the heavy dresser by himself still made Isabelle smile, but she was grateful her brother had stepped in to help. He was always

there when she needed him. Sometimes it felt like he was stepping into her life a little too much, but still.

“Thank goodness they volunteered to help,” said Felicia, “or we’d still be moving in.”

“I have to say it was quite enjoyable watching all those muscles in action,” said Joy, grinning. “Not that I was ogling or anything.”

Mallory snorted. “It’s our duty as women to ogle. Besides, you have your own hunk at home.”

“I do.” Joy’s eyes sparkled as she nodded in agreement. “I ogle Liam all the time until he turns red and demands that I stop.”

“Demands?” whispered Felicia. She tensed and rapidly blinked her eyes. Isabelle patted her leg under the booth. Oh dear. Isabelle opened her mouth to say something, anything that wouldn’t trigger Felicia’s anxiety.

“Yes.” Joy winked. “Orders.”

“Eeew, I don’t want to hear about your love life,” exclaimed Naomi.

Whew. That conversation turned positive quickly. The women smiled and nodded. Tragedy averted, for now.

“Okay, ladies, three slices of blueberry pie, three slices of apple pie.” Margie and another waitress placed the plates of pie and steaming cups of fragrant coffee on the table.

Thankfully, the whole sex discussion ended. Not that Isabelle minded talking about sex when she got some, but that part of her life had dried up. Hopefully, there was a man in her future. Maybe someday she’d run into her potential soulmate again. Then again, if she did, perhaps he wouldn’t like her crazy.

“Yum.” Isabelle looked at the generous pie slices and licked her lips. It’d been too long since she had homemade pie.

“Margie makes the best pie,” said Naomi as she took a bite of her blueberry pie.

The women were quiet as they enjoyed the pie. After a few minutes, Joy cleared her throat.

“Isabelle. Felicia. I invited you here to get to know some women in Haywood Lake and in particular Mallory and Nicki.” She tapped her fingers on the table, then continued. “I’ve already spoken to both of them about your soaps.”

Mallory nodded. “I would love to have you both come to my yoga studio, Spiritual Bliss, and bring some soap samples.”

Hoo boy, this was the in they needed to get known and make money. “We’d love to. Anytime you’re available,” said Isabelle.

“And I’m always looking for interesting and homemade items for the shop,” said Nicki. “I have a small niche towards the back of the shop where I showcase local items. I also include handmade items in gift baskets that we send out.”

“That’s wonderful,” exclaimed Felicia. “Why don’t I set up appointments with each of you for Isabelle and me to visit next week?”

“Absolutely,” Nicki replied. “Shoot me a text, and we’ll go from there.” She fumbled in her purse and brought out a business card.

Felicia took the card. “Petals to Go. Catchy.”

Nicki shrugged. “I wanted something that individuals and businesses would understand.”

“It works,” exclaimed Joy. “Nicki is the top florist in the city.”

“And here’s my card,” said Mallory, handing it to Felicia. “Spiritual Bliss has been in business for over ten years, and we have a large following.”

“I can’t thank you all enough for welcoming us,” said Isabelle. “I believe you’ll love our Two Fishes Soap.”

“Our next stop will be the farmers’ market Saturday to see what it’s like,” said Felicia. “Hopefully, our shed will be ready to make soap by the weekend. We’ll need to source herbs and

flowers and get a business license.” She groaned. “So many items on our to-do list.”

“You girls will do fine. Haywood Lake has a strong clientele that loves handmade items,” said Nicki.

Naomi stood. “This has been fun, but I have a test coming up that I need to study for. So I’ll say goodbye. Let’s do this again.”

“Hear, hear,” Joy replied and scooted out of the booth. “Naomi, wait for me; I need a ride home. Liam dropped me off this morning.”

Mallory and Nicki also gathered their things. “We need to get going too. Let us know when you’re available to visit,” said Mallory.

“Will do,” Felicia said.

The table was quiet after the group left.

Then the two women squealed quietly.

“Well,” Isabelle said. “This has been a productive morning. I know we can put the soaps into both businesses.”

“I agree,” Felicia replied.

Margie came around with a pot of coffee and refilled their cups.

Isabelle lifted her cup. “Here’s to a successful journey. One that is filled with lots of sales and peace. Especially peace.”

“Peace.” Felicia gently clinked her cup to Isabelle’s.

Peace would be wonderful, but Isabelle didn’t want to dampen the mood by also adding “staying safe.” Hopefully, with Colt living close by, whatever happened in Georgia wouldn’t follow them here, and she sure wasn’t mentioning to Felicia the phone calls that ended with heavy breathing.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Isabelle and Felicia lugged the last of their boxes of soaps into Spiritual Bliss and carefully arranged them on the display stands. Mallory gave them a whole wall to feature their soap, which was more than they had hoped for. They could hear an instructor's voice in the background leading a group in yoga.

It was a beautiful venue located in a renovated warehouse downtown. The space was on the second floor and divided into three rooms with paneled glass doors separating them. Potted green plants and a fountain in the corner created a peaceful refuge.

Felicia stood back and smiled. "This is the prettiest display we've ever done," she exclaimed. Isabelle agreed.

The shelves were filled with the brightly colored and muted tones of the soaps they made for the shop. They arranged the soap according to color, and it looked like a rainbow exploded. There were rows of soap featuring bright yellow citrus and calendula, a light brown cinnamon soap, an off-white honey and beeswax, a lovely pale green eucalyptus soap, a creamy pink rosehip with darker pink swirls and a pretty lavender soap with lavender blossoms and white swirled through it. All were encased in kraft paper with their logo, tied with twine and a sprig of fresh greenery.

"Oh my," said Mallory as she walked in. She had just finished a class, and this was her first glimpse at the display. Her eyes widened in awe. "The soaps are beautiful." She sniffed the air. "And smell good too. I put an ad in the paper

and on the bulletin board telling people the soaps are available here as well mentioning them on my social media accounts.”

Isabelle’s heart skipped a beat; that was way more than she expected. They still had to talk to Nicki at Petals to Go and find a space at the farmers’ market, but it looked like they were on their way to making money—something they would need in a couple of months.

“Grab a water and sit for a minute,” Mallory said. They grabbed water from the fridge and sat at a small table.

Isabelle’s heart pounded. They had to discuss soap prices, and she wondered what percentage what Mallory would take.

“I think the soaps will sell well. Tell me what you want to price them at.”

Felicia gave her a price.

“That’s a fair price for handmade soap,” said Mallory.

“What percentage do you usually get?” Isabelle asked. She held her breath, waiting for Mallory’s response. The soaps looked spectacular in the little store, which held beautiful jewelry pieces, handprinted scarves and headbands, and other things.

“Hmmm.” Mallory paused for a moment. “I usually get twenty percent, but I’ll waive that for three months until you get a following.”

Isabelle blew out her breath. The tension in her gut released. “Wow, wasn’t expecting that. It’s very generous. However, we didn’t come here for charity or to take advantage of you.”

“You’re not,” said Mallory, leaning back in the chair. “I do this for all the new artists. It’s good business for both of us. You gain exposure and new customers. My clients get to experience something new and exciting. Believe me when I tell you that my clients love new products and will share them with their friends.” She shrugged. “It works for both of us.”

Isabelle and Felicia exchanged glances.

“What can we say but thank you.” Isabelle finished her water and glanced at Felicity. “We have another stop to make, but let us know when you need more product.”

“Will do.” Mallory glanced at her watch. “Yikes, I have a class soon. I’ll be in touch soon.”

The women stood and shook hands. Walking out to the bright sunshine, Isabelle and Felicia said nothing until they got into Isabelle’s car. They looked at each other, then they let out screams of pure delight.

They were finally on their way to becoming upstanding citizens and businesswomen. Colt would be so proud of them. Almost everything Isabelle wished for was coming true. Now if she could only find the man she snuck out on and if the mob never found them, life would be perfect. That wasn’t too much to ask. Was it?

CHAPTER EIGHT

A small breeze floated over Haywood Lake, and Felicia raised her face to catch it. Voices from the other vendors were background noise, and the delicious scents of cooked meats teased her nose. She carefully added one more bar of soap to the display, stepping back to admire the finished product. The muted tones of pale green and the off-white blended nicely with the creamy pink and lavender.

Wait. A couple of bars didn't have tags on them. She scooped down and pulled out their go-bag filled with essentials they needed. She rummaged through the extra tablecloths, pens, scissors, tape, knife, rubber bands, and suntan lotion and finally found the tags on the bottom of the bag. One problem corrected.

Two Fishes Soap Works was a huge success at the farmers' market. Today was only their second Saturday, and if things went well, they'd be sold out before noon.

She hated being by herself and the face of the company, but Isabelle wasn't feeling well and stayed home. Felicia's expertise was behind the scenes—doing the books, helping to make the soap, and doing the social media. Anything that didn't require talking to people. Isabelle was an extrovert. She loved talking to people and building connections. They were a good team.

Isabelle had been her best friend since kindergarten. Isabelle had stepped in and adopted the skinny, smelly new girl on her first day of school after the other kids mocked Felicia's secondhand clothes and worn-out sneakers. From that

day forward, Felicia spent her free time at Isabelle's house, being doted on by Isabelle's parents and largely ignored by Isabelle's older brother Colt.

Colt! She was in love with him and had been since the first day she went home with Isabelle. Twelve-year-old Colt looked at her up and down once and then promptly ignored her. It wasn't until he graduated from high school and returned on furlough that he acknowledged her existence.

She was in seventh grade at the time and dealing with teenage angst. One Saturday afternoon, she was sitting outside Isabelle's house crying. He stopped to ask her what was wrong and if her parents were still giving her a hard time. That was a laugh. If only it were just a hard time.

Her parents collected welfare and were addicts—nasty addicts. Nothing Felicia did was right. They tried to get her to steal money from Isabelle's parents so they could buy booze and drugs, but she refused. Out of nowhere, her mother backhanded her across the face and called her useless, told her to go out and whore herself, make her family some money. While it wasn't the first time they had hit her, it was the first time she'd been hit in the face where everyone could see.

She'd covered her face with her hands. She wouldn't, couldn't look at him. She didn't want to see the pity in his eyes. Colt had gently turned her around, removed her hands from her face, and gasped. Guess he wasn't expecting the black eye. He gently wiped her tears and swore.

“Goddamn it, Felicia. Why didn't you tell me?”

Why would she? What was he supposed to do? Confront her parents? They were beyond help.

She couldn't answer him. This was embarrassing times a million.

“Felicia, I'm so sorry.” He'd gathered her into his arms. “I should have been here to protect you.”

Ugh. Shaking off the memories, Felicia focused her attention on the customers entering the market. She took in all the colorful displays of fruits and vegetables and several

booths featuring homemade crafts, honey, cheeses, and colorful flowers intermingled with food vendors. The aromas made her stomach growl.

The booth next to them showcased a rainbow of hand-dyed yarn. Felicia was inspired to buy some and make a sweater. She nixed that thought quickly. Knitting tested her patience, and she had two left thumbs.

On the other side was an array of homemade cheeses from goats, sheep, and cows. She grimaced at the thought of milking the animals, although she loved the cheeses. A booth a few stalls down manned by a young man displayed overflowing baskets of fresh vegetables and cartons of fresh eggs. She thought about buying a dozen eggs. Maybe the next time she had extra money.

Most of the vendors were nice and helpful except one. Mandy Stevens. She was another soap vendor. They had a pretty blue logo with M and M Soap Company printed on it. Too bad she wasn't nice. Mandy was well over fifty with graying hair and an attitude that turned most people off. She was very vocal that the market didn't need another soap vendor, and she was especially upset that Two Fishes Soap Works was featured in *Spiritual Bliss* and *Petals to Go*—venues she tried to get into but failed, most likely because she was so nasty.

Despite the tension with Mandy, Felicia remained focused on selling their soaps. The morning was going fast; customers came and went. She and Isabelle had come up with the formulas using natural ingredients and infusing them with unique scents. Customers loved the vibrant colors and attention to detail.

Lost in her thoughts, Felicia was startled to find a large, good-looking, dark-haired man staring at her. His intensity disturbed her, but she put on a happy face.

“Can I help you?”

His brow furrowed as he held out a familiar logo—the original logo of Two Fishes Soap Works without the name. “I’m looking for the owner. Is she here?”

Felicia stepped back, fear gripping her tight like a vice. Why would this man be asking about the logo and the owner? Was he with the mob? Oh God. How had they found them? He had a look about him—hard and unyielding.

“No,” she replied, her voice quivering. That was a safe enough answer. She wasn’t giving the intense man any information. “Why?”

The man furrowed his brow, sighed and ran a hand through his hair. “I’ve been trying to identify this logo for a while, and here you are.”

“Okaaay.” Fear gripped Felicia. She didn’t want to engage him if he was with the mob.

“I’m looking for the owner. What’s her name?”

“Hmmm.” *Think fast, Felicia.* “I don’t know,” she replied, her voice shaking slightly.

His piercing gaze bore into her. Felicia’s imagination ran wild. If he was with the dope dealers, would he shake her down? Shoot her? Kidnap her in front of all these people? Oh God. Felicia looked around. People were laughing and buying products. No one was paying attention to her and the muscular guy staring at her.

“Oh.” He bit his lip. “Okay. Can you leave a note that Will Blake was looking for her?”

“Sure.”

He nodded and walked away. Felicia’s heart raced, and she trembled in fear. Could it be the mob? She needed to tell Isabelle and fast.

As the market began to close, Felicia hastily packed up their booth. Her mind was filled with impending doom. It wouldn’t take long to get home, prepare themselves for whatever was coming.

CHAPTER NINE

The drive back to the house was taking too long. Felicia wanted to avoid speeding and possibly getting a ticket. Besides, there was no extra money to pay for a ticket. Her hands grew clammy and kept slipping off the steering wheel. Thoughts of that man asking about Isabelle lingered in her mind. How did the mob track them down? Would she and Isabelle have to move again? Where could they go? Should they tell Colt about the problem? Nah, he already thought they were irresponsible. Besides, what could he possibly do?

Finally, she turned into the dirt drive leading to the sweet ranch she and Isabelle called home. But for how much longer?

She unloaded the empty boxes into the shed, gathered her purse and the cash box, and trudged into the kitchen. Something smelled delicious. Isabelle must have been feeling better because her homemade tomato sauce was bubbling away on the stove.

“Isabelle!” Felicia walked through the kitchen and entered the living room. Her friend was sitting in a chair reading and looked up.

“Hey, you,” she said with a faint smile. “How did it go at the market?”

Felicia plopped down on the couch and placed her purse and cash box beside her. “We sold out.”

“Great.”

Felicia took a deep breath and exhaled. “How are you feeling?”

Isabelle sighed. “Better. My headache finally went away about a half hour ago. I’m sorry I couldn’t go today.”

“It’s okay.” Felicia knew Isabelle sometimes got severe headaches. They usually went away in a few hours. She tapped her fingers on her thigh. “Um. Um.”

Isabelle stared at her. “Spit it out.”

In a rush of words, Felicia recounted what occurred. “A man came by today, holding our logo sticker and looking for the owner; I told him I only worked there and didn’t know the owner. He said to tell you his name was Will Blake and he’d be back. I think he was part of the mob. He’s big and intense. What should we do?”

“Will Blake?” Isabelle tilted her head. “I don’t know any Will Blake. What did he look like?”

“He was big.”

“Big doesn’t tell me anything.”

“He was tall with dark hair and brown eyes. He was a big, muscular guy and intense. Very intense.”

Isabelle shook her head. “Still doesn’t ring a bell. Did he threaten you?”

“No. But we also haven’t had anyone ask about the owner before, and he recognized our logo.”

“Felicia, we shouldn’t worry about it unless he returns to the farmers’ market. He doesn’t know us personally. Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

“Okay. But if he kills us,” Felicia replied, “I’m blaming you.”

CHAPTER TEN

Darkness had fallen.

The Paws for Caring Center was closed. Chase had called a meeting of the Brotherhood Alliance.

There were a couple of other trucks in the lot. Was he late?

Will arrived just as Colt was pulling into the parking lot. They man-hugged and walked inside the quiet facility. No matter how many times he'd been here, he was still impressed by what the center offered.

The dog therapy program was quite popular, as were the self-defense lessons held on Tuesday nights. He'd taught a couple of those classes. It was an interesting mix of people who assembled. Chase's sister Joy and some of her friends came; a couple of women from the shelter that the Brotherhood helped also came. Occasionally, they'd get a man in class, but more often than not, it was just women. It felt good to know that the moves they learned might save their lives or give them minutes to get away.

Will and Colt walked down the hall to the library. It never ceased to amaze Will that no one had suspected that there was a private room hidden behind a bookshelf. Chase mentioned when he informed the employees, they were shocked. The Brotherhood Alliance was taking on outside jobs, and people would be visiting the center. He didn't want anyone to be surprised.

The door would be closed when they discussed their private jobs—the ones where they took on the protection detail

for vulnerable people and didn't charge. Some of these jobs went beyond legal boundaries. Abusers didn't care about following the law and often were not charged with crimes, or they would threaten their victims to keep quiet.

Chase and Ryker looked up from their conversation and nodded. Finn, Dex, and Zach were laughing about something but stopped when he and Colt came in.

"Great, we're all here." Chase looked at his notes. "I'd like to go over details of completed security jobs and tell you about some coming up." He leaned forward. "Ford McCallum will be joining us in a couple of months. Tex recommended him."

That was good news. The Brotherhood Alliance was growing, but so was the need to help people with no means to pay and also take care of paying clients.

They spent a half hour or so discussing previous cases and what went right and wrong. Finally, Chase cleared his throat. "Okay then, we have two paying clients and one who can't." He looked around the table. "Finn and Dex, why don't you take the paying clients, and Zach, I have information to give you about the other."

"Works for me," Finn said. "I hope it is more interesting than the last case where I had to protect some young singer on tour." He shook his head. "Man, those young women just wouldn't leave him alone. One even snuck into the men's room to say hi."

Will chuckled at that. He never understood why a person would wait hours just to see someone famous. But the security provided them with jobs, and the money came in handy. Plus, occasionally they got to use and refine the skills learned in the military.

"Colt."

Colt looked at Chase.

"You, Will, and Ryker will be up next," Chase said. "Questions?"

"Nah, I'm good," said Colt. Will and Ryker shook their heads.

Will checked his watch. Crap. Eleven o'clock already? It was not late, but things started early on the farm, like before sunrise. Tomorrow he was planting an orchard, back-breaking work at best, but he'd have citrus fruits and peaches in a few years.

He got up to leave and started walking down the darkened hallway.

"Hey, Will. Hold up." He stopped, and Colt caught up to him.

"Listen, my sister is looking for compost for her raised beds. I know you use it for your crops. Can you help her with that?"

"How much does she need?" Will thought about the compost pile at the outer edge of his farm, the one the previous farmer started and he now fed. It continued to grow when they cleaned the chicken house and put dead crops in it. Will was always amazed to see it steaming, that it was a living thing besides providing good crop nutrients.

"Hmmm." Colt looked perplexed. "I know nothing about growing things. Why don't you come with me to her house tomorrow and see what she wants."

There went half a day. But that was what friends were for. "Sure. What time?"

"I'm thinking about one o'clock. I'll pick you up. She lives just outside town, and it shouldn't take too long."

Will nodded. "See you then."

They strolled out into a cool evening.

The darkness cast shadows around them. An owl was hooting in a tree; dark shadows glided in the dark sky—bats, probably. Will paused to inhale the clean air and survey the campus. The cabins were silent. A couple of lights were on. He knew Zach lived in one, and Chase's sister's house was at the end of the driveway. Titus was renting in town near his gym, and Will wondered if Ford would decide to live on campus or in town. He had an extra room at his house, and he

got lonely some evenings, but was he ready to offer it to someone? Nah, not right now.

The drive home was peaceful and traffic-free. He finally pulled into his driveway. A single light shone inside the house, casting shadows across the front yard. Without curtains, the place almost looked abandoned. What would it be like to see more lights glowing within, maybe even have a woman waiting for him? Someone to make his life sweeter.

Will shook his head. He was getting way ahead of himself.

First, he needed to get the farm in order, then work on getting his head together. Until then, he wasn't fit for any relationship. Nevertheless, recognizing the logo at the farmers' market was a good luck sign for sure. It was a shame that the woman he talked to had no information about the owner. In fact, it almost seemed like she was afraid of him.

Despite these setbacks, he hoped that someday he'd find the woman he spent the night with. The woman whose name he never got. The night he could never forget.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The next day, Colt picked Will up. It didn't take long to get to Colt's sister's house. Colt spoke a little about her. He mentioned that she recently moved here from Georgia, that she was creative and a free spirit, which annoyed him a little. Will learned Isabelle always got into predicaments and also that Colt loved her dearly.

Pulling into a dirt driveway on the side of a small ranch with a large front porch, Will noticed large blue pots filled with flowers—yellow-orange calendula, purple lavender, and green mints, if Will had to guess. It was a riot of color, and Will felt instantly at home.

He followed Colt as he opened the door.

“Isabelle mentioned she'd be working and to just come in,” said Colt. “Make yourself at home. I'll find Isabelle,” he said as he made his way to the rear of the house.

“No problem,” Will said. He took a moment to explore.

They'd entered a nice-size living room with a striped couch and two chairs positioned toward the window. It looked like two bedrooms were off to the side. The dining room was a smaller room open to the living room, and the kitchen was at the back of the house.

Wooden shelves displayed an array of books and knickknacks. Will went over to read the titles. He noticed a few romance novels, gardening books, and cookbooks. Although he had little time for reading, when he did, he enjoyed mostly gardening and history books. He sniffed the

air, smelled yeast and herbs, and wondered what Isabelle was making.

He had just put a book back on the shelf when somebody leaped on his back, clinging to his neck, wrapping their legs around his waist.

A woman's voice screamed in his ear, "Run, Isabelle, run."

What the holy hell was going on?

Confused, Will twisted and turned, trying to shake the woman off. Isabelle, Colt's sister? Why should she be running? Who was the nutjob on his back? And what in the world was happening?

Colt and a woman came rushing in.

Stopped.

Started to move toward him but stopped again and burst out laughing.

Sweet Jesus, what on earth was going on?

"Felicia, honey, let go of Will," said Colt calmly. "He's with me."

The woman stopped screeching and released her grip. She got off his back. Will spun around and stared at a slender, red-haired woman in a skirt and striped tee who looked familiar.

Holy shit. He knew that woman. It was the woman from the farmers' market. The one who said she didn't know who the owner of Two Fishes Soap Works was.

"What the hell is going on here?" he asked Colt.

Colt started to answer, but Will's attention was drawn to the sprite beside him. The woman of his dreams was standing next to Colt in cutoff jeans and a sleeveless top. She stared at him with guileless blue eyes the color of spring and soft, full lips he'd spent the last couple of months dreaming about. His heart raced, and he had the sudden urge to scoop her up and run out of the house.

"Digger!" she whispered.

Will grinned and winked. “Hi, sweet cheeks.”

Her mouth fell open and then broke into a smile.

Colt and the slender woman stared at them in shocked silence. Colt’s eyes narrowed, and he glared at Isabelle. “Oh, we so need to talk.”

Then he growled at Will. “And this better be good.” Colt turned to his sister. “Sit.”

She started to protest. However, after a death glare from Colt, she walked over to the sofa.

“Felicia.” Colt’s voice softened as he glanced at the other woman. “Please take a seat, too.”

Isabelle snorted hearing that, but the two women sat down. Colt pointed toward Will, who put his hands up as if surrendering. “I’m sitting. I’m sitting.”

The four of them sat in silence for a minute. Isabelle opened her mouth to say something, but Colt shushed her. Will couldn’t understand what was happening, except that he finally found his woman, who just happened to be Colt’s sister, and that Colt was smitten with Felicia.

* * *

COLT RUBBED his hands through his hair and looked up at the ceiling. He swallowed hard. Inhaled a couple of times. His eyes narrowed, and he glared at Isabelle, daring her to speak. She wasn’t afraid of the glare, but Colt was furious. He didn’t get mad often, but when he did, hoo boy, look out.

Isabelle had no idea what had just happened. How did Digger, the man of her dreams ... no, his name was Will ... end up in her living room?

She brought her hand to her mouth and chewed on a cuticle. All her thoughts were in slow motion. Why did Felicia jump on Will’s back? And why was she screaming for Isabelle to run?

And wasn't that the funniest thing she'd ever seen? Sweet Felicia clinging to Will like a monkey clinging to a tree.

What was Will doing here? How did he know Colt? So many questions, so few answers.

Isabelle knew she would have to confess to Colt why they were in Haywood Lake. This time, she didn't know how Colt would take it.

That was silly. She knew how Colt would react when he found that the mob was chasing them for drugs and thousands of dollars—not well. Not well at all. He would think her the dumbest woman ever, and if he weren't disappointed in her before, he'd really be disappointed now.

And, of course, Colt would want to know how she knew Will. That wasn't going to be embarrassing. No sirree. There was no way in hell she would tell Colt about their one-night stand. How she kissed and explored every inch of Will's body before she snuck out before he woke up, and how she thought Will could be her soulmate.

Although by the time the men heard her story about the mob, Will would probably hightail it out of there. If he was with Colt, he didn't need crazy in his life. He was probably the get-up-at-dawn worker bee type, all discipline and order. That was not her.

Crap. This was just the way her life went.

“Ahem.” Colt sighed. “Why don't we start with why Felicia was trying to strangle Will?”

Felicia's face went pale, and Isabelle reached out for her hand. Drama of any kind depressed and scared her. Not that Colt would ever do anything intentionally to frighten Felicia. He always had a soft spot for her.

“Well,” she whispered, then stopped, took a deep breath and let it out. “Well, I thought Will was a mob enforcer.”

Silence.

Finally, Colt cocked his head and glared at her. “Okaaay. That makes perfect sense.”

He stared at Isabelle. “Care to elaborate?” His face was set in stone. Not a muscle moved.

“Um, no?”

Colt widened his eyes and twirled his finger.

“Okay, okay.” Isabelle huffed. “We might have gotten into some trouble after you got us out of jail.”

Will snickered. Colt scowled at him, then shook his head.

“Go on,” he barked.

“A man, a big man, came to the farmers’ market where we were selling soap and claimed we stole money and drugs from Serena.” Felicia looked hopefully at Colt. “You remember Serena? She was jailed with us.”

Will coughed into his hands but didn’t say a word.

Colt ignored him and nodded. “And?”

“Of course, we had no idea what the mobster was talking about.” Felicia stopped talking and gulped.

“Of course.” Colt rubbed the nape of his neck, a sure sign he was annoyed. He turned to her. “Isabelle, please just tell me what happened.”

Before Isabelle could answer, Felicia blurted out, “He had a gun.”

Colt growled.

Felicia’s face turned pale, but she continued. “It was a big gun, and he was scary. He threatened to kill us unless we gave him the drugs and fifty thousand dollars,” Felicia said in a rush of words. Sure, now she had found her voice.

Isabelle patted her hand. *Thank you, Felicia.* Isabelle was trying to get away with as little information as possible, but Felicia didn’t get the message.

Silence.

Isabelle looked at her brother and Will. They were communicating, but no words were spoken. Both had frowns

on their faces. Their lips were pursed. Anger oozed from their bodies. This didn't bode well for Isabelle. Or Felicia.

“So, Felicia, why did you jump on Will's back?” asked Colt. He ignored the threatening man, the drugs and cash. Isabelle's heart was racing. Colt never forgot anything. They'd get back to that. Hoo boy. Her stomach was doing flip-flops.

Felicia gulped. “I didn't recognize him. He came to the farmers' market, asking about our logo.” She looked over at Will and blushed. “He's big and muscular, just like the mob guy.”

“We've cleared up why Felicia jumped on Will. Why didn't you think to contact the police or me when the man accused you?” said Colt dryly. He stared at Isabelle.

“Hmmm. The man said if we go to the police, he'd kill us just for giggles.” Isabelle's stomach was gurgling. “Besides, I didn't want to bother you.”

Silence.

Could Colt's lips get any thinner? Isabelle didn't think so. Was he ever going to say something?

“Let me get this straight. A mob enforcer threatened you, wanted you to pay him money, so you decided to run and move here. Felicia thought Will was with the mob and yet ...” Colt's eyes narrowed to slits and his voice rose, then very quietly he said, “You didn't want to bother me?”

Isabelle and Felicia nodded in agreement.

“WHAT IN HOLY HELL IS WRONG WITH YOU TWO?”

Isabelle felt a knot in her stomach and hoped that was a rhetorical question because she had no answer for him. No way was she confessing to Colt that she didn't want to disappoint him, not in front of Will or Felicia, for that matter. Felicia was clinging to her hand like it was the only life support they had. How could she have been so foolish to think they could handle this on their own or that the threat had gone away?

Colt stood abruptly. “I can’t deal with this anymore. I’m taking a walk to clear my head so I can think straight about this whole situation. Then we’ll continue this discussion.”

His gaze shifted towards Will. “About everything.”

* * *

WILL WATCHED Colt leave the house. Colt’s anger didn’t bother him much. What was he going to do? Punch him? Maybe. That’s what he’d do if a buddy tried to date his sister. Unfortunately, he no longer had a sister, so it was a moot point.

Isabelle’s body was rigid, and both women were pale. He wondered what was going through their minds and why the ever-loving hell they hadn’t mentioned anything to Colt. This was serious. Being targeted by the mob for drugs and money was bad—really bad—and dangerous.

On a positive note—against all odds—he found his woman. Who would have think she’d moved to the same town as he? Not only that, but she was also a soap maker. Someone who used nature to create. They had that in common, as well as her very angry brother.

He felt bad for Felicia, who looked like she wanted to disappear into the sofa. The dynamics between Felicia and Colt were interesting. No way in hell was he asking Colt about that. Not when he had his own, well, potentially own woman to worry about.

Had Isabelle ever thought about him? Had she searched for him or wondered if it was only a one-night stand with a stranger and that’s all it could ever be?

Not possible. At the very least, he had to try to talk to her privately, find out if there was anything more to their one night together.

He glanced at her face. Her eyes met his. Will saw desire and hope in them. He could work with that.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Colt walked down and back Isabelle's driveway two times, his heart pounding in his chest.

He was ashamed of himself for yelling at the women. There was no reason to do that except for fear. He loved them both, and the thought of losing either one of them made him crazy. Isabelle had to know she'd never disappoint him. From the time she was little, he was her protector and advocate whether she believed it or not.

Felicia was a beacon of stability for Isabelle. Calm and rational—mostly.

However, there was a spontaneous side to her that Felicia didn't let loose very often, probably because of her parents. He had paid little attention to Felicia when Isabelle first brought her around. She was a skinny, frightened kid dressed in a dirty dress and beat-up sneakers.

He couldn't forget coming home one weekend from boot camp and seeing Felicia sitting on the steps crying. He was ready to kill when he removed her hands from her face and saw the black eye her parents gave her.

Over the years, she'd come into her own. The next time he came home, she was twenty. Her body had filled out, and she was taller than Isabelle. She'd cut her long red hair to shoulder length. And smiled more. A thousand-watt smile that wormed its way into his heart and stayed there all these years.

Felicia wasn't ready for a man in her life then. But now, she was twenty-six, had luscious lips and, he couldn't help

noticing, curves. She was intelligent, dedicated, honest, and sexy as all get-out, and he wanted her. He wanted her with a need that consumed him.

At this moment, however, he was enraged. How could two intelligent women end up on the wrong side of the mob? Colt closed his eyes and tried to regain control. He knew they would never steal money or drugs or even do drugs.

He didn't know why he decided to check on the two girls. He'd only had a week before he needed to get back to base. Something told him to check Isabelle's room. His parents told him the girls had gone to bed. Something about getting up early to work—as if.

He got no response knocking on Isabelle's door. He cautiously opened it.

Isabelle had twin beds, and he could see their bodies hidden under the covers. It struck him as odd. It was summer. The AC was on, so why were they covered up? Walking over to one bed, he peeled the covers down. Instead of light brown hair, he found a basketball. He didn't need to check Felicia's bed to know the girls had snuck out again.

As quietly as he could, he searched Isabelle's desk and found a piece of paper with an address. Colt remembered his high school days, all the times he snuck out and how things could go wrong in seconds. He got into his car and drove over to the party.

Music blasted from old man Janco's house. It had been abandoned for years, run-down and supposedly locked up, but there were always ways to get in. There were kids scattered on the lawn partying, whooping it up, and having a good time. Most likely, they were drunk, although he hadn't seen any bottles yet.

He walked into the house. The stench of alcohol, vomit and the unmistakable aroma of weed assaulted his senses. Kids were laughing and dancing, and a few were making out. He pushed through the kids and saw Felicia in the corner, huddled into herself, and he wanted to whisk her away. But first, he had to find Isabelle.

He bent down and had to yell for Felicia to hear him. Felicia wasn't sure but said she thought Isabelle was making out with some guy upstairs—making out, his foot. He got up after telling her he'd be back. He pushed kids aside and climbed the stairs. Four closed bedroom doors taunted him. Isabelle wasn't in the first one, nor the second. But he did scare a couple of kids. His stomach churned as he approached the third door and opened it.

He'd never forget how Isabelle looked, splayed out on a bed in some creep's bedroom, drugged out of her mind. Some pimply-faced kid was starting to remove her clothes. Overwhelmed with anger, he beat the shit out of him and gently gathered Isabelle into his arms. He walked downstairs and met Felicia, who gasped and covered her mouth. He brought the girls home and snuck them back into Isabelle's bedroom. Then he called the cops about the house.

The next day, he had a serious talk with both of them about drugs and safety and threatened to tell his parents if it happened again.

Isabelle had sworn she didn't do drugs and was appalled about being roofied. Felicia would never do drugs since her parents were addicts. Both girls thanked him profusely for rescuing them. That wasn't the first time he worried about them, but until now, it had been the most serious.

Colt sighed. He'd been gone for about five minutes and needed to get back inside and not lose the momentum he'd gained. Plus, there was the issue of how Will and Isabelle knew each other. He had a sneaking suspicion that they had slept together. Wouldn't that be the frosting on the cake?

* * *

THE DOOR TO Isabelle's house swung open, and Colt returned. Will was pleased to see he didn't look quite so angry, but then again, they hadn't talked about how he and Isabelle knew each other. That conversation was going to be unpleasant. He knew how he'd react if someone he knew was with his sister, but

Will also knew he wouldn't take any shit about knowing Isabelle.

After Colt stomped out of the house, the two women hadn't said much to each other or him. Felicia looked glum, and Isabelle alternated between smiling and frowning at him.

She looked about the same as the night they met. He remembered she was only about five feet two to his six feet two, but she had fit perfectly in his arms.

Will watched her wring her hands occasionally. He knew those hands. Knew every inch of her perfect body. Had kissed every inch of her body. Fuck if his cock didn't take that moment to try to say hello. He discreetly tried to cover the bulge by crossing his arms and thinking about Colt, who would probably hand him his head. Isabelle looked at his lap and smirked.

He wanted to say something, anything, to Isabelle but thought better of it. There was too much to discuss right now about the mob. Also, he was curious about where Isabelle disappeared that night. Why hadn't she stayed? He thought they had a real connection. Had she thought about him at all since she left? Would they be able to continue seeing each other?

How in the hell did these two women, who looked about as threatening as kittens, get involved with the mob?

And what were he and Colt going to do about it? Because he had a vested interest in helping too. Maybe if they discussed this with Chase, the Brotherhood could get involved. But he was getting ahead of himself. First, he had to get through the next few minutes.

Colt sat across from the women and sighed. "I don't know what's going on with you two. I get you out of jail, and now I find out the mob is chasing you."

"We had nothing to do with stealing or the mob," said Isabelle. "You have to believe us."

"I do believe you," he replied. "The fact remains, you two are in trouble, and it's got to be fixed."

“I’m sorry you have to get involved,” Felicia said. “We thought we could handle this ourselves.”

Colt pursed his lips and sat back in the chair. “I don’t mind getting involved, but you two should have known better. These are dangerous men. They could hurt you.”

Felicia turned a bright red and looked at her hands.

“Why don’t we talk to Chase and see if we can get some protection for them if it’s needed?” asked Will. It made sense. The Brotherhood had the means to dig deeper and find out what happened. Plus, it would take the pressure off the women.

“Maybe. At some point we will involve the Brotherhood, but first, we need to understand more about this mob. Whether they know where the women are or even if they’re still after them,” said Colt. He tapped his fingers on his thigh. “I’ll call the sheriff in Sandy Creek. He’s a friend. He might be able to shed some light on this. Then at some point down the road, if the Brotherhood gets involved, we might have to ask Tex to dig deeper.”

Will nodded. “Good idea.” Tex had connections and contacts everywhere. If the women were targeted, Tex could get more information than Dex or their other contacts could.

“We don’t need protection,” Isabelle exclaimed. Then her eyes widened when Colt gave her a stare. Will knew that stare. The military had perfected it.

“Hmmm,” Colt murmured. “The way I see it is you can accept protection when we figure out if you’re in danger and what is happening or ...” He cracked his knuckles. “Or I’ll pack you up and make you come to my place.”

Isabelle frowned, and her mouth dropped. “No way.”

“Way,” Colt said smugly.

Will watched the women look at each other and come to an agreement without words.

“Fine,” Isabelle huffed. “Check with the sheriff and your friend. Protect us if you have to, but we’re staying right here in

our own house. Follow us around. See how boring our lives are.”

Will mentally chuckled. It sure didn't sound like their lives were boring—jail, the mob, drugs, stolen money—please.

“If I can interject here,” said Will. Everyone looked over at him. “If it becomes a problem, it's a good idea to have someone looking out for you. We're trained to protect and be unobtrusive. If we offer you protection, you won't even know someone is around.”

The women looked unconvinced.

“It's true. The organization Will and I belong to only hires people with protection skills,” said Colt.

“What organization is that?” asked Felicia. “I thought you owned a garage.” Then she looked at Will. “And you're a farmer?”

Will and Colt exchanged looks. He wasn't sure how much they should tell the women about the Brotherhood. Although it wasn't as secretive anymore since they took on for-profit cases. There was no need to talk about the private matters they took on.

“Um.” Colt took a deep breath. “I do own a garage. However, I also take on security jobs for the Brotherhood Alliance.”

“So, this Brotherhood will protect us if we need it?” asked Isabelle.

“I need to talk to my boss. But I'm talking about security only if you need it and only if we have the extra manpower,” said Colt. “If not, I'll make time.”

“I'll help if and when they need it,” said Will, which caused him to get the stink-eye from Colt. “Whaaat?” He opened his palms. “You can't do it alone.”

“Humph,” Colt replied. He swiveled his head to stare at the women. “First, I'd like to know why the mob thinks you two stole money and drugs.”

Then he turned to Will. “Then I’ll get back to how you and Isabelle know each other.”

Will glanced over at Isabelle, who visibly swallowed. He’d let her take the lead and see which direction she was heading. No way in hell was he throwing her to the wolves or, in this case, to her brother. It was none of Colt’s business.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“I’m curious why the mob suspect you two stole money and drugs,” Colt asked. “And how do you know it’s the mob and not just random drug dealers?”

Isabelle and Felicia exchanged glances before turning their attention to Colt.

He didn’t look furious anymore but angry, which Isabelle could handle. Will was staring at them as if they had grown two heads. Both men probably thought they were airheads. Crap, she didn’t disagree.

“Well,” said Felicia. She started to say more but ran out of words and looked at Isabelle.

No way was Isabelle going to let Felicia tell the story. The woman was nothing but honest. Colt and Will didn’t need to hear everything. She’d tell the story. It had to be told the right way so they didn’t appear to be numb-nuts, because nothing about it was sane.

“As you may remember, we were arrested alongside Serena,” Isabelle said to Colt, who nodded in agreement. Isabelle paused, blinking her eyes. “Serena ... er, something.”

“Parker,” Felicia offered helpfully.

“Right. Serena Parker.” Isabelle continued, stifling a yawn. Colt narrowed his eyes. She couldn’t help it; she always yawned when she fudged the truth. Thankfully, Colt didn’t call her on it—this time. “Anyway, after they released us from jail, Serena couldn’t drive since her license had expired. So we

drove her car to our place to pick up Felicia's car, and then Felicia followed us to Serena's apartment."

She yawned again—dang it. She was getting to the uncomfortable part. "So we get to Serena's, and she invites us up, saying she had a little time before she had to meet a business associate."

"You went?" asked Colt. He rubbed his forehead and sighed.

Isabelle rolled her eyes. "Yesss. There was no reason to suspect something nefarious was going on."

"Nefarious?" Colt repeated mockingly.

"Tsk," she admonished him. "Yes, nefarious, and stop repeating what I say."

Colt mock-saluted her. Will snorted, and she scowled at him. Gah, these two men were driving her crazy.

"We went upstairs, and she offered us a cup of coffee, but Felicia and I were eager to get home, so we declined. I had to use the bathroom and noticed a gift box on the floor."

"What kind of gift box?" asked Colt.

"It looked like one of ours, and I wondered what was in it. You know ... if we had competition."

Colt shook his head. Will sat there with an amused expression on his face. This conversation was going downhill fast.

"Well, curiosity got the better of me. I opened it and looked inside."

"Please tell me you didn't!" Colt's neck was getting red, and he rubbed his forehead.

"Yes, Colt," Isabelle replied sarcastically. "I did."

Colt closed his eyes and exhaled. Then he opened them. "I'm guessing there were no soaps in it."

Isabelle pointed at him. "Bingo. Inside, there were lots of little bags filled with pills or white powder. I closed the top,

did my business, and got out of there. No way were we sticking around.”

“What about the cash?” Will asked.

“Yeah, and why would she say you stole it?” asked Colt. He looked confused, and frankly, she and Felicia were confused why Serena would lie.

“We guess she sold the drugs herself and kept the cash. Serena seemed to think she was smarter than everyone else.”

“How would the mob even know you were at Serena’s apartment?” asked Will.

“Well, that’s the thing,” Isabelle said, biting her lip and tapping her fingers on her thigh. “A man was going up the stairs as we were leaving. He was rough around the edges. He stared us up and down, then scowled, so we hurried to the car.”

“Can you describe him?” asked Will.

Isabelle sighed. She gazed over at Will. God, he looked delicious. Tall, dark-haired, and muscular. Muscles that the white short-sleeved Henley that he was wearing emphasized. He’d paired it with worn jeans and work boots. Could he be any hotter? She imagined undressing him. *Hmmm.*

“Isabelle?” Colt looked at her strangely. Did she just ogle Will and hum? Her eyes met Will’s, and he winked.

Dear Lord in heaven. She was going straight to hell.

“Sorry, I was just envisioning him.”

Felicia had the audacity to giggle. She stopped when Isabelle glared at her.

“I’m talking about the thug, okay?” said Isabelle. Felicia covered her mouth and rolled her eyes.

“He was medium height. A little taller than Felicia. He had brown eyes and a buzz-cut hairstyle.” She turned to Felicia. “Anything else?”

“He was wearing a black shirt and jeans.” Felicia looked up at the ceiling, lost in thought. “Oh. I think he was carrying a gun on his hip. He had a small scar over his left brow, a

longer one from his eye to the corner of his mouth and peculiar ears.”

“How were they peculiar?” asked Colt.

“You know how fighters get broccoli ears?” She glanced at Colt. “Like that.”

The two men exchanged glances. Isabelle started giggling and then laughing outright. Felicia cocked her head.

“They’re called cauliflower ears, sweetie,” she said.

Felicia turned beet-red. “Oh. Right. He had cauliflower ears.”

Colt shook his head. “Don’t be embarrassed. Let’s just call them vegetable ears.”

They all started laughing at that.

“Tomato, tomahto,” Felicia replied.

“Did you talk to Serena after you left Georgia?” Will asked.

“Uh ...” Isabelle thought for a second. “No. We were busy making and selling soap. We didn’t have any more contact with her. Not until that thug turned up at the farmers’ market in Georgia demanding the drugs and money. The only time we were exposed to the drugs was at Serena’s apartment. When we realized she was in with some bad people and there was a problem, then we got scared and came here.”

“Isabelle, is that all there is to the story?” Colt asked. “Nothing you left out?”

“I’m not dignifying that with an answer,” she said. A hot flush started at her cheeks and worked down her chest. Great, now Colt was going to make her look like an idiot in front of Will. She might be impulsive and certainly made her share of mistakes, but come on, give her some credit.

Colt had the decency to look chastised. “I’m sorry. It wasn’t meant to question your integrity, but we need all the facts before we decide what to do.”

“That’s everything pertaining to Serena, drugs and the money,” said Felicia.

Isabelle let out the breath she was holding. Colt hadn’t mentioned her and Will’s acquaintance, and she wanted to keep it like that. Maybe he’d say something to Will, but Isabelle had a feeling Will could hold his own.

Colt slapped his thighs. “We’ve got to leave. It sounds like the drug dealers, mob, whatever you want to call them haven’t found you here,” said Colt. He looked over at Will. “I’m keeping this on the back burner unless something changes. Agreed?”

“I agree,” said Will.

The men got up to leave, but not before Will asked her about compost. She showed him what was needed, and he promised to bring the compost over.

He said nothing about getting together with her, and Isabelle wondered if the craziness they described was a turnoff for him. She prayed it wasn’t, because seeing him today brought back all kinds of good feelings.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Will whistled a tune as he carried a box of tomatoes to his tent at the farmers' market. The market never got old with the scents of meat and coffee coming from the food trucks and the vendors hustling around. Knowing that Two Fishes Soap Works was Isabelle's, he couldn't wait to find her here.

Connecting with Isabelle had been the highlight of his week, besides the fact that he lived to talk about it. Colt wasn't thrilled that he and Isabelle knew each other. They sure didn't tell Colt that they had spent the night together or that they explored every inch of each other's body or that they made love several times. He didn't have a death wish.

Colt had started to voice his opinion. However, Isabelle shushed him and told Colt in no uncertain terms that she was an adult and it was none of his business who she spent time with. Not then and not now. Colt scowled but held his tongue after that.

Will hadn't wanted to ask Isabelle out while Colt was still there; no sense adding fuel to the fire. But when he got home, he'd called her. They'd be meeting tomorrow morning at the Busy Bean for coffee. Will wanted it to be a casual meeting to get reacquainted since most of the time they'd spent together was in bed having sex. There had been little talking.

Will got to the tent, placed the box on the ground, and lifted each plastic container of luscious red tomatoes, then the boxes of green and yellow tomatoes. The gardens produced too much produce for just the farmers' market. Will intended to go to shelters with the leftovers to offer fresh vegetables.

The Brotherhood worked with a couple of shelters in town as well as a low-income motel catering to returning vets. The rooms were small but equipped with a microwave and refrigerator. Many vets worked but didn't have extra money for fresh food.

"This is the last of it," said Jason as he set down his box of zucchini. Jason was a godsend, but they couldn't do it alone anymore even with the two of them working. Will hired two part-timers to help with planting and harvesting.

They put the rest of the vegetables and eggs out just in time. People were arriving. After the initial rush, Will intended to walk around and find Isabelle.

"That bitch."

Will stopped what he was doing and looked over at two women passing through the aisle.

One was Mandy Stevens, who also sold soap. The other woman was younger and looked like Mandy. Sister? Daughter? Mandy was fuming, and Will wondered who was in her crosshairs today.

"I can't believe she set up directly across from me." Mandy's face was flushed with anger, and her voice carried across the bustling market. Vendors and shoppers stopped to listen as she stomped through the market. "And waved at me like we're long-lost friends."

Oh boy. Will knew she was talking about Two Fishes Soap Works—Isabelle's business. He knew where her tent was. But having Mandy practically yelling about Isabelle was a bad look for the market.

It was a good two hours before Will could look for Isabelle. He found her tent in between the fishmonger and the yarn lady. And across from Mandy, who was shooting daggers at Isabelle.

"Wow, talk about competition. Mandy looks like she wants to kill you or set the tent on fire," he said.

"Yeah." Isabelle sighed. "This was the only spot left this morning, so I had to take it."

Will looked around her display and was impressed. She had arranged the boxes of colored soaps by shade, from the lightest to the darkest. She interspersed the shelves with green plants. Isabelle had put out small squares of soap for samples. Overall, the display had a peaceful vibe to it.

“Oh, you’re making body lotion now.”

“Yes. It’s a natural progression from soap to lotion. Plus, it allows us to use any leftover colorants,” replied Isabelle.

She stopped to talk to a couple of women interested in the soaps and then waved at Mandy, who let loose with some remark.

The women paid for their purchases and walked away.

“You’re poking the bear,” Will said. Mandy was known as a woman who got revenge. He couldn’t remember where he heard that. Probably someone at the market commented. That was one thing about the market: Rumors spread like wildfire. He chose to ignore them.

“Bah. She annoys me.” Isabelle straightened up a row of soaps. “I’m not going to let a bitter competitor scare me.” She looked up at Will and smiled. “I’m looking forward to our coffee date tomorrow.”

Will’s heart raced. “I am too. We don’t have to worry about Colt showing up, do we?”

“Ha ha.” Her eyes twinkled. “Colt is a big softy.”

That wouldn’t be how he’d describe Colt, but if it worked for Isabelle—okay. Will knew he hadn’t heard the last of this from Colt. He wouldn’t let it go if it were his sister. But then again, he didn’t have a sister anymore.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Will almost asked Isabelle if he could pick her up to take her to the coffee shop. Her place was out of his way. However, he was feeling unsure about her meeting him. It wasn't as if she hadn't disappeared without saying goodbye the first time they met.

Trust—that was his new mantra. He had to trust Isabelle would keep her word and meet him at the Busy Bean at ten o'clock as promised.

He arrived at a quarter of ten and found an empty table in the window. The scent of freshly ground brewed coffee and hints of cinnamon from their homemade cinnamon rolls made his mouth water. Should he order now or wait? His stomach growled and decided for him. A server came by to take his order. A cup of black coffee and one cinnamon—no, make that two cinnamon buns.

He'd gulped a cup of coffee when he got up at five o'clock but didn't have breakfast. The server was a cute little thing and flirted outrageously with him, but she wasn't Isabelle. She went away disappointed after he refused her telephone number.

The bell tinkled over the door as people stopped in for coffee or a snack. Will looked over each time, his heart racing, but no Isabelle. Was she coming?

Tables were filling up, and he got more than one disapproving stare from customers who thought him selfish for taking a table for four when it was only him. Tough noogies.

He wasn't moving. The window seat offered him glimpses of who was walking by.

Will looked at his watch: five after ten. Isabelle was late. His heart sank. She wasn't coming.

A cup of coffee and a plate of cinnamon buns were placed in front of him. His server didn't smile as brightly, but Will didn't care.

He took a sip of coffee, disappointment clouding his mind.

"Hey," a rushed voice said from behind him.

Isabelle! She came. Today she'd traded the cutoff jeans, which he'd really liked the other day when he dropped the compost off, for a short white-and-beige striped sleeveless dress and sandals. She looked adorable.

He stood, wondering if he should kiss her or not. But Isabelle gave him a quick peck on the cheek and plopped down with a heavy sigh. "I'm so sorry I'm late. Traffic was a bitch, and I had a hard time finding a parking spot." She looked at him with a furrowed brow. "Have you been here long?"

Will shook his head. "Nope, just got here. I'm starving, so I ordered."

"Looks good." She looked around. "In fact, I'm told everything here is good."

With less enthusiasm than before, the server returned and asked Isabelle what she wanted.

"A cup of coffee and one of those cinnamon buns," she replied. The server nodded and walked away.

"Sooo," Isabelle started to say. "How've you been?"

Will could think of a thousand more important questions to ask.

He opened his mouth, but Isabelle had a fit of nervous giggles. Then she hiccupped once and stopped.

"I'm sorry, that was so lame." She looked at her hands and then up at him, her brown eyes filled with—what? Worry?

Pity? Embarrassment?

“I guess you want to know why I left so suddenly that night.”

Will shrugged.

Hell, yeah, he wanted to know why.

They might not have talked much that night, especially when he was balls-deep inside her or kissing every inch of her luscious body. But he also felt a deep connection with Isabelle when they met at the bar and danced. He hoped she felt the same. He didn't want to come on too strong and scare her away right now.

“Among other things,” he replied.

“Hmmm.” Isabelle exhaled. “It was the weirdest thing. When we met, I felt this connection like we knew each other in a previous life.” She hunched her shoulders and let them fall. “It was instantaneous, and I think you felt it, too.” She stared into his eyes for confirmation.

Will nodded.

Isabelle opened and closed her mouth. She took a sip of coffee and leaned forward and in a low voice said, “I loved having sex with you. I loved just being with you.” She shrugged. “I can't explain it, and it sounds silly even now, but I felt like I'd found my soulmate that night.”

“Humph. That's all well and good. Then why did you leave?” Will wasn't letting her off that easily. “Why didn't you wake me up? We could have talked about it.”

“I ...” Isabelle pursed her lips. “You were sound asleep. I lay on the bed thinking how wonderful it was being in your arms, how solid you felt, how you had your life planned out.”

Will remembered telling Isabelle his dream of buying a farm, how he wanted to give back to the community. Although he didn't remember her mentioning anything about her job.

“True. I am living my dream, but you haven't answered my question.”

Isabelle looked down at her hands that were holding the coffee cup. “Look, Will. The truth is that I’m a screwup.”

A tear formed in her eye, and Will wanted to wipe it away but didn’t. “Just ask my brother. Ask anyone who knows me. You heard what happened in Georgia. Who gets caught up in that shit? Me. Until I moved here, I planned nothing beyond the end of the week. I made enough soap to pay the rent and went to bars when I felt like it. I drive a shitty van, have no money in the bank and no skills other than making soap.” She shook her head. “You don’t want my crazy.”

Will leaned back. He stared out the window at the people passing by, laughing, and talking. Isabelle was wrong. So very wrong.

Isabelle fiddled with her hands and sighed.

“You don’t know what I want. You would if you’d stayed around and asked,” Will replied rather gruffly. He leaned in toward Isabelle, drinking in her unique scent. “What I want is a woman who brings joy into my life, one who loves to laugh and loves life. I can be a stick-in-the-mud ...”

“No, you’re not.”

Will cocked his head. “Yes. I am.” He swallowed hard. “I’m disciplined and steadfast. I wake up early, work late and plan. In fact, all I do is plan and work.

“I want to laugh.” Will blew out a breath. “I want a woman who isn’t afraid to be herself and”—he winked at Isabelle—“one who’s wild in bed.”

She opened her mouth to reply, but he held up a finger. “I want children, and I want to watch them running around free-range, exploring, and loving every minute of their lives. Most of all, I want someone who understands that reliability doesn’t mean boring and a woman who knows she can trust me to do anything in my power for her.”

He sat back in his chair. “I want the crazy.”

“Well, then.” Isabelle huffed and thought for a moment. She crossed her arms over her chest and gave him a small smile. “It looks like you found her.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Will was lying on a king-size bed in Tampa. The Brotherhood had a paying security position for a singer who needed protection. It was only for three days. Then he'd get back to his farm and Isabelle.

Isabelle! They only had enough time to reconnect at the coffee shop and make plans to meet again before he was called away. After the Brotherhood meeting, Colt tried to talk to him, discouraging him from seeing Isabelle, and he shut that down quickly. It didn't scare him that Colt had stepped into his personal space, that they were practically nose to nose. He stood his ground and told Colt he treasured Isabelle and Colt needed to stand down because he wasn't going anywhere.

Colt had stepped back and mentioned something about burying him alive if he hurt Isabelle. Will felt churlish and told Colt he should see to his own woman and house and get the hell out of his. That shut Colt up.

He and Isabelle made plans to see each other when he got back. It was more complicated than he thought to make plans with her. They both had businesses to run. Thinking of Isabelle, he pulled out his cell phone and dialed her.

Two rings. A breathless hello.

"Will." Isabelle blew out a deep breath. "Give me a second to catch my breath."

He waited a minute, and Isabelle came back on. "Sorry about that. We were making soap and ran out of packaging

material. I just got back from town. How are you? Where are you?”

“Tampa. Guarding the lead singer in Spiteful Dragons.”

She gave a little scream. “I love that group. Lucky you. Are you having fun?”

Will chuckled silently to himself. He wasn’t sure you could call guarding someone and standing all night on your feet, being on all the time, watching for fans who jump out of nowhere and chase the singer around, fun. It was damn tiring and stressful. He much preferred working on the nonprofit cases, which were dangerous in their own right, but work was work.

“Yeah. I’m having a ball,” said Will sarcastically. “How are you?”

“Great. Felicia and I are making a larger batch of soap to sell at the farmers’ market, then we’re meeting Joy and a couple of other girls at Lucky’s Bar.”

Lucky’s Bar? Lucky’s was a great hangout spot but also known as a pickup joint. He and Isabelle hadn’t talked about being exclusive or where their relationship stood, or even if there was one. They’d only made plans to go out to dinner when he returned home.

“Hmmm.” He sighed. “That sounds like so much fun.”

“I detect a hint of jealousy,” joked Isabelle. “You know I’ll be with a group of women, some of whom are married.”

“No, I’m not jealous,” Will lied. “I wish I were going with you, and I want you to be safe.”

“No worries, Will,” said Isabelle. “Besides, if I know Colt, he’ll make up some excuse to be at the bar.”

“To keep an eye on you?” Will could only hope. On the one hand, that was a terrific idea; on the other, not so much. Although they’d decided since no one from Georgia had threatened them, protection wasn’t called for—yet.

“Nah.” Isabelle laughed. “He’s got the hots for Felicia but hasn’t done anything about it ... yet. It’s both hilarious and

torturous watching those two flirt.”

The landline in Will’s room rang. Damn. It had to be the other security guard checking up. The band had its own security, and the lead singer had him. Between the two groups, they kept the band safe. If only it were that easy keeping his heart safe.

* * *

ISABELLE HUNG UP THE PHONE. The sound of Will’s voice warmed her heart. The conversation at the coffee shop weighed heavily on her mind. It wasn’t easy confessing she was flighty, a screwup, but hoo boy, if Will could handle a bit of crazy, she could handle a focused, disciplined man. She hoped.

Felicia appeared in the doorway of the kitchen, interrupting her thoughts. “Are you ready?”

“Yes.” Isabelle pointed at the countertop to the bars of soap that she had finished wrapping. “We only need a sprig of greenery.”

“Perfect,” said Felicia. She had paired a short-sleeved green V-neck T-shirt with jeans and wedges.

“Look at you. All sexy-looking,” Isabelle remarked playfully.

Felicia rolled her eyes and tsked. “You’re not planning on wearing that, are you?” She looked Isabelle up and down.

“Hey, what’s wrong with this?” Isabelle asked. She had on a tattered pair of shorts and a sleeveless top stained with lanolin.

Felicia groaned.

“Of course not, silly. I’ll take a quick shower and get dressed.”

True to her word, they were out of the house within ten minutes. They were taking Felicia’s car.

“Joy’s meeting us there, right?” asked Felicia. She reached over to turn on the radio.

“Yes,” Isabelle replied. “Although I don’t know who else is coming.”

There was silence as Felicia navigated their way to the main road.

“Do you think Colt might be there?” Felicia asked. She stared straight ahead, only the tips of her ears turning bright red.

“I’m on the fence about that,” Isabelle replied. “I don’t want him snooping around, but on the other hand, I hope he is so that you two can get together.”

“Humph.” Felicia bit her lip. “I’m not looking to get together with him. I was just wondering since he seems to want to protect you.”

Isabelle laughed. “Riiight!”

As they arrived at their destination, Isabelle noted the parking lot was half full. It was still early on a Saturday night. Later it would be packed. They parked under a streetlight and made their way towards the entrance. Stepping inside, Isabelle glanced around. The interior was not what she was expecting.

Instead of the rundown interior that she and Felicia were accustomed to in Georgia, the ambience had a more vintage theme. A long wooden bar adorned one wall, its stools occupied by patrons, while tables were arranged around a dance floor. A three-piece band was setting up. She knew there were pool tables in the other room because Joy had mentioned it, plus she could hear the clack of balls being hit. Some of the floor tables were full. She spotted Joy and three other women in a corner waving.

Joy stood when they arrived and gave each a hug, then introduced them. “You know Nicki and Mallory,” she said and pointed to the other women. “And over there is Dani Ward and Melissa Doherty. Dani is engaged to Ryker Barlow, who works for Chase, and Melissa runs the program at Paws for Caring.” The women finger-waved.

The musicians started playing country rock, and people got up to dance. The waitress came over to take their drink order, and Joy ordered nachos for the table.

Isabelle leaned back in her chair to take in the ambience. It would be difficult to talk until the music stopped. She wondered how many other women had found their mate at the Brotherhood Alliance. So far, she'd met Naomi and now Dani. Was this a thing? Was there something in the water? Or was she reading too much into it, especially since she had no idea how many people were employed by the Brotherhood.

Will worked for them, and she hoped their relationship would continue to grow. She also had hopes for Felicia and Colt to get together.

Bah. The drinks arrived, and the women raised their glasses and toasted to new friends. Joy jumped up and encouraged them to dance. There were a few single women dancing by themselves and enjoying the music, so she didn't feel weird. It wasn't as if she and Felicia had never danced together.

The music got slower, the bar got hotter, and Isabelle felt like she was going to pass out. She fanned herself and needed to sit down. One of the men interrupted them and asked Felicia to dance. Felicia loved to dance, so she said yes.

Isabelle left the dance floor with Dani and Joy. Mallory and Nicki were dancing with partners now. She sat and took a sip of her drink. What was Will doing? Was he thinking about her?

* * *

COLT PARKED his car farthest away from the entrance and entered the crowded bar. He hadn't wanted to come here by himself, but having two or three of the other guys with him would have looked suspicious. The women were here to have a good time, not to be stalked. He found an end stool at the farthest corner of the bar. It was darker here in the shadows.

He wasn't spying on Isabelle and Felicia. No sirree. He convinced himself he was thirsty and needed a beer.

Taking a deep breath, Colt scanned the tables and then the dance floor. The women were dancing exuberantly in a group, laughing, and looking like they were having a ball. Isabelle and Felicia were a hoot together.

Despite his conflicted feelings about Will and Isabelle being together, Colt knew it was out of his hands now. However, if Will ever dared hurt her, he'd be in a world of pain.

For now, his focus was Felicia and the fucker who asked her to dance. She looked gorgeous and downright sexy in a short black sleeveless dress that hugged her curves.

They swayed gently to a slow tune, and the guy was keeping his hands a respectable distance from her ass. Colt's grip tightened on his beer glass. He'd step in if he thought she was in trouble. Otherwise, he'd sit here and have a beer or two just to make sure the women were safe and try to stay inconspicuous. Isabelle would be furious if she knew he was watching over them.

A pang of longing tugged at Colt's heart as he watched Felicia dance with the stranger. She deserved a loving man, and he wanted it to be him. But Felicia was oblivious to his desires. She didn't know how he ached to be with her. It was a dream that was never to be.

* * *

"DON'T LOOK NOW," said Joy. She did a chin lift to the corner of the bar, then picked up a chip and brought it to her mouth.

"Whaaat?" Isabelle looked around.

"I said don't look," exclaimed Joy.

"How will I see what you're trying to point out if I don't look?" Isabelle was laughing.

Isabelle didn't move her head but glanced around the dance floor. Saw Felicia dancing with some good-looking guy, saw Nicki and Mallory dancing, saw people at the bar drinking and laughing and saw—holy hell on a stick.

She knew it. Colt just couldn't stay out of her business. He had a scowl on his face she knew well, having just seen it when he found out about her and Will. However, this time he wasn't looking at her. He was glaring at the guy who was now rubbing Felicia's back.

Oh, this was going to be fun.

"Watch this," Isabelle told Joy.

She walked along the edge of the room, keeping Colt in her sight. She finally got behind him and poked him in the back. Colt jumped and almost knocked her over before he realized it was Isabelle.

"What are you doing?" he growled.

"Saving you from yourself," she replied. "For the love of God, please go over and cut in. Felicia would love to dance with you."

"You think?"

Colt's eyebrows pulled together, and he ran his hands through his hair. He looked uncertain, a look Isabelle had never seen on her brother's face.

She shook her head and tsiked. "You kids."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"It means Felicia likes you. You like her. For goodness' sake, just go ask her to dance."

Colt sighed. "Fine."

Isabelle watched her ex-Navy SEAL brother, who probably faced more threats than anyone in the bar and could kill with just his pinkie, take a deep breath to work up the courage to slowly walk over to Felicia. Felicia, who wouldn't hurt a fly. He tapped on the guy's shoulder. Felicia looked

stunned. The guy gave him grief until Colt gave him the stare. Then he backed off.

Colt put his arm around Felicia's waist, took her hand in his, and they swayed to the music. When they turned, Isabelle saw Felicia smile and snuggle deeper into Colt's chest. He kissed the top of her head.

Isabelle mentally brushed her hands together. *Well done, girl!*

If only her relationship with Will could be so easy.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Will arrived home late Monday night.

Only a sliver of the moon was visible, casting eerie shadows on the path. The woods were silent except for a rush of wings disappearing into the trees. The house was dark, but he hoped it was cool inside because the air was still and humid as hell. When had the weather changed? He shrugged. It was Florida. Cold one minute, wait a minute, then it was hot and humid. He wiped his brow as he stepped out of the car. He grabbed his bag from the trunk, his weary body protesting the late hour. He dragged himself into the house and closed his eyes for a moment.

Home! His home. It was cool. And quiet. He'd sleep well tonight.

He wanted to call Isabelle, but it was too late. She'd never been to the farm, and he was eager to show her what he was doing, eager to see her. Will had the Spiteful Dragons autograph a T-shirt and other goodies for her and hoped she would be surprised. They also gave him backstage passes the next time the group was in town.

A note left on the counter caught Will's attention. It was from Jason, reassuring him that all was well and they would have a good variety of vegetables for the next farmers' market. His thoughts turned to Isabelle, and he wondered if her prediction that Colt would show up at Lucky's came true. Maybe she'd like to go there with him sometime and dance. An image of Isabelle in his arms made him grow hard with

desire. He felt like a schoolboy with his first crush. He'd take care of that later if he had the energy.

Enough thinking.

Will stifled a yawn and stumbled towards the bedroom. He removed his shoes and clothes and fell into bed. His body relaxed. There was nothing like sleeping in your own bed, which would be even better if you had a soft woman tucked in by your side. Especially if that woman was Isabelle. He'd fix that soon enough. First, they had to get to know each other on a deeper level. Their one night was special. However, there was so much more to a person than sex.

Sex. His cock jumped at that suggestion.

He'd never sleep tonight if he didn't do something about the boner he was sporting. Will reached for his cock and gently stroked it, rubbing the pre-cum around the edges. He imagined Isabelle by his side, fingering herself while she watched him. He rubbed faster and faster until his balls tightened, and he ejaculated. Now he had to get up and wash himself off, but at least the edge was off.

* * *

THE SUN'S rays woke Will, and he quickly pulled the pillow over his eyes.

His dreams were memories of Isabelle and the one night they had together. He was just passing through Georgia, never intending to find a woman. He rubbed his chest where Isabelle had snuggled while they slowly danced together at the Twisted Frog. She was a head shorter than he and laughed when he sniffed her hair. Whatever shampoo she used was not too floral but intoxicating. She said it was lavender and mint, reminding him someday he wanted to plant an herb garden. Maybe Isabelle would have some good ideas.

He peeked at his watch and groaned. Seven o'clock? Already? He'd hoped to sleep in a bit more. Jason would be at the farm in a few minutes but wasn't expecting him to be home, so Will could stay in bed if he was so inclined. Will

blew out a breath and uncovered his face—it was time to get up. He had work to do.

Jason was sitting in the kitchen nursing a cup of coffee when he walked in. Will poured himself a cup and sat across from Jason.

“Wasn’t expecting you home so soon,” Jason said. “Or up so early. What time did you get in last night?”

“Way later than I expected,” replied Will.

“How did the concert go? Any problems?”

“Nah. Just the usual. Chicks who lie and say so-and-so invited them to visit their dressing room or fans sneaking in the back entrance.” Will shrugged. “Same ol’, same ol’.”

“Sounds like fun, said no one ever.” Jason laughed.

Will sighed. “Yeah. But it pays the bills, so there’s that.”

Jason stood and placed his cup in the dishwasher. “It’ll be hot soon. I have work to do in the greenhouse. Dan and John will be here later, picking whatever is ready.”

“How are they working out?” Will asked. He had been unsure about hiring the men. They were vets living in the motel where he donated fresh food. Neither was ready for a nine-to-five job, but they enjoyed the freedom of being outdoors, so the job was perfect for them.

“Great. They show up on time, work hard, and leave,” said Jason as he walked out the door.

That was one load off his mind. However, there was a lot of paperwork he had to catch up on. First, he called Isabelle.

She answered on the first ring. “Will!” she squealed. “Are you back?”

Will smiled. He could get used to someone getting excited just hearing his voice, especially if Isabelle was that someone.

“Got in last night.”

“I can’t wait to hear about your trip. Did you have fun?”

Fun? No. Will huffed. “I wouldn’t call it fun, but it was interesting. I’d love to see you. Are you free today?”

“Hmmm. Yes. I just have to finish wrapping a batch of soap.”

“Why don’t you come here? There’s an idea I’d like to pass by you.”

“Oooh. Mysterious.” Isabelle laughed. “I’ll be there in a little while. Can I bring breakfast?”

Will thought about what he had in the fridge. Bacon, bread, eggs from his chickens—perfect. “No. I’ll make you breakfast.”

“Yeah! See you in an hour or so.” Isabelle hung up.

So far, the day was perfect.

The gardens were producing. He had workers he could trust, and Isabelle was coming over. Will looked around his house. It needed a little dusting, and he had to make the bed, but overall, everything was fine. A half hour was all he needed to do those chores and shower.

There was a lightness in his chest as he hurried to complete last-minute preparations. Would Isabelle like what he’d accomplished on the farm?

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Isabelle hung up the phone, her heart racing with excitement.

In a little while, she was going to see Will! She had a couple more bars of soap to wrap, then she'd shower and head over to his place.

As she wrapped the soap, Isabelle's mind wandered. Everything was falling into place. Two Fishes Soap Works was selling out each week. The success of the business brought feelings of accomplishment. Finally, she felt like an adult.

She loved that Felicia and Colt were getting closer. She smiled at their happiness and recalled them dancing at Lucky's and how they spent the rest of the night talking.

Will was back from his security job, and she would finally see what he was doing on his farm. Most importantly, they had heard nothing from Serena or the mob. Hopefully, that meant the mob had forgotten about them.

Finally, she was on her way to Will's farm. It was a half hour away, and Isabelle sang to the radio on her way over. It was a glorious, picture-perfect spring day. The air was clean, the sun was shining, and the sky was a vivid blue with a couple of puffy white clouds floating overhead.

Her heart was racing. She was excited to see Will's farm—to see him.

While she'd love to pick up from the night they made love, there was more to a relationship than sex. They had a connection but needed to know each other better. Isabelle wondered if Will would understand that.

She thought about Colt and Felicia. Theirs was a new romance, but they shared a history. Although Colt was older, he'd grown up knowing where Felicia was coming from and her story. Felicia expressed concern that she had too much baggage for him. Bull—Felicia was perfect for Colt. They both had protective instincts and cared for each other.

If anyone had too much baggage, it was her. Will seemed to want to be in a relationship. Sure, they were more than compatible in bed; however, you needed to leave the bed at some point. They didn't have that history with each other. Yet.

Isabelle turned down a dirt road that led to Will's farm. She pulled up behind his truck and got out to admire the farm. He'd told her he'd purchased thirty acres that chemicals had never touched. The compost he delivered for their raised beds was dark and rich, and plants were already thriving.

The white clapboard farmhouse with a red tin roof, a red front door with windows on each side and a long open porch exuded rustic charm. It needed a paint job but looked homey. Her heart skipped a beat as she walked up the dirt path and knocked on the door.

Isabelle heard footsteps. The door opened. Will stood there and smiled, looking just as yummy as he had when they met for coffee the other day.

“Hi there,” Will greeted her warmly.

Suddenly Isabelle felt shy. Something she'd never been. “Hi.”

Will reached for her hand and pulled her in. “I'm so glad you came.” He leaned in and kissed her cheek.

“Mmmm.” She licked her lips. “Oh. I made you some soap.” She handed him the box wrapped in brown paper. “We're making soaps specifically for guys now. You have in your hands a one-of-a-kind manly man soap box.”

His eyes crinkled. “I feel privileged. Come into the kitchen and tell me about it.”

Isabelle followed him through the living room. Her curious eyes glanced everywhere. It held just the basics: a black

leather sofa, big-ass TV, and a couple of comfortable striped side chairs around a coffee table. There were no pictures on the wall, but it looked comfortable. A small dining room was off to the side, with a wooden table and six chairs. She guessed he didn't entertain much.

The kitchen was bright and airy, and the appliances, although not new, were updated. Formica was on the countertops and floors, and there was a second wooden table with four chairs in the corner.

He placed the box on the table and carefully opened it. She had placed four bars of soap on brown shredded paper and wrapped them in clear cellophane with the Two Fishes logo.

“So, what you have in the box are four soaps. Sandalwood, bay rum, spiced tobacco, and a bourbon-infused soap. None of which will make you smell girly,” Isabelle teased.

Will sniffed each one. “Wow. These smell nice. Very masculine. Thank you.”

“Well, you are a masculine guy.” She winked at him.

His ears turned pink as he covered the box and glanced around the kitchen. Will took a deep breath and let it out. Was he nervous about her being here? “I thought I'd show you around the farm. Would you like to see what I'm growing?”

Isabelle stared at his crotch and licked her lips. “Haven't you already done that?”

Will rolled his eyes. “Ha ha.”

Isabelle started giggling.

Will blushed, and the corners of his mouth turned up. It pleased her that he had a sense of humor. That was one thing she remembered from their night together. She could be herself. Sex was supposed to be relaxing, not a performance. Some men were so serious when it came to sex.

“I'd love to see your farm,” she said enthusiastically.

They walked out the back door, and Isabelle stopped in awe. Will cocked his head. “Is everything all right?”

“Wow,” she exclaimed. “When you said you were farming, I imagined a small plot.” She stretched her arms wide. “This is amazing.” Isabelle took in the long, straight, weedless rows of vegetables, the large, modern greenhouse, the small orchard, and heard the clucking of chickens in the henhouse. A young man was operating a tractor at the far end of the field.

Isabelle’s gaze shifted to the one-and-a-half-story weathered board barn with two openings. “I love the barn,” she said. While she knew little about barns or farming, she recognized the top half of the barn had a door where hay was stored.

“That was one reason I bought the place. I needed a barn for equipment, and I hope to have sheep in it one day.” Will looked proudly around. “It’s everything I wished for.”

“Did you farm growing up?”

Will laughed. “Not hardly. But it’s always been my dream to grow food I could sell and share.”

As they strolled around the farm, Will shared his plans for the future. He explained the organic practices he was using. His enthusiasm grew as they walked, and Isabelle was captivated by his passion and knowledge.

They wandered through the greenhouse full of small plants reaching for the sun. They toured the orchard. The sweet fragrance of flowers enticed Isabelle to sniff deeply.

“Oh my,” she exclaimed when they arrived at the henhouse. The chickens pecked and clucked. Will opened the gate and invited Isabelle in. Fearful of being pecked, she shook her head.

“They won’t bite,” Will said laughingly. “I want to collect the eggs.”

Isabelle gingerly stepped into the enclosure. Will closed the gate and opened the door to the henhouse. Boxes stuffed with straw were built into one side for the hens to lay eggs in, and she could see different-colored eggs peeking out. “The eggs are beautiful,” she said. “Will the chickens be mad we took them?”

“No.” Will laughed and shook his head. “I can guarantee you’ll never eat store-bought eggs again, though.” He gathered the blue and brown eggs in his shirt. “Let’s go back to the house, and I’ll make you an omelet.”

As they walked back to the house, he discussed his plans for adding livestock, starting with sheep, and selling their wool. Eventually, he’d get beef cattle and sell the meat.

They entered the kitchen, and Will put the eggs on the counter. “I didn’t get to talk to you about an herb garden,” he said, indicating that she take a seat at the table. “I know you have your raised beds; however, would you be interested in planning a garden where you could grow more herbs for your soap-making?”

He handed her a glass of water and sat across from her, waiting for her reply.

Isabelle was surprised at the request. She and Felicia had planted a small one in the back of their rental, but it wouldn’t produce enough if they expanded the business. If she helped Will plan a larger garden, it would benefit both of them, plus she’d get to see him more. Win-win.

“I’d love to do that. It would allow us to make more soap.”

Will grinned. “Then it’s settled. Why don’t you think about it, draw up some plans, and Jason and I will dig it up.”

“That would be great,” she replied, then hesitated. “The only problem is, I don’t have much cash to put into another garden right now. Will that be a problem if I pay you when I have some?”

“No. I’m not asking you to put money into it,” he answered. “The plot will be large enough so that I can sell the herbs at the farmers’ market, supply you with what you need and still make a profit.”

Isabelle nodded. “Perfect.”

“Are you going to be at the market on Saturday?” he asked.

While she and Felicia tried to go every Saturday, this coming Saturday was a craft show in Black Pointe. They hoped to get more business owners interested in featuring their soaps. “Afraid not,” she replied and told him why.

“Too bad. Will Mandy be going?”

She shook her head. “I hope not. That woman and her daughter hate me. They’ve been poisoning other vendors’ minds that I’m taking away business from them and taking shortcuts making the soap.” Isabelle took another sip of water and placed the glass on the table. “Bitch.”

“Well, I’ll miss seeing your smiling face.”

“Oh, you can see my smiling face whenever you want,” Isabelle said, winking. It was nice to be able to flirt and laugh.

“Let me make you breakfast. Scrambled eggs good?”

She nodded.

“Okay, eggs, toast and bacon, coming up.”

Will cracked some of the eggs he brought into a bowl, placed a pan on the stove and added butter. Then put four slices of bread into the toaster and started bacon in another pan. Isabelle enjoyed watching him so at home in the kitchen and especially enjoyed watching his muscles move when he beat the eggs.

They ate in comfortable silence.

When they finished breakfast, Isabelle looked at her watch. “Darn.” She stood and brought her plate to the sink. “Let me help you clean up, then I’ve got to run. I have more soap to make.”

Will looked disappointed. “No need. I can handle cleanup duty. I would love to have you stay longer, but I understand you have a business to run. I’d like a chance to date you before we jump into bed.” He gave her a small smile. “That is, if you want to jump into bed again.” He looked so cute asking, Isabelle just wanted to hug him.

“Hmmm. I definitely want to, but I agree. We should get to know each other better first.”

He stood and leaned over and gave her a peck on the cheek. Well, that little kiss wasn't going to do it. Yes, she wanted to know more about Will. What made him tick? Laugh? Angry? Now wasn't the time though.

She pulled him close and lightly kissed his lips. He put his arms around her waist and ran his tongue around the seam of her mouth until she opened for him, then he plunged in. Their tongues tangled. Isabelle was on fire. She needed more. She rubbed his arms and chest. Crap. There went all her good intentions.

Fortunately, he had more willpower than she. Will pulled back and sighed. "Soon."

Yes, indeed. Isabelle knew they would make love soon, and she couldn't wait.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Will got to the farmers' market a little later than he had hoped. The sky was cloudy, and the air was heavy with moisture; thunder rumbled in the distance. Rain was predicted sometime in the morning, which sucked.

Fewer people at the market meant fewer sales.

Earlier, he and Jason loaded a bumper crop of tomatoes, peppers, early corn, and eggplant onto the truck. Memories of showing Isabelle the farm yesterday had been the highlight of his week. He'd miss her today, but she promised they'd see each other soon.

Will had to park on the street, which was unusual, as were the groups of people gathered around staring at the market, their voices muted. When they got to the market, the parking lot was full of emergency vehicles and police cars. Police tape cordoned off a portion of the market. In the background was a constant buzz of radios and the sound of sirens in the distance. A few cops were interviewing people on the side. What the hell?

He and Jason left the produce in the truck, walked over to one onlooker, and asked what was happening.

"I think someone died," said the middle-aged man. He raised his hands and shrugged. "I don't know anymore."

Someone was dead. He wondered who it was.

Then it concerned him that they would shut the market down. If so, all the fresh vegetables in the truck wouldn't hold until next weekend. Well, the shelters would appreciate the

extra food. It didn't make him feel any better since he still had to pay Jason for his time. His shoulders slumped—no sense crying over spilled milk. At least Isabelle and Felicia were away from the drama, enjoying themselves at the craft show.

Will saw some other vendors and went over to talk to them. No one was optimistic that the market would open.

“Excuse us. Move over.” The paramedics pushed through the crowd with a covered body on a gurney. Mandy's daughter, Mindy, trailed behind, sobbing. Crap. It was Mandy who had died.

When Mindy saw Will, she locked eyes with him and pointed an accusing finger. Her anguished cry pierced the air. “It's her fault my mother is dead. Your bitch friend caused this.”

Whaaat?

The woman kept screaming, “It's her fault,” even as the police led her to a car. Why would Isabelle be blamed? She wasn't even in town.

Will recognized Liam as one of the officers and nodded. He walked over and took Will aside.

“What happened?” Will asked, hoping for answers.

Liam shrugged. “Don't know yet. The daughter got here shortly after her mother and didn't see her. She looked around and finally found her under a table in their booth, bloodied and dead.”

“What killed her?”

“We won't know for sure until the autopsy is done, but it looks like she was stabbed multiple times. We have the weapon and will check it for fingerprints.”

One of the cops told Liam it was time to leave. He nodded his head and turned to Will.

“Listen, I have to go. I'll let you know if we get any more information.” Liam stepped through the crowd and got into one of the cop cars.

Jason and Will exchanged shocked glances. “Wow,” Jason said in disbelief. “The excitement never stops. What are you going to do about the vegetables?”

Will let out a breath and replied. “I’ll give them to the shelters. They won’t be fresh by next week.”

“That’s too bad, but the shelters will appreciate the fresh vegetables.”

As news of Mandy’s death reverberated throughout the crowd, whispers started, and several people turned to stare at Will. As if on cue, a loud boom of thunder startled him. Fat raindrops began falling, and the crowd scattered. Will let out an exasperated huff. He and Jason followed the group and hurried to the truck.

That Isabelle had anything to do with Mandy’s death was ridiculous. Wasn’t it?

CHAPTER TWENTY

“We’ll be famous before you know it,” Felicia squealed with delight as she finished taping a box.

Isabelle smiled at her friend’s excitement. They hadn’t been in Florida very long, and things were looking up.

The craft show in Black Pointe was over, and Two Fishes Soap Works just added five new venues that wanted to sell their soap, plus they sold out of the product they brought. Okay, so the venues were in Black Pointe, two hours away from Haywood Lake, but they could do a soap run once a month. What the companies ordered would be more than enough to cover their gas, supplies and maybe pay the two of them a little salary.

She wondered what Mandy would have to say about that. The woman was driving her crazy. They had to stop at the farmers’ market very early this morning to look for the bag of essentials Felicia had left behind the previous week. Fortunately, there was nothing of value in it, but it included items they might need while at the show—a pair of scissors, more price tags, paper clips, a knife, some small bills and coins, an extension cord, an extra tablecloth, and a few other supplies.

Isabelle couldn’t find it, but she found Mandy, who was as nasty as usual. It wouldn’t have surprised her to know Mandy had hidden or stolen it just for spite. She stopped in the restroom before leaving and ran into Mandy. Isabelle asked politely if she had seen the bag, at which point Mandy started screaming obscenities. Isabelle tried to ignore her, but Mandy

jumped at her and scratched her face. Isabelle successfully pushed her off, but it gave her a bad taste in her mouth. Mandy was going to get meaner. Would they have to give up the farmers' market?

“Well, I don't know about famous, but we're on our way to becoming a premier handmade soap distributor,” she said.

Isabelle thought about calling Will and giving him the good news, but he was probably exhausted from getting up early to load the vegetables for the market and then selling all day. She'd call tomorrow.

In contrast to the dark clouds outside, lively conversations and laughter filled the expo center as the show wound down. Crafters were breaking down their exhibits, and the lingering odor of caramel popcorn made her wish she had grabbed some before the popcorn man sold out. Isabelle particularly enjoyed watching the various artisans demonstrating their skills, especially the potters.

Maybe one of these days, when life was quieter, she could take up pottery. It would be a nice addition to the soaps and lotions. But then again, working with clay was messy. She was trying hard to be less messy. She thought of Will's farm and how pretty all the gardens and barns looked. Everything in its place made life so much easier, and one couldn't help feeling in control. At least, that was what Felicia kept telling her. She also told Isabelle that being a little messy or free-spirited shouldn't matter if a man loved her. Isabelle wanted to believe her.

Felicia helped Isabelle pack up the car and had her phone to her ear. From what Isabelle could hear, Felicia had Colt on the line and was telling him the good news. Their relationship was moving along, albeit a mite slowly. Between fulfilling soap orders, Colt's job at the garage, and the occasional security stint, the two had little free time to get together. But they were solid, and Isabelle couldn't be happier.

Her relationship with Will was going slower—by choice. They already knew they were combustible in the sex department. But sex wouldn't complete a connection.

Everything was in the trunk, and Isabelle slammed it shut and got into the passenger seat.

“Gotta go, Colt. See you soon,” Felicia said as she ended the call and looked at Isabelle with a wide smile. “Colt says hi.”

Isabelle laughed. “No, he didn’t, but thank you for saying that.”

“Well, he would have if I’d given him a chance,” Felicia replied as her ears turned red. “We’re going out for a bite later. Do you want to come?”

“Ah.” Isabelle rolled her eyes. “That’s a big no.” Isabelle loved her brother, and she loved Felicia, but no way was she going to be the third wheel in the middle of their lovefest. “You two kids go out and have fun.”

Felicia pretended to pout for a second and then gave her a goofy grin. “We will.”

They waved goodbye to several people they’d met and were on their way. The sky was getting darker, and Isabelle prayed the rain would hold off until they got home—only another hour to go.

They were on a partial asphalt/dirt road that led to the main road into Haywood Lake. It was a pleasant drive when the sun was out. However, their luck didn’t hold— a bolt of lightning, a sudden crack of thunder, then another. One hit a tree. Felicia screeched. The tree fell in slow motion in front of the car onto the road. Felicia slammed on the brakes, and they jolted forward as they struck the tree. The seat belts stopped their forward motion.

The women looked at each other, then at the tree. They let out a collective sigh.

“Are you all right?” asked Isabelle. Her heart was racing. “That was a close call.”

Felicia nodded. A tear slid down her cheek. “Darn. This repair will cost us,” said Felicia, her lips trembling, then she took a deep breath. “Well, we can’t sit here all day. We need to call someone.”

“First, we better call the police,” said Isabelle. She looked around. No other cars were on the road—just them and the tree.

“I don’t have towing on my policy,” said Felicia. She banged her head lightly on the steering wheel. “Or comprehensive since the car’s so old. It’s good that we’re not hurt, but I don’t want to look at the damage. I wonder if Colt can tow it back?” She looked at Isabelle. “Do you think he would drive this far?”

Isabelle snorted. “For you? He’d probably cross the ocean in a rowboat.”

She didn’t want to say anything to Felicia, but having the car damaged would cost them money they didn’t have.

However, if she knew anything, Colt would move heaven and earth to rescue them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Colt arrived with his tow truck about an hour after they called him. Spotting them on the side of the road, he parked the truck and rushed over to check Felicia and Isabelle for injuries even though they told him they were unharmed—just shaken up.

“What happened to your face?” Colt’s eyes narrowed as he turned Isabelle’s face left and right with his hands.

“It’s nothing. I was accidentally scratched.”

Colt seemed okay with the explanation. No way was she telling him that Mandy attacked her. He’d go into full-on ex-Navy-SEAL mode. She didn’t want nor need her big brother to come to her rescue all the time.

“You girls were fortunate that nothing else was damaged, only the front end,” said Colt, his voice tinged with relief. “You could have been injured or killed if the tree had fallen on the car.”

Isabelle’s hands were clammy, and she rubbed them on her pants. She knew just how lucky they were.

They would have been toast if the tree had fallen a few more inches in their direction. The thought sent shivers down her spine. She thought about Will and how she’d never know if what they had was just one night of passion or if they genuinely were soulmates. Isabelle wanted to call him, but he was at the farmers’ market. She’d touch base later.

The road crew and police were on the scene. She, Colt, and Felicia stood silently by the tow truck and watched the road crew diligently cut and remove the tree piece by piece before

like wet dogs when they returned to Haywood Lake—just frosting on the cake of bad luck.

Colt connected Felicia's car to the tow truck and told the women to get in the cab. Felicia protested, telling him they were soaked and to put something down on the seats.

"The seats will be fine. I'm more worried about you two. You're both shivering."

"Please," she asked.

He shook his head and sighed, but he found another tarp and placed it on the seat for them to sit on. "Climb in, ladies, and let's get this shitstorm on the road."

Little was said on the way back. Felicia stared at her hands. Colt was quiet and just drove. Isabelle stared out the window and wondered if they would ever have some luck. Or would disaster taint everything good that happened?

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

After disconnecting Felicia's car in the back lot of his garage, Colt unpacked Felicia's trunk and placed everything in his truck. It was late afternoon, and the rain had finally stopped, leaving the air moist and humid.

"I'll look at your car in a while and get back to you with an estimate," he said to Felicia. "Let's get you two home."

Home. Was there a more comforting word? Isabelle wanted to get home, tear off her clothes, take a hot shower, wash her hair, and remove the stench of disappointment from her body. Then she wanted to have a glass of wine or two and reflect on her life. After that, she and Felicia had to figure out how to pay for the car repairs. She took a deep breath. Being a Debbie Downer wasn't helping. This wasn't her—she was the optimistic, carefree one. Felicia was the worrier.

Colt delivered them to their house, helped unpack and carry their supplies into the house. Felicia asked him if he wanted a cup of coffee or a glass of water, and he said water. She went into the kitchen to get it. Now was Isabelle's chance.

"Colt," she whispered. "Look at Felicia's car and let me know what the damage is before you tell her."

"Why?" he asked in a booming voice. Great. Today his voice had to carry. Men! Sometimes they were so clueless.

"Shhh." She glared at him and whispered again. "Because I want to pay for most of it—somehow. I don't want Felicia to obsess about finding money for the repairs."

He looked at the floor, then at Isabelle and narrowed his eyes. "I'm disappointed you think I'd let her or you pay for any repair."

"It's your business; you need to make money, too," she hissed.

Colt stepped over and hugged her. "I wouldn't feel good about myself if I let either of you pay. So, forget it and ..." He let her go when Felicia walked back in. "Look on the bright side."

"What bright side?" asked Felicia as she looked between Isabelle and Colt.

"I'm sure I can just pull out the bumper and your car will be fine," said Colt.

Felicia's eyes lit up. "Are you sure?"

He nodded. Isabelle couldn't have been prouder of her brother than she was right now. Tact wasn't his middle name, but he handled this perfectly.

"Whew." Felicia closed and opened her eyes. "That is great news. How long do you think it'll take to fix it?"

"A couple of days and it'll be as good as new," he said.

Felicia looked at Isabelle. "I guess our luck is holding," she said exuberantly.

"It sure is," Isabelle replied. Her heart swelled with love for Colt and Felicia.

Colt had his hand on the door when they heard a knock. He looked at them and then opened it. Liam McBride was about to knock again. He was in uniform, so this wasn't a friendly visit. So why was he here? Was it about Will? Did he have an accident?

"Hi, can I come in?"

Colt stepped back and cocked his head. "Is everything okay?"

Liam grimaced. "Not really. I came to talk to Isabelle."

“Me?” she squeaked. Felicia reached over to take her hand, and Colt shut the door and stood by her.

“Isabelle. Don’t freak out. I need to ask you some questions,” he said gently.

“Not freaking out. Much,” she said. “Let’s sit down, and you can ask away.”

Liam and Colt chose the chairs. She and Felicia were on the couch. Deja vu. It was like when they had to tell the guys that the mob was chasing them. Except it was Liam and Colt sitting in the chairs, not Will and Colt.

Isabelle rolled her neck around and blew out her breath. “What’s up?”

“First, can you tell me how you got the scratches on your face?” Liam asked. Colt widened his eyes but said nothing.

“Ummm. I was scratched at the farmers’ market this morning.”

“Aaand?” Liam asked. “Who did it?”

“Mandy Stevens,” she replied. Why did he want to know about her face? “Felicia and I went to the market before we headed to Black Pointe. Our supply bag was missing, and I hoped to find it. I saw Mandy in the restroom and asked if she’d seen it. Instead, she attacked me, calling me all sorts of vile names.”

Felicia looked sharply at her. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

Isabelle shook her head. “I didn’t want you to worry.” She looked at Liam. “Why do you ask?”

“Mandy Stevens was murdered this morning. I’m guessing it was your bag we found beside her, and she was stabbed with your knife.”

“Oh, my God!” Isabelle exclaimed as she covered her mouth with her hands. “Oh my God.” Her heart pounded in her chest. She couldn’t believe what Liam said. Mandy Stevens, her nemesis at the farmers’ market, was dead. Her mind was clouded by shock and confusion. Who could have killed Mandy? It sure wasn’t her.

Colt was stunned. Felicia grabbed her hand, and Liam looked concerned.

Liam leaned forward. “Mandy’s daughter filed a complaint against you, maintaining that you had it in for her mother.”

Oh my God. Could this get any worse? There was another knock on the door. Isabelle’s head was reeling. Who could it be this time?

Colt answered the door, and Will came rushing in.

“I hoped you’d be home.” He looked at Liam. “I’d hoped to tell you about Mandy first, but I’m guessing Liam beat me to it.”

“Yeah. You’re a little late to the party,” Isabelle said. She couldn’t keep the sarcasm from her voice but then felt guilty. None of this was Will’s fault.

Luckily Will ignored that and grabbed a dining room chair and sat next to the couch. “Is there anything new on Mandy’s case?”

Liam took out a small notebook and shook his head. “No. I explained to Isabelle that Mandy was dead and her daughter filed a complaint. We’ll look into it, of course.” He looked over at Isabelle. “Did anyone see you this morning? Was Felicia with you when this happened?”

“No, and no,” Isabelle replied. “Felicia was searching around the area in general.” She looked at her hands and then over at Liam. “I have no idea who would want to kill Mandy or why. I may have been upset with her, but”—she shrugged—“I don’t go around killing people who don’t like me.”

“Okay then,” Liam said as he put the notebook in his shirt pocket and stood. “If there is anything else you can think of, call me.”

“Liam, were there any cameras around that might show what happened?” asked Will.

“Cody is checking that now. Hopefully, we’ll get something. I’ll let you know,” said Liam. “I’d like you and

Felicia to come down to the station tomorrow so we can get your fingerprints.”

Isabelle sucked in a deep breath. “Are you thinking I killed Mandy?”

Liam shook his head. “No. Not at all. I just want to eliminate all possibility.”

He thanked Isabelle for her help and left.

She sat there in stunned silence.

“Oh my God.” Isabelle covered her mouth. “We’re—I’m a murder suspect. What am I going to do?”

Will slipped next to her. “There’s no way you killed her. I’ll come with you tomorrow.”

“Me, too,” said Colt. “You’re not alone.”

Isabelle and Felicia looked at each other. Then Isabelle looked at Will and her brother. “No. Felicia and I can handle this for now. Please don’t come with us.” She begged them with her eyes. “Please.”

Colt nodded. She turned to Will and stared at him. Finally, he nodded. “I’m not happy about letting you two go by yourselves.”

“Will, we’ll be fine,” Felicia said. “We’re innocent. Our fingerprints are going to be on the knife, but hopefully the killer’s will be too. Why don’t you two concentrate on finding out if there were any security cameras that captured who killed Mandy? I know Liam said Cody was looking into them, but I’m guessing your group might be better at it.”

The guys nodded.

If they could find the murderer, that would be the best news ever. However, Isabelle couldn’t shake the thought that Mandy’s death had something to do with the mob. Had they found out they were living in Haywood Lake? Did they mistake Mandy’s soap tent for theirs? Could things get any worse?

What the hell was she thinking? Of course, they could; they always did.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Isabelle got up before the sun rose on Sunday morning. Dreams, or rather nightmares of a jail cell door slamming shut on her, kept her tossing and turning all night. It was a relief to wake up, but when she looked out her window at a dark gray sky, with lightning streaks flashing and sporadically lighting up the heavens, it seemed like an omen—perfect weather for how she felt.

How did her life get to this point? Everything she touched seemed to go wrong: first, sneaking out on Will that night; hanging out with Serena and being thrown in jail, chased by the mob for stolen money; Mandy's death; and now having to go to the police station to have their fingerprints taken and perhaps being arrested. Everything she touched was going to hell in a handbasket.

To make matters worse, Will and Colt insisted they accompany them to the police station. She appreciated the thought. However, it made her more anxious. Now they both were going to believe she was totally incompetent. All she wanted was just one day for everything to go right, for people to believe she had her shit together. Just one day—that wasn't too much to ask, was it?

What she needed right now was a cup of coffee. Sighing deeply, Isabelle filled the pot with cold water, placed coffee grounds in the basket, and turned the machine on. She sat at the kitchen table with her head in her hands and exhaled.

“Whatcha doing?”

Felicia's soft voice interrupted Isabelle's dark thoughts.

"Oh, nothing much. Just thinking about my life, going to jail ... you know, the same ol,' same ol'."

Felicia wrapped her arms around Isabelle's shoulders.

"If you go to jail, I'll bake you a cake," Felicia joked before adding, "Seriously, Isabelle, you did nothing wrong, and you shouldn't worry. Colt and Will are coming with us, and I'm sure they'll think of something to help. Liam and Cody like you. They won't arrest you without cause."

"Cause? Come on, Felicia. It's our missing knife. Mandy hit me in the restroom and was murdered just after I left her. They don't need much more than that."

"Well, I'm optimistic nothing bad is going to happen." Felicia hugged her tightly. "Why don't we have breakfast? I'll call Colt just as we leave."

Isabelle shook her head. "I'll vomit anything I eat right now. You eat, and I'll get dressed."

"Okay, but you get cranky when you haven't eaten."

"What difference does it make? I'm going to end up in the pokey regardless."

Felicia smiled. "You are such a drama queen." She patted Isabelle's shoulder. "Go get dressed, and we'll be on our way."

Isabelle picked up her coffee cup and brought it with her. Felicia was teasing about her being a drama queen. It was something they said to each other when things got tough. Damn. Felicia was worried, too.

She looked in her closet and wondered what to wear. Something that might be easy to take off if they jailed her. Isabelle wasn't sure how an arrest worked, but she wanted to be prepared. *Please, please, don't let the prison uniform be orange.* Orange was not her color.

Gah. Now she was just being silly. It was all circumstantial evidence at this point. Hopefully, the police would find the killer's fingerprints in their database, or Colt's friend would find a camera somewhere with the killer's picture to exonerate

her. Listen to all that legalese—*circumstantial evidence, exonerate*—she was watching too many *Law & Order* shows.

A knock on her door reminded Isabelle that they had to leave. She'd chosen a mid-length floral skirt topped with a navy sleeveless blouse, a string tie at the waist, and a pair of sandals. She sniffed her armpits as a precaution since fear made her hands and her body clammy. Everything was fine there—no offensive odor. Her deodorant was doing its job.

"I'm coming." Her voice trembled as she opened the door and grabbed her van keys. Since he towed Felicia's car yesterday, Colt had not mentioned looking at it.

Felicia looked innocent and adorable in a light blue sleeveless print top over black slacks. Humpf, now she sounded like she was directing a fashion show. This was real. They were being fingerprinted.

"I called Colt," said Felicia. "He'll meet us at the station. Will is driving there separately."

"Great." Isabelle's heart was racing now. She took deep gulps of air. Felicia reached over to rub her arm.

"We are going to be okay," she said.

"From your lips to God's ear," Isabelle replied.

"Isabelle," Felicia said sharply. "Stop this. We're going to be fine."

Isabelle felt guilty for worrying Felicia. Liam would have arrested her yesterday if he had enough evidence. She just had to believe everything would turn out okay.

It was a long twenty-minute drive to Haywood Lake Police Station. Isabelle drove past the children's park and took a right on Middle Street, then a right on Sunrise Cove Road past Lucky's Bar and Grill, then another right on Church Street. The station was across from the library. She found public parking in the back, pulled into a space, and turned off the van. They sat in silence for a few minutes. Isabelle clutched the steering wheel. Releasing it meant reality was going to interfere with her fantasy that she wasn't here because of a crime, that they were getting a tour, visiting a friend, whatever.

“Isabelle?” Felicia reached over to touch her hand. “We have to get out. I see Colt’s truck parked a row over.”

Isabelle nodded. They stepped out of the van, their footsteps and Isabelle’s heavy breathing echoing in the parking lot. The police station was an older brick building surrounded by larger trees. Children’s laughter from the park next to the station would normally be heard if it wasn’t going to storm. They pushed open the double glass doors and entered the reception area. The cop sitting behind the desk asked for their names and who they were there to talk to.

“Hey, you two,” Colt’s steady voice carried in the hall. Isabelle turned to see her brother and Will standing in the corner. The men walked towards them, and Colt kissed Felicia’s cheek. Will stepped close to Isabelle and whispered, “Stop stressing. It’ll be okay.”

She wanted to believe him. “Have you heard any more news?”

Will shook his head.

A door opened, and Liam walked out. He was in his uniform and had a somber expression on his face. He shook hands with Will and Colt. Then he turned to Isabelle and Felicia. “Come on in. This won’t take long, and then we’ll talk.”

They followed Liam into a large office filled with a dozen desks. The sounds of ringing phones and voices filled the room. Some of the police were in uniforms, others in street clothes. Cody waved to them from a far desk.

Isabelle’s heart pounded. She licked her lips and looked around. The desks were relatively modern; the area was bright from the large glass windows. There were two doors that led somewhere. She didn’t hear any screams of torture coming from either. That was good.

Liam walked them through the office and through one of the doors. Isabelle glanced at Felicia, who looked calm and collected even though she was squeezing Colt’s hand. Will

kept his hand on her back, giving her strength. They followed Liam, their footsteps echoing in the stark hallway.

Finally, Liam opened the door to a room set up for fingerprinting. Isabelle watched as an officer prepared the materials and explained the process.

“Okay, who’s up first?” he asked.

Isabelle raised her hand. “Me.” She took a deep breath and approached the table. The officer gently rolled her fingertips on the ink pad and pressed each finger onto a white card. Then she wiped the ink off. Then it was Felicia’s turn. Finally finished, they followed Liam out and into the main office to talk.

“Sorry about that,” said Liam. “One of these days, we’ll get an electronic scanner, but it isn’t in the budget right now.”

Colt and Will had gone over to Cody’s desk to say hello and promised to be right back.

“Anything new?” asked Isabelle. Liam opened his mouth to answer and closed it. His eyes flashed annoyance or humor—she couldn’t tell which—until a familiar voice behind her said hello.

“Joy.” Liam’s shoulders slumped. “What are you girls doing here?”

Isabelle and Felicia turned around. Joy, Mallory, Nicki, and Dani were standing behind them.

“Whaaat?” exclaimed Isabelle.

“We’re here to support you two,” Joy replied. “When Liam told me what happened, we couldn’t let you come down here by yourselves. You need friends with you.”

Friends. Isabelle closed her eyes. The word friend was up there with home and comfort. “You shouldn’t have come. Will and Colt are here,” Isabelle told them. Inwardly she felt a little relief. She and Felicia weren’t alone. Their friends were there and believed in their innocence.

“Not to worry.” Joy patted her arm. “We’re just backup.”

Liam sighed. Will and Colt had returned with Cody, who smiled and shook his head. Now there was a crowd around Liam's desk, and the other cops were looking at them.

"The conference room is empty. Let's move this circus in there," Liam said. They followed him into a small conference room that had a large metal table and twelve chairs. It looked out into a small courtyard.

"Sit," Liam said as he pulled out a chair and sat down.

The women followed his lead, but Will, Colt and Cody stood by the wall.

"Can you tell us what you've found out so far?" asked Colt.

Liam shook his head. "Not much. We'll check Felicia and Isabelle's fingerprints on the knife. Hopefully, the killer's will be on it too."

"So, Isabelle isn't a suspect?" asked Will.

"I want to say no." Liam sighed. "But until we have positive proof someone else did it, she's number one on the list." He glanced at Isabelle. "Which reminds me, and I'm saying this as a friend, stay in the area."

Isabelle's stomach flipped. She swallowed hard. This wasn't happening. "I didn't kill her, I swear."

Joy and Felicia, who were sitting on either side of her, reached over to hug her. "We know, sweetie," said Joy.

"Have you checked the cameras?" asked Colt.

"Doing that now," replied Liam. Silence. He slapped his hands on the table. "That's all I have that I can share." He stared at Isabelle. "I know this is tough, but hang in there. I'm doing all I can to resolve this."

She nodded. Everyone headed to the door. Cody stayed behind to talk to Liam. Joy and the girls hugged her and left. Will, Colt and Felicia followed them. Isabelle let out a sigh of relief to be outside. Never in her life, including their overnight stay in jail, had she felt so alone and vulnerable.

Felicia murmured something to Colt and looked at Isabelle. “Since it’s so late, Colt’s going to stay at our house for a while. Will you follow us?”

“Sure.”

Colt put his arms around Felicia and looked at Will. “We need to talk.”

Will gave him that chin-up thing that men do.

Isabelle wondered what that was all about and was about to ask, but Will had his arms around her waist and whispered, “Come home with me.”

Yes! Because Felicia was heading off with Colt, the girls were gone, and she didn’t want to be alone.

Somewhere, someone had to know what really happened.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The sound of the slap echoed through the empty room. The woman tied to the chair whimpered and attempted to avoid it but couldn't. She screamed as flesh connected with flesh. Didn't she know he loved it when they screamed?

She had been a good-looking woman once, but now she was looking a little, hell, a lot worse for wear. Black mascara ran down her face in rivulets and matched the two black eyes she had. One side of her face was black and blue, the other red and swollen, and several fingers were bent at odd angles—broken. It was her own damn fault. No one and he meant no one fucked with him. Eddie Turboletti, aka Fast Eddie, shook his hand to get some feeling back.

“Eddie, please stop,” the woman begged.

He just smiled. “Tell me what I want to know, and I'll stop.”

Eddie had been going at Serena Parker for several hours now. She'd already given him the location of Isabelle's brother and that he owned a garage. She didn't know his last name, just his first—Colt.

He'd sent Ricardo “Ricky” Decker to find the brother and Isabelle in Haywood Lake, Florida, just a few hours away. He hoped Ricky would get lucky, find the bitch, and get his money back. Eddie didn't care how he did that because Jacko, his boss, would make Eddie pay, one way or another. Time was of the essence.

Eddie shouldn't have sent Ricky's stupid-ass brother Antonio to get the money in the first place. Antonio scared them, and the women ran away before he could collect. Eddie sent Ricky to Haywood Lake to redeem himself, or else Ricky and Antonio would find themselves in the same position as Serena if he returned without the money and Isabelle.

Serena didn't have Isabelle's last name or the name of the soap company she owned, but she was sure Isabelle would be selling soap at the Haywood Lake farmers' market. Serena also claimed she didn't have Eddie's money, nor did she have his drugs, claiming Isabelle stole both. Eddie suspected Serena sold the drugs herself. He just had to get her to confess. A couple more broken fingers, a few more slaps, and maybe she would. If not, he had a baseball bat in the corner for special occasions.

This deal had been his big break. He was low man on the totem pole. Jacko's family was in charge of a large group of drug dealers, money launderers and who knew what else. Jacko finally gave Eddie permission to branch out, sell more drugs, and look what happened. The bitch in front of him got greedy.

It was his fault for trusting a pretty face. Never again.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

We need to talk.

Colt was right; they needed to talk. The situation didn't look good for Isabelle.

Between the scratches on Isabelle's face, her knife being the murder weapon, and the absence of witnesses, it was a clusterfuck. And odd. Had the mob mistakenly murdered Mandy, thinking she was Isabelle? Mandy was a pain in the ass, but no one Will knew wanted to kill her.

That was one conclusion Will could draw. The other was that the murder was random.

Sure, the police were trying to find surveillance cameras around the farmers' market, and Liam was a good guy who was working hard to find out what had happened.

However, they needed more—more time, more information. Maybe it was finally time to get the Brotherhood Alliance involved.

Will gently guided Isabelle to his truck, helped her in, and drew the seat belt around her. She hadn't said a word since they left the station. She looked so lost there. This accusation had to weigh heavily on her mind.

He was grateful that Colt offered to stay with Felicia because it was easier to get Isabelle to come home with him. It would have been awkward to join Colt and Felicia at the house, sitting in silence, staring at each other like old married couples and sipping tea. While he knew Colt was eager to take

his relationship with Felicia to the next level, he was just as keen to be with Isabelle, and this was the perfect opportunity.

“I’ll make us some lunch. Anything special you want to eat?” He glanced over at her. Isabelle was staring straight ahead, her shoulders slumped.

She sighed. “No. Anything you make will be fine.”

Will thought about what he had in the fridge.

Well, for starters, he had lots of vegetables and eggs that he didn’t get to sell at the market yesterday. The police took their sweet time investigating. No, that wasn’t fair; it took time to investigate. By the time the police finished, most vendors and customers had gone home.

All righty then, maybe a frittata and hash browns. He also had bacon, butter, and bread. Perfect. It would be an easy meal.

Then they could talk or ... hmmm—no. He frowned. Sex was probably off the table. Isabelle wouldn’t be in the mood. Maybe they could cuddle and kiss.

It was a good half hour to get to his farm. There was little traffic. Neither spoke. Will got lost in his thoughts about calling Chase and scheduling a meeting of the Brotherhood Alliance. He and Colt needed to coordinate their efforts. Finally, he pulled into his driveway. There were no cars, so no employees. Good. He wanted Isabelle to himself. He didn’t want to be interrupted or worry about anything.

Isabelle was out of the door before he could come around. He huffed as he reached her door.

“Will, I’m perfectly capable of getting in and out of a truck without help,” she said.

He shrugged. “I know, but I enjoy helping.”

“Thank you. I do appreciate it.” She followed him to the front door. “Will you tell me what happened at the market yesterday? Oh, God,” she moaned. “Was it just yesterday? It feels longer.”

“I’ll tell you what I know, but let’s eat first. I’m starving.” Will glanced at her. “And you need to keep your strength up.”

Isabelle huffed. “Yeah. When they throw me in the pokey, I’ll need to be strong.”

Will kissed the top of her head. “You’re not going to jail. Promise.” He grabbed her hand. “Come on in, and I’ll start lunch. You’ll feel better.”

* * *

THERE WAS no way in hell she was going to feel better, but Isabelle shrugged and followed Will into the house. Looking around the comfortable living room, she noticed a couple of small plants on the coffee table. Will had also added several pictures, creating a peaceful scene. One of the larger ones was of a blue rowboat tied to a dock in a lake; alongside it were two pictures of scenes in Haywood Lake.

“I like what you’ve done here,” she said.

“Thanks. I felt like I needed to add more color to the room and some live plants.” He patted the edge of the sofa. “Why don’t you get comfortable, and I’ll bring you something to drink. Beer, wine, water?”

She gave him a faint smile. “I think I’d like a glass of wine. Why don’t you let me help you?”

He smiled. “Come into the kitchen. You can watch while I cook.”

Isabelle followed him into the kitchen. Will bustled around collecting eggs and veggies from the fridge, finding a bowl and whisk. He deftly cut the vegetables, put bread in the toaster, and started a pan of bacon. Isabelle’s stomach growled. When was the last time she ate? She closed her eyes—yesterday at breakfast before the tree crashed in front of Felicia’s car and Liam gave them the unfortunate news of Mandy’s death.

Before long, Will placed a plate of vegetable frittata, crispy bacon, and toasted bread in front of her.

“Where did you learn to cook?” she asked. “This is delicious.”

“Good.” He took a bite of toast and swallowed. “It was learn to cook or eat out every day. I got tired of eating out.”

She nodded. “It does get old. My parents made sure I could make the basics before I left the house.”

“So, your parents are up in Georgia? Colt doesn’t talk much about family.”

Isabelle laughed. “Colt doesn’t talk much about a lot of things. Yes, they’re still up there. They live about four hours from where Felicia and I lived. Far enough away to be missed but not so far that they could just drive for a quick visit.”

“What was it like growing up with Colt? He’s, what ... seven years older than you?”

“Yes. Colt was, is, the best big brother ever. A protector. I didn’t see a lot of him when he was younger, but as he grew older, he spent more time around Felicia and me.” She looked at her hands and then at Will. “Truthfully? Colt was the golden boy, an overachiever, always first in his class, always doing the right thing before joining the military and becoming the best of the best. I was the problem child, and I think Felicia is the daughter my parents wished they had.”

Will leaned back in his chair and cocked his head. “That isn’t what I heard. Colt doesn’t talk about family much, but he is in awe of you.”

“Oh, pshaw. I don’t believe that.” Isabelle could feel her ear tips turning hot.

He shrugged. “True. He loves your free spirit, how you’re not afraid to try something new, how you stand up for your friends, that you are artistic and compassionate.”

She squinted her eyes and said, “Are you sure he wasn’t talking about someone else?”

He shook his head. “You’re too hard on yourself.” He took her hand in his, brought it to his mouth and kissed it.

Isabelle's heart fluttered. She closed her eyes. His lips were tender on her skin. When she opened them and looked at Will, his eyes were a dark whiskey brown. He gently stroked her hand where he kissed her.

"Oh, my," she said in a breathless whisper.

"Ahhh. I shouldn't have done that." Will rubbed his hands through his hair. "You need to relax, not worry about a horndog."

Isabelle licked her lips. Will's eyes followed her tongue. "I am relaxed. Now I could be more relaxed."

"Sweetheart, I didn't invite you here to have sex. I just wanted to be with you."

It was sweet of Will to want to be with her and not expecting to have sex with her. But Isabelle's lady parts were aching. She desperately wanted, or rather needed, the distraction of sex. More importantly, she wanted to have sex with Will. Would it be as mind-blowing as their one-night stand? It was time to find out.

"How about we pick up these dishes and put them in the dishwasher," she said as she stood with her plate.

"Good idea. After, we could watch a movie if you want." Will picked up his plate to bring it to the sink.

Isabelle couldn't help but notice the bulge. He wanted her. She rinsed the dishes and put them in the dishwasher while Will put the butter in the fridge. She turned just as he did, and they bumped chests. Neither moved. Will was breathing heavily. Isabelle gulped. He gathered her in his arms and leaned down to kiss her.

She put her arms around his neck and closed her eyes. Her lips opened slightly. He huffed lightly and ...

Brrrrrrring, brrrrrring.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Brrrrrrring. Brrrrrrring.

Are you fucking kidding me?

Isabelle's rosy lips were within reach. Will's cock was hard—was being the operative word here. Isabelle pulled back and groaned.

"I better take this." He gritted his teeth as he pulled the phone out of his pocket. "It might be Liam telling us that they found the killer."

Isabelle's eyes widened, and she nodded.

Will looked at the phone. Colt! He huffed. Shouldn't Colt be somewhere kissing and making love to his own woman? Why the hell was he calling?

"Yeah?"

Isabelle bit her lip, looking hopeful.

"Just wanted to let you know I spoke to Chase. He's called a meeting of the Brotherhood tomorrow evening at seven."

"Got it. Have you heard anything from Liam?"

"No."

"Okay. Goodbye then." Will hung up, turned towards Isabelle, and shook his head. She gave him a small smile. No way was he letting her obsess about this.

"Hmmm. Now where were we?" He pulled her close, felt her breasts meld into his chest, inhaled her arousal, sniffed her

hair, and breathed in her lavender and mint shampoo mixed with underlying vinegar notes. Fear that he hoped he could banish.

“Will,” she murmured into his chest. “Stop.”

Stop? Will released her. “Isabelle? Sweetheart? What’s wrong?”

She stepped back and stared at the ground. When her eyes finally met his, the pain reflected from them made him want to hit the person who made her afraid and sad.

“I’m sorry, so sorry.” Isabelle sat at the table. “I want to make love to you—desperately.”

He was on board with that, so what was the problem?

“Okaaay. Why did you stop?”

She shook her head. “Let’s see.” She held up one finger. “I’m being accused of murder.” Two fingers: “I may go to jail.” Three fingers: “I feel like a loser, and you deserve better.” Four: “I’ve disappointed everyone in my life.” Five: “All I want right now is to sleep and forget about my sad life.”

Will sat across from her and wiped a tear from her eye. “Isabelle, if the police had any evidence you killed Mandy, you’d be in jail. They don’t, and they won’t. You’re not going to jail on my watch. You’re not a loser; I deserve all your attention and love, as you do mine. You haven’t disappointed anyone. Your brother, best friend, and new friends have all stuck by you. As for sleeping—” He stood and extended his hand. “Let’s get you settled in the guest room. I bet you’ll feel better after a good night’s sleep.”

She gave him a weak smile and reached for his hand. “I hope you’re right.” Isabelle closed her eyes and yawned deeply. When she opened them, her face flushed. “I’m sorry, that was rude. But sleeping sounds wonderful right about now. It’s been a long two days.”

“Come on then. The guest room has never been used. The mattress is new, and the sheets are clean.”

“Perfect. Lead the way.”

He took her hand and led her down the hallway.

She peeked into the bathroom and the two bedrooms on either side of the hall. One he was using as an office, and the other held just the basics: a queen bed with two side tables, a dresser, and a chair with a floor lamp. The walls were painted off-white since he hadn't put any effort into a room that wasn't used.

"My bedroom is at the end of the hall if you need anything." He glanced around the guest room. "It's basic but clean."

She laughed. "It's fine. I'm only sleeping here." Her laugh turned into a frown, and she sighed. "I didn't bring anything to sleep in." She looked down at her skirt. "I'll sleep in my underwear."

That conjured up some sexy memories that he promptly tamped down. Now wasn't the time. Isabelle needed comfort and sleep, not a horndog.

"No worries. I have a pair of boxers and a T-shirt you can wear. You can use an extra toothbrush and toothpaste in the bathroom." He looked around to see what else she would need. "There's an extra blanket and towels in the closet. I have my own bathroom, so the one across the hall is all yours."

"Will, I can't thank you enough." They stood in silence until Will leaned over and kissed her forehead. "Sleep well, sweet cheeks. I'll see you in the morning."

He gently closed the door. Every fiber of his being wanted to take Isabelle's hand, walk her into the master bedroom, make sweet love to her, and have her forget all her problems. That wasn't happening tonight, but it would soon.

Will got ready for bed. Everything was quiet in Isabelle's room. He'd listened at the door. She was lightly snoring, which he thought was adorable. Sleep was good.

After brushing his teeth and slipping under the covers, Will lay there with his hands behind his head, thinking. Was he moving on Isabelle too fast? Too slow? He knew they were compatible, nah, combustible in bed, so that wasn't the issue.

He wanted to get closer to her, understand what made her tick, what her favorite color was, her favorite food and especially make sweet love to her. Was she ready? So many questions but no answers. Maybe in the morning, he'd talk to her.

A slight creak in the night had Will sitting up and reaching for the gun on his night table. The room was filled with shadows. He slowly got out of bed and searched around. No one was in the room. He peered out the window but saw no one.

Then he heard the creak again. It was coming from the kitchen. He quietly opened his door, leading with his gun. The door to Isabelle's room was closed. Good.

Will hoped to solve the mystery and not wake her up. He kept to the side of the hallway, and when he got to the kitchen, he flipped the light on.

A woman screamed. Dear Lord, it was Isabelle. She looked at the gun in his hand and started shaking.

He quickly put it on the table and walked over to her. "Why are you up?"

Her brow furrowed. "I had a nightmare and wanted a glass of water."

"You could have woken me up. I'd have gotten one for you and talked you through the nightmare."

"Oh Will." She shook her head. "You've done so much already."

He took the glass from her hand and placed it on the table. "Sit down, and we can talk." He pulled a chair out for her.

Isabelle sat and folded her hands. "I'm sorry I woke you. Mandy's death is weighing on my mind. I keep thinking about disappointing my parents and brother again." She took a gulp of water and put the glass down. "And I don't want Felicia to worry about me. She's alone in the world." She bit her lip, and her eyes got dewy. "She's my best friend and sister. Can you imagine how she would feel if I disappeared in the bowels of prison?"

Yeah, he could. He was alone in the world. Really alone. There were no parents or siblings. Friends, yes. Best friends, maybe. Men from the military who had his back.

He placed his hands on hers. "I can imagine being alone in the world, but sweetheart, you're going to be fine. I promise."

"Why are you alone?"

Will sighed. "It's a sad tale. I don't want to depress you."

"Pffft. I'm already imagining bread and water and a rat-infested jail cell. Can't get any more depressing than that."

He chuckled. "True."

"Will, tell me about growing up. Where you lived, why you joined the service, why farming is so important to you." She blew out her breath. "You know all about me, but we've never talked about you."

"Not much to tell, sweetheart." He got up to get a glass of juice and sat back down. "I had a wonderful childhood. My parents were loving, and I had a little sister who adored me. When I was about fifteen, I was so into myself and my friends. I was going to be the start-off kicker in my high school football game. It was a big deal. My grandfather, who I was never close to, died, and his funeral was that day. My parents wanted me to go with them, but did I? No. My game was more important."

"Oh Will." Isabelle closed and opened her eyes. "This isn't going to end well, is it?"

He shrugged. "Depends on what you think a good ending is. Anyhow, I didn't go. A drunk driver hit my family on their way to the funeral, killing them immediately. I played the game. Felt great. Came home and the police met me."

"Oh, my goodness." Isabelle covered her mouth.

"There were no other family members for me to live with. Since I was only fifteen, they put me in a foster home." He shook his head. "Several foster homes. One, I was beaten by a couple's son who thought he was all that. In a couple of others, I was always hungry, scrounging for food because they never

fed me properly. I wore clothes from Goodwill. And for years, I blamed myself for my family's deaths. Maybe if I had been with them, they wouldn't have died."

"Oh Will. You couldn't have known what would happen. I bet your parents were glad you hadn't come and died that day, too."

"Who knows?" He shrugged. "All I know is that I wanted to grow food so no one ever went hungry. I wanted to help people in vulnerable positions. I joined the military to get away from all the foster home crap and was given good skills to use in real life, and now I have a job where I can use those skills, provide security to those who need it and give away healthy food to people."

She got up and sat on his lap. He put his arms around her and inhaled her sweet scent. "Then when I least expected it, I stopped in a small town, made love to a woman I couldn't forget who snuck out in the early morning without giving me her name, and surprise, we found each other again."

Isabelle giggled. "Good deal, huh. I'm sorry I snuck out. You were so kind and sexy, and I carry a lot of baggage."

Will pulled her closer and kissed the top of her head. "Were you listening to my story? I think I surpass you in baggage. You grew up with great parents, a great brother and have a best friend who adores you. You have a thriving business, and you've re-found your soulmate. Sounds pretty good to me."

She looked at him cross-eyed. "Is re-found a word?"

"It is in my mind. You re-found me. I re-found you."

"Okay then." Isabelle yawned. "Oh my. I'm getting tired."

"Off to bed with you." He stood up, holding her in his arms.

"Will you stay with me for a little while?" she asked in a small voice. "I don't want to have sex, just a warm body to cuddle with."

“Your wish is my command,” he said. “Make no mistake about it, though, we will be having mind-blowing sex soon.”

“Sounds good,” she whispered.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Spending yesterday with Felicia was a gift that kept on giving. Never in a million years would Colt have thought he'd be balls-deep in the woman he'd lusted for over the years.

Memories of their night together and thinking about her luscious body made his cock hard.

He'd driven to her house, with Felicia following in Isabelle's van. Isabelle was with Will, and he hoped Will was comforting her; if not, bones would break.

He'd followed Felicia into the kitchen, sat at the table, and looked around the small but homey room. It reminded him of his parents' first house, the one they had before Isabelle was born and before they moved to the larger one she grew up in. Felicia placed the glass of water before him and asked if Isabelle was going to jail. What could he say? He didn't know, but he'd do anything to ensure it didn't happen.

They talked briefly, and Colt couldn't help noticing Felicia licking her lips. Her breathing increased, and her face turned a pretty shade of pink. He wondered if she would take the initiative or wait for him to make the first move. Was she experienced in seducing men? Colt didn't think so.

Felicia got up to get another glass of water, and he stood, walked behind her, and nuzzled her neck. She cocked her neck, giving him better access, and sighed. "That feels so nice."

He laughed and told her that he could make her feel even better. She reached behind and rubbed his erection.

Without missing a beat, he turned her, clasped her head in his hands, and kissed her gently. Felicia stood silent for a minute, then took charge. Her kisses were hot and hard. She opened her mouth and let his tongue in.

He reached under her top and rubbed her breasts through her bra until she moaned. He pulled away from her just long enough to take off her top and plain white bra. Then he stared at the perfect globes with pink nipples. Nipples that were puckered and begging to be sucked.

Felicia tried to unbuckle his pants, but he held her hands with one of his while he suckled each breast. Then he pulled her skirt and panties down. They separated long enough for her to step out of them. Finally naked, she stood there, looking uncertain.

“God, you’re beautiful,” he said. She blushed even more. He needed to be in her.

“Hold still,” he told her as he pulled out his wallet and took out a condom. “Bedroom?”

Felicia nodded, and he followed her perfect ass to a back bedroom. Looking around, he realized Felicia was more romantic than he imagined. The bedroom was painted a soft pink, and a queen-size bed was centered on one wall with a white comforter and pillows—lots of pink, white, and striped pillows. There was some cloth around the bottom of the bed; he forgot what it was called. A white dresser and mirror with candles and flowers were in another corner. It was a bedroom made for making love, and that’s what they would finally do.

She pulled the covers down and turned to him. “You’re overdressed.”

Colt laughed, removed his clothes, lay on the bed, and opened his arms. She snuggled in.

Then he kissed her head and moved her so he was on top and kissed her body down to her pussy, which was glistening with juices. He inserted a finger, then another. She moaned.

Felicia got up on her elbows and watched him. “Are you ever going to make love to me?”

“Oh, baby girl, you know it.” He put her legs on his shoulders and started to insert his cock. God, she was tight. He thought she was ready, but apparently not.

“Hmmm.” Felicia opened her mouth to say something but stopped and gulped. “Uh, Colt?”

No. She can't be. Colt closed and opened his eyes and sighed. She was a virgin. A virgin! And he was going too fast. He took her legs off his shoulders and lay down next to her. “It's okay. I'm going to slow down.”

“You're not going to stop, are you?” she asked in a small voice.

He grinned. “Not a chance in hell I'm stopping. I've waited too long for this.”

“Me too,” she replied.

* * *

COLT ARRIVED at the Brotherhood Alliance complex just as a cloud covered the moon. Darkness surrounded him. Shadows from the LED parking lot lights flickered in the light wind. He inhaled fresh, clean air. It'd rained earlier, and the air smelled like freshly mowed grass. He felt satisfied. Life was good. Nah, it was great.

“Hey, man.” A hand on his shoulder and a man's voice pulled him out of his memory. Crap. It was a good memory too. Dex had arrived. Colt took a double take. Dex's light brown hair was a little longer, and had he shaved?

“Going for the clean look now?” asked Colt.

Dex rubbed his jaw. “Have a girl who isn't crazy about scruff.” He shrugged. “If she doesn't last, the beard will grow in.”

Colt chuckled.

They walked into the empty center and down the hall to the library. The secret door was open, and Colt could hear Chase talking.

Every time Colt walked into the room, he was impressed. Even at night, it was pleasing. The faux window felt like they could see the outside. The ceiling lights lit up the room without making it look harsh.

“About time you got here,” quipped Zach. He sat kitty-corner to Chase.

“Like you have so far to go,” said Dex.

Zach shrugged. They all knew Zach wasn’t ready to leave his cabin and move out into the world. But that was okay. He was doing great.

“We’re just waiting on Will and Ryker,” said Chase.

“Now we’re just waiting on Ryker,” said Will. He stood in the doorway and spotted an empty seat next to Colt. He gave them all a chin-up, and conversation resumed.

In a low voice, Colt asked how Isabelle was.

Will shrugged. “Nervous.”

Ryker arrived and took a seat. The men spent a few minutes talking until Chase cleared his throat and looked at Colt. “Want to give us an update?”

Colt told them about the trouble Isabelle and Felicia had with the mob in Georgia, how they were threatened, then moved to Haywood Lake. He described the stolen bag and Mandy’s death, what the police had told them, and what they might need the Brotherhood to do to help.

“Have you heard anything else from Liam?” asked Colt. Since Liam was almost Chase’s brother-in-law, Colt hoped he was able to get additional information from the police.

“This is in strictest confidence,” said Chase. They all nodded. “The latest development is that Mandy’s daughter discovered that the two thousand dollars her mom was going to deposit was stolen. After more questioning, she confessed she saw Isabelle and Felicia’s bag but wouldn’t say if her mother stole it. They checked security cameras and saw a disheveled man going through Mandy’s tent and several others. He had on dark clothes and a cap. We couldn’t see his

face. Mandy saw and confronted him. He pulled the knife out of the bag and stabbed her, then rummaged through the tent, found the money, and ran—it was an unfortunate random act of violence.”

Colt leaned back in relief. Well, that was good news for Isabelle and Felicia. “So the girls are off the hook?”

“It appears so,” replied Chase. “Although the accusation from the mob is disturbing. Have Isabelle or Felicia heard any more from them?”

“Not that I know.”

“What did the sheriff say when you called?” asked Will.

“He had nothing, didn’t know anything about Isabelle and Felicia being threatened. Although he was furious they hadn’t reached out to him before they left Georgia.”

“It’s good he hasn’t heard anything. I agree they should have touched base with the sheriff, though,” Will replied.

Colt looked over at Chase. “Although if the women do receive a viable threat, I’d like the Brotherhood to protect them.”

“Absolutely.” Chase looked around. “Any other business?”

Everyone shook their heads.

“Good.” Chase stood. “We have a couple of jobs coming up, so I’ll call a meeting later in the week.”

The meeting was over. Colt and Will walked out together. “Isabelle okay?” he asked Will.

“Yeah. She’ll be glad to hear that she’s off the hook.” He smirked at Colt. “I’m guessing Felicia is fine, too.”

“Not that it’s any of your business, but yes,” Colt replied. He was going home to his lonely apartment and would miss sleeping with her, making love to her. She and Isabelle had soap to make and planned on getting up early. Soon, though, Felicia would sleep in his bed permanently.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Beads of sweat rolled off Ricky Decker's forehead. His stomach clenched, and he wanted to hurl. Ricky Decker didn't know a lot. But he did know that if he didn't get this job right, his ass was on the line. Actually, more than his ass—his life.

He looked around the run-down motel room on the outskirts of Haywood Lake. On the floor was a faded and stained rug—stains he didn't want to think about. The bedspread was a floral print that thankfully hid any weird shit. He checked the sheets before he fell asleep. They were clean, no cum stains. He was too tired to worry about the screams and slaps coming from the room next door. Not his business if some guy wanted to keep his bitch in line.

If he looked for a room just fifteen minutes closer to the town, he'd be in a much nicer area, but Eddie wasn't springing on motels and Ricky only had the two thousand dollars the old lady had in her purse. It had to last.

He'd spoken to Antonio. His brother informed him that Isabelle was a young woman and not middle-aged. Shit. Fast Eddie's voice was venomous when Ricky informed him that he had accidentally murdered the wrong woman. Well, it was accidental at the time. If the bitch hadn't started shouting and hitting him, she'd still be alive—maybe.

Eddie hadn't told him the name of the soap company. The Saturday he went to the market, there had only been one set up. It was early morning, and no one was around the market except for the middle-aged gray-hair shrew.

The woman had given him lip, told him to go fuck himself, and said she didn't owe anyone anything. Then the witch pushed him and said to go terrorize someone who might be afraid of his pansy-ass self. Then and only then did he haul back and get her good—right in the solar plexus. She bent over, gasping for breath, as he searched the tent area. He'd found a black bag with junk in it and a knife. He also found an envelope with a bunch of cash in her purse.

The bitch had gone berserk and started screeching when he opened her purse. He couldn't have anyone looking at him. He needed to get the money for Fast Eddie, especially after his dumbass brother didn't collect it in Georgia and the women moved away. The woman opened her mouth again, and he punched her, only satisfied when a couple of teeth went flying. Then he punched her again for good measure.

She was on the ground crying and bleeding. He'd looked around. Luck was with him; no one else was there. He searched high and low for the money, then bent down and asked her one more time where it was. She spat in his face. He wiped the spit from his face. Narrowed his eyes. The woman started shaking and begging for her life.

Fury as he never knew took over. He kicked her once. Reached over for the bag and retrieved the knife. Stuck it in her gut as she tried to gulp in the air. Twisted it a couple of times for good measure. Then, with a pounding heart, he hid her body under the table of soaps. Watched her life force die and walked away.

No, first, he grabbed the cash in her purse. He might need it to hide since he didn't get Fast Eddie's money. He stuffed the envelope in his pocket. No one paid any attention to him. He checked a couple of other tents for cash but came up empty.

Cars were starting to pull into the lot. Ricky thought about how to handle this so as not to call attention to himself. He nonchalantly walked out, whistling a little tune. He checked his hands, his clothes, and shoes. Luckily, he'd worn a cap, gloves, black pants and shirt. No blood would show. No one would recognize him.

The notion he might have left evidence behind bothered him for a minute. But then, he was a nobody. His prints weren't in the system. No one knew him except for Fast Eddie. And that was the problem. No one would miss him either.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Isabelle watched in amusement as Joy, her blond hair swinging in time to the music, whooped it up on the dance floor with Mallory. She took a gulp of water, leaned back in the chair, and groaned. Her feet hurt but in a good way. She'd been on the dance floor for a good hour before calling it quits. The small dance floor was packed with bodies, and she got tired of being bumped around.

The girls had decided to celebrate Isabelle being exonerated in Mandy's death. Not that they were celebrating Mandy's death, of course—that would be macabre—but that Isabelle would not be doing time in the pokey.

It was Sunday night, and the girls were at Lucky's. Tonight, it was Joy, Naomi, Felicia, Mallory, Nicki, and Dawn Nailor. Isabelle met Dawn, who was taking a yoga class at Spiritual Bliss, a while ago when she was restocking the soap racks. Dawn was pursuing her master's degree while working at an upscale grocery store. The woman was a hoot, and Isabelle heard rumors that Linc was enamored of her.

Her thoughts shifted to the good news she received a week ago. An unidentified man caused Mandy's death. She felt sorry for Mandy, but the good news was that the mob hadn't found them and had hopefully forgotten about them.

The music was thrumming through her chest. The drinks were frozen and easy to swallow. The girls were having a blast, and Isabelle finally felt at ease.

Everything was going well. Sales were up. Felicia and Colt were in their own little sex-fueled world, and she was thrilled for them. Colt laughed—well, smiled—more in the past week than she could remember. She and Will were learning more about each other, trying hard to keep their hands to themselves. Isabelle was so ready to make love to him, but she relished learning more about what made him tick. Everything about him screamed responsibility and trust. Too bad she didn't see herself as responsible.

“Okay, ladies. I have your watermelon margaritas here. Enjoy.” A server placed the glasses of bright red concoction on the table, their icy rims glittering with sugar. Isabelle passed them around, took a gulp of hers, and wished she hadn't. Brain freeze. But boy, was it good. Perfect to quench her thirst.

* * *

IN ONE CORNER of the bar, Ricky sat nursing a beer. He watched as the petite brown-haired woman sat down and ordered a drink. Isabelle! Finally, a face to the name. He spent yesterday at the farmers' market looking for other soap vendors. Two Fishes Soap Works was the only other one there.

He spent a little time schmoozing with the woman selling the soaps and learned they were from Georgia and new in the area.

Eddie mentioned Serena had just given him another name, Felicia, Isabelle's partner in the business. So, he assumed that was who he'd spoken to. He watched her laughing and dancing to the music with the other women.

In another time, he thought he wouldn't mind getting it on with either woman. They were both good-looking. But now, they were going to be dancing with worms by the time Eddie got done with them.

Silly woman. She hadn't given him much information, just enough for him to piece together that they were who he was looking for. He followed them to a small house outside town when the market closed. Unfortunately, some muscular jarhead

was waiting for them. He'd bide his time. For now, he was content in following them around, determining the best time to get one or both alone.

He'd passed on the good news to Fast Eddie. Eddie wasn't prepared to forgive him for killing the wrong woman but was pleased Ricky found Isabelle and her partner. Now, they could get the money back the women stole from Eddie. Then no one would have to deal with Jacko, who wasn't quite as forgiving.

However, time was of the essence. He had to find a way to get the women alone and soon. Jacko planned to visit in a few weeks, and Eddie wanted this to be cleared up by then. Or heads would roll. His and Antonio's would be first, for sure.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Isabelle wanted to say that she felt free now that the police had exonerated her of Mandy's murder. Going to Lucky's with the girls was a blast and made her forget what could have been.

It didn't help that the police hadn't found Mandy's murderer. Felicia said she made sure that no one was following her at the market on Saturday.

However, ever since then, she'd felt like someone was watching her. She'd seen the same car frequently drive past the house. The first couple of times, Isabelle thought it was one of her neighbors, but they never waved at her, now she wasn't so sure.

She was out in the shed mixing fragrant essential oils, goat's milk, and honey for a new soap and stopped several times to look outside. Silly. Isabelle shook her head. Was she paranoid? This was ridiculous. There was no one watching her. No cars were on the road. No drones flew overhead. The only noise she heard was the breeze whispering through the woods.

Felicia was with Colt. Their relationship was blossoming, and Isabelle was thrilled for them both. Then there was Will, who took her breath away whenever she was with him. Even though she and Will decided to take it slow and get to know each other better, Isabelle couldn't help but feel an intense sexual desire for him. The feeling was getting stronger. She wanted to feel his warm embrace; thinking of his body beside hers gave her shivers. She wanted him—she needed him.

Now all she could think about was sex. Isabelle wiped her hands. The soap was done. She went into the house to change, grabbed her keys, and drove over to Will's. She probably should have called first, but Isabelle wanted to surprise him. He'd most likely be in the field or building the sheep shelter. If he weren't there, well, Isabelle would have to come home and take care of her itch herself. It wouldn't be the first time.

* * *

WILL HEARD a car coming down the road. Not too many people came down the dirt road, but maybe someone was visiting his neighbor, because he wasn't expecting anyone. The houses on his street were about a quarter mile apart, each with acreage. He wiped the sweat from his brow and resumed cutting wood for the new shelter he was building. In a month, he had a dozen ewes moving into it.

He heard the muffled roar of a vehicle turning in to his driveway. He looked over. It wasn't a car; it was Isabelle's van. Did she need his help? Was she in trouble? He turned off the electric saw and walked over.

Isabelle opened the door, and a sandaled foot slipped out as she exited the van. She wore a pair of gray tapered cargo pants and a white sleeveless top with spaghetti straps tied into a bow in front. A bow that he wanted to untie. She looked delicious.

Isabelle stared at him with a smile on her face. *Fuck me now*. She licked her lips like a starving lioness before feasting on a gazelle, and he was the gazelle. Will felt his cock get hard. They agreed to get to know each better before having sex. But it was getting harder and harder not to throw her over his shoulder and take her to bed. Maybe today would be his lucky day. A man could only hope.

"Hey." Isabelle closed the van door and walked toward him. "I felt a need to see you." She brushed sawdust off his shirt. "I hope I'm not disturbing you."

“Not really. I’m finishing the sheep shelter, but I can take a break,” Will replied.

Isabelle looked him up and down, focusing on his cock. “I was hoping you could.”

“Come on in the house. I have coffee on.” He reached for her hand. “Would you mind if I take a shower first?” He looked at his clothes. “I feel kind of grimy.”

“Oh.” Her brow furrowed. “I did disturb you.”

“Nope.” Will led her to the kitchen. “Sit.” He poured her a cup of coffee and brought it to the table. “I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll be here.” She grinned and wriggled her eyebrows. “Unless you need help in the shower.”

Oh, sweet Lord in heaven. She was going to be the death of him. “Hmmm. I think I can manage today.”

“Okay then. I’ll be right here.” She looked at her cup. “Drinking my coffee. Thinking of you.”

She was killing him. Will quickly walked to his bedroom, stripped off his clothes, showered, dressed, and found Isabelle where he left her in the kitchen.

“Wow. I’m impressed. That was quick.”

“I was motivated.” He poured himself a cup and sat across from her at the kitchen table. “Is everything all right?”

Isabelle nodded. She bit her lip and sighed.

“Tell me,” he demanded.

Silence.

She huffed once. “I want to make love with you.”

“I thought we were going to get to know each other better first,” he said. His heart was thumping in his chest. He already knew she was it for him, but he didn’t want to pressure her into anything.

“I think we know that we’re right for each other. Don’t you?” she asked as she fidgeted with her hands. She got up to

get another cup of coffee. Will followed her and put his arms around her waist. She sank back into his chest.

“I know you’re right for me,” he whispered as he kissed the side of her neck. She cocked her head to expose more skin. He inhaled the scent of lavender and mint. Will felt Isabelle’s heart beating with his. Was this really happening? Was he finally going to make love to the woman who stole his heart a few months ago?

Isabelle managed to turn and put her arms around his neck. She looked up into his eyes. “I believe you were going to kiss me and hopefully ravish my body.”

“Ha,” Will chuckled. “No ‘hopefully’ about it. I intend to make you orgasm and scream with joy.”

Isabelle kissed his nose and whispered, “I hope so.”

Oh yeah. She was on board for this. Will’s cock poked into her stomach. If she felt it, she didn’t mention it. Then Isabelle rubbed her body against his and smiled into his chest. Oh yeah, she was definitely on board.

Will gave her a hard kiss and then pulled away. “I don’t believe I’ve shown you my bedroom.” Then he winked and added, “said the spider to the fly.”

Isabelle giggled like he hoped she would. “Lead on, Mr. Spider.”

Her hand was in his as he walked down the hall to the bedroom and opened the door.

“Ah. The spider’s lair.” Isabelle stepped in and looked around.

He tried to see his bedroom through her eyes. For sure, he wasn’t a decorator, but he had help with the wall color. The walls were painted a soft green—sage green, the paint store employee told him.

The room contained a king-size bed with a green-and-white striped comforter, a dresser, and an ensuite bathroom. It was simple. He didn’t need more than what he had. He had no TV since he didn’t watch TV in bed and no chair because he

read in the living room. It could use some pictures, maybe. A woman's touch was what it needed. Isabelle's touch, if truth be known.

"Nice," she said. "Basic but still masculine and nature-oriented." She turned and pointed a finger at his chest. "It's you."

She pulled the comforter down and curled her finger at him. "I believe you promised me an orgasm."

"I did." He gently pushed her onto the bed, followed her down, and turned on his side to look at her. She licked her lips, and he leaned over to nibble her lower lip. Then he started kissing his way up to her nose, forehead, and cheeks. Isabelle moaned and pulled his face down and kissed him hard.

Will's tongue sought refuge in her mouth, and she opened and received it. Their tongues tangled in that age-old dance, and his body heated.

He pulled away and slid Isabelle's top over her head with her help.

God help him. She wore a lacy pink bra with a little bow on each strap. He pulled the bra down, and her generous globes fell out with light brown nipples that puckered. Will had always been a breast man, and man, he wasn't disappointed. He licked his lips and leaned into Isabelle. He gently sucked one, then twirled his tongue around her nipple before sucking it again. Isabelle moaned and pushed her chest at him. He sucked harder, then let go with a pop, only to suck on the other.

"Take my bra off," Isabelle said.

Will was more than happy to unhook and fling it aside. Now he could see her breasts in all their glory. He leaned over and ran his tongue around one nipple, then the other. Isabelle was perspiring lightly and buckling under him. Her arousal only made his cock swell.

He moved down and pulled off her shoes, pants, and, good God, pink thong panties that matched the bra, with little bows

on the straps around her hips. Her panties were soaked with her juices. He inhaled deeply and let out his breath.

“You’re overdressed,” she murmured.

Will got up from the bed, immediately missing her heat, and shucked his shoes and clothes into the corner.

“Stay there for a moment. Let me look at you,” Isabelle said as she sat up and leaned on her elbows.

He stood still and watched her face as her eyes went slowly from the top of his head to his feet. Then up again until she got to his cock. She slyly licked her lips and smiled but said nothing. He felt her eyes devouring him, and he desperately wanted those lips around his cock.

She finished inspecting him and nodded. “Perfect. Just as I imagined, although it was dark that night,” she added.

“Well, it’s not dark now,” he countered. “Can I get into bed and continue to bring you joy?”

Isabelle giggled, then went into a full-body laugh. Will loved it. Sex wasn’t supposed to be a wham, bam, thank you, ma’am. It was supposed to be sensual, rewarding, and relaxing. It was okay to laugh.

He got back into bed. “Close your eyes, and don’t move.”

She didn’t ask why, just closed her eyes, her body humming with energy. Will sat back on his haunches and took his time, admiring every inch of her body from head to toe as she’d done with him.

Isabelle lay there, a flush starting at her neck and coiling down. He was already familiar with her breasts; his hands desperately wanted to move and touch every inch of her luscious body. Will’s mouth watered, thinking about her opening her legs and exposing that sweet pussy of hers. He already knew what it tasted like, but that seemed so long ago. Besides, it was dark then.

Damn. Could his cock get harder?

It hurt now. He needed to be in her, but there was still more to do. He wanted her to orgasm around his fingers. He wanted

to see how long it would take if he rubbed her clit. He wanted her to scream his name. She had before, but it was his nickname. Digger was okay then, but he wanted to hear Will. Or “Oh God.” Either would do. Will smiled to himself.

First, he reached over to the side table and brought out a box of condoms. He couldn't remember how long ago he bought them. Isabelle started to move, and he placed his hands on her stomach. “Stay still.” She stopped moving.

Will checked the date. Yup, still good. Then he remembered he bought the box while traveling to Florida just before he met Isabelle. There were several missing, used in their one night of passion.

There had been no other woman since then.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Will's hands were shaking, and he accidentally emptied the condom box on the bed. Isabelle opened her eyes and stared at the plastic discs.

“Are we going to need all those?” she asked playfully. Will blushed, and she laughed.

“If we do, either I'm not doing something right, or I'm going to drop dead from too much sex,” he replied.

“I have complete faith in your ability,” Isabelle teased.

“Good.” He placed a couple of condoms to the side and carelessly pushed the rest to the floor. He turned to his side and drew her close, showering sweet kisses on her cheeks, her nose, and finally on her mouth.

The tip of his tongue tickled her lips, and he gently nudged her mouth open. His lips were warm and soft. Will's tongue darted in and out, and she followed his tongue with hers. A groan of pleasure escaped him. Then he swirled his tongue around hers, and Isabelle moaned. Their tongues tangled like that for a few minutes when he suddenly withdrew and gently nibbled on her bottom lip. Her breath increased; she wanted more. She clasped his head in her hands and invaded his mouth with her tongue.

This time he groaned and held her tighter, his hard cock pressing against her stomach. Will took control, and he darted and swirled with his tongue, giving her little time to breathe. When she couldn't take it any longer, he pulled back—the

lingering scent of the bourbon-infused soap that she made him heightened her senses.

He took her face in his hands and gently caressed her cheeks with his thumbs while he stared into her eyes. Isabelle saw desire and love in them. Then he kissed and nibbled his way to her breasts.

With wanton carelessness, she pushed her chest out in invitation, and Will twirled his tongue around her nipple before flicking it with his tongue. She closed her eyes and undulated her pussy against his hard cock. Then he took the whole nipple in his mouth and sucked, letting go with a pop before gently blowing on it.

“Oh my God, that feels so good,” she moaned.

“Look at me,” he said. “I want to watch you come.”

“I’ve never ...”

“You will.” He kept one hand on her breast and with his other brought her hands over her head so she was completely exposed.

“Your breasts are so responsive.” Will repeated the action on the other breast while he tweaked the nipple he’d released with his fingers. He sucked harder as he pinched her other nipple. She groaned and closed her eyes but remembered what he asked and opened them.

His brown eyes were dusky, and he was breathing hard but not as hard as Isabelle. Her pussy was clenching and wet. She bucked against his body. He sucked and teased with his tongue, then sucked harder while caressing her other breast, then changed sides.

Isabelle was hot. She was wet.

“Let go, Isabelle.”

She was coming. Oh, God. Her orgasm washed over her. She screamed his name. He didn’t stop sucking and caressing her breasts. It felt so good, so intense.

She felt warm, sweet kisses on her stomach. Will stopped and looked up at her. “You’re beautiful when you come.”

“What about you?” she asked, trying to sit up, but Will pressed her back on the bed.

“Not done here, sweetheart.” He repositioned his body so he was between her legs. He pushed them up and stared. “That is a sweet pussy.” He leaned over and sniffed. “I’m going in.”

Isabelle giggled, then started laughing. Will struggled to keep the smile off his face but failed.

He sat up straight. “Woman, I’m trying to be romantic here,” he grumbled.

She couldn’t stop giggling, so he moved up and kissed her breasts and stomach. When she got herself under control, he continued down, pushing her legs apart and fingering her. When he inserted two fingers and found her G-spot, she clenched her pussy. When he combined that with rubbing and flicking her clit, she closed her eyes and moaned with delight. When he fingered her, licked, and sucked her clit, her ass clenched, her body tensed, and she shattered.

Will moved up and held her until the orgasm passed.

“Will.”

“Hmmm?”

“That was fantastic.”

“You’re fantastic,” he whispered into her hair. He lay back and gathered her in his arms. Isabelle’s heart was overflowing with desire. Will ran his hand up and down her body, occasionally flicking her clit or inserting a couple of fingers.

“I want more. Now.”

“Shhh. You’re a greedy little girl, aren’t you?” He started kissing her breasts and stomach before ending at her pussy. “We’re not leaving this bed until you’re satisfied.” Isabelle thought that was a wonderful idea. They could stay in bed forever.

Will ripped the condom package, removed it, and rolled it over his cock. Then he placed her knees on his shoulders. He guided his cock into her entrance and stopped. “I’m not hurting you, am I?”

“No. Just keep moving.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He thrust his cock in. Isabelle groaned and pushed her body closer to his. He thrust and thrust, then stopped momentarily until she encouraged him to keep moving.

“You feel so wet and warm. It feels like home,” he murmured. A few more thrusts and Isabelle was going over the edge. Seeing the strain on Will’s face, she surmised he was too.

One final push. Her body quivered. Will’s eyes focused on her. He groaned, and she felt his release. They came together. Will stayed in her while he lowered her legs.

“Let me take care of the condom. I’ll be right back,” he said. He kissed her lips and got up.

Isabelle listened to the water run and lay in an orgasmic state. Making love to Will was everything she wished for. He was sexy and caring. And very, very good in bed.

He came back and lay next to her, pulling the covers up. “Isabelle, that was special. Thank you.”

“No. Thank you,” she replied. “It was fantastic.”

“Fantastic, huh?” He nodded to himself. “Glad I still have it.” Will gave her a big smile and gathered her into his arms. “It surpassed the first time we made love.”

“Hmmm.” She snuggled into his arms, inhaling the bourbon soap and male essence. “Definitely.”

Within a few minutes, Will was softly snoring. Isabelle watched his face soften. She’d never noticed how long his eyelashes were. She lightly kissed his cheek and closed her eyes.

* * *

ISABELLE WASN’T sure what woke her up. It could have been because she was in a strange bed. It could have been the dream where she was in jail, wasting away in a basement somewhere,

and no one could find her. It could even have been Mandy laughing at her, telling her she was a loser—whatever the dream was, it was disturbing.

She lay awake replaying her life over and over. Will had everything going for him. He was a hero and had achieved his dream of owning a farm. On the other hand, she had been in jail once, accused of murder, and almost jailed again, and let's not forget she had the mob looking for her. She had a crappy old van and hardly any money to her name.

Why would Will or any man want her? She felt like she had an angry black cloud following her around.

Isabelle gently removed Will's arm from her stomach and eased out of bed. The clock's neon dial showed it was three o'clock. *Déjà vu*.

Searching blindly in the dark for her clothes, she found her shoes, top, and skirt. The pretty pink underwear she'd bought especially for Will was somewhere. There was no time to hunt for them. She needed to leave before she chickened out. Her stomach clenched. Isabelle swallowed hard—no time to be sick.

She tiptoed out of the bedroom and closed the door, rummaging around in her purse for a piece of paper and a pen. Shhh. Too much noise. She cocked her head to listen. All she heard was Will snoring and the ticking of a clock. Isabelle wiped her sweaty hands on her skirt, scribbled a note for Will, and left it in the kitchen. Keys in hand, she went out the front door, locking it behind her, and got into her van.

Tears streamed down her face the minute she closed the van door. Damn, damn, damn. She beat on the steering wheel repeatedly with her hands.

She was a hot mess, and Will was everything good. He deserved someone sane in his life, not someone skirting the law and the mob. Certainly not someone running away from her problems.

And darn it all to hell, here she was, skipping out on him again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Will slowly opened his eyes as the sun's rays filtered through the window. Making love all night to Isabelle had been a dream come true and was just as fulfilling as the first time. His cock was hard, and he was ready to go again. He needed her. He glanced at the other side of the bed, hoping to see her sweet face, but she wasn't there. He reached over, but her side of the bed was cold. Tightness gripped his throat. Where could she be?

He lay back, stretched every muscle, and frowned. Perhaps she was making breakfast. That was it. She was in the kitchen making breakfast. Sharing a meal with the woman of his dreams sounded wonderful. He got out of bed, pulled on a pair of boxers, and walked to the kitchen.

Silence. No Isabelle.

Nothing on the stove or counter that suggested she even started breakfast. Weird. His throat tightened with anxiety. He prayed she was outside.

He looked out the kitchen window. Again, no Isabelle. Just the chickens in the henhouse pecking for worms and Jason driving the tractor over the new plot of land. Will's heart pounded louder.

Please, let her van be in the driveway. Opening the front door, he glanced around. No Isabelle. Hell. She'd left.

Why?

Well, he knew where she lived, and he wasn't letting her go this time. She was his soulmate. He needed to find and

claim her, have her understand that they belonged together, and find out why she left. Had they gone too fast? Should they have waited longer to get to know each other before sex? Was the sex bad—no, that wasn't it. He knew she wasn't faking orgasms—not that he could tell anyway.

Will went in to shower. He'd touch base with Jason later but needed to see Isabelle face-to-face. Find out what was wrong. What scared her? Because that was the only reason he could come up with. Something scared her.

His hands trembled as he put on his clothes. Walking into the kitchen, he decided to make coffee. The coffee would wake him up, maybe help him think more clearly.

The aroma of freshly brewed coffee was comforting. He reached for a cup and saw a note on the counter.

He picked it up with a heavy heart. "*I'm sorry.*" Two words—that was all she wrote. His heart sank.

Damn it! His mind raced with possibilities. None made any sense. What was going on in that pretty mind of hers?

He grabbed a to-go cup, filled it, gathered his keys, and got into his truck. The drive to Isabelle's was both too long and too short. His mind was racing at warp speed. Will hoped she'd be there and not have run away. What the hell was he going to say to her? If she was at home, he couldn't go in yelling. He needed to be calm. *Think!*

* * *

WILL'S heart was pounding when he finally pulled into Isabelle's driveway and saw that her van was there. Thank God.

Felicia's car wasn't there, but Colt's truck was. His heart plummeted. This wasn't good. Not good at all.

He got out of the truck and approached the front door. Suddenly the door opened. Will hoped to see Isabelle standing there. Instead, he saw Colt. A pissed-off, foaming-at-the-mouth Colt.

Colt barreled out of the house, and before Will could even say hello, Colt's fist collided with his jaw.

Will reeled back, rubbing his jaw incredulously. "What the hell?"

Angry, menacing brown eyes bore into him. "I told you what would happen if you hurt my sister," Colt growled, his nostrils flared.

"Hurt?" Will was confused. "I would never hurt Isabelle." How had he hurt Isabelle? Did he hurt her when they were making love? He didn't think so.

Before he could elaborate, Colt sucker-punched him.

Oh no, he didn't. Son of a bitch. Will's vision blurred, and before he thought about it, he made a fist and returned the punch.

Then it was an all-out fight. They dodged. They jabbed. Each one got in a punch.

Oof! Will got one on the chin, snapping his head back. Damn it.

He fainted and landed a good blow to Colt's ribs.

"Stop! Stop!" Felicia screeched desperately. Colt turned to look at her, and Will got a hook to Colt's jaw.

She ran over to them, trying to pull Colt off Will. She screamed for Isabelle.

Colt tried to shake her off, but she held tight to his arm. Will backed off. Colt's eyes were furious, but he was careful with Felicia.

Isabelle came running out. She took in the scene, shook her head, and stepped in front of Colt. Adrenaline coursed through Will's veins. He looked at Colt, who was breathing hard, blood seeping from a cut on his face. He knew he had a similar cut because he could feel something warm dripping from his chin.

"What the hell was that for?" Will spat, wiping blood from his chin.

“I heard Isabelle crying when she got home late last night.” Colt rubbed his face. “Late from your house. So I’m going to ask you again. What did you do to her?”

Felicia was crying now. She still held on to Colt’s arm and was trying to pull him away. Colt didn’t budge.

Will stepped back and put his hands up.

“He didn’t do anything to me.” Isabelle was blocking her brother and Will as they stood face-to-face. “I did something to him.”

Colt’s anger began to wane as he looked from Will to Isabelle. “Someone better tell me what’s going on and fast.”

He looked down at Felicia, still gripping his arm with tears streaking down her face. “Sweetheart. It’s okay. I’m fine.” Colt pulled her in close and kissed her head. Then he looked at Will. “I’m listening.”

“Not that it’s any of your business,” he replied. “But I was coming to check on Isabelle, who left my house early this morning while I was sleeping.” Will frowned at Isabelle.

Isabelle looked down at her feet and then up at Will. Her eyes were red from crying, and he wanted to kiss her problems away, but first, he had to know what they were.

“Colt, Felicia, this is between me and Will.” She turned to walk into the house.

Will glared at Colt before speaking again. “If you ever strike me again, all bets are off.”

“I’m sorry, man,” Colt replied, looking contrite. He did a chin-up towards Isabelle. “You better go after her. You might not get a second chance.” Then he gently removed Felicia’s arm and kissed her head. “Felicia, why don’t I drive you to my place and let these two lovebirds duke it out?”

Felicia glanced between the two men. She took a deep breath. “I don’t know what’s going on,” she said to Will. “But if you hurt my friend, Colt’s anger will look like child’s play.”

Colt smirked but said nothing.

Whoa, Felicia. Will was impressed that the slender, sweet woman shaking like a leaf stood tall and defended her friend. Of course, she was also threatening him. Him! Ex-military badass. Take-no-prisoners warrior. She could never hurt him except with her words. However, Felicia need never worry; he would never hurt Isabelle.

“Felicia.” Will held both hands up in surrender. “I promise I’m not going to hurt her.”

Satisfied by Will’s answer, Felicia gave him a small smile. “I’ll get my purse,” she said to Colt.

The two men stood there awkwardly while Felicia left to get her purse. “I love my sister, but sometimes she gets these crazy ideas about herself that aren’t true,” said Colt. Will wished he had lost the furrowing brow and worried eyes, but at least it wasn’t directed toward him.

“I know.”

Felicia came back, and the two men gave a chin-up.

“Make it right, Blake,” said Colt as he helped Felicia into the truck and drove off.

Will huffed, not excited about the next few minutes. Time to sort out what was bothering Isabelle. He hoped it was something that they could easily fix. If not, well, he had all the time in the world to get to the bottom of whatever it was. No way in hell was he giving up on her or them.

“Knock, knock.” Will peeked in the front door. Isabelle was sitting on the couch, staring into space. He walked in and sat next to her, not so close that he’d scare her but not so far away that he’d let her run away from him. It was a delicate dance.

He struggled not to put his arms around her. Her body was tense. Her eyes were red.

“Isabelle,” he said softly. “Tell me what the problem is. We can figure it out together.”

She shook her head and wouldn’t look at him.

Will sighed. Didn't she know there wasn't anything she could say to him that would make him change his mind about her?

He reached over and covered her hand with his. "Did I do something wrong?"

She shook her head.

"Please."

"Will, you have everything going for you."

"Isabelle ..."

"Please don't interrupt. I woke up last night, actually rather early this morning, and realized this was the second time I could have gone to jail. I don't want the mob to hurt you. I'm a mess. You don't need my baggage."

Tears dripped down her cheeks, and Will's heart broke. He drew her close and hugged her tightly. Thankfully, she didn't resist.

He rested his head on hers and kissed the top of her head. "I know I told you about my parents and sister and how I went into foster care. I didn't tell you about all the fights I got into, how one foster family called the cops on me, and by the grace of God, I wasn't arrested. I was so angry at the world. I'd be in jail if I didn't join the military."

"But ..."

"Let me finish. I was cocky, picking fights with everyone, and almost got kicked out of the military until this older instructor gave me a wake-up call. I realized that I needed to be more focused. That if I focused, I could do and have anything I wanted. It was hard work, and I had to believe in myself."

"Will ..."

He placed a kiss on her neck before continuing. "Give me another minute, sweetheart. You have nothing to be ashamed of. Spending the night in jail for being young and foolish is part of the process. Mandy's death was unfortunate, and as for the mob chasing you, well, you were in the wrong place at the

wrong time. But you have great friends, a terrific brother, and a business you've built that is going well. You're gorgeous, kind, and a little sexy."

She sat up and turned around. "Just a little sexy?"

Will chuckled. "Maybe more than just a little."

"Humph." Isabelle bowed her head and murmured, "I'm sorry I left."

"Me too, sweetheart. Just know there isn't anything you can say, do or think that will change my opinion that you are my sun, moon and stars, the person who makes my heart sing." He placed her hand on his heart. "This heart is yours." He placed his hand on hers. "This heart is mine. Do you understand now?"

Isabelle nodded.

"Okay then. The next time you sneak out on me, I will find you and bend you over my knee. Understand?"

Isabelle's eyes widened. She nodded. Smiled. "You could do that now if you want."

This woman is going to be the death of me. Visions of bending her over his knee, her luscious ass up in the air, made his cock hard. But he wasn't doing that now. He promised her he'd do it if she left again in the middle of the night. Right now, he wanted to do it fast and hard, have her scream his name so that she understood he was hers.

"So, just to reiterate, if you had woken me up, we could have resolved this and made love again."

Isabelle rubbed her eyes and turned to face him. "I understand." She bit her lip and narrowed her eyes. "We could make love right here."

"We could." He lifted her chin up. "But only if you promise not to leave me again. This old heart of mine can't take the stress."

She laughed like he hoped. But he wasn't lying. He hated that she felt she wasn't good enough, and he especially hated that she felt she had to leave him.

Isabelle leaned in and kissed his lips. He pulled her closer and took over. Will was determined to make sure that Isabelle knew she was it for him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

The drive to Colt's apartment was silent. He glanced at Felicia a couple of times. She was wringing her hands but stopped when she noticed Colt looking at her. Getting into a fight with his future brother-in-law, and that's what Will was going to be, no doubt about it, was not on his agenda this morning.

He had plans to stay in bed with Felicia, worshipping her luscious body.

However, when he heard the front door open early and Isabelle sobbing in her bedroom, he was furious. Since he knew she came from Will's house, she wouldn't be crying if the bastard hadn't hurt her. Colt warned Will what would happen if he did.

When he heard Will drive up, he had already worked himself into a lather. It felt good to get in some punches, although Will had a wicked right hook.

What made him feel bad was that the woman he loved thought he would lose control and be afraid of him. Felicia never had to be afraid of him. He might get angry if someone hurt the two women he loved unconditionally, but he would never hurt a woman. Besides, he was generally very good at not losing control. Funny how that all went out the window when you loved someone.

Somehow, he had to make this right with Felicia. And Isabelle. Colt wasn't worried about Will. They had duked it out, and the fight would be forgotten. Maybe not forgotten, but it was over, and he wouldn't waste more time thinking about

it. It was up to Will and Isabelle to make their peace. Right now, he had a woman of his own to worry about.

Colt didn't want to have this conversation in his truck. When they got to his apartment, he would get Felicia naked and in the bedroom where he could hold her close and talk to her. Let her take out a piece of his hide for scaring her, because he did scare her. Violence of any kind was a trigger for her. He had to make Felicia understand he would always protect her, but sometimes one had to take action. Colt prayed the conversation would be enough. He never wanted to lose Felicia, not after waiting years to have her by his side and in his bed.

The drive to his apartment was too short. Colt was still going over scenarios in his mind. He turned off the truck and came around to help Felicia out. She willingly took his hand, but her blue eyes held such sadness in them.

"Come on, sweetheart. I know we need to talk," he said. Felicia nodded. She followed him up the two flights of stairs to his apartment.

He opened the door to his apartment and looked around. Neat and clean—good. Not that he was ever messy. That was one thing he and Felicia had in common—they hated messes. Actually, they had a lot in common besides history, which was one of the many reasons he loved her.

Colt still couldn't get the vision of Felicia riding Will's back like a bull out of his mind. She'd been fearless that day. He had been so proud. Isabelle was lucky to have a friend who had her six.

But this morning was different. He'd seen red, and if she hadn't tugged on his arm, it wouldn't have ended as quickly as it did.

"Do you want something to drink? Water? Juice? Coffee?" he asked.

Felicia gave him a small smile. "Water would be nice."

He walked into the kitchen, got a bottle of water, and handed it to her. Colt watched her uncap it and take a long

swallow. He stared at her lips as she drank and couldn't stop seeing Felicia on her knees sucking him off. His cock got hard. Damn. Colt thought about punching Will to make it go down. Sex was off the table until he talked to her.

"Come lay down with me," he said and held out his hand. Felicia bit her lip, and Colt was afraid she would reject him. She put the bottle on the table and took his hand as he led her into his bedroom.

He lay on the bed and opened his arms. Felicia bowed her head and sighed. Colt's heart dropped. Was she going to reject him?

Finally, she gave him a small smile and lay next to him. He gathered her back to his front and held her. The scent of honeysuckle in her hair was comforting.

"I was so scared," she whispered.

Colt closed his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he replied. "You know I would never hurt you."

She nodded. "I was afraid you would kill Will."

"I wanted to." He nuzzled into her neck. "But Isabelle would never have forgiven me."

Her body stilled. Had he said the wrong thing? He wanted to make her smile. Maybe it wasn't the right time for a little humor.

Colt felt her shake her head. "Men!"

Okay then. She wasn't mad, just scared. "Felicia, I will never apologize for hurting someone who hurts the people I love. I don't enjoy fighting, but sometimes it's the only way to make a point with a guy. If I had just let it go, I wouldn't have felt good about myself, and the other guy would not take me seriously and think me weak."

"Humph."

"I'm a military guy. Will's a military guy. The fight would have stopped before we killed each other."

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?” she asked as she turned around to face him.

He kissed her nose, and she blushed. “No, and yes. You need to understand I will always stand up for you. I don’t pick fights just for fun, but I won’t back down from one either.”

“Do you think Will and Isabelle will work it out?” The slight furrow in her brow did him in.

“No doubt.” Colt was sure that the two were meant for each other. “In fact, I bet they’re naked right now, fucking like bunnies.”

She shook her head and rolled her eyes. “You are so crude sometimes.”

Did he offend Felicia? That wasn’t his intention. Colt looked at her face and her slightly upturned smile. Ah, she was teasing him.

“You love it.” He kissed her lips. “Why don’t we get naked and fuck like bunnies? They shouldn’t have all the fun.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

It was the middle of the week, and the guys were at Lucky's. It was a quiet evening, and the dimly lit room provided a relaxing atmosphere for the group. There were a couple of other groups sitting at tables and a few people at the bar. Will heard cheers and the clacking of balls coming from the pool room. TVs over the bar had the sound turned down on several games playing.

Chase had invited the gang to welcome the Brotherhood's newest members, Titus Finch and Ford McCallum.

John "Tex" Keegan had recommended both. Will always wondered how Tex found the right men who came to the center. As far as he knew, none wanted to work for someone else or have a strict nine-to-five job, and all wanted to use the skills they learned in the military. He guessed if he were categorizing the Brotherhood, they were all misfits in some way. Will shrugged. It worked for him. He didn't care what other people thought of him, only Isabelle.

Titus was buying a gym in town and was in the process of remodeling the building. The guys were excited about that and helping him with the renovations. There wasn't extra space at the center for an exercise room, so the gym would be a perfect fit.

On the other hand, Ford had yet to decide what he would do. Both were temporarily living in the cabins on the property for the time being. Both had beards and mustaches, which struck Will as humorous. What were the chances? The other men were clean-shaven or had some scruff.

He had yet to find out which branch of the service they were in, but that would come. The only thing that mattered to him was if they would have his six.

Thankfully, Lucky's didn't have music during the week. The men pushed two tables together so they could hear each other talk. They told stories of past deployments. He and Colt hadn't spoken to each other since the fiasco at Isabelle's a week ago. They both had bruises and cuts on their faces, remnants of the fight, but no one mentioned it. Will wondered if everyone knew what was going on. Certainly, Chase did, since Naomi and Joy were Isabelle and Felicia's friends. The good thing about Chase was he only delved into someone's problem if it affected the Brotherhood. The other guys tended to gossip, so they might have heard about the fight somewhere. Will didn't care. It was over and done.

"Okay, fellows, I have your beers," said the server as she placed the glasses and bottles on the table. They all picked up the beers after she left, and Chase officially welcomed the new members.

Isabelle was home with Felicia, making soaps. He missed her. But they both had businesses to run. One of these days, he hoped to have her in his house permanently. His mind wandered to their last get-together just a couple of days ago. They had made love, and Isabelle had regaled him with stories of her childhood over a glass of wine. She was a hoot, and Will could only imagine her and Felicia trying her parents' patience.

"So, Will ..."

Titus's voice interrupted his thoughts. Will's attention turned to Titus, who wore his reddish-brown hair long on top and shorter on the sides. His full beard and mustache made him look more like a mountain man than a gym owner. He was buff. Will had to give him that. Actually, all the guys were in good shape, but Titus's muscles were well-defined. Will wasn't sure he could take him in a fight, but then again, he wasn't getting into any fights.

"Yeah?"

“I heard you have an organic farm.” Titus furrowed his brow.

“Yup. It’s all organic.” He cocked his head. “Why?”

“Zach mentioned something about a CSA. Are you offering it yet?”

“Not yet. Why?”

“I’d be interested in that when you set it up. I try to eat organically, and many of my clients do, too. I know they’d be interested.” He puffed out his chest and smirked. “Gotta keep this body clean inside and out.”

Will laughed. All righty, then. Show off those muscles. “I’ll let you know when I start it. Otherwise, see me at the farmers’ market on Saturday.”

Titus nodded.

This was a positive response to his idea of a CSA. He and Jason needed to get their heads around this. It would mean extra money for the animals and new crops he wanted to put in. The sheep would be coming to their new home soon, and he wanted to get beef cattle as soon as a fence was built around the farm.

Now if everything on the farm worked out the way he hoped, and if Isabelle stopped running away from him, and hopefully, if the mob had forgotten about her—life would be perfect.

But Will knew from experience that life, somehow, had a way of kicking you in the balls when you least expected it.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Isabelle and Felicia were in their shed finishing the last batch of rose hip and hibiscus soap and packaging it. Since it was a small shed, most of what they made started in the kitchen and was packaged in the shed. Colt got an electrician who didn't charge an arm and a leg and who was able to run electricity to the shed for an air conditioner and lights. It made their work easier.

Next week, they were driving to Black Pointe and delivering the first batch of soaps promised to the new customers from the craft show. Spiritual Bliss and Petals to Go were almost out, and they needed more product for the farmers' market. That left little downtime for Felicia, their accounting and social media guru, to finish her work. Since Isabelle was the face of the company, she was always on.

Between making soap and delivering it, they saw Colt and Will. Life was good.

But as Isabelle had learned, good things could turn sour in a second.

They needed an infusion of cash to continue buying products. She needed to talk to Will about the herb garden. Growing most of their own herbs would cut expenses.

Isabelle looked at her watch. "That's it. We're done." She slapped the last tag on a bar of soap. "I'm going to shower and run over to Will's and ask about the herb garden."

Felicia looked up from where she was stacking soap in a basket. "Good idea. It'd be nice to save some money." She

wiped her hands on her shorts. “I might take a nap or go into town. Maybe bring Colt lunch.”

Isabelle was thrilled that Felicia and Colt were spending so much time together. They were both happier.

“How’s the car?” she asked.

“I can’t believe how lucky we were. Colt had another wreck, and the bumper matched mine.” She shook her head. “It didn’t cost anything.”

Isabelle smiled. “It’s a miracle.”

Colt did an excellent job with Felicia’s car. Isabelle knew for a fact it cost him about a thousand dollars to repair. He had someone come in and detail it for her too. He wouldn’t let her pay for anything. By the time everything was done, the car looked new. Well, not *new* new, but really good.

“Will I see you for dinner, or will you stay with Colt?”

“Hmmm. No, I’ll be home. He mentioned something about a Brotherhood meeting, and who knows how long those go on?”

“Great, see you back here. I’ll make pizza for dinner,” said Isabelle. They brought the baskets of soap into the house. “I’ll see you later, then.” Her heart was thumping. Every time she saw Will, it was like the first time they met.

* * *

RICKY HAD no idea what was going on with these people. His job was to watch Isabelle. When he could, he was to bring her up to Georgia whether she wanted to go or not. It wasn’t an option.

There was some crazy shit going on with the women. So far, he saw the police come to her house. He watched both women leaving and staying overnight somewhere. He observed Isabelle coming back early one morning, and he would have missed that if he hadn’t been up early himself.

He laughed as two beefy guys fought—over what, he wasn't sure and didn't care—but was glad it wasn't him. The men looked like they'd been in the military and knew how to fight. Ricky knew how to also, but he was a dirty fighter. Not that he cared what people thought. There was none of this “you take a shot; I take a shot.” He always went for the eyes or the balls. And if he somehow produced a knife, well, he used that too.

He drove by Isabelle's house on his way out of town. Both the van and car were gone. Strangely, there was another car parked in a stand of trees on the side of her property. Was someone else trying to shake Isabelle down? Damn, they'd have to get in line. Eddie was first and probably last.

He drove by, then turned around. He thought he saw a person with a red hoodie walking in the woods. He couldn't tell if it was a man or a woman. Probably berry-picking or doing something woodsy. Not his business. Who knew what the crazies were doing?

Eddie informed him that Serena had been taken care of. Ricky knew what that meant. At least he didn't have to take care of the body. Antonio had.

Then he'd be back in Haywood Lake with Antonio, and between the two of them, in no time, Isabelle would be hog-tied in the back of his car. Ricky chuckled. He was mean, didn't mind hurting or killing someone, but Antonio? Antonio got off on hurting. Those women didn't stand a chance.

Ricky decided that after days of watching Isabelle, the best time to get her would be when she was in the house whether she was alone or not. If he had both women, bonus to him. Because the one thing he knew was that Fast Eddie never let anything go—ever.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Isabelle left after she had lunch with Will and Jason. Unfortunately, Will had a lot of work to do, so the thought of a quickie went out the window. Besides, it wouldn't hurt for her to start soaps for tomorrow and get a jump on orders.

Will asked her to sketch a garden design of the herbs she might use in her soap and what he could sell at the farmers' market and give it to him.

He also shared that one of his co-workers at the Brotherhood Alliance was interested in a CSA, and he wanted her help brainstorming about what could go into the baskets. The farm could provide vegetables, eggs, and eventually fruit and meat. They tossed around ideas like recipe cards or featuring a new item, like handcrafted products from artisans in the area. It would give exposure to those shops, and he asked if she thought that was a good idea for her soaps.

Exposure for a small business was everything. She loved the idea and told Will she'd pass it by Felicia to see if it made sense financially.

Isabelle stopped at the grocery store and picked up the premade dough, sauce, and mozzarella for homemade pizza. There were few customers in the store, which was good for her. Her mind was preoccupied with ideas for potential new soap recipes using herbs. Will could grow lemon balm, mint, yarrow, calendula, parsley, rosemary, sage—oh, the list was endless.

She was close to her house. Her mind was so busy making up a list of herbs for Will to plant that she could almost smell the herbs. Then an underlying scent of smoke tugged her attention from her thoughts. Someone was burning brush, and it smelled oddly comforting.

As she drove closer to her house, the smoke became visible, and she saw dark, angry smoke billowing up from the back of her house. Anxiety gripped her as her mind raced with scenarios.

Was Felicia burning something? No, she wasn't, because her car wasn't there. Isabelle knew they hadn't burned anything in the fire pit lately. It was too hot. Her stomach dropped. Did she leave the stove on? Isabelle prayed she hadn't.

Panic set in as she parked her car and raced into the house. She reached the kitchen and looked around. Everything was as they left it. Then she looked out the window.

Oh, dear God! She stared in horror, realizing their shed was on fire. She quickly dialed 911, ran outside, grabbed a hose, and turned on the water. Her heart was pounding. The water wasn't enough to extinguish the fire, but she held on to the hose like a lifeline.

Sirens wailed in the distance and got louder as the fire department approached. Then she realized she didn't know where the fire hydrant was. How would they get the water needed, especially if her hose wasn't outputting enough? Fear overwhelmed Isabelle. What if the fire spread? Would the fire truck get there in time to save the house?

One fire truck screeched to a halt by the shed, followed by another. Then the EMTs and police arrived. Isabelle felt a wave of relief. The tan-coated firefighters all got off and busied themselves connecting the hoses. Her thoughts were interrupted when a voice called her name.

“Ma’am, are you all right?”

She looked at the man. Ma’am? God, now she was a ma’am. When did that happen?

Isabelle shrugged. Was she all right? Hell no. Her livelihood was up in smoke. She had no extra cash, and it would take days to reproduce the soaps stored in there.

“Do you know how the fire started?”

“No. It was burning when I got home and called you.”

He looked at the men preparing the hose. “What’s in the shed?”

“My life.” She sighed. “Soap.”

“I’m sorry.” The firefighter stared at the shed. “I see an air conditioner; where is the electrical shutoff in the house?”

Isabelle realized she was still holding the hose, set it down, and turned it off. “Follow me.”

The firefighter turned off the electricity to the shed.

“How are they going to put out the fire? My hose wasn’t enough.”

“No, it wouldn’t be.” He looked over at the fire trucks. “The tanker over there holds about a thousand gallons of water and will produce a large-caliber stream that will extinguish the fire. Then when the fire’s been knocked down, we’ll cordon the shed off to determine what the accelerant was.”

“Knocked down?” she cocked her head.

“It just means the fire is under control. Then the fire investigator will gather evidence.”

“Oh.” Isabelle watched the firefighters work quickly and efficiently. The fire was put out or knocked down, as the firefighter said, in a few minutes. The two fire engines and EMT left, leaving just a couple of police cars, a fire investigator’s car, and Isabelle staring at the ashes of her dream of being self-sufficient.

Isabelle surveyed the damage. The shed lay in ruins, a pile of ashes. How would she and Felicia be able to afford to replace it? Or the soap inside? She put in a call to Felicia and Colt and wondered if she should call Will. No. He was so busy

on the farm, she decided not to involve him. There was nothing he could do anyhow.

She watched a man, probably the fire investigator, walking around the shed, picking up debris, then she heard vehicles coming down the road and walked around to the front.

Colt's truck stopped short on the road. Felicia jumped out of the truck and ran towards Isabelle.

"Are you all right?" Felicia patted Isabelle's body.

"Yeah." Isabelle closed and opened her eyes. "The shed is gone. Our inventory in it is gone, and I don't know how we will repair it."

"Was it an electrical fire?" asked Colt. He approached from behind Felicia and hugged Isabelle.

"No," she replied. "At least I don't think so."

She shook her head. "Boy, the bad luck just keeps coming."

"Do they know what started the fire?" asked Felicia with a worried look. "Oh, God." She brought her hands to her mouth. "You don't think it was the mob, do you?"

Crap. Thinking that the mob was behind this never entered her mind. But why would they only burn down the shed? Wouldn't they go for the house too? How would they even know where she lived? She had heard nothing from them since she and Felicia left Georgia.

Isabelle shrugged. "Who knows, although I don't think so. The immediate problem is rebuilding the shed. Our landlord won't be happy if he sees this."

The three fell silent.

"I never thought about that." Felicia thinned her lips. "Well, you and I will just have to rebuild it ourselves."

"Materials cost money, sweetie."

"Right." Felicia exhaled. "Well, I have a little nest egg. About five hundred dollars. That'll get us started."

“And I have a little more.” Isabelle huffed. “That should do it. I think. Although I have no idea how much wood costs.”

“Stop!” Colt inserted himself between the women. “Neither of you knows how to build a shed. I’ll have the guys come over. We’ll get it done in no time.”

“We can’t afford to both buy wood and pay them for their time, Colt,” Felicia replied.

He glanced at the two of them and smiled reassuringly. “Who said anything about buying wood or paying? If you two provide food and drink, I believe that’ll be enough.”

“We couldn’t ask your friends to work for nothing,” said Isabelle.

“You’re not asking,” he corrected her gently. “I am, and that’s what we do. Help one another.”

“Do you think they’ll help?” asked Felicia hopefully.

“Yes. You two concentrate on making more soap. I’ll coordinate the building of the shed and get the electrician back when it’s finished.”

“Excuse me.”

They looked over at the fire investigator holding a thick piece of charred cardboard. “I found this around the back of the shed. It has a partial logo on it. Do you recognize it?”

Felicia and Isabelle leaned close. It was a partial circle with a deep blue swirl, not unlike elements of their own logo.

Isabelle gasped. There were several like it at the farmers’ market. She hated to think one of them could do this, but one name in particular came to mind. She prayed it was a stray piece of cardboard.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

“This is so exciting,” exclaimed Joy as she placed a container of cut-up fruit on the kitchen table. “I’ve always wanted to go to a barn raising.”

Isabelle groaned. “You do know this is just a shed, not a barn raising, don’t you?”

“Tsk, tsk,” Joy replied. “You’re a Debbie Downer. Of course, I know, but I’m using my imagination here.”

Isabelle laughed. Three days after the disastrous fire, today turned out to be a joyous day. Considering the circumstances, she never expected to see all of Colt’s friends cutting and hammering wood to build the shed. She never expected that her girlfriends would be in the kitchen, having brought all sorts of food and drink. Nor did she expect they would all gather to party after the shed was finished. Isabelle never felt so treasured.

Joy had coordinated it all. The women brought salads and sandwiches for lunch and burgers, hot dogs, and dessert for dinner, with all the condiments and accompaniments. She and Felicia only spent money on drinks.

“Wow,” said Dawn, staring out the window at the men working. “There are some mighty fine specimens of manly men out there.”

Mallory looked out. “I say we pull up chairs and cheer them on,” she said.

Joy looked over at her friend. Her eyes crinkled, and she grinned. “I agree.”

She and Mallory went outside, and Isabelle watched them position the lawn chairs in a semicircle facing the shed.

“I have drinks in the cooler for the guys,” said Felicia. “Why don’t we bring it out, and then we can relax and watch the show.”

“Sounds good.” Isabelle helped Felicia carry the cooler out and place it on a table by the shed. The men were working diligently, and the shed would be finished by the end of the day.

She and Felicia walked back and took seats with the other women. Isabelle hoped the guys wouldn’t be offended by having the women ogle—er, watch them. However, when she saw the T-shirts coming off and the men preening, she knew they were quite happy to have an audience. Men!

“Oh, my goodness,” exclaimed Nicki as she fanned herself. “This is the stuff dreams are made of.”

“True that.” Mallory nodded in agreement.

Isabelle grabbed an iced tea and leaned back in the chair. Colt and Will were there, as well as the other members of the Brotherhood Alliance. Liam even brought several of his buddies from the police force. All in all, over a dozen men volunteered to help build the shed. Tears formed in her eyes. Who woulda thunk that the devastating fire could turn into something positive? And ogling good-looking men was the icing on the cake.

She wanted to talk to Liam and ask if the police had any more information about the charred paper and partial logo the fire investigator discovered, but now wasn’t the time.

Yesterday was a blur. Between dealing with the fire, the fire department, EMTs, and police, it took a couple of glasses of wine to control her panic. Thankfully, Will had stayed the night with her after Colt had called him to tell him about the shed.

Isabelle had been uneasy about staying on her own since Felicia went back to Colt’s apartment. Only after Will pulled up had Felicia left.

His presence was a comfort. Originally, he had been furious she hadn't told him, but when she explained she didn't want to disturb him since he was so busy with the farm, he forgave her. Although he told her that she would always come first. It was comforting to have him there. The fact that Will brought a gun with him told her how serious this was.

What kind of sicko would burn down a person's property?

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The next day was stormy, and Isabelle just wanted to stay where she was—in bed, naked with Will. She watched him sleep. He worked so hard that she never noticed how peaceful he looked when he slept and how long his eyelashes were. Isabelle sighed.

Will opened his eyes. “Are you staring at me?”

“No. Yes. You’re purty,” she replied.

Before another word left her mouth, Will had her underneath him, holding his body off hers with his arms. “Purty, huh? I prefer to think of myself as manly and handsome.”

“That too,” she teased. “Especially manly when ...” Her eyes traveled down to where she felt his hardness bumping into her stomach.

“Hmmm. It seems like I need to exercise my manliness.”

He leaned down and kissed her gently on the forehead, her nose, and finally her lips. Isabelle put her arms around his waist and relished the light kisses that turned into burning, passionate kissing, leading to a fulfilling orgasm.

* * *

LIAM SAT in Isabelle’s kitchen drinking coffee and looking quite professional in his uniform. He’d called late morning, saying he spoke to the fire department as a courtesy and asking

if she wanted an update. Hell yeah, she did. There would be no peace in her life if a crazed pyromaniac was on the loose. It was still raining but being with Will and having sex had taken the edge off her nervousness. They had nothing planned for the day except maybe getting back in bed for some afternoon delight—Will’s words, not hers.

“So, tell us what you found out?” asked Isabelle.

“The fire marshal determined the fire was caused by gasoline.” Liam reached for a piece of coffee cake left over from the previous night. “As you know, he found charred paper with a partial logo on it. It belongs to Mindy, Mandy Stevens’s daughter.”

“I knew it.” Isabelle slapped the table and groaned. “I just knew it when I saw the design.”

“Why did she do it?” asked Will.

Liam shook his head. “Don’t know. Mindy has disappeared.”

“Disappeared?” Isabelle’s stomach clenched. She rubbed her brow aimlessly and looked at Will. “Am I still in danger?”

“Isabelle, you will have protection.” Will reached for her hand. “Don’t worry about that.”

Don’t worry. DON’T WORRY? Okay, Isabelle added Mindy to the list of shitty things happening to her—almost going to jail for Mindy’s mother’s murder, having the mob threaten her for money, and now—now some crazy woman was on the loose setting fires in her backyard. Isabelle held her head in her hands and stared at the table. What was next?

“What are the police doing about finding her?” Will asked Liam.

“We are talking to her neighbors.” Liam took a swallow of coffee and placed his cup down. “Also, some vendors at the farmers’ market. She didn’t have any friends, nor did her mother.”

Isabelle snorted. Imagine that. That vile woman and her daughter had no friends. Still, she never wished Mandy dead.

“Any leads?” asked Isabelle.

“We have a man staking out her house and work. She’ll show up eventually.”

“Hopefully, you’ll find her before she sets any more fires,” Isabelle replied caustically.

Liam leaned back in his chair, a sympathetic expression on his face. “I know this can’t be easy. But trust us to find her and get you justice.” He let out a breath. “I don’t need to remind you to be aware of your surroundings. And don’t hesitate to call us. Okay?”

Isabelle nodded. “I’m sorry.” She placed her hand on Liam’s hand. “I’m tired of being targeted. I’m scared.”

“Targeted?” Liam narrowed his eyes. “How? By whom?”

Why, oh why did she say that? Liam was a cop for crying out loud. Of course, he would have picked that up. No way in hell was she telling any more people, especially the police, about her previous run-ins with the law and the mob.

“No one. It’s nothing. I’m just feeling vulnerable.”

Will drew her to his side. “You have nothing to be afraid of, sweetheart. You’ll be safe.”

She gave him a small smile and nodded.

Liam finished his coffee and stood. “I’ll keep you updated.” He looked at Will. “You’ll take care of security.”

“Absolutely.”

She closed the door behind Liam and stepped back into Will’s arms. He nuzzled her neck. “I need you.”

They spent the rest of the afternoon wrapped in each other’s arms. Thunder in the distance rumbled, and the occasional flash of lightning reminded Isabelle that while outside was chaotic, inside, she was safe and warm in Will’s arms. She knew without a doubt that Will would protect her.

She always knew Felicia had her back, but it was time for Felicia to have her own life and explore all the possibilities of a relationship with Colt.

Isabelle was comforted by the thought that she was loved, had a partner who would stand by her side and fight for her.

But the fact that trouble followed her wherever she went weighed heavily on her mind.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Will hated leaving Isabelle but promised her he'd be back later. She wasn't alone. Some of their women friends were with her and Felicia and assured Will they would keep the girls safe.

He had spoken with Chase last night about ways to protect Isabelle. Sure, they could take turns staying with the women or have Felicia stay with Colt while Isabelle came home with him. But that was only a Band-Aid. Besides, Isabelle nixed the idea.

They really needed to find Mindy. Isabelle and Felicia were living in fear.

As Isabelle explained, the fire destroyed a good deal of new product that vendors were expecting, and they needed the money. There was soap to make, and with the new shed, they had no reason to leave the house. They assured Will that they would take precautions.

It wasn't enough.

The Brotherhood was meeting tonight. There was much to discuss. Asking the guys to watch her for free wasn't fair, but he couldn't be there all the time. Jason was capable of working the farm, as were the two part-timers, but there was still too much work to handle for his small crew. He needed to be there during the day to help. Colt had a business and obligations to meet, and he couldn't be here all the time either.

Will had some savings and was more than happy to use it to pay the men to keep Isabelle safe. However, if the police

couldn't find Mindy quickly, the money would run out. Will hadn't spoken to Colt about contributing for protection, although Will knew her brother would let nothing happen to her or Felicia.

The Brotherhood had resources and access to money. Will hoped they could use some of that. It was not unlike a protection detail they did all the time for someone who couldn't afford to pay. There had to be more he could do to protect the women.

Cameras! The Brotherhood had the ability to tap into security cameras—sometimes illegally but most times not. Will remembered the Brotherhood had security cameras around the campus and in stock. Maybe he could buy a couple. Hopefully, they would allow Isabelle and Felicia to feel safer or, at the very least, give them a heads-up if Mindy came snooping around.

The parking lot at the center was half full when Will arrived. The cool breeze on his forehead did nothing to alleviate his tension. He swallowed hard. His heart was pounding. This felt like a military operation. One Will wasn't fully prepared to go on—so many variables. So many things could go wrong.

He spotted Colt's truck and recognized some of the other trucks in the lot. His eyes adjusted as he walked from the darkened lot into the fully lit hallway. Will felt a lump in his throat as he attempted to swallow. *Nervous much?* Asking for help was new to him, and he wasn't sure what the response of the guys would be. That wasn't true. They'd all stepped up to help build the shed, but now he was asking again for help. Thankfully, the women didn't need security before since the mob hadn't found or contacted them. But this thing with Mindy was unpredictable.

The center was deserted, as the employees had left hours ago. The interior doors were closed, and the hall was quiet, although he heard men's voices coming from the meeting room. Someone had burgers at lunch. The meaty scent lingered in the hall, a scent he usually enjoyed, but tonight it made his stomach churn.

He stepped into the meeting room and took a deep breath. The stakes were high. If he couldn't get help, he'd do it himself. The hushed conversation and serious expressions of the men added tension to the air. Several guys were deep in conversation with Chase. Colt was talking to Finn and looked concerned.

Zach was sitting closest to the door and stood up to man-hug Will. "Glad we could help build the shed. It was nice to get together with everyone." It was good to see Zach there helping. He interacted with the guys but tended to avoid large groups.

"Appreciate you coming," Will replied. "The girls were devastated when they lost the soaps they were making."

"I can understand that." Zach nodded and sat down.

"I think we can get started," said Chase, his voice booming over conversations. The men settled down. Chase looked at Will and Colt and said, "One of you want to tell us what's going on?"

Will did a chin-up at Colt since he had been in the group longer than Will.

Colt filled them in on the story Isabelle and Felicia had shared with them. Only once did he stop and take a few steady breaths before continuing, and that was when he disclosed how the women were accused of stealing money and about the man threatening to hurt them.

There were a couple of gasps and clenched fists around the table, and a few swear words. It didn't surprise Will. This was a group of hardened ex-military men, but if a woman, especially one of theirs, was bullied and frightened, shit was going down.

"Will, why don't you update everyone about what the police are doing to find Mindy?" asked Colt.

There wasn't much to tell. Will repeated what Liam had told the women, which wasn't much, and that Mindy was in the wind. However, no one was convinced that Mindy

wouldn't try something else. He could sense the frustration in the room.

He looked around the group, and his heart swelled. Will felt like he had a family again. Sure, they weren't blood relatives, but these men ... Will released a deep breath. These men had his six.

He could count on them when the stakes were down.

He found his woman. He had his tribe. He was home.

* * *

"THAT WENT BETTER THAN EXPECTED," said Colt as they walked to their trucks.

The meeting was over, and Will was overwhelmed with the help offered. He took a deep breath, inhaling the cool air.

To a guy, they had volunteered to help guard the women without pay. However, Chase insisted there were funds to pay them and to keep track of their hours. He would make up a schedule so no one was overworked. The weight on Will's shoulders lifted. Although he knew that even with the cameras and protection, their efforts might not be enough. Danger still loomed for Isabelle and Felicia.

Chase sold the security cameras to Will at cost, and Colt chipped in. The cameras offered a glimmer of hope.

He or Colt would alternate staying at the house at night. That is, if Isabelle and Felicia agreed.

Although it didn't matter. There wasn't anything the women could say or do that would prevent him and Colt from providing protection for them.

As for the mob, Chase only wanted to involve Tex if necessary and only if the Brotherhood couldn't get the pertinent information themselves. Dex was good at getting basic information, but Tex had contacts everywhere and resources to dig deeper. However, they weren't at that point yet.

Colt promised to call the sheriff in Sandy Creek again and get an update.

Tomorrow, Zach would go over to the house and install the security cameras.

While Will wanted to spend the night with Isabelle, she hoped to go to bed early, and he was needed at the farm. Colt had already made plans to be there with Felicia. Both men staying there would feel like a frat party. Not that Will ever went to one, but staying in the house and making love to Isabelle while her brother was in the next room would be awkward. Hell, it would be a lot more than awkward.

But tomorrow night, he was calling dibs.

CHAPTER FORTY

“Come on, Isabelle, you can throw him,” yelled Joy. Her voice echoed through the gym. Isabelle stared at the six-foot-two-inch bearded giant standing before her whose lips curled into an amused smile. He motioned her forward with his hands. Riiight.

There was no way in hell she would be able to budge Titus.

She hadn't been able to in the hour she'd been in the self-defense class the Brotherhood sponsored at the center. Will and Colt were helping other women. They begged off teaching Isabelle and Felicia. The big cowards, er, softies claimed they didn't want to hurt them. But the guys had no problem passing Felicia and her off to two hulks. At least they were good-looking hulks.

The class was big tonight. Isabelle had come the week before, and only ten women attended. Tonight, fifteen women were here seeking to learn how to protect themselves. Joy, Mallory, and Naomi came for support. Isabelle didn't know the rest of the women. It was a good thing the gym was big; everyone was spread out enough not to get in anyone's way.

“Isabelle, you can't freeze,” said Titus. “You may be an itty-bitty thing, but you can still do some damage.”

Itty-bitty. ITTY-BITTY? Did Titus really call her an itty-bitty thing? He smirked at her and winked. Yes, he did. Well, she'd show him itty-bitty.

“Okay, big boy,” she snarked. She rolled her shoulders and shook her hands, stretching out her itty-bitty, five-foot-two frame. “Get ready.”

“Ooooh.”

Isabelle glanced around. Some of the class was watching her, egging her on. “You’re all jealous,” she shouted, then lunged at Titus, who raised his hands to stop her. He missed.

Isabelle slipped past him, her body sliding on the floor.

Oh God, she caught him off guard. Her breath quickened. Everything was now in slow-mo.

Titus was still facing the other direction. Instructions that she learned flashed before her eyes.

She kicked out with both feet as she thrust her hips from the floor. Her feet connected with the back of Titus’s legs. *Ha! Take that, you giant.*

She moved him an inch. An inch!

Her heart was beating fast now. Springing to her feet, Isabelle did a Rocky Balboa victory dance. The class erupted in cheers and applause. She took a bow.

Will and Colt shook their heads.

Titus turned to look at her. The corner of his lips turned upward for a second before he put his serious face on.

“Decent move, Itty-Bitty,” he grudgingly said as he nodded. “You might be able to get away with that if someone doesn’t know any self-defense moves, especially if you get up and run—fast.”

There was no doubt if she was in danger, she’d run fast. The lessons were an eye-opener for Isabelle. Until they were confronted by the mob guys and left their small town in Georgia, Isabelle realized she and Felicia led innocent lives, never thinking they could get hurt. That wasn’t to say they put themselves in harm’s way, just that they didn’t think much about danger.

“Okay, folks,” yelled Chase. “I think we’re done for the night. Next week, same time, same place.” He met Naomi as she was rolling up her mat and kissed her sweetly.

Will walked over with a towel, wiping his face. “Nice move, sweetheart.” He reached over and pulled her close to whisper, “We can practice some moves later.”

She batted his arm. “Nothing for you, mister. You assigned me the Hulk.”

“He may be a Hulk, but you don’t get to decide who attacks you,” Will replied. “It doesn’t matter if the person is taller, shorter, or heavier than you, just that you know how to keep your pretty self safe.”

“Oh, you sweet talker, you.” Isabelle laughed. “Maybe, just maybe, I’ll show you some of my special moves later.”

Will’s eyes got dark and dusky. “Hmmm. Looking forward to it.” He gathered their belongings, took her arm, and gently pulled her towards the door. “I can’t wait to get you home.”

Tonight, they would spend the night at Will’s house.

Last night he had been at hers. As she and Felicia found out, he and Colt were taking turns staying at their house. It was a good thing. Isabelle couldn’t imagine having sex with her brother in the next room.

Colt said he was okay with Will staying there when he was around, but Isabelle knew better. He hadn’t said it with conviction. Colt was still on the fence about Will. Not that he didn’t like Will. But Colt never liked anyone interested in his little sister.

Brothers! They were a pain in the ass until they weren’t.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Isabelle sat at the kitchen table across from Will, sipped her coffee, and stared at him. Was there anything better than looking at a sexy, handsome man cooking breakfast? Will was wearing jeans that hung loose on his hips; he was barefoot and bare-chested. Yum.

“Here you go, sweetheart.” He placed a plate of scrambled eggs, toast, and bacon in front of her.

“Looks delicious,” she replied as she looked him up and down, concentrating on the happy trail leading from his chest to his crotch. Instantly, his cock turned hard, threatening to burst free from its zipper cage.

“Eyes up here, Isabelle.” Will’s eyes crinkled in amusement as he pointed at his eyes. “There is no way you’re distracting me from talking to you about security.”

Isabelle was hoping to have him forget about the “talk.” Guess that idea flew out the window. What was wrong with her? Why was she avoiding talking about her and Felicia’s safety?

Isabelle supposed talking about it would make it real. Sometimes, though, she just wanted to forget all the bad things that had happened lately and just live. But maybe she wouldn’t be alive if she didn’t take protection seriously.

“I’m sorry.” She sighed. “This whole security scenario makes me uneasy. This is so out of my element.

Will sat across from her and took her hand. “I know, sweetheart. That’s why you have me, Colt, and the entire

Brotherhood willing to keep you safe.”

He ran his hand through his hair. The muscles in his forearm bulged. Isabelle stared at those rippling muscles. Gah. She was so distracted by Will’s body today. It wasn’t as if Will hadn’t made her scream his name three times last night.

Then he picked her hand up and kissed it gently. “But I promise knowing what you need will make it easier for you to feel in control.”

“Thank you,” she said gratefully. “I know it isn’t easy convincing someone they have to give up parts of their freedom in order to stay safe.”

“If you’re really good and listen carefully”—he wiggled his brows—“I’ll make it worthwhile.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Really?”

“Really.” He checked his watch before continuing. “Zach will be at your house in two hours. We’ll talk fast and then ...” He winked at her. “You’ll get a reward.”

“Humph,” she muttered. “I guess I’m all about delayed gratification. So, talk. Fast.”

Will laughed. “Ha ha. First, finish your breakfast, then we’ll talk. Then and only then, you’ll get your reward.”

Isabelle pretend-pouted. “Meanie.”

They ate breakfast in comfortable silence. Isabelle wondered what protection meant to Will. To her, it was twenty-four-hour vigilance by someone who only let her go to the bathroom by herself if they were standing outside the door. If Will suggested that, she wasn’t sure what she’d do, because no way in hell was that happening.

* * *

ISABELLE AND FELICIA FOLLOWED ZACH, Colt, and Will outside as Zach installed and adjusted the security cameras.

“You’ll be able to see everything on your computer, tablet, or phone,” Zach said. “These cameras are state-of-the-art so that the pictures won’t be blurry.”

It was a sunny, hot day. She watched Zach moving around the house, looking for the right angle for the cameras.

Isabelle was sweating. Her heart was racing. Security cameras. That was what their lives were reduced to—Big Brother watching them twenty-four seven. Will explained that Dex, their IT guy, could also pick up the feed at the Brotherhood offices, but he wouldn’t unless it was absolutely necessary. She’d met Dex a couple of times and liked him, but did she want him to have access to her everyday life? That was a big fat no.

In fact, she was getting a little perturbed by all of this. Instead of enjoying life and being carefree, they now had twenty-four-hour protection and security cameras. Who was paying for this? She sure wasn’t, nor was Felicia. Isabelle never asked Will this morning because she had been focusing on his muscles and other parts of his body, but she had time now.

“The cameras are motion-activated and will send you an alert if anyone is around the house or out back,” Zach was telling Felicia, who looked enthralled with the information. As she would since she loved everything technical. Will was helping Zach. Colt was in the woods somewhere, checking something out.

Isabelle tapped on Will’s shoulder. “Can I talk to you for a few minutes? Privately.”

Will turned, his brow furrowed. “Sure. Is everything okay?”

She shrugged and walked back to the kitchen. Will followed.

Her throat was dry, although her body was sweating. Confrontation was not her strong suit. “Water?”

Will nodded and took a seat. Isabelle also got a glass for herself, returned with them in her hands, and placed them on

the table.

“Sweetheart, what’s wrong?” Will asked. “And don’t tell me nothing. You’re pasty and sweaty.” He took her hand in his. “Tell me,” he asked gently.

“This.” She spread her arms. “This is all too much.”

He looked around. “What’s too much?”

“The cameras, the protection, everything.” She sighed and bit her lip. “Felicia and I don’t have the money for this. Crap, we’re barely hanging on since the shed burned down. Plus, I’m not sure I want someone hanging around watching everything I do, following me to the bathroom, watching me sleep.”

A smirk slipped off Will’s face. “Let’s put those concerns to bed. First off, the Brotherhood Alliance is footing the bill —”

“But—”

He put his hands in a placating gesture. “Let me finish. The Brotherhood has a huge budget to protect those who lack the funds to pay for protection. Second thing, whoever stays here isn’t following you around. You won’t even know they’re here.

“They’ll be watching for threats, for Mindy.” He leaned in. “And no one is following you to the bathroom. Regarding your other concern, no one, I repeat, no one is going to watch you sleep except me.”

Isabelle let the information sink in. “Oh.”

A small smile tugged at Will’s lips. “That’s all you have to say, oh?”

“Well, now that you’ve explained it—” She shrugged. “Yeah.”

He pushed his chair closer to Isabelle. “Sweetheart, I never want you to feel uncomfortable. Protecting people—it’s what we, I do. And we’re very good at it. I would hate to find out we neglected our job and Mindy or anyone else was able to sneak up and hurt you.”

Well, that information made her feel better.

“Why don’t we talk to Zach, so you know how to access the feeds?” he asked.

“Probably a good idea.” She stood. “Oh, by the way, I have some brownies from the Queen of Tarts. Why don’t I make coffee before we talk to Zach?”

“Good idea. I could use a snack. I used a lot of energy this morning.” Will stood and winked.

Isabelle measured the coffee grounds into the pot and stared out the kitchen window. All doubts about being protected were gone. She felt safer already. If and when Mindy came back, wouldn’t she be surprised?

She felt a sense of calm come over her. She and Felicia were safe.

Hopefully, nothing else would go wrong. Isabelle snorted—when had that wish ever come true?

* * *

THE JOB for Eddie took less time than Ricky expected. Once again, he was back in Haywood Lake, back in the dump of a motel he had stayed in before. Different room, same décor, same stench.

Eddie was going crazy. He was concerned that Jacko could come any day to surprise him. Eddie confided that to her dying breath, Serena never confessed she sold the drugs, although he knew that she had. They still didn’t have the stolen money. Eddie didn’t have extra money to make up for the shortfall, and he was becoming paranoid and angry. Between the drugs and stolen cash, it was over one hundred thousand. Not chump change.

Antonio returned with Ricky and was holed up in an abandoned cabin in the woods.

It was serendipity that they found the cabin. They only found it because Antonio got lost and ended up on a rugged

dirt road that led to who knew what.

The abandoned cabin was just outside Haywood Lake city limits in a secluded area that hadn't seen people in a while. They could hear the hum of engines from the main road, even though it was about five miles away. The site was surrounded by pine trees and live oaks. A marshy area was close by, but the ground around the cabin was dry. Remnants of a stone-enclosed fire pit were about ten feet from the cabin. All that was left of a fire were pieces of charcoal. There were no other cabins nearby. How and why the cabin got here remained a mystery.

When they pulled up and looked inside, it reminded Ricky of the shithole they grew up in, minus their spaced-out mother and drunk father.

The cabin worked for Antonio. The front door opened into a small living room that had a couch and table. Everything looked like it hadn't been used in some time. Behind the living room was a tiny kitchen that had one countertop and bottom cabinets. There was a one-burner propane stove, and much to their surprise, it worked. The tank still had propane. There were two bedrooms. One had two bunk beds pushed against the wall with a narrow pathway between them, and the other was a slightly bigger room with two single beds. The mattresses were usable, although the sheets were musty and pockmarked with holes, so Antonio had thrown those out. The bathroom was an outhouse about twenty feet from the cabin. Antonio bitched about that. Looking inside, they gagged. It stunk to high heaven, cobwebs clung to the ceiling, and critter poop littered the floor. Antonio said he'd rather use the woods.

Leaving Antonio at the cabin, Ricky decided to take a quick look around Isabelle's place just for shits and giggles. He and Antonio needed to come up with a plan to kidnap Isabelle and bring her to Eddie ASAP. Ricky drove by her place slowly, taking note of a couple of trucks in the driveway, Isabelle's van, and the other women's car.

He drove farther down the road. Something had changed, something he couldn't put his finger on, except something about the house that looked different.

Turning the car around for a second pass, he drove by again.

As if this job wasn't complicated enough. The bitch had security cameras installed. He saw one in the front aimed at the front, and he bet another was situated in the back. He wondered if the installation of the cameras had anything to do with the person he saw prowling in the woods that night before he left.

His initial plan of kidnapping Isabelle from the house needed adjustment.

Ricky's frustrated sigh did nothing to alleviate his anxiety. Disabling the cameras was iffy and dangerous. Somehow, they had to come up with a Plan B, whatever that was. There were always ways of getting around cameras. Then they had to make sure they completed the task.

Lives were on the line—his and Antonio's.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

True to Will's word, Isabelle didn't have to worry about someone watching her sleep. It'd been a couple of days since the cameras were installed, and she and Will alternated between staying at his house or spending the night at hers. The same was also true for Felicia and Colt.

During the day, one of the other guys was around. She hadn't noticed at first that someone was watching.

One morning when she went to her van to get something, Isabelle noticed a truck parked across the street semi-hidden by bushes and a man getting out. She waved and walked over. It was Finn. That was when she told him it was silly to sit in the truck; he could hang out in the house. He was grateful for the change. It had to be icky sitting in a hot vehicle. At least her house had air-conditioning.

After Will left the next morning, Isabelle looked out. The day was gray, and thunder rumbled in the background. Heavy downpours were predicted later in the day. A sense of déjà vu came over her as she approached the truck. Today Titus was guarding her. She invited him in.

Felicia had the books to work on, so Isabelle was in the kitchen making soap. Titus was sitting at the kitchen table drinking coffee. The man still intimidated her, but it was nice to have someone to talk to while she worked, not that he was much of a conversationalist.

"So, how do you like working for the Brotherhood?" she asked.

“I like it.”

“Where did you live before you came here?” Isabelle placed a cup of coffee in front of him.

“Around.”

Isabelle closed her eyes. It would be a long day if the man only replied when asked a question and in short sentences.

“You’re a regular chatterbox, aren’t you?”

Titus emitted a brief snort. Isabelle got the tiniest of smiles from him.

“I’ve been known to carry a conversation,” he stated.

“Good to hear.” The wax had melted, and Isabelle slowly poured it into the molds. A wisp of air behind her startled her. Titus.

“Let me help,” Titus said. “I hate sitting around.”

Isabelle placed the pan back on the stove.

“I’d love the help. So today, I’m making a melt-and-pour soap, which means there is no lye in it. Some people prefer it. Actually, that’s how Felicia and I started making soap. Usually, we use a cold process which uses lye.”

“Doesn’t lye burn your skin?” he asked.

“No. The lye is used up in the saponification process to turn oil into soap.” Isabelle watched Titus pour the soap into the molds. “Are you impressed with my big words?”

Titus nodded and laughed. “Most impressed.” He turned to get the pan from the stove. “I know what saponification is, though. And I know a lot of big words. Actually, I know a lot of things.”

“Oh, you.” She lightly batted his shoulder, then got serious. “Let’s finish the wax before it hardens.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

They finished the soap in no time, and Isabelle’s stomach rumbled. “How about some lunch?”

“What are you having?” he asked.

“Let me see what I have.” Isabelle looked in the fridge. “I have cold cuts, bread, yogurt, fruit.” Isabelle turned to Titus. “Not a lot, but I can make you a sandwich, either with cold cuts or peanut butter.”

“I wouldn’t mind a couple of peanut butter sandwiches.”

Isabelle looked in the cabinet for the peanut butter. “Do you want jelly on them?”

Titus stared at her, his eyes twinkling as he swept his hands down his body. “Does this body look like I put a lot of sugar in it?”

“No. But whatever you put into it seems to go straight to your big head,” she teased.

“Laugh now,” he replied. “But the next time you come in for self-defense lessons, I’ll be sure to ask for you.”

“Ha. Next time, I’ll have you on the ground in seconds,” she threatened.

“Bring it on, Itty-Bitty. I’ll be ready.”

Aargh. Itty-Bitty again. It was fun to tease him, though. Isabelle would never have guessed Titus had a sense of humor.

She handed him his sandwiches and made one for herself. They sat at the kitchen table.

“So, what are your plans besides working for the Brotherhood? I know some of the other guys have jobs.”

He took a bite of the sandwich, chewed, and swallowed. “I bought a gym downtown.”

“Oh. That sounds interesting. Will you offer classes, or is it just machines?”

“No classes.”

“Men and women?”

Titus shrugged. “Doesn’t matter to me.”

“So, do you have a girlfriend?” Isabelle threw that out and mentally giggled. Titus was a good-looking guy. She was sure

he had the women lined up to go out with him. Although maybe not if he was this grumpy and didn't like small talk.

Titus choked on the swallow of water he was taking. The look of surprise on his face was priceless. Guess he wasn't expecting that question.

He rolled his eyes. "No, not that it's any of your business." He took another bite of the sandwich and gave her the evil eye. "And don't try fixing me up. I can find my own woman."

"I wouldn't dare. Women like to talk. You're not a talker." Isabelle was curious about how Titus would be as a business owner. Would he be welcoming to new clients, or would he scowl and hide in his office? She sure wasn't asking him that.

He grimaced. "Thankfully."

Isabelle finished her lunch and collected their plates. "I still have more soap to make. If you want to help, that would be great."

He nodded.

The rest of the afternoon went fast but was quiet. Felicia stopped in the kitchen for a bottle of water, said a few words to Titus, and left.

When they finished, it was late afternoon. Colt was coming over after he finished at the garage to pick up Felicia.

Will promised to come back again tonight, and Isabelle had great plans for him.

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

Later that week the girls decided to make a night of it and go to Fat Jack's Roadhouse to catch up, have a couple of drinks, and leave early since they all had work in the morning.

Joy and Mallory hyped the place so much that Isabelle and Felicia were excited to try it. Since it was Wednesday night, they were practically guaranteed a table. Live music only occurred Thursday through Sunday, so they didn't have to deal with the deafening backdrop of live music drowning out their conversation.

Isabelle and Felicia arrived around 7 p.m. and entered a brightly lit room. Many of the tables were full, but fortunately, they were able to grab a big table near the back wall. They weren't alone, however—Will and Colt were at the bar. It was either have the men come with them or not go. It was an easy concession to make. The guys weren't taking any chances.

As Colt explained to the women, just a short time ago, Chase's crazy ex-girlfriend Mara tried to kidnap Naomi from the Roadhouse. The guys barely made it there in time to rescue her. Naomi had excused herself from coming tonight; she just couldn't return there, even with protection. Isabelle was shocked. It just went to show her that even innocent venues and events could turn nasty. She couldn't help herself from looking around, making sure Mindy wasn't lurking in the shadows.

"Hey, hey." Mallory slipped into a chair, followed by Joy. "Nicki and Dawn will be here later." She turned towards the bar. "It looks like reinforcements have arrived."

Isabelle looked over, saw that Finn, Dex, and Titus had also arrived and taken seats at the bar.

Joy pointed out a bleached blonde laughing it up with the guys and told her that was Sunny Jack, the owner of Fat Jack's and a consummate flirt. The guys seemed to enjoy the interaction with her. Will looked over at her and grinned. Sunny smiled and gave her a finger wave.

A server came over, and they ordered drinks and nachos for the table. Isabelle's mouth watered; it'd been so long since she had nachos. Tonight was a splurge. Her budget, or lack of one, didn't allow for eating out much, and she didn't want Will paying for all her meals.

"I'm surprised Colt and Will let you two out," said Joy. "Are you worried about running into Mindy?"

Felicia replied, "Not really. We haven't heard anything more from her." She looked worried. "Has Liam said something?"

"No. The police aren't staking out her place anymore. It seems like she's in the wind. Pffft," said Joy. "Good riddance. Why anyone would burn down someone's property is beyond me."

Isabelle shared the sentiment. She couldn't understand the violence, either. Mindy had to be suffering from a mental breakdown. It was unfortunate they hadn't found her yet.

"The guys did a great job rebuilding. Have you caught up on your loss?" Mallory asked Isabelle.

Isabelle sighed and shook her head. Talking about the shed and loss of product was depressing. She thought they were here to have a good time.

A gust of wind at Isabelle's back had her frantically looking around, her palms sweating, and she almost dropped the glass she was holding. All the talk of Mindy was worrying her. What if the next time Mindy showed up, she had a knife or tried to burn the house down?

"Hi, everyone. Sorry we're late. I had a customer who just wouldn't leave."

Nicki and Dawn had arrived, and there were kisses all around. Dawn settled next to Joy. Nicki pulled out a chair next to Isabelle. “How are you, sweetie? It must be a stressful time for you. What with Mindy still on the loose?”

“We’re managing.” Isabelle nodded towards the bar. “Our keepers are in the corner.” She looked over and saw the guys laughing and joking. “Apparently having a good ol’ time.”

“Maybe so but watch this.” Nicki suddenly stood, pointing at something on the table with a scared look on her face. Isabelle wondered what the heck she was doing. The next thing Isabelle knew, Will was at the table.

“Everything okay over here?” he asked in a concerned tone.

Nicki winked at Isabelle. “Everything is fine. I thought I saw a spider,” she told Will.

He looked around the table and floor, then at Nicki. “I think you’re safe. I don’t see anything.”

Will walked back to the bar, and Nicki sat down. “Those guys are protectors. They’re vigilant even if they’re relaxed. You have nothing to worry about.”

The drinks and nachos finally arrived. Isabelle took a long sip of her frozen watermelon margarita. The frozen delight soothed her jangled nerves.

* * *

WILL LAUGHED at something Titus said but kept his eyes on the women, especially Isabelle, who looked stunning tonight in a short, sleeveless black flowery dress with sandals.

He was thrilled that she was laughing and chatting with her friends, but it made him sad that in order to be carefree, she needed protection.

He hadn’t been sure what was going on with Nicki when she suddenly stood up and pointed at the table.

It could be nothing, but one never took chances. At least none of the guys stood up and pulled their guns as they rushed over to see what was happening. That wouldn't have been embarrassing to Isabelle—nope, not at all.

Being out with the guys was good, even if they were on the job.

He wished the police would find Mindy soon and put everyone's minds at ease. Will knew Isabelle and Felicia were afraid, but they had said nothing.

* * *

AT ANOTHER TABLE, Ricky and Antonio were devouring chicken wings and nursing their beers. Ricky liked Fat Jack's. It was casual, the beer was good, and he decided he wouldn't mind doing the big-bosomed blonde who was laughing with the customers. He was a breast guy, and she had some nice knockers. He sighed—thoughts for another time.

They had followed Isabelle here. It was pretty obvious to him that the big guys sitting at the bar were watching over the women.

“Not good,” said Antonio when he noticed Ricky looking over at the bar. “There are so many of them, and they look like they're all ex-military.”

Antonio was right, but it didn't matter. Eddie gave them a job, and it needed to be completed or else.

Ricky took a sip of beer and placed the bottle on the table. “We're smarter than those chumps. They may have muscles, but we have brains.”

“What are you thinking?” Antonio asked. He stuffed a french fry in his mouth, and pieces flew out.

“Eww. Close your mouth,” said Ricky as he wiped particles of fry from his face. “I think we need to be clever. Eddie is getting antsy and angry. He's worried that Jacko might make a surprise visit.”

“Hell, yes. I’m getting tired of the cabin. It was fine for a few days, but now I think I’ve got a squirrel, or worse, a rat living with me. All I hear at night is scritch in the walls and ceiling.”

Ricky shook his head. “We only have one chance to get the bitch, but it won’t be here.”

“When?”

“I don’t know yet, but it has to be soon.” Ricky sighed. “As soon as this job is done, I’m gone, and I suggest you take off, too. It’s getting too dangerous working for Eddie.”

Antonio nodded. “So true, brother, so true.” He picked up a wing. “As long as we’re here, though, I’m going to enjoy the food.”

“Might as well. If we don’t get Isabelle, this might be our last good meal. The next time, we might be competing with worms for food.”

“Ew. Really? While I’m eating?” Antonio scrunched his brows. “I have no intention of dying.”

Ricky looked at his younger brother.

Antonio’s face carried scars from fights, as did his. There was gray creeping into his black hair. He looked worn out. How old was he now? Two years younger than him. So, thirty-eight. He looked sixty.

The years hadn’t been good to either of them—crappy childhoods, crappy life, but Ricky was going to make sure he stayed alive to enjoy it.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

Will followed Isabelle back to her place since Felicia decided to go home with Colt. The women enjoyed their evening at Fat Jack's Roadhouse. He did too. Too bad they were there for protection.

He'd never been there before, but he liked the atmosphere and liked the owner. Sunny Jack was a hoot. The big-bosomed blonde teased them, made them laugh but also made it clear she was no pushover. A tear welled up in her eye as she told them that the bar was named after her late husband. People called him Fat Jack, but he was a skinny guy with a big heart.

After leaving the bright lights of town, Will was fully aware that many of the back roads lacked houses or streetlights on them. The danger was everywhere right now, and he kept his eyes peeled for anything out of the ordinary. No one knew where crazy Mindy was. He wasn't comfortable with the women's decision to drive themselves, but as Isabelle said, driving themselves gave them a sense of freedom.

He knew the protection detail upset their daily lives. Most people needed to get used to having twenty-four-hour security. Isabelle had made the most of it by inviting whoever was watching them to come into the house. Titus and Finn briefly mentioned that they liked getting to know her and Felicia better and appreciated being in the air-conditioned house.

That was all good. Will planned on Isabelle being in his life forever as well as working for the Brotherhood. The fact that his friends and Isabelle liked each other was a bonus.

Sure, he knew he wanted to farm full-time; that had been his dream. On the other side of the coin, the whole reason he joined the military was to serve and protect. The Brotherhood fulfilled that dream using the skills he learned. He'd try to make them both work for as long as he could.

Isabelle's turn signal blinked. They were at her house. She pulled in and parked her van next to Felicia's car. Will parked behind her and checked the security feed from his phone before he got out. Good. Nothing out of the ordinary.

Isabelle walked up beside him.

"Hey, stranger. Want to come in for a drink?" She winked at him and licked her lips. "Or something more?"

Oh, hell yeah. He liked the way she thought.

"Hmmm," he mused and looked at her up and down. He thought about it for a minute. Two could play this game. "Maybe. If it's worth my while."

Isabelle giggled. "Oh. It's going to be worth your while and then some." She reached over, took his hand, and opened the door, ready to lead him.

"Hold on," Will said.

Isabelle paused. "What's the matter?"

"I need to sweep the house first."

"Why?"

He leaned over and placed a gentle kiss on her nose. "Because that's what security guards do. The client"—he looked at her—"and that's you—never enters first. How do you know someone isn't hiding in your bedroom or in a closet?"

She shrugged. "I guess I never thought about that."

"That's why you have me." Drawing his weapon, Will turned to enter, but Isabelle placed a hand on his arm. "Will?"

"Yes, sweetheart?"

“While you’re checking out the house, what if someone comes up behind me and kidnaps me?” Isabelle smirked.

Wiseass. She was going to keep him on his toes for sure.

He shook his head in exasperation. “Fine. Follow behind me. But if anyone jumps out, you have to promise to get out of the way and run out of the house. Promise?”

She crossed her heart. “Promise.”

Isabelle was close behind him, holding onto his belt. Her soft breath caressed his neck, and he felt his cock get hard. Great.

This was not the way he imagined checking the house out. She had made a point, though. The house was dark. He turned on lights as they made their way towards the kitchen, hitting the bedrooms along the way.

He had checked the perimeter with his phone when they got here. Now that he thought about it, they should have put a camera in the house. Tomorrow, he’d talk to Zach about installing one.

Finally reaching the kitchen, he let out a sigh of relief. Isabelle took her hand off his belt, and he tucked his gun back inside his waistband.

“Wow. I’m impressed,” exclaimed Isabelle.

“With what?” Will was confused. He didn’t do anything.

“In the way you get into security mode.” Isabelle tilted her head. “Hmmm. I’ve just never seen you draw your gun.”

This was too easy. “I can show you how I draw my other gun.” He winked at her. Will’s heart raced.

Isabelle’s mouth fell open. She was momentarily stunned—only momentarily.

“Only if you can catch me.” Isabelle turned and ran towards the bedroom. She got about three feet before Will was on her, scooping her up in his arms, gently tossing her on the bed before following her down.

“Gotcha.” He leaned down and kissed her. “Now I’m going to show you my other gun.”

Isabelle giggled and reached for his zipper. It was going to be the perfect ending to the day.

* * *

WILL WAS AWOKEN BY A FEELING. Something was amiss in the universe. He’d learned long ago never to dismiss a gut feeling. His pulse quickened. He looked at his watch. Three a.m. The red numerals taunted him. Nothing good happened at 3 a.m.

The shades were pulled down. The night-light provided a little light in the bedroom and cast eerie shadows around the room.

Turning, he stared at Isabelle. Her face was serene, and the curve of her exposed shoulders excited him. The urge to reach out and touch her was overpowering. But now was not the time.

He closed his eyes, willed his breathing to slow down, and lay there listening.

Silence. Was he wrong? Had he really heard something?

Then he heard it again. It was by the kitchen, a faint rustling sound. He reached for his phone and brought up the security feeds. There! In the shadows was a figure dressed in black.

Will slipped out of bed, pulled on his jeans, and grabbed his gun, the cold weight of it comforting him. The noise was coming from the back of the house, so he quietly unlocked the front door. He glanced around. No one was there, but over by the trees he saw an outline of a car on the road.

He stayed close to the side of the house, carefully placing one foot in front of the other after feeling for branches or leaves that would make a noise. His feet touched down toe to heel like he learned in the military, and it was serving him well now. Breathing through his nose, he concentrated on slowing his pulse as he moved silently in the inky darkness. His eyes

had adjusted to the dark, and he could make out shadows. Although night goggles would have helped tremendously.

He was almost at the back of the house when the scent of gasoline wafted through the air. His stomach lurched. Mindy! She was going to burn the house down, and Isabelle was still asleep. Now was the time to be extra careful. He got to the edge of the house but couldn't see Mindy. Where the hell did she go?

A sudden flicker of red flame caught his attention. Mindy was so engrossed in what she was doing that she was oblivious to his approach. He had to stop her.

Will lunged forward just as the back door creaked open and they were bathed in light.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

“Will?”

His heart froze. Oh, sweet Jesus. Isabelle!

He was close enough to tackle Mindy to the ground. They landed with a bone-jarring thud. Mindy was a handful. She screamed and fought, biting him on the arms and his chest when she could.

Isabelle screamed.

In the second it took him to look at Isabelle, who stood frozen in the doorway, eyes wide with shock and fear, Mindy slipped from his hands and started towards Isabelle.

A light flashed on the grass. Will realized with horror that he hadn't extinguished the flame heading toward the house. *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.*

“Oh my God.” Isabelle came out the back door.

“Get the hell back in the house,” he roared, but she just stood there with her hands over her mouth in disbelief. His body coiled, ready to pounce. But Mindy back-kicked him in the balls, and he doubled over for a second. *Must save Isabelle.*

“Isabelle, damn it, get inside. Call the police.”

Did she listen? Noooo.

Will watched in horror as Mindy was almost upon Isabelle.

Before he could act, Isabelle rushed toward Mindy and pulled the maneuver she used on Titus. Mindy wasn't

expecting the force with which Isabelle shoved her. Mindy put her hands out to stop her fall. Nevertheless, her body collided with the patio. There was a sickening sound as her head struck the ground, and she was out like a light.

Will's breath caught in his throat. He turned to see the flame inches from igniting the gasoline. He jumped up and stomped on the flame; the fire sputtered and died. His balls were on fire, but Isabelle was safe.

He straightened, gasping for air, and stared at Isabelle, who was pale and shaking. Mindy was face down and out on the patio.

Isabelle ran over to him, running her hands up and down his body.

“Are you okay? Where does it hurt?”

Will took a deep breath. “Isabelle, I’m okay. Go into the house and call the police.”

A tear slipped down her cheek. She opened her mouth to say something.

“Please, go call the police.”

Isabelle turned and walked back into the house.

A few minutes later, she returned and ran into his arms. She was trembling. “I was so scared for you.”

“Humph.” He closed his eyes and inhaled her scent, then hugged her tight. Mindy was still out cold, and he had secured her arms with a piece of rope. Will led Isabelle farther away from the house. “We need to talk later about safety and listening to instructions.”

Her eyes watered, and she nodded. They heard sirens in the distance.

“After they leave, we’re going to my house until the gasoline isn’t a problem.” He sniffed the air. “God, it stinks.”

The sirens were in front of the house. Liam and Cody walked around the corner of the house. “Are you two okay?” asked Liam.

“We’re fine,” Will replied.

Cody walked over to Mindy. “Is she dead?”

“No. The fall knocked her out,” Will replied.

“The medics will be here in a minute,” Cody said. “I don’t want to touch her, just in case.”

Liam took Will and Isabelle’s account of what happened and mentioned they searched Mindy’s car and found more containers of gasoline and knives.

More sirens and then two medics came rushing around the corner. They stared at Mindy for a second. While one man was looking her over, the other brought back a stretcher. They carefully loaded Mindy on it and wheeled her to the ambulance.

“Someone needs to look at Will’s feet. He put out a fire,” Isabelle yelled. “And his ba—”

“I’m fine, Isabelle.” Will put his arms around her and whispered in her ear. “I’m fine.”

Isabelle sighed. “What’s going to happen to Mindy?” Isabelle asked Liam.

“Lots,” Liam said. “The EMTs will bring her to the hospital, and the police will keep a guard on her. We’ll do an initial assessment to determine her mental health after she’s released. We’ll book her and get a comprehensive mental health screening. Then we’ll go from there.”

“Well, anyone who tries to set fire to someone’s home is a little off, for sure.” Isabelle shook her head. “I feel bad for her, especially since she just lost her mother, but the other side of the coin is that ...” Her voice got louder. “She tried to KILL us.”

Will tugged her closer and kissed her cheek. “It’s okay, sweetheart. Everything is going to be okay.”

“Don’t leave yet.” Liam patted her arm and went over to talk to the EMTs.

Now that the Mindy danger was over, Will hoped he and Isabelle would finally have a normal life. He knew it wasn't easy for her to have someone protecting her, and it wasn't easy for him to worry about her getting hurt.

Although the stunt when she attacked Mindy could have gone two ways. Isabelle was lucky but not smart in attacking a crazed person. Even though she was taking self-defense lessons, she was still a small woman.

They were most certainly having a heart-to-heart. And more self-defense classes and maybe even teaching her to shoot.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

The police cars and EMTs finally left, their flashing lights lighting up the woods. Isabelle felt relieved. Dawn was fast approaching, painting the sky with various shades of gray. Isabelle couldn't decide if she was tired enough to sleep or if she should just stay up. They were on their way to Will's house. What a night it'd been.

It was a relief to know Mindy was finally in police custody. It must have been Mindy driving by the house so many times. Isabelle wished she had said something earlier when she felt she was being spied on.

She and Will were okay, except for his balls. Will hadn't complained, but Mindy had kicked him pretty hard. The lingering smell of gasoline would be gone in a couple of hours. The firefighters used the hose to dilute it. Fortunately, only a little got on the house. It was mainly on the ground.

They'd go back to the house tomorrow and see what damage there was, if any. Since there was nothing more to be done about it tonight, Isabelle didn't want to disturb Felicia and Colt until a reasonable hour.

Will's voice interrupted her thoughts. "I need some sleep." He looked over at her. "You do too."

Isabelle nodded in agreement. "First, I'm going to take a shower. I'll call Felicia later."

"A shower sounds good." He wiggled his brows. "We can shower together and save water."

“You’re kidding, right? You want sex after the night we’ve had? Don’t your—” She pointed at his crotch. “Don’t your—”

“Balls.” Will chuckled. “You can say balls, Isabelle. Yes, my balls hurt. I didn’t say we were having sex, just showering.” Then he got serious. “And don’t think I’ve forgotten that you and I need to talk about what went down tonight.”

Isabelle grimaced. She had hoped Will would forget about the talk, and her stomach churned with anxiety. He wasn’t happy that she hadn’t listened to him. But hey, she saved his life. The self-defense lessons came in handy. That had to count for something, didn’t it? Guess she’d find out.

* * *

RAYS OF SUNSHINE streamed through the window, disrupting his sleep. Will slowly opened his eyes, feeling a mix of exhaustion and relief. It felt like they had just gotten into bed, but he couldn’t sleep any longer. He glanced over at Isabelle, who was lightly snoring, and thanked the good Lord they were safe—last night had been a nightmare. The events of last night were still fresh in his mind.

They could have been burned alive if his Spidey senses hadn’t kicked in. Will shuddered. For so many years, he only had himself to protect. Now, he had a woman he loved who seemed to attract trouble, which made it more important to be alert. Dragging himself out of bed, he stretched his tired muscles, reached for his phone, and made his way to the kitchen.

He dialed Chase to inform him of what had happened. Then called Colt. The phone rang once, twice, and three times before Colt answered.

“This better be important,” Colt growled. Will felt bad. He’d woken him up—tough.

The conversation was brief. Colt was glad he called and relieved that they were safe. He said he’d tell Felicia when she got up and meet them at the house in a couple of hours.

That worked for Will. He had things to do around the farm before he brought Isabelle home.

He also had to have that conversation with Isabelle. He was proud of her for using new self-defense skills. However, there was a distinction between self-defense and combat—and she wasn't a fighter. Mindy had about six inches on Isabelle. It was a good thing Mindy wasn't thinking clearly, or Isabelle could have been hurt or worse.

In a way, he was impressed with Isabelle's ninja skills, not that he would tell her that. There was no way that she was strong enough to be in a real fight—a fight to the death. That she even remembered how she surprised Titus and used that skill on Mindy was downright clever. He wondered if Isabelle had thought about that ahead of time or just did it. He thought about the latter. You would get hurt if you had to stop and think about what to do in situations.

“Hey.”

A soft voice behind him pulled him from his thoughts, followed by the warmth of arms around his waist and soft lips kissing his neck.

He turned and pulled Isabelle into his arms. “Hey, yourself.” Will looked at the dark shadows under her eyes. “How did you sleep?”

“Like the dead.” Her eyes widened, and a small smile tugged at the corner of her mouth. “Thankfully, we're not dead. It was a deep sleep for ...” She looked at her watch. “Two whole hours.”

Two hours. It seemed like that was a lifetime ago.

“Have you contacted Colt yet?” she asked. “Felicia is going to be so happy this is behind us.”

“Yes, I called when I got up. We'll meet them there later.”

“Do you think we can move back into the house?” She looked so hopeful; he didn't want to give her false promises.

Will ran his fingers through his hair and took his time answering. “I don't know about moving back. We'll check

with the fire department.”

Seeing the disappointment in her eyes, he added, “I don’t think there’ll be a problem. Gasoline evaporates pretty fast, and Mindy didn’t use that much.”

“Why don’t I make you some breakfast? I make a mean omelet,” Isabelle said. “I’m sure you have things to do outside, and I can help.”

“Breakfast would be great.” He leaned over to kiss her, then kissed her again. If only they didn’t have to go back to the house, he would have led her back to bed. However, running a farm meant he didn’t always get to do what he wanted. “I don’t have much to do. You don’t have to help. Besides, Jason will be here soon.”

They worked comfortably in the kitchen. Will chopped. Isabelle beat the eggs and toasted bread. Being in the kitchen with her felt good, and Will thought it would be nice to do it more often. Maybe every morning? However, Isabelle wasn’t ready. She didn’t have to say anything. He just knew.

A knock on the door disrupted Will’s domestic thoughts. It was Jason, and he was early.

“Hi. I wasn’t expecting you here,” Jason said with concern in his eyes. “Is everything okay?”

“Jason. Come in. Have breakfast with us,” Isabelle said.

“I don’t want to interrupt.” Jason shuffled his feet, and a flush appeared on his cheeks. He looked at Will as if for confirmation.

“Come in. Pull up a chair,” Will said. “Isabelle’s made her world-famous omelet, and there’s plenty.”

Breakfast was quick. Isabelle was eager to get back to the house. After hearing what happened, Jason insisted he didn’t need Will’s help on the farm and that he’d call Steve and John to help him. Will was relieved. He hated to leave all the work to Jason, but he needed to be there for Isabelle. Also, he wanted an update on Mindy and the potential damage to Isabelle’s house.

Not for the first time, he wondered if he could convince Isabelle to come live with him. Will knew she wouldn't leave Felicia or her business. He also knew it would thrill Colt to have Felicia live with him.

As for Isabelle's business, he could build a shop for her on the property that would be bigger than what the women had now. And she'd have the herb garden she needed for her soaps.

Now he only had to convince Isabelle to move in with him.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

Isabelle barely waited for Will to put the truck in park before she jumped out. Her heart pounded in her chest.

Felicia and Colt pulled in right behind them. Felicia rushed over to Isabelle and hugged her tightly. Then the tears started flowing. The two men awkwardly observed them for a minute before walking around to the back of the house. Smart move on their part.

“Oh, my God. Isabelle, are you all right?” Felicia stuttered through tears only after she patted Isabelle down, looking for injuries.

Isabelle mustered a slight chuckle. “Yes, sweetie, I’m fine.”

“You have to tell us all about last night.”

Isabelle didn’t want to relive anything about last night, but Felicia had a right to know what happened. She closed and opened her eyes. “Come on. Let’s find the guys and talk in the kitchen.”

They walked around back. The backyard looked the same. Their new shed was unscathed, and leaves rustled in the breeze; it was peaceful except for a little patch of burnt grass. Colt and Will were already in the house. Felicia looked around. “I don’t smell anything.”

“Me neither.” She shrugged. “Maybe we can move back.” Isabelle started for the back door, but Felicia’s arm stopped her.

“Is ...” She took a deep breath. “Isabelle, this isn’t the best time, but before we go in, I want you to know Colt wants me to move in with him.” She looked at Isabelle’s face for a reaction.

“Today?” Isabelle wasn’t sure her heart could handle that.

“No, not today, but sometime soon.”

Isabelle felt a tear slide down her cheek. “Oh, Felicia. I’m so happy for you. You’re good for Colt. Maybe someday, you’ll be my sister for real.”

Felicia hugged Isabelle. “I’d love that. I told Colt I’m not ready to move out yet. We still have a business to run and a lot of things to discuss.”

“Good. I’m not ready to let you go, even though it’s time,” Isabelle replied.

Having Felicia move out wasn’t the end of the world. They could still run their business, make and sell soap together. The only issue would be one of money. She couldn’t afford to live here on her own unless something big, like a huge order, well, several huge orders came in. However, she was happy for Felicia and Colt.

The sound of a car coming down the road interrupted their conversation. She heard the sound of an engine being turned off and a car door opening.

“I wonder who that is,” Felicia asked.

“Let’s go in. Whoever it is will be coming in through the front.”

Walking into the house, they heard a man’s voice greeting Colt and Will. It didn’t sound familiar, and Isabelle wondered if it was the landlord. That would be sweet—after being almost killed and then to be kicked out of their home. Where would she live? Felicia would go to Colt’s apartment, and she was happy for them. She was. But that would leave her life in limbo. Will never mentioned her living with him. *Suck it up, buttercup.*

A dark-haired man was in the living room talking to Will and Colt. Not the landlord, thankfully.

“Isabelle,” said Will. “I don’t think you’ve met Austin Peters. Austin is with the fire department, and I asked him to come over.”

A dark-haired man stepped forward. “Pleased to meet you two, finally.”

“Were you here last night?” asked Isabelle. He didn’t look familiar, but then again, she wouldn’t recognize anyone from last night. Besides the fact everyone was in their uniforms, it was dark, and she was scared and trying hard not to be killed.

Austin shook his head. “No. I was off. Colt asked me to stop by and look around. Since there was no fire, the fire investigator isn’t involved.” He sniffed the air. “I don’t smell any gasoline. I recommended to Colt and Will that they dig up, bag, and dispose of the contaminated soil at a waste facility.”

Isabelle’s shoulders slumped.

Great, one more job to do. She and Felicia were behind making soap. Will was missing time on his farm, and Colt probably had a backlog of cars to work on. Crap. She was still the same fuckup she was when she left Georgia.

* * *

WILL LISTENED INTENTLY to Austin’s advice. Digging up the contaminated soil would take no time. The gasoline smell was gone. It disappointed him a little that Isabelle would return to her house instead of being ensconced in his, but he was working on that.

He and Isabelle had the talk before they left his house this morning. He’d been firm about her listening to him in an emergency. Isabelle had tried to tell him that she was only helping, but Will stayed firm, reminding her this was what he was trained to do and if he had to worry about what she was doing, he wouldn’t be able to do his job. Isabelle didn’t like what he was saying but said she understood. Time would tell.

Will's gaze shifted to Isabelle, and his heart broke. She looked so beaten and discouraged. What was going on in her mind?

Everything was good. Mindy tried to set the house on fire and was caught. No one from the mob was chasing Isabelle. The soap business was doing well as far as he knew, and she was happy with him, he hoped—no, he knew.

This was a new beginning for her, for them. Somehow, he needed to find out what was wrong and fix it. He shouldn't, but he was a guy. A guy who fixed problems. But wasn't that what women told men when they shared their problems? *Just listen. Don't try to fix it.*

The hell with that.

He'd have to be sneaky, but no way was he going to let this compassionate, joyful, free spirit be sad. She was the light to his darkness and had been through a lot these past months.

He had to do something to make her happy again.

CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

What to do? Isabelle put on a good face, but from some of the comments she'd made in the past couple of days, Will could tell she felt overwhelmed. He wanted to do something fun with her, lift her spirits.

She wasn't into fancy dining. Lucky's and Fat Jack's were out. They were bars. He wanted something else, something Isabelle would love and never think to do.

He asked Joy for suggestions. She thought about it and got back to him this morning. The Redfish Lounge, she said. "It'll be fun. Trust me."

And Joy added that having friends there would make it more enjoyable.

So here they stood at 8:30 p.m. on a Friday night outside the Redfish Lounge downtown. The evening was cool, and the palm trees lining the path to the lounge swayed in a light breeze. The girls had all dressed up and looked festive. Even the guys wore long pants and shirts. Isabelle looked stunning in a black sleeveless sparkly dress that shimmered when she moved.

As they reached the lounge's double red doors, Will was a little put off by the bouncer checking IDs and the line to get in. Was this a pickup joint? A bar? Joy had told him little of the place, just that it would be a fun evening. They got to the end of the line, but it moved swiftly.

Colt, Finn, Liam, and some of the other guys came, as well as Felicia, Joy, Mallory, Dawn, Naomi, and Nicki. It was a

good-size group.

Will was concerned that it would be a stuffy restaurant, but no. The room was dimly lit with starry projections on the walls and ceiling, and each white-clothed table had a single lit candle.

“Oh, this is so different,” exclaimed Joy. “The last few times we’ve been here, they’ve had neon lights everywhere.”

A lot of people were already seated and eating and drinking. They found two large empty tables by the side wall and put them together with the hostess’s help. Large potted plants were placed around the tables and walls, creating a pleasing atmosphere. Isabelle’s eyes were everywhere. “Will, have you been here before?” she asked.

He shook his head. “No, but Joy promised me this would be fun.”

She raised her brows and giggled. “Okaaay.”

There was activity on the stage as workers placed a large sign that read, “Karaoke tonight, 9 p.m.”

Will groaned inwardly. Was singing to strangers Joy’s idea of a good time? He had no idea what Isabelle thought of karaoke. He’d play it by ear, but they were out of there if she didn’t like it. Colt was sitting next to him and whispered, “This is so not Felicia’s thing.”

The server came. They ordered drinks and several hors d’oeuvres for the table. The women chatted animatedly. The men stared at each other, their faces blank, probably wishing they were somewhere else like he was. Finally, the drinks arrived: frozen concoctions for the women and whiskey and beer for the guys.

Isabelle took a sip of her mango margarita and closed her eyes. “Whoa, brain freeze.”

“It’s delicious, isn’t it?” Joy asked.

Isabelle nodded. Lights illuminated the stage, and a man came out. “Welcome to karaoke night at the Redfish. Enjoy!”

Several people got up and sang. They were okay. Will prayed Isabelle wouldn't ask him to get up and sing. He wondered if she liked doing this, but it was too late now.

“Get ready, ladies. We're next!” said Joy. Except for Felicia and Isabelle, the other women had been here before.

Chase leaned over and addressed the group. “I'm not getting up.”

Will's sentiment exactly.

Joy stood, and the women followed suit. They sang a couple of songs with enthusiasm. Joy did a solo. Will looked at Liam, who shook his head and rolled his eyes. She was awful. Will chuckled.

What surprised him was how much Isabelle and Felicia were enjoying this. The two women were born performers. They were animated, laughing, and engaging the audience.

“Okay, folks. This is our last song, and Isabelle is going to take the lead,” Joy announced.

The music began when Isabelle got to the mike, and she belted the lyrics to “Proud Mary.” The music grew louder. Isabelle started shaking her body. The girls were in sync behind her. People in the audience were cheering and clapping. Felicia came to the mike and sang with Isabelle. It was wild on the stage.

Will looked at Colt, who was dumbfounded. The women were fabulous. He didn't know either could sing. They were naturals on the stage and loved every minute of it.

The song ended, and the women bowed to thunderous applause. They were all smiles when they came back to the table.

Isabelle's face was flushed, and her eyes sparkled. “Oh my gosh, that was so much fun.”

Will leaned over to kiss her. “I wish I'd known I was with a rock star.”

She lightly tapped his shoulder. “Oh, you.”

The group sat for about another hour until Chase and Naomi stood and announced they had to leave. Naomi had a test the next day and didn't want to stay late.

Colt and Felicia were next. No excuses. But the look in Colt's eyes when he looked at Felicia was anything but pure.

Will wanted to take Isabelle home. He wanted to slowly remove her sparkly dress and the black bra and thong panties she'd put on. He felt his cock getting hard. She was having so much fun that he didn't want to spoil it for her. That is until she gave him a sultry look that told him she was ready. Oh yeah! He knew that look.

Isabelle stood and hugged the women goodbye. She took his hand, kissed his cheek, and they walked out to a cool evening.

"That was so much fun. Thank you."

"Sweetheart, you don't need to thank me. I'm just happy you enjoyed yourself," he replied.

"Hmmm. I believe there is more fun coming later," she said. "Am I right?"

"You're right, as usual." Will was thrilled they were on the same page. He couldn't wait to get to Isabelle's house and make love.

CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

Coming off the weekend's highs and lows, Will was excited as he made his way to command central on Monday night. Chase called the meeting to review past assignments and update them on new ones. Will had a hunch he was up next for a job. He wasn't sure how he felt about that. On the one hand, he loved protecting those who needed it. On the other, he didn't want to leave Isabelle.

Parking his truck in the lot, he saw most of the guys were already there, including Colt. Zach was walking over from his cabin, and they entered together.

"Sorry, I missed karaoke Friday night," Zach apologized and shrugged. "It's not really my thing."

"I hear you on that," Will replied. "The girls had a great time, and I discovered Isabelle can sing."

"Yeah." Zach chuckled. "I heard she's like the new Tina Turner."

"Damn straight."

Will was still in awe of Isabelle and Felicia's performance. They had to have done that before, because the two of them were so in sync. Colt had been surprised that quiet Felicia sang and had moves. Felicia and Isabelle shook their booties and shimmered across the stage like pros while they belted out the lyrics.

He and Zach followed the dimly lit hallway to the library where the guys met.

A while back, Will and Liam had talked about the concept for this building. Liam told him that when he met Joy, she was fostering dogs and always dreamed of a place to train them to become companion and therapy dogs. When she inherited the house, land and some money, her dream came true. Paws for Caring was established and also offered training classes for other dogs. He'd been here when Melissa had classes; you could hear more barking than human voices. Chase was thrilled to be named director and was thrilled to be able to provide a safe place for veterans who worked at the Brotherhood Alliance to live as well as find funding for the Brotherhood.

Will knew that Liam had issues with dogs, and that was another reason the center was established. Joy could get her dog fix there.

Conversations faded as Will and Zach walked into the conference room.

Chase was sitting in his usual spot at the head of the table. The regular faces were there, including the newcomer, Ford McCallum. He hadn't spoken much with Ford. The man was reserved.

Chase began the meeting by discussing recent projects and giving out new assignments.

Will was assigned a weeklong job in Jacksonville. His mind wandered as he reviewed everything he had to do on the farm. He hated leaving Isabelle but felt better that Isabelle and Felicia's security would be in Colt's capable hands. Hopefully, there would be no issues. Although if there were, the Brotherhood would step in.

They said good night, and Colt and Will walked out together. It was a clear night, and the full moon hung low on the horizon, casting a soft glow on the landscape. A flutter of wings overhead startled Will.

"Good time Friday night," said Colt. "I'd forgotten Isabelle and Felicia used to participate in theater in high school."

“Ah. Isabelle forgot to mention that.” Will chuckled. “They were something, all right.”

“I’ve put in another call to the sheriff in Sandy Creek.”

Will turned to stare at Colt. His heart was racing. “Is there something I should be worried about?”

Colt shook his head. “Not that I know of. I just want to follow up on any rumors or rumblings there since my last call.”

“Keep me posted.”

“Will do.”

They shook hands, each going their own way.

Will had to leave the day after next, and he was eager to see Isabelle before he left.

He hoped everything was calm in Georgia and Isabelle had been forgotten.

* * *

“YOU’RE BACK!” Isabelle jumped into his arms and plastered Will’s face with kisses. “I’ve missed you so much.”

He had been away for a week. While it had been an easy security job—guarding a controversial CEO—Will had reservations upon hearing about the CEO’s biased views on life. However, the man turned out to be easygoing, even if he was a little peculiar. He mainly kept to himself, and each day was filled with meetings. The CEO went to bed early and got up early. Whatever the man was expecting to happen on this trip never materialized.

The job finished early, and Will drove straight to Isabelle’s house. He had to see her, touch her, make sure she was all right.

She and Felicia were packaging soaps in the shed. He watched them through the window, talking and laughing, and loved that they felt carefree and safe. When he opened the

door, Isabelle screamed and jumped him. They stopped what they were doing and went into the house. Felicia put on a pot of coffee and brought out some pastries.

“Tell me what’s been going on,” he asked Isabelle.

“Not much.” She reached for a pastry and took a bite. “Work, farmers’ market, work. Oh, the girls and I went to Lucky’s one night.”

Will couldn’t help noticing she hadn’t mentioned Colt’s name. Had he not been watching them?

Isabelle’s eyes twinkled. “And before you ask, Colt was our shadow at Lucky’s. I think he just went there to see Felicia, though.”

Good. At least Will didn’t have to worry about that. Everything was looking brighter with all the drama behind them.

Maybe now he’d talk to Isabelle about the future—a future with him.

Colt had confided in him that he asked Felicia to move in with him. She was agreeable but informed Colt that she wouldn’t move out until Isabelle was settled.

Will was going to do everything he could to make sure Isabelle was settled and permanent in his life. He and Colt would both get what they wanted in life.

CHAPTER FIFTY

Ricky clenched his fist in rage. He was tired of following Isabelle, and tired of driving by her house, and especially tired of listening to Antonio's constant gripes about the cabin being invaded by small animals. It was Antonio's fault for not bagging up his garbage—served him right. Not Ricky's problem. Antonio had always been a pig.

But that wasn't Ricky's only problem. His problem was completing this job. He was sure Isabelle had spotted him staring at her when he drove by a couple of times. He caught her staring at his car and tried to duck, hoping she didn't recognize him. If she looked at the cameras, he wondered if they would catch whoever was driving by. If so, he was a dead duck.

Eddie told him they had a week to wind it up, that he was tired of waiting for his money, and if Ricky and Antonio couldn't handle one petite woman, he'd make them pay. Eddie wasn't talking about money, either.

Sweat dripped down Ricky's forehead, and he wiped his brow with his sleeve. Worrying about the what-ifs was driving him to drink. Ricky was tired of this town, tired of listening to Antonio whine, tired of Eddie's threats, and tired of seeing happy people while he was so miserable.

Maybe tonight, he'd take a chance and drive by Isabelle's house in the hope she was alone, then he'd visit the Olde Haywood Inn and Out. It was off the main road in the poorer section of town and posed as a dive bar up front. The inside was a mishmash of unmatched chairs, rickety tables, and a bar

counter you didn't want to touch, let alone order a drink from. The restroom smelled like piss and vomit.

However, behind the bar was a trailer park where all the action was and where he would head after he had a couple of whiskeys. The trailer park contained about ten trailers, all in various states of disrepair, better than the bar but not by much. Each one housed two women who worked as bar staff. All were available for whatever pleasure a man could imagine, and he was imagining lots.

Ricky visited once before and fucked a skinny woman named Gypsy. Not her real name, of course. She wasn't bad-looking and didn't talk much—although the only thing he wanted her mouth for was sucking his cock. She was up for whatever he suggested. Good times, that one. Besides, he was tired of his hand. Time for some real pussy. The only thing he needed besides courage to visit her were condoms. Lots of condoms.

Tomorrow, he'd collect Antonio and go into town. He had a great idea for kidnapping Isabelle that she'd never see coming, and they needed to scope out the area and make a final plan.

Then they'd deliver her to Eddie and get out of Dodge.

CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

Will's phone rang abruptly, pulling him from a sweet dream involving him and Isabelle naked. He gently untangled himself from the sheets and Isabelle. The sun was barely up, and he'd hoped to stay in bed longer. He dislodged his arm around her waist. Isabelle emitted a soft protest as he slipped out of bed.

He was expecting a call from Jason about the gardens. When he looked at the caller ID, he was surprised. It displayed Colt's name. Why was Colt calling him? Everything had been so peaceful since Mindy was arrested.

Will didn't want to wake Isabelle. He walked into the kitchen.

"Yo."

"Will, meet me at the Red Rooster in an hour."

"Hello to you too," Will said sarcastically. "What the hell is going on?"

Colt sighed audibly. "I really need to talk to you." Before Will could confirm, Colt hung up.

Crap. There went his early morning nookie and probably his plans for the day. Nothing good ever came out of an early phone call asking someone to meet them. Will decided not to wake Isabelle. He'd write her a note telling her he'd be back and made a pot of coffee to fortify himself.

He stood looking out the kitchen window, worrying about what Colt had to say. He heard footsteps behind him and

turned. Isabelle had pulled on a robe. She was yawning, looking sleepy and well-fucked.

“Morning.” She yawned again. “What was that about?”

Will debated telling her Colt called. A gut feeling had him thinking it wasn’t good news. Isabelle probably didn’t need to hear it until he and Colt spoke.

He handed her a cup, and she gave him a tender kiss on the cheek.

“I have to get to the house and help Jason,” he lied. “What are you up to today?”

“Felicia and I are making soap. We have a delivery to Black Pointe coming up.”

Right. Two Fishes Soap Works business had grown steadily since the craft show, attracting new customers.

“I need to shower. Do you want to stay at my house tonight?”

She put the cup on the table. “Hmmm.” She looked him up and down. “Maaaybe.”

Pulling her close, he kissed her hard. “It’s settled then.”

* * *

WILL PULLED into the back parking lot of the Red Rooster Diner. He’d been there several times and loved the ambience and the food. The place looked the same—kitschy mementos, red leather booths reminiscent of the 1950s, tiered pie holders, and heavenly scents of bacon. However, his stomach was churning.

He spotted Colt in a corner booth with a cup of coffee and eating a slice of pie.

He slid into the booth. Colt looked over at him and didn’t say a word.

“Can I get you a cup of coffee?” One of the servers stood by the booth. She looked familiar. Maybe she’d waited on him

before.

“That would be great.” He gave her a small smile. She nodded and left.

“What’s going on?” he asked Colt.

Colt wiped his mouth with the paper napkin and leaned forward.

“I spoke to the sheriff in Sandy Creek yesterday.”

Will’s heart sank. This wasn’t good news. “And?”

“I asked him if there had been any gossip about the mob or drugs. He said not that he’d heard.”

“Well, that’s good news. Right?”

Colt shook his head and sighed heavily. “Then I asked about Serena.”

No. No. No. Will didn’t want to hear anymore. He swallowed hard. “What did he say?”

“They found Serena’s body dumped in a shallow grave in the woods. She’d been tortured before being shot.”

Will’s chest tightened as Colt continued. He leaned back in the booth, running his fingers through his hair. He couldn’t process what Colt was telling him. All he heard was Isabelle was in danger. Again.

He cleared his voice. “What else did he say?”

“Not much. She was naked. The coroner didn’t find any DNA.”

Will stared at Colt. Voices and the clinking of dishes faded into the background. A cup was placed in front of him, and he was startled. It was just his cup of coffee. He took a swallow of the hot liquid.

“Suspects?”

Colt shook his head, his expression grim. “None. They’re treating it as a homicide. Serena’s apartment had been trashed, but the police found nothing of importance. Upon talking to a neighbor, they confirmed Serena kept company with some

lowlifes and heard rumors she was dealing drugs. The police are checking into their stories. They have some idea who might be in this mob, but the sheriff wouldn't share their names, claiming it was an ongoing investigation."

Names would have helped. "We need to call a meeting of the Brotherhood. The women need protection until we get this under wraps." He wasn't telling Colt anything he didn't know. And here he hoped Isabelle was safe. But as usual, when you dealt with slime buckets, the shit just kept on giving.

"What'd you want to tell Isabelle and Felicia?" asked Will.

Colt pinched his lips together and gathered his thoughts.

"I'd like to wait until we meet. No sense in having the girls worry until we know what is going on. We've already asked for protection when Mindy was a threat. This time, it's big." He scrubbed a hand over his head. "I'm sure Chase will want the Brotherhood to help again. We will probably need Tex's help this time."

If Chase and the Brotherhood would not help, it would be just him and Colt. No way was he letting either woman get hurt.

CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

Colt and Will left the Red Rooster Diner with a plan to call Chase. However, when Colt called the center, he found out that Chase and Naomi were away for an overnight and turned their phones off. No way were Will and he getting a meeting of the Brotherhood today.

The happy feeling Will woke up to had now turned into the black hole of despair. The early morning sky that had been sunny and bright was now dark gray and bleak. A fat raindrop hit him in the eye as he opened his car door—perfect.

Will was furious, but as he learned in the military, if Plan A doesn't work out, go to Plan B, C, D—whatever.

Something had to be done about the Brotherhood's chain of command. If Chase was incapacitated, who would be next in line? One didn't cut off the head of the organization without having a backup. He and Colt both knew Tex, but the ask should rightfully come from Chase. It was a fucking mess.

Their immediate plan was that Isabelle would stay over at Will's tonight, and Colt already planned on staying at the house with Felicia. The women were as safe as they were going to be for now.

Will was needed on the farm, and he hated to miss more work. He called Jason and asked him to get John and Steve to help. Thankfully, Jason had no problem working without him. They would be working in the sheep shed today, preparing for the ewes that would arrive in a couple of weeks. He also called

Zach and asked if he was available tomorrow to keep an eye on the girls. He was and didn't ask questions, which was good.

Colt was the only mechanic at his garage and swamped with repair jobs. He volunteered to close the shop for a day or two, but that made little sense. Any business that was shuttered too long went out of business. Will's time was more flexible, but even though he had commitments, he couldn't pass on security to another teammate.

Will drove back to Isabelle's. His heart was racing faster than the windshield wipers. Thunder boomed overhead, and streaks of lightning lit up the dark sky. The heavens opened up, and the car's wipers barely kept the rain off. His fingers drummed on the steering wheel. He could not keep still.

Reaching her house, he pulled into the driveway and saw that her van was gone. Inwardly groaning, Will flung open his door and sprinted to the porch. The front door was unlocked. Crap. so much for security measures. He'd have to talk to the women about that. He walked in.

"Isabelle? Felicia? Is anyone here?"

Felicia emerged from the kitchen, wiping her hands on a towel. "Hey, Will. Is everything okay?" she asked.

"Yeah." He rubbed the back of his neck. "Yeah, everything is okay."

"Are you all right?" She looked at him quizzically. "Isabelle just left to go into town. Was she expecting you?"

"Hmmm. I'm fine, and no, she wasn't expecting me." Will felt a rush of panic. "I wasn't needed on the farm, so I thought I'd hang out here."

"Well, come into the kitchen. I'll put on a pot of coffee, or would you like something else?"

"Coffee's fine." He followed Felicia into the kitchen and watched as she made the coffee. "So, where did she go?"

She paused and shrugged before placing the cups on the counter. "I'm not really sure."

He dialed Isabelle's phone. Crap, it went to voice mail. Where was she? Could she have left at a worse time? He cursed his timing and cursed the mob. Even though he knew it wasn't fair, he cursed Chase for leaving and having fun. Then Will felt terrible about that. Chase and Naomi were entitled to have some alone time and fun. It was just bad timing. Will debated about calling Colt, but what could he do? Haywood Lake was rather big. He'd be wasting his time looking for Isabelle.

"Here you go." Felicia placed a cup of coffee in front of him and one for herself. "I'm sure she'll be back soon if you want to wait."

Oh, he was going to wait. That woman was never leaving his sight again if he could help it.

* * *

IT'D BEEN over a half hour since Will arrived at Isabelle's house, and anxiety was building in his chest. He called Isabelle several times, but her phone still went to voice mail. Felicia kept offering him coffee, but his stomach was too sour to drink it, and his heart pounded like a racehorse's.

He'd been trying to keep up his end of the conversation, but it wasn't easy. By the third time he called Isabelle, Felicia frowned and asked if something was wrong.

"No, nothing at all," he lied.

Will wasn't going to worry her. Not until he spoke to Colt and Chase. But he was worried. He shifted in his seat. Where the hell was Isabelle? Why wasn't her phone on? Had the mob found her? Hurt her? Fuck. His brain hurt. And worst of all, he couldn't leave Felicia alone in the house to find Isabelle.

"Will," Felicia said, "something is bothering you. What is it?"

He drummed his fingers on the table. "I'm just concerned because I can't get in touch with her. What if something happened?"

“Maybe her phone died. Sometimes she forgets to charge it up.”

Will nodded. “Maybe.” He picked up his cup and took a swallow of—damn—cold coffee. Yuck. Could things get any worse?

Just then, he heard the sound of a vehicle pulling into the driveway. Will’s heart skipped a beat as he headed for the front door. Felicia followed him.

“She’s back,” said Felicia. Isabelle got out of her van, and Felicia patted his shoulder. “See, I told you she was all right.”

Isabelle entered the house, saw Will, and gave him a big smile, which turned into a frown. “What’s wrong?”

“Oh, Will was worried when he couldn’t reach you,” said Felicia.

“Oh dear,” Isabelle replied. “I turned my phone off by mistake and never looked at it.” She walked over and hugged him. “I’m sorry you were worried.”

He kissed the top of her head and hugged her tight. Will inhaled the lavender and mint shampoo she used and closed his eyes. The day ended well, but it could have gone wrong quickly.

CHAPTER FIFTY-THREE

Chase finally returned on Wednesday, and Colt had reached out to him. The Brotherhood had a meeting tonight. It couldn't have come at a better time. Since he and Colt met at the diner, Will's stomach hadn't stopped churning, and his anxiety levels were off the chart. Isabelle kept giving him the side-eye, but he claimed he was worried about the farm.

The day before, Zach stayed with Isabelle and Felicia under the guise of maintaining the security cameras. They suspected nothing—in fact, they fed and pampered Zach to the extent that Will almost had to throw him out of the house. Tonight, Finn volunteered to keep an eye on them while the Brotherhood met.

These guys! Will was overwhelmed by the help he and Colt were getting.

The men were volunteering hours they weren't getting paid for. He felt like he was back in the military, where his brothers had his back. No questions asked.

Now, he was back at command central. Colt was giving the group an update.

“Let me make sure I have this straight,” said Chase. “You haven't told Isabelle and Felicia that the mob is gunning for them, and that Serena was murdered?”

“No,” Will replied.

“Do you think that's wise? Isn't it a good idea that they need to be more aware of their surroundings and the danger?”

Will shifted in his seat. Had he and Colt made a mistake not telling the women? “We wanted to discuss it with the group before we mentioned it to them,” Will replied.

Will rubbed the back of his neck. Was it stuffy in here, or was it just him?

He had confidence that Chase and the Brotherhood would help, but just talking about the love of his life being targeted by the mob was stressful.

Chase tapped his fingers on the table and looked around. “Does anyone disagree that we should help?”

The tension in the room was palpable until Dex spoke up. “Hell, no,” said Dex, vocalizing how everyone felt. “We protect our own.”

At Dex’s declaration, Will let out a sigh of relief. Beside him, Colt muttered, “Thank God.”

“We’ll make a schedule for security,” Chase said. “Ford and Ryker won’t be back for a few days, and I’ll fill them in when they return. We’ll meet up tomorrow morning. I’ll call Tex. Maybe he can tap into the police files and get the suspects’ names.”

Chase checked his watch and stood. “Nothing else is happening here tonight. Let’s plan on meeting at 10 a.m. tomorrow.”

The men filed out of the room.

Will and Colt walked to their trucks. It was still early; the meeting hadn’t taken very long. Will wanted to be with Isabelle, but he also had to get up before dawn the next morning and do chores before coming to the Brotherhood meeting. He’d been neglecting the farm.

“I’m going to the house to relieve Finn and stay with Felicia,” said Colt. “See you here tomorrow morning. Titus said he’d go to the house tomorrow while we’re meeting, and we can update him after.” He gave Will a reassuring nod as he got into his truck.

Perfect. Will would call Isabelle when he got home. At least he'd hear her voice and sleep better for that.

* * *

WILL SHOWERED and got ready for the Brotherhood meeting. He'd been up since before dawn, feeding the chickens, checking on the sheep barn, and getting the CSA boxes ready. They only had a few customers so far, but the idea was gaining in popularity. He placed the rest of the day's crops in the box and included a couple of bars of the Two Fishes Soap Works soap. Isabelle and Felicia were thrilled to have more exposure for the soap, and the customers who received them were already placing orders. Win-win.

He left after speaking with Jason about what needed to be done. After the meeting, he would spend the night at Isabelle's house. Felicia would stay in town with Colt.

The sun's rays lit up the trees surrounding the center. The parking lot shimmered. Birds were chirping. It was going to be a beautiful day. Will took a deep breath and let it out. There were a couple of trucks and cars, but Colt's wasn't one of them. He and Colt decided they would talk to Isabelle and Felicia after the meeting. They couldn't hide the danger anymore. At least the women would be aware of it.

Will wondered how they would take the news. Somehow, he had a funny feeling that they would push back over security. The last time, Mindy was the issue, and the danger was real and immediate. But to tell them that maybe the mob was looking for them, especially when nothing had happened yet, might be a little dicey. Although mentioning that Serena was killed might make it real for them. *Gah*. Protecting your own was much more complicated than providing security for a stranger.

He and Colt would make it work. They had to.

Will hurried into the center. He smelled the scent of coffee in the kitchen and stopped to get a cup. Then he made his way to the library. Chase was there, as well as Finn and Zach. Titus

volunteered to watch the women since it was important for Will and Colt to be at the meeting.

Chase glanced at him. “We’re waiting on Colt and Ryker, then we’ll start.” He passed a sheet of paper to Will. “This is a tentative schedule. I wasn’t sure what you and Colt were doing with security, so we can work around that.”

“Colt and I are taking turns staying at the house. So it would be better having someone there just during the day,” Will replied. He looked at the schedule. Chase had planned for that.

The men talked a little about what they were doing. Finally, Will heard footsteps and voices. Colt and Ryker were here.

“Take a seat, and we’ll go over the schedule,” said Chase. “I know you would all volunteer for this, but as I told you before, there is money in the budget for everyone to get paid.”

Will looked around the table. Knowing the guys would get paid was a relief. Most of the men had other jobs and the flexibility to leave for a short time; the extra money would come in handy.

Chase was dialing the phone. It rang two times before Tex picked up.

“Mad Dog! Long time no hear. How are you, man?”

Will chuckled. One of these days, he would find out how Chase got his nickname. Not one of the guys ever asked that he knew of.

“I’m fine. Let me put the phone on speaker.” Chase put the phone on the table. “The Brotherhood is meeting, and we have some questions. First off, though, how are Melody and the girls?”

Will remembered hearing about Tex’s friend, now his wife, Melody, disappearing. He crossed the country to find her and fell in love. Then they adopted Akilah from Iraq, and Melody gave birth to a baby girl. Tex was happily married but never said he was too busy or said no to helping anyone from the teams.

“They’re good. The baby is getting so big and almost walking,” he replied. Will could hear the pride in his voice.

“Good to hear,” replied Chase.

“We have a problem here. Will Blake and Colt Zander’s women are in trouble. You remember Will and Colt?”

“Of course,” said Tex. “How can I help?”

Chase hesitated before answering. “It might not be legal.”

“Humph.”

Will mentally laughed. That was Tex’s answer whenever anyone said something silly like “it might not be legal,” etc. Tex was known for doing almost anything for his friends.

“Let’s hear it.”

Chase explained Isabelle and Felicia meeting Serena Parker, then being accused of stealing drugs and money from a mobster in Sandy Creek, Georgia. Serena was dead—brutally murdered. He told him Colt tried to get details from the sheriff, but he was stonewalled.

“We need to identify who these people are before they come looking for the women.”

After a moment of silence, Tex spoke. “Hmmm. So, you want me to hack into the Sandy Creek database for the police report and look for possible suspects’ names?”

“Basically,” Chase replied, then added, “for now, at least.”

“I’ll get back to you.” Tex hung up.

Chase sighed with relief and turned his attention to the group. “Okay then. Hopefully, we’ll have some names soon. In the meantime, review the schedule and coordinate it with Will and Colt. I don’t want to fuck around with this potential threat.”

Will and Colt spent a few minutes reviewing the schedule with the guys. When that was done, it was time to talk to Isabelle and Felicia, and the conversation was not one Will wanted to have. He felt a knot forming in his stomach.

How would they react? He hoped they wouldn't panic and continue with their everyday work. All they had to do was be aware of their surroundings. The guys would do the security.

Mostly he prayed Isabelle wouldn't get it in her head she was a fuckup and run.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FOUR

Will arrived at Isabelle's house before Colt.

He spoke to Titus, who had parked outside the house, and updated him on the meeting. After Titus left, Will made his way to the house.

He cursed under his breath. The front door was unlocked, as usual. He needed to talk to Isabelle and Felicia about that. Although they were outside the city limits, off a less-traveled road, it wasn't safe even when there were no threats. Will heard voices coming from the kitchen, and he walked towards them, his stomach doing somersaults, and he prayed he could hide the fear in his voice.

It wouldn't be easy telling the women that Serena had been murdered and that they needed protection again. This situation was far more serious than the one with Mindy. They were up against men who would kill or beat up anyone—men who liked to hurt.

It was going to be especially difficult since Isabelle already believed she was a screwup. That was so far from the truth. But how could he make her believe she wasn't? He admired Isabelle. She was a good businesswoman. Yes, she was a free spirit. But she was full of imagination, compassionate, loyal and funny and, he couldn't forget, damn sexy.

Will stopped at the kitchen doorway and observed Isabelle and Felicia making soap. They were like a well-oiled pair, almost anticipating what the other was doing. How lucky

Isabelle was to have a lifelong friend and vice versa. She looked so happy and at ease.

They were laughing about something, and Isabelle looked so relaxed. Will hated that he and Colt were going to be the bearers of bad news. She wore a pair of short jean shorts that were ... short ... and a blue striped top that showed off her shoulders. She was barefoot, and darn if he didn't want to throw her over his shoulder, take her to bed, and have his way with her.

He didn't want to ruin this moment by giving them the bad news.

Hopefully, Colt would get here soon so the two could sit the women down and explain how their lives would change until they caught the mobsters.

* * *

THERE WERE many things that Isabelle loved about Felicia. She always had Isabelle's back. She was gentle and thoughtful. And when she allowed herself to let loose, which wasn't often enough, downright funny.

It was a perfect day to make soap, sunny and cool.

Isabelle wanted the work done quickly so she could spend time with Will later. She had missed him last night but understood he needed to work at his business, too.

"Eek!"

Felicia screamed, startling Isabelle, who stopped what she was doing and grabbed the ladle she'd been using to beat whatever scared Felicia. She turned to see Will standing in the doorway, quiet as a mouse.

"Jeez, Will." Felicia gasped, placing her hands over her stomach. "You scared me half to death."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to," Will replied with a hint of a smile. "It fascinates me watching you two work."

Isabelle put down her ladle, went over to Will, cradled his head in her hands, and kissed him. She kissed him like she hadn't seen him in a year. Then he wrapped his arms around her. His tongue sought entrance to her mouth. She opened, and they shared a slow, sensual dance with their tongues.

"Really? Can't you two keep your hands off each other?" Colt's voice broke the moment.

Will let go of Isabelle, and they turned around to look at Colt, who was himself embracing Felicia.

"That's rich coming from you," Isabelle said to her brother and chuckled.

Colt released Felicia and kissed her on the cheek. His brow furrowed. "Has Will mentioned anything to you yet?"

Oh, Isabelle didn't like this. When Colt went all furrowy-brow, something was seriously wrong. Thankfully, it wasn't his mad face, which she usually got when something got screwed up.

"No," answered Will. "I was waiting for you."

"What's wrong?" asked Isabelle. "Did someone get hurt? Die? Tell us."

"Why don't we go into the living room and talk," said Will.

Isabelle mentally shook her head. Talk wasn't good—not good at all. Felicia turned a worried face to Isabelle, her blue eyes wide as she gulped for air.

"Felicia, sweetheart, calm down." Colt put his arms around her, guiding her into the living room. "It's gonna be all right."

Will reached out for Isabelle, who cocked her head. He sighed but wouldn't answer. She took his hand and sat on the couch next to Felicia. Then he settled in the chair across from Colt.

"Spill," Isabelle said.

Colt rubbed his hands over his face. He looked at Will, who gave him a chin-up. Okay then, Colt was going to be the

bearer of bad news.

Colt opened and closed his mouth and took a deep breath. “I won’t sugarcoat the problem. Serena is dead, murdered.”

Felicia gasped.

Colt continued, “The sheriff has some suspects but wouldn’t give us their names, so we have a guy looking into it. We think the mob knows where you live, and the Brotherhood Alliance will protect you.”

Isabelle was astonished that bad news could be told so succinctly in fifteen seconds. She was grateful Colt didn’t drag out his statement. But what did it all mean? The Brotherhood was going to protect them? From whom? From what?

Then it hit her. *Oh my God! Serena is dead. Murdered?*

This was worse than she imagined. What were they going to do? Isabelle glanced over at Felicia, who had her hands over her mouth, breathing heavily.

“Breathe, Felicia,” Isabelle whispered as she put her arm around Felicia’s shoulders. Isabelle looked at Will. His face showed no emotion, nor did Colt’s. This must be how military guys dealt with their emotions. Step back. Take a deep breath. Don’t get involved. Keep moving forward. But she and Felicia weren’t in the military.

Isabelle wanted to run—grab Felicia and run. Somewhere. Anywhere far from here. And here she was again, bringing her mess to Colt, Will, and now the entire Brotherhood Alliance. Not to mention all her girlfriends would know the truth and think she was an ass. Isabelle groaned inwardly.

“Stop!”

Will’s tone exuded authority. “Stop right there, Isabelle. I know what you’re thinking. This has nothing to do with you—you are innocent, and this is not your fault.” He inhaled and blew out his breath. “And you are not running. We are going to stand tall and strong and face this together. Hear me?”

Isabelle couldn’t answer. How did Will know what she was thinking?

“Woman! I asked you if you understood me.” Will’s stern voice jolted her out of her stupor.

Felicia patted Isabelle’s arm. “We’re going to be fine,” she said softly. “I think you need to answer Will. He kinda looks like he’s going to combust.”

Isabelle looked over at Will. He was rigid. Not a muscle was moving. She sighed. “Yes. I understand. We are innocent, and we are not leaving.”

“Good.” Will nodded to himself. “Colt, why don’t you tell the girls what the plan is?”

Colt looked at Isabelle and Felicia. “Are we good here?”

They nodded.

“No more panicking?”

They nodded.

“All right then. As I mentioned, we have a guy who served with the SEALs who has IT skills out the wazoo looking into this. He will try to get names and other pertinent information from Sandy Creek.”

“Hmmm.” Felicia raised her hand. “Colt?”

Colt’s gaze shifted to her, and the corner of his mouth twitched upwards. “Yes, Felicia?”

“What if he can’t get the names? We’ll never know who’s following us.”

“Good question.” Colt thought for a moment. “If we don’t get the names, we’ll still provide security. The mob has to make a move at some point, and the Brotherhood will catch them. Does that answer your question, sweetheart?”

Felicia nodded.

“Continuing on, the Brotherhood will always have someone watching you two except when Will or I are here. If, and that’s a big if, our guy gets the names, we’ll be searching for them,” Colt said.

“Does that mean we’ll never be alone?” asked Isabelle.

“Yes and no,” Will replied. “Colt or I will be with you at night, but the Brotherhood will be around. You won’t see them.”

“You mean like Titus and Finn?” Isabelle asked. Memories of entertaining them in the house flashed through her mind.

Will exhaled and shook his head. “You’re a wiseass. You know it, don’t you?”

Isabelle chuckled and winked. Gotcha!

“It’s up to you whether you want them in the house. The guys don’t care either way. Does that answer your question?”

“I guess so,” Isabelle replied.

Will cocked his head. That was the wrong answer.

“Yes, sir!” She mock-saluted him.

Will just rolled his eyes and let it go.

“How much is this going to cost?” asked Felicia.

“Felicia,” Colt replied gently, “we told you the last time that the Brotherhood has deep pockets for this kind of thing. However, you are family. We take care of our own, which means you two don’t have to worry about money. You also don’t have to worry about the logistics of the security detail. That’s my responsibility.”

“Oh,” Felicia whispered.

Colt slapped his thighs. “I have to get back to the garage. Will said he’d stay until tomorrow. Someone else will be here during the day, and I’ll stay tomorrow night.”

Felicia followed him to the door, and they stood outside talking for a few minutes. Isabelle stared at Will.

“This sucks.”

“Yeah, it does.” Will stood and opened his arms. “Come here, sweetheart. I really need a hug.”

“Hmmm.” She stepped into his arms. “Just a hug?”

Will nuzzled her ear. “Later, I’ll show you what else I need.”

“It’s a date.” Isabelle smiled and kissed his cheek. “Well, bodyguard, follow me into the kitchen. I still have work to do. You can watch us make soap and earn your keep.”

Isabelle turned to go into the kitchen. She didn’t want Will to see how upset she was. It wasn’t his fault. She couldn’t shake the failure she made of her life, no matter what Will thought.

CHAPTER FIFTY-FIVE

It was taking longer than Will expected for Tex to get back to them. Chase was giving Tex a few days before he touched base with him again.

The only thing going according to plan was the security detail. He and Colt took turns staying at Isabelle's house rather than schlepping one woman or the other to their house. It was easier for everyone. The team took four-hour shifts during the day and were invited into the house each time.

Surprisingly, the girls loved having the company despite Isabelle's initial feelings about having someone around twenty-four seven. And the guys? Well, what was not to love? The girls fed the guys, made them feel at home, and talked to them. They even took them on field trips to Spiritual Bliss and Petals to Go, and Isabelle and Felicia's girlfriends stopped over.

Saturday was the farmers' market. Will broached the subject of the women not going. He was unpleasantly surprised by the pushback.

Isabelle explained to him that a good portion of their income came from the farmers' market. They couldn't afford not to go. Plus, it was good exposure.

Right. Exposure. That was what Will was afraid of. Isabelle made a good point that they could set up their tents beside each other. That way, he would be able to watch out for them. It was a compromise but a decent one.

So he had two days to worry about the market.

* * *

RICKY DROVE by Isabelle's house a couple of times. There were houses up and down the street, so he didn't do it often to look out of place, but no one could say for sure that he didn't live on the street.

His initial plan was to kidnap Isabelle at home. It was usually just the two women. But for the past few days and nights, an extra truck had been in the driveway. He also noticed some muscular men going in and out of the house. Even when the women went out, they went together with a man. It didn't seem like the women were hookers, so the only other reason was somehow, they had security. The house was out. He and Antonio were running out of time.

Eddie called last night and told Ricky, enough fooling around. Get Isabelle to Georgia now. Time was up. Jacko would arrive next week, and he needed the money now.

Antonio and he had come up with a backup plan that might work. They just had to be smart about it. Ricky found a dealer who had no problems getting him what he wanted. No questions asked. They were ready. Well, as ready as they were going to be.

They had come up with a Plan B, since kidnapping the women from the house wasn't panning out. That was the only plan they had now. It had to work.

* * *

THE SKY WAS overcast Saturday morning, with rain and high winds predicted for later in the day. Whoever was in charge of the market decided not to cancel.

Will and Jason staked out their site earlier and were in the process of putting up Isabelle's tent. Will put it in his truck last night to make sure they got an adjoining site.

“We’re here,” sang Felicia just after the tent was up. “Thanks for doing this.” She looked around the market. “It looks like it’s going to be full of vendors today.” She unclasped the sides of a table.

Isabelle followed with baskets of soap. “Good morning, you two. After we’re finished, how about getting some breakfast? I’ve been thinking about Sal’s Breakfast Burritos all night.”

“Sounds good. Jason just went to get another basket of vegetables from the truck,” said Will. “Can I help carry something for you?”

“Only if you let us buy breakfast,” said Felicia.

“Deal.” Will was starving; he sure wasn’t passing up a free meal. They spent the next fifteen minutes setting up and still had a good half hour before the market opened. Sal’s Breakfast Burrito won, and they found an empty table.

“Oh, my goodness, this is delicious,” said Felicia as she took a bite of her burrito.

“What kind did you get?” asked Jason.

She wiped her mouth with a napkin. “Sausage, eggs, cheese, and fresh avocado salsa. Sal makes his own avocado salsa, spicy but not too spicy.”

“So, what do you two have planned for the rest of the day?” asked Will.

Isabelle smiled. “Depends on who’s babysitting us. We might make more soap or brownies. Maybe an apple pie.”

“You’re evil.” Will laughed. Brownies and apple pie were his favorite. One of the guys was going to get first dibs.

“Who’s coming this afternoon?” asked Felicia.

Will tapped his fingers on the table. “Finn, if I’m not mistaken.”

“I’ll make sure Finn doesn’t eat all the brownies and pie,” Isabelle said. She started chuckling to herself, and Felicia joined in.

Will looked at Jason. “Now you see what I have to put up with.”

Jason rolled his eyes. They finished breakfast and got coffee to go. The air was thick with humidity. It would be a rough afternoon if the weather forecast was correct. Hopefully, they’d sell out, and there’d be little to bring home.

They got back to their tents just as the market opened. There were more people than on a typical morning. Will guessed the impending storm was the reason. Get in early, get out before the rain starts.

The sky was blackish gray at noon, and they could hear thunder in the distance. Vendors were hurriedly dismantling their tents and packing up their belongings. Will and Isabelle decided that was a good idea. Getting caught in a storm hauling baskets and tables was something you only did once.

Isabelle slammed the back door of the van closed after the last table was in. The parking lot had cleared out. There were a few vendors’ trucks still there.

“Will, we’re ready. Are you going to follow us?” asked Isabelle.

“Yeah.” He felt in his pocket for the keys to the truck. “Shit, Jason has the keys.” Jason was picking up last-minute items from the site. He shouted to Jason, but the wind picked up, and he couldn’t hear him.

Their tent had been pretty close to the parking lot. Will gauged the distance between the parking lot and the tent site. It would take him less than a minute to get the keys and Jason. “I’ll be right there.”

CHAPTER FIFTY-SIX

Isabelle turned on the radio to her favorite station.

As soon as Will got the keys and Jason and pulled up behind them, they could take off. It had been a good day. They sold out of everything. She hoped Will would hurry.

A rustling noise in the back seat had Felicia and Isabelle both looking at each other. *Please don't let it be a rodent*, Isabelle prayed.

“Hello, Isabelle.”

It was a man's voice. Isabelle turned to look and saw a dark-haired man holding a gun. A large gun pointed straight at Felicia. She thought about trying to knock the gun out of his hand, then stopped. What if it went off? Felicia would be dead.

“Now, little lady, drive.”

“No.”

The man gave them a creepy smile. He took something out of his pocket and jabbed Felicia in the neck. Isabelle screamed. Felicia let out a little groan. Seconds later, she slumped and knocked her head on the window.

“You killed her!”

“Nah. Just a little propofol to put her to sleep. However, if you don't want me to kill her, drive.”

Isabelle's stomach roiled. This was what Will warned her about. Where the hell was Will? Who was this man?

She drove out of the parking lot and reached the main road. “Which way?”

“Head left out of town. I’ll tell you when to stop.”

As if Felicia being shot with drugs and being held hostage by a creepy man wasn’t enough, the rain started. It wasn’t a drop. It was as if the heavens opened up. The windshield wipers could hardly keep up.

She drove until they were about ten miles out of town in an area Isabelle was familiar with. There was a dirt road off the main road. “Which way?”

“Drive straight.”

Great. Isabelle’s heart was racing. Felicia was still asleep. The man still held the gun. She couldn’t see well. Fog covered the road, the rain hadn’t let up, and now gusts of wind shimmied the van around the road.

“Speed up. You drive like my grandma.”

“It’s hard to see.”

“Tough.”

Isabelle hit the gas, sending the van careening down the road. The road was narrow, and puddles had formed on the asphalt. The van was planing over the water.

She took a sharp turn, lost control as the van swerved, and slammed into a tree. They came to an abrupt stop.

Silence.

“Bitch. You did that on purpose.”

Isabelle looked up from the steering wheel where her head was resting. The airbag was in her way, but she saw smoke coming from the front of the van, and all she could think was she’d never be able to afford another van. She glanced over at Felicia, who, thankfully, was still sleeping.

Something wet dripped into her eyes. She brushed her hand over her eyes and came away with blood. Bile slithered up her gut.

The driver's side door flew open. A hand reached in and released her seat belt. Isabelle tumbled out of the van and stepped into a giant puddle. The rain beat down mercilessly, drenching her clothes and plastering her hair to her forehead. Blood trickled down her face. She looked up. Another dark-haired man stood there. One who didn't look happy to be out in the rain and wind with her. There was something off about him. Think!

Oh God. It was the man from the market in Georgia. The man with the cauliflower ears who threatened them. Isabelle's life passed before her eyes.

"Antonio, grab her," said the man from the back seat.

The man went to grab her, but Isabelle's stomach revolted. Like a slow-motion movie, she opened her mouth and projectile-vomited. It was all over Antonio, just like a scene out of *Carrie* on steroids.

He jumped back in surprise, but it was too late. "Son of a bitch. Ricky, she got vomit on me." As he wiped vomit from his clothes, which seemed silly considering the rain was washing it away, he gave her a look of disgust.

Ricky got out of the van. "Stop your whining, Antonio. The rain will wash it away. Get her into your car. I'll grab Sleeping Beauty."

Antonio grabbed her arm roughly, pinching it painfully, and dragged her to an older sedan nearby. "Stop here," he snarled. He held on to her while he removed a piece of plastic from the trunk and placed it on the back seat. "Sit on that." He grabbed another for the front seat.

The passenger door opened, and Ricky dumped Felicia next to Isabelle. "Put her seat belt on and then yours. Can't have you get hurt in an accident, can we?"

Wasn't ol' Ricky the comedian? Isabelle reached over, wrapped the seat belt around Felicia as best she could, and then did the same to herself. She looked out the window, hoping to recognize the area. However, between the fog and

rain and the blood dripping down her face, it was difficult. Isabelle thought she'd never been on this road before.

How were Will and Colt going to find them? And when? These two men didn't look sympathetic or care about the women at all. This must just be a job for them. If they were from Georgia, would they drive back today? If they stayed in Florida, there might be a chance of escaping. First, Felicia needed to wake up. Isabelle would never leave her. Why did she ever try to convince Will that they should go to the farmers' market? Another mistake.

The storm was getting worse.

They were doomed.

CHAPTER FIFTY-SEVEN

Will raced to the tent site, got Jason, and returned to the parking lot.

Fuck. Isabelle had started home without him after he warned her to be careful.

“Come on, Will, we can catch up,” said Jason. They hopped into the truck. Will turned on the ignition and put it into drive. He hadn’t gone a foot when they heard a grinding noise.

“What the hell?” he said.

“Sounds like a flat tire,” Jason replied. He opened the door and got out. “Will, you’ve got to see this.”

Will got out and looked. Two flat tires. He looked closer. They’d been punctured. Fuck. This was no accident. Someone purposely ruined the tires.

The women had been kidnapped. He was sure of it and on his watch.

He dialed Chase.

“Yeah.”

“Chase, someone has kidnapped Isabelle and Felicia.” Will swallowed hard. Exhaled. “I’m stuck at the farmers’ market with two fucking flat tires.”

“What do you need me to do?”

“Ask Dex to hook into the security cameras and see which way Isabelle’s van was heading,” Will replied.

“I can have him try to ping their phones, too,” said Chase. “Oh, by the way, Tex got back to me with information on the suspects. Come in as soon as you can.”

Will hung up and called Colt to come tow the truck to the garage and order tires. He didn't have two spare tires.

This was the clusterfuck they'd hoped to avoid.

CHAPTER FIFTY-EIGHT

Colt arrived with his tow truck about fifteen minutes after Will called him.

Jason called a friend to pick him up and had just left. Will found a windbreaker, put it on, and jumped out. The rain and wind had picked up considerably, and he felt the spray from the lake hitting him in the face.

Colt's face was grim, and he said nothing until he hooked Will's truck up. Then they were on the way to the garage.

"How did this happen? I thought you were watching them," Colt asked through clenched teeth. Colt cracked his head from side to side and stared at the road.

"I was watching them. I ran back to get the truck keys. They were out of sight for less than a minute." Will didn't need Colt to bring up the fact that he'd failed. Yes, it was only a short time, and yes, he'd failed. Hell, it had happened to all of them at one time or another.

Colt slammed his hands on the steering wheel. "I'm going to kill those motherfuckers when we catch up with them."

Yeah. That was how Will felt, too.

Where had they taken the women? Were they all right, or had they been hurt? What information did Tex have? Was Dex successful in tracking the van? Fuck.

Will was impatient to get to the center, but Chase wouldn't start without him and Colt. He also was waiting for Dex to gather information. After changing the tires, he and Colt

would head to command central. He desperately wanted to look for Isabelle but had no idea where to start.

“Have you heard anything from Chase?” asked Will.

“No, Chase called everyone in and will update us then. He didn’t want to repeat himself. Besides, we need to strategize the girls’ rescue.”

If there was a rescue. No. Will wasn’t going there. *Think positive.* They would rescue Isabelle and Felicia, and everyone would live happily ever after except for the scum who kidnapped them. Will didn’t know how the other guys felt, but he would have no problem if the kidnapper just happened to fall on his gun.

They finally arrived at the garage to find the two tires had just been delivered. It took a short time to change them, and they were on their way to command central.

It was a busy Saturday at Paws for Caring. Melissa had a class going.

He and Colt walked back to the library. Even though the door to the training center was closed, they could still hear dogs barking and voices giving commands.

The secret door to the library was open. Colt and Will took the last available chairs. Chase was at his spot at the head of the table. Dex had his computer out. Will guessed this was going to be a show and tell. He hoped they had a location on the girls. It would be wonderful to hold Isabelle in his arms as they fell asleep tonight. That was wishful thinking. Rescue missions rarely went that easily.

Will looked around the table at the men he was proud to call his brothers. Besides Chase and Dex, Zach, Finn, and Ryker sat on one side of the table. Colt sat next to Titus. The only one missing was Ford, still away on a job.

“Will, close the door, will you?” asked Chase.

He closed the door without a sound.

The room was big enough that the guys had plenty of room to move around. The mural on the wall of the scene outside

made it feel even bigger, plus Chase had a skylight installed to bring in more light. Although today all he saw was black sky and rain.

“I’m going to let Dex show you what he’s found,” said Chase.

Dex pressed a remote, and the picture behind Chase disappeared and a TV screen came up. Huh. Was Will the only one to know that the image hid a TV? He looked around. Nope. Everyone was in awe.

“This is what I’ve found. Isabelle drove off seconds after you left, Will. I couldn’t see anyone else in the van except Felicia. She took a left and headed away from town. I followed the van as far as I could. They headed for an area that didn’t have security cameras. Then I lost them.”

Fuck. This was not going to be fast and furious. “Did you see anyone near my tires?”

Dex pulled up another security feed. “Before the market opened, I caught this guy near your truck. You can tell he’s fiddling with the tires.”

They watched the asshole lean down and puncture Will’s tires.

“Where did he go after?” asked Titus.

“That’s the thing. I have him there, and then I don’t. He walked out of the farmers’ market,” replied Dex.

“Then who was in the van?” asked Will.

Dex sighed. “It’s hard to tell. There were so many people and cars there. I couldn’t find anyone getting into the van.”

“Great, thanks, Dex. I believe Tex has some information for us.” Chase dialed Tex’s phone and put him on speaker.

“Tex, we’ve just gone over the security tapes here. What do you have?” asked Chase.

“Will, Colt, sorry to hear that your women were kidnapped. We’re gonna get them back,” said Tex. “I don’t

know what's in the water, but too many of my friends' women get themselves in trouble.

“What I've found out from the police report is that a small-time drug dealer named Eddie Turboletti, aka Fast Eddie, is trying to make a name for himself. He isn't the boss of this operation, more like an underboss. I couldn't find a name for the big boss. Eddie employs several men who do his dirty work. Ricky and Antonio Decker are brothers who do the shit work for him and are known to be violent and unpredictable.”

Will groaned. This was even worse than he imagined. Those two brothers were used to roughing up men. He shuddered to think what they would do to Isabelle and Felicia.

“It turns out Ricky isn't that smart. He registered at a motel outside Haywood Lake under his name. I checked with the motel. His car is there, but he isn't. Supposedly, he has the room for another couple of days.”

“Wanna make a bet one or the other asshole was in the van?” Titus asked.

“That's what I'm thinking,” replied Tex. “This is where it gets interesting. Antonio owns an older black sedan. Dex, did you spot it on the security tape?”

Dex rewound the video footage. “There it is. It blended in with the rest of the traffic.”

“Okay, so now we know Ricky and Antonio have the women. The question is, where did they take them?” asked Chase.

“What about GPS on the van?” asked Finn.

Will shook his head. “It's too old to have it.”

The silence in the room was deafening.

“Dex, have you tried pinging their phones?” asked Tex.

“I have. But only as far as the towers went. There's a dead spot outside town.”

“What about ‘find my phone’ on their computers? Even if the phones are dead or turned off, it will give you the last

known location,” suggested Tex.

“I know Isabelle’s computer is password-protected, but I don’t know the password,” said Will. He mentally slapped himself on the side of the head. It never passed through his mind that they could check for her phone like that.

He looked at Colt. “Do you know Felicia’s?”

Colt shook his head.

“Dex, can you hack into their computers?” asked Tex.

“Yes.”

“Okay, then. That’s all I have so far. Good luck.” Tex hung up.

“Humph. It never ceases to amaze me how Tex can uncover information,” said Colt. “Until we can have a general sense of where the women are, we can’t devise a strategy to get them. Why don’t Will, Dex, and I go to the house and see if we can get into their computers? We’ll call you for the information and come back here.”

Chase nodded. “Good idea. We’ll start making plans as soon as you call, so come back.”

“We should get going. No telling what Isabelle and Felicia are going through,” said Will as he stood. They only had a small window to catch these assholes.

Dex and Colt followed him out. Thankfully, Isabelle’s house was close.

Will’s only hope was that one of their computers was there and that the Decker brothers hadn’t tossed away the phones.

CHAPTER FIFTY-NINE

As if things couldn't get any worse, before Antonio got into the driver's seat, he pulled out a piece of rope and tied Isabelle's hands together. From his cold, dark eyes to his hands that he kept flexing, Isabelle could tell he was pissed, most likely because he stank from the vomit.

"Can't have you jumping out and trying to escape, can we?" He laughed at his own joke.

Isabelle's heart pounded in her chest. Having her hands bound made escaping harder. Thankfully, they hadn't tied up Felicia. Isabelle was worried; Felicia had been asleep for a while. Isabelle could see Felicia breathing, so she was alive, but shouldn't she be awake by now?

Antonio started driving. He inched along the road avoiding the big puddles, but visibility was poor. The rain was relentless. The wind moved the car like a toy. Isabelle leaned her head against the window and watched her breath fog up the window. What a giant mess. How were they ever going to get out of it?

Isabelle looked over at Felicia, who hadn't moved. She looked so peaceful, and Isabelle was glad her friend was asleep. She would be terrified if she weren't. But then, Isabelle wished Felicia wasn't asleep because she was terrified.

There was a movement. Isabelle was sure her eyes were deceiving her. It looked like Felicia winked. Was she just pretending to be still sleeping? That was good. It meant that they might have a chance to get out of this alive.

Antonio drove through the storm for a short time before turning off the main road. He followed a rough dirt road through the trees before pulling in front of an old cabin. Crap. Nothing good ever came from stopping at an old cabin. Isabelle huffed. Nothing good ever came out of someone hiding in your back seat. She was zero for two.

After Antonio parked, he dragged Isabelle out of the car.

The rain was still coming down relentlessly.

Now was her chance to make a move. Isabelle took a deep breath. She lunged forward, shoved her shoulder into Antonio's gut. The impact caught him off guard. He stumbled but held on to her. She tried to kick him but missed.

His hand across her face didn't. "Bitch," he roared.

She fell to the ground, slipped in the mud, and couldn't get up. Antonio's face contorted into unbridled rage. He decided pulling her by her hair into the cabin was a good idea—not. Tears streamed down her face. No one ever had hit her across the face, and Isabelle was sure she was missing a clump of hair. Isabelle gulped for air as Antonio dragged her down to a small bedroom and threw her on the floor. Ricky followed, dumping Felicia on the bed.

"Tie this one's hands. I don't trust these bitches," said Ricky. He nodded toward Isabelle. "And tie that one's feet. We can't have them escaping again." He looked at Antonio. "We'll move them as soon as the rain stops."

Antonio grabbed another piece of rope and wound it around Felicia's wrists. Felicia never moved. He headed into the other room and returned with more rope, which he used to bind Isabelle's ankles. The smile he gave her as he patted her knees and slid his hands up her thighs before he got up promised bad things would happen. Isabelle's stomach churned.

Ricky gave them a sinister look. Then they slammed the door closed and left.

They smelled like wet dogs. That was Isabelle's first thought when she stopped crying. The second thought was,

what the hell were the stains on the mattress? She didn't want to know.

Then she hopped slowly over to the other bed where Felicia was lying.

“Are they gone?” Felicia asked in a trembling voice.

“Oh, good. You're awake,” said Isabelle. “How are you feeling?”

“Weird. What happened?”

Isabelle told Felicia about the parking lot, the needle, the rain, the accident, and how they got there. “We're screwed unless we get out of here before the rain stops. I'm not feeling good about this.”

“I agree. What time is it?” asked Felicia.

“About one o'clock—I think,” replied Isabelle, looking at her wrist. She realized she had lost her watch when she was pulled out of the van. “The phones are also in the van,” Isabelle said. “We need to figure out how to get help, but I don't even know where we are. All I know is that we're off a main road in an abandoned cabin,” said Isabelle.

As Isabelle surveyed the small room, her heart sank. There was nothing in it they could use as a weapon. With their hands tied, there was no way of taking a bed apart, even if they could. She noticed one of the bunk beds blocked a small window. “I wonder if one of us could get out the window and go for help?”

“Isabelle, we're tied up.” Felicia groaned. “Besides, let's try to leave together if we can.”

Isabelle sat on the edge of the mattress. “Of course. I would never leave my best friend,” she replied. “Let's rest for a while, then make a plan. Okay?”

Felicia scooted over in the bed so Isabelle could lie next to her.

“I'm scared,” Felicia whispered.

Isabelle's heart ached with guilt. This was all her fault. First, she shouldn't have insisted they leave Georgia. In retrospect, they should have gone straight to the police. Then she waited too long to tell Colt about the mob and finally, didn't fully believe Will when he warned her about the threats and the danger she was in, which put everyone she loved in danger.

"I'm scared too, sweetie," Isabelle said softly. "But we're going to be okay. Will and Colt will find us."

"I hope so," Felicia replied. "But we can't wait for them. I'm willing to make a run for it. Are you?"

"Yes."

Isabelle closed her eyes. The pounding rain was both soothing noise and safety for now.

They had one chance to make it work and get out of this alive. First, she needed to rest. Fear and anxiety had taken its toll on her body and mind.

She wanted a future with Will. She wanted to laugh and make love with him, make babies, live life. And Colt and Felicia deserved to have a long, loving life together.

Their escape had to work. The alternative was worse and final.

CHAPTER SIXTY

Will, Colt, and Dex returned to command central within the hour. The guys were eating lunch and saved sandwiches for them. Will's stomach was still queasy, and he wasn't sure he could hold anything down. Just then, Will's stomach growled. It might be a long time before they'd have time to eat. He grabbed a sandwich, chips, and a bottle of water.

Chase had brought in a whiteboard that showed the last location of Isabelle and Felicia's phones based upon the tracking information from their computers that Dex found and a map of the area. It showed the phones pinged on a cell phone tower about ten miles outside town. Ten miles! It might as well be a hundred.

Chase looked at the board and drew a red perimeter circle. "Here is the cell tower. It's an older model and has a range of twenty-five miles."

A collective groan was heard. The Brotherhood needed an army to cover that distance.

"We know where the tower is and what road Isabelle took out of town. It's a rural area with few roads and surrounded by state forest. That narrows down our search. We gear up, find the van, and work from there. There might be clues we can follow. The women may not have much time."

Will put down the sandwich he was eating. Bad news all around. "The Deckers are either in Georgia now or holed up until the weather clears. I hope it's the latter."

"Me too, brother. Me too," Chase replied.

They packed up the remains of lunch and tossed it. Then they gathered guns from the gun safe in the closet, packed them in a locked container, and placed them in Chase's truck. Chase and Titus took most of the men in their trucks. Will and Colt drove together.

The wind blew hard, and Will cursed the torrential rain that wouldn't stop. He couldn't decide if it was a good thing or not. Hopefully, the Deckers decided it was too nasty to continue driving and holed up somewhere and the Brotherhood would find them. He didn't want to think about them already in Georgia.

It took longer than Will hoped to get to the turnoff Isabelle would have taken. Traffic was slow. Giant puddles were everywhere. There was no sense in getting into an accident and losing more time. They saw two accidents on their way. Thankfully, they were on the other side of the road.

The group followed the narrow road for a couple of miles. "There." Colt pointed straight ahead.

The van! They found it.

Will parked on the side of the road and ran over to it. Would it be too much to ask that the women were in it? The whole front end was smashed, and no Isabelle or Felicia.

"I hope they weren't hurt," said Chase, who had parked and walked up to the crash site. "This looks pretty bad."

Titus felt the engine. "Not cold but not warm. This didn't happen that long ago."

Will saw a bloody handprint on the driver's side window and almost lost it. His stomach churned. He bent over, placing his hands on his knees while he gulped in fresh air. Will prayed not to lose his lunch.

"It looks like someone was in the back seat. If he were crouched down, Isabelle would never have seen him until it was too late," Chase said.

"Motherfucking assholes," shouted Colt. He pulled up a syringe from the floor of the back seat. "Isabelle was driving, so he must have jabbed Felicia to keep Isabelle in line."

Will's heart sank. These assholes meant business. Isabelle would never leave her friend, especially if Felicia were incapacitated. At least they were together and hopefully not injured.

“Look over here.” Finn was pointing to tire tracks and footprints. “I bet this was the black sedan.” He stared at the road. “It looks like they headed north.” Finn stared at the ground. “It looks like someone vomited.”

Will had a sinking feeling it was Isabelle. He sent happy thoughts to the universe, hoping she'd receive them. The women had to know the Brotherhood would be looking for them.

Will looked at the forest surrounding them and turned to Dex. “What's up there?”

Dex pulled out his phone. “It leads to the state park.”

“Do they have campsites?” asked Chase.

Dex nodded. “I don't think the Deckers would have brought the women there. The campsites this time of year would be full.”

Will looked around. What else was out here? “There's too much ground to cover.” He looked at his watch. “Our window of time is getting short.” The rain was still coming down but not as heavily.

“I'm going to call Tex. He might be able to scan the area and see if there are any abandoned sites where the Deckers can hold out,” said Chase. “In the meantime, let's split up and check out any houses along the way. I'll go back the way we came and knock on doors.”

Will and Colt continued down the road. Titus veered off an unmarked dirt road with a rusted mailbox out front, the only clue that a house was back there.

They passed several houses, stopped, knocked, and asked if anyone had seen two women and two men or a black sedan. No one had.

Will was getting discouraged. No way were they going to find the girls. There were no more houses on the road. He stopped at the side of the road and banged his head on the steering wheel. “Damn. We’re getting nowhere. The rain is getting lighter, and if the Deckers are still here, they are going to leave soon.”

Colt said nothing. He stared out the window and shook his head.

Will’s cell phone rang.

It was Chase. “I don’t know how he did it, but Tex used some advanced surveillance equipment he had, or he hacked into a satellite, no matter. He came up with two potential locations with abandoned buildings on them. One is close to you. It’s a cabin that the park rangers used years ago. Another is an old hunting lodge. It’s pretty remote, and there are no roads to it.”

“Send Colt the directions to the cabin. Why don’t you meet us there?” replied Will.

“Will do,” Chase replied. “I’ll have Titus check out the lodge.” He ended the call.

“Sounds promising,” said Will.

They heard a ding, and Colt looked at his phone. “Okay. The cabin looks like it’s about two miles north of here, off a dirt road.” Colt pointed in the direction.

Will felt more optimistic. Hopefully, they’d find the women, find them unhurt, and deal with the Deckers.

CHAPTER SIXTY-ONE

Isabelle opened her eyes and listened. The cabin was quiet, too quiet. She could hear herself breathing.

The rain was still coming down but not as much. Were the men even here?

She slowly maneuvered herself out of bed and groaned quietly. She'd been lying with her hands tied behind her back, and as she stretched her shoulders, her eyes teared. She looked over at Felicia. Was she asleep? Her eyes were closed, but that meant nothing.

Isabelle tried stretching her hands, hoping the rope would give—no luck. Damn, Antonio must have been a Boy Scout. She wiggled her hands harder, but the rope wouldn't budge. "Felicia," she whispered. "Felicia."

Now was the time for them to escape. Hopefully, the kidnappers were sleeping.

Felicia opened her eyes. "I'm awake." She glanced around the room. "Has anything changed?"

"I don't know. It's so quiet." Isabelle shook her head. She sat back on the bed. "Try to untie me."

Isabelle turned. Felicia got as close to Isabelle as she could to try to untie her. She felt Felicia fumble with the rope.

"It's so tight," Felicia said. "I don't know if I can get it off."

"Try harder. I know you can do it." Isabelle tried to help by moving her hands. She felt something hot and sticky dripping

down her hands.

“Your wrists are bleeding,” gasped Felicia. “I hate to say it but keep doing what you’re doing. The blood is loosening the rope.”

Isabelle gritted her teeth. Her heart was pounding, and she kept tugging at the rope to loosen it.

She felt Felicia breathing down her neck. She felt her fingers trying to untie her.

“I think I got it,” whispered Felicia.

Isabelle pulled her hands apart and almost screamed. The pain in her shoulders was too much. She rubbed each one for a minute, untied her ankles, and shook her feet. She turned to Felicia and said, “I’m going to untie you. Then we’re going to be as quiet as possible and move that bunk bed. I only hope the window isn’t stuck shut.”

Moments later, Felicia was shaking her hands out. They tiptoed over to the bunk bed. “On two, let’s move this, hopefully not making any noise.”

“One. Two.” They slid the bunk bed over enough so they could get out the window. “Now for the hard part.” Isabelle pushed up on the window. It squeaked and moved about an inch.

They stopped and listened. Nothing from the other room. Good.

Isabelle lifted it up, pushed the screen out, and stopped. She listened again. Still nothing.

“I’m going to give you a lift,” she said to Felicia. “When you get out, run away as fast as you can. I’ll be right behind you. Ready?”

Felicia nodded. It was a small window; Isabelle hoped they’d fit through. Isabelle clasped her hands together and bent over. Felicia placed her foot on them and went headfirst out the window. Isabelle heard a soft oof, but that was it. She looked out the window, and Felicia was standing there. “Run!”

Now it was Isabelle's turn. She braced herself on the side of the window and was about to push her way out when ...

"You bitch."

Hands pulled on her ankles. She held on to the window, but the hands were too strong and pulled her back in, turned her around, and punched her in the gut. Isabelle's breath stopped. She buckled over. No sound came from her mouth. The pain. The agony.

Ricky flung her on the bed and smacked her face several times while he screamed, "I'm not getting killed over you." She tried to protect herself, but the gut punch was too painful. Isabelle only prayed that Felicia made it out and ran into the woods.

She watched him close the window, push the bunk bed back, and pull out handcuffs. He put one end on her wrist, her very bloody wrist, and attached the other to the bedpost.

"There. That's what we should have done in the first place." He was so angry, spittle was flying from his mouth and landed on her face.

Tears fell down Isabelle's cheek. The only thing she could think of was that Felicia had run into the woods, and maybe, just maybe, if they were lucky, she would get help.

A body was hurled into the room. Felicia screamed as she landed on the floor.

Isabelle groaned. She looked over at her friend and took a deep breath. Antonio had not been gentle with her. Felicia's one eye was closed, her lip was swollen, and what hurt Isabelle the most was the fear in her friend's eye.

"Here's the other bitch." Antonio shook his head, water spewing everywhere. "I had to run through mud to catch her."

Ricky pulled out another set of handcuffs. "Cuff her to the other bed. Goddamn bitches. Never do what they're supposed to." He watched Antonio cuff Felicia to the other bed.

"We leave in two hours. The rain should be done by then. I'm not staying here any longer," said Ricky.

The men stomped out of the room.

Isabelle's gut was churning. "I'm so sorry, Felicia. So sorry."

"This isn't your fault. You told me to run, but I couldn't leave until I saw that you were on the ground. I ran when you were pulled back, but it was too late. I'm sorry."

Isabelle hung her head. What could she say? They were in a particularly bad spot, and unless Will and Colt got here soon, the next spot would be worse.

CHAPTER SIXTY-TWO

The cabin was located about two miles from where the guys were. Titus had called to report that the abandoned hunting lodge was just that—abandoned. He would meet them at the cabin.

Tex had mentioned that the cabin was tucked into the trees off a dirt road. Chase took the lead.

Will got off the main road and was grateful he had a truck. The dirt road was filled with water-filled holes. It was raining intermittently and would soon stop. Assuming the women wouldn't be moved until the weather let up, there was little time to rescue them.

Will swallowed hard. He took a few long breaths and let them out slowly. He was trying to be optimistic, but thinking about the worst-case scenarios was getting to him. He'd much rather be in a battle than worry about the safety of loved ones.

Colt had said little as they were both looking for the dirt road that supposedly went through a thick copse of pine trees that led to the cabin. They saw nothing here but trees and more trees. It would have been peaceful any other time.

Chase finally pulled into an opening in the brush. He turned the engine off, and he, Finn, and Dex got out. He motioned to Will to pull over next to him.

Will and Colt parked and walked over to where the guys were quietly talking.

“The cabin isn't far from here,” said Chase. “The rain will stop soon. It's so quiet here. If the Deckers are in the cabin,

they'll hear us." His phone dinged, and he looked at the message. "Titus is five minutes away. We'll wait and strategize when he gets here."

The tension was rising, and Will was ready to go in by himself but held back. This was a group effort.

They heard Titus's truck roar down the dirt road. He, Ryker, and Dex joined the group. Chase had opened the weapons container. They armed themselves and gathered around Chase.

"The cabin isn't far. We'll spread out as we get closer. I don't know if the Deckers have guns. Let's assume they do," said Chase.

Chase took the lead. They walked through a pine forest so quiet that Will could hear himself breathe. The soft pine needles muffled the sound of their boots. They avoided a marshy area. The only sound was the pitter-patter of the rain and a light wind that swayed the branches. There was no path, so they made their own through the brush and trees.

Finally, the trees opened. Dreading and yet hoping to see the car, they crept closer. There was a small clearing with a primitive road stopping at an old wooden cabin. It looked abandoned until Will spotted the black sedan parked out front.

Will closed his eyes and willed Isabelle to know he was there. She was safe now.

Guns drawn, the men spread out, covering the front and back of the cabin. Finn crab-walked to a small window and peeked inside. He gave them a thumbs-up. The women were in the room.

Then Finn continued on and peered into the larger window. Two fingers. The Deckers were there. Whether or not they were armed was unknown. However, the element of surprise was on the Brotherhood's side.

It looked like the front door was the only egress, so they had to be smart about this.

Chase took the lead. In one kick, he had the door open.

The men rushed in, guns trained on the Decker brothers, who were lounging and drinking beer.

The brothers looked up in surprise and then in anger. One was already in motion, pulling a gun from his back. He aimed.

One deafening shot rang out. He was too slow. Titus was faster.

The brother gazed down at his chest in disbelief. His brow furrowed in confusion. He opened his mouth like a fish to form words that never came.

His arms stretched out towards his brother. Blood spurted from his chest, and he staggered forward for a moment. Then he slowly fell to his knees. His head thudded against the coffee table until he finally fell to the ground. He gasped one deep breath until blood poured from his nose and mouth. Then he quietly died.

The other man jumped up, fists ready. “Son of bitch. There was no reason to kill Antonio.”

Will stared at the dead guy. So that was Antonio. The asshole ready to fight six ex-military guys with guns and fifty pounds on him was Ricky. Not the brightest. He was disappointed Antonio hadn’t stood up to fight. Will was more than ready to break a few bones.

Chase pushed Ricky back on the couch.

“Hey.” Ricky put his hands up. “No need for violence. The women aren’t hurt. My boss just wanted to speak with them.”

“Riiight, asshole, and I’m the Easter Bunny,” said Chase. Will and Colt rushed down the hall—no one in the first small bedroom. The door to the second bedroom was closed. That had to be where Finn saw the women.

He opened the door. Nothing prepared him for the sight of the two women handcuffed and beaten. His stomach roiled. Will could only stare. What the hell?

“Key,” yelled Colt, hugging Felicia like his life depended upon it. “We need a handcuff key here.”

Will bent down and sat on the bed next to Isabelle. Her face was cut and bruised. Her right eye was closed. She looked pale. He got the sweetest, most beautiful smile from her. “I knew you’d come,” she said.

“Always, sweetheart.”

He looked over at Colt, who was comforting Felicia. She looked worse, with cuts on her face, a black eye, and a swollen lip. Her hair was plastered to her forehead; tears ran down her face. The look Colt gave him was thunderous. It was a promise someone was going to hurt bad.

“I have the handc—” Ryker stood in the doorway and closed his eyes. When he opened them, Will knew it took all his willpower to be positive. “I have the handcuff key,” he said gruffly. Ryker looked at Will and cocked his head as if to ask if it was okay if he opened the handcuff. Will nodded. He didn’t want to let Isabelle go.

Finally released, Isabelle let loose with a little groan before she shook her hand and tucked it behind her waist.

Will reached over and gently pulled her hand out. He looked at her bloody wrists. More had gone on here than just being handcuffed. What had these bastards done to the women?

Isabelle gave him a small smile. “I’m okay. Honest.”

She wasn’t okay. Will wasn’t okay. He wasn’t sure if he’d ever be. Violence against women and children was repulsive.

Ryker said nothing. He removed Felicia’s handcuff and left the room, taking the handcuffs with him.

“Will, go get your truck and take the women to the hospital,” Colt said.

No. He didn’t want to, but either he or Colt had to stay and deal with Ricky because no way were they not getting their pound of flesh. Colt had more at stake. Ricky had hurt his woman and his sister.

He nodded.

Felicia cried, “No, come with me,” and tried to hold Colt tighter. He whispered something in her ear, and she nodded. Will kissed Isabelle and told her he’d be back.

Will paid no mind to the other men and Ricky. He raced out of the cabin. His heart was pounding hard. He got to the truck in a few minutes and drove back to the cabin.

Colt was still with the women in the back bedroom. When Will walked in, Ricky was on the floor swearing. Finn and Chase had their guns trained on him.

He bypassed them and stepped into the room to see Isabelle huddled next to Felicia. Colt was holding Felicia’s hand. The two men guided them through the house. Gasps and swears came from the men, who kissed or touched each woman as they passed.

“Bastard,” Isabelle hissed but refused to look at Ricky. Felicia walked by without saying anything. Good ol’ Ricky smirked, thought he was home free and no one would hurt him. He didn’t even mourn for his dead brother.

Will settled Isabelle and Felicia in the truck. He turned on the ignition.

“Stop,” Felicia called out. She rolled down the window. Colt was still standing there.

“Sweetheart, everything will be okay. I’ll be at the hospital before you know it,” Colt said, kissing her again.

“Colt, you know I’m not a violent person. That man in there hurt Isabelle, hurt me for no other reason other than he could.” She looked at Isabelle, and the two women came to some sort of agreement. She nodded, looked at Colt and said, “Hurt him good.” She rolled up the window. Colt patted the door and walked back in.

Felicia didn’t have to tell Colt that. Ricky would be lucky if he got out of that house alive.

Isabelle snuggled close to Will and held Felicia’s hand until they got to the hospital emergency room, where they were whisked away.

CHAPTER SIXTY-THREE

Isabelle had been at Will's house recovering for a few days. He had Jason and the part-timers working the farm while he waited on her.

"Will, go to work. I'm fine," she told him just this morning.

She was okay, not fine. Her ribs were bruised, and she was told to rest. The black eye and cuts were healing. The nurse had taped her wrists, and they were healing. She and Felicia had been seen by the doctors and released the same day. It was all good news. Too bad someone couldn't convince him of that.

Will was having nightmares about the women being kidnapped. He dreamt that the Brotherhood hadn't gotten to the cabin in time and missed the Deckers, who traveled back to Georgia. He dreamt the women had been tortured and killed. He never saved them; hell, he never even found them.

Now that Isabelle was in his house, he didn't want her to leave to go to work. Hell, he didn't want her to leave the house—ever. Will knew it was irrational. He knew it wasn't his fault they were kidnapped, but the last few days still brought back flashbacks of when he failed to save his parents and sister from dying.

Colt had reached out to him, but he hadn't returned his phone call. Felicia had spoken with Isabelle and kept her updated on her condition. She was on the mend and staying at the house with Colt and was happy.

“How about I make some lunch?” asked Isabelle as she entered the kitchen and startled Will.

He turned to her and pulled her into an embrace. “You’re supposed to be in bed resting.”

“Will, I swear I feel fine. Let me make you a sandwich.” Isabelle kissed his cheek and pushed out of his arms. “You can’t keep me here and turn me into an invalid,” she said, smiling.

“Oh yes, I can,” he replied.

She playfully slapped his arm. “Silly.” Then Isabelle frowned. “If you’re thinking you did something wrong, you didn’t. No one blames you for what happened—not me, not Felicia, not Colt.”

Will shrugged and ignored that. “How about you sit down and let me make you lunch and some coffee?”

“Works for me.” Isabelle sat at the table and stared at him.

“What?”

“I’m ogling,” she said. “Don’t disturb me. Just make lunch.”

Will shook his head. He got out the sandwich fixings and started a pot of coffee.

The past few days, he wasn’t happy for the reason why Isabelle was in his house but was thrilled she was there. Although it was hard to have her look at him. Did she see the guilt in his eyes? Did she blame him for what happened?

Somehow, he had to make peace with those thoughts.

Footsteps from the living room had him turning around. Colt and Felicia were here. Oh God, Will didn’t think he could face them right now.

CHAPTER SIXTY-FOUR

“Ohhhh.” Isabelle got up and hugged Felicia, then Colt. She took a long look at Felicia. “You’re looking so much better.”

Felicia giggled. “Colt’s been waiting on me.”

Colt stood in the kitchen watching the women with his arms crossed and smiling.

He looked over at Will. “Can we talk?”

Will nodded and followed Colt into the living room. “What’s up?” Will asked.

“You,” replied Colt.

“Me?”

“Yeah, you.” Colt cocked his head. “I have to hear from my sister that you’re blaming yourself for what happened.”

“So?”

“So, you’re wrong. You know as well as I do that things go fubar. You know you can’t control every battle and need a Plan A, B, C, whatever.” Colt glared at him. “Shit happens. It wasn’t your fault. No one blames you. Get over it.”

Will stared at Colt and sighed. “I know. It’s just I felt guilty that the women were hurt on my watch.”

“It’s happened to all of us.” Colt put out his hand. “You’re my friend and hopefully soon to become my brother-in-law if you get your shit together.”

They shook hands and man-hugged. The weight Will was carrying slipped off. Wait. What did Colt say again? Brother-in-law? What did that even mean?

Isabelle screamed for joy in the kitchen.

It took Will a second to figure it out. “Bro. You asked Felicia to marry you?”

Colt gave him a shit-eating grin and nodded.

“I’m guessing she said yes. Although why she’d want your sorry ass, I don’t know,” teased Will.

“Hey, there’s nothing wrong with my ass. It’s your sorry ass that going to get an ass-kicking if you don’t get on the stick and ask Isabelle to marry you,” said Colt. “The girls are planning a double wedding, and I won’t have you disappointing Felicia or Isabelle.”

The men returned to the kitchen, and Isabelle told him the happy news about Felicia and Colt. Felicia showed off her ring.

Will thought about the little black box in the nightstand beside the bed. He’d been holding off asking Isabelle to marry him, but maybe now was the time. Well, not now, but tonight when they were in bed.

A knock at the door disrupted his thoughts.

“Yoo-hoo!” Joy and Liam walked into the kitchen.

Fuck. This was becoming like an old home week. Who else was going to show up? Will just wanted to be alone with Isabelle, not share her with anyone yet.

The men shook hands, and Felicia showed Joy her ring. The girls had another round of joy and squeals.

“Hey, we were just going to have lunch. Anyone hungry?” asked Will.

“I am,” said Felicia, and the others chimed in. The guys made lunch and carried it to the dining room.

“I hear Ricky is giving up all his secrets,” said Colt. He picked up a bottle of beer and took a swallow before setting it

down.

“Yeah. He said he wasn’t going down for murder and fingered Eddie, who killed Serena. Eddie finally gave up this Jacko. It was a cop’s dream,” said Liam with a smile. “The sheriff in Sandy Creek was ecstatic. This solved some of the crimes they had no suspects for.”

“Where’s Ricky now?” asked Isabelle.

Will didn’t want to talk about Ricky. He was lucky to be alive. However, talking about the aftereffects of the kidnapping might bring some closure to Isabelle.

“Oh, he’s still in the hospital,” Liam replied. “Somehow, he fell and destroyed his knee, broke a few ribs, lost a couple of teeth, and all his fingers are broken on one hand. He claimed he was clumsy.”

Liam looked over at Colt. “You don’t happen to know anything about that, do you?”

Colt shrugged his shoulders, then looked over at Will and winked.

“Too bad for him,” said Felicia. She leaned over and kissed Colt.

The group ate lunch, laughed, and told stories. Finally, the two couples left. It was just Isabelle and Will at the table.

Isabelle started to say something, then stopped.

“What? Tell me,” Will said.

She swallowed hard. “If you stayed, would Ricky have”—she made quotation marks with her fingers—“fallen and hurt himself?”

Will thought about his answer. He wondered if Isabelle would understand. “No. If I’d stayed, I probably would have killed him. Colt understood that.”

“Oh.”

“Does that bother you?” he asked. He mentally begged her to understand. No one hurt what was his.

She thought about it and shook her head. “No. I would have done the same thing. He hurt me and my friend. He liked it.”

“Come here.” Will opened his arms, and Isabelle sat on his lap.

“You never have to worry about what I would do. I will hurt anyone who hurts you and never think about it again. You are the most precious thing in my life.”

Isabelle reached for his head and pulled it down. “I love you. Just know that I’m never putting myself in a position where you would have to kill somebody, ever.”

He kissed her back. “Good.”

Will stood, holding Isabelle in his arms. “I’m putting you back in bed where you belong.” He carried her to the bedroom and gently placed her on the bed. “Now rest.”

Isabelle grinned as she pulled him down beside her. “I will rest after you make love to me.”

“Isabelle, that’s not resting.” Oh lordy, he wanted to stay, get naked, and make sweet love to her.

She rubbed his cock.

“That’s not fair.”

“Hmmm. Who said I played fair? Take your clothes off and get in bed. Don’t make me beg.”

“I would never make you beg for sex,” he replied. “Or anything.”

Will stood, shucked his clothes, and got back in bed. He put his arms around her and turned to kiss her forehead. “You are my moon and stars.” He kissed her nose. “My sun and rain, the love of my life.”

Isabelle giggled, pulled him in for a kiss, and released him.

Will stared into her whisky-brown eyes. Eyes that saw him and who he was. “Will you marry me, make me the happiest man in the world, and make your brother and Felicia happy

and my life expectancy longer? I also heard from the grapevine that you two talked about a double wedding.”

Isabelle laughed. “Oh, you heard about that? Felicia and I talked about a double wedding when we were little. I guess she told Colt. Yes, I would love to marry you.”

Will reached over to the nightstand and brought out the small black box.

He opened it. “I bought this a while ago. If you don’t like the ring, we’ll exchange it for something you like.”

He placed the ring on her finger and waited. It had taken him a while to choose the perfect ring. It wasn’t a huge diamond, but it was flawless. Isabelle didn’t wear a lot of jewelry, so it had a simple setting.

Isabelle admired it, turning her hand left and right. The light reflected off the diamond. She looked at him with desire in her eyes.

“I love the ring, and I love you.”

A kiss sealed the deal.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I love writing whether I'm writing poems, plays, short stories, cookbooks, grants, newsletters, newspaper articles or full-length novels.

Growing up in New England where summers are sweet but winters are long and cold has given me lots of opportunity to expand my creativity.

I have enjoyed: basket weaving, spinning wool, quilting, canning, teaching cooking and traveling.

I have been a recipe tester, sailor, farmer, shepherd, cattleguard, chick herder and Master Gardener.

Like many women, I have worked full-time, raised two children, and helped my husband's career. Finally, I get to make my dream come true. After all, dreams never die, and new doors open every day.

Today, I live in sunny Florida with my husband enjoying paradise. In addition to writing novels, I recently took up birding and photography. My photos have done well in local contests.

My stories are about courage, redemption and second chances. Everyone deserves them. Don't you agree?

Find me on:

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