



CALLE J.
BROOKES

DEFINING

THEIR

Destiny

TYLERS
OF
MASTERSON
COUNTY

DEFINING THEIR DESTINY

MASTERSON COUNTY

CALLE J. BROOKES



DEFINING THEIR DESTINY

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1

SOMEONE WAS WATCHING HER AGAIN. DUSTY TALLEY HATED IT WHEN THAT happened. It seemed like she had been watched by people from the time she had been just a kid. It had just gotten worse since one of the biggest Hollywood actors in this century had moved to Masterson, Wyoming, and married Dusty's closest friend within the last eight months.

People wanted to know what that actor was up to at all times. At all times. Nikki was threatening to do *something* about it sometime real soon.

Dusty lived in fear of what her bestie would come up with.

Dusty crossed the street from the side parking lot and headed up the half block to the diner she and her family owned and worked six days a week.

The hair on the back of her neck stood on end. Masterson County had been incredibly tense in the last month or so. A rich rancher named Morris Preston had nearly killed multiple people—people Dusty cared about a great deal. Including Nikki's older brother Gil. It had unsettled everyone.

Everything was sideways. Unsafe.

Masterson used to be *safe*.

She hadn't felt that way in a long time now. It just...something didn't *feel* right. The watching felt *different*. Really different tonight.

Not that Dusty was the type who believed in *feelings*, premonitions, or fate. But tonight...

Maybe just a little.

Or maybe it was the snow. The first significant snow of the year was supposedly coming in by the weekend. Mother Nature was already getting started. They'd had an unseasonably dry and warm October. *That* was over

now.

Dusty would probably always hate the snow now.

After what had happened to her before.

Dusty pushed open the glass door into the diner that had almost always represented safety, and finally took a breath. Her family, her friends, were inside.

Marin, her cousin, looked up when she entered. “You’re safe, Destiny Marie, you know. Here. But I really wish you wouldn’t walk here alone any longer.”

Marin had been cautioning her about doing that since a Hollywood executive had hurt Dusty once before. Dusty had just been in the way—he’d wanted Nikki.

Nothing ever felt *right* anymore. It just didn’t.

It had only been eight months. Healing just didn’t happen overnight, right?

“I have to be alone sometimes, Marin. We all do.” She’d lost her faith that Masterson was a safe place that day. She was determined to get it back. Marin’s scary doom predictions didn’t help.

“I know. I just...the idea of *you* being alone right now scares me a little.” Marin glanced toward the dining room. They had a few tables full at the moment, but not much. It was a Tuesday at four, one of their slowest times of the week. “I’m not sure why. Just a feeling I have been having lately. Just promise you’ll be careful. What has you spooked? You’re as jumpy as the Lowells’ cat tonight.”

Dusty shook her head. She hadn’t realized it showed. “Nothing. Just... being paranoid.”

“Well, call me if you want me to come over and get you tonight after closing. Don’t walk home alone tonight, okay?”

Marin was missing the point. If she drove over to get Dusty, Marin would be the one out there alone then. The older woman had a habit of hovering. Especially since what had happened to Junie in the back alley behind the diner just a month ago. “I drove.”

“I can call Zach. Have him swing by here at closing to walk you and whoever else is on the schedule out to your cars. It’s what hot cop ex-boyfriends are for, you know.”

“It’s Junie on at close tonight. You might cause a massive explosion.” Their waitress, Junie, and Marin’s ex-boyfriend, one of the local deputies,

despised each other. Sparks flew whenever they got too close to one another.

“They are so entertaining.” Marin shot her a wicked smile. “They’ll end up married with six kids of their own someday. Bet you a hundred.”

On that, Dusty wasn’t about to take that chance. Marin was right more than she was wrong when it came to people pairing off. Besides, *everyone* could see that there was some serious fire between Junie and Zach.

Except for, well, Junie and Zach. Those two seemed to have completely missed the memo.

But the conversation had done exactly what she suspected Marin had intended.

Dusty didn’t feel so afraid any longer. For now.

SECRETS. THEY HAD A WAY OF FINDING LIFE.

Wayne Pryor was a man on a mission now.

There were those out there who knew what he had been apart of. People who knew *enough* that they could destroy him now, even decades after what had happened. Maybe he had disassociated himself from Morris Preston and that dumbass Bruce Tyler a good ten years back—but the memories, they remained.

People *knew* what he had done. The good. And far too much of the bad.

He'd done far too much *bad*. But he'd replaced it with good. He had. His girls—they were everything that was good about the world. He'd built himself a real *life*. He had a wife and four beautiful daughters, young women now, dependent on him to be there when they needed it.

Morris Preston getting arrested now threatened to upend all of that. To destroy all Wayne had worked toward. To destroy what was good in his world now.

Wayne just couldn't let that happen. He just couldn't.

If he lost Linda and the girls—her girls, he'd adopted them when they'd been young girls, after he'd married their mother—he would be nothing. They were his *everything*.

Wayne wasn't going to lose them. No matter what he had to do to protect what he'd built now.

Wayne had packed up his family and moved them to damned Idaho, to get himself out of range of Preston ten years ago. It had pissed Preston off, but Wayne had told him a wallop. That Linda's father had threatened to

disown her if they didn't. Said the man was getting on in years, and he wanted to know his granddaughters better—before he considered leaving them all that money of his. Preston had believed it—understood.

He'd lived under his own father-in-law's thumb, once. For about a year.

Then the old man had up and died like he had.

Wayne wasn't stupid. Preston had had something to do with it. Anytime *anyone* got in Morris Preston's way, well, they were eventually gotten out of the way.

Sometimes, Wayne had been the one to do that "getting."

Not exactly something he was proud of. That was for sure.

Moving his family away had been the best decision he had ever made. But Morris Preston, the people Morris had *hurt*, people who knew all about Wayne Pryor and what he had once *been*. What he had *done*. What he had threatened to do to them, just because Morris Preston had ordered it.

He'd bought in to everything Preston had promised.

Wayne had been stupid all those years ago. Dumbest thing he had ever done. He'd practically given Preston all the ammunition he needed to keep Wayne under his thumb for years.

Sweat covered his brow. He wiped it quickly. Linda was looking at him, a curious look on her sweet face. She'd never been a great beauty, but she'd made him feel important. Not that he was that great of a catch either. He loved her, more than words could ever say. And the girls? Being their *dad* had given him real meaning. Made him feel like he'd belonged right there with them, like he was *needed*. For the first time in his life, someone had needed him.

Linda and the girls were his world. Everything that mattered. Everything.

Morris Preston's secrets threatened to destroy everything he'd ever worked for.

And with Preston in jail—those loose ends might just start to unravel.

It was time to go back to Wyoming.

Wayne couldn't escape it any longer.

3

HER SHIFT STARTED OFF SLOW. TUESDAY NIGHTS USUALLY WEREN'T TOO BAD. It was mostly regulars. People she had known for years. That made it a bit easier. Dusty didn't really enjoy waitressing. But the diner was a part of her life. Her responsibility. And she wasn't quite ready to give it up yet.

It was home. It mattered.

She appreciated the inn and the diner more than words could possibly say. But it was time she admitted it to herself. They weren't what she wanted forever. She enjoyed working at the vet clinic far more. She spent less than fifteen hours a week at the Masterson Vet Clinic. But she just felt more like *her* there.

It made her disloyal to even think it. That was probably why she felt so unsettled.

The vet clinic.

Matt had offered her more hours that morning—and had offered to pay for classes if she wanted to take the next step up to be his full-time assistant. All she had to do was take the offer. She wanted to do that. More than anything. She *loved, loved, loved* working with the animals at the clinic.

How to make it *work* around her family responsibilities, though—that was something she hadn't figured out yet. Not without ending up working double the hours she already did now.

She didn't want to let her family down.

She was still contemplating what to do about Matt's offer when a pair of men in severe suits came in. They settled in her station. She didn't like the way they looked at all, but it was either Dusty took them, or Meyra, who was

filling in for a few hours after their latest hire had quit.

It was the suits that decided for her.

Meyra had a bit of an unreasonable anxiety where men in those particular kinds of suits were concerned. Leftovers from a nasty incident in Spain when her cousin had been three or so. Right before Meyra and Marin's mother had died.

No one had ever been able to fix that anxiety for Meyra. They just worked around it.

Dusty grabbed silverware rolls and two mugs. She stuck two menus under her arm, and did what she had to do.

The younger of the two men looked up, right at her. His gaze shifted to her name tag then back to her face. Lingered. Men had looked at her that way before, but tonight? Tonight, it felt *wrong*. Gave a woman the shivers in all the wrong ways. He was in his late thirties, well-groomed, but cold. Very, very cold. His friend was about fifteen to twenty years older. A little shabbier. He was sweating. And they just looked odd. Especially in Masterson County.

"Hello, I'm Dusty. How can I help you today? Can I get you started with some coffee?" She said the words instinctively. She'd been working this diner since the age of fourteen. This was like breathing to her. She'd deal with them now, and they'd be on their way soon. It was just the coming snowstorm making her feel chilled. She wasn't like Marin—Dusty believed in what she could see, touch. Not phantom feelings. "You two new in town or just passing through?"

Her first thought was that they were bigwigs for Hunter's production studio. Hunter was working hard on getting the studio itself built now, instead of traveling back and forth to L.A. like he had been. But the younger guy just shook his head. Watching her.

"Just coffee, to start," the older one said. He studied her face for a long moment. "Dusty. An unusual name for such a beautiful young woman."

She'd heard a variant of that since she'd been able to remember. "It's one of those annoying family nicknames from a younger sister that stuck. The special today is a Reuben on homemade rye, with homestyle french fries. I can guarantee they are unforgettable. There are also Salisbury steak or meat loaf, fried chicken, plus your choice of two sides, and our regular menu items."

"Just coffee," the older man reiterated. "We are taking a break from

driving now.”

“I’ll take some pie, though. If *you* bring it to me.” The younger one was more intense, definitely. And his eyes were cold. The words were flirtatious—also something she was used to in the diner—but the man was like ice. Like he was just saying the words. Testing her or something. He didn’t mean it at all. She fought a shiver.

When the doors opened and a familiar figure stepped in, she almost breathed a sigh of relief. Usually, she wanted to roll her eyes in annoyance whenever she saw *him* lately—he’d been doing things to deliberately push her buttons over the last year or so—but tonight, this was exactly the kind of person she wanted in the diner tonight.

Ben Tyler stood there. Her best friend Nikki’s older brother.

HIS FIRST INSTINCT WAS TO ALWAYS CHECK A ROOM WHEN HE ENTERED. FOR A threat.

Ben Tyler had lived that way since his army days. He had no intention of stopping. Even at the diner. Especially with recent events that had damned near taken his older brother and the woman his brother loved. And far too many other people Ben loved.

Since everything that had happened to his sister a little over eight months ago, Ben had made a point of keeping an eye on things—especially around the diner. Nikki still hung around the diner almost every day, at some point or another. Sometimes her movie star husband was with her; sometimes Hunter wasn't.

Hunter was a tough SOB—he could protect Nikki just fine, but old habits were hard for Ben to kill. Looking out for Nikki, and her friends because they were *there* with his sister, had become almost as natural as breathing.

They made a man feel needed. Ben was the kind of man who *needed* to feel needed. He was good with that.

His eyes met startling green.

It was Dusty working tonight. That meant it had to be a Tuesday. She worked the inn of the evening on Mondays, Wednesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays.

Sometimes he lost track of the days when in the throes of writing the next book. He studied her for a moment. He'd spent a lot of time over the last year analyzing—and watching—his kid sister's bestest pal, Dusty.

Ben liked trying to figure her out. She was a puzzling woman, that one.

Lately, especially. Sometimes, he'd just be there, brainstorming story ideas for his next book, and *Dusty* would creep her way in. Maybe it had something to do with her almost being killed with Nikki.

She'd changed after that night. Hell, they all had. He was still trying to figure out just exactly how. But Dusty had changed most of all.

She'd almost died because of her relationship with his only sister. Dusty was Nikki's closest friend. He'd been looking out for her since she'd been a kid. He didn't have any intention of stopping that anytime soon. No matter how often she snapped at him for it. A man had to do what a man had to do, after all.

He would watch over her as much as he possibly could—until she found a guy who could watch out for her instead. Then Ben's duty, so to speak, would be done. He would pass on the Dusty-shaped baton and move on.

Ben followed his cousin Junie to a table at the back of the diner. She was hostessing tonight apparently, even though it wasn't one of her regular nights at the diner. Sometimes she covered shifts for extra cash.

Especially after what had happened with Morris Preston.

Things still felt unsettled from *that*. They probably would for a long time. Ben wasn't a fool. Tragedies and traumas shaped people. Changed them.

It was inevitable.

He followed Junie to the back booth, biting his tongue on what he wanted to ask her. She was still so fragile. She probably shouldn't be back at the diner considering what had happened that night because of Preston—but there she was.

The back was usually where he wanted to sit—where he could watch each corner of the diner more easily. Tonight, he planned to grab a burger and sit his ass down and finish the second chunk of his next book. He had his laptop with him in his bag. He was going to attack that damned thing—as soon as he had *food*.

That book was getting finished. No matter how much it argued.

Things had gone sideways for his main character, good old Harrold Howard. Harry just kept getting distracted by a lady lately. Ben didn't have time for Harry to go out on an unplanned romantic tangent with a woman just a little too young for him right now. Blond, green-eyed, snarky and beyond tempting—the woman just kept getting under Harry's skin. Making things happen.

Things definitely *not* on Ben's outline.

Ben didn't like it when Harry started doing whatever Harry wanted to do instead of what Ben wanted him to do. Things got complicated that way. Fast. Ben was in charge, *not* Harry. They had established that a long time ago.

Harry was just not *cooperating* right now.

He checked on his cousin quickly. Ben's blood burned every time he thought about what that bastard Morris Preston could have cost his family.

Ben would *never* forgive.

But Junie had a will of iron. She was doing okay.

Ben looked up as the waitress walked in front of the tables by the window.

Blond. Green-eyed. Slightly taller than average. Hmmm.

There weren't that many Talleys in here tonight, though. Dusty and Meyra and Marin. Three beautiful women he wasn't related to that he absolutely adored—even if he'd never be crazy enough to tell them that. They terrified him, each and every one of them.

Talleys always terrified mere mortal men. It was kind of what they *did*.

Everyone in Masterson County knew that.

Marin sashayed over—there was no other way to describe that woman's walk—and took his order. "I'm glad you're here tonight, handsome."

There was something in her big blue eyes that had Ben's focus sharpening on her. "What's up, kid?"

"I don't know. Just a chill across my spine mostly." She looked over her shoulder at her cousin across the room now. Dusty.

"I'm just not too keen on leaving her here alone tonight. Either of them really. Meyra's filling in for the cook who quit tonight." Marin shrugged lightly, but Ben wasn't stupid. "Just ghosts, I think."

"I'm going to stay until close." He'd just nurse a few cups of coffee, tap into the diner's Wi-Fi, and work. Ben got extremely cranky when he fell behind his writing schedule. Extremely cranky. "I was feeling a bit hemmed in anyway."

"I'd appreciate it."

She was called away, leaving him with his coffee. Ben just sat there and watched the room around him. The women around him mostly.

But mostly, he just watched *her*.

Destiny Marie, who refused to go by her real name, choosing Dusty instead. Maybe if he could figure *her* out in the real world, the fictional

woman tormenting his main character might start cooperating and doing what Ben needed her to do within the confines of the story he had already planned in great detail.

But no. The woman in his story—Sasha Nally—was being extremely difficult. And enigmatic.

Dusty—he didn't know when he'd first started finding his baby sister's closest friend too much like Sasha for comfort. He just did. Now he had to figure out why. *Sasha's* role in the latest story had come out of nowhere. It was driving Ben crazy.

He did not like plot detours. Ben just didn't.

Sasha had only had two mentions in the previous eight books, along with the character that was a great deal like Nikki. Sasha was Harry's kid sister Rikkie's best friend. Who owned the little diner in town.

That was all Sasha was *supposed* to be. That was it. A minor character to add flavor and world-building. Because no one lived in a vacuum. That was *all*.

Now, Sasha was showing up everywhere. She was even getting her own point-of-view *scenes*. She was a *side* character. That wasn't supposed to happen at all.

He was behind schedule, thanks to what had happened to his brother Gil when Morris Preston tried to kill him. Now, Ben had to get back on track. Somehow.

Sometimes *life* delayed books more than he wanted to think about. Ben was starting to accept that. Somewhat.

Dusty kept creeping into his thoughts lately. The last two books he'd written had started off with just a female character who looked like, spoke like, and acted like that green-eyed woman right there. But he'd been able to get her to do what he wanted, where he needed her to without any trouble at all.

That had been before what had happened that night with Nikki, Dusty, Hunter, and that bastard who had tried to kill Ben's sister and Dusty. Masterson County had become a bit of a violent place lately. It had the hair on his own neck standing on end when he thought about it.

Sasha had been described as a green-eyed blond in the first book he'd mentioned her in. He'd just filled her out a little over the series, until she resembled Dusty a bit more than he'd realized.

Ben watched the way Dusty moved around the dining tables, the way she

tilted her head, the quiet way she smiled.

Very, very Sasha-like. *Why* hadn't he realized that before?

He hadn't done it in one scene, it had just evolved as the stories had progressed. He'd never had a character resemble someone he *knew* quite so strongly. Well, except for his alter ego, good old Harrold Howard. And, well, Rikkie and Drescher and Hilbert. *They* did rather resemble his two brothers and sister. At least superficially. They all had brown hair, though. And green eyes. He had changed that much, at least.

Okay, maybe Ben hadn't been incredibly creative when naming his original cast of characters, but they were established characters now. Not like he could change their names or anything. And those names *fit*.

Maybe *this* was exactly what he needed? Dusty. He'd figure out Dusty Talley, apply what he'd learned about *her* to Sasha, and then put little Miss-Far-Too-Tempting-To-Harry Sasha Nally back into her prescribed role in the story. And move on. Get past this damned block.

And keep Sasha's clever little hands off of Harry. She was just getting too *frisky*. With her best friend's older brother. What was Sasha *thinking*?

Harry was most certainly not *thinking* where Sasha was concerned, either.

That was just crazy. And...that was the problem. Harry was starting to want *things*, too. Things he had no business wanting with *that* woman at all.

"Hey, Ben," she said quietly. Dusty usually was a bit more reserved than some of her sisters or cousins.

He turned more fully. Looked at her. He remembered her as a quiet little blond girl with crooked ponytails. He did the math. She was twenty-five now.

Dusty was a *woman* now.

Hell. He tried to look at her objectively for a moment. As if it was the first time he was ever seeing her. As if he was Harry looking at the annoying little pest who had followed Harry's sister Rikkie everywhere for years.

Ben tried to envision Nally's Diner, set smack in the middle of his fictional town. It did look a lot like the diner he was in right now. Ben's eyes narrowed as he tried to cut out that diner and look at the *woman* looking at him now. To put Dusty there, in his make-believe world.

He blinked.

He blinked again at what he saw.

He hadn't expected *this*. This didn't make any sense.

Dusty was a damned gorgeous woman now, too. With a *body* that could drive a man insane. Had he missed when she'd grown from that girl into *this*

creature?

Big green eyes that knew all the secrets of the universe were trained on him, and perfectly straight blond hair that belonged on a shampoo ad hung loose around her shoulders—almost reaching the most perfect female rear end he had ever seen. She had a quiet smile on her lips—lips that were perfect.

Perfect for kissing. Lips just made for a man to want to kiss. Over and over again.

Dusty.

Sweat slicked his palms like he was a total loser.

Had he been completely blind?

BEN HAD SUDDEN INSIGHT INTO EXACTLY HOW GOOD OLD HARRY HAD FELT IN that instant he'd first seen Sasha as a *woman*.

Ben was living that moment right now.

Until he saw the expression in those green eyes as she looked at him. She was hurting. Why? He'd always hated it when Dusty was hurting in any way.

"Hey," he said softly. Tonight just called for softly. "What's wrong, baby? Are there dragons out there that I need to slay?"

"Just feeling a bit off, mostly." She waved her hand dismissively. But he knew she was hiding something. Keeping her secrets all to herself. "What brings you out of your cave?"

"The, uh, book, isn't going well." Well, Harry's reactions to Sasha weren't going well. The things Harry wanted to *do*...

Hell, Ben didn't write romance. That was his sister's gig, not his.

Ben refused to ask Nikki what to do next. A man had his pride. He wasn't going to ask romance advice from his baby sister—even for a fictional character. Nikki would just laugh like a lunatic and then probably give her husband a kiss she definitely shouldn't in front of her big brother. Then laugh at Ben again, call him a baboon—and text Dusty to tell her all about it.

Then they'd both snicker at him.

He was wise to Nikki Tyler Clark, after all.

He'd fully admit good old Harry didn't know what to do with this Miss Sasha Nally, of the curvy body, straight blond, waist-length hair, and big green eyes. With the mouth that was made for smiling...and other things.

Sinful type things.

Just like Dusty's mouth. Dusty's mouth was made for sinful type things too! With a man.

Ben stared at the real-life version of Sasha in front of him. Yes, Dusty had a mouth made for sinning. With a man.

Hell. Hers looked even softer, pinker, than he'd imagined Sasha's.

He just stared.

Then Ben remembered she'd asked him why he was there. He'd probably better answer. He couldn't just stand there staring at her like an idiot. She'd call Nikki or Fletcher and he'd end up having to deal with those two tonight. There was no way he'd want to explain to his sister that he was staring—in *lust*—at Nikki's best friend. "Work is not going well. I figured a change of location might help jog something loose before I chuck my laptop out the window."

"You've come out of your writing cave? Midbook? Did the universe shift or something?" The teasing tone was there, but she looked tired. *Too* tired. Worry hit him.

They'd almost lost her when she'd been fourteen. From a heart attack, of all things. But he thought she was okay now. Nikki would have said something if Dusty was ill. Actually, Nikki would have been panicking if something was wrong with her precious bestie. *Everyone* in their little family would know if there was something going on with Dusty. Immediately.

"You are worrying me, kid." Ben wrapped his fingers around her wrist and just kept her there next to him. He brushed his thumb over the soft skin of her inner wrist, immediately noting how silky her skin felt against his for the first time in his life.

The stray thought that Dusty would probably be that soft everywhere struck him completely witless.

What was he *doing* here?

He had no business wondering if Dusty's skin was that soft all over. Or if those lips tasted like the cherry Coke he suspected she'd already poured herself. She loved cherry Coke and always had.

He just didn't think of her that way and never would.

But Dusty was old enough now.

Old enough for anything a man wanted to do with her. To her.

She may have *already* done some of those types of things before.

His heart about stopped even thinking about that.

It hit him, hard. Some guy sooner rather than later was going to swoop in

and take Dusty away permanently, too. Just like Hunter had captured Ben's precious baby sister Nikki.

Right there in the middle of the diner Dusty could meet some guy and then marry him and just change things forever. Some of the Mastersons, like that asshole Jack and his two brothers Gabe and Eli or their cousin Dane or Dan or whatever his name was, were always in the diner around lunchtime lately. Talking to the girls. Flirting with them. Trying to get them to go out on dates with those baboons even.

The Talley girls flirted back most times, too. Well, so did Junie and Em, but he wasn't going to think about *that*. It was just small talk, conversation. It happened there in the diner all the time.

He'd seen guys flirt with Dusty a million times before. It had never been anything serious. Everyone flirted with the waitresses in the diner. Ben did, every time he was in there.

But they were getting old enough to want more than just flirting, right? All of them. Even Meyra and Daisy had to be twenty-three or -four now, he thought. Old enough. They were all old enough.

To have husbands, families, of their own. It would happen someday soon.

Why hadn't he noticed this before? Ben had been a bit out of touch lately, apparently.

He felt so old. Almost left behind, even. He was thirty-three now. Not like he was ancient or anything.

Maybe one of those Masterson boys was looking at *Dusty* now. Doctors, lawyers, accountants—men who could take care of her and settle down with her and give her two or three really cute babies and things.

Maybe even *four* cute little Dusty babies.

Drive her to church on Sunday and hold her hand on walks around the neighborhood. Buy her a puppy and a beautiful house and a wedding ring and hold her really close each night. That kind of thing.

The perfect, wholesome kind of life he'd always wanted for his sister. And her friends. The way life *was* in Masterson. The kind of life he'd missed when he'd been out there in base housing, being just one of a faceless number.

Ben had spent a good deal of his life—at least when he had been back in Masterson on leave from the army anyway—looking out for Dusty. He liked it that way, too. He hoped that didn't change when she did find someone someday.

It probably would.

What if the guy was jealous or something? Didn't want her hanging around with Ben or his younger brother Fletcher after they were together? Fletcher and Ben—and their older brother Gil—had spent years looking out for Dusty. He didn't want that to change when some other guy took her away.

It was possible the guy would feel like that.

Those Masterson brothers weren't exactly too *friendly* with Ben and some of his cousins. He couldn't see one of them wanting Ben all up in Dusty's life. There was no way in hell Ben would want to share a woman like Dusty's time and attention with a random man she wasn't related to. No. That would be one thing he wouldn't like.

Dusty's future husband would be the possessive type, Ben suspected.

Especially with a phenomenal woman like Destiny Marie.

If Ben had Dusty for his own, he'd pull her into his arms, roll up the sidewalks, batten down the hatches, and carry her off to his bed every opportunity he could. Keep her there as long as he could, too.

Ben stared into those green eyes of hers as he imagined doing just that.

Having her naked and in his bed for as long as he wanted her. Even if it was forever. Like Gil now had the seriously hot and sexy Sage in *his* bed forever.

Ben, for just the shortest moment, imagining having that very type of life with *Dusty*.

Dusty. Naked. In his arms. His bed. Forever. Being *his* everything.

His body tightened so swiftly, so strongly, with nearly instant hunger, he almost let out an *oomph*. His chest tightened, too. That...was insane.

Hell, he'd almost lost the ability to breathe, just standing there staring at *Dusty*. Imagining taking off that red *Eat at Flo's Masterson Diner* T-shirt and tossing it against the blue wall of his bedroom. Of luring her into the bed and doing all sorts of wicked things to that soft, pale, silky skin. Of pressing his lips to hers. To tasting that soft-looking bottom lip. Over and over.

To just doing *things* to her. With her.

To devouring her. Just having her to himself for hours and hours and hours and devouring her.

Dusty. Devouring Dusty. Doing things to Dusty. To Dusty.

That was just crazy.

A man just didn't think of his sister's bestest friend like that. He just didn't.

He had *never* thought about Dusty like this before. He'd have punched any other guy in the world for having that exact thought about her. But as she stared up at him, it struck him that that was exactly what Ben wanted to do to her now. *Right now.*

Just take her back to his lair and love her until that sadness in her eyes disappeared forever.

6

US MARSHAL SEAN SUTTON WAS A LITTLE MORE THAN IRRITABLE NOW. FRED Brown had called him when Sean was less than a mile away from Fred's house. Told him they couldn't meet today, after all. That LaDonna and the girls were home. Fred never wanted to meet with Sean when the four girls were around.

Too much of a chance they could overhear. Learn the family's *secrets*.

Never mind that Sean had driven through *two states* to get there and it was getting late.

Just so Fred could avoid telling the girls the truth again. Sean had been intending to give the man an update on where the Browns stood in the program and to share what he had learned recently. Discuss possibilities with Fred on what it could mean for his family.

Sean had never agreed with Fred and LaDonna's decision not to tell their four daughters where they had come from. Why they moved so frequently. Why they had to be so careful all the time.

What they had lost.

Telling a mother she couldn't openly grieve her lost children was abhorrent to Sean. He adored his three sons and saw them as often as he could. He traveled extensively as a witness inspector, of course, but when he could be with his boys, he was. Never would he let anything happen to his sons.

Nor would he keep these kinds of secrets from them. At least not when they were adults. Fred and LaDonna's girls were adults now. The youngest had turned nineteen four months ago. They should have the *choice* about how

they lived their lives. Who they *were*.

Fred had taken that from them. Sean understood theoretically that it was for their safety, but he did not agree with the way Fred had handled raising his daughters. Not one bit. Maybe it had been grief causing the older man to tighten his hold on the four girls, keeping them close and protected. Isolated.

Too isolated, even for necessity.

It was remarkable the girls had turned out as well-adjusted as they had. They were all as beautiful as their mother. Kind, intelligent, compassionate, beautiful girls. A little naive and incredibly sheltered, of course. But they were wonderful young women.

Sean would be proud to call any one of them his daughter. Yet Fred seemed so much more concerned with controlling them, that he was missing who they had become.

Or what they *needed* now.

Sean's job was to keep the Browns safe. That was *it*. Not to tell Fred Brown how to raise his four daughters—or deal with them now. To meet with them the required once per year, to address any problems and make certain the Browns were following protocol. Some in the program didn't follow the rules. They either had to be relocated, or were removed from the program when it became a problem.

No one who followed protocol had ever been killed. It was those who *didn't* follow the rules, or who went back, that faced trouble.

Fred and LaDonna had moved six times now. Not out of necessity, in Sean's opinion. But out of paranoia. Maybe even restlessness.

Many in the program hated it. Hated cutting off the ties to their past, hated being stuck in careers they might not have actually chosen for themselves. Hated the secrecy and the fear. Sean made a point of checking on the Browns three or four times a year. Even if just a telephone call.

For LaDonna mostly.

He recognized the fear in that woman's beautiful eyes every time he saw her. The pain. The hurt. The growing fears as her daughters prepared for the next stage in their lives.

It had surprised Sean that their eldest daughter hadn't left the nest already. Dylan and Fred, especially, clashed and butted heads. Dylan was twenty-two, almost twenty-three, now. Well old enough to be out on her own.

Hell, she was old enough to be married with a couple of children now, too. Sometimes, that didn't seem possible.

Sean suspected she'd stayed for her mother, for her sisters. Dylan seemed to think it was her job to take care of all of them. Sometimes, LaDonna just couldn't handle the day-to-day of *life*. Dylan would step in—take care of her family, then. Fred had practically brainwashed those girls into thinking they had to stay close to one another. No matter what.

Sean had always been conflicted. Especially about *Fred*.

He had never delved too deeply into the why of Fred Brown.

The man just infuriated him too much. But now? Maybe now was time. For those four girls, if nothing else. Those four young women deserved a better life than they had.

They deserved so much better than Fred Arnold Brown as a father.

But that wasn't Sean's job. Even if that man angered him to new heights.

Sean turned his car around, reminding himself that he was a professional. He had a duty to make sure the entire Brown family was safe from the men who had threatened to kill their mother so many years ago, and that was it.

That he personally felt LaDonna Brown and her four daughters deserved better, well, that was an opinion Sean was just going to keep to himself.

BEN WAS ACTING EVEN WEIRDER THAN USUAL, DUSTY DECIDED A FEW HOURS into her shift. Jumpy, whenever she got near him. He pulled away every time she accidentally touched him, too. He normally didn't do that. He was just as likely to pester her, to touch her, as he was his sister—in the same oftentimes annoying ways.

Not tonight, though. Tonight was just weird all around. He was watching her. More than he normally did. In that particularly broody way he had, like something heavy was on that complicated man mind of his. Some women—her baby sister Daisy included—insisted it was very sexy.

They said *Ben* was very sexy, too. Well, that was just crazy.

Daisy always had been a bit off her rocker.

Nikki had said he pouted. Dusty believed that was a far more accurate description. Still...Ben had that whole broody poet thing going on that some women—Dusty excluded, of course—found fascinating. Dusty shot him a look. His head was down and he was typing furiously. There was a frown line on his brow.

She studied him for a moment, trying to decide.

Sexy—or pouting?

She'd never really thought about Nikki's brothers as being *sexy* in any way. Not really. She squinted, tried to pretend she didn't know the man sitting there as well as she did.

But maybe? Just a little. Maybe. He was definitely tall, broad-shouldered, and muscular. But that described every Tyler guy she had ever seen. There was that.

Maybe there had been that tiny crush she'd had on Ben's older brother Gil when she'd been eighteen and Gil had been around twenty-seven or so. But that had fizzled pretty quickly.

Gil had always just been more of that big brother type for her. Ben's younger brother Fletcher had been involved with her cousin Charlotte for a while—and he had always been the one to drive Dusty and Nikki around. To be all big brotherish for longer than Dusty could remember. Fletcher definitely had 'big brother' down to a science.

Ben was the one she'd interacted with the least because he'd avoided her and Nikki the most when they'd been younger. As soon as he'd been eighteen, he'd enlisted in the army. She and Nikki had been around nine or ten then. He hadn't been back much until the last two years.

Her path crossed his more now than it ever had before. Everywhere. Ben lived in town—just a few blocks over. He was all over town now. Everywhere. He was the kind of guy who was hard to miss, too.

Every Tyler man in existence was. It was just a given.

No, Dusty wouldn't say she knew him nearly as well as she did Gil and Fletcher. Or that she even wanted to. Not after the way he'd butted in to Nikki's life over the last few years—and Dusty's, by association. He'd ruined at least a half-dozen dates for Dusty in the last eighteen months alone. So much so the guy she'd had dinner with two months ago had asked if he had to watch out for Guard Dog Ben if he just wanted to hold her hand.

She finished with her final table of the evening. The odd pair of businessmen had left hours earlier. Taking her *fear* with them.

She just skirted Ben where he was, leaving him mostly alone. He didn't even seem aware of the world around him tonight. He just kept typing away. She studied him for another moment. She had never had the opportunity to watch him work before.

The diner seemed to be the place people were coming lately to get away. They were slow enough tonight, Dusty felt more than comfortable sending Meyra home an hour early when her uncle Gerald stopped by to grab dinner for himself and his wife. He took Meyra home on his way. Her cousin didn't protest—whatever was on her mind had had Meyra quieter than usual all night long.

Dusty went back to rolling more silverware, trying to keep her hands busy. While she rolled, she watched Ben and tried to figure him out until the last customers wound up their conversation and left.

He was far prettier than either of his brothers. They were all around the same size, tall, broad-shouldered, strong, muscled, and beautiful. Ben was the prettiest, of the three, she decided. Ben looked like a Greek statue. Every inch of him was physical perfection. Gil and Fletcher had that whole cowboy rugged thing going on, but Ben...

The man was seriously buff to be a writer nerd, like Nikki called him.

Dusty hadn't noticed that before. But now, it was rather hard to miss.

Was she just that used to him being around that she rarely even looked at him any longer? His hair needed combed again. Maybe even cut. It was mostly warm dark brown, with hints of the red that every Tyler had. It was long and shaggy now, with a tiny bit of curl.

His shoulders were roped with beautiful muscles.

She could sit there and *look* at him all day. No denying that.

It was when he decided to meddle in her life that she had the biggest problems with the man. Hard to forget that.

Junie had her bag and keys now. Ben took that for the signal to close his laptop and shove it into his bag. "I'll walk you to your truck, then come back in and stay with Dusty until she locks up."

His cousin didn't protest. She'd never come out and say it, but Junie was afraid of the dark now. Especially when she was at the diner. After what had happened before. It had probably taken a whole lot of guts to even come back to the diner as quickly as she had after Junie had been abducted from the back door.

Well, Dusty could understand that. She'd never be able to drive in the snow without remembering what had happened to *her* ever again. She used to love when it snowed. How beautiful and pure it would be. Now? Not so much. Probably never again.

She was remembering again when a hot hand landed on her shoulder. "You ready to go?"

Dusty yelped and turned.

Ben was right there. Staring down at her from eyes so blue a woman could forget to breathe just looking into them. Well, most women. Dusty was immune to Tyler-blue eyes completely. "You scared me!"

"Sorry. I wasn't exactly quiet." His fingers trailed down her arm and wrapped around her elbow. "You okay?"

"That tickled." Dusty shivered at the heat of his touch. His eyes darkened. Her breath caught as the scent of him surrounded her.

He smelled like warm spice and coffee. And man. Her palm was pressed against one of the most defined male chests she'd ever felt before. Not that she'd gone around feeling lots of random men's chests, but wow.

Ben was *ripped*.

No denying that.

This was her best friend's once scrawny, pimply-faced older brother? He'd had acne until he was twenty. This was not the Ben Tyler from Dusty's memories. And to her shock and, yes, a little bit of horror, Dusty wanted to curl up right there against that chest and just let Ben surround her with himself.

So she could forget the nightmares haunting her now.

BEN WANTED TO JUST SCOOP HER UP AND CARRY HER OFF. BACK TO HIS LAIR. Where he would claim her as his own and never let her go. Keep her forever. Just *his*. Like he'd heard his brother say about his own soon-to-be-wife just two days ago.

Gil was always teasing Sage about being a caveman where she was concerned. Ben suspected he knew what his brother meant about that sexy woman his brother adored. Sage would get a soft look in those big brown eyes and her cheeks would turn red and she'd just watch Gil, like she was waiting, hoping for something.

Ben wasn't stupid. He had a good idea of what usually happened after she looked at his brother in that particular way. They were so beautiful together.

Maybe Ben didn't have a romantic bone in his body, but he loved how much his brother loved his fiancée. And how obvious it was that Sage felt the same in return. Same for his sister Nikki and that dork husband of hers, Hunter. Hunter adored Nikki—just as much as Gil adored his Sage.

The way it was supposed to be.

Dusty was looking up at him. She was beautiful. He could see some man adoring *her* some day, too. But it would have to be the right kind of man. The special kind. She deserved that much and more, this beautiful woman in front of him.

Dusty was one of the most phenomenal women Ben had ever known.

Ben wanted to touch her all over. Before he could stop himself, he slipped

his hand up to cup her cheek. He leaned down and brushed a kiss across the soft pink lips. Like he'd done dozens of times before.

Well, normally he kissed her forehead.

Never her soft, perfect, beautiful mouth.

Yes. Cherry Coke. Just like he'd suspected.

He forced himself to pull back quickly. To keep it *brotherly*.

Brotherly? Ben definitely didn't feel *brotherly*. Far from it.

Ben fought the urge to carry her off with everything he had. He *was* just as much a caveman as his older brother was, after all. Damn it. What in the hell was happening here? "Come on, kid. I'll walk you to your truck."

She just blinked at him for a moment. Ben slung his laptop bag over his shoulder, forcing himself to turn away from her. Her hair was straight and long. He wanted to tangle his hand in it, see if it was as soft as it looked. He wanted to taste her lips for *real*, not just a stupid brotherly peck.

Then he wanted to enjoy her every way a man could.

Before doing it all over again. And then, again the next morning.

He waited while she locked the diner and slipped the keys into her bag. Then she turned to him. "My truck is right there. I think I can handle it from here."

"Nope. That wasn't the deal. I told Marin I would see to it that you made it home. I'm going to do that. Otherwise, that witchy-woman might just put a spell on me or something."

"And you're afraid of her. Everyone knows it. She uses it to her advantage."

"No kidding. That woman is the dangerous kind. You can tell it by looking at her."

"Because of how she looks? I didn't think you'd be that shallow—having all this insight into humanity that Nikki assures me all writers possess, after all. And I know Nikki tried to train you three baboons better than that. We both did."

He snorted at that. They had done no such thing—but he and his brothers let them think that. "Harry's not cooperating today. And I don't care how your cousin looks. It's that whole predict the future thing that scares me spitless. You can see her magic powers in her eyes."

Her face tightened. "Yes. If you believe in that kind of thing."

Ben wasn't sure if he did or not. He'd seen a few too many things in his lifetime to completely discount it. But Dusty, she was a skeptic through and

through. He doubted she'd ever even believed in Santa Claus, this woman. "I'm not saying I do. Or I don't."

He just went with it—he slung his arm over her shoulder. She stiffened. He refused to pull away. He shot a challenging look at her. Daring her to say something. She looked so *grumpy* in her heavier winter coat. "Come on, I'll help you across the road. Since you are so defenseless and helpless."

"Ha ha. What would I do without you?"

"I hope you never have to find out." He willingly did his duty, walked the gorgeous woman to her truck, and made sure she was tucked safely inside. Ben helpfully lifted her in, even after she gave him an exasperated look. He was used to her looking at him like *that*.

And maybe...putting his hands on her hadn't been a smart move. But he'd think about *why* later.

Then, mostly because he knew it would irritate her and he loved it when she snapped fire at him, Ben pulled out right behind her and followed her the short distance home.

That was what a good best friend's older brother did, after all.

IT HAD TAKEN SEAN ANOTHER FULL DAY TO GET TO THE BROWNS. FRED couldn't put him off any longer. He'd finally made it to the Browns' home in a small town in southeastern Idaho.

LaDonna Brown greeted him at the door.

She was a remarkably attractive woman. Sean had always thought so. It was in the turn of her head, the way she smiled. The look of vulnerability in her blue eyes. And the pain. There was a heartbroken look in her eyes that never truly went away.

She had lost four children because of the monsters of the world.

No woman like that would ever be fully whole again. A chance overheard conversation and murder witnessed by her and her husband had cost them four of their children. *Four*.

She'd mentioned them *once* in his hearing. Spoke of the loss and how much it had nearly destroyed her. And if Dylan hadn't needed her so much, LaDonna wouldn't be there now.

Sean knew what LaDonna had been implying.

He could not imagine. He had three sons. The oldest was now twelve. If he was to lose him or his younger brothers, even if he didn't see them as much as he would have liked, it would destroy him.

The woman who now went by LaDonna Prescott Brown smiled at him, again. But the shadow was always there.

Sean would give anything to be able to help her erase that look from her eyes. He adored LaDonna. He had from the moment he'd been assigned to her case six years ago. Her younger children, four beautiful daughters, had

been teenagers. He thought Dylan, the eldest, had been sixteen at the time. Dylan's younger twin sisters had been just shy of fifteen. And sweet little Dorothy had just been thirteen or so.

They were adults now and just as beautiful as their mother, though only two had their mother's blond hair. They all four had their father's eyes. Bright green.

And then there was *Fred*.

Even at his age, Sean had men he admired.

Fred Brown was not one of them. Fred Brown was ruthless, intelligent, harsh, and incredibly dominant and controlling.

Fred loved his daughters, and flat out adored the woman he had married. He loved his family. It was the man's one redeeming quality. Even if he *controlled* that family completely.

Fred Arnold Brown, that was the name the tall man in his sixties went by now. It had taken Sean a while to find the original files that pertained to this family. They had been buried, deeply. Deeper even than they should have been.

Sean had always felt a bit paternal where the Browns' daughters were concerned. They were good girls. Smart, a bit on the quiet side, though Dylan could be a real pistol. She'd gone through a bit of a rebellious phase that had given them all fits for a while there. Not wild, or problematic, or anything like that. Just passionate, full of *heart*.

That girl could change the world some day.

If given the chance. Sean truly hoped she one day had the chance.

The girls were all in college now, but only online. Living on campus had not been an option Fred would even consider, for any of his daughters. The controlling part of Fred kept his daughters ridiculously close. They had one computer in the center of the home that the girls had to share, plus the little cheap laptop Dylan had bought five years ago that was close to on its last legs. Fred kept a close eye on what his daughters did online, too.

But considering what Fred and LaDonna had lost, how could Sean blame them?

Dylan should be graduating soon. The twins would be about a year or so after. Then they'd all get jobs. Try to build careers. Lives for themselves. If Fred allowed it anyway. Did Fred honestly think he could keep Dylan and her sisters at home with him and LaDonna forever?

They would want more than that. Far more.

He knew that once the youngest girl graduated, the Browns planned to move again.

Or they had. Until *this*.

This changed everything.

“Sean, can you stay for dinner?” LaDonna asked. “I’ve made pot roast. That’s Fred’s favorite.”

Fred. She didn’t even hesitate with the name he used now. So many Sean worked with struggled with the changing of their identities. With the loss of those identities.

“I was hoping you’d ask.” He leveled a look at her. “Where are the girls?”

“They went out. A movie. Why?”

“I have some things I need to talk to you about. I don’t know how much you want to share with your girls.”

“They want to move out,” LaDonna said, anxiety crossing her beautiful face. Anxiety ate at her, Sean knew that. And had for as long as he’d known her. Fear. How could it not? “To start living their lives. But I just...”

“Can’t keep them safe out there?” He understood. Of course, he did. This woman had *lost* four of her children before. Two girls, he believed, and two boys, though he had never fully asked. And it wasn’t listed in their files, other than they had lost four children. Genders and names had been redacted.

To have been given a second chance with the younger girls, of course, she was terrified of losing that. Of losing them. They were her world. Her heart. LaDonna didn’t work. She didn’t attend church. She wasn’t on social media. She had no other social network. She had Fred, and she had her daughters. She was isolated. Living behind a wall of fear.

“If we have to run again, I don’t know if we’d be able to take them with us. I can’t...leave my daughters behind. It would destroy me.”

Yes, he knew that it would. But he had information that could change things for them all. That was why he was there to begin with. “Morris Preston has been arrested. And his empire is crumbling as we speak.”

The dish in her hand slipped to the floor. “It’s over? It’s almost over?”

Sean shook his head. He truly didn’t want to get her hopes up. But Morris Preston was in jail, and the other two men who had been associated with what had happened to the Browns hadn’t been seen in at least a decade. Sean had searched for them himself. “I don’t know that I’d say that yet, but... something major happened in Masterson County. Preston was arrested

recently.” Several weeks ago, but it had taken Sean’s people a while to get details to him. For him and his supervisor to consider what it meant for the Browns’ case.

There were still others out there, after all. Morris Preston had never acted alone. But Sean was cautiously optimistic for the Browns.

“Is my family, our family...are they all okay?” LaDonna asked as the back door opened and *Fred* came in. Her eyes immediately went to her husband. Sean would never forget the hope on her beautiful face in that moment.

All LaDonna Brown really wanted was to go back to the life she’d left behind.

Fred was a tall man, at least six foot five. The man he had been originally would be around sixty-five or so now. *Fred’s* documentation listed him as sixty-two years old. LaDonna was fifty now in reality, but her ID listed her as a few years older.

She’d practically been a child bride, in Sean’s opinion. Fred Brown was far too old for her. He’d robbed the cradle. And then, seven years later, he had destroyed her world.

By being arrogant, cocksure, and a little greedy. Getting involved with men Fred should have known to avoid. It had all boiled down to a restless need to prove himself or something. And a quest for money. Reckless, thinking his charm would make everything fine. Controlling and demanding, full of so-called righteous fury.

Instead, it had cost his wife four of her children.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen next. But...I thought you deserved to know that something *has* happened. And...” He leveled a look at LaDonna. She had always been a lot easier to handle than Fred. Fred just infuriated him on such a deep level. Sean almost wished he’d never been assigned the Browns in the first place. But LaDonna and the girls deserved someone to look out for them. So he stuck it out, even though he’d considered asking to be reassigned so many times before. “I think it’s time you told your daughters the truth. All of it. I think they deserve to know.”

If everything went well, the Brown family could return to where they had come from. Could try to build a life no longer having to look over their shoulder for the threat they knew was out there coming for them.

Could visit their four older children’s graves, if nothing else.

LaDonna would be *free* of the damage Frederick Arnold Brown had

caused twenty-three years ago forever. It was all Sean wanted. To give her back what had been lost.

As much as he could anyway.

His smile spread as the back door opened and there they were. LaDonna's daughters. So beautiful. So perfect. Just like their mother.

And far more than Fred Brown could ever deserve.

Dylan looked up, a grin crossing her pixie-beautiful face. "Uncle Sean!"

He opened his arms. The little thing came right to him, just like she always had every time before. No. Fred Brown didn't deserve his daughters or LaDonna for a single hot minute.

THE MAN HE WAS SUPPOSED TO MEET UP WITH AGAIN WAS WAITING FOR Wayne just outside a cafe in Sublette County. Jason Smith-Morris had the look of his biological father, but he was shorter. Uglier. Colder. Morris Preston was a monster. Wayne had long known that.

But the monster Morris Preston had *fathered* was far, far worse.

“About time, Pryor. I didn't think you were going to show.”

Wayne studied the younger man he'd known since the boy had been eight. The years hadn't been exceptionally kind to Jason. It had once been plain old Jason Smith. But the man had added *Morris* to the name the instant he'd hit eighteen. It had been his way to taunt Morris Preston that the boy knew about his parentage. And was daring Preston to act on it.

Preston had. But he'd kept this animal on the sidelines, on a leash with what he knew about Jason's mother.

Where the body was. Literally.

It made Wayne physically ill to imagine it. Only a monster could have done what Jason had back then. And since. “What do you want from me?”

“I need to get in to one of Preston's old places. He has a safe room. There are things in there we both probably want before the bumfuck cops in Masterson put it together that he might have hidden things...elsewhere. I have a *friend* delaying the investigation, warrants, that kind of thing now. But time is running out.”

Morris Preston's world was most certainly unraveling. It had kept Wayne up at night, worrying about it.

Morris Preston had kept a house on the edge of Masterson County. It had

been where he'd lived with whatever number wife he was on, his two legitimate sons by his first two wives, his three daughters who were near the same age as Wayne's own girls by the third wife, and Wayne thought that one of the articles on the news sites had mentioned there was a much younger son now as well.

“What do you need me to do? Not that I am saying I will. I gave up Preston's way of doing things years ago. I'm not interested in going back.” Hell, Wayne had mended his ways. He went to church every Sunday and sang in the choir. He wasn't Morris Preston's lapdog anymore.

“Get me in to good old Daddy's place and in that special little room of his, and we'll call it square. I'm not interested in anything resurfacing right now, either. I have...plans.”

Wayne just bet he did. “Who got the main house now that Preston got caught?”

Morris had multiple properties in southwest Wyoming. What Jason wanted could be anywhere.

“No one yet. He's keeping it until it goes to trial. He was denied bail. Got an unsympathetic judge. Not one on my payroll, unfortunately. Yet. But the other place behind that damned Talley Inn, he sold it two weeks ago to fund his defense. To some Barratt out of Texas. Guy is letting the girls keep the smaller house on the property since they have my sweet little baby brother to take care of now—until the places they inherited from Vince Preston are ready, I heard. Supposedly, this Barratt is a *nice guy*. Barratt's staying at the main house next door. He's repairing it and everything. He's going to be a problem. But I'm sending men to take care of him soon. Real soon. I hate rich men who think they can buy whatever they want.”

Wayne fought the urge to say something. He truly did. Everything Jason Smith-Morris had done for twenty fucking years had been to make himself richer. Where was his room to talk?

“Is the house with the safe room occupied?” He was glad Morris Preston had been denied bail—couldn't have happened to a more deserving man. There was nothing Wayne regretted more than getting involved with Preston all those years ago. His only excuse—Preston had been like a brother to him when they were kids. Had given Wayne a place to *belong*. Back then, that had mattered.

Wayne belonged with Linda and the girls now. But he could probably do what Jason needed. Without too much trouble. He'd done it before.

He'd perfected the ability to get in and out of houses before he was nineteen. This job might take him a bit more research and preplanning, but Wayne knew his own skills. Morris Preston had had better security monitoring than most since day one, until the internet systems had become all the thing. It had taken Wayne another couple of years to find his way around internet monitoring, too. But he could still do it. Wouldn't pose much of a challenge at all.

He could break into Morris Preston's place. If he wanted to. For the right reason.

"Sure is. It's the smaller one on Barratt's new property. Morris Preston's *daughters* are all three sitting there nice and cozy. Along with that last kid of his." Jason gave a chillingly cold smile. "Those bitches shouldn't be any trouble at all. I get what I want out of that house, deal with good old Geena, and then I am out of Wyoming forever. Help me do that, and my silence is *yours*. Don't help me, and, well, I hear the sheriff of Masterson County is actually one of the good guys with a beef over what happened to that pretty little deputy of his with Preston. I'm sure he'd love to learn about everything I know about...you. And what happened to dear Linda's first husband."

That was a secret Morris Preston had promised to take to his grave. Apparently, he hadn't kept that promise. Of course not. Wayne suspected Morris was pulling his son's strings from behind bars still. And now Jason was pulling Wayne's.

Ice chilled Wayne. And it had nothing to do with the approaching storm.

Jason had him by the balls.

And they both knew it.

HIS NAME WAS FREDERICK ARNOLD BROWN NOW. IT HADN'T ALWAYS BEEN.

Fred wasn't exactly his first choice, but it was bland enough to not be all that memorable. Arnold—Arnold was a stab in the gut, though. And always had been. It was why he had chosen it.

At almost six five, Fred Brown knew he stood out. Literally. He always had. He'd liked it, when he was younger. Liked towering over other men—and had liked being the man in charge.

Until his hubris had cost him what mattered most.

Fred had spent the last twenty-three years regretting the choices he'd made before. Choices that had cost him and his wife more than he would have ever imagined those days so long ago.

The four girls staring at him now were far more than he deserved. His second chance. His baby girls. Each one of them so special in their own unique ways.

They...*they* were the best of him. He had become a better man when he had been gifted the eldest of these girls now. A damned sight better father, that was for sure.

He would never forget how much that mattered again.

But that girl? Dylan was a handful. No denying that.

“That’s all I’m saying on the matter, young lady.” He gave her his sternest look. She shot him her most defiant—so small and scrappy. Delicate and dainty.

Even her hair was scrappy. And looked like the kid had taken scissors to it herself.

She probably had, knowing his Dylan.

Never had one of his children maddened him more than this one.

It had taken him two days to get up the nerve, the sheer guts, and the *words*, to tell his daughters the truth. Two damned days. His parents hadn't raised him to be a coward, but that was exactly what he had become.

"So basically, you and Mom saw this dude and his son and his goons murder a woman. Then they came after Mom. That's where she got the scars for real. Not a car accident like you've always said. So you turned state's evidence. But nothing happened? The guys were just out there living the good life, for twenty-three years, while you and Mom had to *hide*. And we had to hide."

Leave it to Dylan to get right down to the heart of the matter. She should consider law school, his kid. Instead of business administration and whatever those classes were she had taken about plants and seeds, of all things. He'd talked her out of most of those plant classes—and into business. She was good at it, and it would be a way for her to take care of herself when the time came. When he wasn't around to take care of her.

His baby girl—she wanted a place of her own, a place big enough for her own gardens. Her own experiments with seeds and plants and everything else Fred had never been all that interested in.

His baby girl had *dreams*.

She deserved to go for them. Except Fred stood in her way, and he knew it.

Guilt for holding his baby girl back was sharp—but she was alive. That was what mattered. Losing her or her sisters would destroy him. Even if they hated him for life, keeping them alive had been the only real goal he had had since that day.

"I hate him and that stupid Tyler guy," Dorie said angrily. His youngest was a real sweetheart, quiet and shy. But she had a bit of a temper when riled.

"I'm not too fond of them myself," Fred said, holding open his arms. Dorie would hug him, even if she was angry. She'd always been his most affectionate child. His baby girl. "But Bruce Tyler is a wanted man now. Morris Preston has been arrested. He sent a gunman after Bruce's daughter, and Bruce turned on him."

"Is she okay?" Dahlia asked in her whisper. She always whispered when she was afraid. "That girl."

"From what I have heard, she is. She was shot, as were a few other

women that day.” Right there in the middle of Masterson’s main street. Fred fought the anger as he imagined it. Those girls who had been harmed were near the same age as his own girls. Young, innocent, vulnerable to the monsters of the world. He wasn’t stupid—those girls had been shot to send a message to Bruce Tyler. Preston was like that. He’d stab his own best friend in the back if it made him more money. Or kept him in *power*. Fred just hoped those poor girls could *heal*, put their lives back together somehow. “But they all survived. The authorities are looking for Bruce now. They’ll find him eventually.”

“So you want to go back,” Devaney said. “To this place you were both born. Where these things happened? Is that what you are saying?”

“No. That’s not going to happen. Not until we know that all of Morris Preston’s tentacles are cut off. Bruce is still out there. And that man has dozens of relatives. Damned Tylers, nothing but hotheaded troublemakers, the lot of them. No good ever came out of the Tyler lines—mark my words on that, girls. Brawlers and drunks—they’d work their ranches during the week and drink away their pay on Sunday. Boozing and going from girl to girl every chance they could. When we left there were a good fifteen to twenty more Tyler boys in the county. Growing up just as wild as the ones who came before. There were a good nine or ten in my own generation, cousins, second cousins. Damned Tylers everywhere, filling that county and half the one next. Too damned many of them to count. All the ones in that line—redheaded and *mean* bastards, every one of them. And the cops in that town are dirty. They were then, and I don’t see it changing now.” Fred stood. He towered over his daughters and his wife. His family. He’d kill for any of them in a heartbeat. “But we thought you four deserved to know *why* we have had to live the way we have. And that things might be different going forward.”

He didn’t have to keep them so ruthlessly close now. They would like that, he thought. Especially his Dylan. She needed room to spread her wings—he had always known that. Always.

Fred wanted that for his daughter, so damned much.

He stopped next to his daughter and leaned down. He scooped her up close. “I love you, Dylan Brown. And I love Devaney Brown, Dahlia Brown, and Dorothy Brown. Forever. Everything I have done has been for my girls and their mother. Everything I do always will. Don’t ever forget that. I love you more than anything.”

“There’s more,” the woman who had held his heart from the moment he had first seen her said. “Girls...”

“What?” Dylan asked. Fred put her back on her small feet. His Dylan barely hit one hundred pounds—something she was still so touchy about to this day. Hell, she’d only weighed two pounds and thirteen ounces at birth. She’d always been his tiny one.

This...this was going to be the hardest part. The worst betrayal of them all. He had always known that. From the day Dylan was born.

Then Fred told them.

About the ones they had left behind.

And watched their faces as their world shattered.

THE DOG WAS BIG AND GOOFY. BUT HE WAS FRIENDLY. NO DENYING THAT. Sean had had a big doofus yellow dog just like that when he'd been a young teenager. He had adored that dog. Still missed him whenever he remembered.

That dog had gotten him through a seriously difficult time in his life.

This one was of a similar breed—mixed, all the way—and just as goofy. There was a smear of blood on his paw, like he'd gotten himself into trouble. There was also an address on his collar, but GPS showed that the dog was quite a distance from his home. Far too far for Sean to run him home, and stick to his own schedule.

And with the way the big guy was limping and looking at Sean with soulful brown eyes...

No, he couldn't in good conscience, leave the dog there alongside the highway, even though he had a schedule he needed to keep. Sean had almost hit the big guy himself. "Come on, buddy. Let's take you to town. I'm sure this place has a vet clinic that can help you find your way home."

Sean would normally just drive him back to his owners, and probably give them a bit of a lecture on watching their pet a little closer, but he just had too much to do today.

He wanted to head back to Idaho next. Check on LaDonna, see how the discussion with her daughters had gone after he'd left. She'd texted him the night before that Fred was finally going to tell the girls the truth. Sean hurt for those girls. So damned much.

It wouldn't have been easy, for any of them. Not with the knowledge that they'd *lost* so much in twenty-three years. Their whole worlds had been

destroyed—before the girls had even been born. That would never be right.

If he was going to have time to stop in Idaho with the Browns, he had to get the lead out. He'd taken too long with that new family in Nebraska. They were still in panic mode. That family would be for a long time.

He hurt for that family, but he'd been hurting for the Browns for so much longer.

Sean was going to swing into Masterson. See what he could find out about Morris Preston's arrest, and what the town buzz was. See if it would ever be safe for the Browns to return home to where they belonged.

Those girls deserved to know where they belonged. To know who had come before.

But first...the dog.

"All right, big guy. Let's go for a ride." Sean guided his new friend off the highway. The dog jumped readily into his rental truck. There was a no-pets policy, but he'd just swing by the car wash and vacuum after he took the big guy to the vet.

He wasn't going to just leave the dog there by the highway. Semi trucks had been all over the road the entire drive he'd been headed toward Masterson.

Sean just couldn't do that.

He drove into town. Fortunately, there was a vet clinic right there, unimaginatively named Masterson Vet Clinic. It seemed to be a thriving place.

He grabbed his duffel and pulled out his spare tie. He didn't want the dog yanking free. Masterson wasn't a big town, by any means, but the main area was a bit congested. He tied it to the big guy's collar. "Come on, bubba. Let's get you home."

He crossed the parking lot, the dog loping along beside him, big floppy ears giving the dog real character. When he pushed open the door, he paused. Took a look inside for threats. He'd watched for threats his entire career. It was just ingrained now.

There was a woman there. Just three feet inside the door. Kneeling down to pet a smaller dog. She looked up when he entered. Smiled.

Sean stared. Well. His day had certainly gotten a little brighter.

He hadn't expected *this*. Expected *her*. Sean paused where he was for a moment, and admired. This was a woman worthy of admiration. No denying that.

She was blond perfection. With hair that was long, straight and warm gold. It fell almost to her waist. When she smiled at him...

Holy hell, she had a smile as powerful as LaDonna's. And her eyes? So green. Beautiful green.

It was almost as if he'd seen those eyes before, too. Somewhere. Maybe in his *dreams*?

He could see dreaming about this woman. She was the type of woman men definitely dreamed about. Sean might have been near forty, but he was a healthy man, still. This woman was beautiful.

Well, Sean had always preferred blondes.

He laughed at himself, bemused. Sean wasn't prone to flights of fancy, but sometimes...

Well, he was a lonely man at times, on the road as much as he was.

The *vision* in front of him smiled. "Hello, how can I help you?"

"I..." Needed to get himself together. He was a professional with the federal government, after all. He couldn't be knocked sideways by a much younger woman in puppy-covered hospital scrubs. Why was he there? Something tugged his arm. The dog. The dog! Sean was far more tired than he had realized, apparently. "Well, I'm hoping you can help me help him actually."

She looked down when the dog gave a woof in greeting and wagged his tail excitedly. Like he'd been there before. Which he might actually have been. Sean had googled—there was only one vet clinic in the entire county, after all. "I found this big guy on the highway, and I believe he may have hurt himself a bit."

She reached out. Ran one slender hand over the dog's head affectionately. Stan envied the dog. "You big lunkhead. What have you gotten into this time? The dog, not you, sir."

The dog barked, like he was explaining himself to her.

"I take it you know this...delinquent." He was a good fifteen years older than this beautiful creature. But his body was on high alert, telling him that he was a *man*.

And this was such a beautiful woman. Utter perfection.

Males had been attracted to females since the beginning of time. It was survival of the species, after all. It was the law of the jungle. One he understood, but he had never been attracted to much younger women before. He had always preferred women with maturity, with knowledge of the world,

and confidence.

Older women.

He had always had a thing for *older* women.

Maybe Sean needed to remind himself of that here.

His ex-wife was five years older than Sean. But this woman wasn't *ordinary* in the least. Sean just reminded himself he was a professional. Again.

And got himself back on track.

"This is Kody the Gunder-dog. He belongs to a good friend of mine, Maggie Gunderson. I've dog-sat for him several times. Kody can be a bit mischievous. Though I haven't ever known him to wander away from home before. I'm almost certain he never has. He's pretty good about staying on their property. He sticks pretty close to Maggie and the kids." She stood after accepting the dog's enthusiastic greeting. She just laughed. Those eyes met Sean's, she still had a smile on her face, and it was like she was just *his* for that one instant.

Capturing Sean's heart forever, if he was a fanciful kind of man.

There was something about her when she turned to him. Something that reminded him of the older woman he adored so much. Around the jawline, maybe. The shape of the eyes. Certainly the same sleek blond hair, though LaDonna's natural color was a bit darker. And far shorter. The smile, though, very, very similar.

Perhaps, they were related. It was Masterson, Wyoming where he was. LaDonna had been born here in Masterson County, after all. So had that husband of hers.

Thoughts of *Fred* were all it took to have him getting back on track. For good, this time.

"I'm Sean Sutton. I'm actually just driving through. I'm with the US Marshals service. And you are?"

"I'm Dusty. I'm the vet tech here. Welcome to Masterson."

Sean stepped back. Before he did something insane, like...asked her to dinner while he was in town, or something. This woman, hell, she was probably only a year or two older than little Dylan.

"I'm not exactly certain what I should do about this dog." He didn't want to overstay his welcome. He was in town for a purpose, after all. "Unfortunately, I am on a schedule. I don't have time to assume responsibility for him."

The Browns were his job now. He wouldn't do anything to screw that up. Of all the families he had ever handled, they mattered to him. They had been the first he'd worked with right after his own divorce.

He'd gotten attached. To LaDonna and the girls anyway. More than any others, *LaDonna* mattered. Sean would never do anything to let that woman down, to hurt her in any way.

"I'll take care of him. You can leave him here. I'll call his people. and I... we're soulmates, after all." She stroke the dog's head with the most feminine, graceful hand Sean had ever seen. "I've known him since he was a puppy. He's the love of my life."

This woman was perfection.

Absolute and utter perfection. And she made him feel young again. Alive.

The way he hadn't in a long time. No, he didn't regret this delay, not at all. He left the dog with her and got back to his life. She had made his day.

He climbed into his rental, a small smile on his face. He wouldn't forget her, the beautiful woman with the golden laugh. Not for a long time.

It was nice to feel like a man again, if only for a few moments.

He'd thought his ex-wife had robbed him of that ability forever.

Speaking of...Sean pulled out his phone. Texted his boys a picture he'd taken of the dog, with the message he'd made a friend. And would call the boys before bed tonight.

He missed those three little monsters.

Sean just didn't get to be with them enough.

Sunlight glinted off the knife before Harry plunged it into the man in front of him. He never thought he would become a killer—but to defend the gorgeous blond woman he had loved for longer than he had ever realized, he would do it again and again.

He had to get Dusty to safety. To keep her safe from this monster who'd tried to kill her.

There was nothing Harry wouldn't do to keep Dusty safe. Forever. All he wanted was to keep her safe until the day he died. She was his world, after all.

Harry didn't know how it had happened, but it had. The woman meant everything to him. And always would.

He just hoped he'd get the chance to tell Dusty that—

BEN'S APARTMENT WENT DARK BEFORE HE COULD ERASE THE FREUDIAN SLIP of the fingertips and replace Dusty's name for Sasha's.

Again. She'd done it to him again.

Dusty just kept creeping her way into his work. His every waking thought. And ninety percent of his dreams on top of that.

For seven days now.

He'd been back to the diner twice now—she hadn't been there. Either time. He'd been both happy she hadn't been there and disappointed. Damn it.

The woman had him all tied up in knots, and she didn't even know.

Maybe that was it? Not being able to face his Dusty Demoness made her that much stronger? Made Destiny Marie Talley have even more power over him than she'd ever had before?

He'd just been doing a find/replace each night when he finished working and changing Dusty to Sasha. Otherwise, he'd make himself crazy wondering *why* she just wouldn't get out of his head.

She could have cast a spell on him. It could happen. It could happen.

Ben could just see the story playing out just like that. He'd been toying with the idea of starting an urban fantasy pen name in a few years. Once he had the dojang going with someone to run it and had his rental properties going and had himself settled on a ranch nearby or something.

When he had more time.

Maybe he'd start with a storyline about a gorgeous blond woman who looked just like Dusty. And she got sucked into another dimension or something. Or discovered how powerful she was over men. Because she just had to be a demon. Well, a demoness anyway.

The character. Not the real woman who seemed to be possessing him now.

Dusty had *done something* to him. Ben was starting to just accept that.

Ben had just been innocently sitting there in the diner, writing the words about a hapless man falling in love with his sister's bestest friend while a killer was on his tail and the love interest had morphed into *Ben's* sister's bestest friend.

It was that whole write-what-you-know-BS beginning authors were spoon-fed until they vomited. That was what it was.

He definitely hadn't intended that to happen. Yet it had.

Again.

Over and over and over for seven days.

Dusty just kept slipping herself into his head. Taking over. Destroying him.

Damn that woman. She was even more witchy than Marin. She just didn't advertise it. She'd cast a spell on him. He was almost certain of it.

He stared at the words in the glow from his laptop screen and cursed. He found-and-replaced once again, cursing himself for losing his mind. Only

then did he grab the flashlight and head to the fuse box.

Fifteen minutes later, he admitted to himself he wasn't going to be able to fix the problem. The electrician he'd hired to fix the building's problems—his uncle Bill—couldn't get to it for two more days. At least.

Bill was tied up fixing a wiring problem in the bedroom of one of Ben's youngest cousins, out at his cousin Augusta's ranch, more than an hour from town. Since Auggie, Junie, and Em were going to be raising their six younger sisters by themselves, their needs took ultimate priority. Auggie had only had the kids for two weeks now. While trying to get back into some sort of *normal* after taking a bullet on the damned street.

How could her life ever be *normal*, when she had one traumatized teenage baby siter, four traumatized little girl baby sisters, two traumatized grown-up baby sisters, and a *baby* baby sister that was just three-and-a-half months old—while Auggie had also just started walking again herself?

Ben knew the truth—he wasn't half as strong as that beautiful cousin of his. He just wasn't.

Ben had no choice. He was going to have to face his new personal succubus nemesis for the night. On *her* home turf.

Time to storm the Talley Castle.

Ben shoved a few days' worth of clothes into his duffel bag and grabbed his laptop bag, locked the building, and headed on foot in the one direction he had no business going. If he was lucky, he'd be able to get a room at the inn before she even crossed his path.

Sometimes Ben didn't get that lucky at all.

Then his head went straight to the thought of getting lucky with Dusty and...hell. He'd circled himself right back to the beginning. His body was tuned up and ready to roll now. For her. No denying it was for her now.

Dusty the Demoness struck him again.

Sometimes, being a writer and imagining scenes in such exact detail seriously sucked.

At least, when it came time to living in the real world.

As the light snow picked up around him, he tried to come up with his battle plan. Dusty wasn't going to defeat him. She just wasn't.

Unless that meant she cuddled him after, anyway.

Ben wouldn't exactly fight her on that.

Hell. The woman was destroying him. And she didn't have a clue.

DUSTY MADE IT BACK TO THE FRONT DESK AFTER HELPING WITH HOSTESSING in the dining room for a small rush. Kody trotted along next to her like that was where the big doofus belonged. She'd already shooed him out of the dining room once.

He'd waited in the lobby just outside the hostess podium and *howled* until she made it back to him. Like he was lovelorn or dying or something.

The guests—mostly locals—had all laughed, thankfully. Kody could be a handful. He loved the inn. And the attention he garnered there. He was spending the night, for sure.

Maggie was out at her cousin Gil's again tonight, and Clint was off with the Weatherby brothers helping one of them repair his roof before the snow hit again. Neither of them could drive into town to get him. Kody was going to hang out with Dusty. He liked that.

Marin looked up. "When I told you to get out and find yourself a man to follow you around like crazy, Dusty, I didn't think he'd have yellow fur."

"I called Maggie. She's going to come get him in the morning if the weather cooperates. She and the kids are spending the night at Gil's again tonight. She thinks one of the new hands may have left the door to the horse trailer open and Kody slipped in with the horse they took across town. Blended in with the hay. He likes to go for rides."

"They are taking turns with Gil and Sage, I think." Marin greeted the dog with love and hugs—Kody was undeniably in love with Marin, too. Come to think of it, Kody was in love with just about everyone he met. Especially women. He really was a good-natured dog. "Gil had to go to Finley Creek

with Fletcher, I believe. First time since what happened with Bruce Tyler and Morris Preston. He didn't want to leave her. Gil would only go to Texas if someone stayed with her. I believe Claudia has Sage duty tomorrow night. I thought I'd join them for a few hours if the weather cooperates."

A look passed over Marin's face. Dusty understood. Marin and Claudia had once been the closest of friends. Just like Dusty and Nikki. Until the day Claudia's father had almost killed Marin. *That* had seriously changed things.

Marin had pulled away from Claudia sharply back then—which had hurt Claudia a great deal. Now they barely talked at all. Claudia had been through real hell lately, too.

"I'll call. See if Sage needs more company, too." Maybe Dusty could go, be a buffer between her two friends somehow. Claudia worried her lately. What had happened to Gil and Sage and Junie had nearly cost Claudia her life. Twice. That had to have Claudia seriously reeling. Even if Claudia was the type to keep that to herself.

"In the meantime, are you sneaking this hot blond into your room tonight? Or does he need his own room key?" Kody was nosing his way behind the half-door that led to the rear of the front desk. He knew his way around the inn. She'd dog-sat him several times before. They usually just kept him in the family wing or behind the front desk.

Well, she wouldn't count the times he'd gotten loose and wandered into the dining room, looking for handouts. Or gotten into the elevator and somehow pressed buttons to get to the bottom level. They'd found him swimming in the pool with some of the younger guests once. It had been memorable. The kids had loved it. Dusty and Marin had had to wade in to get him out.

"I think he may be throwing me over for you tonight." He liked to sit behind the front desk and greet guests, too. He was a very social creature, Kody the Gunder-dog.

"We'll just let him end up wherever he ends up, then." Marin typed something into the computer. She usually ran all the night reports, and credit cards, and audits, right at midnight, and took the six-p.m.-to-one-a.m. shift behind the front desk, four nights a week. "As long as he stays out of the pool this time. He seriously doesn't understand that swimsuits are required."

She and her cousin kept talking, while Dusty settled in for her shift. They had other employees on duty within the hotel now, but it was a Wednesday, one of their slower nights.

On Wednesdays, guests were more likely to see a Talley working around the hotel of the evening than of any other time. It was more cost effective that way. And that was when they did their business meetings and planning all that was required to run two successful businesses.

Dusty loved the routine of it, but sometimes, she wondered if she'd be able to do it forever. She didn't know if she wanted to live at the inn until she was old and gray.

It would be nice to maybe have a quiet place of her own. With a yard. A big one, large enough for a big goofy dog. They had Chloe. She had been Miranda's before Miranda had moved to St. Louis, and Miranda had asked Dusty to keep her when Miranda had left for the FBI. But Chloe was almost fifteen now. They wouldn't have her forever. And she had been Miranda's first.

Dusty had never picked out a puppy for herself before. She wanted to experience that someday. And having her own house. That was a secret dream she'd not shared even with Nikki. It could be close to the inn. Like her uncle Gerald now. He just lived a few blocks over. Close enough to help when needed.

A pang of guilt went through her. Her *family* lived in the inn. And they stuck together. They always had. It had hurt when first Miranda and then Charlotte had left. It had been what her cousins had needed to do for their own happiness, and she was in full support of that. But each time one had left, it had changed things.

Dusty was starting to suspect she wasn't going to be so great with *change* going forward.

She didn't want to change things for the rest of her family again, just so she could have a house, with a house payment and a yard to mow.

Daisy and Dixie had other, full-time jobs. They worked part-time shifts around the inn and diner when they could. Darcey and Marin loved the inn and the diner—and the two crazy women worked fifty-plus-hour weeks between the two places. Marin had needed a few months' time away, to breathe, she'd said. But she was back full-time now, mostly running the diner, and doing four shifts a week at the inn, too. Darcey had scaled back at the radio station, from five nights a week, four hours a night, to three nights, three hours. Eventually, Dusty suspected her sister would quit the radio station. She didn't love it that much.

Not like Darcey loved the inn. Darcey *loved* the inn more than any of the

rest of them.

Not like Dusty loved the vet clinic, either.

She worked for Matt at the clinic three days a week, five hours each day, and did check-ins on any animals boarded there, on Sundays, as she lived the closest to his office. But he'd offered her the nine to four, five days a week now. And would pay for her to take classes to become his assistant. If she wanted it.

She just had to decide. Matt was expecting her answer after Thanksgiving—her new hours would begin after the first of the year. They could give Junie Dusty's hours at the diner. And give their second cousin Jacy more hours at the inn. They could make it work.

She had a nice routine, and she didn't deviate from it much at all. She had family who loved her and she adored in return. And she had good friends. Close ones. Friends she would do anything for, and she knew would do the same for her.

So why did she feel so adrift lately? Like her life had just become monotony now? One day blending into the next. With nothing really to work toward.

Maybe that was it. She lacked defined goals for her life now.

Dusty sat behind the front desk and tried to figure that out. It was a Wednesday. It should be slow. She'd have plenty of time to think.

"Something is going on in that complicated Dusty brain of yours," Marin said quietly around seven thirty. "Care to share what's been bothering you for a while?"

Dusty ran her fingers over Kody's big yellow head as she tried to put how she felt into words. "I'm not sure. I think what happened to Sage and Junie and Claud and Gil has me thinking again. Just...do you ever wonder if there is *more* for you out there?"

"You mean besides running hotel credit card receipts at midnight, and trying to decide which of the seven menu items we carry in the dining room to request for dinner?" Marin asked almost drily. Then she sobered, too. "Sometimes, I *know* there is. Something dark and evil and dangerous is out there, Dust. And it'll come for me eventually. I...feel...that. Probably sooner than I want to think about. I have never really been able to put it into words, though. Just a vague apprehension. I know it sounds crazy. But it's how I feel. And don't tell anyone, but...it's been growing lately. It'll be soon. I don't know if I am ready."

Marin had nightmares. Still. The entire family knew. They'd started after the former mayor of Masterson—Claudia's father—had held her and Maggie—Kody's owner's wife—and another man hostage. Marin had ended up shot, the man they'd been with had almost died from multiple gunshot wounds, and Maggie had ended up going into early labor with her baby Barratt.

The trauma had changed Marin in so many ways. Just like Dusty had changed after... "I think it has to do with what happened that night with Nikki. For me anyway."

"I know," Marin hugged her quickly. "How could it not? You changed that night. Just like I did after Jasper Grady. Change after trauma is inevitable. People we really care about just had massive traumas heaped on their shoulders. Worry for them has us unsettled. And brings our own hurts to the surface. It reminds us how out of control we really are. Of our lives...our destinies. I know I struggle with that. A lot. Therapy has helped me. Since Jasper Grady."

"I just feel off tonight, for some reason, I guess. Itchy, raw."

Marin shot a worried look toward the front doors of the inn. "Something happened today. Or will. Something that will change your life, I think."

Dusty laughed. Marin really took the entire I-can-feel-things thing she had going on to the extremes. "You know I don't believe in your brand of magic."

"I know you are the logical, skeptical, grounded in fact *Destiny* Talley. Talk about a total misnomer there. But..."

But, Marin was right more often than she was wrong. Dusty had to admit that. She shivered. "Sometimes you are just too spooky."

Dusty stood when a man approached the counter. She gave her best "Welcome to the Inn" smile. It took her a moment to realize where she'd seen him before. The man who had found Kody. "Hello, again. Welcome to the Talley Inn."

"What a pleasant surprise," he said in an almost-too-formal tone. "You work two places?"

"My family owns the inn, and the diner in town. I work several shifts here, and there, and the vet clinic as well. How can I help you tonight?"

"I am in need of a room." He had a bag over his shoulder. He had that rumpled traveler appearance, even though the suit had probably been pressed that morning and his distinguished slightly graying hair was ruthlessly combed. Dusty studied him a moment as Marin stepped closer.

He wasn't unattractive, at all, she realized. Just reserved and...very formal. Businesslike. He had had a nice smile—when he'd been laughing at Kody's antics.

He was just a quiet kind of man, she thought. The exact opposite of those wild man Tylers that were all over the place lately. She'd seen three of them in the dining room tonight, wooing their wives with romantic dinners for two. Marin had been pushing Wednesdays as the night for lovers each week—with a special menu and romantic themed desserts—since July. It had picked up their slowest night of the week by over ten percent, Marin had told her. Phil, Nick, and Chandler were as beautiful as the rest of the Tyler men, no denying that. Their wives were very lucky women. This man was as tall and well-built as a Tyler, but he would blend in to the background of wherever he was, she suspected.

“For how long?”

“Just tonight, as far as I know, I'm afraid. I'm just passing through. I was on my way to the hotel by the interstate, but my buddy there found me and brought me into town. Your inn is rather hard to miss. Maybe it's fate. And with the storm coming, I thought better safe than sorry. But with Mother Nature, I may be here longer. I don't know yet.”

“Well, I hope you enjoy your stay.” Dusty had never found it easy to do the whole chit-chat-the-guests thing that was so easy for Marin, Darcey, and Dixie. He seemed like a perfectly nice man, in his late thirties or early forties. He was tall and lean and in good shape. He was clean and well-kept. He was kind of bland, really.

Almost like he worked at it.

He was the only thing different about her day today at all. Marin's words from earlier had her spooked. That was all it was. Dusty was sure of it.

BEN NEEDED FOOD. HE NEEDED A SHOWER. AND HE NEEDED A BED FOR THE night.

More importantly, Ben needed electricity and a desk and someplace with actual *heat* and internet where he could work. Mostly, heat.

And, well, if Dusty didn't get out of his head, he probably needed a lobotomy.

Ben knew there was one place he could get all of that. Well, minus the lobotomy. He *could* have headed to his brother Gil's, but that would mean intruding on Sage, who now lived there—she had his cousin Maggie and Maggie's kids there tonight. He didn't want to interrupt their girl party or anything. There had been mention of *wedding* planning in family circles. Ben did not do romance—he was the mystery kind of guy.

He'd leave the wedding planning to them, thank you very much.

He still had nightmares about helping with Nikki's wedding, and with his uncle Phil's, which had happened shortly after. And his uncle Nick's, too. Weddings were kind of scary to Ben Tylers. Of that he was one hundred percent certain.

That left only one place he wanted to go.

He'd known that since the moment he'd stepped out of his building.

He walked. All he really needed was his bag with a change of clothing, his keys, his winter coat, and hat, and his wallet. And his laptop. As long as he had his laptop, he was good, honestly. Ben was accustomed to years of traveling light. And he used the walk to shore up his Dusty-defenses.

To remind himself that she was completely, totally, utterly, forever off

limits.

He would be able to get back to the repairs on his building soon. After his uncle could check the wiring. Ben bit back the irritation at the setback.

The wiring could wait.

The writing most certainly could not. He had a damned deadline, damn it. He was falling more and more behind every day.

Destiny Marie had kept distracting him.

It was driving Ben insane.

He did not write romance.

He most certainly did not write *erotic romance*. But it was starting to feel that way. When he was working, and in his dreams at night.

His editor was already booked, and expecting his manuscript in ten days. He would not miss his deadline, no matter what. He had more than ten days' worth of writing to do on the damned thing now.

He pushed open the hand-carved antique wooden doors. He'd been to the inn thousands of times through the years—mostly to pick up his pest of a sister. And her equally annoying bestest friend.

Dusty, Dusty, Dusty. The woman just kept *getting* him.

So many of his memories of his sister's childhood were tied up in Dusty's as well. She'd always just been there with Nikki. Eight years separated him from his baby sister. He'd always had to look out for her. He adored her, and always would.

Even if he was inclined to figure this thing out the physical way, it wouldn't be best for Dusty. He had come to that conclusion *last week*. Had told himself he was good with that decision.

Ben wasn't exactly the kind of guy a woman like Dusty needed. He was too rough, too dark, and not sophisticated enough for a woman like Dusty, for one thing. He was a Tyler—used to fixing things with his hands, his back, and sometimes, his fists.

The military had taught him some serious self-control, though. He hadn't brawled with someone in years. There was that. Hurting himself on base and being on medical leave for twelve weeks—and not being able to afford to come *home*—eight years ago had taught him self-discipline.

He'd written his first book then out of sheer, unadulterated boredom—and he'd wanted to fulfill the promise he'd made to his dad before his dad had died. Ben had always wanted to write a book, and his father had known that—his dad had dared him to.

His dad had said Ben was too imaginative not to.

His dad had wanted him to.

So when he was stuck in a hospital bed with nothing else to do, he finally had. People had liked it, as rough and unsophisticated as it was. So he'd written more. And more. And when his enlistment was up, he'd come home.

He could afford to, then. And after the last six books he'd released had performed better than the fifteen that had come before, he was a wealthy one, too. He could afford to buy the entire block his building sat on now—ten times over.

Ben Tyler was never going to be a poor man again. He would never let that happen. He had created something, using just his mind and his ability to learn. And he was just going to keep going.

He could afford a family of his own, now. Could look at what he had with pride. But he was a rough man around the edges, and he didn't see that changing anytime soon.

Dusty needed a man with more polish than he would ever have. And he knew it. Dusty deserved the best man in the world, and, well, that was just not him.

She deserved someone far more sensitive, for one thing.

She'd told him before he had the sensitivity of a mud-covered rock. She wasn't far off.

He'd just get these inconvenient bouts of insatiable-for-Dusty lust out of his head and *move on*.

Somehow.

He stopped walking, just inside the lobby. *Demoness alert*.

It was definitely not his lucky night.

There she was. Straight, long blond hair hung down her back. He liked it when it was down like that and not in the ponytails or braids she usually wore. Ben instantly wanted to bury his hands in that hair and just hold her still while he kissed the hell right out of her.

Tell her he'd missed her this week.

Ask if she'd missed *him*.

It was like he'd just found his entire reason for being, right there in the lobby of the Talley Inn.

Totally insane.

She was next to Marin—who made a man's brain fly right out of his head with one look—but he barely noticed her cousin at all now. How could he?

She only had half the succubus power that Dusty did.

It was all Destiny Marie for him now. She was casting her spell over him, and he was just hers. He rubbed a hand over his mouth, checking for damned drool.

Nothing. Thankfully.

A man had to have some pride.

There was another man at the desk, a guest from the looks of him. Ben waited his turn patiently. Well, mostly patiently.

The man wanted to linger, and why wouldn't he? Marin and Dusty side by side were the stuff legends were made of. Wars had been fought for women demons like these two—and not just because of how they looked.

It was the way they *were*. The beckoning smiles on those lips, the fire in those eyes. The inner female knowledge he'd never been able to find words to describe. He'd definitely tried. For over a week, he'd been trying to describe the power Sasha held over Harry.

He pulled back on the drool and smiled at the woman who *didn't* burn his insides. "Hey, gorgeous."

"Hey, handsome. What can I do for you tonight?" She shot a sly look at her cousin. He strongly suspected this woman *knew* exactly how he felt about Dusty.

Marin just *knew* things.

Ben just accepted that Marin just *knew* things.

There were some things that just *were*.

He'd long learned to be okay with that.

"I blew the wiring in my building, and I'm on a deadline. I'll probably need a room for a week or so. I need power, heat, routine food I don't have to take the time to make, and to be left alone until the book is done." And if he was lucky, the hottest woman on the planet in his bed. But that would never happen. Hell, Dusty was right there, looking at him with those beautiful green eyes, his cousin Maggie's big yellow dog right next to her. "Just tuck me in the top corner of your attic, and I'll be just fine."

"Will do, Mr. Tyler Bennett, sir," Marin cooed, fluttering her lashes. "We *could* let you have a suite in the family wing, for additional privacy, if you'd like. But the dining room doesn't deliver in there, and you'd have to emerge occasionally. If you are a regular guest, all you'll have to do is place an order and someone will deliver. *Everything* you could want. So what will it be?"

Oh yeah. That would definitely work. Let him behind that secure door to

the family wing every night. Just a few damned feet from Dusty. The demoness who'd already lured him right to where he stood.

She had to have cast a spell on him.

If he stayed in the family wing, he'd be in her bed by midnight. Tonight.

He checked the clock. Almost nine.

Okay, probably by *ten*, he'd be in her bed, if he was allowed behind those sacred walls. Her uncle Gerald would end up killing him. Not to mention what Ben's sister would do to him once *she* found out. Nikki was a lot scarier than retired general Gerald Talley. By far.

Ben wouldn't be able to stay away from Dusty knowing she was that close. "No thanks. I'm not going to be very sociable right now. Just...make sure I have heat and internet. Clean towels occasionally."

"And a room with a comfortable desk. I know right where to put you," Marin almost purred.

He just bet she did. Marin Talley could be a bit frightening. A lot frightening actually. Maybe he would do that urban fantasy. And Marin could be the main character's coven sister or something. That would seriously work.

Of course, she'd have to have a nemesis. Maybe a really big, muscle-bound, dark-haired warrior-type guy who was all logical and rumbly or something? Someone the Marin witch could battle wits and magic with as the stories progressed?

Ben could even include a food fight scene of some sort. That would be fitting.

Marin excused herself. and it was just him, and Dusty, and that damned guest who apparently still wanted to linger.

Ben gave the man a glare. It was time the dude got lost. He looked at Dusty next. "I am going to grab something in the dining room after I get settled in. Can you eat with me, so I don't look like an antisocial stalker?"

You know, just like that guy there and everything.

She shook her head. "Sorry, I'm on desk duty. Maybe next time."

Sure. "I live in eternal hope you'll one day see I'm not a total jackass, you know. Then we'll get married and ride off into the sunset and have six Talley-Tylers of our own."

"On what horses?"

"We'll borrow Big Bubba and Angel from Gil and Sage. I know you like her."

“That I do. But she adores Sage now.” Dusty shot him a tired smile. His poor little demoness—she worked too hard sometimes. Ben almost told her that—again—but she got snippy whenever he mentioned that lately. “They are seriously cute together, by the way.”

“Yep. That they are. Christmas can’t come for them fast enough, either.” Well, the Christmas wedding anyway. Gil and Sage had said before—they weren’t going to waste time waiting. Life was too short for that. Since they’d both recently almost died—Sage had almost died *three times* in the last year—they knew what they were talking about.

Life was short. No regrets. Ben tried to remember that, too.

“I heard they’d set the date today.” Dusty handed him his key card. “I put you on the third floor, 308, the last room on the hall before the family wing. I’ll try to keep the rooms across and next to you empty if I can, okay?”

“I’d appreciate it. Although I’ll probably have on headphones some of the time. It helps focus.” Ben leaned over the counter as he signed the slip. He couldn’t help it. She just looked so perfect there. His demoness was luring him in. “Now, give me a kiss, baby girl, pat me on the tush, and send me on my way. Then you can tell Nik you tucked me in, and I’m being a good boy, and she should leave me alone for at least the next week, and not to get into too much trouble, as Fletch and Gil are in Texas and I’m on a deadline. Unless Hunter is back to wrangle her. He’s almost halfway good at it now, at least. I warned him what he was getting into, but he didn’t listen.”

“You really are a butthead.” But she laughed, and some of the clouds in her eyes faded. That was all he wanted. Dusty to be happy forever. Or as much as anyone could be. Well, that and for Demoness Dusty to stop tormenting him when he was trying to work. He had deadlines, after all. “No wonder you drive Nikki insane.”

“I do my best.” His stomach growled, reminding him of his first priority tonight. “Now. Checking in, hitting the room. Then food. Then...I have thousands of words to write tonight. Quit distracting me, woman. I know you’re doing it on purpose.”

She thought he was joking. Well, he would keep the fact that he wasn’t to himself for tonight.

Life was safer that way.

WAYNE WAS SWEATING. FIGURATIVELY AND LITERALLY. HE'D TRIED TO GET into Preston's place. But there had been at least one of Preston's girls there at all times. Pretty girls, sweet, hardworking—nothing at all like their father or brothers. Girls Wayne didn't want to *hurt*.

And that kid. Wayne wasn't going to do something stupid and risk hurting one of those girls. Or that little boy.

Hell, the eldest had been friends with Wayne's middle daughter up until Wayne and Linda had moved the girls away ten years ago. She'd been his girl's closest friend back then, when his girl was going through an incredibly hard time fighting that eating disorder that had nearly blindsided them all. Preston's girl had gotten Wayne's daughter through.

That deserved loyalty.

That was not something he could easily forget. He'd practically known Morris Preston's girls from the day they'd been born.

He'd made a point of doing some scouting in the area. Making a few contacts with men he had once worked with when he drove for Preston back in the day. When he did *odd* jobs. Men who would have kept their ear to the ground since Preston had been arrested.

Men who had their own secrets to hide.

What had Preston been thinking? Attacking a deputy sheriff like that? Whatever beef Preston had had with Bruce's nephew over that inheritance that Gil Tyler guy had gotten, it had made Preston stupid.

Stupid men made stupid mistakes.

Now the sheriff was looking in to everything to do with Preston. Wayne

had been associated with Preston for more than twenty years before he'd even met Linda. If someone in Masterson recognized him, that could mean trouble.

Preston's daughters could recognize him, too.

He wasn't going to do anything to come face-to-face with one of those young women. He just wasn't.

Jason wasn't having that. "You need to get in there, fast. I heard some things in town today. I'm going to hit that inn in the middle of the town on the way back through. See...what *they* know, too."

He was talking about Geena again. Jason was obsessed with that woman. With finishing what he'd started so long ago. Geena was the one who'd gotten away, after all. Who'd bested him. Jason couldn't stand that.

"Like what?" Wayne straightened his suit. He hated the damned thing. It was cheap and ill-fitting and still smelled like mothballs. But Waylon Price—now Wayne Pryor—from years ago wouldn't be caught dead in a suit. It was about as much of a disguise as he could get.

"Nothing for you to worry about. Just...do what I need done and we'll call it...square."

"I need to get in when the house is empty. I told you that."

"I don't care if it's empty. Get in there, kill the stupid bitches and the kid, if you have to, and get what we need. So we can get out of this damned town." The cold light of evil was in Jason's eyes. Madness, for certain.

It sent chills up Wayne's neck. This guy? This guy was *evil*. There was no other way to really describe him. There just wasn't.

"I am not doing a damned thing to hurt those girls. Hell, man, they are your half sisters. Don't you give a shit at all?"

He smirked. "Can't say that I do. Why should I? Everything *they* have should have been mine. I am the damned firstborn. Isn't that how it works with all the moneyed set?"

Wayne leaned forward. Let his hand touch the gun under his suit. Jason's eyes followed. He was a cold son-of-a-bastard, no denying that—but he feared one thing. A gun.

Jason always had.

Since Morris Preston had held a .45 to Jason's head when he was thirteen and told him to keep his fucking mouth shut about his parentage no matter what.

Such a lesson had left an impression.

Wayne didn't think Jason would have ever mentioned being Morris

Preston's son ever again.

Wayne damned well wouldn't have.

Morris Preston was a monster. Wayne should have seen that when they'd been boys and playmates together so long ago. He hadn't.

To his shame, that was only his first mistake. One thing he'd learned—one mistake so often led to another. And just kept building. Until it destroyed everything that mattered. "I'll get you what you want. But you won't hurt *any* innocent young woman or innocent little kid on my watch, Jason. Understand me? *Especially* your sisters. Or it'll be *me* bringing you down. Remember that. Be a good boy now. Or else."

Be a good boy now. Words Morris Preston had used to control his son so long ago.

DYLAN BROWN WAS A COMPLETE LIE. EVERYTHING ABOUT HER WAS A LIE. She stared at her parents as what they'd told her started to sink in. "Is my name even *Dylan*? Are they Devaney and Dahlia and Dorothy, or are our very identities lies, too? How many times have our names changed?"

Her mother was shaking. Dylan was aware of that on some level, but all she could think about was the lies. Besides, something was *always* upsetting her mother. That was just something that just was. Sometimes Dylan thought her mom panicked when she didn't have something to panic about—so she'd have something to panic about and everything.

"We have other siblings." Devaney was the one who said it aloud. "Four of them. Older than us. Four."

"Yes." Their father was as stoic as he always was. No emotion showed on his face. Just like in every other family crisis they'd ever had.

Just State the Facts Fred. Deal with the Dilemma Dad.

But his name wasn't Fred.

He and her mother had hidden who they *really* were for decades.

And hadn't told them where they had come from exactly. Not even what town. They had skirted around that. Or what their real names were. Where they had come from. Whether those siblings were boys or girls or a mix of both. How old *they* were, or what their names were. Or even where they were, or nothing.

They'd told them everything. And they'd told them nothing, too.

She had so many questions.

Dylan was two months from being twenty-three years old. Almost

twenty-three years they had lied to her. “Who are we really then?”

Dahlia slipped her hand into Dylan’s. Her sister was afraid. Dylan had always hated it when Dahlia was afraid. *Dylan* was the big sister. The one who was supposed to take care of the twins, and definitely Dorie.

She did. She always had. Even when their parents had woken them up in the middle of the night before and told them they had to run. That the bad guys were after them again. Then they’d tell them some made up baloney. Their mother would stand there, panicking, her hand on that scar on her neck and everything. And Dylan would believe it.

So they’d just follow along. Like good little sheep. Never questioning. Just believing. Trusting.

They’d changed last names at least four times that Dylan could remember. In her special book she’d kept as a kid, she’d written down each of those last names and where they’d lived, from the time she had been old enough to realize not every family lived that way.

So she wouldn’t forget who they had once *been*. Who she *was*.

But this?

“We have another family out there. And you kept them from us. Why?” Her hand tightened around Dahlia’s, as Devaney leaned against her left side. Dorie sat in the chair across from their father. Just staring.

The twins had been taller than Dylan since about the time she was twelve. They had five inches on her now. Dorie had seven. But Dylan was the oldest. The one in charge. The one who did things first, so the scary wouldn’t be there for them, too. Dylan was the brave one.

But she wasn’t the *oldest* at all. “What are their names?”

Her father hesitated.

Anger flashed through her. She and her father fought a lot. They always had. He was very demanding, controlling. Especially with the twins and their mother and Dorie. But Dylan? Dylan was too much like him. He hadn’t been able to control her for a long, long time.

Something she knew he took pride in. Even when it angered him every time.

She’d always been so close to her parents. But now? She didn’t know them at all. “You owe us that much. Why did you leave them?”

“We couldn’t take them with us,” her mother said. She reached for Dylan. “It wasn’t safe for them.”

Dylan didn’t *want* her mom to touch her. Not now. Just not now. “You

just left them. And ran. Why?”

“It was the right decision,” her father said, standing up. So tall. Dylan had always wondered why she was so short, at just five feet—in thick-soled shoes—and her father stood a full foot and a half taller. Her mom, too, was five eight or so. But Dylan was a lot shorter. “Are you even our real parents?”

She looked like her mom. Her hair was blond, just like her mom’s, though Dylan’s was far shorter, curlier, and way lighter. She thought her mom’s hair was blond anyway. Her mom dyed her hair a lot. Saying she needed a change now and then. Or was it to hide who she really was?

Dylan was seriously fighting the urge to scream at them now. To demand to know *why*. Just... “Why did you leave them behind?”

“We just had to,” her mother said. “It was best for them...and...”

She knew, though. “You left them because of me, didn’t you? You were pregnant with me. You had to be, to have left them twenty-three years ago.”

Her mom just kept stepping closer. Dylan wanted to put her hand up, to stop her mom from touching her right now. But Dahlia still held her hand on the one side. And somehow, she’d linked fingers with Devaney on the other.

Her sisters. Her best friends. She adored them. Would do whatever she had to forever to protect them. And they had *four* more out there somewhere? “We never got a chance to know them. How old were they when you dumped them?”

Left them on the doorstep. On their grandparents’ doorstep. They’d just left them.

Grandparents. Dylan had always wondered what it would be like to have grandparents, too. They never had. “Are our grandparents still alive?”

“I believe your grandfather passed away fifteen or sixteen years ago. He was a good man,” her father said quietly. A flash of grief crossed his face. “I...miss him every day, girls. But my mother is still living. I know my brother is. I don’t know about anyone else.”

They had a grandmother. Sisters. An *uncle*. Probably an entire *family* out there.

“How old were our siblings when you left them?” Dahlia repeated Dylan’s question. Something the quietest sister did. Dahlia had her own way of doing things. She always had. She’d had more struggles than Dylan and Devaney and Dorie—Dylan had privately thought Dahlia probably had mild autism, but she had never been diagnosed or anything. Her sister had struggled, but she’d triumphed now. She didn’t do that flicking thing with her

hands anymore either. Mostly.

But sometimes she did. When she was upset. Like right now.

She was just quieter and more reserved than Dylan or Devaney, and even Dorie. Now Dylan had to wonder—how much like these *other* sisters was Dahlia? Devaney? Dorie? Devaney wasn't very extraverted either. But she was more confident than Dahlia. And Dorie was different from them all, too.

Dylan was the firecracker—she'd been told that more times than she could count. She was the voice of her sisters. She said what had to be said, whenever it was needed.

Usually battling with her father.

Her mother was a lot less hardheaded than her father. She always had been.

They'd been homeschooled Dylan's entire school years. Now she understood why. "*You hid us. You just kept us away from the entire world. So that no one would even know we existed. We hid. We didn't live. We just hid. Marking time while you kept secrets.*"

"We did," her father said in that infuriating this-is-fact voice that he used with Dylan when he thought she was being unreasonable. Dylan had always hated that voice. Nothing got under her skin faster. "We had our reasons."

"I'm sure you did," Devaney said just as calmly. She could be just as obstinate as their dad sometimes, but always in this calm, reasonable way that pushed his buttons, too. "But you have to see where we don't really understand any of this."

"Understood. If you girls will sit down. We need to talk."

Maybe. But how did Dylan know she could trust anything her parents said ever again?

DUSTY WAS STILL THINKING ABOUT EVERYTHING—including BEN, WHO JUST wouldn't get out of her head tonight—when two men in business suits came in. It took her a moment, but she recognized where she'd seen them before.

The diner.

The two men who had been in the stiff suits over a week ago. The ones who had stared.

She felt the same sense of apprehension now as she did then. “Hello, welcome to the Talley Inn. What name is on the reservation?”

“We actually don't have a reservation,” the younger of the two men said. He was so cold. Clinical. Even with the light of masculine interest in his eyes when he looked at her. He liked what he saw, but there was no heat. Just admiration and calculation. She fought a shiver.

“You are in luck then. We have several rooms still available. We had some cancelations because of the storm.” Hunter had had some people planning to join him to help plan his studio, including executives from Finley Creek and L.A., but they'd rescheduled. “Will you need two rooms or one?” Sometimes, businessmen shared to cut costs.

“Two,” the older man said. He was looking at her, too. In a way that crept her out. Normally, guests didn't creep her out.

But she hadn't forgotten that first meeting. “I'll need some identification and a credit card. From each of you.”

The first placed an open wallet in front of her. It showed his name as Wade Kellogg. With the FBI. But the identification didn't look a thing like her sister Miranda's. Or any of the FBI agents who had visited Masterson

before. “My cousin Miranda is with PAVAD, out of St. Louis. Are you familiar with it?”

“No, I’m afraid I’m not,” the older man said. He handed her a credit card. “We prefer to be away from any crowd.”

“Of course.” She’d just put them a few doors down from Ben. Most of that floor was still open. “The dining room closes at ten tonight. We also offer room service for a slight upcharge. Menus are in the portfolio on the bureau in your rooms.”

“Thank you, Dusty,” the younger man said. “You are very beautiful to have such a name.”

“Family nickname.” And she’d told them this at the diner. She was sure of it—she hadn’t forgotten that conversation. She ran their credit cards without a problem, and had them sign the printed registration slips. When they disappeared into the elevators, she finally breathed a sigh of relief.

FBI agents who hadn’t heard of PAVAD? That was just strange.

She picked up her phone, dialed her cousin in St. Louis. When Miranda answered, Dusty explained about their new guests. FBI agents who had never heard of the biggest branch of the FBI ever created.

Miranda was as puzzled as Dusty. Probably more so. She made it clear—everyone in the FBI knew about PAVAD and knew how to contact the agents assigned to it. Knew what the unit did. That two hadn’t, well, that was really odd. Those were Miranda’s words. Not her own. Even other federal agencies would have known about PAVAD.

Dusty rattled off the ID numbers and names that had been on the badges.

Miranda was going to keep those ID numbers handy. Just in case.

HE WAS ABLE TO GET MORE DONE THAN HE HAD EXPECTED AFTER HIS favorite demoness checked him in. Maybe just *seeing* her had been what it was? All that was needed?

Ben contemplated that once he closed his laptop after a good fifty pages of words had flown from his fingers. Sasha was hiding something from Harry now, he thought. And Harry had just *shot* someone to protect her. He'd started off using a knife, but Ben had decided a gun was less personal and fit that point in the story better.

Of course, the villain—still unnamed at this point, going by the current moniker of [FIRSTVILLAIN]—had been trying to abduct Harry's little sister's best friend, Sasha. When she'd been all alone and vulnerable and locking up the diner one cold snowy night in November.

Harry had been with her—he'd stopped by after a bad case, for coffee and conversation. It was a good thing Harry had been. Sasha would have been in serious trouble otherwise. That had scared Harry.

Defending her with a weapon was justifiable. At least, Harry's friends on the force had argued that. Harry probably wouldn't face charges, even though [FIRSTVILLAIN] had died.

Now Harry wanted to know what Sasha was hiding. He was going to find out, too...as soon as Ben figured out what it was.

Ben needed to think. To figure it out. *Normally*, Ben plotted out his books ahead of time. Flying into the dark wasn't something he did often. But some books...some books just wrote themselves. If he trusted good old Harry, Ben hoped this one would too.

But Ben needed a break. It had been hours since he'd grabbed a burger and potato salad in the dining room and some of Meyra's apple cobbler. He loved that gorgeous woman witch's cooking. If the way to a man's heart really was his stomach, Ben probably would have married Meyra years ago.

But, well, his demoness had cast her spell on him instead. There was that. He was Dusty's, not Meyra's now.

Coven sisters didn't poach, he didn't think.

Ben needed food again. He was a rather simple man, after all.

He checked his watch. Damn it. The dining room had closed a long time ago. He was going to have to hit the small pod of vending machines downstairs in the game room area. There were sodas and candy bars and even an ice cream freezer.

Snack time.

He'd swing by the front desk, see who was manning it, and get change. All he had was a fifty in his wallet. He didn't want to get fifty dollars in quarters. And if it was Dusty, well, maybe writing this book was the catharsis he needed to get thoughts of that woman naked out of his head.

No time like the present to check.

Ben headed down the stairs, manfully forcing the fantasy of Destiny Marie naked out of his head by step two.

Well, maybe by step ten.

It wasn't Dusty at the front desk, thankfully, but a young woman who resembled her, just a little. The hair was that common caramel brown—same as Dusty's coven sister/real sister Daisy's, though the eyes were the same witchy green. She was a lot shorter than Dusty. Her dad's cousin, he couldn't remember which one. Dusty had three or four second cousins that worked around the hotel. One of the -aceys. There were Jacy, Macey and Casey, he thought. Or Pacey or Dacey or Stacey or...he didn't really remember their names, but they were getting old enough to be demoness coven sisters in his urban fantasy, too. He'd have to remember that.

This one's name tag read Jacy. She gave him some tens and smiled, blushing prettily. She couldn't be more than twenty. She'd break men's hearts with that smile when she was a little older. No denying that.

Coven demoness sisters always did.

Then, it was on. His quest for food had just begun.

Ben took the stairs—he'd never really liked elevators, he'd probably been crushed in one in a past life or something—and came around the corner. The

game room was more of a lounge area that led into the indoor/outdoor pool area that had been added to the inn back in the seventies or something. It was a bit of a dated part of the inn, but he'd spent several hours there before.

Nikki certainly had. She'd always wanted to be with Dusty. They weren't together as much now that Nikki was married, though. He wondered how Dusty was adjusting to that. Nikki had Hunter to entertain her, after all.

But Dusty—what if she was all alone now and needing Ben to keep her company? Things had changed for Dusty when Nikki had swept poor little Hunter off his feet like that, too. No denying that.

Life had a way of changing. Ben would maybe someday get used to that.

He stopped short, seeing the woman refilling the towel shelf next to the pool entrance. "Hey, hot stuff."

He'd called her that before. Mostly to annoy her. But tonight, he meant it. Those little *Eat at Flo's Masterson Diner* T-shirts were driving him mad.

Marin had had to know they would drive men crazy when she'd designed them. She had witchy powers, after all.

"Well, I see you've emerged. Hunter and Nikki were in the dining room earlier. Practically wrapped up in each other, closer than plastic wrap. I almost had to use the fire extinguisher to get them apart—we have child guests here tonight and are completely G-rated. I gave her your message to leave her alone."

"I appreciate that." He didn't want to talk about his sister with her. They could talk about something besides Nikki. Anything but Nikki actually. "How did the night go? Get rid of your little friend who was drooling over you?"

"Kody went upstairs with Daisy for the night actually. I think he's taking turns with us or something."

"I wasn't talking about Maggie's dog. I was talking about the guy in the suit. He liked how you looked."

"He might have liked how Marin looked, if it's the same man I'm remembering. We had four men check in tonight. Two are together, I think. One US marshal and two FBI actually. And one salesman, I think." She frowned, arms full of folded towels. "I asked the FBI guys if they knew anything about PAVAD, and I think I confused them. Which is weird. Miranda says everyone knows about PAVAD. It's talked about in basic training videos even."

"Probably selection bias. Miranda thinks everyone should know about

that specialty unit she works for, but that doesn't mean everyone does." Ben didn't care about her cousin who worked for the FBI out of St. Louis. He wanted to snuggle up to Dusty. They could spread those towels out and he could seduce Lady of the Inn Dusty right where they were.

He was always so pumped up after he wrote *good* words. Of course, the juices flowing through him now weren't the kind he'd want to work off in a dojang practicing taekwondo. No. They were the other kind.

For her.

He coughed and forced himself to step back. Before he suggested they skinny dip in the indoor pool behind her. It was after pool hours. That was when she and her family had always used the pool, if he remembered correctly. No one would be in there with them. They had a button that darkened the windows to the pool, too. It would be just them.

He'd have a wet, naked Dusty all to himself.

"So what are you down here looking for?"

Oh boy. She didn't know what she was doing to him, asking him that. Not by a long shot. Ben just stared at her for the longest time.

Until that same damned guest came wandering in. The man shot Ben a decided frown. Hmmm. Guy had a problem with Ben. Well maybe Ben had a problem with that guy looking at Ben's demoness like *that*, too. "I'm here... for food. I missed the dining room closing."

"I can make you a sandwich. In the family wing. I'm just about to go to my room, as soon as I finish this." She bumped the towel cart with one foot.

Not going there. Not even going to think about Dusty's *room*. Nope. He was better than that. Maybe. He thought. His mother had certainly tried to make sure he was anyway.

"Yeah, I'm good. I'm going to junk food it. I'm celebrating almost sixty pages written in five hours. My hands are shot, but...I need sugar." And he wasn't going anywhere until that guy was gone. Ben had his cavewoman to protect, after all. "Tell me something, you have a security guard on duty at all times right? You really need two of them actually."

"We have someone. He's probably off walking the grounds now. He usually does this time of night, why?"

"It just occurred to me. Most of the inn's staff, women, right? And with you girls living here...and take your little cousin at the counter, for instance. She's what? Twenty and one hundred fifteen pounds and quiet and sweet? Honey, you all are like dessert to the bad guys out there." He watched the

man as he crossed to the vending machines. “This place is a damned buffet to the wrong type of guy.”

He was almost certain the guy was trying to be unobtrusive, but he was watching them.

Watching *her*, most likely. Ben wasn’t stupid. He’d been a cop in the military before. He knew when someone was watching.

Wars had been fought over enchanting demonesses like this one, after all.

Demonesses needed big, strong thug-type warriors to protect them. At least in urban fantasy they did. Or was that paranormal romance? Ben wasn’t fully up on the differences. But he’d be Dusty’s thug, as long as she needed him to be. “And there’s what? You, the front desk clerk, and the security guard around here, right now? What if someone tries something? What would you do?”

“Scream like bloody murder. Then the front desk clerk will call for help. Marin’s in the back office, too.”

So then the bad guy could get little sweetie Jacy, Demoness Dusty, *and* Witchy-woman Marin, too?

“I’m being serious. What if someone wanted to rob the place? I’m surprised your cousin Miranda doesn’t throw a fit. Or your uncle, for that matter.” Ben didn’t like this setup at all. Now that he thought about it, it could be bad. Real bad actually. “Someone could go after one of you girls. Hotels can be dangerous for women.”

Ben watched a lot of crime dramas and forensic science shows for inspiration. Hotels could be very dangerous—especially for women. People didn’t always realize that. But some predators saw hotels as their happy hunting grounds. And the female staff as their prey.

“It’s been this way forever, Ben.” She was looking at him like she usually did. Like she thought he was being a bossy butthead.

It wasn’t that he was telling her what to do. Far from it. He just didn’t like the idea of how alone she would have been if he hadn’t come downstairs. Alone with that guy who couldn’t keep his eyes off of her.

Ben wasn’t stupid. He’d been a military cop for three years. He’d seen things he’d never be able to forget. He just wanted Dusty safe. Nothing wrong with that. Maybe a part of him thought she was *his* demoness to protect. He was her thug warrior, after all. Hard for him to forget that.

SEAN HADN'T MEANT TO GO LOOKING FOR THE BEAUTIFUL BLONDE AGAIN. He'd just felt restless in the small but comfortable room he'd been assigned on the third floor. He'd wanted to walk around, explore this surprising piece of Wyoming history. See something beautiful again. The Nebraska situation was heating up. It wouldn't be good for Sean's latest assigned family.

They might have to be moved again.

The inn was a distraction. One he needed.

There had been a description of how the thirty-plus-room, three-floor-plus basement-and-attic-level inn had come to be. Complete with a much older structure that had had ten rooms. Those ten rooms had become part of what they now called the family wing, along with what had once been the inn's kitchen and dining room and main lobby.

It was now, according to the brochure complete with eight smiling young women and their grandmother on the front, ran by the Talley family. Another photo of several Talley second cousins was on the back. Including the sweet-faced child down at the front desk. She looked even younger than LaDonna's twins. Of course, Dylan was almost twenty-three now. Fiery, just like her mother. Dylan looked a great deal like her mother actually.

Except for that distinctive white-blond hair of Dylan's.

He'd seen another young woman with that unusual hair color recently. He just couldn't recall where. He was too tired to think at the moment honestly.

He'd been driving around from assignment to assignment for days. It was time he took a break. A real one. Maybe around Thanksgiving he would. Spend some time with the boys, while they were home from school. If his ex

wouldn't be so difficult about that anyway. She was getting harder and harder to deal with lately.

Sean punched in the number for the chocolate bar that he wanted absently. He'd seen the beautiful blonde working there by the pool entrance. She was hard to miss.

So was the man next to her. All polished and rugged looking. He wore a T-shirt with ARMY printed on it. He was in prime physical shape, too. Sean had always prided himself on keeping in excellent physical shape, but that guy...

He probably spent half his day working at looking like that.

Sean tried to hear what they were saying, but they were too far away.

He'd made a career out of reading people. He studied them surreptitiously. Even though he thought the man suspected. Most people Sean watched never realized it—but some did.

This one probably did.

These two knew each other very well. A relative, perhaps? He discounted that idea, after one look at the guy's face. There was hunger there. A lover then. Or a man who wanted to be.

The woman, Dusty, was turned away slightly. She wouldn't have seen the hunger. It was most likely he was a guest, like Sean. One who was trying to put the make on the beautiful blond innkeeper. Sean had seen similar play out thousands of times in his travels through the years. He'd never used hotels as hunting grounds, but many men definitely did.

How often, he wondered, did beautiful women like Dusty get harassed and hit on during a normal business week in a place like this? Men far from home, looking for a little companionship that could be forgotten the next day?

Probably more times than a decent man wanted to consider. Sean was going to stay close. Until he knew the man wasn't pushing for more than Dusty wanted to give. It was the honorable thing to do, after all. Sean had worked law enforcement since he was younger than Dylan.

Far, far too many times he had seen the results of unscrupulous men targeting young women who deserved better.

The younger guy had his hand on her shoulder now. Like he was trying to comfort her? Or just because he was that familiar with her?

It was probably that. Familiarity.

The man leaned forward and placed a kiss right over her forehead. And

she didn't push him away. She knew him. And knew him well.

That was just confirmed when the man leaned down and gave her a quick peck on the lips next. She smacked him lightly with the hand not holding towels, and pointed toward the ice cream freezer instead.

But she was smiling quietly. Relaxed. Like the brute had kissed her that casually before. Many times before.

Sean dawdled over the soda machine next, just watching. Finally, she took the three or four towels in her hand and put them on the top shelf, stretching in a delicious way that would heat any observant man's insides instantly. Then she turned back to her friend.

And they left together, him dangling ice cream in front of her like he was using it to lure her to the nearest bed perhaps?

Were they sleeping together? Did the man live here, with her?

The Talley family *lived* in a portion of the inn. All women. Beautiful, young, attractive, *tempting* women.

That could be dangerous. The women in that brochure were highly attractive, alluring women. And that was like waving an open invitation to the more unsavory types out there. Saying, "Here we are. Come get us. Just... take your pick."

His stomach tightened in revulsion. Nothing angered him more than men preying on women. Not since one had taken his twenty-four-year-old sister so long ago. And killed her. They'd never learned who. Sean would *never* forget. Nor forgive. It was why he did law enforcement in the first place.

But maybe that young man lived here, with her, and with that phenomenally alluring white-blond creature with the stunning blue eyes that had been at the desk for a few moments tonight. It clicked. *That* was where he'd seen the white-blond hair. That other clerk. It was so unusual.

As he made his way back to the elevator, he could just see the two of them entering the elevator together. That was a very lucky man, indeed. To have *her* just for his own. Sean wished he was the kind of man women looked at like that.

He would love to have had a woman like that for his own.

But women like that—they didn't fall for ordinary men like him at all. Men who blended in, like Sean had been trained to do so long ago. Hell, maybe it was time he admitted it to himself. Sean was lonely. He and his wife? It had been six years since she'd left him, taking their boys with her. And he wondered—was there something he could have done differently?

Made it work somehow?

He had tried—he truly had. But he had been away from home so often, and the life of a law enforcement spouse could be so hard. He didn't blame her for leaving him for someone else. Not really.

Sean returned to his room, heart heavy and feeling a little broken.

Maybe it was time to move on? Put the marshals and the Browns behind him?

Have a different kind of life for himself? He'd be forty soon. Was this what he wanted for the rest of his years? Going from place to place—with no one even remembering his name? Barely spending any time with *his* family, while protecting those like the Browns?

Stan was really missing his boys right now. They were getting older, getting close to the more difficult teen years.

Maybe it was time.

Maybe.

Once he figured this out for LaDonna and the girls, he was going to seriously consider it. Maybe it was time for a change.

BEN BARELY CAME OUT OF HIS ROOM UNLESS HE WAS WANTING FOOD. ONE thing Dusty could say—the man was very elemental. Food, shower, heat—and he was good. She had thought there was something *different* in how he had looked at her that night when she'd been restocking the pool. Now Dusty was convinced she had been imagining it.

Still, the man hadn't emerged from his room in *two days*. She was sure of it. No one had seen him at all. She was about to do a proof-of-life check on that man. Just to be sure.

She took a load of clean towels up to his room. Not that she needed the excuse, but he'd been in there for two days. The only signs he was even still there were the food orders that had come to the dining room a couple of times. But as Marin had pointed out when she suggested Dusty check on the man—*anyone* could have been ordering that food. No one had seen Ben since the room service cart had been left outside his door. They hadn't even seen *him* then.

Her bestie would never forgive her, Marin had pointed out, if Dusty let a troll or an ogre get Nikki's big brother. Dusty was there at his door now, just to escape her cousin. Marin was being more than a little bit annoying lately.

Constantly teasing Dusty about *Ben*. About there being something between them. As if Marin had completely fallen off the deep end or something.

Dusty knocked. Waited. That man had to be in there. She just knew it. She'd do her duty to her best friend, make sure their hotel guest had all that he needed, and then she would escape back to her suite. After grabbing

something for her own dinner from the dining room. She was starving.

All thoughts of food went right out of her head when the door swung open and a bare chested man stood there, staring at her.

OMG, that man had the most defined chest she had ever seen.

He had a six-pack. An actual six-pack. He wasn't all bulky and body-builder, nor was he all oiled up and sleek. But Ben Tyler was in *excellent* physical shape.

Her fingers were just itching to run over every perfect muscle.

"Hey, babe. You're just in time." He took the towels from her hands. Her limp, lifeless hands. And used one to pat at the beads still clinging to that chest. He had just the perfect amount of dark-brown chest hair. Nothing gross and Bigfoot hairy at all. Ben Tyler was a Man. With a capital M.

And the world had gone completely insane. "I brought you...towels."

Lame. The lamest thing she had said to anyone in her entire life. Dusty shook herself back together and made herself act normal again. She never would have believed pimply-faced Ben would turn into *this*. "I am here to check on you to make sure you weren't eaten by trolls or ogres or some blend of the two Marin assured me exists. So that Nikki won't hold your demise against me personally forever."

"Come in, babe. I just finished the scene that has been bugging me for two days. It has some romance in it. Nothing like I've ever written before either. I'm pretty pumped." He grinned at her. That perfect Ben grin. It told her one thing—he was very happy with himself. Ben grabbed a T-shirt off the bed—an *Eat at Flo's Masterson Diner* shirt he'd gotten from Marin, she suspected—and pulled it over all that perfect man muscle.

Dusty wanted to cry.

She wanted to *look* at him.

Just look. No harm in looking.

Even if he was her bestie's big brother. Guys *looked*, so why couldn't girls? She was justifying here. No denying that. And had totally gone off the deep end. "You wrote romance?"

Dusty had read every book he had ever written—she was intensely loyal to his precious baby sister, after all. Nikki was incredibly proud of what her brothers had all accomplished. And, well, Dusty enjoyed what Ben had written. He was an excellent storyteller. He had an understanding of people that was deep. "You have never written so much as a kiss."

"I haven't. Until now." He shot her a Ben grin. "Want to read it?"

“You’d let me?”

“Sure. You’re a woman. You like romance.”

“You are generalizing. Not all women even *believe* in romance.”

His expression turned serious. “Don’t you?”

“I’m not so sure anymore, Ben. I’m not so sure. And then...I look at Nikki and Sage and Maggie and Aunt Rhea, even...and then I wonder if maybe I do.” She stepped more fully into the room and closed the door behind her. “Maybe it’s just that I don’t believe in romance...for me? I’m too practical for that.”

THAT WAS JUST *INSANE*. “YOU’RE THE KIND OF WOMAN ROMANCE WAS created for.”

She shot him a look that told him she didn’t believe him at all. Ben just didn’t understand how she could think that. Her—not believing in *romance*? Seriously?

“What do you mean by that?” she asked.

She looked good tonight. He’d been so consumed with getting Harry to kiss Sasha, he’d lost touch with the world around him for a little bit. He hadn’t seen her in hours. Maybe a day. Or possibly two? He had slept some each night—so he thought it was two nights. She had on a little blue Talley Inn hoodie this time. So pretty in blue. Her hair was down long and loose again. Tempting a man to *touch*.

And she was right there, within reach. Ben slipped one hand around her waist—and the other started playing with that long, blond, silky hair. “What made you doubt romance?”

“Maybe because I’ve never really experienced romance. Real romance isn’t very...practical. Especially around here in Masterson.”

“A county where women are outnumbered by at least a factor of two?” He wanted to give her *romance*. More than anything.

Ben had been so certain that getting Sasha out of Harry’s head would get this Dusty Demoness out of his own. Had counted on it, a little.

Apparently, he had been wrong about that. She was even more entrenched than ever. Maybe he should just accept his fate.

Or would that be just accept his *destiny*?

“Maybe I’m just not good at it then? I’ve had that thought before.” She looked up at him, those big Dusty-green eyes kind of sad in a way that stabbed him in the gut. “Romance is more for women like Nikki or Sage.”

“How so?”

“It just seemed so easy for Sage. Sage and Gil were like magnets. You could *see* the connection between them after he rescued her along the highway that night. And Nikki? Well, everything that happened between her and Hunter is a made-for-TV movie waiting to happen. If they don’t already have the script written.”

“And that is romance to you? Isn’t romance hearts and flowers and the guy making a wimp out of himself for the woman he wants? I mean, Hunter is mush where Nik is concerned. Hard to miss that.” He hated that broken look in her eyes. He wanted to get it out of there fast. “And Gil is totally pitiful now. Follows Sage around like a puppy.”

Not made for romance? She was the kind of woman men fought wars for. She was the kind of woman romance was always about. At least for him.

He wanted to give her hearts and flowers. Buy her chocolates and take her on moonlit carriage rides. He thought the inn had a carriage somewhere. From years past. And his brother Fletcher’s place was the first one right outside city limits. It used to be Ben’s parents’ place. Ben jogged by Fletcher’s place—and their cousin Chandler’s restaurant that was nearby—every time he jogged when the weather was nice.

He could wait until the snow stopped—he’d noticed the flakes at the window—and he’d get Fletcher to bring him a damned horse. Fletcher’s horses had pulled wagons before. In parades, and in that damned Rowland Bowles movie where Hunter had met Nikki in the first place. Ben was a rancher’s son, born and bred. He’d take Dusty around town, no problem. He’d make sure to take warm blankets and would have Meyra get him some hot cocoa or spiced cider.

He’d take his woman all around the town. Snuggled up close.

Maybe he’d give Fletcher two hundred bucks to drive the carriage, so Ben would be free to keep his woman warm and everything. Yeah, he could see it happening. Just like that.

“Tune in, Ben. You’re spacing out again. I want to read your kiss.”

Read his kiss? How about *getting* his kiss instead?

There was a bed right there.

Just her, him. He could turn on the electric fireplace right there in the

corner. They could love each other and cuddle each other for the rest of the night. Maybe. She might be *working* right now, after all. “Are you off the clock for the night?”

“Yes. Let me read it. Who does Harry kiss anyway?”

Ben felt the heat in his cheeks at her look. “Well, Rikkie’s best friend actually. It just sort of happened.”

“Really? I so have to read this.”

Ben sat in the chair, and opened up the laptop. He’d just show her then. “Come here, woman. Let me show you what romance really is about. Doubting Dustina.”

“It’s not doubting. It’s being realistic. Practical. Real romance...is almost nonexistent. Except for women like Nik and Sage anyway.”

But didn’t she get it? She was a woman, just like Nikki and Sage. A woman who deserved to be *loved*. No matter what. Well, almost *all* women deserved to be love. Just like almost all men did. But *Dusty*? She deserved to be loved most of all.

BEN TYLER HAD NO BUSINESS WRITING KISSING SCENES WITHOUT SOME serious training.

Dusty knew that after she'd read the first two pages. Oh, the man was clueless. And Harry could do so much better. She looked at Ben—he had a wary look on his beautiful face now. Vulnerable.

“Ben...”

“You hate it, don't you?”

“Not at all. It's very well written. Like everything you write is, honestly. It's just...not that realistic of a kiss. At least, not Sasha's point of view. I don't really remember her from any of the other books. I'll have to reread them.”

“Why not? I thought I did a great job of showing Sasha's feelings. He totally blindsided her by kissing her.” He shot her a wicked look. That man did *wicked* very well. “He didn't know he was going to do it either. He's giving her fits now. She deserves it for how she's been tormenting him in previous chapters. And she doesn't even know she's turning him on. Well, until now.”

“True. But...I can guarantee she isn't thinking *that* quite that quickly. A woman does not think like that before she gets involved with a man. At least not... a practical one. And I have definitely never been kissed like that.” Dusty smirked at him after she said it. For a man to have that kind of reputation with the opposite sex, was Ben seriously that clueless? Kisses were not all hearts and flowers and bright colors at all.

The man—oh, he was adorable sometimes.

“No? Well, how have you been kissed then? What goes through your head before a man kisses you for the first time?” He shot her a grumpy look of real challenge. It had her wanting to laugh even more. He just looked so adorably grumpy. A far cry from how he’d looked a moment ago. “And just who have you been kissing lately anyway?”

“Not very many men lately. Every time I’ve tried since I was eighteen, it seems like a baboon—or two or three, for that matter—shows up to get in the way.” Okay, maybe that was a slight exaggeration. But...Well, maybe it wasn’t, really. Fletcher and Gil and Ben—it seemed they were always interrupting her dates. And had been for years. Hers and Nikki’s. Well, until Hunter had moved right in to Nikki’s spare apartment anyway. “Honestly? The first time a man kisses me, I can’t help but wonder if all he is after is sex. What he’s really after.”

“What in the hell?” Now he was fully turned toward her. “That’s bull.”

“No. It’s experience talking. I’ve been there before. Two guys—and all they wanted was sex. They thought that I would give it to them, too. Unfortunately, those were the last two guys I’ve kissed. So...experience has taught me.”

“You’re conditioned to doubt a guy’s intentions now?”

“Yes. So tell me, Benjamin. What is the first thing you think of when you kiss a woman?” She leveled a look at him. He was one of the most honest men she knew—even if he could be a bossy butthead about it. “It’s definitely going to have something to do with...sex.”

“Hell, yes, it is. If there’s no sexual attraction I wouldn’t be kissing a woman to begin with. I only ever kiss a woman I think is incredibly hot, Destiny Marie.”

“Well, no. I suppose not. But tell me the truth: Have you ever kissed a woman like you just wrote? Because she was everything, and you couldn’t resist? And told her that? As you were kissing her. Come on. Truth, Ben. Put your money where your mouth is. What is the first thing you think about when you lean in to kiss a woman? How hot she is? How you hope she’ll let you do even more than just kiss? How easy she is? How easy you hope she is?”

“Well, how hot she is, probably. But I tend to not kiss women unless I feel an emotional connection first. I don’t do random. Nor do I think about women as being *easy* or not.” His expression darkened. “Did some guy do that to you? Tell me who, and I’ll—”

She covered his mouth with one finger. She knew where that train of thought would lead. Ben could go all caveman in an instant, after all. Especially where Dusty or Nikki or now Sage were concerned. “That doesn’t matter now.”

His blue eyes flared. He stilled.

Dusty hadn’t realized she’d gotten that close to him. She’d been leaning over his shoulder, reading his screen, and now...

Now...She...Was...On...

His *lap*.

Holy hell bananas, to borrow one of Charlotte’s favorite expressions, somehow, when she hadn’t been paying attention, she had slipped onto Ben’s *lap*.

Or maybe she half-remembered his hands on her hips, guiding her to sit there, or something? She just couldn’t remember.

Ben’s lap. While they were talking about kissing.

And they were in kissing distance now. She couldn’t help herself, Dusty leaned back.

Hot, strong male hands fell—one to her knee, the other to her rear end—and he held her. Held her right where she was. Dusty wasn’t moving anytime soon.

His eyes were trained right on hers. She wasn’t about to look away.

Dusty didn’t think she actually *could*. “B-Ben? I...probably shouldn’t be sitting on your lap. It’s a little...weird.”

“Is it? I can’t think of a more perfect place to have you sitting right now.” His words were at a whisper. One hand rose, and he cupped her cheek.

His touch scorched her. No denying that.

This was Ben. *Ben*. And the look in his eyes wasn’t pseudo big brother *at all*. “Ben...what...what are you doing?”

“I’m sitting here, thinking that good old Harry might just have the right idea.” He said it so slowly. A little shiver of *something* went across her entire body. Every nerve she had went on instant alert. Just like he’d written for Sasha.

“How so?” Maybe she should learn to keep her mouth shut? She should. She definitely should. She could smell the soap he’d used. It was the same soap they had in every room. But on him, mingled with the warm male scent of him—*okay*.

Dusty was in serious trouble here.

“Because Sasha is driving him just as crazy as you are driving me. But he’s about to decide to do something about it. About...her...” His thumb brushed her bottom lip. His eyes darkened from Tyler blue, to almost black. From hunger. “You have the prettiest mouth I have ever seen. Maybe not when you are shooting fire at me, but...I look at you lately, and I want to do things to you that would shock you, Destiny Marie. Right down to that little toe you used to wear that ridiculous toe ring on. Things that would feel so damned good, we’d both want...more.”

No man had ever said things like that to her. No. Both of the men she had been intimately involved with had just somewhat happened. They’d drifted into bed together. Marin had criticized after Dusty’s last relationship had fizzled.

There had been no grand fire between them like Marin insisted should be.

Come to think of it, she didn’t even think she had ever sat on an attractive man’s lap like this before. Maybe that was it. What had her feeling so off-kilter?

Sitting on Ben’s lap was definitely off-kilter time.

This wasn’t exactly her wheelhouse here. She tried to will herself to stand. She knew he’d let her up the instant she demanded it. She trusted him probably more than she did any man other than her uncle in the entire world. Him, and his brothers.

She lifted one hand. Pressed it to his chest. Oh yes. That chest was just as hard as she’d imagined it would be when she’d first knocked on his door tonight. She was in serious trouble here.

His heart was racing against her palm. Hers sped up to almost echo his. “W-what?”

“What kind of things?” he asked, smirking.

His fingers sank into her hair. His other hand was still on her hip. He’d turned her somehow. Both of her knees were on his right. Her shoulder—all she had to do was lean in a little and she could rest her shoulder against that perfect man chest. His scent surrounded her. He smelled like heat and spice and just... Oh, hell.

“Be careful what you are asking me, Destiny Marie.”

He smelled perfect. The chest beneath her palm felt perfect.

His arms around her felt like fire. Just like Marin had told her a man’s should. This was insane. This was *Ben*.

“To hell with it. Let the demons take my soul, then.” Then his head

lowered and she felt herself tilted back, just a little. Just enough to give him access. Ben's mouth covered hers.

And her entire world just changed. Instantly.

HE WANTED HER MORE THAN HE HAD EVER WANTED A WOMAN IN HIS ENTIRE life. Ben knew that. Within a half second of him kissing Destiny Marie for the first time, he just *knew* he would never be the same again.

She had him.

Just like that. Without him fighting or protesting or anything else. Not like he'd always imagined he would fight or protest when the woman who would capture him for life someday first captured him for life and everything.

It wasn't like that at all.

He was the one who was going to have to do the capturing, he suspected.

The wicked woman *had* him. In her clutches. Probably for eternity.

The demoness in his arms stole his soul in just a half second.

It was hers forever. He was a total goner now. Just like he'd sort of suspected he would be.

She was just that kind of woman.

That had him shaking. Right there, holding the woman he wanted in his arms for the first time, and he was shaking in his boots like he was a pimply-faced fourteen-year-old alone beneath the bleachers at the ball field—with the prettiest girl in the eighth grade.

She gasped, her mouth opening beneath his. A curl of instant heat went through him as he took advantage. Her lips tasted perfect. Like chocolate. And her. Always and forever her.

Dusty.

He could kiss this woman every minute for the rest of his life. He was a Tyler man, after all. He knew what—*who*—he wanted. His father had told

him and his brothers once—when it was *right*, a man knew it.

Well, Ben knew it.

It might have taken him a long damned time to get to this point, but he knew it *now*.

Her hand slipped up into his hair. She started kissing him back.

That was what did it.

It wasn't just Ben kissing Dusty.

Nope.

Dusty was kissing Ben, too.

Tongues met. Lips clung. He wanted to touch her all over. He wanted her naked and beneath him. Hell. There was a bed *right there*.

Ben wanted nothing more than to just lift her up and carry her to that bed and *show* her what she was doing to him. But even though the demoness in his arms had scrambled his brain as well as stole his soul, he still had some sense of rationality left.

That would be far too fast for Dusty. Probably for him, too.

Especially after what she'd said she thought men wanted when they kissed her. He didn't want to push her before she was ready.

No.

He needed to think. To reevaluate.

To...plot.

Because the last thing he would ever want to do was hurt her in any way. Rushing her would hurt and confuse her. Besides, if he was going to withstand her charms long enough to survive, he had to think. To strategize exactly what he wanted—and how he was going to get it.

He wasn't quite ready to let her go just yet.

He dropped his hand to her waist, and he pulled her closer. He gentled the kiss so it was less of an intense battle. Ben wanted to enjoy this moment the way it deserved to be enjoyed.

This was the very first time he had ever kissed her, after all.

Well, *seriously* kissed the woman he wanted anyway. Those little friendly pecks before had just been the warm up.

He wanted to remember every instant, every second of right now, forever.

It felt too perfect not to.

So Ben just enjoyed.

NEVER IN TWENTY-FIVE YEARS—WELL, NEVER IN THE TEN YEARS SINCE HER very first kiss with Logen Hoffman her sophomore year—had she *ever* felt this way during a simple kiss.

There was nothing simple about it, though.

His scent surrounded her, as did the heat of his body. His arms felt hard and strong and like they would never drop the woman he held. Of course, he wouldn't. He was *Ben*.

Tylers didn't drop the women in their arms. They just didn't.

She'd just never expected to be in a Tyler man's arms, though.

Kissing Ben felt different from every man she'd ever kissed before.

Dusty's brains were too scrambled to figure out what that meant.

It had been a long time since someone had held her this close, too. She had missed it. The feeling of strong arms blocking out the world.

Not that her ex's arms had ever done that. No. She had been the practical one, the one who handled all the bad in life so he didn't have to.

Ben could handle his own *bad*.

That stray thought reverberated through her head. With him, she wouldn't always have to be the strong one. The backbone. The one who kept everyone calm and going forward. No.

Ben had seen things himself. Far more than she had. Ben was *strong*. Confident in who he was and what he needed, wanted.

Dusty ran her fingers over that rock hard chest now, feeling the definition beneath her touch. The *Eat at Flo's Masterson Diner* shirt felt so...soft. Softer than she thought her own versions were.

The cotton was so soft, but a wild part of her wanted him to take it off. So she could feel *him*.

All of him, forever.

Forever.

Forever was the one word that terrified Dusty down to her very soul.

That was what had her pulling back as fast as she could. She jerked to her feet and just stared at him. Like a wide-eyed lunatic.

He stared back. “Say something.”

He was the writer, wasn’t he supposed to be the one with all the *words*? “I...no. This is insane. Completely insane.”

She did the only thing a smart woman wanting to seriously preserve her status quo could possibly do.

Dusty ran for the hills.

He caught her at the door.

His much larger hand covers hers on the doorknob. His other hand captured her shoulder. Dusty dragged in a deep breath. His front pressed against her back.

He was just the right height—she could feel him. Perfectly.

“You don’t have to run,” he said in that gravelly Ben voice that she had always thought secretly gave a woman shivers in all the right places but she would never tell his sister that. Even when she wasn’t certain she liked Ben—and she still wasn’t—his voice had given *her* the shivers. “We can figure this out together.”

“There is no *this*.” She looked over her shoulder at him. His mouth was right there. She forced herself to meet his eyes. “This shouldn’t have happened.”

“Why not? We’re both free right now. We both trust each other, care about each other. And, even though it just hit me like a bolt of lightning almost completely out of nowhere last week, I’m seriously attracted to you. And I think you could say the same. I wasn’t the only one doing the kissing.”

No, he hadn’t been. And that was what terrified her. She was already so confused about her entire *life* right now. To add a sudden attraction to Ben, it just didn’t make sense. It wasn’t practical. Or logical.

Or very smart, for that matter. It was almost a guaranteed path to even more confusion.

“Ben, I just can’t do *this* right now. And with you... if... when... things went wrong... I just can’t.”

Hard, hot, strong hands went around her waist. Dusty found herself turned around so neatly she just blinked at him. His hands rose, cupped her cheeks. “Who says things would go wrong?”

“I...” Well. That was an answer she didn’t have.

“I’m not ready to give up before the game has even started, Destiny Marie. You can count on that.” He pressed a deliberate kiss to her lips, then pulled back, quickly. “But run, my favorite little green-eyed mouse. I’m eventually going to catch you. I know all your hidey-holes, after all. I know you—you won’t escape me for long. I’m looking forward to catching you. I will *always* find you. Remember that.”

He shot her that grin that always toasted her insides, and not in a good way. The one that had always made her want to clobber him every chance she could. Then he reached around her, grabbed the doorknob and opened it. Trapping her between him and the wooden panel.

“*You* most certainly are the kind of woman *made for romance*. I’m going to prove it to you. Get ready.” He kissed her again, this time on her temple. “Run, sweetheart. So that I can catch you. Go. You’ve accomplished your mission, you little witch. You’ve captured my soul. It’s yours forever now. No giving it back. I am yours. Better get ready.”

The man had gone insane. No denying that.

Dusty just escaped while she could.

She didn’t stop until she was back at the end of the third-floor hallway. Where the entrance to the family wing was. She keyed in the code as she looked over her shoulder. At the end of the main hallway.

Ben was in the hall. Watching her, arms crossed over that perfectly muscled chest. Dusty felt hunted then. Flat out hunted. Like a warrior had set his eyes on her, and she was defenseless to stop him. Which was just ridiculous. She didn’t think about things like that. Not her.

He was the imaginative one. Him and his sister.

She swung open the door to the family wing and stepped through. She shut it quickly, then took the stairs to the first floor. Her room was right there. Off the kitchen.

She stopped short, seeing her cousin Meyra right there in the center of the kitchen. Just sort of standing there. A confused look on her own face.

Meyra stared at her for a moment. “Your lips are all red. Have you been kissing someone?”

Dusty almost shrieked. “Meyra, that’s none of your business.”

Meyra put her own fingers to her lips. “Well, are *mine* red, then?”

Dusty’s gaze narrowed. Meyra’s lips *were* swollen. “Yes. Why? What have you been doing?”

Meyra’s cheeks turned flame red. “Nothing. Nothing at all. I’m going to my room.”

But she started toward the kitchen instead. Opposite of the stairs. “Mey, your room’s upstairs.”

“Oh yeah. I forgot. Well, I’m going to my room now. Good night.”

Dusty thought that sounded like an excellent idea. She practically ran into her room and closed the door behind her.

Her entire world had gone mad. Dusty was completely convinced of it. Meyra had. *She* had. Ben definitely had.

It was probably all *Marin*’s fault, too.

Sending Dusty to check that trolls hadn’t eaten that man. Insane.

Everything had gone mad.

SEAN COULDN'T HELP HIMSELF. HE WAS BETWEEN A MEETING WITH HIS superiors and a small vacation when he decided to swing back through Idaho and check on LaDonna and the girls. She had sent him an email, had said they had spoken to the girls. It hadn't gone well.

And things were very tense now. Sean could understand that.

He fully believed that honesty was the best policy. And the safest. If the girls knew they had reason to be concerned for their own personal safety, then they'd be more on alert. That they had to destroy the girls' naiveté, that stung. Those girls deserved to have a pretty kind of life. More than anyone he knew. And it would have hurt them, all of them. Even though Dylan and Devaney were tougher, it still would have hurt them.

He wanted to check on them.

Sean just had just crossed the state border when he got another text. From Fred this time.

The man suspected he was being followed.

Sean cursed. Fred was paranoid, yes. But he wasn't a fool, by any means. If Fred Brown thought he was being followed, there was a high likelihood that he was. That meant things weren't going to be as easy as Sean had hoped.

He'd wanted to give LaDonna back the life she had lost before. To see some *good* in this job for once. All he saw now was the bad. Far too much of it.

Sean was reevaluating his life, his values again.

Sean met him just outside the diner that Fred ate at almost every day.

Fred was perversely drawn to diners—Fred swore he had always liked the heavy food. Sean personally preferred lighter fare. Something healthier. But Fred certainly looked fit for a man twenty-five years older than Sean. Sean joined him at the booth in the back. “What is going on?”

Fred pulled out his phone. “These two men were behind me all day yesterday. I saw them in here and at the office. And, damn it, Sutton, I’m almost certain that one there on the left is a cousin of Morris Preston’s that I’ve met before. From Sublette County. And that one, the younger one, I think it’s Preston’s son by his mistress. I’m almost certain of it. He’s the one who did it. He cut my wife. I’ll never forget his weaselly little face.”

“You sure?” It had been nearly twenty-three years, after all. Morris Preston’s son by his mistress would have been seventeen or so then. Fred and LaDonna had given sworn statements that the Preston’s illegitimate son had been the one to kill his own mother that night. But nothing had ever come out of the investigation. The investigation had just stalled. Stopped.

No one could find out the reason behind that. Sean definitely couldn’t. He’d tried.

“As I have ever been. I am going to tell LaDonna and the girls tonight.”

And that meant he was ready to run again. To disrupt the girls’ entire lives. “What about the girls’ classes?”

Fred paid for any college class the girls took online. It was their compromise. He had refused to help with financial aid forms for the girls four years ago when Dylan had first enrolled. Sean had understood. He hadn’t agreed, but he had understood. Fred had finally agreed the girls deserved educations.

They’d compromised, after Dylan threatened to just move out anyway. As long as they lived at home, Fred paid cash for their classes.

“I will discuss it with them tonight.” Fred had a stubborn look on his face. One Sean had seen before. “They may just have to drop out for a while. Or just finish them wherever we end up. It can’t be helped.”

“Dylan’s almost ready to graduate.” She couldn’t just stop two-thirds of the way through the semester. The girl only had three or four weeks *left* on this semester. Then just one more semester and she’d be finished. Her father couldn’t seriously just expect her to give that up.

“She just has next semester, and she’ll have her bachelor’s. She can enroll somewhere else in a year or so. Finish then.”

“I’m sorry, Fred, but I don’t agree with that. Dylan has worked hard to

accomplish what she has. Starting over somewhere else because this might be Preston's cousin is insane. If the credits even transferred. And what would it do to Dahlia?" LaDonna's third daughter struggled with massive changes. Learning a new system, giving up what she had been working on? No. She wouldn't adjust well. "I'll see if I can identify these men. They may just be coincidence. Just don't do anything rash in the meantime. The girls are adults now. You can't keep controlling everything in their lives. Ruthlessly ripping them away from everything they try to do this way. They are going to resent you even more. And you will lose them."

But Frederick Arnold Brown never listened to anyone when his mind was made up.

Sean wasn't a fool. But he was almost fully convinced Fred Brown was.

And if any of Sean's assignments could drive Sean to drink, it was Frederick Arnold Brown.

JASON WAS A COLD SON-OF-A-BITCH. MADE WAYNE'S SKIN CRAWL. THE younger man had a dead look in his washed out blue eyes. No denying that.

Of course, he hadn't changed much in ten years. He'd always been a real frozen bastard.

Jason hadn't even been fifteen when he had killed his first man. The woman that had changed everything was just a year or so later.

Jason had killed his own mother.

Right there in front of Wayne, Preston, and Bruce. And Geena. That woman—she'd had no business being there with Preston's wife that day. She was too damned naive and sheltered, but Preston's wife had thought it was funny to expose her new little friend to the *real world*. Patsy had gotten off on shocking little Geena, too. No denying that.

Wayne regretted Geena most of all. She'd been a *nice* girl. Young, innocent, that kind of thing. Naive. Her husband had sheltered her a great deal. Probably too much. Wayne had been dismissive and derogatory about that woman. She'd annoyed him. All that wholesome *goodness* he had thought was stupid.

He'd been a fool. Innocence like that should be protected.

His girls were all that innocent, too. He'd kill a man who took advantage of one of his girls. Destroyed that goodness in them. Without hesitating. Now...now he understood why her husband had been so rabidly overprotective of her back then.

But Patsy had pushed, and pushed. Until Morris had turned to the boy and told him to do it. Right there. Jason Smith-Morris had stabbed his own

mother dead. Without hesitating. On his father's orders.

Then turned on her little friend Geena.

Geena had gotten lucky to survive. She'd ran, bleeding from the wound in her neck.

Right outside.

Just as her husband had been pulling up, angry that she was there in the first place.

Wayne hadn't seen them since.

Well, Geena probably regretted that day more than anyone. What that woman had lost—well, *now* Wayne understood the hurt. He had nothing against Geena and her husband. He never really had. He just wanted her to keep her mouth shut. That was it. She had for twenty-three years, as far as he knew. But things were changing.

Morris Preston would face the consequences of what he had done now. Wayne just wanted to make sure that *he* didn't face those same consequences along the way.

As far as Wayne knew, Geena was the only one on the planet besides Wayne now who knew the truth about Jason. About who the man's mother was.

More importantly, Geena knew who Jason's *father* was.

Morris Preston's secret. Geena knew. Now Jason wanted her dead because of it. The younger man was a psychopath. There was no other way to describe him. Obsessed.

Jason wasn't going to stop until Geena was dead. Wayne needed to figure out a way to either make that happen. Or take Jason out of the equation.

Geena and her husband dead would clean up some worries for Wayne, too. He couldn't discount that. He was going to have to find a way to make that happen.

Wayne just had to *find* her first.

Jason's sources—they weren't infallible. Geena was still out there.

But it was just a matter of time.

MARIN'S IDEA TO START A CATERING SIDE OF THE DINER HAD BEEN A GOOD one, but Dusty was beyond exhausted. It hadn't helped that she hadn't slept well. Again.

It was all Ben's fault.

She'd tried to avoid him while he'd been at the hotel.

It hadn't been easy.

Ben, Ben, Ben. He was all she had been able to think about.

Ben and the kiss that had flamed her insides and changed her forever. She would never be able to look at him as just Nikki's older brother again. No. He would forever be the man who turned her world on its side when she had least expected it.

That they were getting ready to cater a Tyler family get-together just kept throwing that in her face. He would probably be there. And she couldn't avoid him forever, after all.

"What's eating you, kid?"

Dusty shook her head. Of all of her sisters, Darcey probably understood her the best. But the last thing she was going to talk about with her sister today was a Tyler man.

That was a surefire way to make things harder than they had to be.

Martin Tyler was paying the bill for this today. That was going to be hard enough for Darcey as it was.

"Just...thinking, lately."

"Whenever you want to talk, I'm here to listen."

Of course, she was; they all were. Dusty nodded. "I know. And I love

you. Let's get this started."

They'd had the auxiliary staff at the inn and the diner handle the shifts tonight. A Talley-catered event would be served by Talleys. That was something their business manager dictator, aka Marin Talley, insisted on. Dusty understood it in theory. But she was tired—she'd worked a full shift for Matt that morning, came home and started loading the back of the inn's van for tonight. She was already exhausted, and there were five more hours on her schedule. Then she had another shift for Matt in the morning, but it was a Sunday shift—just feeding the animals they were boarding, so it wouldn't be too bad.

Then Monday—she was taking the day off. Probably just to sleep, at this rate. Her oldest sister stepped into her path. Darcey put her hands on Dusty's shoulders. They were the exact same height. Darcey outweighed Dusty by maybe ten pounds.

They looked alike, sounded alike, and sometimes even thought alike.

No one knew her as well as Darcey—except Nikki. "Darce?"

"I know something's brewing up there," Darcey thumped her on the forehead gently. Just the way their Aunt Jessica used to do. "And you need to understand something—we love you. All we want is for you to be happy. If that means...working full-time with the furballs, then *do it*. Don't let the *family* swallow the Destiny Marie. Promise me you won't do that?"

Tears hit her eyes. Dusty threw her arms around her big sister and just hugged her. "As soon as I am ready to talk, you'll be the first person I find. I promise."

"I'd better. I take my role as head of our little clan seriously. Remember that."

Dusty just nodded. Darcey had always been there—for her and Dixie and Daisy. No matter what. She had her sister. Sisters. Cousins. Her family.

She would be okay. Even if *everything else* was going sideways now.

"YOU'RE PREOCCUPIED." HIS SISTER STARED AT HIM THROUGH THE BIG BLUE-framed glasses and blinked. Like she was trying to read his mind with some weird Nikki power. She always had been precocious.

Or as Fletcher put it, a real brat.

Ben adored her. The idea that the so-called hottest man in America had been wrapped around her just five minutes ago when Ben had come into the small kitchen at the back of the barn Martin had turned into what he called “Tyler Hall” irked him. Hunter had looked like he was trying to swallow Nikki whole.

It was disturbing to even think about. Little sisters shouldn’t be doing *that* kind of thing with Hollywood playboys. Still, his sister was practically glowing now that her husband was back from his overnight stay in Hollywood.

Hunter was actually going to do it—build a production company in the middle of Masterson County. The whole idea was crazy. They already had the land—it butted up to Fletcher’s property and Chandler’s restaurant, and had been *Tyler* land originally.

Nikki had said that *mattered*.

Plans to build were in place, and it would start being built—as soon as Hunter’s house was finished. They were hoping to have that built soon. Weather permitting, of course. The house was less than an eighth of a mile past Fletcher’s.

Nikki’s house. Hunter Clark was building Nikki the perfect house. He had said it was a matter of pride. And he had wanted *Tylers* to build it for her. Some of Ben’s cousins were trying to get their own construction company off the ground. Hunter’s house was a good place to start. He wanted the perfect house for Ben’s sister.

With a little white picket fence.

That white picket fence was a big deal for Hunter and Nikki.

Hell, Ben understood *symbolism*. He was a writer after all.

His sister was happy—and that was really all Ben had ever wanted for the little brat. But there was an odd little glow in her big blue eyes he’d never seen before. He was going to take tonight to figure it out. Nikki was definitely cooking something up in there. Ben now had a mystery to solve. When he had time.

But now, he was thinking of a woman with soul-searing green eyes. Who was currently avoiding him. He knew exactly what she had been up to. “I’m just mentally working on the book.”

“Sure you are. Always lost in your own head. But, hey, I get it. Hunter is the same way with screenplays. I have to practically dance naked in front—oh, sorry. Didn’t mean to let that slip. I know you are sensitive. I need *girl*

conversation. I haven't had a chance to talk to Dusty this week—she's been working double shifts. I'm hoping to have a few minutes tonight.”

“She's going to be here?” Maybe she hadn't been avoiding him? It was a Tyler pitch-in. Friends were always welcome, and she'd come with Nikki dozens of times, but when he hadn't seen her with his sister, his hopes had been dashed. “Why?”

“Martin hired the Talley Catering Company—Marin's latest scheme—to cater tonight. All the Talley girls will be here. I'm interested in seeing Martin pay Darcey.” Nikki sent him a wicked grin, looking just like their mother for the briefest of moments—with the exception of the red hair. The grin was about all Nikki had gotten from her, except for her puny size. Ben hugged his sister, impulsively. “Bound to be fireworks. I bet she sends Marin to pick up the check.”

“Leave Martin alone.” His cousin was head over heels in love with Dusty's sister Darcey—Ben would bet his entire life savings on that. The two of them just kept acting like warring idiots whenever they got too close.

He empathized with his cousin completely. Those Talley girls were dangerous to a man's well-being. He'd been dreaming about a particular Talley girl of his own for five days now. Since the kiss that had rocked his entire being completely.

Well, technically before the kiss, but it had intensified. Ben was *still* at the inn—his uncle was rewiring his entire apartment this week—but Dusty had kept disappearing every time he thought he even glimpsed her.

“I personally think he just needs to carry her off somewhere and finally get her naked. Keep her that way for a few weeks.” Okay, so he didn't really think that, but, well, maybe the caveman side of himself understood it.

It was very tempting to go to the inn or diner and scoop his own woman up and just carry her off. Enjoy each other. Do things to each other he wasn't going to tell his sister about *at all*.

Didn't want to shock or traumatize the poor innocent kid, after all.

Ben reined himself in.

He had to convince Destiny Marie to let him catch her first. Then he'd strategize where he was going to carry her off to. First, anyway. Probably back to his apartment—once the wiring was fixed. They could be completely alone there. And it was within easy walking distance of the inn and the diner. Even in the cold. Or he'd just drive her wherever she needed to be.

He'd pick her up after her shifts ended, and bring her back to his cave.

And just *be* with her. He'd feed her dinner, and then enjoy her.

Show her this Tyler was almost domesticated, even. Then, they could plan what happened next. "I'm going to head outside and wait for them. See if I can offer a hand. Flirt with D—Marin—a bit."

"You're never going to get lucky there, Ben. Might as well give up trying."

He had no intention of "getting lucky" with Marin. He never had. But Dusty? He wasn't about to tell Nikki he wanted her best friend so deeply his very bones ached with the hunger. And after five days, it still hadn't gone away. He had finally accepted that it probably wouldn't.

Hell, before long, Ben would be talking about little white picket fences, too.

He imagined it for a fast moment. A big house, right there across from the inn. There was one next to his cousin Chandler that had been a foreclosure for a while. It would probably need some work, but he could get Martin to help him. They could stay at his apartment until it was ready and everything. And he could put a white fence in front, no problem. It would be big enough for him and Dusty and two or three, or maybe three or four—

"What is going on in your head right now?"

That wasn't anything his brat of a sister needed to know about. Yet.

There would be plenty of time for that later.

"Just how to kill my next victim so Harry can come in and save the day. That's all."

He was an *author*. He made up tall tales for a living, after all. But he really had no business standing there daydreaming about white picket fences. That was just not Ben Tyler's *thing* at all.

Maybe.

What did he really know?

Dusty had sent his whole world into chaos. Demonesses were good at that, after all.

BEN WAS JUST RIGHT THERE. OUT OF NOWHERE. DUSTY ALMOST SQUEAKED when a hot hand landed on her back.

She knew exactly who it was. The man's touch was distinctive.

“Let me help, babe. Show off all my manly muscles. Make all the ladies wish they were going home with me tonight.” He leaned closer, as he grabbed the heavy bag of cutlery and serving utensils. “You smell gorgeous tonight. I've been looking for you...for days. You cannot run from me forever. I am caveman. Me chase hot cavewoman. Forever.”

He was still checked in at the inn. She had confirmed that every night when she made it home. But Dusty hadn't been crazy—she'd stuck to her side of the family wing when not working.

Ben had changed everything with his killer kiss. She wasn't ready to deal with Ben yet. Just not yet.

She needed time. “Don't you have a book to write?”

“I am getting closer to the switch point.”

“And what is a switch point?”

“I just write and write according to my outline, and then a switch is flipped, and the story is just...clear. Just have to get there first.”

“Nikki doesn't outline.”

“Some writers don't. I was with this book. Then I wasn't. Sasha ended up needing Harry's help. I knew that part. I just didn't know he was going to feel the sudden urge to seduce his sister's bestestest friend while he was rescuing her.” He sent her that wicked, wicked Ben look that shot her right in the stomach as she remembered his arms around her. His lips pressed to hers

before he pulled back. “Harry really wants his hands on her.”

She wasn’t lost to the parallels between his latest story and what was happening between them now. “Are you acting out your book or something? Some kind of method...writing?”

“Nope. Not my style. If that was the case, I'd have had to be villains before. And, well, I'd probably be in jail, if I did the things *they* did.”

“So what are you really after?” She was trying not to shiver out in the cold. The van was backed up to the rear of Martin's precious Tyler Hall. Her cousins and sisters were all inside now.

It was just Dusty and Ben and the falling snow.

“I just looked up and realized that I knew exactly how good old Harry would have felt in that moment. Because...I had my own sister's bestestest friend tormenting *me*. It made a few things clear. Very clear.” He slung one strong arm over her shoulders. Pulled her closer. “Come close. Keep me warm. Kiss me. That should do it. One kiss. Then I will behave.”

Dusty stopped herself from doing just that at the last minute. The guy had serious power. No denying that. “Ben? What are you *really* after?”

He shrugged. She felt it beneath his arm. “I am after finding out why I suddenly can't get you—and that kiss—out of my head. Although to be honest, I've been thinking about you that way since before that kiss, you know.”

“I think you’re insane.”

“I've heard that before. But, hell, Destiny Marie, I just can't get you out of my head.” He stopped walking, turned. Until he was right in front of her. “You know I will never do anything to hurt you, right?”

Well, logically, she did. Ben was one of the few men on the planet she could say she felt absolutely *safe* with. But the way he had her stomach churning right now—it was pure fear.

Not in a physical sense. But in a her-world-was-about-to-change-forever sense. And that, more than anything, was what scared her so much.

THE LAST THING HE WANTED TO DO WAS UPSET HER OR CONFUSE HER. BEN couldn't help himself. He leaned down, kissed her on her mouth once. Like he had before. Even though he really wanted to scoop her up and carry her off to another barn on his cousins' ranch. Just be with her. Get her out of that Talley Catering hoodie and just see what treasures there were beneath it.

But his mother had raised him to be a gentleman—especially with the one woman not related to him he cared about most on the entire planet. So he stepped back. “I'm not going to push, babe. But when you decide you are ready—I'm going to be here. Waiting. Lovesick and waiting. In the meantime, I'm going to have Harry rescue Sasha from her current predicament—she's been taken hostage by a vengeful policeman who has suddenly developed a conscience. It's a bit warped, but it is a conscience. And then...I think Sasha is going to rescue him in the final chapter. Why should the guy always be the one who does the rescuing in romance suspense?”

“It's called romantic suspense, you goob. At least, according to Nikki. And that is an outdated trope, by the way. The hero and heroine, or heroine and heroine or hero and hero—whatever pairing there is in the book—can rescue each other. As long as it's believable. Nikki spent thirty minutes last month informing me all about that.”

“Yeah. She thinks she knows everything. This book is not *romantic suspense*. It's a thriller. Just like all the rest of my Harry books. A thriller. With romantic elements this time, though. Maybe. I don't know if it will go more than a kiss yet. Harry is running scared. He doesn't want to

change the status quo with his sister's best friend. He values the relationship they have, you know.”

“Does he?”

“Very much so.” And he wasn't talking about Harry. They both knew that. “It's just as new to Harry as it is Sasha. And very unsettling, all around.”

“What does Sasha think about all of this?” Dusty asked in a quiet voice. “Have you figured that out yet? Because...maybe she can give me pointers.”

“I haven't. I don't usually do secondary characters' POV scenes until I get to the end, you know. I want to make sure Harry's reactions work well first. I follow an outline, but don't always write in order.”

“You are the exact opposite of Nikki. She never writes in order, which is insane to me, and never follows an outline. She always looks like she's having so much fun.” She shot Ben a look as they stepped up on the porch. “You don't. You look like you are doing battle.”

“It's different for every author.” He cupped her cheek, now cold from the air around them. He manfully resisted the urge to tell her he'd warm her right back up. “How *would* Sasha feel? For when...the time comes to write her POV?”

“Scared. Confused. Overwhelmed.” She laughed a little. The look in those big green eyes stabbed at him a bit. “And tired actually. If Sasha is anything like *me*, anyway. I've been working a lot lately. Trying to...come to a decision.”

All thoughts of romance went out of his head. Something *else* was hurting her. Ben wanted to fix it. “Talk to me. I promise I'll listen.”

“Matt's offered me full-time at the clinic. But it would mean...changes. For my family. I'm not sure I want to do that to them right now.”

“But you love the clinic more.” Hell, now he understood some of her hurt. Dusty took a huge part of who she was from where she fit with her family. He had always known that. Being a *Talley* was just as important to her as being a *Tyler* was to him. “Babe, all your family wants is for you to be happy. They can hire help at the inn. But is it really that making you hesitate?”

“What do you mean?”

It was getting colder out. He needed to get her inside before she turned into a Dusty-cicle. But for now, it was time for some home truths. “I think it's fear, babe. What is the worst thing that can happen if you make this change now? I went through the same damned thing, stationed at Fort Carson. I

wanted to come home so bad my teeth ached just thinking about it. But if I didn't reenlist—and I couldn't make it and take care of myself financially here, I would have failed. It took me six months to make the decision—and I had two hundred grand in the bank as a fallback option if I screwed up. Or if book sales weren't what I wanted. Just in case. And a pal told me the truth—if I screwed up here, I could always reenlist. So, question: If you screw up with Matt, what will happen? What will you do next?”

“I don't know. That's something I'm still trying to figure out.”

“I'll tell you the one thing you are not doing, Destiny Marie Talley.” He kissed her again. He just couldn't help himself.

“What is that?”

“*You* are not reenlisting in the army! I am not letting you leave Masterson County—or me. I just am not. So if that's your plan, or flying the coop to Texas to join that wicked cousin of yours down there, or going to St. Louis to set up a tent beneath the arch—if either of those are your backup plan, just think again. I am not letting you. Now, inside, woman. Parts of me are about to freeze off here. And that just isn't allowed to happen.”

She laughed. Which was what he wanted in the first place. Ben pushed open the back door of the barn, to be greeted by the warmth inside. There was a small kitchen area there. And an open window area where the servers—in this case, those gorgeous, maddening, far, far too sexy Talley women—would serve the food-buffet style.

Her family was already in there, waiting.

Marin shot him a wicked look. “There you are, handsome. I see you found something we were missing out there in the cold.”

“Something like that. Now I need a gorgeous woman to help warm me up. Dusty has volunteered, though. So don't you get any ideas.” He handed Marin the bag in his hand. Then hooked one arm around Dusty's shoulders. Pretending to keep it casual. Friendly. *Brotherly*.

He almost snorted at that.

He would never feel *brotherly* about Destiny Marie ever again.

Nope. Ben had made his decision. He wanted what Gil had. What Hunter had. Chandler, and Clint, and all the rest of the men who had been captured by their women already. He wanted *this* woman as his one and only.

He just had to convince her of that first.

FLETCHER TYLER HAD ALWAYS THOUGHT DUSTY TALLEY WAS THE PERFECT woman. Utterly perfect. Well, since she'd become an adult, that was.

That she was his sister's best friend had nothing to do with it. And it wasn't like Fletcher would do anything about that—he thought she was the perfect woman, that didn't mean she was the perfect woman *for him*.

She was beautiful, funny, intelligent, and loyal. And incredibly sexy—hard for a guy not to notice *that*. He liked watching her snap at his brother Ben, that was for sure.

Dusty and Ben bickered a good deal of the time their paths crossed. Fletcher suspected Ben thought Dusty was the perfect woman, too. In a lot more elemental ways than Fletcher did. Ben just hadn't done anything about it. Fletcher had thought he would, a while back. When Ben had first come home a few years ago. But Ben had gotten busy remodeling his building, and then everything that had happened to their family in the meantime. Especially what had happened to Nikki and Dusty eight months ago.

Fletcher wasn't stupid, though. There was *something* about the way the two of them had always looked at each other since Ben had come back to Masterson County.

The rest of the family was filling Tyler Hall up quickly. They were having a welcome-to-the-family party for his bastard of an uncle's six youngest daughters, ranging in age from four months all the way up to thirteen years. Fletcher and some of his other cousins had pitched in to help pay for catering and balloons and party decorations. And presents for the kids.

They wanted to make it a special event for the kids. To show them that they were loved. Those kids hadn't had enough love in their short lives.

And if Fletcher ever caught his uncle out alone, well, Fletcher was going to reeducate Bruce on how a Tyler was supposed to act.

Especially toward his own kids.

Bruce would be charged with child abuse and neglect, among other things, as soon as he was caught.

Bruce and that psychopath Morris Preston had nearly killed Fletcher's brother. They'd tried to kill Gil's woman multiple times. Morris Preston had been responsible for almost killing two of Fletcher's young cousins. Auggie and Junie were young. Innocent. Bruce's own daughters.

Fletcher would never forgive Bruce for what he had been a part of—Fletcher's own brother had been shot because of Bruce. Gil was still a little wobbly on his feet. His oldest brother wasn't about to let that show—Gil was a bit old-fashioned like that. He wouldn't show weakness if he could help it.

Fletcher checked the crowd for his brother's distinctive red hair. Only Gil and their cousins Monroe and Junie, and their uncle Nick's seven-year-old Nova had hair that red.

Well, besides Bruce's baby daughter, Maeha.

Auggie's baby now.

Gil was right there. Next to a gorgeous brown-eyed, brown-haired goddess of his very own. Fletcher envied his brother, the way Sage looked at him. Those two had practically taken one look at each other after Gil had rescued her from a mudslide and just caught fire.

Just like that, Gil and Sage had found each other. After Morris Preston had his goons—including Fletcher's uncle—almost kill Sage along Wreck Curve Road in the middle of a thunderstorm.

Movement from near the supply closet caught Fletcher's attention next.

Ben. Carrying something for Dusty.

Fletcher watched Dusty again. She definitely was one of the most beautiful women he knew. Hard to reconcile that with the little girl he had known, and taken care of, for almost as long as he could remember. He'd felt half-responsible for her forever since the day she'd collapsed practically at his feet from a damned heart attack when she'd been a teenager. He loved her, just as much as he did Nikki.

Nothing was ever going to change that.

But was there something different about the way Ben was looking at her

now? Even more *different* than Ben looked at her before? He hoped so.

Fletcher liked to think he knew both his brothers almost as well as he knew himself. And, yes, he knew when one of his brothers was hot for a woman. Seriously hot for her and everything.

Ben was staring down at Dusty like she was *his* personal goddess, just like Gil was looking at Sage a few feet away. Well. Damn. It was about time.

Fletcher had thought Ben would never figure it out.

Those two? They were just as made for each other as Gil and Sage.

Fletcher had known it for a long time. Maybe someday...maybe he'd find a woman like Dusty for himself too. There were a few more just like her running around, after all. But for tonight, he had family around him. That was what truly mattered.

The people he loved. No matter what.

DYLAN HAD LAID IN HER BED, FOR HOURS. JUST THINKING. SHE'D EVEN skipped dinner. She just hadn't been hungry. She hadn't really been hungry in days. Not since her parents had told the *truth*.

"You need to eat something."

Dylan rolled over in the bed, in the bedroom where she'd spent every night for the last three years of her life. From the time she had been nineteen. She had wanted to go to college, live in the dorm. Be around *people*. But she'd let her parents convince her not to. That it made more sense for her to live at home, and let her parents help her pay for her degree. Online. Save herself the debt. It had made sense. But, it hadn't been what she really wanted at all.

Well, the debt she hadn't wanted, but...the rest of it? She'd wanted to get out. Away. If only for a little while. "I'm not really hungry, Dev."

She'd been ready to try life on her own. To be out there, making connections with people who weren't her family. Or the handful of neighbors on either side. Instead, she still slept in the double bed she'd had since she was fifteen.

They each had their own rooms. In this house that they'd lived in for three years. They'd had to double up a time or two before. They'd moved...a lot. Now she understood why.

Looking back, Dylan understood the truth. Her parents had kept them isolated. Trapped. And she and her sisters hadn't even known it. It was going to take her a while to accept and forgive that. She didn't know if she believed in their story. It was too wild. Definitely too farfetched. Dylan didn't believe

in wild crazy stories.

She'd always been more practical than that. Corrupt small-town cops, a family of hotheaded criminals always causing trouble—all with red hair and hateful attitudes, so farfetched—her father...innocent in everything. Of course he was.

And four siblings she had never gotten a chance to know.

It was just too farfetched.

“I know. But we need to come up with a battle plan. You up for it yet?” Devaney asked. Devaney was their *planner*. Dylan preferred to just wing it. To go where her instincts told her to go.

Dylan pushed the blanket back and sat up. “Yes. Can't say I'm going to be sleeping all that well for a while.”

“No kidding. How much did you believe?” Devaney asked, coming farther into the room, as Dahlia and Dorie crept in behind her. Of course, they did. They stuck together. It was the four of them against the world. It always had been.

Sisters took care of sisters.

There had been plenty of years where the only real *friends* the four of them had had were each other. If there were neighborhood kids to play with, that was it. Oftentimes...where they lived...there weren't. And it was just them.

She'd asked so many times before *why* they couldn't do the things other kids did. Sports, drama clubs, homeschool groups, field trips, anything to be with other kids—but their father had always been far too busy *working* to take them.

And their mother had just been too afraid.

Supposedly Dylan's mother's social anxiety disorder had kept them home. Dylan understood that.

Her mom did have social anxiety. Severely.

She'd seen evidence of it so many times before. And she'd reconciled with what that had meant for her and her sisters long ago. Things had eased up a little once Dylan had been able to drive herself and her little sisters other places. To the mall, the park, movies, that sort of thing.

They'd never really been allowed to go anywhere else. They should have. She should have just taken her sisters wherever she wanted to take them. But she hadn't. Dylan had always toed the line like the good little girl her parents had demanded she be.

But now...she had to wonder if her mother and father had lied about that, too. If her mother's severe anxiety hadn't been a handy little excuse to keep their daughters right there next to them forever.

Trust, once destroyed, was hard to build back.

It was hard not to feel like they had been robbed of a real childhood.

As well as robbed of their *real* family, too.

"I want to know about *them*," Dahlia whispered. She always whispered when she was nervous. She'd struggled to speak as a kid. Speech therapy had helped. But she'd always been shy when she spoke—and reverted back to whispering when she was nervous. Afraid. Confused. "If they are anything like *us*."

Devaney pulled her legs up under her, then patted her lap. Dahlia laid her head on her twin's knee. They looked alike, but Dahlia just had a fragile air about her that had always made Dylan and Devaney want to protect her from everything. Dorie, too. She was sweeter than Dylan and Devaney by far.

Also a little bit more stubborn, too.

"There is no one quite like us," Devaney said dryly. "We're originals, remember?"

Well, maybe they *weren't*.

Their parents hadn't told them their siblings' names. They didn't know if they were boys or girls, or how old. They just knew...Wyoming. Near Sublette County. There was an inn there. And that inn had been in their father's family for decades.

Dylan reached for her laptop. She'd bought it with her own money five years ago. Her father had been so angry—they hadn't wanted her or her sisters on the computer unsupervised at all. He'd said it was because of *screen time* rotting brains and internet predators and things. Well, she'd been eighteen. He hadn't been able to stop her buying it with her own money.

She'd turned her laptop into her key to a *life*. She'd worked as a virtual assistant for five years now. She had her own company and everything. Dylan had her *own* money. Not a lot, but more than her sisters had. And she used that money for them, too. Whenever she had to.

Now she wondered if his resistance to the internet had just been to keep her and her sisters from knowing anything about the outside world. The internet was a powerful equalizer, after all. She could have found out about *them*.

About what he and her mother might have done. She didn't even know if

her parents were criminals or not. WITSEC was for criminals, right? Well, Dylan was going to find out.

“I’m going to find them.” Dylan looked at her sisters. She’d taken care of them for as long as she could remember. That was what a good sister did. This...wouldn’t be any different. “And we’ll get our answers from *them*. We won’t stop until we have those answers.”

“In this together?” Dorie asked.

Dylan reached for her youngest sister’s hand. “We start it now, and then we finish it. Together.”

“Together, always. It’s what we do.” Devaney covered Dylan’s hand next. Then Dahlia’s went on top. “We will be okay. No matter what.”

Dylan made her sisters a silent promise—she was going to make sure that was true for all of them. WITSEC, that meant dangerous people had been after her family before. She wasn’t stupid.

That...could still be true now.

If her parents weren’t lying, anyway.

They would have be careful.

She studied her sisters for a moment. Dahlia, so sweet and shy and vulnerable; Devaney, who thought she could handle everything if she just pretended nothing was wrong until she could break down alone.

Dylan wasn’t stupid; Devaney was just as scared inside as Dylan was. Dorie, just a kid at nineteen. How could Dorie understand *any* of this? “We’ll find them. And then we will know exactly who *we* are.”

Because Dylan *Brown* wasn’t even her real name.

She didn’t have any idea where to start. Except...an inn. In Wyoming.

Well, no time like the present.

Dylan wanted answers—and she wanted them now.

Her father couldn’t stop her this time.

DUSTY NEEDED TO GET OUT OF HER ROOM. SHE COULDN'T PUT HER FINGER ON it at all. But something just didn't feel right. It hadn't since she had driven the van into the back parking lot of the inn after the Tyler party had finally ended two nights ago.

Feel.

Maybe she was a bit more like Marin than she'd thought.

She'd check on things throughout the inn, grab a snack from the muffins Meyra had made as an experiment—her cousin was seriously on an egg-free/allergen-free baking kick, for some reason, lately—and then maybe go outside for a moment.

She had an idyllic life, she thought. She would always have a roof over her head, and food in her stomach. She had everything she needed. Had far, far more than others. But why did she hurt so much?

It probably had something to do with what had happened with Brad. Maybe she hadn't fully dealt with it yet? It hadn't quite been eight months yet. She had just sort of pushed it aside, focused on moving forward with her family. With her friends. Helping Nikki with the wedding, then helping her cousins and sisters with the diner and the inn, like always. Everything had just meant changes.

Maybe the snow had brought it all up to the surface in a way she wasn't ready to think about yet. She and Nikki had been on their way to Gil's that night. There had been snow on the roads. Dusty had been driving. Brad had followed them.

To kill Nikki.

Brad. Nikki's husband Hunter was one of the most successful actors in Hollywood now. Brad had been his manager. Brad hadn't wanted Hunter to fall for a small-town girl like Nikki, and ruin the good thing Brad had going on. So he'd casually decided to kill Nikki. Dusty had been with her at the time. So he'd decided to kill them both and make it look like an accident. Just like the two of them hadn't mattered at all. Just in *Brad's* way.

It had been sheer luck that had had Hunter coming up behind their wrecked truck and realizing what was happening. He hadn't come alone. He'd had Slater Davis, big time Hollywood star, with him. Slater Davis—of all men to be out there, it had been Slater Davis.

She had been very lucky it had been—Slater was a former army cop like Ben, a three-time world-champion martial artist, six foot five and strong. Determined. Action hero in more than a dozen movies now.

He'd definitely been Dusty's hero that night.

One of the biggest actors in Hollywood had carried Dusty through the snow, unconscious, before she'd frozen to death. Winter would always bring the memories. Make her *hurt* again.

Maybe that was it—part of why she felt so unsettled since the snow had first started? That, and with what had happened to Gil and Sage, people she had known and cared about her whole life? What had happened to Junie right there in the diner? Ben's cousin had just been taken out of the alley right behind the diner. They'd gotten lucky to get her back. Lucky Junie, Gil and Sage, Auggie and Claudia, and two helpless little girls had survived.

The knowledge of that might have just brought everything that had happened to Dusty boiling back to the surface.

She had just gotten lucky to survive. Survival hadn't been her doing at all. Dusty barely remembered anything past the moment Brad had grabbed her, and slammed her head into the steering wheel of the truck Matt had let her drive around when she was off the clock. Her very life had been in the hands of others that night. First Brad, then...Hunter and his friend.

Slater—a man she had only met long enough to set his drink on the table in front of him at the diner once or twice.

A very terrifying man—sexy as hell, almost as hot as Ben—but one she wouldn't have interacted with by choice. Not back then. Now he always made a point to check on her when he was in Masterson.

That complete stranger had carried her through the falling snow. They both could have frozen to death out there that night. Slater Davis had risked

his life for her that night. A total stranger.

A total stranger had saved her. An acquaintance had nearly killed her.

None of it had been within Dusty's *control* at all.

That was what bothered her the most.

How out of control it had all been that night. Sometimes, the nightmares were worse than others. She just felt so out of control sometimes now.

Dusty threw on some sweatpants and a sweatshirt, and headed out of her room, and through the family kitchen. Chloe stayed on her heels.

She kept to the areas that were pet-friendly—any place that wasn't carpeted—and made her way through the inn that had been in her family for ninety-nine years. They would celebrate one hundred next summer.

Marin was already planning the celebration. Marin handled most of the marketing for the businesses now. She was really good at it, too. She'd raised the occupancy rates at the inn by twenty-nine percent in the years since Rowland Bowles had made his movie in Masterson County. And increased profit at the diner by a full ten percent in the last year alone. Marin had the most business-oriented mind of them all. Even with her intuition and gut feelings.

She'd gotten that mind from their grandmother.

Sixty-seven years ago, her grandmother had taken a massive risk, and started the Masterson Diner, using her small inheritance from her own grandfather, and a lot of gumption. She hadn't even been an adult at the time. Ten months later, Arnold Reginald Talley had taken one look at her and decided she was going to be his forever. She'd been seventeen at the time she'd first opened the doors to the little diner downtown.

She'd married Arnie Talley the day after her eighteenth birthday. Ten months to the date after that, her twin sons Gerald and Arthur had been born. Her daughter Jessica had followed five years later.

Her grandmother was a remarkable woman, no denying that.

Dusty didn't feel remarkable at all.

She felt like a mass of nerves and fear more than anything now.

Afraid. Ben had asked her if she was afraid. What she was afraid would happen. She hadn't thought it was *fear*. Not really. But now...the man had been right. Of course, he was. Ben saw right through her, apparently. To the *Dusty* she was inside.

That terrified her, too. That man...

She hadn't been *afraid* before. Not of life. Not of a man like *Ben*.

Brad had robbed her of her courage. Her confidence.

Her believe that everything would be okay.

She would never forgive him for that.

Now she was afraid of everything. Of every possible *risk*. Not just with personal safety—though she would never take that for granted ever again—but with far more than that.

Emotional safety was far more tenuous. Dusty believed that down to her soul now.

Dusty checked on Jacy, their night clerk on duty at the front desk.

Everyone else had gone to their suites, but Marin had been around somewhere. Checking on the inn one last time. “Where’s Marin?”

“She’s around the back. Next to the gardens. Said there was something she needed to check on. In six inches of snow. She had that *look* in her eyes again.” Jacy was their father’s cousin’s daughter. She was twenty now, and did online classes through the college two counties over. She had the Talley green eyes, too. When her father had died three years ago, she’d asked for a job at the inn to help support her two younger sisters and the aunt who had helped raise them—who was working two jobs herself. The aunt had two children under ten, too.

Now, they would fight tooth and nail to keep Jacy, even though they hadn’t known her well growing up. Jacy was extremely sweet. Rather like Dusty’s baby sister Daisy. Jacy, her aunt, her cousins, and her two sisters Macey and Casey lived in a small house on the outskirts of town. Just eighteen, nineteen, and twenty. Their aunt was thirty-four or thirty-five or so. But they stuck together. They were family.

Family.

Family mattered to the Talleys. More than anything.

And if Marin had that *look* in her eyes again, it meant nightmares. Marin’s nightmares were probably back, too. They all had their struggles now.

Dusty turned toward the gardens.

MASTERTON COUNTY. HE WAS BACK IN WYOMING YET AGAIN. SEAN WASN'T entirely certain how he had ended up here. Not really. He'd just been driving. The road from Idaho had looked familiar, so he had just kept driving. As he'd processed what LaDonna had said.

He just wanted to see something *good* in the world tonight. Nebraska was getting worse. And it hurt. Innocent people, children, were involved.

The inn beckoned.

A beautiful woman with a smile that could light up the night definitely qualified as *good*.

He wondered—had LaDonna worked at that inn? Had Fred? They had come from this town, this county. They had *history* there. He bet if he asked about four children left on a damned doorstep, he would find the old gossip soon enough.

Maybe he *would* ask. See what had happened to those innocent children.

He'd just go to the diner that seemed to be the center of social activity in the small western town, and ask. "Hello, pretty waitress, do you know of anyone who was left on their grandparents' doorstep twenty-three years ago, who may be willing to talk to me?"

That would probably get him some odd looks. And suspicion.

Especially considering Morris Preston's involvement. If Fred and LaDonna had been friends with a man like that—they probably weren't at the *top* of Masterton's most prominent citizens list. Had it even surprised people when they had abandoned four children to grandparents, or was that something that had been just par for the course for the people Fred and

LaDonna had been back then?

Sean knew the truth, though. He just wanted to see LaDonna's children. That was all. Make sure they were all okay. To know that something had turned out good.

The oldest would be near thirty. The youngest, twenty-four. Adults. With lives and careers—maybe even children of their own. He needed to make certain they were all okay. That the abandonment hadn't screwed those four children up completely. If it had, maybe he could help in some small way.

Children had been abandoned in Nebraska, too. Children Sean hadn't known about. If he had—he would have asked to not be given this case. Kids, the cases with kids hurt him the most.

Sean grabbed his duffel bag. The inn definitely drew a man.

Not just because of the beautiful young women who ran the inn. But... Sean was a man, after all. The beautiful women who ran the inn—well, they were certainly a *draw*. No denying that.

Sean stepped up to the desk. There was a blonde there. The same one from before. Not Dusty, but her cousin. Marian or something. A beautiful woman. Very, very beautiful.

She was speaking to a tall man around Fred's age.

That man turned. Sean almost cursed at what he saw in front of him now. *Who* he saw.

Fred Brown's face stared back at him.

The hair was pure silver and cut in a ruthlessly neat cut that Sean had never seen Fred wear. The eyes were hard green. But the face—was Frederick Arnold Brown. Almost enough to be...identical.

Sean tried to strip away the disguises he had seen Fred use through the years. This man...was Fred's brother. His *twin* brother. Of that, Sean was one hundred percent convinced.

His twin brother. Identical.

And the Talley girl at the desk had just called him *Dad*.

Sean had never been considered a stupid man at all.

Frederick Arnold Brown was a Talley. Fred Brown came from...this *inn*.

Sean was absolutely certain of it.

The door behind the front registration desk opened. A familiar blond woman stepped through, an elderly dog behind her. He had seen them walking around the inn before. And had enjoyed watching her. Watching how sweet she was with the dog.

“Hello, Uncle Gerald, did Aunt Rhea kick you out?” *Uncle*. She’d just called Fred Brown’s brother...uncle. Sean’s stomach clenched as pieces began to fall in place. “Marin, I thought you were outside.”

“Just checking the back gate. Making sure it was locked,” *Marin* said, a pensive look on her face Sean didn’t miss. She was an odd woman—he had noticed that before. Gorgeous, but odd. He looked at her again, now that he *knew*.

How had he missed it before?

Marin had hair the same unusual shade as Dylan’s. And had those same pronounced cheekbones, and delicate feminine mouth. But whereas little Dylan was short and thin, this woman was tall and thin. But there was no denying Dylan and Marin were related in some way.

“We were here for dinner. She is in the dining room chatting with your grandmother.” The man with Fred’s face leaned down. Kissed Dusty on her cheek. “How are you, little girl?”

“Pretty good. Tired. But I have two days off on the schedule. Everywhere. I’m going to relax.”

“You do that. You work far too hard, Destiny Marie. Far too hard. You are young. You should enjoy it.” Even his voice was a match for Fred’s. The way he held his head. The slightly arrogant way he looked at the room around him. He noticed Sean standing there. “Hello. I’m in the way. I apologize.”

“I’m sorry, but you look incredibly familiar.” Sean knew how to play the pretty when meeting people. Especially when he got caught staring. “Have we met before?”

“I have one of those faces.” The man gave a practiced, but shrewd smile. Just like Fred’s. “But you most likely have seen me in the news a time or two. Retired general Gerald Talley. I was a diplomat to the UN for a fair few years, too. Pretty high up that food chain. Now, I am retired. Riding herd on my daughters, nieces, grandson, mother, and the woman who is worse than all of them combined—my new bride. Is this your first visit to the Talley Inn?”

He even sounded just like Fred. Down to the inflection in his voice. But Sean recognized the name. Gerald Talley had been a national name in the diplomatic scene for decades. Sean had seen photos of him before—but had never put it together. Now he wondered *why* he had missed it—of course, the man was almost always photographed in full military uniform.

No wonder Fred’s files with WITSEC had been so buried. Someone had

put the pieces together years ago. Buried Fred Brown and his secrets, probably to *tidy up* Gerald Talley's past, too. Make it easier for any scandals to stay hidden, after all.

Powerful men like this had powerful friends.

And a brother like this possibly *could* frighten men like Morris Preston, for that matter.

"Uh, no. Return trip actually. I stayed a week or so back. I found myself here again, and decided the inn was far better than the chains by the interstate."

"Uncle Gerald's grandparents built the inn, Marshal...Sutton, isn't it?" Dusty said, giving him a beautiful smile. *Her mother's* beautiful smile. Now Sean understood why she had struck him so strongly. She had LaDonna's smile. Dylan's smile. Sweet little Dorie, who was just a slightly smaller, younger, version of this woman in front of him now. He should have seen the resemblance before. "Now, my cousins and sisters and I run it. Uncle Gerald and Grandma are retired. At least, they are supposed to be. They like to keep their fingers in things. How long will you be staying this time?"

"I...a few days, this time, I believe. I hope you have availability." He was staying exactly where he was. Until he figured all of this out.

"Marin will get you taken care of," she said.

"Where are you going tonight?" Fred's twin asked in the same tone Sean had heard Fred use with his daughters before. "It's getting dark in about an hour."

"Matt just called while I was looking for Marin. I'm going to meet him at the Collier place. They have a mare having problems with her first foaling. I'm going to take Matt his spare bag. And be there if I'm needed."

"That's the place just a mile past city limits?"

"Yes, Uncle Gerald. Just right up the road. I'll be fine."

"Call me when you get home, young lady. You know I worry like an old woman."

"I'll do that, you beautiful old woman, you." She kissed her uncle on the cheek and hugged him. And then was gone. Sean resisted staring after her like an idiot.

He knew one thing, though. Dusty Talley was LaDonna's daughter. And she had deserved better than what she had gotten.

What he was going to do about it, Sean didn't know.

For now, it was time to retreat.

He had some thinking to do.

DYLAN HATED DRIVING IN THE DARK AND ESPECIALLY IN THE SNOW. BUT Devaney had driven for six hours straight already. Her sister deserved a break. Dahlia didn't drive—she was too afraid to. And Dorie was too young and too inexperienced to drive that far in the dark and inclement weather.

Dylan was just going to take it slow. That was all.

“Do you think they are like us?” Dorie asked from the backseat. The little car Dylan had bought two years ago wasn't really made for the weather like this. They rarely went anywhere when it was snowing this hard.

Dorie and Dahlia were crammed into the back. Devaney was working the GPS.

“Masterson County is south of Sublette County,” Devaney said. “I'm sure they are like us, but also different, Dor. Nature vs. Nurture. I mean, look how different Dahl and I are.”

“They may not want to meet us,” Dorie said, voicing Dylan's own fears. “I mean, Mom and Daddy just left them behind. And then had four more kids. What if they resent us?”

“Do we resent them, though?” Dylan asked. She hadn't let herself think too much about these four siblings she didn't know. “I'm not sure how we are supposed to think or feel about them.”

“Mad,” Dahlia whispered. “I'm mad that we didn't get to know them, didn't get to grow up with them. We don't even know their names or how old they are. And it isn't fair. We'll never have ties with them. Not like we do each other. And they won't have those memories with us, either. We're just...two separate families now. And that just doesn't seem right at all.”

Leave it to Dahlia to nail exactly what Dylan hadn't been able to put into words.

"Yeah. I feel like we've been robbed." That was exactly how she felt. In every way possible. "I feel like they took our entire identities from us, took our family from us, and lied to us our entire lives. Did they feel like they were doing the best they could back then. I don't know. Do I believe them that there was no way they could have defeated these so-called Tylers of Masterson County? I think that's silly. No one family can be *that* powerful."

Dylan half thought she hated the Tylers of Masterson County. If what her parents had said was true anyway. Tylers had destroyed their family. She wouldn't forgive that, ever.

If it was true anyway.

Dylan really didn't know what to believe anymore.

"Unless they are like part of the mob or something?" Dorie had a wild imagination. She liked to read thrillers and romantic suspense and just all sorts of unrealistic books that Dylan always found silly.

Dylan was more the vampire-romance type herself.

Because, you know, vampires were just so *realistic*.

Books were her *escape*. Who wanted realistic *escape*? Dylan didn't like to read books about stuff that could *really* happen at all. They were a little too scary for her sometimes.

"We have to face the fact—these siblings might not want anything to do with us. They may have been split up, or adopted out, or just...not nice people." Devaney was their most pragmatic one. There was no denying that. "And considering that they were abandoned and replaced—which, like it or not, it does seem like it—we might not be a welcome sight."

"So what do we do about that?" Dahlia asked.

"I think we should just not...identify ourselves right away. Let's ask around. See if we can figure out who these siblings are." Devaney was the strategic one of them all. No denying that. Dylan—well, Dylan had always had problems with impulse control.

Her dad had always told her it would get her into trouble some day. He was probably right about *that*.

"Hi, strange gas station attendant or diner waitress, can you tell me about any kids who were abandoned twenty-three years ago by their parents? We'll get run out of town that way, I think." Dylan could just imagine. "I think we should start on the safe side. We'll figure out who and where these so-called

extremely *dangerous* Tyler guys are first. Then...find out who our brothers and or sisters just might be.”

“That...may be easier said than done.” Devaney, so wise. So wise. And a wee bit pessimistic sometimes.

“There is always hope, Dev.”

“Oh, just...watch the road. We’re going to have to find a hotel or something soon. This snow is getting worse. And we’re hours from the Wyoming border. We might just have to wait it out for now,” Devaney said. “How much money do we have?”

Dahlia was the one who did the money. She was really good at it. “Not that much. We’re going to have to all share one room. I just hope we can get one soon. I’m tired.”

“I just want to not be out here driving any more,” Dorie said. “It’s... anyone could be out here tonight.”

Well, she wasn’t wrong.

Dylan’s hands tightened on the wheel. First hotel she saw, she was getting her sisters off this road. It just didn’t *feel* right out here tonight at all.

If this was a novel, there would be werewolves out there or something. She just knew it. No. Vampires. Tonight just called for vampires or something. Her hands tightened on the wheel. And she just kept driving.

FRED WOULD NEVER FORGET THE LOOK IN HER EYES. THE FEAR FOR THEIR daughters.

Damn it, he was going to tan Dylan's hide when he caught up to her. He never had spanked her before, but maybe he should have.

His wife was at his side in the passenger seat of the old van he had bought with cash from a man who dealt in used clunkers, supposedly so he could tinker with it in his spare time. Truth was, he'd bought it long ago because it was plain, and big enough for him and his wife and the girls to take off in, if needed. But she would never show him her fear tonight. Not tonight.

Geena—he had never fully thought of her as LaDonna or any other name she'd taken before—she would always be his Geena—wasn't *strong*.

She was holding herself together with everything she had. And probably prescription drugs now. His Geena had always been so fragile, at times. She'd been orphaned by seventeen. A year later she'd walked into the inn looking for a job where he had been manning the desk, angry that he had had to. He had imagined running the inn was beneath him then, though the business had supported his family for decades and was something a man should be proud to be a part of. He hadn't known what had truly mattered then.

He had learned a great deal about what mattered since his stupidity had destroyed his world. His mistake had cost her so much. He had never fully forgiven himself for that. Fred probably never would. Until he made things *right* somehow.

His mistake had defined their destiny.

He was still paying the price. So was Geena, far more than *he* ever had.

But his girls? They weren't going to be the cost. Not this time. He had already lost the four elder. He wasn't going to see *anything* happen to the four younger. And while he was at it, he would keep Morris Preston's evil from *ever* touching his four older girls, too.

They would hate him forever. Of that he was certain. And how could he blame them? Fred had always intended to go back for them someday. When he was absolutely certain it was safe for his girls. He had even written down the speech he would give his family about why he and his wife had left their four children behind the way they had. He had hoped it would convince them all he and Geena weren't monsters. That their reasons had been valid. Hell, his wife still had the scars from the knife. Scars anyone could see.

But one thing was certain—if Fred hadn't been so damned dissatisfied with the monotony that was life in Masterson County, Geena would never have been near Morris Preston's place that night. Would never have met Patsy Smith a few weeks earlier, either.

She had lured them in, duped them. Dragged them right into Morris Preston's net to begin with. Then, right before Geena's eyes, Patsy had met karma face-to-face. When her own son had stabbed her in the neck. Then turned on Geena next.

None of this would have happened if Fred hadn't thought he could work a deal with Morris Preston. Force the other man to do what he wanted because of who Fred had come from before. Who his brother was.

Nothing Fred had done had been illegal. Or even unethical or immoral—even back then he had had some very high standards for himself. It had just been him getting into business with the wrong kind of man. He should have *known better* than to fall for a con like Morris had been running.

But Fred had been so arrogant. So sure a man like him couldn't, wouldn't fail. And he and his Geena had been running ever since.

Nothing had stabbed Fred in the heart more than knowing his four older children were growing up in the same town as that damned Morris Preston's children. Knowing that *he* couldn't protect his kids. All he'd ever wanted from the moment his eldest had been born was to be a good father worthy of his baby's love and respect.

But his damned *pride*.

His pride had cost him everything then.

Almost everything.

He'd still had the woman he loved. The woman he had always promised to protect. No matter what the cost. And he still had his four baby girls.

Nothing was going to happen to them.

Fred wasn't going to let it.

"They've stopped for the night. They took that wrong turn. They are nowhere near Masterson now," Geena said.

She had his phone. Was tracking the girls, using the app Fred had put on Devaney's cell phone when he'd found it in her backpack one day when the damned thing had buzzed while he was making dinner. The girls didn't think he knew they all had cell phones that Dylan paid for. But he knew. Just like he knew about the internet business his Dylan had built. He knew everything about his girls. He was their father, after all.

"We should probably stop, too. It's getting worse out," she said.

She was right about the weather, but the girls had a day and a half on them. Little monsters were probably driving in shifts—Dylan and Devaney, and possibly Dorie. All three knew how to drive—Dylan had made certain of it. The damned boy next door had taught Dylan when she was eighteen when her parents hadn't been home.

He had always wondered what else that boy had shown his daughter. He wasn't a fool.

Even if he and Geena drove in shifts, they still wouldn't catch up quickly. Even if Geena could. Driving...made her highly anxious. Especially in inclement weather like this.

He usually drove. It was just safer that way.

He and Geena were just not going to be able to catch up. But they could *wait* for the girls here in Masterson. Get the girls before they got to the inn. He had no doubt Dylan had figured out where he had come from. He had told her too much. And she was so damned smart.

The van slid a little on the ice. Geena gasped, grabbed the handle.

Decision made.

Geena was terrified right now. And the roads were just getting worse. Fred was going to get her someplace safe. They'd catch up to Dylan and the rest of the girls tomorrow.

When they did, he was going to hug his girls—and make it clear they weren't to scare him and their mother like this *ever* again. He couldn't risk being seen tonight, though. Having a damned identical twin complicated things for him, that was for sure.

Grief for his brother had always been sharp, too. But that was for later. Tonight...

He knew one place they could go. It would be rough, but it would hopefully be enough to keep them sheltered for tonight.

THIS WAS DAMNED STUPID. WAYNE HUDDLED IN HIS PARKA THERE NEXT TO the damned road, and waited.

Jason was getting sloppy. Desperate. They weren't finding a damned thing. And there were rumblings with Wayne's contact in the FBI.

Rumors that there were fake FBI agents roaming around Idaho and Wyoming.

Well that was the damned truth. How that had gotten out there, he didn't know.

Unless it was that gorgeous blond thing at the desk. She had asked them twice about the FBI. Questions Wayne hadn't fully known how to answer. Jason had provided the IDs. The younger man had contacts with the unsavory sort ranging from Canada and Alaska all the way down to Mexico. Fake IDs had been an easy thing for him to provide.

Well, apparently, they hadn't been good enough. Wayne was going to have to make the best of what he had.

But that girl—if she put it together and turned them in...

Time was running out.

Wayne knew it.

Rumor had it that the man and woman they were looking for were on their way to Masterson County now. Would be on this road, in a damned white van, soon. Jason's contacts said the man was desperate.

To find his missing daughters.

Well, which damned ones were missing? That was what Wayne had wanted to ask.

The man was a piss-poor father. No denying that. That disgusted Wayne. His phone vibrated. Jason waited up the road. Watching from a higher vantage point. But Wayne? Wayne was the one who held the rifle.

All he had to do was take out the two people who had the power to destroy everything he had built over the last ten years.

Even before.

Twenty-three years was a long damned time to wait to clean up a man's messes. It just was. He had no real regrets for what he was about to do. He had killed people before—but he wanted to make it quick. This time.

Geena deserved respect, after all.

There the van was. Going slow over the snow. That would make things easier. Less likely to miss that way.

Wayne sighted the rifle. He didn't have to see the occupants, just estimate where the seats would be located. He knew how it worked.

Wayne pulled the trigger. Waited for the inevitable jerking to happen. And aimed again. At the passenger side next. With a squeeze of a trigger, it was done.

It was too dark to tell if he'd hit the people he was aiming at. But the van swerved, almost going over the ravine. Wayne grabbed his gear and took off into the woods. He wasn't sticking around.

But he so rarely missed his target. It was why Morris had kept him around before.

Wayne *always* hit what he was aiming at.

It was a skill he still practiced to this day. It had made him a wealthy man, after all.

More—it provided for Linda and their baby girls the kind of *life* he had always wanted for them. And they were what mattered most.

THE MARE WAS GOING TO BE FINE. DUSTY HAD BEEN AFRAID SHE WOULDN'T when she had first arrived with Matt's bag, but Matt knew what he was doing. She loved working with him. He was her stepcousin now—her uncle Gerald had married his mother recently—and Matt had one of the gentlest ways with horses she had ever seen. As did his wife. Pip had been with him. She and Dusty had both been needed tonight.

Matt cautioned her to drive carefully. She was only a mile and a half from the inn. The snow was mild for this time of year, but it showed no signs of stopping. Dusty had been driving in snow her entire life.

Still, it would probably always make her nervous now.

Because of Brad.

Even without trying, she remembered the feel of the wheel beneath her hands that night. It had been in a truck the same model as the one she drove now. Matt had let her drive his extra truck since her second year working for him. Since she had often had to drive out to his ranch where he had animals boarded occasionally. Or would have to drive to meet him at times.

If she had been in her own car that night, she and Nikki might not have made it out of the car in the first place.

Brad had rammed them hard, with his rental truck. Then he had come for Dusty. He'd slammed her head into the steering wheel before she even realized he was there to hurt and not to help.

And then he had turned on Nikki.

Dusty was so consumed with memories that she almost missed the man waving her down from the side of the road.

Then she recognized him—panic hit her, *hard*.

He shouldn't be out there like that.

She threw the truck into park and opened the door. "Uncle Gerald! What happened? Where are you hurt? Uncle Gerald? Where's Rhea?"

She had just left him at the inn two hours ago. And he'd been with his wife. Where was Rhea? Rhea was a retired physician.

She would have been helping Uncle Gerald with the blood—if she'd been able. Terror for her family slammed into her. Her aunt...

Her uncle had his hat over his head. There was blood all over his light-blue parka. "Uncle Gerald! What happened? Where's Rhea? Were you in a wreck?"

She hurried to his side.

He met her halfway. That's when she realized.

The hair beneath that hat was dark brown. Uncle Gerald's was *light*. It would be light under that hat.

"You're not my uncle Gerald—"

"No. I'm not." His hand wrapped around hers before she could back away.

"What?"

His arm, the one not covered in blood, slipped around her waist. "I'm sorry to do this, but you are coming with me. I need help. And...my wife panics when there is blood. This is about to send her over the edge, and I need an extra set of hands. Fast."

He sounded so much like her uncle.

Just like that, he lifted her off her feet and muscled her to the white van, fifteen feet away.

Dusty tried to fight. He was six five and strong. Wiry, even though he was in his midsixties. He was so strong. She tried. She really did. She even bit him. "Let me go!"

She knew who he was. Who he *had* to be.

That was confirmed when a woman met him at the door. "What are you doing? You can't just take a woman off the highway. You'll be *arrested*."

"Get the door, honey, and hurry."

"Who is she? What if the shooters are still out here? What if they see us and try again? What—"

Dusty could hear the total panic in the woman's voice. Her own fear tripled.

Dusty bit his hand. He yelped. “Damn it, young lady. Stop that biting right now!”

“What are you going to do? Ground me?”

“Get in the van! Hurry! Before they shoot again!” the woman said, sliding the door open. “Hurry!”

“Surprise, surprise. Hi, Mommy. Long time, no see.” Dusty almost snarled it at the woman, fury more than fear was in control of her now. In the dim light of the interior, she recognized the woman staring at her now.

Her *mother* had dawning horror on her face.

“Not one of our babies! We can’t take her with us. We can’t. What if they find us again? What if they hurt her? They shot at us! We can’t!”

“Well, we can’t damned well *leave* her here for those bastards to find next, can we?”

“Get her in the van. I don’t want her near this mess!” Her mother closed the door behind her father, even when she was telling him what he could or couldn’t do. Then she got right in the driver’s seat and drove away.

“Just drive. We need to get out of here.” He had a command in his voice. It was obvious *he* was in charge.

Dusty just stared at the man in front of her. “What are you doing back here? And what do you want with me?”

“I’ve been shot. I need you to bandage me up. Then...it’ll all be okay. I promise. You’re mother’s right. The person who shot me is probably still out there. I’m not leaving you there for them to find.”

“Who shot you, Daddy dearest?” Dusty was truly trying not to panic here. He was her father.

Definitely not a *good* father, but he was the man who had fathered her. There was no denying who he was, or the blond woman at the wheel.

Her mom. That was Dusty’s *mother* right there. All she had ever seen of Geena Talley before had been photos. Dusty tried hard not to stare. She’d heard stories of her dad before. Her grandmother hadn’t ever hid who he had been from them. But they hadn’t had any relatives on their mother’s side. Dusty knew almost very little about her. Just what her grandmother, Rhea, and her aunt Jess had told her. It wasn’t much.

“I want to go home. I don’t want to help you.” She looked at her father. He was less *hurtful* to look at than her mother. She’d looked at a better version of him countless times in her life. She was used to knowing her uncle looked exactly like her father would have.

But her *mother*? Her mother was who hurt her the most.

How could a mother have left four daughters behind without a backward glance? Dusty had never been able to answer that question. “When do you plan to make that happen?”

“I don’t know. I need to think.” He touched his shoulder and groaned. Just a little. The van swerved. Her *mother* pressed on the horn.

“There’s a tractor with a cowboy on it in the road!” she yelled.

“Go around him!”

Dusty just *knew* who that cowboy had to be. She’d passed him not even two minutes ago. *Fletcher*. So close. So right there. And she couldn’t get to him at all. She tried. There was a window right there. But her father guessed. He blocked her.

Her father took off the hat. There was a small reading light in the top corner of the backseat. It showed her exactly who had taken her.

He did look like her uncle, but he was a little softer. Not fat, at all. Still in excellent shape—he’d lifted her right off her feet without a struggle, mostly one-armed. But her uncle had kept himself in rigid physical shape.

She probably couldn’t escape her father easily.

She would have to outsmart him. And if he was a brilliant as his twin, that might be harder than she wanted to think about.

“We’re here,” her mother said almost half an hour later. “What are you going to do?”

“Get her inside.” He looked at Dusty. From eyes the same green as her own. “Do you think you can do stitches, young lady?”

“Yes.” Matt had taught her how to do basic sutures. Dixie had helped her practice. “But if you’ve been shot, you need to go to the hospital.”

Right there, with people she knew, who could help her.

“There isn’t time.” He opened the rear door, and climbed out of the van. “We need to hide tonight. And start again tomorrow.”

DUSTY SERIOUSLY FOUGHT PANICKING. PANICKING WOULDN'T HELP. SHE knew that. But...

"We're not going to hurt you, sweetheart. I promise," his wife said softly as *he* took over the driver's seat and just drove away with her. "We just... need a little help. We're trying to fix things. To make every thing right. For everyone."

She reached for Dusty's hand. Dusty jerked back. "Please don't touch me. If you really are my mother, then you really don't have that right. Please just don't. I don't want you to touch me."

"No. I don't suppose you do." There were tears in the woman's voice. The voice that sounded almost like Daisy's. "I am so sorry. For then. And now. Maybe one day, you girls will be able to forgive us. All of you. We had to leave, baby. We just had to. I am so sorry."

"I don't care what you are doing here, what you are up to, or what you need. I want to go home to the people who love me and care what happens to me. Who won't exactly leave me on a doorstep in the middle of a thunderstorm. In fact, just drive me right back to that cowboy on the tractor. He's my best friend's brother. His name is Fletcher. He'll see I get home *just* fine. He'll even walk me inside—won't leave me on the doorstep or anything like that."

"We can't do that."

He parked. Told her and *her mother* to stay there. No matter what. Five minutes later he was back.

Then her father was reaching into the van for her. He wrapped one hand

around her wrist. Dusty had no choice but to go exactly where he wanted her to go.

He was strong. Very strong. No. Dusty wouldn't ever be able to overpower him physically. She'd just have to outsmart him. Somehow.

He led her into an old camping trailer. It was cold, and musty, but it had power.

"We're in luck. I found propane in the tank, ladies. There's going to be heat. It might just take a while to build up. I don't want to have to go buy more." He guided Dusty toward the kitchen area. It was a really small travel trailer. With just a fold-down bed, and a two-seater dinette. A tiny kitchenette. A small bath. That was it. "I need you to just sew me up. That's all."

"I have the first aid kit," her mother said. But she was almost ringing her hands right there. There was panic in the big blue eyes. Eyes shaped just like Daisy's. Daisy looked the most like this woman. But Daisy looked more like their cousin Meyra, really. Just a little bit of resemblance to their mother. But there were bits and pieces of Dusty's sisters in both of her parents. And of herself. That hurt. It really hurt.

"We'll get to it," her father said. He was definitely the one in charge. "I need...to think. Plan what to do next. Talk to...our contact here in town and...see what's going on. Someone knew we were in the van and on that road. I want to know how they did."

Dusty just got to work.

Dusty leaned over the man who had her uncle's face, her hands steady over the blood. She'd never been squeamish. But this...

Her father stared back at her, his eyes combing over her face as if he was trying to figure out who she was.

Maybe he was.

It wasn't like he'd seen her in almost twenty-three damned years or anything like that.

She'd been two-and-a-half years old when he'd left her, her two older sisters, and not quite fifteen-month-old Daisy on her grandmother's front porch. Poor babies left on the doorstep, she'd heard far too many times to count.

By people looking at them with pity.

Didn't people get it? They'd been better off with their grandmother than with this man and his wife. Dusty had always known that. Always.

“I don’t think it did any lasting damage. The bullet passed through the fatty tissue on the arm.” She leveled a look at him. Looking into eyes the same color as her own. “You’ll need to be on antibiotics for about ten days. Then, see your primary care physician, and have a nice life, you asshole.”

Probably not something she should say to a man holding her hostage, but surely the fact that her *parents* had abducted her meant something?

Like maybe they wouldn’t kill her right away?

Her father's eyes hardened. His hand on her elbow tightened. Okay, maybe he would. This could be a very dangerous man when crossed. Just like her uncle could.

It would probably be smart not to forget that.

Dusty tried not to wince. “Let me go, Daddy dearest. You’re hurting me.”

His hand eased up. He didn’t say another word as Dusty just sewed him up. Trying not to hurl from what she was doing. It was different, sewing up her *father*, than helping Matt sew up a laceration on a kitten. When she was finished and washing her hands with rubbing alcohol, that was when he spoke.

“I know you're angry with your mother and me.”

No *kidding*. “I'm good. I mean, I've had a long time to get over you. Not like I ever knew you to begin with. Not like I'd even know who I was missing, right?” She balled up the trash from the gauze and tossed it toward the trashcan in the corner. “Now, the fact that my parents kidnapped me and are keeping me hostage in a snowstorm—that might take a bit longer to get over. But, I've done my duty to the human race here, kept one of our kind from dying from blood loss...when can I go home? I have a life to get back to—one you aren’t a part of. One I’m really struggling to figure out right now, as it is. The *last* thing I needed in my life was you two coming back just to confuse me even more.”

His expression darkened, and he looked just like his identical twin brother when her uncle had gotten angry. But whereas Uncle Gerald was putty where his daughters and nieces were concerned, she had no clue how the stranger in front of her would react.

It was hard not to be afraid. Her father and mother were the unknown, after all.

She couldn't be an idiot here. If she was going to escape, she had to get them off their guard. Somehow.

She hadn't missed the gun her father carried. Or the tightness of his hold.

“Dixon.”

She snorted, a sudden rush of anger going through her. Well, he'd guessed *wrong*, hadn't he? “You don't even know which one of your daughters you nabbed, do you?”

“Which one are you then?”

“Dusty. Well, you'd probably remember me as *Destiny*. If you remember me at all. I'm the vet assistant, not the nurse. Surprise. I deal with dogs on a daily basis. Maybe...it was appropriate you nabbed me, after all? And she doesn't ever go by Dixon, either. I can't believe you named a girl *Dixon*. Can you imagine what kind of crude comments the boys used to make to her, *Daddy*? Especially when Dixie got boobs in eighth grade. They teased her forever. Until Dixie got big enough to slug a guy right in the face, anyway. You know nothing about any of us. Don't even pretend you do. *We* are nothing to you. Tell me what you have planned for me. I don't want to know what happened to you, or who did it, or even what is going to happen to you next. All I care about is going home to the people who actually love me.”

“Dest—Dusty. You look very much like Jessica, don't you? That's why I thought you were Dixo—Dixie. Dixie was Jessica all over again when she was younger. I bet that thrills her.” A look of something went over his face. “Jessi always did like how she looked.”

“Dixie looks the most like her. Aunt Jess did get a kick out of it.” A pang of grief so strong threatened to bring her to her knees. She didn't want to say the words, but... “Aunt Jessica passed away ten years ago. Aggressive ovarian cancer. It took her six weeks to...go.”

His face blanched. His hand tightened on her again. Then loosened. Grief—it was there. Maybe. How was she supposed to know? “Damn. I...I wish I had been here. How is my mom? Charlotte? How...hell, I guess I don't have a right to even ask, do I?”

“No. I can't say that you do. And I'm not going to just sit here and fill you in on all the family gossip. You relinquished your right to care the day you drove off into the sunset.”

“It wasn't like that.” He stood, towering over her. Looking like a dark-haired version of her uncle.

Her uncle. The man who had truly been the closest thing to a father for her and her sisters. This man was *nothing* like Uncle Gerald. “Sure it wasn't. Grandma kept the note. We've all seen it. When we needed to know what had happened. *We're just tired of dealing with them. They are not our problem*

now.' You just left us there. In a damned thunderstorm. And drove away. Probably never looked back even once. Daisy almost wandered out into the parking lot, *Daddy*. Darcey grabbed her at the last minute while Dixie was trying to get the door to the inn open."

He stood up. Grabbed her by the arm and almost marched her out of the little trailer. Dusty fought panic. He could do anything to her out here. In the woods. In the dark.

In the snow.

No one would find her, either.

For one brief moment she imagined what that would do to her family, to Nikki...to Ben.

Ben. As soon as they realized she was missing, *Ben* would be looking for her. Dusty just knew it. And Ben? He'd never stop. Not until he found her. He just wouldn't. She wanted *Ben* more than she'd wanted anything else in her life right then. "Why don't you just let me go, and you can disappear again? In a snowstorm, this time?"

Then he was rushing her across the snow. To what looked like a garden shed. He pushed open the door. "You'll stay in here tonight. It's...warm. I plugged in a heater when I found the propane, too. You'll be as safe as I can make it. The trailer...is just too small for all of us. And I can't let your mother out of my sight right now. She'll panic, and I don't know what she'll do. She's not...very emotionally strong. What happened, leaving you girls, being hurt, it changed her."

"I really don't care. She *left us*, remember?" The anger—it was easier to focus on the anger. Instead of all the questions she'd had her entire life. She'd once believed they'd come back someday. That there would be a *reason* they had left. A real one, a *good* one. One that made it better for all of them.

Until she'd woken up in a hospital after having a heart attack at fourteen. And it had been her grandmother holding her hand. Not her mother. She hadn't heard even a word from her mother then. All hopes of her parents coming back had vanished that day. Forever.

Just like eight months ago with Brad. It had been Dixie holding her hand when she woke then. Never her own mother.

"It broke your mother's heart to do that. But we had no choice. Remember that. She hasn't been the same since that day. It almost destroyed her. For a while there, I was almost certain it had. And it was all my fault. I'm the reason we had to leave. Please...don't blame her. She adored you girls. And I

would have killed for you. All of you. Any of you. I still will. All of you. She's had a hard life—and it was my fault. All my fault. I'll make it up to all of you one day.”

“Sure you will. Like we'll ever believe that.”

He *finally* let go of her arm. Dusty moved to the opposite side of the shed or garage or whatever it was he was keeping her hostage in. She sank onto the army cot. He'd plugged an orange extension cord into a space heater.

That was apparently all she was going to get tonight.

“Excuse me if I don't believe you. Are you going to let me go anytime soon?” Only Marin and her uncle Gerald knew she had been out there. And Matt. Foaling happened on its own time. Would Marin's freaky intuition be enough to sound the alarm? Would anyone even realize she was missing? Dusty bit back panic again. Were Marin's so-called magic powers all she really had to believe in here? To rely on? Panic almost had her sick right where she stood.

“Nothing will hurt you. I definitely won't, baby girl,” he said. It was the way he was watching her that freaked her out the most. He looked like her uncle, a man she knew loved her and always would. But this man hadn't wanted her or her sisters. And he'd just abandoned them. Just walked away like they had never mattered.

“I don't want you back in my life. Neither do my sisters.” But she remembered what Marin had said. After Marin had nearly been killed. By a man who had known Dusty's parents very well.

Marin insisted Jasper Grady had said her mother was pregnant when she'd left. They deserved the truth about that, if nothing else. “We heard your wife was pregnant when you left us. Did you leave that baby on some random doorstep out there, too?”

He hesitated. She knew he was getting ready to lie to her. No surprise there. This wasn't exactly the most trustworthy man on the planet.

“We had no choice but to leave, Dest—Dusty. Remember that. We really had *no choice*. And we felt it was safest, best for you girls to stay in Masterson County. With...family. And...I'm sorry. For everything. For then, for now...for your sisters. For not being there for Jess, for my mother. My father. I wish...I wish I could just *talk* to him one more time. If I had been half the man he was or Gerald—none of this would have happened. I live with that every day. I'd give anything to go back and fix what happened. Fix the mistakes my *pride* caused. My arrogance. But...I'm not going to talk about

your younger sisters with you. It just isn't safe. For them. Or for you.”

Sisters. She only had *one* younger sister that she knew. Well, apparently she had at least one more. “How many more of us are there? Just tell me that much.”

“We’ll talk about that later.”

“Where are they?”

“I honestly don’t know right now. They took off. They’re angry at your mother and me right now. I can’t say that I blame them. Some things have... happened. Dangerous things.”

“Father-of-the-year material, aren’t you?” She just kept needling him. Dusty knew she was. She just didn’t think she could stop. She was so *angry* right now. How could she not be? “Are there more than one?”

“Yes. There are. All girls, too.”

Did he *love* them, at least? She almost asked that. But she was afraid to hear the answer.

She hoped he did. Hoped these younger sisters had had a decent childhood. But Dusty wasn’t stupid. People didn’t just leave their kids and start over again. At least not in good ways. Those sisters had been innocent little kids once, too.

“They are good girls. And I am so sorry that you didn't get to know them. Sorrier than you can ever know. But they may be in trouble right now. I need to find them, first. Fast. The people who shot me, shot at your mother tonight, they won’t stop. They won’t care who is innocent, either. I’m not going to let them get to you, or your sisters. I need to find those girls, before they drive right into trouble. Then...then I will deal with you and your sisters here. Face the music. I’ll explain everything. Soon. You have my word on that.”

“And what will that go for on the open market, I wonder? Two wooden nickels, maybe?”

“You are a fast one, aren’t you?” He came right at her. Dusty did her best not to flinch away. She didn’t succeed. A look of pain went through his eyes. No doubt from the bullet wound in his arm. He kept coming.

Her *father* reached toward her.

Her arms came up to protect her face. She cried out, backed away as fast as she could.

Instinctively.

She'd never forget what had happened to her before when a dangerous man had come right for her on a cold, dark snowy night just like tonight. She

would never forget.

Dusty stayed right where she was as she lost the battle with tears. She kept her arms up to protect herself as much as she could.

His hands went to her shoulders. He pulled her hands down. He held her there, turned her to look at him fully. Then her father pressed a kiss to her forehead. “I am so sorry I could not be the father you deserve, my beautiful Destiny Marie. I named you, you know. As I held you that very first time, on a snowy night much like tonight. I’ll always remember how beautiful you looked that night. Maybe someday you’ll understand why we did what we did. It was the *hardest* thing I have ever done.”

“Never,” Dusty whispered, pulling away. This man had no *right* to ever look at her like he cared at all. “I just want to go home. To the people who *really* love me. And forget about you forever.”

Her family, her friends.

Ben.

She wanted to get back to *Ben* so much she ached from it. To figure out what could be there between them. To stop being so *afraid*.

“I know. And you will soon, baby girl. I promise.”

Like his word would ever be good enough.

Then he was leaving and she was stuck there. Dusty didn't know what else to do—she just sank to the plywood floor and wrapped her arms around her knees. Tried to huddle close to the small space heater that was her only source of heat, of light. Then she stood. She couldn't just *sit*.

There was a way out of there. She would find it.

Somehow.

Wrong.

It took her at least an hour to realize there was no way out. He'd barricaded the door. She wasn't getting out—until he let her. She just wasn't. She sank on the cot, pulled the sleeping bag around herself.

She stayed right where she was until he returned, a sandwich wrapped in plastic wrap and a sports drink in his hand. Dusty stood, not wanting him to have that advantage over her, even though at five eight, he had nine inches on her. “What is it?”

“Sunbutter on wheat, corn chips. You need to eat something.” He sat it on the overturned apple crate next to the pallet *her mother* had apparently made for her while Dusty was sewing up her father. “I'm sorry it's nothing fancy. Just what we had in the van. Eat, baby. Then get some sleep. We'll see you

get home in the morning. It's too late and too damned cold to drive that old van out there now. The roads are icing over pretty badly."

She almost refused. But Dusty was starving. "Sit it there. I'll eat when I'm ready."

"As you wish, my queen. You are very sassy. Remind me of your mother. She's always been fiery. Well, she was. Until...what happened. That damned Morris Preston broke her, in so many ways. You got your smile from her. Beautiful." He stared at her in the dim light from the battery-operated lamp he held for a long moment. "I can't leave a light on in here. Someone might see it and wonder who is in here. I can't risk that. Risk them finding you and hurting you. Curl up there under those blankets. They are a little musty, but they'll work for tonight. Get some sleep, baby. And...I'm going to take care of this. *Fix* it for all of you. The way I was told it would be fixed more than twenty years ago. Damned crooked cops in this county ruined everything then, too. No one is going to hurt you or your sisters. Any of them. Never again. You have my word."

Like that was worth very much. But when he was gone, she devoured the sandwich and sat there in her corner on the old cot, pulling the blanket tighter around herself. Wondering what was going to happen next. And about the sisters she had never met.

Next time he came for her, she was going to ask their names.

And why they had kept *them* instead of her, Daisy, Dixie, and Darcey.

Maybe she'd get lucky and he'd at least tell her that.

She was still sitting there, trying to imagine what those younger sisters looked like when her eyes closed. When she couldn't open them again.

Her body felt like lead. She couldn't open her eyes, couldn't lift her arms.

That's when it hit her. Drugged. Her father had drugged her.

When he came to her again, she couldn't fight. When he leaned down, kissed her forehead, and told her he was sorry for everything. When he turned her on the cot and almost *tucked* her in beneath the heavy blankets. She couldn't even open her eyes when he was doing that.

She'd been stupid to trust him even for a minute.

Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.

BEN FINISHED UP HIS CHAPTER, CHECKED HIS WATCH, AND DECIDED IT WAS *time*. Time to go hunting.

For his woman.

He had come up with a plan. He was going to just be there. Ready to pounce, the instant she was ready to let him. He would wear her down eventually. If not, well, he'd just scoop her up, take her back to his own cave, and love the hell out of her, until she took pity on him and agreed to keep him for life.

Because wasn't that the way it worked in romance novels?

Ben was going to do some research. Dusty didn't think she was made for romance, well, he was going to show her very differently. As soon as he figured out what real romance was.

Romance novels were a great place to start, right?

Marin was buzzing around, a concerned look on her gorgeous a-little-like-Dusty face, when he made it to the lobby. Which meant his Dusty should be around somewhere.

"Something doesn't feel right," she finally said. "I feel...edgy. Dusty was called out to help Matt. But...I haven't heard anything from her since. She's in trouble. I can just feel it."

That was all it took. Marin *knew* things, after all.

He grabbed his phone. Dialed. She didn't answer. Now, she could be busy, but...

He texted next. Then Marin tried from her own phone.

But Dusty didn't answer.

That wasn't like her. All she had to do was hit the button on the steering wheel to talk to him if she was driving. That she hadn't...

He looked at Marin. "I'm going to go check the roads. If she shows up, text me. I'm just...not going to take any chances."

"Be careful out there, Ben. There is a chill out tonight. And I don't think it has to do with the weather."

She was getting spooky again. But the hair on the back of Ben's neck was standing up just like heroes' neck hairs had in millions of books before.

His woman was out there somewhere. Ben was going to go find her.

His phone rang. He grabbed it. "Crazy woman, where are you?"

"*Ben, listen.*" It wasn't Dusty. "*It's Hunter. We have a problem.*"

"What? Is something wrong with Nik?"

Marin stopped what she was doing that passed for pacing. She just watched him, as the door to the offices behind the desk opened. Meyra was there, sweet little Daisy with her. Those two were best friends as well as cousins—they were always together. Two adorable little sweethearts that were as terrifying as their older sisters.

It wasn't even eight thirty now. On a Friday night. The dining room rush was about to begin.

"What's wrong?" Daisy asked. She was the sweetest of the four Talley sisters. Her eyes were big, soft, and worried.

"Hunt? What is it?"

"*I just found Dusty's truck off the side of the road. The engine was running. I can't find her. There were footprints in the snow. They led to where I think a car was parked. Did someone pick her up that you know of?*"

"No. She was out with Matt on a call. I'm on my way."

"*I'm calling the sheriff. I'm going to keep looking until you get here.*"

Hunter disconnected. Ben looked at Marin as he dialed Matt Masterson, the vet. What he learned terrified him.

Matt was married to Ben's cousin Pip. They'd both been with Dusty until an hour ago. When they'd sent her back to the inn so she could shower and help in the dining room. Matt promised to get his brothers Nate and Levi and meet the sheriff—their brother Joel—in town. Because Dusty should be home by now.

And her engine shouldn't have been left *running*. That wasn't something Dusty would do. It just wasn't.

Ben looked at Marin again. She would be the one to sound the family

alarms. “Hunter found Dusty’s truck along the road. The engine was running. She had left Matt an hour ago. And there were signs of another vehicle. Hunter’s calling the sheriff now. I’m going out there.”

“What are you saying?” Daisy asked.

“Dusty’s missing. He’s saying Dusty’s missing.” Marin was already grabbing for her phone. “Meyra, tell them in the dining room. Daisy, go find Grandma and my father. We need to get people out there looking for her right now. As many as we can.”

“Who are you calling?” he heard Meyra ask.

“I’m calling Clint. He can get the Weatherbys here, too. I’m calling everyone we can.” Marin looked toward the big windows that looked out over the back gardens. The snow. They could all see the snow. Building. “Dusty, if she’s out there in this, find her, Ben. Just find her.”

“I’m never going to stop looking. I’ll bring her home, Marin. No matter what.”

His woman was out there. Ben would move heaven and earth to get her back.

Now he knew exactly how he felt about that woman.

Exactly how he felt about her now.

Once he had her back, he was never letting go of her ever again.

HE'D WANTED TO SEE THE TALLEY GIRL AGAIN. SEAN WASN'T STUPID. SHE hadn't just captured him because she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. She was LaDonna's daughter.

It was a Friday night. A busy night for any hospitality establishment. There would be more of LaDonna's daughters around. He was certain of it.

He now knew the Browns'—aka Talleys'—children were all female. Eight daughters. That was surprising. Now he wanted to figure out which were which. To find out what he could about them.

More importantly, it was a part of his job, his duty, to ensure Morris Preston's perfidy, his base evil, didn't reach those four young women, either.

He suspected the girls with names starting with D were a good place to begin.

The young woman at the front desk of the evenings was Marin. She'd called Fred's brother Daddy. She had two sisters, she had told him. Meyra from the diner was one of them.

Another worked for PAVAD. That was a specialized branch of the FBI that all in law enforcement knew about now. It wasn't easy to get into. He'd heard that from friends of his who had tried and failed. Fred Brown's niece had.

More power to her. That was one hell of an accomplishment.

There were bound to be more Talleys visible this evening. Sean wanted to meet them.

When he made it down the lobby, there was a crowd forming. And panic on the faces of the women who worked at the inn. Marin was pacing, almost

beside herself. Sean was used to taking control in stressful situations. He stepped up to her, flashed his badge again. He wrapped his fingers around her thin elbow.

“Marin.” Her name almost rolled off his tongue. She was an amazingly beautiful woman, especially when a man got even closer. She had the same porcelain skin that Dylan and Dorie possessed. The same cheekbones, too. That resemblance had his breath catching, just a little. He should have seen it before. “Marin, what is wrong? Is there something I can help with?”

She looked at him. From eyes so pure a blue they had to be unreal. He had to wonder, if he had seen this Talley first, would Dusty have captivated him so quickly? It was a question he would have to ask himself later.

“My cousin Dusty, the one who works at the vet clinic, she’s missing, Marshal Sutton. And we are trying to find her now. The sheriff has called out search parties.”

“Missing? What on earth happened?” He looked for the man or woman who would be in charge. “Tell me. I may be able to help. Every pair of eyes and hands can help. I’ve the training to help, as well.”

Technically, he was supposed to stay out of any local law enforcement matters unless he—or his assignment—were in imminent danger. But Dusty was his assignment’s daughter. Sean would use his best judgment. If his supervisors didn’t like it, well, his career could handle the reprimand just fine.

And there was no way in utter hell Sean was going to let something happen to one of LaDonna Brown’s daughters. Even one of the ones left behind.

HE HADN'T STOPPED LOOKING. THERE WERE NO SIGNS OF DUSTY ANYWHERE. She would have been close. She had been three-quarters of a mile from Fletcher's place. She could easily have walked there if something had happened. It wasn't snowing that hard. She would have known she could go to Fletcher. Or go to Chandler's restaurant right next door.

She could have walked *home*, too.

Daisy and Meyra had searched every room. In case she had, and someone had done *something* to her.

She wasn't at the inn. Anywhere. There had been men searching the woods behind the inn, too. Where it butted up against that ranch Brandt Barratt had recently bought and was remodeling. She could have walked behind Fletcher's place, and right through Brandt's place, and made it to the backside of the inn in under an hour. But she hadn't.

Everyone had searched the area around her truck repeatedly. No sign of her anywhere. They had search parties, volunteers from the neighborhood around the inn, and the town. And every Tyler they could gather.

More Tylers were on their way.

Ben fought the panic. He knew exactly what could happen to a beautiful young defenseless woman like Dusty. There were monsters in the world—he wrote about them each and every day. And darkness like that could leave a mark on a man's soul.

That she could be out there, broken and hurting and *needing* him sickened him. Where the hell was she?

"We need to get out there and keep looking," he snapped at the deputy

next to him. Sage just blinked up at him. She'd stopped by where he stood to ask if Dusty was dating anyone that he knew of.

Dusty wasn't dating *anyone*. He'd backed off, to give her space to process that damned kiss.

But he got it. Romantic partners were the prime suspects when a woman like Dusty went missing. Hell, if he was writing this, *he'd* be the prime suspect, and he knew it. He wanted her, she hadn't agreed—yet—and he was basically right there in her damned home.

“They're bringing dogs out to help, Ben,” Sage said. “To see if they can follow her scent.”

Search dogs could search in snow. Very well. Ben knew that. He knew it. They'd find her. It hadn't been that long. Maybe two hours now? Three? He'd searched himself. Around her truck. Between her truck and his brother's place. Nothing. Not so much as a footprint.

Ben just nodded, though it wasn't his place to call the shots at all. Or even be the one the sheriff kept in the loop. In cases like this they would talk to one family representative, to keep information straight. And save time.

Time that could mean the difference for survival.

It wasn't him. It was her uncle. Of course, it was. He was always the man in charge.

Gerald Talley had everyone under his command, it seemed. Ben wanted to know what was going on, he was going to have to stay close to Dusty's uncle. But it grated on him. He wanted to be out there, looking for her.

Somehow.

“I need to get back out there.” He had the training to be out there. To be some damned help. He looked at the sheriff, his cousin Phoebe's husband. He loved that woman. So damned much his heart threatened to pump itself out of his chest. Or break. Right inside of him. “I just need to find her, Joel. Somehow.”

Joel leaned closer. Ben ignored the wind and the snow. “How long have you been in love with her, Ben?”

He just shook his head. “Forever. Or maybe just from this very minute. I don't...know. I just know that I *am*. And she's out there. Needing *me*. She needs me, Joel. Let me out there.”

From the moment he'd realized she was missing, he'd just *got it*. Exactly what he felt for that maddening woman.

“Yeah. I understand what you mean.”

He made himself a promise: once they found her, he was going to let her know how he felt. Even if she decided he was a surly bastard who she wanted nothing to do with, he was going to tell her.

Ben had never been one who waited. Not when it mattered most.

Joel shifted, blocked the rest of the crowd from hearing or seeing. "I'll tell you what I know so far. Nothing says I can keep you from going out driving. It looks like she parked willingly, but quickly. Footprints approached her car. Large ones, probably male. Her bag and phone were left on the seat of the truck. There are signs of a struggle, then. Maybe someone being... dragged a little. Someone...smaller."

His blood froze, right where he stood. Colder than the damned light snow that was falling around them now. "That's going to terrify her. To have it happen again. In the damned snow. The roads around this damned town are too isolated."

"We may have had a sighting of an out-of-town van, near Fletcher's place, with a woman resembling Dusty in the driver's seat. But that's it. We're starting road blocks on all the major highways. And we're getting volunteers in place for all the side roads and back roads. I'm going to do whatever it takes to get her back. You just need to trust me."

But they'd both worked the cop gig long enough to know, once an abductor got a woman in their vehicle, chances of survival dropped. Considerably.

"I'm going out there. Tell me where to concentrate."

"Toward River Road. That's the direction the van was headed. Eli Masterson was out that way. He saw it turn off near the old Beise place."

"I'm going."

"I figured you would."

Ben didn't hear anything else he said. A familiar pair of trucks were pulling in. Fletcher and Gil climbed out of the first. Martin and Reese and Kaece climbed out of the next.

More Tylers had arrived. Word had gone out less than an hour ago. There they were. Ready to help.

Now it was time to get Dusty back where she belonged.

FRED BROWN—AKA ARTHUR ARNOLD TALLEY—WASN'T GOING TO BE ABLE to keep his third daughter for too long. But he would be damned if he would let her go in the early morning hours. What was she going to do, walk along the highway in the snow and ice? Hope someone came along to help her? Hell, no. He'd figure out a way to get her *home*. Somehow.

Truckers and all sorts of out-of-towners used this highway. A beautiful girl like his daughter, walking alone—that was just asking for trouble.

He sat in the small travel trailer, by the window, keeping one eye on the storage shed where they had her now. They had just enough heat in the trailer that he and Geena wouldn't freeze to death.

He wrapped another blanket around his Geena. He'd put the space heater in the shed with their daughter. But his wife had pointed out that it was an old heater and they didn't know whose it was or how well it worked or how safe it actually was.

It might stop working, it might catch fire. Their daughter could suffocate, or freeze to death out there, she'd pointed out. Multiple times.

Geena was freaking.

He had agreed to check on Destiny periodically, just to keep his Geena calm. Her anxiety had just gotten worse over the years. He should have gotten her therapy years ago. He had been so afraid she'd inadvertently disclose something dangerous about their past, he never had.

Hell of a husband he'd turned out to be.

She had always deserved so much better than him. As their four youngest girls had gotten older, her fears had just grown. And sometimes, sometimes

he thought maybe she was angsty over the girls she'd left behind, too. Phantom fears she'd never be able to alleviate. Never be able to put to rest with a simple peek in her daughters' bedrooms, or a check on them from the window while they played. She'd lost all of that with the four older girls.

Sometimes, he wondered if the trauma of leaving them behind had damaged her beyond repair.

She had wanted to sit out there with Destiny. To watch over her baby girl through the night. To hover, like the mother she was. But he knew she wouldn't sleep that way. She needed to rest. And if she learned he had given his daughter one of Geena's muscle relaxers she took for the anxiety—Geena would be beyond furious.

Geena wasn't really made for roughing it, for these kinds of adventures. She'd always been a little fragile. Not helpless, but...vulnerable. And he'd always wanted to protect her from the world. That was the tone of their marriage from day one. Maybe it was because of his age then. He'd been a mature man of thirty-one when they met. She'd been a naïve eighteen, and all alone in the world. He'd wanted to be her hero.

Maybe he'd sheltered her a bit too much back then. Protected her too much. Maybe if he hadn't, she wouldn't have missed the signs of trouble. The lies Morris Preston and his goons had told.

The lies *Patsy* had told, to lure Arthur and Geena right into their little con back then.

It was Arthur's fault. *He* had been the one who had been friends with Morris Preston. Who had brought Preston into Geena's world.

That was another one of his great failures. He had promised her when she was no older than their Dorie that he would always take care of her. He'd done a great job of it, hadn't he?

Hell, he had known he was far too old for her then, but he had taken one look at her and practically fallen in an instant. If a man that age ever even looked at his little Dorie, or any of his girls, he'd see the guy was thrashed to within an inch of his life.

He had been too old for Geena back then. He knew that now. But he had loved her. And he'd thought that was enough.

That love had never lessened. Not even for a moment.

She rested now, just because he had promised to watch over their daughter from the window. He checked his cell again—Devaney and her sisters were still at the chain motel several hours away. They were safe for

now.

Destiny Marie. Dusty. It would take him a while to get used to calling her Dusty. Why did they call her that? It wasn't a name he would have picked for his daughter. He remembered her as a rambunctious toddler.

Always in his memories of her, she was a toddler.

No wonder.

She hadn't been old enough for him to really know her. To love her—absolutely. But to *know* her, no. He had always loved his daughters. Always. He'd go to his grave loving those eight girls more than life itself.

When the door to the old shed slipped open, he almost didn't believe his eyes.

He almost laughed. He'd slipped one of Geena's nerve pills into the girl's drink. Apparently, it hadn't lasted as long for her as it would his wife. Of course, Geena was forty pounds lighter, older, and far frailer than his daughter. Arthur had forgotten to lock the shed last time. But a truck had been roaring by. He hadn't wanted to get seen.

He'd been careless.

She should have been out for at least a little bit longer.

Where did Destiny think she was going?

They were probably two miles from town or so. On a lot that had been in the Talley family for generations. The travel trailer he and Geena had preempted tonight had been their own years ago. He'd put it on that lot without telling their family so long ago he couldn't even remember *why* now.

Right before he'd traded the damned lot to Morris Preston in a damned card game—without telling his father or brother and sister. Same game Leonard Triskele had wagered a damned ranch worth almost a million dollars.

Bruce Tyler had cheated and won both pieces of property.

And hadn't done a damned thing with either since.

There was still electricity to the travel trailer, though. Which meant someone was paying the bill. He'd wondered at that. And someone had been staying there, relatively recently. There had been canned food in the cabinet. Still good, too.

And men's clothing. A tall, big man's clothing and a sleeping bag. A sleeping bag that he'd used to cover his daughter. Arthur had helped himself to all of it. And had wrapped Geena in a hooded sweatshirt over her sweater.

He watched his daughter as she escaped. Destiny was stumbling. A great

deal.

That erased all humor and pride at her spirit he felt. He was proud she'd managed to escape, but she was probably still heavily sedated. And afraid.

How could she not be?

She wasn't wearing her coat—it was right there in the chair next to him.

He grabbed his coat, hers, the flashlight, and a blanket. Just in case he needed it. He wasn't about to let his daughter wander off in the damned cold, without her coat and drugged like that. No way in hell.

Destiny—he'd probably never really think of her as *Dusty*—was faster than he had anticipated. Stronger, like his Devaney. Scrappy like his Dylan. Stubborn like his Dorie. She kept trudging forward. He heard her curses when she slipped on some ice.

But his daughter didn't give up. Not for a moment.

Resilient like his Dahlia.

He stayed where he could see her. Be there if she needed him.

They were only two miles from town. She might just be able to make it two miles. It would solve his dilemma on how to get her home. Not his first choice, but all he wanted was her safe at the inn where she belonged. Where he had no doubt his brother would watch over her like a hawk.

He'd known, when he left, he was leaving the girls with a far better man than he could ever be.

He wanted to be able to drive her right up to the front entryway of the inn that had been his family's life's work for as long as he could remember back. But he couldn't.

He'd rather forfeited that right twenty-three years ago.

Still...he wasn't going to let her walk through the snow that far without her coat. He just wasn't. Arthur caught up to her. "Destiny Marie. Wait."

"Leave me alone." Her words were slurred. From the drugs? Or the cold? Panic threatened. It was damned cold out there. She could freeze to death in this. He slung her coat over her shoulders.

Maneuvered her arms into it. Zipped it closed.

He wrapped the blanket over her shoulders.

Arthur pulled his own knit hat off his head and put it on his daughter's. "I'll drive you home in the morning, sweetheart. I promise. You can't walk home in this snow now. You just can't."

"I can. I will. Not staying with you and her. I'm not. I want to go *home*. But...Slater Davis's not here to carry me now." She was still slurring.

Leaning against him. He never should have drugged her. Never. He'd screwed up again. "I want *Ben*. He's looking for me right now. Ben...and... Gil...and Fletch...and...and..."

There probably *were* people looking for her now. Arthur wasn't stupid. Someone would have found her truck alongside the highway. They'd only been a half mile or so outside of town.

"Come on." He could carry her. If he had to. And he would, too. If he had to. Arthur turned her. Back toward where they had come from.

They must have made it almost a half mile before he heard it.

The sound of a big engine. Coming.

He ducked behind a large pine. He watched, hand gripping his gun, in case he needed it to defend his daughter. He'd die to defend one of his girls. All of them, Geena all the way down to their Dorie.

A sound behind him had him turning. *Destiny*. She was moving. Toward that truck.

Faster than Arthur had anticipated.

Destiny stumbled to the edge of the road. Waved her arms. Almost went to her knees. Arthur bit back a scream, fear the damned truck would hurt her having him moving closer. Fast. If she stepped out into the road, they could hit her.

Just like that, the truck stopped. With almost a screeching sound. It slid on the snow. Opposite direction from his daughter.

Doors opened. Men's voices could be heard.

Arthur darted behind the nearest tree.

Three men piled out. Young, strong, fit.

From the distance he watched from, in the early morning sun, they looked like some of those bastard *Tylers* he remembered from so long ago.

Even with winter gear on, he'd recognize *Tylers* when he saw them. Damned hotheaded, good-for-nothing bastards. If something bad was going on in Masterson County, it was highly likely Bruce Tyler or one of his ilk were involved. That was the way it had always been. Bruce or Marty. Always doing something they shouldn't.

He would never forget Bruce ramming his fist into Arthur's face—because of something that had supposedly happened between his sister Jessica and Bruce's brother Marty so many years ago. Before Marty had dropped dead from a heart attack, shocking everyone in Masterson who'd known him.

That was ridiculous. Jess wouldn't have gotten tangled up with a damned Tyler.

Tylers were no good. And always had been. Brawlers with bad attitudes, mostly. Some were flat-out drunks and just trouble. He had no doubt Phil and Nick—Bruce's brothers—had turned out just as bad. Bruce had been a lazy, shiftless, beer-guzzling grifter, robbing whoever he could for a damned buck. Or driving for Morris Preston. That was it.

The rest of those Tylers hadn't amounted to much. It just wasn't possible.

"Dusty. Thank God, woman! Come here, baby. Come here," one of the men said. "I found you. We found you. We've got you. You're safe now, baby. You're safe."

His daughter stumbled toward the young man in the middle. "Ben!"

Arthur stayed right where he was. And watched. *Dusty*. That young man had called her *Dusty*.

She knew that boy. She went right to him, right into his arms and everything. The boy just held her close. She clung. She knew that boy well. Very well.

A boyfriend, maybe? She was a beautiful girl—there would be men interested in her. And the way that boy was *holding* her...

Some of the tension in Arthur lessened. He pulled his body farther under the large, sheltering bows of the pine. He didn't want those three to see him. That would just put Geena in jeopardy. And the girls. Those three boys were young and strong and probably able to thrash him just as much as he deserved.

He still had four of his daughters missing out there somewhere. And those four weren't safe.

"Ben! I knew you would be looking for me." Arthur would never forget her slurred words. Or the way that boy adjusted the blanket around Arthur's daughter's shoulders. The way he was holding her.

"Always. Forever, baby. I never would have stopped looking for you, Destiny Marie. Forever. I'm here now. I'm here."

Then the young man scooped her close and held her. Like he loved her.

"Dusty, babe, open your eyes. Open them. She's...out. Gil, she's not opening her eyes." The guy's voice held panic now. Arthur's daughter was limp in his arms.

Arthur tensed. It was just a muscle relaxer. It should have her out for a few more hours. It surprised him she'd made it as far as she had.

“Get her in the truck, Ben. The sheriff can meet us at the hospital. Let’s go,” another man said in a slightly lower tone. One that sounded a damned lot like Bruce Tyler.

Arthur studied him quickly. Yeah, it could be Bruce standing there. His blood ran cold, imagining Bruce having one of his daughters like that. His hand tightened on the .38 reflexively. Ready, if he had to.

He’d die for his daughter. In a heartbeat. That was his baby girl there. Bruce Tyler wasn’t going to hurt one of Arthur’s girls ever again.

The guy turned. Better into the early morning light. Arthur relaxed some.

It wasn’t Bruce Tyler. The man was far too young for Bruce. And the hair far too light blond.

But those boys were Tylers.

And that just meant trouble.

Arthur stayed right where he was, and watched.

BEN SCOOPED HER INTO HIS ARMS. “COME ON, BABY. OPEN YOUR EYES.”

Fletcher helped him lift her, Dusty clutched tightly to Ben’s chest. Like deadweight.

Gil helped steady them. “We’ll get her to the hospital. Then we’ll take her back to my place, with me and Sage. Pamper her a bit. Or Nikki’s. She’d like to go to Nikki’s. Hell, we’ll take her back to the inn and set up guards over her ourselves. A Tyler to guard every corner.”

Ben barely heard his brother. All of his focus was on the woman in his arms. “She’s been sedated. It...someone *did* this to her.” He’d seen the effects of sedation before. He battled the rage. As he imagined reasons someone would do this to her. “We need to get her to the hospital. Find out what that bastard did to her. When I find him, I’m going to kill him.”

Ben carried her to Gil’s truck. Fletcher already had the back door open. He leaned down to help lift her in. Ben handed her to his younger brother while Gil called Sage.

His brothers were men he could count on. He was never more grateful for that than he was now. He never would have found her if they hadn’t been searching together tonight.

Gil had been the one to see her. On his side of the road. In that dark coat, a dark blanket around her.

Ben might not have seen her at all, if his brother hadn’t seen her first. She might not have been found at all. Could have just been there along the damned road until it was too late. In the damned snow.

He knew—the snow scared her now. Since that damned Brad had almost

killed her. He had always known. Dusty hated the snow. “Get the cab warmer. She’s so cold. She was in the damned snow. She hates the snow now, guys. She hates it. Since Brad.”

“I’m on it,” Gil said, flooring the gas as soon as Fletcher was in the front seat and pulling the door closed. “We’ll have her there in thirty minutes.”

Fletcher grabbed his phone. Dialed the ED, told them they were bringing her in. That they had her. Had found her.

They’d found her. Tears of relief stung his eyes. They’d found her.

Ben just held her close, trying to get her to open those eyes of hers. He wrapped his fingers around her wrist, checked her heart rate.

A little slow. But steady.

Nikki had told Ben before—Dusty’s heart was better than it had ever been. The surgeries she’d had when she was younger had repaired all the damage. She wasn’t even on medications. She was healthy.

It had to be whatever sedative they’d given her. That was all it was.

When Ben found the man responsible for this, he was going to pulverize him. Into pieces so small they couldn’t even be found. He kissed her forehead, and just held her. As his brother drove.

“Open your eyes, baby. Just open them, okay?”

Ben looked up, his eyes meeting Gil’s in the rearview mirror. He saw understanding, compassion in the eyes so like their father’s.

Gil understood. Knew how Ben felt.

Of course, he did. He and Sage had almost died together.

Hell, maybe his brother had known all along. Both of them.

Maybe it had just been *Ben* who hadn’t realized exactly how much the woman in his arms meant to him. Until it had almost been too late.

The ED staff was waiting, including his cousin Perci and her husband, who ran the hospital. Nate was ready, to help get Dusty out of the truck. Fletcher was there to help. Ben lowered her to his brother’s arms. They had her safe and secure between them.

Then Perci and some of her nursing buddies were there with a gurney.

“I’m going in with her,” Ben told Perci. “No one’s stopping me.”

“Dixie’s waiting inside,” Perci said. “It’ll be up to her if you can go in or not. We have her, Ben. I promise. She’s going to be okay. You can let her go now.”

“*Never.*” Never again. “I’m never letting go of her again.”

DUSTY'S OLDER SISTER DIXIE ALLOWED HIM IN, BUT ONLY BECAUSE HE'D practically begged her. She took pity on him, probably because she didn't want to have to stop what she was doing to argue.

She wasn't treating her sister—that wasn't allowed. But she was staying close. Holding her sister's hand. Answering health questions related to Dusty's previous conditions and any allergies.

Dr. Paterson leaned over Dusty, checking her pupils.

Dusty let out a loud gasp and flinched from the light.

It was the first *reaction* Ben had seen her make since they'd found her.

"I think she'll be coming around soon," the doctor said. "We need blood screens as soon as possible. Find out what she's been given. We'll do a SART after she wakes and can give consent. In the meantime, Ben, we're about to get her out of these clothes and give them to the sheriff. You'll need to step outside. We'll let you know when she's awake."

The doctor was firm. Ben wasn't going to argue. The last thing he needed was to get thrown out of the hospital. His cousin Perci's husband ran the place—and Nate was just mean enough to do it. For that matter, so was Perci.

Ben found Gil and Fletcher prowling the waiting room. Gil looked at him first. "Anything?"

"They are trying to figure out what the bastard gave her. She's acting like she's coming out of it soon."

"Joel's on his way, with the rest of her family. Dixie back there?" Fletcher asked. Ben just nodded. "Hunter's bringing Nik. She's beyond freaked right now."

“Someone’s going to have to go back to where we found her. Show Joel exactly where she was.”

“I’ll do that,” Fletcher said. “You stay with her, of course.”

Gil put his hand on Ben’s shoulder. “She’ll be okay. Dusty’s one of the toughest women I know.”

“She must have hiked through the woods, practically stoned, in the snow.” Ben had seen some dark things in his time with the military police. And he wrote about dark things all the damned time. Some were based in things that he’d researched, or read about actually happening, still others came from the darkest parts of his own soul. “All alone.”

But nothing had hurt him as an adult as badly as the last few hours had. Nothing. The only thing that had even come close was when Dusty and his sister had been attacked before. Or when Morris Preston and his goons had hurt Gil and Sage and Junie the way they had.

Fletcher went outside to wait for the rest of the sheriff’s people. Ben knew how his younger brother operated. Fletcher breathed best outdoors. It was how the other man centered his soul.

A part of him wanted to be out there, finding the person responsible for taking her. The other part wanted to be back in the exam room holding her. Telling her what she meant to him.

But her sister was there with her. She was safe and in good hands.

And it wasn’t his job to go out hunting monsters any longer. He’d made that decision consciously before returning to Masterson County.

Only for Dusty would he ever reconsider. For her, he would do anything.

A hot hand landed on his shoulder. He turned, eyes meeting Gil’s. “Yeah?”

“When this is over and she’s home and safe, just scoop her up and carry her away, Ben. Don’t live with doubts. They’ll destroy you. Go after her. After what—*who*—you want. I think the two of you would be good together. Just like Mom and Dad were. Just do it. Find a way.”

There was a look in his brother’s eyes that Ben didn’t quite understand. One that said Gil knew something he didn’t. Maybe it was his recent ordeal with the beautiful sheriff’s deputy his brother adored. And what had happened to them. How close Gil had come to losing her just a matter of days after he’d fallen so hard for her.

Ben couldn’t imagine losing Dusty. He just couldn’t.

It would flat out destroy him.

He loved that woman just too much to ever lose her.

When he got the chance, he was going to tell her that. He was going to tell her. She was the other half of his soul. He'd just never realized that before.

WHEN DUSTY OPENED HER EYES, THERE WAS A BLUE-EYED TYLER HOLDING her hand. Like she had somehow suspected there would be. But instead of the gorgeous man who had found her—like she had known he would—his sister sat next to her. Staring down at her like she was a bug.

“You’re awake. Thank goodness. They said someone gave you a sedative. Some really powerful muscle relaxer or something. We just had to wait until you woke up.”

“Nik...”

“How much do you remember of what happened?” another voice said beside her.

Dusty turned her head. Sage was there, in her sheriff’s department polo. “We sent the rest of your family home, by the way. They’d been up all night. Gerald is sleeping in the lobby, snoring. He refused to leave.”

“Where...Ben? He found me.” She’d known he would. Had clung to that knowledge with every step through that snow. Dusty remembered waking in that shed, remembered feeling out of it, but she’d *had* to get up. To get out of that shed. And the door had been unlocked. She had told herself she was getting back to *Ben*. No matter what. Because she wanted to talk to Ben, to *kiss* Ben, one more time. To figure this thing between them out. Before she gave up. Dusty had just kept walking. Because she had known Ben was coming for her. “Him and...his brothers. I knew he would.”

She had just known that once people realized she was missing, *Ben* would come for her. Dusty was trying to put things together, but her mind still felt clouded.

“How? Mind meld?” Nikki asked, but Dusty suspected her friend was just talking. Nikki had that my-bestie-is-in-the-hospital-and-I’m-going-to-totally-freak-at-any-moment look in her eyes again. Nikki panicked every time Dusty had a sneeze.

A holdover from when Dusty had had her heart attack right there in front of Nikki and Fletcher. Fletcher had been twenty or so then. He’d gotten Dusty to the hospital just in time. Nikki was incredibly freaked by hospitals. Especially hospitals plus Dusty.

Well, so was Fletcher, for that matter. Like seriously freaked.

Dusty wasn’t about to tell her what was happening between her and Ben. Nikki would freak over that, too. And Dusty just wasn’t ready for the questions. “Don’t remember. Just knew Ben would be looking. Him and Fletcher and Gil. Where is he?”

“He and Gil took Joel and Zach and Rex Weatherby’s people out to where they found you. They are searching for signs of the man who took you.” Sage leveled a look at her, as Nikki helped adjust Dusty in the bed. “Those Tyler boys are on the warpath right now. You are being discharged as soon as you are awake. Dixie said they’d do a SART exam if you gave permission. I need to know what happened to you.”

“No need for that,” Dusty said as memories came rushing back. “I know exactly who took me and why. They didn’t hurt me. Just...apparently slipped me a little something in that snack.”

And the mere idea of it just infuriated her like nothing before. They... what if they had grabbed *Daisy* or *Meyra*? It would have been worse for one of those two. It would have traumatized Meyra completely. Daisy wouldn’t have handled it much better.

“Who was it?” Sage patted Dusty on her free hand. Nikki still had a death grip on her other one.

Before Dusty could tell her, the door opened. Her sisters were there. Three of them anyway.

“Perfect timing,” Dusty said drily. “I need a drink before I explain what happened. Preferably something strong and neat, but I’ll settle for water. I’m never drinking an orange sports drink again.”

Dixie rushed over, grabbed the water pitcher. She fussed over Dusty like she tended to do when one of them was hurt or sick. Dusty took a long drink and then another.

How on earth was she supposed to tell them?

“What happened?” Darcey asked. She had that warrior sister look in her green eyes. “Who hurt you, Dusty? Tell me.”

“First, they didn’t really hurt me.” Dusty was a Talley. She’d been raised to be honest. She wasn’t hurt. “Just...they drugged me. Well, he did. I don’t know that she had anything to do with that part.” Her *mother* had been fussing. Making sure Dusty’s cot had blankets and pillows, and everything. Making sure the heater was far enough away to not catch those blankets on fire. Calling Dusty *baby*, and everything. Fussing. Like...Dixie had just done. Until her father had basically carried Dusty’s mother out of the shed. Where Dusty had been left behind. “He thought I was Dixie at first.”

Dixie’s eyes widened. “Who?”

“*Our father*,” Dusty just said it. Her sisters all just stared. “He’s back. She’s back. And there are more of *us* out there. All girls, but he wouldn’t tell me how many. I’m thinking at least three. He said *all* of the girls, not both. So definitely more than two...maybe? He’d been shot, Sage. And I came up behind them right after it had happened. They forced me into their van, supposedly so the shooter couldn’t shoot me, too. She was seriously freaking. Kept saying the shooter could follow me home, what if he thought I’d seen something, too, and they couldn’t just leave me out there like that, they couldn’t.”

She paused for a moment. As she tried to put it into words. “She was almost acting like she cared or something. She seems the really nervous type. He said she had anxiety and nerve issues and panicked a lot. I don’t know if he even knew I was a Talley at first. I thought it was a wreck. I thought he was Uncle Gerald standing there. I thought they’d been in a wreck and I couldn’t see Rhea or Uncle Gerald’s truck. Just an older white van. I was afraid Rhea was hurt somewhere. But he recognized me. Well, recognized me enough to know I was one of his daughters—after I called him Uncle Gerald, though. So maybe not? Maybe he was just guessing.”

“What happened next?” Sage asked, when Dusty paused.

“I sewed him up in a travel trailer not far from where Ben found me. He gave me a sandwich and sports drink, but he’d drugged it. I stayed in a garden shed with a small heater all night. I slept for a while. Then I got away and headed toward the highway. He was with me after a few minutes. Saying he was going to take care of me, drive me home in the morning. That the roads were too slick to drive on. He put his hat on my head and put my coat on me. Wrapped a blanket around my shoulders. And we walked back toward

the travel trailer—he held my waist, and we walked. Until...I heard a truck coming. And I got away again. Then Ben was there with Fletcher and Gil. Details are a little cloudy still. But they didn't hurt me. Not really."

"Why are they back now?" Darcey asked, fury in her tone. "What did they want?"

"They didn't say. I have no clue. But he said...he said no Tyler was going to hurt one of the people he cared about ever again. And his girls—his *other* girls—had taken off. They were angry and left. He was searching for those girls."

"What does he mean about Tylers?" Nikki asked almost indignantly.

"He wouldn't say. She hushed him when he started...almost ranting, but contained. Quiet. Like Uncle Gerald does. His hair is dark brown. Dyed. He looked just like Uncle Gerald except his hair. She kept...fussing over me. It was really weird. She was acting like she honestly thought she had the right to fuss over me like that. And he hovered over her. Worse than Uncle Gerald with Aunt Rhea. He loves *her*, at least. She has a really old long scar on her neck that she didn't have in those photos. That is all I remember. I got away. And I walked through the snow. Toward the highway. Toward town. I knew...people would have found my truck. Would be looking for me. And I just kept walking. I knew...Ben or his brothers...they would find me. I knew...Marin would have told Ben..."

"Of course, Ben and the boys found you. They love you just as much as I do." Nikki hugged her. Dusty resisted the urge to cling.

Her eyes met Sage's.

Sage knew. About her and Ben. Dusty could see it in her eyes.

"I'm going to let you talk to your sisters and Nik. I'm going to call Joel. Tell him what you've said."

"The van was white. The RV was an old travel trailer. There was a garden shed painted blue, I think. He said...he said it was his once. But it was obvious someone had been using it. For a hunting cabin maybe. It wasn't that far from where they found me. There was fresh food in the cabinet, too. He had definitely been shot. She was terrified the shooters were still out there. She demanded he not leave me behind, kept saying it wasn't safe for me. I genuinely think she believed they were protecting me somehow. In a twisted kind of way. She...was just panicking constantly. Over everything. What if the space heater caught fire. What if a tree fell on the shed. What if a bear broke in. All sorts of improbable things. He was constantly trying to calm her

down. And she said... the rest of their girls were out there somewhere. And they had to find them before *those monsters* did. She seemed so terrified for them. And really emotionally fragile.”

“We’ll find it. And we’ll find your parents, too,” Sage squeezed her hand, once.

“They aren’t my parents. And they never will be again.”

“I’ll drink to that,” Dixie said, hugging her next. “But we have you back now. And that’s what matters most. We’ll figure out what *they* are doing back in Masterson County later.”

Dusty looked at Sage. As she remembered... “One more thing. He said Morris Preston once. I think...this has something to do with *him*. Or Bruce Tyler.”

Sage’s face tightened. She had scars on her arms from fighting with that man. “Then we’ll find out what. I can promise that. Rest. Joel and I will take it from here.”

WHAT HAD FRED BEEN *THINKING*? OF ALL THE FOOLHARDY, STUPID THINGS for Fred to do, taking his own daughter that way? Keeping her out in a snowstorm? *Drugging* her? *Fred* would never have done that to Dylan or Devaney, Dahlia, or Dorie. But he had done it to Dusty without a second thought?

Sean reported in to his supervisor about his little side jaunt out into the snow. Technically, he wasn't supposed to be getting involved in any law enforcement activity not related directly to his assigned witness. But he had played his trump cards. He was one of the more senior marshals assigned to this area. He had a sterling reputation, and an exemplary career. And it was his witnesses' daughter who had been taken. That had been justification enough.

It could have been connected to the case, after all.

And it was.

But that it was Sean's own witness who was responsible, *damn it*.

This was enough to get Fred and LaDonna removed from the program. He never would have thought Fred and LaDonna would be ones to break protocol. They just wouldn't. Not if it meant endangering their four daughters.

But could Sean have left one of his boys out there with a possible shooter nearby?

No. He wouldn't have.

He grabbed his phone, when he was alone in his room at the inn. After everyone was excitedly talking about Dusty having been *found*. By that

young stud who had been staying at the inn, too. Strange coincidence it had been him to find her.

Then again, Sean had seen them together several times now.

That man wanted that woman. Strongly.

Maybe they had already been together. Maybe he had been searching for the woman he loved.

If that had been *his* woman out there like that, there was nowhere on the planet Sean wouldn't go to find her. Hell, he'd search the world for LaDonna or one of her girls in an instant, too.

And if it was one of his boys out there near a possible shooter, *nothing* would stop Sean. Ever. Not if it was one of his boys.

Maybe it wasn't so coincidental, after all.

Fred answered his phone. It shocked the hell out of Sean. "What in the hell did you think you were doing? You will be kicked out for this."

It was the closest he had ever come to saying anything about WITSEC over the phone with Fred since he had been assigned the Browns in the first place.

"I had no choice. I was getting out of the van after some asshole shot me, so LaDonna could drive. Destiny came right up on us, and saw me, almost less than two minutes after the shooting happened. Recognized me. I had to get her out of there before the shooters targeted her next. In case the bastards were watching. What was I supposed to do? Leave my little girl there?"

"You let your daughter loose in a damned snowstorm drugged out of her mind. She could have been killed out there alone like that." That was what Sean didn't understand. How Fred could have just done that. She could have frozen to death, encountered wildlife, or someone could have taken her and hurt her. Killed her.

"I damned well didn't leave her out there alone. You should know me better than that, Sutton. I was three feet away from her the whole time until those damned Tylers came up on us. I was hiding under a damned pine tree. I watched them myself. Heard her call them by name. Saw her hug one of those damned boys. I would never leave one of my girls in danger like that. I'd kill for my girls. In a heartbeat. Remember that."

Sean's fury lessened, just a little. Only a little, though.

"I'm at the inn now. I think she's involved with one of those boys who found her. He's been staying here, too. He's with her a lot. Watches her, teases her."

“Destiny Marie going to be okay? I just gave her one of my wife’s muscle relaxers, damn it. She should have stayed out for hours. I was going to drive her home and drop her off in the morning. It was too damned dangerous to drive her home last night—between the damned shooter and the road conditions. What the hell was I supposed to do—leave her out there with a man shooting at me? But my girl’s a strong one, stubborn.”

And there was pride in Fred’s voice at that. Damn it, Sean didn’t understand Fred Brown, aka Arthur Talley, sometimes. Not at all.

“Someone shot at us, Sutton. Why don’t you get off your ass and find out who?”

“Why are you back here in the first place? We agreed you’d wait until I gave the all clear.”

“Have no choice. The girls, Dylan, the twins, my Dorie—they took off. We were tracking them, until we think Devaney’s damned phone died. They are out here somewhere. With bastards who have already shot at me and their mother. Find my girls. Help me keep them safe. All of them. That’s all I am asking.”

The man disconnected.

Leaving Sean with no more information than he’d really had to begin with.

Someone had shot at them last night. Stan hadn’t asked if Fred and LaDonna were all right. But he didn’t think the man had been lying about that. And where were Dylan, Devaney, Dahlia, and Dorie now?

Sean was going to have to find them, fast. Those four...they were defenseless. Completely. So sheltered and naive. They weren’t like the Browns’ four older daughters. They just weren’t.

And that made them easy targets.

There wasn’t anything Sean wouldn’t do, he realized, to find those girls and keep them safe.

Maybe he and that asshole weren’t all that different in the first place.

SHE WAS TIRED, CONFUSED, A LITTLE SORE—THAT COT HAD BEEN INCREDIBLY uncomfortable—but she would live. She was *home* now. The inn would always mean *home* to her. Dusty understood that more now than she had just the day before.

Her uncle had driven her home from the hospital. Dusty was in the backseat, with a blanket—and a fussing, hovering Dixon Genevieve Talley. Ben and Nikki and Hunter followed in Ben’s truck. He was sticking close. Dusty wasn’t ready to think about how that was exactly what she wanted.

She had *known* out there that Ben was coming for her. Had trusted him. More than she had ever trusted a man before. And when she’d woke, it had been *him* she had looked for.

Dusty needed to figure out exactly what that *meant*.

No denying that.

Her uncle pulled up to the curved drive and the portico that had sheltered the entryway to the inn for decades. Dusty opened the rear door.

“Stay there, young lady. It looks like Ben is going to help you inside,” her uncle said. He had always made her feel so safe. Like her uncle could protect them all from the hurts of the world. She studied him for a quiet half moment. Seeing him there, but remembering his identical twin brother. They were very different. Her uncle was rigidly honorable, for one thing. Uncle Gerald always tried to do the right thing. Always tried to help those who needed.

Her father? She didn’t think he was like that at all. She’d always heard he’d been arrogant and a little self-centered. Well, now she most certainly believed that.

Except where Dusty's mother was concerned. He definitely loved *her*.

"Ben was a mess," Dixie told her, fussing with her blanket one more time. "You really scared him. He searched for you for hours. Ben and both of his brothers. They tried to get Gil to stay behind, help coordinate searchers but Gil insisted he was going to be out there with his brothers. They really love you, Destiny Marie. Just like we all do. But Ben...there was a look in that man's eyes when you were brought in that I will never forget."

There was a question in her big sister's beautiful eyes. Dusty didn't know how to answer. If she couldn't explain what was happening between her and Ben to herself, she wasn't ready to put it into words for anyone else. Just not today.

Not today. She just nodded instead. Looked away. Looked for him.

Her door opened.

Ben leaned in. "Hey, babe. Let's get you inside. Out of the snow."

She wanted away from the *snow* more than she did anything else right now.

Ben slid his arms beneath her knees and behind her back. Dusty felt herself being scooted right out of the truck. "I can walk, Ben."

"I know. I don't think there is anything you *can't* do, Destiny Marie Talley. In fact, I am certain there is nothing you can't do. But for today, I am going to be the man who carries you. I just am. It's what the heroes in romance novels are *supposed* to do, I think." There was so much *depth*, meaning, in his words, tears hit her eyes again. "I don't know yet. I haven't read one. But I'm going to. For research purposes, you know."

Somehow that man got her right out of the truck and into his arms. He stood still for a moment, balancing himself. Balancing her. In more ways than one.

The rest of her *family* waited on the porch. Her best friend was right there, too. The inn stood strong above all of them. Sheltering them like it always had.

She was *home*. Dusty wrapped her arm around Ben's neck and cried.

For everything that had happened before.

WHEN DUSTY WOKE THE NEXT TIME, SHE KNEW EVERYTHING HAD CHANGED. For one thing, there was a man sitting in a chair next to her bed. That was definitely not a sight she had ever anticipated. One of her sisters, yes. Her cousins, her grandmother, even her aunt Rhea. Nikki—most definitely, it wouldn't have surprised her if Nikki had been the one sitting there, guarding her as she slept. Ready to defend her with a toothpick if that was all she could find.

But Nikki's brother slept there instead.

She studied him for a long time. He was beautiful. He was real. And he would *never* do anything to hurt her. As she studied him, he shifted. Woke. He just stared at her in return. "Hey, you're awake."

"We both are." Dusty sat up, then looked down. Made sure she was in *appropriate* clothing. She wore the same T-shirt and sweatpants Dixie had brought to the hospital. Nothing to shock Ben there. "How did you get in here?"

"I think Dixie took pity on me actually. She seems to think you would want me in here with you. I think she's my new bestestest friend forever."

She did. She definitely did. She didn't even want his sister in here right now. But... Just what exactly *did* she want?

Wasn't that the question?

He stood, stretched. Then she felt her bed dip. Ben was on the mattress with her. "I need a hug. You scared me, baby. You are not allowed to do that ever again."

Dusty lifted her arms. She wanted a hug, too. No, she wanted more than

that. She wanted the man to *hold* her. To block out the chill of the snowstorm. To block out the memories. All of them. Maybe that wasn't fair of her. To want that from him now. But that was what she wanted.

Instead, she wrapped her arms around his neck. "Will you just...hold me for a minute?"

"I'm ready to hold you for a lifetime. Just whenever you are ready. Say the word. I'll hold you forever. I'm just waiting for you to tell me I can."

Dusty leaned up. She didn't know what made her do it. Maybe it was just a combination of everything. But it felt right.

For the first time, she was the one who kissed *him*.

He kissed her back, of course. For a long time. No pressure, no pushing for more. He just held her, kissed her. Made her feel *safe* again.

He held her all night. Just the way she needed.

Of course, he did. He was *Ben*. No one made her feel the way he did.

Or ever had.

Dusty started to suspect no one ever *would*.

She was going to have to figure out what she wanted next. Tomorrow.

Tonight, she just stayed right where she was—Ben Tyler's strong arms around her. Exactly what she wanted.

WAYNE WASN'T STUPID. JASON WAS GETTING MORE ERRATIC, MORE OBSESSED. Wayne was going to have to find a way to just walk away. To take Linda and the girls and disappear. For a moment, he considered doing what the Talleys had done so many years ago. State's evidence or something. He could tell his family he'd witnessed Jason doing something—there was a family connection. He could tell his wife he'd merely stopped back off in Wyoming to check on his second cousin, and had walked into him doing something illegal. He could apologize, make himself out to be innocent.

Linda would believe him, she loved him, after all. Far more than a man like Wayne deserved.

“Come on, damn it.” Jason was getting bossier, and the decisions he was making were foolish.

Dangerous.

Wayne didn't play that game. He never had and he wasn't about to start. “Where the hell are we going?”

“Those girls at the diner. They're Geena's younger daughters. Exactly what we need.” Jason had a triumphant, almost gloating tone in his voice that made Wayne's skin crawl more than it ever had before. He knew Geena had had a few more kids after she and that husband of hers had run from Masterson all those years ago. Arthur Talley hadn't hidden himself as well as he'd thought. The man was too damned distinctive for that.

He hadn't realized Jason knew that, though. He should have. That bastard had contacts going deep into the federal government. Just as corrupt and dirty as Jason was himself.

Jason hit the gas. In a matter of no time, they were right there on the little four door sedan. Wayne had seen those girls in the diner. They'd reminded him of his own three daughters. They had that same innocence about them. "You are not going to fucking hurt those girls!"

"I don't intend to hurt one," Jason said. "I intend to use one. The only way to get Geena out from behind that damned husband of hers is through one of those bitches."

Before Wayne could stop him, Jason slammed the front bumper into the rear of that car.

Sending those girls skidding straight into the ditch. Wayne yelled.

He watched that car go into the ditch, and his own girls' faces flashed into his eyes. Those girls—they were just *girls*. The youngest one might not have been even eighteen yet. Kids.

They didn't deserve this at all.

Jason pulled the truck to a stop. "Come on. We just need one. Kill the rest if you have to."

Wayne climbed out behind him as fast as he could.

DYLAN'S HEAD HURT FROM WHERE SHE'D SLAMMED INTO THE DASHBOARD. Well, where the airbag had kept her from slamming into the dashboard anyway. She turned.

Toward Devaney.

Her sister wasn't there.

Her sister's door stood wide open.

Dylan jerked around.

Dahlia was in the back seat, big eyed and terrified. Dorie was yanking at her seat belt. But they were moving. But where was... "Dahlia, where's Dev?"

"I don't know. She was right here. Then she got out. She just got out." Dahlia was yanking at her seat belt, with hands that shook. She struggled with the latch. Like she used to when she was a kid. "Where is she?"

Dylan jerked open her own door.

That's when she saw *them*. The two men in dark suits that had been in that diner. The ones who had watched Dahlia and Devaney.

And they had her sister. Why would they be taking her sister? Her mom and dad had said there were people after them. They had. Maybe they hadn't *lied* about that?

"Dev!" Dylan didn't stop to think that they had carried guns. They had her baby sister. "Let her go!"

It was obvious they weren't there to *help*. Not the way they were dragging Devaney over the embankment. Devaney fought and twisted, and it just wasn't enough.

“Run, Dylan! *Run!*” Devaney shouted. “Get out of here! All of you!”

The younger man reached out and slugged her sister with something in his hand. Devaney went limp in the guy’s hold. The other man, the older man, yelled or something. He scooped Devaney up and tossed her over his shoulder.

And carried her toward the truck that was waiting.

Dylan could never hope to get over the rock-covered embankment fast enough to help her sister. She dove to the ground when the man who had hit her baby sister turned the gun toward her and started *shooting*. He was *shooting*.

All she could hear was Dahlia screaming her name. Dorie’s terrified shouts. And then the men drove away. Her sister held captive in their truck.

“No!” Dylan just yelled it as she watched them drive away.

Devaney.

THE CLOSER THEY DROVE TO MASTERSON, THE MORE CONCERNED ARTHUR got. Geena was on the verge of total meltdown. She was just getting more and more terrified the closer they got to where that Smith guy and Pryor were probably headed. Arthur was just as concerned. Not just for Dylan and the younger girls, but for Destiny Marie and the older. For his family.

Jason Smith knew he had an ace in his sleeve just because he knew where Arthur's older girls had been all these years. Arthur wasn't a fool. Leaving the girls behind all those years ago had been a terrifying gamble. He had just counted on Gerald's connections being enough to scare Jason and Morris and their goons away from the four older girls and the rest of the Talley family. And on them not wanting the attention going after innocent children would bring. Morris Preston had been *all* about fitting in with life around Masterson County. Keeping his dark side hidden from the rest of the world. He'd wanted the power being a wealthy man in a small town had brought him, for one thing. For another, Masterson was where all the man's secrets were buried. If someone looked too closely at what Preston had been doing in Masterson all those years, Morris Preston's empire would come crumbling down.

Like it just had.

Morris Preston and Jason Smith had had an ace in their sleeves where Arthur was concerned, yes. But he and Geena had had one, too. Everything Geena had seen. She'd recorded video testimony years ago. And Arthur had hidden copies of that testimony in various safe deposit boxes decades ago. As long as Geena knew what she knew, Jason Smith wouldn't risk going after one of their girls.

But Jason was most likely getting desperate.
Desperate men did desperate things.

Arthur was just going to make certain one of his girls didn't get caught in the middle.

“The girls' just *stopped*,” Geena said. “The dot isn't moving, Arthur. They are just outside of town. And the dot isn't moving.”

“Google what's in that location now. See if they stopped at a store or a gas station.” Four girls in a car on a long road trip meant restroom breaks. Lots of them.

Arthur still had nightmares about long car rides with four young girls. Bickering and whining and just driving him crazy. Damn, he loved those girls so much.

“There is a restaurant there now, it looks like.” Some of the tension in her voice lessened. “Maybe they are eating now.”

“It makes sense.” And those little monsters of his had apparently had more money between them than he had realized. Of course, they had. Dylan never did anything *halfway*. “We'll catch up to them, Geena. I promise.”

“When we do, I'm grounding them for life.”

That wasn't going to happen. They knew that. Arthur had come to the realization on the drive to get them. His girls were adults now. They deserved the world. And not to be kept hidden from it any longer.

It was time the running *stopped*. Time the truth came out. Time his girls got what he had wanted from them all along.

“Wait. The dot is moving again.” Geena said. They were in a rental truck now. He'd sent her in to rent it, under their current aliases. He was too distinctive, and Arthur knew it. And there were BOLOs out for him. He'd heard one on the radio as they were driving. As well as a news bulletin delivered by the radio DJ on duty tonight—his eldest daughter Darcey. She'd signed off with an angry promise—that if her *father* was listening, he was going to get what he deserved.

But they didn't have his current name, thankfully.

They were probably giving Sutton a real case of fits, the way he was such a stickler for the *rules*. Arthur had to admit Sean Sutton was the least annoying of the marshals they'd worked with. And... “Honey, call Sutton. See if he can give us an update.”

DYLAN KNEW WHAT SHE WAS DOING WAS PROBABLY THE STUPIDEST, MOST dangerous thing she had ever done. But she honestly didn't have much choice. Devaney was in trouble. Her sister.

And the keys were right there. On the dash. That was just crazy. What kind of a place was this? Was the owner of the truck *shouting* out that it was right there to be stolen or something?

Divine intervention, maybe. The truck was there—because she *needed* it. It was a way to get to Devaney.

She slipped open the door. Climbed behind the wheel. She adjusted the seat quickly. Whoever owned the truck had to be ninety feet tall. Dylan grabbed the keys and found the right one.

The truck purred to life.

At least whoever owned it took care of it.

She was going to seriously make it up to them someday. Somehow. If she wasn't in jail anyway. Or dead. Those guys had had guns. They'd probably kill her—but she had to get her sister back. No matter what. Maybe she'd just be a distraction, and Devaney could get away then.

She thought about calling 911, but her parents had said cops in this county were dirty. They probably wouldn't help *his* daughters at all.

She backed the truck out of the drive, hoping no one inside noticed. All she needed was a way into town. Or south of town, really. She'd laughingly put tracking tags on all three of her sisters' bags once. And their phones all had GPS tracking on them. Cell phones she'd bought them for their birthdays, and paid for with money she'd made designing websites online.

Cell phones their parents still didn't know about. She would check her cell phone when she had better signal.

She was holding out hope that Devaney still had her cell phone in her bra. They all carried them there. So their dad and mom wouldn't see.

Dylan knew something bad was going to happen to her sister if she didn't find her fast.

Dylan knew how to track that cell phone in the family app, too. They'd laughed and joked and then hidden their phones from their dad, so he wouldn't get nosy and want to see who they talked to.

Not that they had a whole lot of friends. Just a few they had met in online classes and had to collaborate with sometimes for school. *Everyone* had had cell phones. Except them. She had been so tired of her sisters doing without things because of their dad.

But now? Now she wished her Dad was there right now.

He would know how to get Devaney back. He just would.

All she had was *hope*, right now. And a stolen truck.

FLETCHER WATCHED HIS TRUCK AS IT PULLED OUT OF HIS DRIVE—AND CURSED himself for being a damned idiot. He had only intended to be inside his house for a damned minute, before heading back to the inn to check on Dusty—and Ben. Make sure she was okay—and make sure Ben hadn't gone out hunting for Dusty's father or something.

It was very tempting to go hunting for that old bastard himself. Fletcher was still fighting the fury over what that man had done. Maybe the guy *had* thought he was protecting her from whatever enemies he had. But he never should have drugged her like that. That was just wrong.

The guy needed to pay for that.

Fletcher was fighting the urge to find him and make him pay. Fletcher was a Tyler, after all. And Dusty was his brother's woman. No one messed with a Tyler's woman. Not even her own father. But now he had a more immediate problem.

Who the hell would steal his truck?

He grabbed his phone. And dialed the person he wanted. His future sister-in-law answered. She'd practically worked twenty-four hours straight since they'd gotten word Dusty had been taken last night. "Someone just stole my truck. Right out of my driveway."

"What? Did you see who it was?"

"Blond hair. That's all I could see. Looked like a damned kid. No bigger than one. Couldn't tell if it was a boy or girl. Probably didn't even weigh one hundred pounds. I don't think they were very old. Probably a boy—had shorter hair."

Some stupid kid out joyriding and screwing up their entire life.

Just why in the hell had it happened to Fletcher—again?

He listened as Sage told him what to do next and what the sheriff's office was going to do. Joel was in the precinct. He and one of the deputies were going out looking for it, but with what had happened to Dusty and the search for Arthur Talley, his truck probably wouldn't be a high priority right now.

Well, it was to *him*.

Fletcher's place was the first one outside city limits. He wasn't that far from the precinct. He could walk there, if he had to.

"Just stay there, Fletch. There are only two roads into town from your place. We'll find your truck."

"Of course, I'm staying here. They stole my damned truck. Unless I want to drive the tractor, I'm stuck here." And he would damned well do that if he had to. He'd done it before.

"Did you leave your keys in it again?"

"For two minutes." He'd left his keys in his truck *twice* since he'd gotten his driver's license sixteen years ago. Both damned times someone had stolen his truck. The first time had been Charlotte Talley. He'd forgiven her for that—probably by day two after, when she'd grabbed him and laid a big kiss on him to stop his ranting.

It had totally distracted him. Why wouldn't it? Charlotte was the hottest woman he knew. And he still loved her, even if it hadn't worked out between them. He'd been her first lover—she'd been the first woman he had loved.

But this time, he was going to kick someone's ass. This truck had cost a hell of a lot more than that old one he'd bought off his uncle had. "If there is even a single scratch on it when I get it back, I'm going to do some damage of my own to someone's hide, Sage. I swear." Like that kid's parents, for one thing. They needed to keep a better eye on their kid. Then he'd deal with that kid himself. Tylers never stole a damned thing. It was a matter of honor. They worked for what they got. No matter what.

"I'll be right there. And you will let us handle it. Or I'll do some damage to your hide myself."

Well, Sage was just feisty enough to do it, too.

But, damn it, Fletcher loved that truck. When he got the person who had taken it...

JASON DROVE, AFTER ORDERING WAYNE TO KEEP THE GIRL IN LINE. SHE JUST sat there, wide-eyed, pale and terrified. Jason hadn't had to hit her like that. If some man ever hit one of Wayne's girls like that, he'd kill the bastard. Without hesitation. He just would.

Wayne was fed up with this shit. "I'm done."

"Where the hell do you think you're going?"

"You are taking this kid back to her family." Wayne pulled the .45 he'd carried with him for years. The one he had used countless times before. Against people—*men*—who deserved it. He hadn't used it in more than ten years. He preferred the rifle for distance work. He'd gotten out of close-up work years ago.

He wasn't going to use it again. Unless he had to.

The girl let out a whimper, but she was keeping herself under control. Somehow. Even with that bastard Smith's hand running over her front like that, while he drove one handed. Sick pervert. Wayne wasn't going to sit there and watching him keep doing that.

She was just an innocent kid.

Wayne put the .45 to the back of Jason's head. He had never forgotten Jason's little *fear*. "Go to the inn, *Smith*. Go there now. We are taking her to her family now. You have a problem with her father or mother, you are going to take it up with them. Not her. She's just a *kid*. She's never hurt you at all. You are just a sick bastard on a power trip. Well, I'm the one with the power now that Daddy is in the big house, aren't I?"

Jason did exactly what he was told. Of course, he did. He was the big

man when he was the one calling the shots, but Jason wasn't calling the shots now.

SUTTON HAD PROMISED TO CALL IN FAVORS. FOR NOW.

But Arthur wasn't a fool. WITSEC wasn't in the cards now. They'd broken the rules, after all.

He didn't care.

Not if it meant he had the girls back and safe. That was what mattered most.

With two turns down the Main Street he had played on more times than he could count as a child, they were a block away from the girls. Just a block a way.

Geena looked at him, almost in horror. "They're at the inn. Arthur, they are at the *inn*. What do we do now?"

Arthur pulled in a deep breath. "We do what we have to do. It's time."

Geena's fear was on her beautiful face. Sometimes...sometimes he thought she feared reuniting with their four older girls more than she feared facing the nightmare that was Jason Smith. Smith could just hurt her, kill her...but their daughters' reactions could damned well destroy her.

Well, Arthur was going to be there to protect her. No matter what. Just like he had promised her he always would.

IT WAS TUESDAY NOW. ONE OF THE SLOWEST NIGHTS OF THE WEEK. DUSTY was glad of that. Her sisters and cousins had ganged up on her. She was going to help out in the dining room by hostessing for a few hours, then she'd been ordered to rest of the remainder of the night.

Well, she had plans. She was going to *rest* in room 308, with strong arms around her. She didn't know exactly what was going to happen between them. But something was going to. It was just a given. She was ready for that next step.

With him.

Maybe it had been what had happened to her. Or maybe it had been the *trust* she had felt in him. She had known that when the world was caving in on itself, Ben would be there for her. No matter what.

And that meant everything to her. Everything.

Now she was ready to see what happened next.

"You should be resting," a firm voice said behind her. Dusty turned. Nikki stood there, Hunter behind her. "What are you doing down here?"

"Hostessing for a few hours. Before the main dinner rush. Then...I have plans for the rest of the night." She hesitated. Normally she didn't keep secrets from Nikki, but tonight? She wasn't quite ready to share what was happening between her and Ben with his sister yet. "I am going to *rest* for the remainder of the night. What are you two doing?"

Nikki shot her a wicked grin—one she shared with that brother of hers—and looked at her beautiful husband. "Celebrating."

"Celebrating what?"

“I’ll tell you later.”

Dusty led them to the table in the center. “You will. I’ve missed you, you know.”

“I know. It’s because I’m adorable.” Nikki looked at her for a moment. “You good, Dust?”

Dusty knew what her best friend was asking. “I’m...good. Irritated and angry at them, but...whatever happened was *their* doing. And the other night—I think they really did believe they were protecting me. Other than that whole drugging me thing—I’m not even too traumatized. I was afraid, *yes*. But not that afraid. I was more angry, really. Furious that they came back now. It wasn’t like what it was with Brad.”

With that monster, she had been helpless, vulnerable, and not in control. With her parents, she hadn’t truly felt that. Mostly...mostly she had just been *angry*.

But it had taught her a few things.

Life really was too short for regrets.

They could have been anyone out there on that highway that night. *Anything* could have happened to her. She wouldn’t always be able to *control* everything. All she could do was make the decisions she made—and face the consequences of them when she had to.

And she was good with that.

She still hadn’t figured out what she wanted to do about the vet clinic or the inn, but she wasn’t as conflicted as she was before. Change was inevitable. She was going to have to remember that.

Ben was the biggest change.

She was going to see just how much that man would change everything.

Dusty was looking forward to it. As soon as her shifted ended...

That man was *hers*.

Someone was *watching* her. Dusty could almost feel the eyes.

She looked up.

Right there. Next to the hostess stand, was the man with Nikki’s grin and Tyler-blue eyes. There was a look in those blue, blue eyes. A look of hunger.

She didn’t think he was there for the *food*.

“I’m going to go seat your brother,” she told Nikki. “You want custody of him now?”

“Well, not *really*. But if you’re too busy to Ben-sit, then I suppose he can join our celebration. At least for a little while.”

Dusty walked over to him. His eyes darkened. He put one finger on her chin. Until she looked right up at him. “Hey, baby. Miss me yet?”

“Behave. Your sister is watching.” Dusty wanted him to kiss her. Right there in the middle of the dining room. More—she wanted to stretch up and kiss that man right where he stood. “What do you need tonight, Mr. Tyler Bennett, sir?”

“Food. Woman. In that order. Think you can meet my needs?”

“I think I’m probably the only woman in the world who can.” He kissed her on the forehead. They both knew it was just a substitute for what he really wanted to do.

“Then as soon as you are finished being Lady of the Inn tonight, I’m going to hold you. For as long as you’ll let me.” He shot her that grin again. “In the meantime, feed me, baby. I’m going to need the calories.”

And he walked right over—and plopped himself down at the table with his sister.

Of course, he pushed a chair *between* Nikki and Hunter’s so the two couldn’t wrap around each other like plastic wrap again.

He was *Ben*, after all.

Dusty returned to the hostess podium, feeling *happier* than she had in a long time. She had work to do now.

There would be time for Ben later.

ARTHUR'S BLOOD FROZE IN HIS VEINS WHEN THE TWO MEN WALKING ACROSS the parking lot became more visible and he saw the young woman being almost dragged along behind them.

That was *his* girl. And from the way she held herself and without the glasses, he knew which daughter it was. Which of his baby girls. "Those bastards!"

Geena followed his gaze. She cried out. "Devaney. They have our baby. They have our baby."

Arthur knew immediately what Jason Smith and the other man intended. "They're using her as bait. I just don't know why they brought her *here*."

Here. Where four of his daughters were, his mother, and his brother's family.

No. Arthur knew. This was going to end badly.

He was going to get his daughter out of the way. All of them.

All he had ever wanted was for his girls and Geena to be safe. That was all he had *ever* truly wanted.

He killed the engine to the truck. "Call the police, Geena. I hope it'll be enough. We need to get Devaney back. And find Dylan and the other two."

"He has my baby. And my girls. My girls are inside here. No. No he won't. Not my girls."

And then his wife did the last thing he ever would have expected her to do.

She opened the truck door and hopped out. Almost ran, faster than he would have ever thought she could.

And followed the man who had almost killed her twenty-three years ago inside.

Inside the inn where most of Arthur's family waited.

SEAN WAS ABOUT TO HIT THE DINING ROOM OF THE INN FOR DINNER WHEN HIS phone rang. It was his boys, and they were upset. They were struggling, especially his eldest, to get along with their mother's new husband. Sean thought the man was too rigid in his ways—he was a great deal older than Sean's ex—and wasn't a good fit for his boys. He'd been intending to address that with his ex when he returned home.

He did not want his boys growing up in an isolated, rigid environment like this man was trying to establish. The man was far too harsh when he punished the boys, as well.

But how to fix it, Sean hadn't figured out just yet. But he would. Those boys were his life, after all.

The dining room was only open a few hours on Tuesday nights, he had learned. After what had happened with Dusty, everything was subdued around the inn, as well. Part of that could be that it was early in the week and the inn only had a few rooms occupied. But Sean felt it was more than that.

Dusty and her sisters had less vibrant expressions on their faces now.

But she was apparently recovering from her ordeal quite well. The few times he had seen her since she had been brought home from the hospital, she had had that man with her.

Ben. His name was Ben. He was Bruce Tyler's nephew.

Sean had had a colleague of his run the young man through the system. He'd been impressed by what was found. Ben had had an exemplary record with the army, then an honorable discharge. He'd built a career writing mystery novels—novels Sean had read and enjoyed a great deal in his free

time in various hotel rooms—and Ben was stable and responsible. It was also obvious that he cared about Dusty a great deal. A great deal.

Fred and LaDonna could do far worse for a son-in-law, if that became an eventuality. Sean had spent the last day learning everything he could about the Browns'—aka Talleys'—older daughters, and he was happy to see that they had thrived with their family in Masterson County.

That was all he had truly wanted to learn.

Now, though, he had been ordered to stay there. To find out what was going on with Morris Preston and the men who had worked for him—before giving the all clear for the Browns to return to Masterson County.

But Sean could say with all honesty, that the Browns *should* be able to return to their previous lives. Not many in the program could ever say that. It would be a good ending for LaDonna's case. One that gave Sean a proud feeling to be a part of.

But it would take time, and there would have to be something *done* about what Fred and LaDonna had done to their daughter Dusty, first. Sean would honestly have let Fred face the consequences on his own, but LaDonna had been involved.

And she deserved better.

The heavy doors to the inn pushed open.

Two people came in. An older man, around his own age.

And a young beautiful woman. For a moment, Sean thought it was Fred's niece Meyra. Then he looked closer.

And realized...

Devaney.

And the man with her had a gun.

There was another man behind them. Equally armed.

He took a look around. Saw the thinness of the crowd. His eyes met Sean's.

The man turned around and left the inn. Like he had never been there. Sean's first instinct was to go after him, but with Devaney in danger and the small crowd, no.

His first priority was safety of the ones around him.

The first man dragged LaDonna's daughter toward the dining room.

Sean was already moving.

He looked at the beautiful woman behind the check in desk. “Call the police, Marin. *Right now.*”

“What is going on?” She was already grabbing for the phone. “What's happening?”

“Tell them Sean Sutton, US Marshals service, is on assignment at the inn. An armed gunman just entered the front doors, with a young woman as a hostage. Call, now.”

Sean pulled his service weapon.

And crept closer.

DUSTY BIT BACK A SCREAM.

Okay. Maybe her parents weren't lying. That was the first thought Dusty had when her eyes met the man's in front of her. She had nowhere to go. The man had the gun pointed right at her. "What...do you want?"

Dusty's gaze landed on the woman held in front of him, with the gun right there to her head. Bright, terror-filled green eyes the same shade as her own stared back at her—from a face like Meyra's. "Who is she?"

She *knew*, though. With one look, she knew. The hair was the same color as Daisy's. The jawline was Darcey all over again. And the eyes? Those green eyes that were so distinctive on almost every Talley in existence—except Marin.

"Shut up, bitch. I need to think. I need to think. I didn't fucking want to come here."

"Then why did you?" Dusty asked, trying to stay as calm as she possibly could. They had twenty-five guests in the dining room, five of those were checked in. The remaining were locals eating dinner at the inn. Including Nikki and Hunter. Nikki had screamed when she'd seen the gun. Nikki and Hunter and Ben—they were at the center table. She shot a look at them. Hunter had pulled Nikki under that table now. But she wasn't stupid, the chairs wouldn't provide much cover. But Ben—he was edging closer.

There were two employees in the kitchen—Meyra and Daisy—Dusty was hostessing, and Macy, their nineteen-year-old second cousin, was waitressing. They just had one waitress tonight. Dusty had helped out where needed. Nikki and Hunter had seated themselves with Ben.

Thank God it wasn't a Friday or Saturday night. That thought ran through her head when she looked around the dining room quickly. The room would have been packed.

“That damned Pryor forced me at fucking gunpoint, bitch. Now, I haven't got a choice. Close that door. Now. Or I blow her head off right now. Or yours.”

Dusty did as he instructed. She pulled the doors—the big, heavy wooden doors her great-grandfather had carved by hand one hundred years ago—shut.

“Lock them. I'm not stupid. Where are the other entrances?” He looked at Macy. “Kid, lock that door over there.”

“What do you want tonight?” Dusty asked. Somehow...somehow she was going to have to be the one to face him. But Hunter was moving closer. And...that was Jack Masterson there. To her left. He'd been eating dinner with his little sister Nora in the far corner. They'd been bickering about something. Just like Ben and Nikki did sometimes. *Ben*.

Ben was moving closer. Ben and Hunter and Jack—they all knew martial arts. They were strong and dangerous. They could stop this man.

But he had a gun.

And they didn't. She didn't think they had a gun.

Dusty bit back panic. He was right there, and he had a woman she was *sure* was her younger sister in his hold. With a gun to her head. She looked so young and terrified right there. And she looked like *Daisy*. Like Meyra, too. “Can you let her go a little? I don't think she's going to cause much trouble. Please?”

“You're one of Geena's daughters, too, aren't you, bitch?”

“Yes. I am. Though I've only met her once that I can remember.” Dominoes started to fall into place. Her sister was staring at her. He wanted her mother. “What does that have to do with tonight, with what you want?”

“I...think maybe I should answer,” a voice so like Daisy's said. Dusty turned her head.

There. Coming from the entrance by the side restrooms...was her mother. With an odd sort of determination and dignity around her.

No sign of her husband anywhere. That was...surprising. He'd barely let her mother use the wet bath without him in that travel trailer. But there she was. Dusty wasn't stupid. Her father was around here somewhere.

“Hello, Jason. I think it's me you really want to kill, isn't it? Not one of

my daughters.”

“*Mom!* Get out of here. What are you doing here?” Dusty’s little *sister* asked, panic on her face. “Get out of here. Now.”

“Your father and I tracked your cell phone, young lady. Did you and your sisters really think we didn't know about them?” Geena Talley asked. She was shaking. She looked frail. Broken. Terrified. But determined. “Where are Dylan, Dahlia and Dorie?”

“I don't know. This man and another...took me out of the car. He shot at them, Mom. And...” The girl sounded just like Daisy.

Dusty was really trying not to freak at that.

The gunman yanked the girl closer. “Well, well. I knew it would work. I *knew* you'd finally come out of hiding if I had one of these little bitches. Which one will it be—older daughter or younger daughter?”

He turned the gun. Toward Dusty. Just as the kitchen door swung open.

Dusty saw her sister there. And Meyra. “Get back in the kitchen, Daisy! Right now!”

Daisy didn't hesitate. She grabbed Meyra and pulled her out of the doorway. As he fired.

He took a step in that direction. Toward Daisy.

“Don't bother,” Dusty told him quickly, shifting into his path. No. He wasn't going after *Daisy*. “There is an emergency exit right there by that door. They are already outside. Already calling the police. Say what you want to say. Then you'd better run. You don't have much time to get out of here.”

Then Ben was there. His hands went around her waist. He almost *yanked* her behind him. Putting that strong body right in front of her. Protecting her. Again.

Like she knew he always would.

NO ONE EVEN SAW HER. DYLAN TOOK IT FOR THE GIFT THAT IT WAS. THE TWO girls had run out of the kitchen, to the outside. They'd run right by her, but they hadn't seen her, either. She'd seen the fear on their faces when the gunshot had sounded. Dylan looked down.

Her arm was bleeding, and it *hurt*. But she would live. At least for now. She had to find a way to help her sister.

She'd seen Devaney in the open kitchen door. Seen the man with a gun to her head like that. Dylan fought nausea. Fear.

There was an eighteen-inch opening at the bottom of the kitchen door.

Dylan crept to it carefully. If he shot toward the kitchen again, she'd probably be toast.

But she had to do something. She'd seen her sister. And she'd heard her mother's voice. And she *knew*. Her family was in trouble.

It had always been *her* job to take care of them whenever her dad couldn't.

Someone had to do something. Somehow.

The kitchen door was one of those swinging kinds. Dylan stayed on her belly on the kitchen floor, scooting closer to the door, until she could see better.

There was a buffet table right there. Built into the floor.

If she slithered just right, and stayed quiet, she could get into the dining room.

Do *something*. Somehow.

She was as careful, as quiet, as she could be. She was small. For the first

time in her life, she was grateful for that. She made it right under the door without disturbing it one bit. Then she was behind the buffet. There was stuff stored beneath it. Stuff she could see.

No real knives or anything, though. She'd been hoping for a meat cleaver that was at least as long as her arm or something.

No such luck.

But there was a meat fork.

One of those really wicked looking things people used to stab hams or something when they were carving them. It was about all she was going to get. Dylan slipped it quietly out of the bin of soapy water it rested in. There was crusty ham on the tines, but, well, she didn't exactly have time to wash it right now, did she?

Now, she had to find a way to get across the room. To where her baby sister was the captive of a madman.

ARTHUR STAYED WHERE HE WAS, BEHIND A DUMPSTER WITH *TRASH'D MAN Removal Service* printed on the sign, trying to decide what to do next. The last thing he should do was rush in there like Geena had.

Of course, she had.

Geena had always believed she was living on borrowed time. That she had survived that day just for their daughters. To bring Dylan into the world. Or maybe for today—to protect them when they needed it most.

Arthur *knew*.

She'd survived that day for the girls.

Well, she was going to survive today, too. Even if Arthur didn't.

Fear for his wife, for his girls, had his gut clenching. There could be dozens of people in the inn right now—his girls, his Geena, his mother, brother, and nieces—his entire family was in that building right there.

The last thing he could let himself do was *panic*.

He checked the parking lot behind him. It hadn't changed much since the last time he was there.

The same wooden chairs his father had made forty years ago still set on the veranda in front of his family's inn.

Hell, he had missed this place. So damned much.

There weren't a great deal of cars. The inn probably wasn't super busy. Thankfully.

The side door, not even fifteen feet from where he hid, jerked open. Two young women came out, panic in their movements.

For a moment, he stared. At first glance, they looked like his twins. But it

wasn't Devaney and Dahlia there. At all. He recognized one, though. Gerald's youngest girl. He'd seen her photo on the internet the last time his brother had been mentioned. That was his brother's baby girl right there. She looked like his girls.

The other girl...He knew. With one look, he *knew*. That was *his* baby girl there.

Neither saw him where he hunched down.

His girl identified herself. "This is Daisy Talley. I'm at the Talley Inn. An armed gunman is holding the people in our dining room hostage!"

Daisy. That was Arthur's fourth daughter right there. Daisy was safe. One of his girls was safe, for now. Now he had to find the other seven.

"I don't know. He has a woman with him. He has a gun to her head. There are between a dozen and two dozen people in the dining room, including my sister Dusty. And other people. Just hurry."

Destiny. *Devaney*. Two of his girls were in there with that bastard. And Geena.

Arthur needed to get in there.

He was their father—and they needed him now.

SEAN HAD SLIPPED INTO THE SIDE ENTRANCE OF THE DINING ROOM RIGHT before the little waitress Macy had closed the door. She had seen him—had met him eye to eye. He'd put one hand on his badge and then touched his lips. She'd looked at his gun and she'd nodded just a small bit. Brave girl.

Sean had quietly nudged her down to the floor then pointed to the still unlocked door. He'd whispered for her to stay down, and get out when she could. The inn and its dining room were old. Filled with character—and nooks and crannies. Plenty of places for a man with his training to use as cover.

The gunman wasn't looking toward that teenager now.

He was fully focused on the woman he truly wanted.

LaDonna Brown, formerly known as Geena Dixon Talley.

Movement caught Sean's attention. A familiar tall man was coming through the kitchen, like he owned the place. Back military straight and command in every movement he made.

“Smith, put the damned gun down and think about this, you fool,” Fred-slash-Arthur Talley demanded. He stepped more fully into the dining room. And drew the attention his way like he had always done before. “Let my daughter go.”

“Which one, Talley? Which one? You and your fucking *wife* have ruined everything. And Pryor. He set me up. Made me come here, walked right in with that damned .45 of his to my head, then he turned around and walked right out. Probably halfway to Colorado and that wife of *his* now. Bastard. Now I'm screwed.”

“You are pretty screwed, actually,” Devaney said. So calmly. That girl...she never let anything rattle her. Or rather, she never let it show. “Can I sit down, Jason? I'm starting to get a real headache here, from you pulling my hair. And you know, hitting me in the face with your gun a few minutes ago. That really hurt, you jackass.”

“Shut up, bitch. I told you in the car, to shut up! Damn, do you ever *shut up*? I should have grabbed one of the other ones. They would be far less trouble than *you!*”

“Well, my sisters and I...we really don't listen all that well. We're the bane of my father's existence, you know. He tells us that all the time.”

“Devaney, be quiet,” her father said. Sean could hear the underlying note of panic, though only those who knew him would have. “Jason and I...we have something we need to finish, don't we?”

“Don't you get it? It was never you I needed to finish with, Talley. It was that bitch wife of yours who got away. No woman ever gets away from me. But she did. Why did she? Tell me what makes her so special?”

“I fought you that day, Jason. For my daughters. It was for *them*. For the four I had to *leave* because of you. And for the baby I carried that day. You never understood that. I am a *mother*. There wasn't anything I wouldn't do for my girls. Unlike *your* mother, I'd have died for my girls, but I will fight even harder than you can ever imagine.”

“Bullshit. You just got lucky.”

“You killed your own mother that day. And then you tried to kill Geena. That is how she was scarred. You are Morris Preston's illegitimate son by a woman named Patsy Danica Smith. You killed Patsy, and buried her on Morris Preston's property in Wyatt Township. We told the US Marshals that, but some dirty cops in this town made my statement go away. But I have a recording, Jason. And it is hidden. Well, I have dozens of them. And all these people now know. And so do the US Marshals. Good ones now. Men and women who won't hesitate to stop you. And...I sent a copy of our statements years ago to the FBI this morning. Right to my brother's daughter's office. I suspect that girl will know exactly what to do with that tape. Let my daughter go. Hurting my daughter isn't going to change one damned thing for you now.”

Sean searched the room, counting hostages, making note of potential problems, checking exits. He saw a woman under a table now. He'd seen her with some of the Talley girls before. She had her phone out. Recording.

A few others did, as well. Still others huddled behind what cover they could find.

Jason Smith-Morris had to know this was the end.

Unless he intended to go out by a bullet, he had to know this was the end.

DYLAN HAD BEEN TOLD FAR TOO MANY TIMES THAT SHE HAD A REAL PROBLEM with impulse control. No denying that.

But her dad was in there, her mom, her sister, innocent people including a kid who probably wasn't even two years old yet. She kept making her way closer. Using the empty tables and the chairs standing like guards around them as cover.

Never in her life had she been happy to be so small until tonight. No one was looking *down*. Everyone was so focused on the man with the gun at Devaney's head.

Dylan paused for a moment. She looked around.

There. By the door. Someone had *moved*.

She looked closer, biting back a gasp.

The man she had once believed was her father's old colleague was there. He had a gun in his hand.

She knew exactly who he was.

US Marshal Sean Sutton. The man assigned to protect her mother. Uncle Sean, she'd always called that man *Uncle Sean*.

Seeing Sean there gave her hope.

But he couldn't shoot the bad guy. Not now. Not with Devaney trapped right there.

Dylan needed to come up with a plan.

THIS WAS A POORLY WRITTEN HOSTAGE SCENE. BEN KNEW THAT. WHOEVER wrote this kind of scene didn't really know what they were doing—either from a writer's perspective or from someone who had worked law enforcement like he had.

The man had nowhere to go.

And the gun he carried at max held six bullets. He could kill people, yes. But even if he fired six times more—and he'd already fired once, so Ben revised that count to *five*—he could only kill five people in the room. That was five more than Ben was going to let happen.

But how to resolve this without that happening, still hadn't come to him yet.

He shifted again, until he was blocking the woman he loved from the line of fire. He checked where he had last seen his sister. She was under the table now, chairs blocking as much of her as humanly possible. Hunter was quietly putting more chairs in front of her, too. Building a wall as much as he could.

She was next to a column, as well. It gave her as much cover as anyone was going to get. Her husband was on his feet, inching closer to Ben's side.

Well, Hunter was a good one to have at a man's back in a crisis like this. He was just as dangerous as Ben was himself.

If they could get that gun away from that bastard, it would be easy to take him down. Ben, Hunter, and that boogerhead Jack Masterson over there on Ben's other side were all damned good at hand-to-hand fighting.

But hand-to-*gun*, that was another matter.

A gun would seriously even the playing field. Especially with that

younger version of Daisy right there with a gun to her head.

The older woman who had to be Dusty's mother took two steps to her left. Putting herself right in front of Dusty. Ben admired the effort, but if she was the one the man had a serious problem with, well, he didn't want Dusty behind her. At all.

Ben shifted to block that woman with his own body. He was a hell of a lot bigger, after all.

“Ben.”

“Destiny Marie, babe. I want you to go over there, behind the wall, okay? While we figure this out.” Ben kept his hands up in front of him, where the man could see them. “No one wants anyone to get hurt here, do they, man? I think you just want to *talk*.”

“You're a damned fucking Tyler, right? Man, you assholes sure are distinctive, aren't you?”

“Funny, I have heard that before. I think it's the red hair honestly. What else could it be? Not like we all look that much alike or anything. The name is Ben Tyler. I believe you know my uncle Bruce. Do you know where he is? I'd really like to say a few things to him when I see him. You know, with my fists and stuff.”

“I just bet you do. Bastard nearly knocked my eye out once. Did you know that? I'm not exactly too fond of him.” The guy was seven or eight years older than Ben, three inches shorter, and flabby. Clammy.

Hell, he even still had acne. If this was Morris Preston's son, talk about unimpressive. And Ben had thought Desmond was a puny wimp. This guy? Pitiful. No wonder good old Morry hadn't claimed him.

“Well, I'm not too fond of him, either. See. We have something in common, right? Now...can you tell me about that girl right there? What has she ever done to you? Her. Specifically. I mean, I understand eye for an eye and all of that, but...she's kind of young to have done something really bad, right?”

The girl with Dusty's eyes gave a smile that nearly stabbed Ben right in the heart. She had Dusty's smile, too. “Well, I did bite him once. I guess that makes for a lifelong grudge, and all. But that was only twenty minutes ago and his hands were groping places they didn't have *permission* to grope, so...how deep of a grudge could he really have, Mr. Ben Tyler, sir?”

Okay, so she wasn't the type of girl to panic. That was good.

Now Ben had to figure out what to do next.

The other man, the one with Gerald Talley's face, took a bold step farther. He'd almost marched in through the kitchen. Ben suspected Daisy and Meyra had run outside after that first shot. They'd probably already called for help. Reinforcements would be there as soon as they could.

But that bastard had five bullets left.

"We're all going to be cool here, aren't we?" Ben asked. "No one wants things to get crazy in here, or anything."

"What are you, a cop or something?" the bad guy, Ben thought his name was Jason, demanded.

Ben wasn't stupid—he kept the knowledge of his past life as a military cop to himself. He was just a normal old nerd, in the dining room with his family and his woman. That was all. No threat to good old Jason at all. "Well, no. Actually, I write books mostly. But, well, I'm hungry. You interrupted my dinner. I figured I'd help you out, and then finish with some brownies. Meyra makes awesome brownies, you know."

Ben just kept his tone as calm as he possibly could.

Someone had to be in charge here, and since that was his woman there, her sister, *his* sister, and his sister's dork of a husband there, well, it was going to have to be Ben.

DYLAN CRAWLED CLOSER AND CLOSER. IT WAS A MIRACLE NO ONE HAD SEEN her yet. Well, besides the redheaded woman hiding under a table. And there had been a woman around her own age in the back corner that had told Dylan to be careful. Dylan had whispered back that that guy had her sister and she had to do something. The woman had understood, she thought.

A sister had to do what a sister had to do.

Uncle Sean was there, and he had his gun. That other guy was keeping the gunman distracted. No one else probably even *knew* Uncle Sean was there. That was probably a really good thing. Uncle Sean *probably* knew what to do now.

She just hoped *someone* did.

Devaney had to get away somehow.

Dylan crept even closer.

She held the only weapon she was going to get in her left hand. She looked up. Her eyes met dark puppy-dog brown in a face that she had always thought was more distinguished than handsome.

Uncle Sean.

He'd seen her.

He shook his head at her, gave the signal one would give a dog to *stay*.

Well, Dylan hadn't ever really listened much, had she?

She just kept getting closer. She didn't know exactly what she was going to *do*...but she had to do something.

She just had to wait until that gun moved away from her sister's head first.

SEAN WAS GOING TO PUT THAT LITTLE BLOND MONSTER OVER HIS KNEE THE first chance he had, and spank Dylan's scrawny little rear end until it glowed for this one. He had never spanked a kid in his life, and she wasn't a kid now, but damn it, she would deserve it for this one.

She had no business in that dining room. None.

But that girl was full of *heart*. Courage. Loyalty, especially to those sisters of hers. Dylan would sacrifice herself in a heartbeat to save one of her sisters. In a heartbeat.

She was going to do something.

Sean knew it.

And he knew how that would play out in a hostage situation. It wouldn't be good.

He had to get that gun away from Devaney's temple like that. Before that bastard reflexively pulled the trigger.

He stood, to his full six-four height. And stepped out from behind his cover. "Jason Smith-Morris, put your hands where I can see them. US Marshals Service! Do not move!"

Like Sean had suspected, the man immediately pulled the gun toward Sean. And away from Devaney.

Just as Dylan popped out from behind that table.

The man howled. Bent over instantly. Like he was in pain.

"Deevie, run! Move now!"

Devaney did what her older sister had ordered. She dove to one side and out of the way. Rolling to one side, just as a man headed straight toward her.

As Smith-Morris fired. And just kept firing.

BEN JUST ACTED THE INSTANT HE SAW THE LITTLE BLONDE COME OUT OF nowhere and start yelling. He hooked one arm around Dusty's waist and took her down to the ground. Fast. He covered her with his own body, aware of Jack Masterson grabbing the girl who had been held hostage and pulling her out of the way. Masterson was a former army cop, too—he'd used it to pay for law school, Ben had heard—and damned good at martial arts. He was just as fast as Ben.

But the little blonde? That bastard with the gun had turned toward her.

He was trying to aim at that kid now.

But that US marshal that had kept eyeballing Dusty—and Marin, to be fair, he'd eyed Witchy-woman Marin a dozen times in front of Ben, too—was ready. “Lower your weapon now!”

Ben had to give it to the guy, he gave fair warning. More than what Ben would have, even. But when that bastard turned the gun toward that marshal, well, the guy did what he was supposed to do.

The gunman went down with three quick shots.

It was too late for Ben though. He looked down. And saw all the blood.

And he knew. The book was going to be *late* this time. And there was nothing he could do about it.

DYLAN WRAPPED HER ARMS AROUND DEVANEY AND PULLED HER AWAY FROM the guy's dead body. There was blood on her sister. Dylan tried to find where it was coming from. "Are you hurt? Devvie? Are you hurt? Where are you hurt?"

Her sister leaned against Dylan for a moment. "I'm okay. That guy, that guy is dead, isn't he? Couldn't have happened to a nicer perv. We should put that on his tombstone, I think."

That was Devaney, never panicking over anything. Dylan was fighting the urge to wet her pants. But she had her sister back. Devaney was safe. Dylan hugged her again.

"I can't believe you did that, Dyl," Devaney said, clinging just as tightly. "You could have been killed. That was crazy. What did you *do*?"

"Stabbed him with the meat fork from the ham." Dylan shrugged. "I was a bit pressed for time. It was the best I could find."

"Well, he was a total pig. A meat fork from the ham was entirely appropriate for his ending." But there was a look in Devaney's eyes Dylan never wanted to see there again.

Someone was there. Leaning over them. She looked up. Into incredibly beautiful blue eyes in an extremely hot-guy face. The dude who had tried to talk to the bad guy. He'd been so calm and hero-y. And, well, seriously pretty to look at. Hard to miss *that*.

"You two ladies okay?"

The guy had warm brown hair with red streaks. He was really strong. He was pulling Dylan up to her feet. Then leaning down to help Devaney and the

guy who had just been kneeling there next to Devaney. He'd gotten Devaney out of the way. He went on Dylan's superhot hero list. They both did. "Masterson, you good?"

"Just a small graze. You?" the man with rich brown hair and beautiful gray eyes said.

"Same." Red-brown hair hottie guy turned back to Dylan and Devaney. "You two scared the bejesus out of me. Especially you, kid. You just came out of nowhere."

"I technically think I *crawled* out of nowhere. Like a little bug, honestly. Or...a rodent, maybe. I came under the kitchen door and those tables. It was a bit too scary for us, too." Dylan didn't regret it. Devaney was going to be okay. She'd do it again in a heartbeat. "Why did he do that? Why did he want *us*, anyway? And where's the other guy?"

"What other guy?" Red-brown hair hottie hero asked.

"There were two. They ran us off the road and took my sister. They were shooting at us, too," Dylan told him. "The other guy was older, fatter."

"His name was Wayne, I think. I don't think it was *us* they wanted specifically, Dyl," Devaney said. "I think they just wanted a way to get to Mom. That one...his name was Jason. He kept saying Mom was going to pay for opening her mouth. That she got away from him decades ago, but no more. I don't think Jason was entirely sane. He said Dad and Sean kept getting in the way. I was the bait. To lure Mom and Dad out. Wayne just wanted to clean up the past and go home. To his family. But he...had killed people. They both had. They talked about it. And they argued."

"I see." Dylan really didn't. How could anyone hate someone else that much?

"Ben!" Another woman was there. She'd been right in front of the bad guy and Devaney until Dylan's mom had stepped in front of her. Dylan *knew*—this was one of *them*.

Her sister.

The man turned. Toward that blond woman. Dylan just stood there. Staring.

He pulled that woman close. Wrapped his arms around her. There was a look on his face Dylan would never forget. No guy had ever looked at *her* that way.

She didn't know that she ever wanted one to, actually.

That was intense. That was the way her dad looked at her mom,

sometimes, though. Her *mom*. Dylan's mom was probably freaking right now.

Dylan pulled Devaney closer. She didn't know what they were supposed to do next.

There were other people surrounding their dad. She could see him across the room.

The door behind them opened. Then Dahlia and Dorie were there. And a bunch of other people. Dylan fought stepping back. Their *dad* was right there, too. Only, his hair was shorter and silver. And he wore his polo shirt tucked into his jeans.

Her father would never wear his shirts tucked in like that. He'd said it really made a man look like a dweeb once—but there had been a look of pain on his face she hadn't understood then. She'd just told him no one used *dweeb* any longer and didn't ask more.

It sank in fast. That wasn't her *dad* at all. “What...what exactly is going on here?”

She pulled Devaney away from the growing crowd. Toward the wall. Dahlia and Dorie came to them. Dylan kept her arm around Devaney. And they just *watched*.

DUSTY CLUNG TO BEN AND WATCHED IN UTTER SHOCK AS HER UNCLE, THE man who had always been her hero, stormed right up to her *father*, and rammed his fist into Arthur Talley's identical nose.

"What kind of father are you? That's a question I've wanted to ask you for twenty-three damned years!" her uncle's roar practically shook the rafters. "Did you not care about those kids at all?"

Her father pulled up his hands, but he didn't hit her uncle back. "I did what I had to do. Do you think I really wanted to leave them? I had no *choice*."

"Bullshit, and you know it. You could have come to me! I could have helped you. With anything, you dumbass!"

"And gotten you hurt? Hell, no. I got Geena out of town as fast as I could, but the damned cops in this county hushed everything up. Preston paid them off! I found proof of that years ago!"

"And what about your girls? You just left them."

"I protected them! Gave them the kind of life they *deserved*! I knew you and Dad could protect them far better than I could, Gerry!"

Dusty just stared. They were gearing up for a total beat down right now. Two sixty-five-year-old identical men who should know better.

They were yelling at the top of their lungs. For everyone to *hear*.

And there was a dead man at their feet.

Dusty really fought the urge to puke as that sank in. There was *blood splatter* over the front of the dessert bar. She would never forget that sight. She just stared. And stared.

Someone turned her. Ben. It was Ben. “There’s blood everywhere. Someone will have to clean that up.”

“It won’t be you. It won’t be you.” Then the man she loved was pulling her into his arms. But...

“There is blood on you. You were hurt.”

“Dude just grazed me. I think it went up in that old portrait of that bear on the wall. I couldn’t have written it better actually. You know, the bear painting that looks like it’s from a horror movie or something. It hit him right in the peni—”

“Ben!” But she tried to see for herself. He was bleeding. He was hurt. That monster could have shot him. Shot Daisy, or Meyra, or Nikki or Hunter, or Macy—or Dusty’s *mother*.

So many people could have been killed tonight. For what?

“Destiny Marie Talley, will you move into my castle with me once this crazy night is over? And live with me happily ever after? An HEA is what a romance novel requires, right? That’s all? People falling in love and an HEA?”

Ben turned her. Until she was looking at him face-to-face. Even with all the blood on his arm and everything. Like he didn’t even feel it.

“Eventually, maybe we could do the two or three pretty babies thing, too? Like maybe...beat Hunter and Nikki and Sage and Gil at that, even?”

Had he just asked her what she thought he had? “Are you *insane*?”

Like, this was not a discussion she was ready to have *right now*. With a dead man at her feet, her parents right there, her uncle yelling at her father, her mother crying and wringing her hands, the police—including Sage and Joel—rushing in, other people crowding in even though their guest, the US marshal, was trying to keep them out, and *now* Ben wanted to talk about the *future*?

“No. Not insane. I just...am impatient. My brother is right, you know. Him and that sagey Sage of his right there. Life is too short for regrets. If any man in this damned wacky town is going to give you two or three babies and a pretty kind of life, it’s going to definitely be *me*.”

Dusty stared at him, as what he’d said started to sink in. Her *mother* was right there, crying. Cops—including Sage and Joel—were surrounding *her father*.

And her uncle, who had just *slugged* her father right in the face.

She had at least two sisters that she didn’t know at all.

Everyone was looking at her. And Ben chose *now* to tell her he wanted forever? “I think, before Harry gets with Sasha, we’re going to have to work on *your* timing a little, Benjamin Kenneth Tyler.”

“Nope. I’m good with it. I’m not going another moment without you, Destiny Marie Talley, hopefully *Tyler*, soon.” Then he was lifting her off her feet.

“Ben! Your arm!”

“Just a little bitty bullet wound. A scratch. Let me be all heroic. Epic-conclusion style. Kiss me back, baby. Just kiss me back. We’ll deal with everything else in a minute. I really just need you to kiss me right now.”

Dusty knew one thing for certain. Life was *far* too short for regrets.

She wanted to be with him. She wasn’t going to let *fear* hold her back any longer.

Dusty just went with it. Wrapped her arms around him. This...was the man she would love until her last day on earth.

Maybe she had loved him for a long time, and just hadn’t let herself see that. Because she’d been afraid. “I can do that. Kiss me, Ben Tyler. Like you mean it.”

His leaned his head down. She stretched up to meet him.

She kissed him right back. Like, really kissed him. The way she’d wanted to all along.

Someone squealed behind her. Loudly.

Dusty knew exactly who it was.

Oops.

She’d practically forgotten all about her best friend in the heat of everything that was happening.

“Dusty’s kissing my brother! Dusty’s kissing my brother! Like really *kissing him!* Look! Look! Dusty’s kissing *Ben!*”

Yes. It was Nikki. Of course, it was. Dusty didn’t care. She just kept kissing him. His arms tightened around her. She pulled back—a woman had to breathe, if she was going to live long enough to give him those two or three pretty babies—and looked into his blue eyes. “I have no idea how she missed it.”

“Me, either. Normally, Nik misses nothing.” Then he was kissing her again, for the longest moment. He pulled back. “I’m carrying you away now. Probably....has to be to upstairs here, though. The wiring in my cave, you understand. I think Harry is going to carry Sasha away soon, too. Maybe the

next book. She needs to give him real fits, first.”

“So does that mean I can give you fits for inspiration?”

“Only in the bedroom, woman,” he whispered in her ear. “As soon as you are *ready* for that next step. My heart can’t take it anywhere else. Tonight... was one of the scariest in my life. When I saw that bastard so close to you, my world almost came crashing down. I can’t lose you, Destiny Marie Talley. Ever. You keep my heart beating. And don’t you ever forget it.”

She didn’t know where he was carrying her off to.

He just was.

Well. He tried to anyway.

Damn it. Someone blocked the door. Said Ben’s name, and Dusty’s. With insistence.

She looked at the deputy standing there. “Excuse us, Sage. We’re *leaving* now.”

“I’m afraid you can’t leave yet. We have to do the statements thing first,” Sage shot her a wicked grin. “I promise not to drag it out. I understand exactly how you feel right now. Exactly. Those Tyler boys—there is just something about them that makes a woman lose all sense of reason. Should I say...welcome to the family? And should we just let Nikki keep squealing like that until she wears herself out? It might take a while. You two have apparently shocked...her, at least. The rest of us...not so much. Not so much.”

“Just hurry it up, Sage. We have somewhere more important to be,” Ben said, scowling at his brother’s fiancée. Looking all adorably Ben-grumpy once again. “This is our dramatic exit scene here!”

But whatever he had planned had to pause.

There was a crowd right there. Pushing their way in. Then *they* were there. Her sisters. Well, Darcey, Dixie, and Daisy anyway. She didn’t know where the others had disappeared to.

That was when Dusty’s tears started. Her sisters. They were going to have so many questions. And they deserved answers, too.

Reality had just sunken in faster than she wanted to think about. “You’re going to have to put me down. I think...there are some things my family and I are going to have to talk about now. You and I—we’ll do the romantic ending...later.”

“Beginning. It’s a romantic *beginning*.” But he kissed her again. Right there in front of everyone.

Nikki squealed again. Or it might have been Daisy actually. Dusty really wasn't paying attention. She just kissed *her* Tyler man right back.

She knew what was important now.

"Daddy? Mom? What's going on?" a voice called. One that was so much like Daisy's Dusty *almost* thought it was her little sister. That had Dusty snapping back to reality. Ben lowered her to her feet. But his hand wrapped around hers. He pulled her close until she could rest against his chest. But she couldn't see the woman who had said it.

Darcey came straight for her. "Dusty!"

Her oldest sister wrapped her up in a hug so tight, Dusty thought Darcey would choke her.

"I'm okay, I'm okay. I promise. They...were there, too. That was who he really wanted."

"Who are they?" Daisy asked, hugging her next and clinging. Her baby sister. "I couldn't really see anyone but the man with the gun. And that girl."

Dusty pulled in a deep breath. And looked. Toward where Joel still stood. "Our parents."

"*Them* again?" Dixie asked, fury in her tone. Then, to Dusty's shock, Dixie headed right to where Joel had her father now in handcuffs, with that US marshal there next to Joel. Joel and Marshal Sutton seemed to be in a heated discussion about who was taking charge—of Dusty's mother.

Neither one of them really wanted Dusty's father, though.

Dusty and Darcey shared a look. And followed. Dixie was the calmest of them all. And always had been. But when her temper erupted, the entire county shook.

Daisy's hand slipped in hers. Dusty pulled her closer. Like she always had, always would.

"What did you think you were doing?" Dixie's voice was loud enough that *everyone* heard. Everyone in the dining room got quiet. Fast. "Did you even bother to consider what you did? What you were doing? Couldn't you have just stayed away forever? We do *just fine* without you here. We always have. But the instant you come around, Dusty almost dies!"

"I'm sure you can talk about this later," Joel said quietly. "Less publicly."

"Why bother caring who listens or who doesn't?" Dixie demanded. "Everyone in town knows what they did to us, don't they? We've been gossiped about for decades. *Poor little babies left on the damned doorstep. How sad! How tragic!* It was our lives they screwed with. And now we want

answers.”

“I think my *sisters* and I have waited long enough, Joel,” Darcey said, putting one hand on Dixie’s shoulder. Dusty shifted closer, pulling Daisy with her. United, like the Talley sisters almost always were. “We deserve answers. Right now is about the only time we trust he’s not going to take off. Just walk away and leave us behind again. Not even a note this time, either. No handy *doorstep* around right now, huh, *Daddy dearest?*”

Daisy took it one step farther. Well, three steps. Dusty watched in shock as her sweet-natured baby sister took three steps toward their father, hauled back her leg—and kicked him right in the shin. “Why couldn’t you have just stayed away forever, huh?”

Dusty had almost expected Darcey to kick the man. It wouldn’t have surprised her at all. Or Dixie.

But *Daisy?*

Their father cursed. Hopped a little. “I suppose I deserved that.”

“You think?” Darcey snarled. Dusty reached out. Put a hand on her oldest sister’s shoulder. Darcey was seriously about to erupt. If she did, it would not be pretty.

Dusty pulled Daisy closer. And looked at *them*. “Where are *they?*”

“Where are who?” their father asked, a cagey look on his face. His nose was swelling now. Uncle Gerald had struck true.

“Don’t be an asshole,” Darcey said. Her temper was just as hot as Dixie’s, and a lot more noticeable. Dusty felt her own fire burning now. Enough was enough. He wasn’t getting away this time. “*Daddy*. Answer Dusty’s question right now.”

“Where are our younger sisters?” Dusty yelled, so loudly the dining room’s occupants pulled in a collective breath. Yelling seemed like a good way to get through to that man. Maybe the *only* way. “Or did you just take off and abandon them, too?”

“Sisters?” someone in the crowd asked. “There is more than *one* missing Talley girl out there?”

“Yes. There is more than one missing Talley girl out there! We just don’t know how many. They just left us behind and started right over again. I don’t know their names, or how old they are. Or anything. Because they mattered enough to them for them to keep. But we didn’t,” Dusty said. Ben’s hand landed on her shoulder. She’d always feel that hurt. Her parents had just dropped them off and walked away. Dusty looked at her mother, who was

just standing there, looking overwhelmed and like the world was ending. Geena just looked so helpless and fragile. “Just tell us why. That’s all we really want to know. And their names. You owe us that much. Hell, just tell us how many of them there are!”

Her mother just stared at her, from tear-filled blue eyes. Then she looked at Darcey, Dixie, Dusty, and Daisy one by one. Like she was trying to figure out which was which? Because their own mother didn’t even *know* them now. “I didn’t want to leave you. I never wanted to leave you girls. I didn’t. Please don’t think that I ever did. Never.”

“Frankly, we don’t believe you.” Dixie pulled Daisy closer, protecting her like she always had. Dixie and Daisy, and Darcey protecting Dusty. Like they had always done. Because...

“They are our sisters. Why did you take them away from us? You could have called Uncle Gerald. He would have come and gotten them, too,” Daisy said, tears running down her cheeks. “You didn’t have to even see *us* again if you didn’t want to.”

Darcey cursed, something she rarely ever did. She pulled Daisy closer, too. “Or...you could have at least contacted us *once*. Just one time. Like when Dusty almost *died* from a heart attack at fourteen. Where were you then? Did you even know that she almost died back then? That she was so sick? Did you know how sick she was? You should have been there. Instead Fletcher Tyler drove her to the emergency room to get her help that day. Or when Aunt Jess died. Or Grandpa or Aunt Sherry. When Aunt Jess and Aunt Sherry were so sick? You were *nothing* to us after you just left us like we were old clothes you were donating to a yard sale. *You were our mother* and then you were just...gone. How could you do that?”

“Stop, girls. Stop it right now,” their father barked. Of course. Because he loved her. “Just leave her alone. Leave your mother alone! It’s me you should be angry with. Not her. It wasn’t her doing. It wasn’t her fault. Never her fault. It was mine. All of it was *mine*. Never hers at all. She never wanted to leave you, and she was in so much pain, and she didn’t even really know what we were doing that day. *I* convinced her it was best. *I did*. It was *my* fault. It broke her heart every damned day to not have you girls with us. Every damned day!”

“Sure it did,” Daisy said quietly. “Why would it? You just had a few more instead. Replaced us right away. You didn’t need us. *You were just tired of dealing with us*. That’s what your stupid note said. But that’s fine.

We didn't really need people like you either. Grandma and Uncle Gerald and Aunt Jess took care of us just fine."

"I knew they would," their mother said. She was just staring at them. Dusty fought the urge to just stare back. "I am so sorry. So sorry."

"It was my fault," their father said again. "I thought I could fix something that I couldn't. And we had no choice but to leave. But we didn't feel it was safe to take the four of you with us. And just keep living a life of running. Never knowing where you really came from. Knowing your family. We wanted better for you than the life of fugitives."

"But it was okay for *us* to live that exact way? To hide *us away* and then uproot us whenever you wanted? To just finally feel like *we* belonged somewhere, got settled somewhere, and you yanked us away again and again?" An angry voice almost shouted from behind them all. "Why didn't you tell us about *them*, Daddy?"

Then another woman was there, pushing through the crowd. She just glared at everyone who got in her way. She had pixie-cut, curly, white-blond hair the exact shade as Marin's that stuck out all over her head and big green eyes shaped just like Daisy's. She was no bigger than their cousin Charlotte. No. She was even smaller than Charlotte. If she hit five feet, Dusty would be surprised.

Behind her, moving much more slowly, were her sisters. Dusty knew that was exactly who they were. She studied them quickly. Four of them. Her parents had had four. That number stung. "You just had...*four*...more, didn't you? How...ironic."

Like they didn't want the first four, but had just replaced them with better options later?

Two had hair the same color as Daisy's warm caramel brown. The eyes were the same shade of green as Dusty's own and the rest of her sisters. But they looked the most like their cousin Meyra. A great deal like Meyra actually. They were only around five five. Apparently, her parents' second batch of daughters were smaller than their first.

One was bruised, and her shirt was torn. Her hair was a mess. She'd been the one that monster had held. There were ghosts, hurts in her eyes. She leaned heavily on her identical twin. Who was slightly thinner and wore glasses. That was the only visible difference.

And then there was the one who couldn't be much past eighteen or nineteen. It was like looking in a mirror to the past, looking at *her*. Except

she was two or three inches shorter than Dusty. Twenty pounds lighter, maybe. She had an overwhelmed, bewildered look on her face. She was just a kid. And afraid. So afraid.

Well, Dusty definitely understood that. Nothing about this felt real at all.

“We wanted to, so much,” their mother said. “We just couldn’t. We wanted so much better for you girls, *all of you girls*, than we could ever give you. And I am so sorry.”

“Why is Daddy in handcuffs?” The one in glasses almost whispered. “What did he do? Is he going to jail forever?”

“He needs to answer some questions, at the station,” Joel said. “Girls, I’m afraid we can’t just stand around here all day. There will be time for this later.”

“Is our mother under arrest, too?” the twin with the bruises asked, looking directly at Joel. Dusty’s hands tightened around Daisy’s and Darcey’s. The four of them were holding hands—just like the four *other* sisters were. “What exactly did they do?”

“How about we start with kidnapping?” Uncle Gerald said. He was still very, very angry right now.

There was confusion and pain on the younger women’s faces. Dusty suspected it was on her own face, as well. Just like it was on Darcey, Dixie, and Daisy’s. And everyone in the room was *watching*.

Everyone was watching.

She’d admit it—she’d been angry at their parents for keeping these sisters, but she hurt for the pain this was causing the sisters she didn’t know. She, Darcey, Dixie and Daisy had been abandoned. But these girls had been lied to. Their entire lives.

There was nothing *right* about this situation at all.

“Not now, Gerald,” Joel said. “But we do have questions. For both of them. And for you girls, as well. We need to know what happened to you...”

“And there’s probably the matter...of that truck, too. Probably should mention...that,” the tiny blonde said, shrugging a bit. “You know...lay everything out on the table dramatically and everything. Situation seems to demand it.”

“What about a truck?” Sage asked, eyes narrowed. “A black F-150?”

“Yes. I took it. Borrowed it actually. And I’m really, really sorry. But those guys had run us off the road and taken Devaney and were shooting at me and Dahlia and Dorie and...we’d been told cops in this town were all

really crooked.” She shrugged, but Dusty saw the fear. “I just had to get my sister back. And I had to leave Dahlia and Dorie behind to do it. So I ran to the nearest house I saw...”

“I’m rather glad you did rescue me. Considering they almost killed me and that sick dude was feeling me up and everything,” the twin with the bruises said. “But...what exactly did you *do* this time, Dylan?”

“I stole—borrowed, really—a truck and drove it to where I could get signal on my phone so I could track your cell phone. I was banking on you still having your phone in your bra. Then I drove it to where those guys had you. Well, here. I’m really sorry about stealing the truck. And I didn’t actually hurt the truck. Here are the keys. I left it in the parking lot when I tracked Dev here, but it didn’t seem right to just leave the keys in it. I mean, someone...could...come by and steal it...and everything, you know...” She shot a completely unrepentant grin at Sage. Dusty just stared—it was Daisy’s most wicked smile, on another sister’s face. “Umm, what exactly is the penalty...for *borrowing* a truck to save my sister’s life when she’d been abducted by armed goons and my other sisters and I were being shot at?”

“It depends on whether the owner wants to press charges,” Sage said. She looked at Joel. “Should we relocate this party to the station?”

“Why not?” Joel shrugged. “I have to admit, this was the kind of thing I never signed on for when I ran for sheriff, Sage. I’m about ready to turn the county over to you, pack up the wife and girls—and head for the hills. It just keeps getting stranger and stranger around here. Now, I’m going to take my new stepuncle here and get him booked.”

“On what charges?” the twin with the bruises demanded, pulling the younger blonde closer. “What did Dad actually do exactly?”

“I don’t know yet. Except they did abduct Dusty from the highway and kept her overnight. And *drugged* her. I’m not feeling all that kindly toward him right now, for that. I’ll figure that out later. But he is not taking off again—until we get some answers.” Joel looked at Darcey. “Take your sisters back to the family wing. Except...Dusty. Ben can bring her to the precinct so we can talk about the kidnapping charges and what exactly happened here tonight. And...as for that one, I’m assuming she is a Talley girl. Put her in handcuffs and parade her in front of Fletcher first. As for you, kid, try to look really contrite when you see a pissed off strawberry-blond man who looks a great deal like this man right here, but with paler hair. It might...go in your favor. He loves that truck almost as much as I love my wife, I swear. Of all

the trucks to steal—you stole Fletcher’s. Talk about bad luck.”

With that, Joel led Dusty’s father away.

Dusty looked at Sage. “You really going to take her in?”

“For now. The boss says to do it. Besides, I think I’m supposed to be on Fletch’s side on this one. Considering. Family loyalty, and all.”

Sage looked at Dusty’s sister—the new, feisty one. Dusty looked at her younger sisters again. It was hard to look at them. It *hurt*.

The twin with glasses looked overwhelmed and like she was about ready to cry. The younger girl didn’t look much steadier. The other twin just watched everyone, a considering look on her face, and one hand to her stomach. As Dusty watched, the girl winced. She was hurting. The last thing she needed was to be standing there, dealing with all of *this*. Whatever *this* could even be called.

“I really do have to put on the cuffs, but we’ll remove them once we get past the lobby. No weapons?” Sage asked. Dusty could hear the humor, though.

“Just a smart mouth, I’m afraid. I dropped my deadly meat fork already. Like I said, I don’t regret it. I’d probably do it again, you know. In the same situation and everything. I’m just glad that guy was stupid enough to leave his keys in the truck. I mean, who in the world does that, in this day and age? And the windows were scraped off and everything. It was like a truckie gift from God just waiting for me right there.” The girl—in baggy overalls and Prince Rufus and Wonkus McBubbles tennis shoes, of all things—held out her hands to be cuffed. She shrugged. “Had to do, what I had to do.”

“My future brother-in-law actually.” Sage told her, snapping cuffs on. “Don’t worry, I’m sure we’ll work it out. Under the circumstances. It might make things pretty awkward otherwise, considering. Have you met Ben yet? He’s going to be my other brother-in-law.”

“He’s the hot guy right there, right? Wow. Talk about spicy jalapeños.” Dylan shot Ben a wicked look. And winked. She was almost a pixie-cute version of Marin, really. “Nice to meet you, pal. Sorry about your brother’s truck. But...you might want to tell him to take a bit better care of his possessions. His truck sure did come in handy. I got my little sister back. Can’t beat that.”

Little sister. She was older than the twins, then. And since the one girl was still a teenager—this one was probably older than she looked. *This* was probably the one her mother had been pregnant with the day she’d left Dusty

and her sisters behind.

This one was *the* missing Talley girl everyone had wondered about.

She wasn't exactly how Dusty had imagined she'd be.

"Shouldn't you read her her rights or something?" the bruised twin asked, holding the twin in glasses by the hand. The twin in glasses had barely spoken at all. She just looked more overwhelmed than her sisters. More fragile.

Sage laughed. "Oh, I'm not really arresting your sister or anything. I'm just...walking her past Fletcher for the moment. Until he has time to cool off. He's out in the lobby. He *really* loves that truck. And I don't want to deal with him right now."

Dusty could just imagine what Fletcher, normally calm and unflappable, was going to have to say about his truck now. But as Sage led Dylan out, every thought about her sisters, both old and new, and what was going to happen next flew right out of her head.

Ben was watching her.

She walked up to him, ready to just kiss him every moment for the rest of her life.

That wasn't going to happen.

Somehow she found herself swooped right up—with her sisters. The ones she'd known forever.

Not the three younger sisters standing there looking like their entire world had come crashing down. As they watched Joel and Zach lead their father and mother away.

The quieter twin's words barely carried over the crowd. "Devvie, what are *we* supposed to do *now*?"

The bruised twin pulled her closer, wincing again. "I don't know, but we'll figure it out. I promise. We'll do it together."

The youngest blonde shifted closer. "Somehow, I don't think we will this time. Where are we even supposed to *go* for tonight?"

Dusty's heart broke. They just seemed so young and alone.

OKAY, MAYBE SHE HAD ACTED ALL CONFIDENT AND BOLD, BUT DYLAN KNEW she was in heaps of trouble now. Her father was behind her. She could hear him voicing his opinion on Dylan getting arrested, saying it wasn't her fault. She was doing what she had to do to protect her family.

That other guy—the one with her father's face—was questioning her father on why he thought he had room to talk about *family*. That dude was *angry*. No denying that. Well, Dylan still was, too.

But she could hear her dad now. And Uncle Stan. But mostly her *dad*.

He was fighting for her. It really didn't surprise her that he would. Her father loved her. She had never really doubted that before. Until recently.

She looked at the cop walking her through the crowd that had gathered in the front lobby of this inn. People were staring at her. The woman had a friendly look on her pretty face.

Dylan turned her head, studying the people staring.

Well, let them stare. No doubt she and her family would be giving them lots of gossip to chew on now. Once she figured out why, anyway.

There was a trio of men there. Two of them were identical. She'd always noticed identical twins—kind of hard not to, considering her younger sisters. Worry for Devaney, Dahlia, and Dorie tightened her stomach. She was always the one who took care of them. Dylan and Devaney, but... Dylan stopped walking. The dark-haired woman stopped with her. "I get that you have to arrest me, but...what about my sister Devaney? Those jerks took her. I don't know what they did to her. She got away, but I think they really hurt her. I know they hit her a few times, when they were dragging her from my

car. In the face and in the chest. Can someone make certain she's okay? Dahlia is her twin, but she doesn't do great in stress situations. Dorie tries, but she's just a kid. She can't take care of the twins by herself. Usually if I can't take care of them and Mom, Devvie does. But she's hurt and..." Dylan's breath hitched. She forced herself to hold it together.

"Someone will take care of your sisters. I promise. Watch your step here."

Dylan stepped up dutifully. She couldn't help herself—she looked back at those men watching. There was something about the way they held themselves. Talk about hot jalapeños. And, well, guys like that probably meant a lot of trouble.

Her dad had said those *damned redheaded Tylers* when he'd told them what had happened years ago. All those men right there had *red* hair. They were probably Tylers.

That meant they were probably *trouble*.

Well, Dylan Geraldine Whatever-her-real-last-name-was had been raised to meet trouble head on, right?

Her eyes met diamond-blue ones. Her breath stuttered. He was glaring.

It was *him*.

The light hair was very distinctive. Kind of like her own almost white-blond really. Only his was red-blond and a few shades darker.

She'd seen him well enough on his porch in the rearview mirror to see that much.

He probably *had* gotten a good look at her earlier. Dylan shot him her best I'm-sorry smile. His glare deepened.

She fought a shiver, then turned to the deputy. "That's him, isn't it? That really scary one in the middle?"

"Scary? I've never thought of him as scary before. But, yes, that's Fletcher Tyler. Like I said, he really loves that truck." They were right there, almost three yards away from the door.

Fletcher Tyler. *Tyler*. That figured. *He* was probably a common criminal, like her dad said all the Tylers in this town were. And the cop that was marrying his brother soon, well, she was probably dirty, too. Even though she acted nice and stuff. Dylan wasn't *stupid*.

Dylan just couldn't help herself. Whenever she'd ever been really afraid, well, snark was her first defense. "*Hey, you! Fletcher Tyler dude. Hey!*"

He looked at her. His glower darkened. Blue eyes practically sliced her to

pieces.

“I am just so sorry about borrowing your truck, man. But well, I was on a rescue mission. Next time, don’t leave the keys inside, okay. I just can’t seem to help myself. And I probably only dented it a *little*. When I slipped off the road. You might want to check and everything! But it drove just fine. Well, once I pushed up the seat as far as it would go anyway...so thanks.”

He almost growled.

It took all the courage she had not to jump back and try to run away. Well, that and the fact that she was in handcuffs, anyway.

Then she heard the crowd behind them get all excited.

Dylan turned.

She watched her father as he was led past an elderly lady and another woman with chestnut hair. And those other women who looked vaguely familiar. One kind of looked like the twins. Her sisters, not the hot-guy twins next to the truck’s owner.

“Arthur!” The elderly woman yelled loud enough for everyone to just kind of stop. “Arthur Reginald Talley, you...oh, have I got a few things to say to you!”

Dylan looked at the deputy. “Who is that lady?”

The deputy leaned closer. Her hand tightened on Dylan’s elbow, but it wasn’t to keep her still or anything. It felt almost reassuring, really. Dylan liked her, she decided. Even if she was semi-arresting Dylan.

Maybe. It could be the real deal. And she could be dirty, too. Hard to forget that.

Her parents had told her and her sisters the cops in this place could never be trusted, after all.

“She’s your father’s mother. Your grandmother. She raised Darcey, Dixie, Dusty, and Daisy after they were left on the front porch steps here almost twenty-three years ago.”

Almost twenty-three years ago. “My mom would have been pregnant with me, then. And she just *left* them? I don’t think I’ll ever understand how they could do that. So that’s our grandmother. She’s alive. We have a real *grandmother*. I can see we have an *uncle*. He looks kind of mean, really. Scary.”

“Yes. And you’ll like her. She’s wonderful. So is he. I promise. You don’t have to be afraid of him. He’s a kind man. I promise. Let’s get out of here. We’ll get this figured out. And then your family can ask your

questions.”

Dylan looked back at her sisters, deliberately ignoring the complaints coming from the big cowboy behind her. Dude would just have to get over it. But...he was loud. That was rude. She looked at him. “Dude, *let it go*. Just let it go. Be a man, will you! It is just a truck. I needed it to rescue my baby sister from a pair of maniacs who had already tried to kill us. They were *shooting* at me and my baby sisters. They took one of my sisters hostage. I was rescuing my sister! What would *you* do if a bad guy tried to kill your baby sister, huh? Bet you never had to think about that in your life. Maybe you have, though. You kinda look like you would be a bad guy, I think. It’s those beady eyes. Sometimes you gotta make decisions. You decided to leave your keys in the truck. I decided...to use your truck to rescue my sister. I’d do it all over again, too. Not repentant at all. I got my sister *back* alive. It did get a little close there at the end, for both of us, I think, though. Getting shot really does kind of hurt, actually. A lot, now that I think about it.”

The dark-haired deputy stopped walking. She stepped in front of Dylan. “Wait? That blood is *yours*? I thought it was that guy’s.”

“Yeah, it’s mine. Evil dude got me with his first shot.”

Dylan would deal with *those* memories later. She just couldn’t deal with them right now. Or she’d fall to pieces completely. She wasn’t going to do that in front of Fletcher Truckboy Tyler. She had her pride, after all.

Then she looked back at her little sisters. There wasn’t anything she wouldn’t do to keep them safe. Ever. Even if she had to go to jail for ten years. She looked at the deputy. “Sorry, I can’t do the whole contrite thing. I’d do it all over again to get Devvie back. No hesitation. She’s my kid sister. There isn’t anything I wouldn’t do to protect them, you know. There just... isn’t.”

Her sisters came through the crowd. Dorie was helping Devaney, her arm around Devaney’s waist. Worry shot through her. She looked at the deputy. “Devaney really needs to go to the ER now, I think. Not be the sideshow here. Someone needs to take care of Devaney. I don’t know what those jerks who took her actually did to her—and they ran my car off into a ditch before they took her. I don’t know if my sisters were hurt in the wreck or not, either. Airbags do kind of hurt, you know. As I have learned. And she won’t say if she’s really hurting—she won’t want Dahlia and Dorie to worry. It’s kind of the way she is. Devvie and I always take care of Dahlia and Dorie. Someone needs to take care of Devaney. And make sure my younger sisters weren’t

hurt in the wreck, too. Well, and our mom will need someone to take care of her, too. She's really...fragile. Our mom is. I usually take care of all of them, but I sort of can't right now."

"We'll take care of them. I promise. The four of you were in a wreck, those men took one of you hostage, and you were struck by a bullet?"

"Yeah, sounds about right."

Dylan wouldn't let herself look at the four sisters she had never gotten a chance to know.

She didn't know what she thought about them at all.

What was she supposed to say? *Sorry our parents left you on a doorstep twenty-three years ago? That was not a conversation she would ever want to have.*

FLETCHER STUDIED THE PEOPLE STANDING AROUND THE LOBBY OF THE TALLEY Inn, not really certain what was going on. He did recognize the little truck thief. She'd been wearing overalls.

She was still wearing overalls. She looked all of fifteen in those damned things. Even though...those were real curves under those things. Just...small ones. But he'd heard her words to Sage. Almost twenty-three years ago her mother had been pregnant with her. Kid had to be twenty-two or so, then. Fully an adult. He'd been doing his damndest to make his ranch pay off when he'd been that age. He'd been a *man* then.

She looked young, but she was a full-grown woman.

Old enough to have known better. Hell, all she had had to do was explain to him what was going on and ask for his help. He'd have helped her. Of course, he would have. A maniac wanting to hurt her younger sister—hell, he had lived that. Of course, he would have helped her.

But she had been damned reckless. He'd have been within his rights to shoot at her for stealing his truck. He could have killed her.

There was blood on her arm. Staining the long sleeve of her shirt. Staining the overalls, too. Did she not have a coat?

He studied her quickly as Zach Lowell held back a bottleneck of people by the lobby doors. Zach was holding the crowd back—as the EMTs, Fletcher's cousin Josh and his pal Jake—headed toward the dining room of the inn. Fletcher's gaze followed them.

“The body will need to stay in place until the state boys get here,” Joel said. Loud enough for several of the crowd to hear. Fletcher turned.

That was when he saw the dead body near the hostess station. Hell. Fletcher hadn't known...

The crowd got quiet. Solemn. Fletcher had heard gunshots. He hadn't known someone had died. Who the hell?

The girl in cuffs had a haunted look on her face. She just kept looking toward the three girls he had never seen before. Twins who looked a lot like sweet little Meyra Talley, and a blonde who looked a lot like a slightly smaller, younger version of Dusty.

Then it clicked just exactly *who* they had to be.

The missing Talley girl. That was who she was. Only...

Dusty had said she'd been told there were more than one.

And this girl was one of them. Well, she was definitely no *Dusty*. She was nowhere near the perfect *woman*, that was for sure. He did see the resemblance, though. A little.

There was a look in her eyes he would never forget. One of memories and pain and far too like the looks he'd seen in Nikki, Dusty, and Sage's faces after the hells they had been through.

She was damned young to look like that.

Ben came to him, pressing a hand towel or napkin to his arm or something. But he kept looking back toward Dusty. Fletcher saw Nikki come up behind Dusty and wrap one arm around her. Hunter was there, too. Staying close to Nikki like he always did.

Fletcher hadn't known they'd been in there.

He'd just seen his truck in the parking lot when he, Kaece and Reese had driven through town trying to find it. They'd stopped. Made it to the door of the inn just as little Daisy and Meyra had come rushing around the side of the building, frantic about an armed gunman inside. Fletcher and his cousins had headed toward the front entrance in time to help Marin and the rest of her crew get everyone in the building out to the back parking lot and to safety.

"Ben, what in the hell happened?" Fletcher asked, all thoughts of his truck forgotten. His family had been in there—and there had been gunshots. Someone was dead now, too. It was more than just his truck tonight. "You okay? You good?"

"We're good. Everyone is safe now anyway." Ben had the memories in his own eyes now. He looked back at Dusty. Watching her like he expected her to just disappear in front of him. "Someone after Dusty's father took one of her younger sisters. To use her as bait, to draw out Dusty's parents. Over

something her mother saw Morris Preston's illegitimate son do twenty-three years ago. Apparently, that was why they left Dusty and her sisters behind. The other sister—the tiny one—followed them and interrupted. Crawled under the tables in the dining room and stabbed the man who was after them—with a meat fork—so her sister could get away.”

Seriously? The kid had attacked an armed man with a meat fork? Was she insane?

She had to be. Either that or she seriously needed a keeper.

“And the rest of the people in the dining room?” Kaece asked. “What happened? We heard the shots and tried to get in to help, but the door was barred.”

“You should have gone the other direction. Do we need to do a refresher, when there is gunfire?” Sage asked, pulling the little blond demon closer. The girl was shifting from foot to foot. She just almost seemed to vibrate with energy or something. A girl like that would make a regular guy dizzy. “We’ll fill you in later. But next time there is a hostage situation and gunshots, please *don’t* run toward them, okay, guys? Run away. Run away and let the cops handle it. It’s what we’re supposed to do.”

“That’s not how a Tyler does things,” Kaece told her. “People were trapped in there. Of course, we were going to help.”

“Is Dusty all right?” He didn’t think his brother would just be walking around like he was if she wasn’t. Fletcher looked for her. She stood with her sisters at her side. They were looking at the younger women. In a weird kind of standoff way.

Right there in the lobby of the Talley Inn. With people *everywhere*. Watching.

The girl next to Sage made a small sound. Tried to take a step toward them all. Like she wanted to be there, too. With her sisters. All of her sisters. Damn, this had to hurt Dusty and the rest.

Fletcher studied the girl’s face. Woman. Hell, she was almost twenty-three, and she *looked* like a woman not a kid when he really looked close at her, just a very small one. She was older than Junie and Em. She had Dusty’s cheekbones, but they were covered with freckles. Mostly, she looked like Marin. It was the confusion in her big green eyes that stuck with him though. She didn’t know what was going on any more than anyone else did, he suspected.

“Dusty will be fine,” Sage said firmly. “She just has some family things

to deal with. And...I think Ben is going to make sure she's okay forever now."

"It's about damned time," Fletcher said, watching his brother slip an arm around Dusty again. "I thought he would never figure things out where she was concerned."

"You knew about them?" Sage asked. "I didn't think anyone else did."

"Of course, I knew about those two. How could I not? Haven't you seen how he looks at her? Dusty is the *perfect* woman, after all. Well, one of the two most perfect women on earth anyway." Fletcher meant that. Dusty and Sage, there were no other women out there like them. He was certain of it. "And my brothers grabbed them both first."

"You are a such sweet man, Fletcher Tyler. It's one reason we keep you around."

The girl in handcuffs snorted a little. He heard her whispered, "*Yeah, right,*" loud and clear.

Well, she was definitely *no* Dusty.

This woman was pure trouble. No doubt about it. He shot her a glare.

She shot him a smile that could rock a man back a mile. He was immune, though. Women like her—all they did was cause a man trouble. He'd learned that a long time ago.

It wasn't a mistake he was going to make again.

"Truckboy, you just really need to get over yourself, you know. Otherwise, no sane woman will ever have you. Well, someday. I strongly suspect you need to grow up first, though. Before you become *hero* material like that red-hot, chili-pepper-hot brother of yours anyway."

He heard Reese and Kaece snicker beside him. Even Sage had a smile on her gorgeous face. But that woman smirked at him. Challenged him eye to eye, like *he* was the one at fault for her stealing his damned truck.

It was the smirk that did it. The look in those green eyes just like Dusty's. It just really pissed him off. "What would you know about it? Nothing *sane* or even *real woman* about you at all. Are you even full-grown yet? If you were a fish, we'd just have to throw you right back. If we caught you at all, the worms would even be laughing, seeing you, little bitty fish."

She blanched a little. He regretted what he'd said—the instant Sage said his name chidingly.

"Dude. Go soak your head in a snow bank or get eaten by a Chupacabra or something useful. Maybe be food for the moth man of Masterson County

or something. Do the world a real favor.” She snarled it at him, little lip up and everything. Fletcher snorted.

No. She was definitely no *Dusty*, that was for sure. Fletcher just glared as Sage turned the girl away.

HE HAD IMAGINED THIS DAY FOR TWENTY-THREE YEARS. ARTHUR STARED INTO his mother's eyes and tried to fight the tears in his own. His mother was right there. He had missed her so damned much. She'd gotten older. It hurt him to see the pain in her faded eyes.

Pain *he* had caused.

He hadn't always appreciated Masterson County, the inn, or the diner. Or even the family that he could say now that he definitely had always loved.

He'd been an arrogant asshole twenty-three years ago. Losing what—*who*—had mattered most had shoved that down his throat every single day. Had he not been so damned arrogant, the woman he loved would have never been put through the hell she had. Wouldn't have become the shell of herself that she had.

She should have left him years ago. Taken Dylan and the rest of the girls when they'd come along, and just left him. Started a better life somewhere else. Found another man, a better man, to give her a better life.

But she had stayed with him. At first he had thought it was because of Dylan. His little Dylan had been premature, and so tiny. So needy. But they had gotten through.

The twins had come a little over a year later—definitely unplanned. Dorothy, two years after.

Their sweet little Dahlia had needed so much extra help those first ten years. Maybe his wife had stayed with him for the younger girls at first. He wouldn't have blamed her if she'd left him.

Arthur had never fully known why she'd stayed. He'd always been afraid

to ask. He'd lost his four elder daughters, and the rest of his family. He had been terrified to lose the woman he adored and the four daughters they'd been gifted after the dumbest mistake of his life.

He had cost her their four older daughters. He had never forgiven himself for that. Never would. What his wife had lost because of him. He had lost them, too.

It was a pain he had felt every single day. His baby girls. His world.

The hardest thing he had ever done was leave them on his parents' porch steps and drive away. Just drive away, like they hadn't mattered.

They had mattered more than they could ever know.

Now, though, his girls were all together. All of them. For the first time. Arthur just wanted to stare at them, to watch them.

To see the beautiful, wonderful women they had all eight become.

He looked at the sheriff of this place. "I'll tell you everything I know. But I want my daughter uncuffed. Let her go."

"I'm not sure that's a good idea." The sheriff sent him a mild look. "She seems to cause trouble."

Dylan was over there with a dark-haired woman—and some of those damned Tylers. Arthur didn't want any of his girls near Tylers. But he kept his mouth shut for now.

The new sheriff wasn't a pushover. His father hadn't been, either.

Neither was his mother, who was fussing over Gerald in a way that shouted definitely not platonic at all. He knew who she was. She'd been his sister Jess's closest friend for as long as Arthur could remember, and had been married to Gerald's best friend. Apparently, Rhea and Gerald had gotten a lot closer since they'd lost their spouses.

He hoped his brother's life was *happy* now.

Gerald had loved Sherry so much. Arthur had known she'd passed away. He'd known what was going on in his brother's life, at least. The internet and news had made sure of that. He had a hard time looking at his twin. Arthur understood why. Leaving his brother had *hurt*. Far more than Arthur ever could have anticipated it back then. But now? Now he knew differently.

Arthur knew what mattered most.

The eight young women watching everything that was happening now.

They looked so young. So confused. So hurt. He checked on Devaney once more. She was leaning against Dorie now. Worry shot through him. Devaney was his most stoic daughter. She wouldn't say a word if she was

hurting, not if it would keep her sisters and her mother from worrying. The marks on her beautiful face—he would never forget, nor forgive.

“I know what Morris Preston was doing twenty-three years ago.” It was the only bargaining chip Arthur really had. He’d spent *decades* collecting every bit of information about Morris Preston and his particular brand of evil, just for this very moment. He said it loudly enough for everyone in the damned room to hear. “Let Dylan go now, get Devaney to the hospital, make certain *all* of my daughters are safe and unharmed, make sure my wife is safe, and I’ll tell you everything. Things I didn’t even tell the US Marshals twenty-three years ago.”

“You were WITSEC?” The sheriff’s eyes narrowed. He resembled the father he’d lost. Daniel Masterson had been a good man. A good friend. It hurt to know he was no longer with them.

“Yes.”

“We’ll talk. Back at my office.”

“Only if you let my daughter go. Dylan is young, impetuous. If she thought she was protecting her sisters—” His daughter had always known what was most important. Dylan might be reckless, but it was out of love for her sisters. He studied her for a moment. Her shirt was red, but that side was darker red. And it was growing. “*Is she bleeding? She’s bleeding.* I can see blood on her. She needs to be taken care of right now.”

She was far better than Arthur would ever be. And had the most *heart* of anyone he knew. He looked at her again. So tiny, that one. She never had gotten very big and was still very sensitive about her size, but she was his scrappy little fighter. He hadn’t really *felt* anything after leaving the girls twenty-three years ago—until he’d finally been allowed to hold his Dylan, once she’d been healthy enough in the hospital back then. He’d made her a promise that day—to take care of her far better than he had her older sisters.

He’d failed in that promise, too.

“Sage, go ahead and let her go,” the sheriff told the pretty brown-eyed deputy standing next to Arthur’s fifth daughter.

A young man with the look of that asshole Marty Tyler behind her protested. Kid was a Tyler, no denying that. Damned hotheaded, redheaded bastards. Bruce Tyler was someone Arthur was never going to forget. Or forgive.

Bruce had screwed him over, then laughed all about it. Said it was revenge for Marty and something to do with Arthur’s baby sister, so long

ago. Jessica had never had a thing to do with those lowlife Tylers. She wouldn't have. No smart woman ever would.

Grief for her was as strong as it was for his father, and always would be.

Arthur's arrogance had cost him the chance to say goodbye.

The sheriff held up a hand. "We reserve the right to bring charges against her for your truck later, Fletch. That's as good as you are going to get tonight."

Then Dylan was free and headed straight toward her little sisters.

The four of them just clung to each other. And eyed their older sisters. Suspiciously. His younger girls weren't so great in crowds. His doing. He'd kept them too isolated, close to home. And just when they'd be comfortable somewhere, he'd pack them up and move them somewhere new. Just to keep them safe.

He'd told them they had *each other*, and that was enough. Said it enough times until everyone had believed it. Even knowing he hadn't been fair to his daughters.

But they wouldn't understand that. *Everything* he'd done that night after Morris Preston had changed everything had been for those eight girls right there and the wife he adored so much. Everything.

If Arthur left this world tonight, he would die remembering all of his daughters together for the first time.

His girls.

He loved each and every one of them so damned much.

He had just never known how to show it.

"They deserved so much better than me," he said softly. "I've always known that."

HE HEARD HER FATHER'S WORDS. BEN KEPT HIS MOUTH SHUT.

This wasn't for him to do, and he knew it. But he was going to stay close in case Dusty needed him. People were everywhere, gawking.

He looked at his brother and his cousins. "Keep the crowd back. Dusty and her sisters—all of them, none of them deserve to be a spectacle. Right in the middle of the town for everyone's entertainment and amusement."

She'd told him how hard that had been, growing up as a *Talley girl*. He'd seen it for himself before. Talleys were talked about in town. They always had been.

This was going to stir up gossip left and right.

Well, not on his watch.

Fletcher and Reese and Kaece started moving around, sending gawkers out of the lobby. The ones who would go. The rest—Nikki took care of them herself. With one sharply worded order.

Nikki was the scariest Tyler in existence, after all.

Then the world narrowed until it was just four young women staring at Dusty and her sisters, beautiful eyes all full of questions. No one said a word for the longest time.

Then Darcey stepped forward.

Dixie put one hand on her shoulder. Dusty matched the move on her left, while pulling little Daisy closer.

"I'm not entirely certain what is going on here," Darcey said. "But...I think we need to have a talk."

"Devvie needs to go to the hospital. She's been hurt," the extra small one

with Dusty's eyes and cheeks, with spiky white-blond hair curling out everywhere, said. She did look like Dusty, a bit. But smaller. Definitely younger. She winced, put one hand up to the blood stain on her arm. Hell, she'd been hurt. There would be time enough for conversation later.

"So have you," the youngest one said. "You're still bleeding, Dylan."

"I'm good. As long as whiny truckboy over there doesn't eat me alive or something anyway. I think he's a *Tyler*. Probably a criminal, too. Just like Daddy said they all were." The girl scowled at Fletcher. Ben wasn't fooled. This little sister was hiding behind a cocky attitude that didn't fool anyone who looked closely. The girl was scared to death right now. Confused. And deflecting her fear through anger at Fletcher or something.

Well, Ben's brother was big enough and strong enough to make a decent target.

"Tyler's aren't criminals, just our uncle Bruce, who we *all* despise," Ben told her. "And you are still bleeding. You need to go to the ER. Or let Dixie look at your arm, kid. I'm Fletcher Truckboy Tyler's brother Ben. I won't let him eat you. I promise. So, what did your dad tell you about us Tyler's?"

"Bruce Tyler was there." The twin in glasses almost whispered the words, even though her sisters shushed her. "When Morris Preston tried to kill our mom that day. Daddy said Tyler's are hotheaded, redheaded criminals and stuff and shouldn't be allowed near decent women at all."

"I promise I'm a good guy. So are the rest of us Tyler's." Hell, they were breaking his heart. He could see so many pieces of Dusty in their faces. And the hurt...a man could almost feel it. "Come on, kid. Let's get you taken care of. You...saved the day, you know. Just popped up out of nowhere at the exact right moment."

"I'm okay," the little one said. She was also very suspicious, apparently. "I'm not going anywhere without...my sisters."

Well. They were *all* sisters, weren't they?

"Then we all go," Dixie said. "I think we all eight need to stick together until we figure this out. I think we've been kept apart long *enough*."

The pain in Dixie's words was damned hard for anyone to miss.

"Okay, enough is enough. Let's get you and your sister here taken care of." Ben looked around. There. His cousin Josh, the paramedic, was right there. "Josh, I have a few ladies who need your attention. How about doing your job for once, you goober?"

His cousin nodded.

Then the ones in charge took care of what had to happen next.

DUSTY STAYED IN THE ER WAITING ROOM, WITH HER SISTERS. AND TWO OF the new ones. They'd both been checked out by the ER staff and given clean bills of health. They had a few bruises from seat belts and would probably be sore for a few days, but they were okay. The other two were still in the back.

She really tried hard not to stare. But they were her sisters. It meant something. She didn't know what to feel, but it had to mean *something*, right?

Sage stood in the corner, supervising—and waiting on injury reports on Dusty's sisters, for the official report. Or something. That was what Sage had told her. Dusty just suspected the other woman was there in case she was needed.

Just like Ben's two brothers had stayed close, too. For her. Even if Fletcher was a bit grumbly. He'd get over it. He'd gotten his truck back, after all.

Her grandmother and uncle showed up a few minutes after Dylan and Devaney had been taken back by Shane Lowell and Dixie's best friend Laney. Dusty's grandmother came right to her and hugged her. "You just keep scaring me, young lady. Let me look at you. You are okay?"

"I'm okay, Grandma. I promise." But Dusty fought the urge to cling. "I think it's probably over now. No promises, but..."

"I have a lot to say to that wayward son of mine," her grandmother said. "But first..."

She turned toward the two young girls who had just been sitting there in hard plastic chairs, not saying anything to anyone. Even each other. "You two."

The younger girl looked up. The one who *looked* so much like Dusty and Darcey. Just on a slightly smaller scale. “Yes, ma’am?”

“None of that ma’am stuff. You’ll make me feel old.” Dusty watched as her grandmother walked right up to them. “I am Grandma, sweetheart. Or Grandma Flo. I am your grandmother, and I always will be. And I always have been. From the moment you were each born. No matter what that dweeb of your father has done or told you or not told you. I promise.”

The girls just *looked* at her. For the longest time. Then the blonde nodded. “I’m Dorothy. They call me Dorie, though. This is Dahlia. Her twin is Devaney. They are twenty-one. I’m nineteen. Dylan...she’s the...oldest, well, of us anyway. She’s almost twenty-three. Dahlia...she really doesn’t talk much. She’s very shy.”

“You are beautiful girls with beautiful names.” Dusty’s grandmother looked at Uncle Gerald. “This is your father’s twin brother, of course. Gerald. He looks a lot more intimidating than he really is. He’s a bit of a marshmallow. He has three daughters—Miranda lives in St. Louis and works for the FBI. She has a son. She is the eldest of my granddaughters. Marin is the tall, thin, pale blonde who seems to think she’s in charge at the inn and my diner. You’ll meet Gerald’s girls soon. Meyra is the quiet one. She, young Dahlia, looks a good deal like you. And I suspect you may have quite a bit in common with her. You also have a cousin Charlotte who lives in Finley Creek, Texas. She is a forensic scientist there who moonlights as a movie actress. She’s something else.”

“We have cousins?” Dahlia whispered. “Daddy never...told us...anything about *here*.”

“I know. And I’m sorry you had to wait so long to find out where you came from.” Her grandmother had always been a no-nonsense kind of woman. Don’t dwell on the past. Focus on the future. And what *you* could make of it. Define your own destiny. That was what Flo Talley had always done.

Never had Dusty admired and respected her grandmother more than she did right now. Watching her grandmother hug those girls like that. Her grandmother pulled back. “Now. For the really important part. Your sisters. Your older sisters. I think *they* have waited a long time to meet you, too.”

“We probably should wait,” Dorie said. “Until Dylan and Devaney get back. We...tend to do everything together. We are really all we’ve ever had. Dad and Mom...we moved a lot. And we were homeschooled. We stuck

close to home. Mom...isn't really, well, you know. She gets afraid a lot. Nervous. She has anxiety disorder and panics *a lot*. We...don't really know what we are supposed to do right now."

"We'll figure it out," a quiet voice said from the door. One of the other sisters stood there. The smallest one. "They are going to bring Devvie out in a minute. They want to take X-rays of her ribs where that one guy punched her and where the airbag hit her, too. But it will take a minute. They said she can come out here. With the rest of us. While they wait for the X-ray tech to get to her."

Dusty looked at this little sister. She was so cute. For lack of a better word, *cute*. The hair stuck up literally *everywhere*. It curled, too. None of their hair curled, but this one's... It was the exact same shade as Marin's weird white-blond, too. She was the only one of them with actual freckles. "How are you feeling, Dylan?"

Dylan looked at her. There was mistrust in her eyes. "You were the one kissing that Tyler dude."

"Yes. I was kissing that Tyler dude. I plan to kiss him a lot more in the future. He's waiting in the cafeteria with his brothers. They drove me here. His sister is my best friend. I've known them forever. How is your arm?"

"Holy. Very holy." She shot Dusty a wicked grin. Yes, it was definitely Daisy's grin right there. "Entrance and exit actually. But they stitched me right up. Gave me some pain pills and everything, for later. I am probably going to be really sore later, too. From the airbag and everything. They gave me a shot of something, too. That Dr. Lowell dude is seriously hot. Does anyone know if he likes younger women?"

"His sister is the cop who fake-arrested you," Dixie told her. "She'll probably know."

"Ask him for me?" Dylan asked Sage. "He is like sizzlingly hot."

"I'll do that, though I've never thought of him as sizzlingly anything before—except annoying actually. How do you feel about devil children? He has two...they tend to frighten most women away, though. They are so precious. I love them so much." Sage's niece and nephew had reputations, after all.

"Everyone really is related in this town, aren't they?" Dylan asked as Laney came in, pushing the other twin in a wheelchair. She was wearing a hospital gown and had a blanket over her legs.

"Devvie!" The girl's twin jumped up and went to her sister's side. "Are

you okay?”

“Just bruises. I promise. Dahlia, I am okay. They are just going to do X-rays to see if my ribs are actually cracked instead of bruised. I’ll be okay in a few days. They said they’ll probably let me out after the X-rays are back.”

“But where are we going to go?” Dahlia asked. “I don’t think the car is going to run very much longer. We were lucky to get it to town anyway.”

“Just *how* did you get it to town?” Dylan asked. She was the one in charge, Dusty suspected. “How did you know where to find me?”

“I drove,” the teenager said. “Dahlia tracked your phone on the app. We followed you.”

“Are you insane? The next time I am chasing armed gunmen down in a snowstorm to rescue Devaney, you two are to go in the *opposite* direction! Haven’t we covered this before? Where did I go wrong raising you three?” She waved her good hand around exaggeratedly. “You are supposed to run away, Dorie! And take Dahlia with you! Devaney, for heaven’s sake, can you please refrain from getting Devaney-napped next time we have an actual adventure, okay?”

“There won’t be a next time,” Devaney said calmly. She seemed to say everything calmly. “I *really* hope there won’t be a next time.”

“This is our grandmother,” Dahlia said in a whisper. She strongly reminded Dusty of Meyra. “Her name is Flo. And there is...*him*. Our uncle. We have an aunt and cousins, too.”

“And these are our sisters,” Dorie said.

Almost as one, the four turned toward where Dusty and her own sisters were standing. And they just *looked* at each other for the longest time.

Dusty didn’t have a clue what they should even *say*.

It was Dylan who took the first step. “Well, I think we’ve dramatically eyeballed each other long enough. No more staring contests. Dahlia always wins those, and it is really unfair. I think we should just get it out there, and then have a great big party. Family-reunion style. Hopefully with food—but...no ham, okay? I am so starving. I am the *little one*, yes, but, well, I eat like a horse. I was *seriously* hoping at least one of you four would be smaller than me. No such luck, I see. I shall still be the runt forever, damn it. I am Dylan. She’s Devaney. Then it’s Dahlia and Dorothy. You all are?”

This little baby sister, well, Dusty suspected *this* one was probably one of a kind.

Darcey was the one who took charge. Like always. “I’m Darcey. I run the

inn during the day. The inn has been in our family for one hundred years. I'm almost thirty. I also am on the radio three nights a week, and when needed in weather emergencies."

"I'm Daisy," Daisy said quietly. "I'm an elementary school teacher. I teach second graders. I'm the...well, I *thought* I was the youngest. This is Dixie. They named her *Dixon*. Can you believe that?"

"Sheesh, yikes. I am like so glad the 'rents got that one out of the way before they got to us," Dylan said right to Dixie's face. Dixie just gave a surprised laugh in response. "I thought being called Dylan was bad. Do you know how many times people have thought I should have a penis?"

Dylan looked so affronted, Dusty cracked up.

"I don't know why you are laughing, lady. Didn't they name you Dusty? I'm just glad they stopped at eight. Number nine might have been called Dirty or something. If they had to do the cute little naming thing, couldn't they have come up with a better theme? I mean, we all eight *could* maybe have been flowers or something. I'd probably have gotten stuck with delphinium, though. And that one is really hard to spell."

Dusty didn't know what made her do it. She just reached out. And hugged this little sister she had never known. She just looked like she deserved it for that one. "I think we will keep you."

Dylan shot her a grin, but she looked so tired. Overwhelmed. Well, Dusty understood that. "Was there ever really any question? Everyone just *loves* me, you know. Well, except for Truckboy Tyler. He'll just have to get over me, though. I'm the love of Dr. Lowell's life now, after all."

But the girl started swaying while she said it. Dusty gasped, reached out. She and Dixie caught their little sister just in time.

DYLAN STARTED TO RELAX A LITTLE. MAYBE BECAUSE HER NEW SISTERS weren't running her, Dorie, Devaney and Dahlia out of town with pitchforks or anything. Or maybe it was because she was starting to really get tired and everything. Really tired. She couldn't keep her eyes open or anything.

But she still didn't know what was supposed to happen next. Somehow, her new big sisters—two of them—got her to one of the chairs in the corner. “Dude, they really gave me something in that shot.”

She heard one of the two nurses—Perci and Laney, they'd said their names were, she thought—talking to her new sister Dixie. Telling her the name of the shot or something. Dylan didn't care. She just wanted two things—to make sure Devaney was okay, and well, to sleep.

They'd have to figure out everything else in the morning. Someone was holding her hand. She didn't know if it was one of her new sisters, her old sisters, or—she forced her eyes open for a minute—it was the older lady. Her dad's *mom*. Her grandmother was holding her hand.

Like she actually wanted Dylan there or something. Cared about her and everything.

How cool was that?

She'd had so many fears. About this new family. About them not wanting *her* or the rest of them. Of them just hating them all. Resenting them and not wanting them around. But maybe it wasn't going to be like that after all.

“Just sleep for a while, Dylan. I'll make sure everybody is okay,” Dorie said on the other side of her.

Well, Dylan thought that sounded like a plan. She would just figure

everything *else* out later.

BEN FINALLY CHASED DOWN HIS WOMAN. NOT THAT IT WAS ALL THAT HARD to do, or anything. But he and his brothers—they'd picked up a Gilbert along the way when he'd met them in the inn parking lot, after having heard Fletcher's truck was stolen—found Dusty and most of her sisters, Flo Talley, Gerald, and Sage in the waiting room. Sage was in official "chief-deputy mode" while Joel had Arthur Talley and his wife at the station.

Good old Artie. Probably lying through his teeth.

Arthur Talley was one man Ben would never like. It just wasn't going to happen.

Dusty looked up when he came around the corner and the potted tree that gave the waiting room a small bit of privacy. "Ben."

She stood. He went to her. Pulled her close against him. "Hey, how are your...sisters?"

He studied the collection of beautiful Talley women. Really looked at these new sisters of hers. That teenage one was definitely a mini-Dusty. She'd break hearts one day—when she finally grew into her demoness powers, too. The one in glasses was a beautiful girl, too. No denying she was Arthur Talley's daughter—any more than Miranda and Meyra Talley could ever deny their own father. The little feisty one was right there, curled up in a cushioned chair—fast asleep, her arm in a sling, and the bloodied sleeve of her shirt cut away. Her feet didn't even touch the floor. She had cartoon characters on the side of her tennis shoes.

Prince Rufus and Wonkus McBubbles.

How ironic.

“Dylan was shot,” Dixie said. “But it was a minor wound. Entrance and exit. She said it makes her holy now. Sore from being run off the road, too. They all are. She’ll be okay. They’ve given her something for the pain. Apparently, she’s a bit susceptible to drugs. She’s been out for a while.”

“She always has been,” the mini-Dusty said. “She was sick a lot as a baby, too. She was a preemie.”

She looked right at Fletcher. Looked his brother straight in the eye. “She’s really sorry about your truck, Mister. But...Dylan thinks she has to take care of us, you know. And she did. She got Devaney back. We’ll find a way to pay you back for the damage when we can.”

Fletcher turned a bit red. Ben knew the truth. His brother wouldn’t make these girls pay for that damned truck. Hell, Ben would pay for the repairs himself, if needed. This little Dylan was Dusty’s sister, after all.

“They are doing X-rays on Devaney,” Dusty said. “The men who took her...kicked her and punched her, among other things. They are ruling out broken ribs now.”

Devaney was one of the twins. Probably around twenty-one or so. Ben fought the anger.

“Once Devaney is discharged,” Gerald said. “I will be taking my nieces back to the inn. *All* of my nieces. I just may need a few volunteers to make that happen.”

The twin shot him a frightened look. Gerald could be intimidating, that was for sure. “We don’t have enough money to go to the inn, Mist—Uncle Gerald. Dylan is the only one who has a job. But it’s only part-time while she is in school. Our dad didn’t know about it, either—she does it all online. We really...need to know where our dad and mom are right now, so we can figure out what to do next.”

“Sweetie, you don’t ever need money to stay at the inn. It is your home, too. No matter what,” Flo said firmly. The two girls just stared at her—warily. They were so afraid. It broke a man’s heart to see. “We’ll talk more tomorrow. When all of you girls can sit down together. I promise. For tonight, we’re going to take you to the inn. You’ll be okay there. And safe. I promise. No matter what.”

“We need to figure out what to do about the hospital bill, and about Dylan’s car, and...and...” The teenager was close to panicking. That was hard to miss.

Dusty went to her. Wrapped an arm around her shoulder. “It’ll be okay. I

promise. It'll all be okay. It's over now, Dorie. I promise. It's over and you'll all be okay."

Dusty just held her while she cried, wrapping an arm around the twin in glasses as well. They had a long way to go until they had it all figured out. But they'd get there. Eventually.

FLETCHER FELT LIKE A FOOL—AND LIKE A BULLY. MAYBE IT WAS THAT THE one sister *looked* like a smaller version of Dusty that was doing it. He'd been angry at Dusty in the past before, of course, but never had she looked at him like she was afraid of him or anything like that kid had.

He'd looked at his truck in the parking lot of the inn before he'd caught a ride with Gil and Ben to the hospital to get Dusty. It hadn't been damaged that badly. Not enough for it to be worth scaring a teenager.

But now...her older sister...

She was around nine years younger than he was, but *she* wasn't a kid like her sister. In spite of the child-size shoes and overalls. She had to face consequences for her actions. But, hell, he would have done the same thing to help Nikki or Dusty—or Gil, Sage, and Ben, for that matter. Or one of his cousins.

But something about that woman got under his skin damned fast. Maybe it was the unrepentant way she'd smirked at him and insulted him and everything. In front of everyone.

He stayed next to the waiting room door while they waited for the fourth sister. Or the eighth? He looked at the pain-in-the-ass one. The chair dwarfed her. She didn't seem to have a coat. Her shirt was missing one sleeve now. He could see the bandages. She had to have been scared out there.

Dixie covered her with a blanket, fussing like Dixie always had done when she was worried. It seemed like the Talley girls were just sort of absorbing their younger sisters, at least for the night.

Rather like the Tylers had absorbed Bruce's missing daughters. Talley

and Tylers—really weren't all that different. Not when it came to *family*. Except the Talleys were mostly beautiful women. No denying that. The new sisters were beautiful women.

All four of them.

Even the little truck thief right there.

He could just imagine what was going to be said around town now. When it got out there that Arthur Talley had *four* more gorgeous daughters. Gossip was going to go crazy over them. The diner would be inundated with guys, ready to check out these four. There were twice as many single men in Masterson County as there were women, after all.

These four were going to be swarmed, as beautiful as they were. Even that one.

Fletcher looked at her, trying to be objective about it. She was a beautiful woman, really. Just small.

Yep. Some rancher would scoop her right up, probably pretty quickly. Scoop her up, carry her off, and bed down for the winter, all wrapped around *her*. That would probably be a good thing—keep her out at some ranch, *far* from town, where she couldn't get herself into trouble. She just looked like she'd be the kind to cause trouble. Fletcher pitied the guy.

He was the kind of man who would want peace in his own life. No ups and downs for him. He wanted a calm, reserved kind of woman for himself. Like Dusty's sister Daisy or her cousin Meyra, for example. Not that he ever would—he'd already been involved with their cousin Charlotte, after all.

Being with a Talley now would be...too awkward. But a woman like them.

A calm one.

Not a tornado with kid-size feet and a snotty attitude.

Finally the last sister was wheeled out. She looked tired. She was a dignified woman, he thought. Calm and steady. Beautiful, attractive. Young, though. She had that same type of grace Dusty and Darcey both had.

She looked at her sleeping sister immediately. "Is Dylan okay?"

Dylan. That was the brat's name. Fletcher wasn't going to forget it. He'd get his revenge for the truck later. When she was up to sparring with him more fully. Right now, she looked a bit puny and defenseless. Not much sport in battling with a woman like that.

"She will be. Minor wounds," Dixie said. "We're going to get you all *home*. With us. We'll figure everything else out in the morning."

“Devaney’s been discharged,” Perci said. “Everything is good to go, Dixie. I take it you’ll handle it from here?”

“Exactly. We will be taking care of our family now,” Dixie said.

“Rhea and I will be spending the night at the inn, as well,” Gerald said. “In case she’s needed. We’ll take care of Arthur’s girls now. *All* of them.”

“So...how are we going to do this?” Dusty asked. “Should we wake her up?”

“Good luck with that. It will be practically impossible,” the twin in the wheelchair said. “She sleeps like the dead in the best of circumstances. Drugged, she’s probably not going to move until morning.”

“Our house caught fire a few years ago. She was on over-the-counter cold meds at the time, and slept right through the fire alarm. Daddy had to run back in and carry her out over his shoulder,” the teenager said.

Fletcher looked around. Ben had his own arm in a damned sling. He wasn’t going to be much good for what needed to be done. And Gil was still a bit too winded at times now, not fully back to where he was before Morris Preston had shot him. “Hell. It’s going to have to be me to deal with her, isn’t it?”

Sage smirked at him. She was enjoying herself, his future sister-in-law. “It’s either you, or I can ask Shane to do it. She probably wouldn’t mind. She thinks he’s *sizzling* hot. And thinks you are a whiny jerk. Just so you know.”

That sealed it for him. Why give her what she would have wanted?

Fletcher stepped up to the monster in the chair, and did what had to be done. He just scooped her right up. It was incredibly easy to do. “Hell, Gerald. I think you might need to *feed* this one double or something. She’s so small, you probably just need to throw her back, honestly. How did she even reach the damned pedals in my truck?”

“Please don’t say those things, you great big jerk,” the mini-Dusty said, shooting him a real glare next. “She’s really sensitive about her size.”

“Well, honey. I’m really sensitive about my truck. I’m still recovering.” He looked at Gerald, as Dixie covered her baby sister with the blanket a bit better. “Lead the way.”

Her sisters just watched him suspiciously. Like he was the monster who had hurt the girl in the first place.

“Don’t worry, ladies. I promise I won’t drop her. I’m a better man than that. I’ll get my revenge later when it’s more of a fair fight. That way she can have something to look forward to.”

Fletcher was going to make sure of it.

He looked down at her again. The cheeks and maybe the mouth were the same as Dusty's. The shape of the eyes. But *this* was definitely no Dusty.

No *perfect woman* about this one, that was for sure.

He carried her out to Gil's truck and loaded her in the backseat. Even clicked the seat belt around her as gently as he could.

The pain in the ass never stirred at all.

EVERYTHING WAS FINALLY WINDING DOWN. DARCEY AND DIXIE GOT THE girls settled into the rooms right next to the family entrance. They'd suggested the girls stay in the family wing, but the twins had balked at that. Said they'd prefer to share rooms. Stay together. Dusty suspected they were actually more overwhelmed by the idea of having *family* than anything. Dylan and the younger girl were in one room. The twins were right across the hall. Dixie had checked on all of their new sisters, and they were going to be fine. They just needed rest for now.

Dusty found herself at the kitchen table, with her family. It was late. Meyra had been baking, like she always did when she was freaked. No one really knew how to explain what had happened. Marin was supervising the inn, after what had happened. Dealing with the state cops who had shown up. Including her nemesis Commander Weatherby.

Dusty looked at her uncle, where he sat, nursing a cup of coffee, a fresh cupcake in front of him, his wife hovering next to him, when Marin finally joined them. "Well. Anything from Joel?"

"I called. They are keeping Arthur and Geena for the night. That US marshal insisted it was the safest place for them. The second man who took Devaney escaped. Like he knew the terrain well. Arthur told Joel he believed the man was Morris Preston's second cousin or something. He used to be one of Morris Preston's thugs. And lived in Sublette County and south Masterson County years ago."

"And the man who...died?" Dusty would never forget him.

"Morris Preston's illegitimate son. Who killed his mother twenty-three

years ago by slicing her throat. Before...going after yours. Your mother was injured the night they left; she'd witnessed the whole thing. Jason Smith attacked her, she managed to get away just as your father was pulling in the drive to get her. The US marshal was obtaining permission to get their file. At least...for me. And for Joel." Her uncle suddenly looked his sixty-five years now.

"I see. So they really did run."

"Apparently. I'm just glad they decided to leave you girls behind, Destiny Marie. *This* was where you belonged. I just wish none of it had happened. All eight of you deserved better. Hell, so did your *mother*. She's not the same woman she was twenty-three years ago. She's so...fragile now. It's heartbreaking."

Dusty didn't know how she felt about her parents now. She just wasn't ready yet to figure that out. Just not yet. Maybe with time. After the *anger* settled. Her parents hadn't just abandoned them for no reason. They'd thought they *had* a reason. She just didn't know what to feel about any of it now.

"We'll have to get the answers from them," her grandmother said. "Later. Right now, you four need to decide what you want to do about them. And about your sisters."

"It won't be easy. We can't just build connections out of nowhere," Daisy said, that anger Dusty understood still in her voice. "The don't really feel like our sisters. They definitely don't feel like our parents. How could they?"

"No. They don't," Dusty said, thinking of those four women upstairs right now. "But...that doesn't mean we shouldn't at least try. If *they* want to. Our...sisters, I mean."

"Girls." Her grandmother poured herself a cup of coffee as Rhea took a seat next to Gerald. "If there is anything in life I have ever learned it is this: every moment *matters*. Determines what comes next. I will always hurt for what happened to you girls. And I will always hurt for what was *missed* with my new, beautiful, infinitely precious granddaughters. And I hurt for what they are going through now, too. Fire...almost always brings pain if you get too close. But out of the ashes...you can make something beautiful. I am not saying you should just ignore everything that happened with your parents. Heavens knows, I am not saying that. They made bad choices—that led to now. We all know that. It's up to you if you forgive them that—and it's up to *each* of you to decide. Not all of you together acting as one group. Life

doesn't always work that way. But each of you needs to build the relationships with each of them that you want to have—individually. It definitely won't be easy. Am I glad he is back now? Yes, in a big way, a part of me *is*. It was like he was dead to me for twenty-three years. That was a real hurt only another parent can truly understand. And now...I could have a few more years with one of my children. I can't ever regret that, even when I also want to tie his tail in a knot right now. These are your sisters. They are as innocent victims of the circumstances as you are. I think you should remember that. Because those are some seriously scared young women upstairs. And while you four had full, active, healthy lives with your family, your community, and your roots around you—that is something I think *they* were denied. I don't think they had *anyone* but your parents and each other. They are the ones who don't know *who* they even are—or what the world holds for them now. And as isolated as I suspect they've been...the world is an incredibly *scary* place. Probably a lot scarier than it was for them even yesterday.”

Daisy sat down next to Dusty. “They are the ones that were hurt the most, weren't they?”

“I think they were.” Well, Dusty finally understood that for herself. An odd rush of protectiveness filled her, as she thought of those four younger sisters. She and her sisters with her now—*they* had been the lucky ones. She fully believed that now. They...*knew* exactly who they were. Her youngest sisters couldn't say that.

“So...what are we going to do about it?” Dixie asked. “What do we do now? How do we help *them*?”

They talked. All four of them, her aunt and uncle, Meyra and Marin, her grandmother. Until they all knew what everyone was feeling. Until they had some sort of a plan about what to do next. Her uncle told them what he suspected would happen with their parents. It wasn't super good.

They'd probably face charges for what had happened to Dusty that night they'd taken her. Even if she didn't press charges, Joel could on her behalf. She didn't know what she wanted to do in that regard. That was one of the things she was going to have to figure out. Later. For now, she was just focusing on her sisters. Her family.

And Ben. It was time for *Ben* now. Dusty wanted to be with him now more than anything else in the world.

When the discussion ended, it was time. Time for *Ben*. Ben had waited

long enough.

As if her older sister knew what she was thinking, Darcey stopped her before she could step out of the family wing and into the hall that led to the front desk. “I grabbed you this already.”

She handed Dusty a keycard. “To where?”

“Room 308. I think what you want more than anything is waiting up there for you now. Go to him. Grandma’s right. Don’t live with regrets.” There were memories in her sister’s eyes. Hurts. Hurts that went back far further than tonight. And probably had to do with her own beautiful Tyler man Darcey had loved once.

Dusty hugged her sister, hard. “It’ll all work out, you know.”

“I’m going to believe that. Go. I think your man is probably waiting.”

HE'D NEEDED TO DISTRACT HIMSELF. SO HE DIDN'T BARGE INTO THE FAMILY wing and just *be there* for his woman when she needed him most. Only that he understood this was for her family to do had kept him in check. Ben had kept himself occupied by fixing that scene with Harry. The kissing scene.

And then finishing the damned book. So he could send it off to his editor and be done with it. He had other things to focus on right now. Like, buying a better cave for his cavewoman and everything.

He could see it right there across the road, from the window of his hotel room—well, he would when the sun was up. That would still be close enough to the inn, to her family, for her to be there when they needed her—but still far enough away they could build the kind of life he hoped she wanted together. Their kids could play on the lawn of the inn, just like Dusty and Nikki had all those years ago.

Yep. White picket fence time.

As soon as he captured his woman.

He stood. The book was finished. Sasha and Harry had shared a *realistic*, but beautiful kiss. One that had Harry tied up in knots. Things would progress a bit more between them over the next two or three books, he'd decided. He'd just wing it. See how it went. Ask his own woman for suggestions.

As soon as he found her.

Ben started for the door.

Just as it pushed open.

He just stopped. There she was. "Well. I think you have some of Marin's magic powers, lady."

“I don’t believe in that.” She stepped into his room, closed the door, and dropped a keycard on to the table next to his computer.

“I’m not sure you are supposed to barge into your guests’ rooms unannounced.” He crossed his arms over his chest, ignoring the slight pull in the stitches. Twelve stitches, that was all. He’d been ignoring them while he typed. While he distracted himself from waiting impatiently for the love of his life and everything. “I think there are laws against that.”

“So sue me.” She just looked at him. She looked tired. She’d been crying. But there was a resolve in those gorgeous greens. “Did you mean it?”

“Mean what exactly?”

“Two or three pretty babies and a pretty kind of life.”

She was just standing there, staring at him. Driving him insane. Ben wanted his hands on her. But...he was a big boy, a gentleman like his mama had raised him to be.

“Or...just what were you saying, Benjamin? What exactly do you want from me?”

Well, he wasn’t a stupid man, by any means.

Ben went straight to his woman. He bent. Slipped his good arm behind her waist, and lifted. “I thought you would never ask. That we would never get to this part. I have been waiting a lifetime for this moment.”

“What moment is that? Spell it out for me, Ben. Where...do you see this going?”

“Well, first, I am taking the woman I want to my bed. I have been thinking about carrying her off to my cave for what feels like a century. But since the wiring in that cave went kaplooeey, that might not be a good idea right now. But I hear she has a bunch of mini-caves here. And then, well...”

Ben carried her to the window. Lowered her to her feet. “You see that castle right there. With the green shutters?”

“It’s dark out, Ben. All I can see is the driveway of the inn. And those houses are way too far away to see—even in the daylight.”

It was official, he’d have to be the one to teach their kids about Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny. This woman—he was going to be the imaginative one, apparently. He was good with that.

“Imagine it, woman. Imagine it. It’s right next door to my cousin Chandler’s place. It’s a foreclosure. I think it’s listed on a realtor site online, too. We can look later. Much later, even.”

“Okay. What about it?”

“Well. I’m thinking of buying it. Fixing it up, with some help from my Tyler worker-bee cousins and brothers.”

“And then?”

“Putting a little white picket fence in front. A better one than Hunter is giving Nikki, though. I’m competitive, you see.”

“Okay.”

“If it’s not big enough for you, we can add on to the side of it. However big you want to go. I have money to do that.”

“Do you now?”

“Yes. I can take care of you forever. If you will let me.” He wanted that. He wanted his woman in his cave, while he slayed all the dragons of life that threatened her. No denying that. But mostly, he just wanted his Dusty Demoneess for his very own.

“I can take care of myself.”

He knew that. And knew it would be important to her. He did know her so well, after all.

“I know. But...I like the idea of taking care of you. And, well, the three or four pretty babies you want to give me. How about I take care of you, and you take care of me, and together, we take care of them?”

“I thought you started with two or three pretty babies earlier?”

“Well, I’m adaptable, you see. However many pretty babies you want to give me works fine for me actually.”

“So you are talking forever.”

“I am talking forever. As soon as you say the word.”

Ben leaned down and kissed her. He had her right there, in his arms. Right where he wanted her to be. Life really didn’t get better than that. He kissed her, then pulled back to let his cavewoman breathe, and all. “Are you going to say the word anytime soon?”

“Forever. Word. Whatever you want me to say. You are the one with all the words.”

“So I am.” Ben scooped her up again. Carried her to the bed. And showed her exactly what he felt for her.

No real words were needed *then*.

None at all.

EPILOGUE

“YOU WERE KISSING MY BROTHER.”

It was the first thing Ben’s sister said to Dusty when Dusty finally came out of that man’s room the next day and stopped by the front desk—wearing Ben’s T-shirt and the pants she’d been in the night before. His sister had been waiting to capture her the first chance Nikki could get. “I was kissing your brother. I just *finished* kissing him again.”

“You were in his *room*, Meyra said. All night long, you hussy.” Nikki was giving her that *look*. The one that said she knew Dusty wasn’t telling her everything. “Had you...been kissing him *before*, Destiny Marie?”

“I had. A few times. It just sort of...happened, Nik. I wasn’t hiding it from you. Not exactly.”

“Are you going to be kissing him again?” Nikki crossed her arms, and blocked Dusty from the front desk. Even with the life-altering events of the night before, she still had to work the inn. Not because of the schedule, but for *herself*. The continuity of it, the stability, it mattered now. More than she had ever realized before. She was going to take Matt’s offer. But she wasn’t going to give up the inn and the diner completely. She’d find a way to make it work. Just like she’d told her family last night. Dusty *knew* what she wanted now.

She was going after what she wanted.

She and *Ben* would. He had loved her through the night. And it was as hot and fiery and passionate as Marin had always insisted it was supposed to be when you were with a man you loved. When he had whispered that he loved her that first time, she’d believed him wholeheartedly.

When she'd whispered it back, she had meant it just as deeply. She didn't really know when it had happened. But it had. She loved Benjamin Tyler. And always would.

"Your brother and I are going to be kissing each other a lot going forward." Dusty looked at her closest friend in the world. She put her hands on Nikki's shoulders until they were eye to eye. She...really wanted to see Nikki's reaction to her next words. "Forever, Nik. Forever. I am moving in with your brother as soon as we can make that happen. We are going to have between two and four pretty babies. We haven't quite decided on how many yet. And we are going to be together. Forever. In case you missed it or something."

Nikki squealed and squealed. It brought Meyra and Daisy running from the back office.

"What's happened now?" Daisy asked, fear on her beautiful face. "Dusty? Are you okay?"

"Dusty is going to be kissing my brother. Forever." Nikki was practically bouncing right there where she stood.

"Well, everyone knows that," Meyra told Nikki, shaking her head at Nikki. "I mean, we were all just waiting for the two of them to figure it out."

"Don't tell me you didn't *know*, Nik?" Daisy asked almost incredulously. "Haven't you ever noticed how he looked at her all the time? All sexy and longing and hungry? She really needed to *feed* that man months ago."

Dusty just stared at her younger sister. "What?"

"Ben treats you differently than he does any other woman in the world," Meyra told her, almost patiently. Like Dusty and Nikki were both clueless idiots or something. "Daisy and I figured it out *long* ago. Like right after he came back to Masterson County and everything. We were just waiting for you to catch up."

"Apparently, I've missed a few things lately," Dusty said.

"Me, too. Me, too." Nikki wrapped one arm around her shoulder. "But of all the women in the world for Ben to fall in love with, I'm glad it is my best friend on the whole planet."

Dusty was, too. Ben was hers now. She wasn't about to let him go.

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*For my grandfather, the best man I have ever known. You will be missed.
Oct. 2015*

*For my grandmother, who gave me the courage to try. Without you and
your love of romance, I never would have made it this far.
Feb. 2016*

*For my papaw, whose children loved him deeply, and will always miss him.
Oct. 2017*

Calle J. Brookes enjoys crafting paranormal romance and romantic suspense. She reads almost every genre except horror. She spends most of her time juggling family life and writing while reminding herself that she can't spend all of her time in the worlds found within books. CJ loves to be contacted by her readers via email and at www.CalleJBrookes.com. When not at home writing stories of adventure and wrangling with two border collies and a beagle puppy, CJ is off in her RV somewhere exploring the beautiful world we live in, along with her husband of she can't remember how many years and their child. 102022