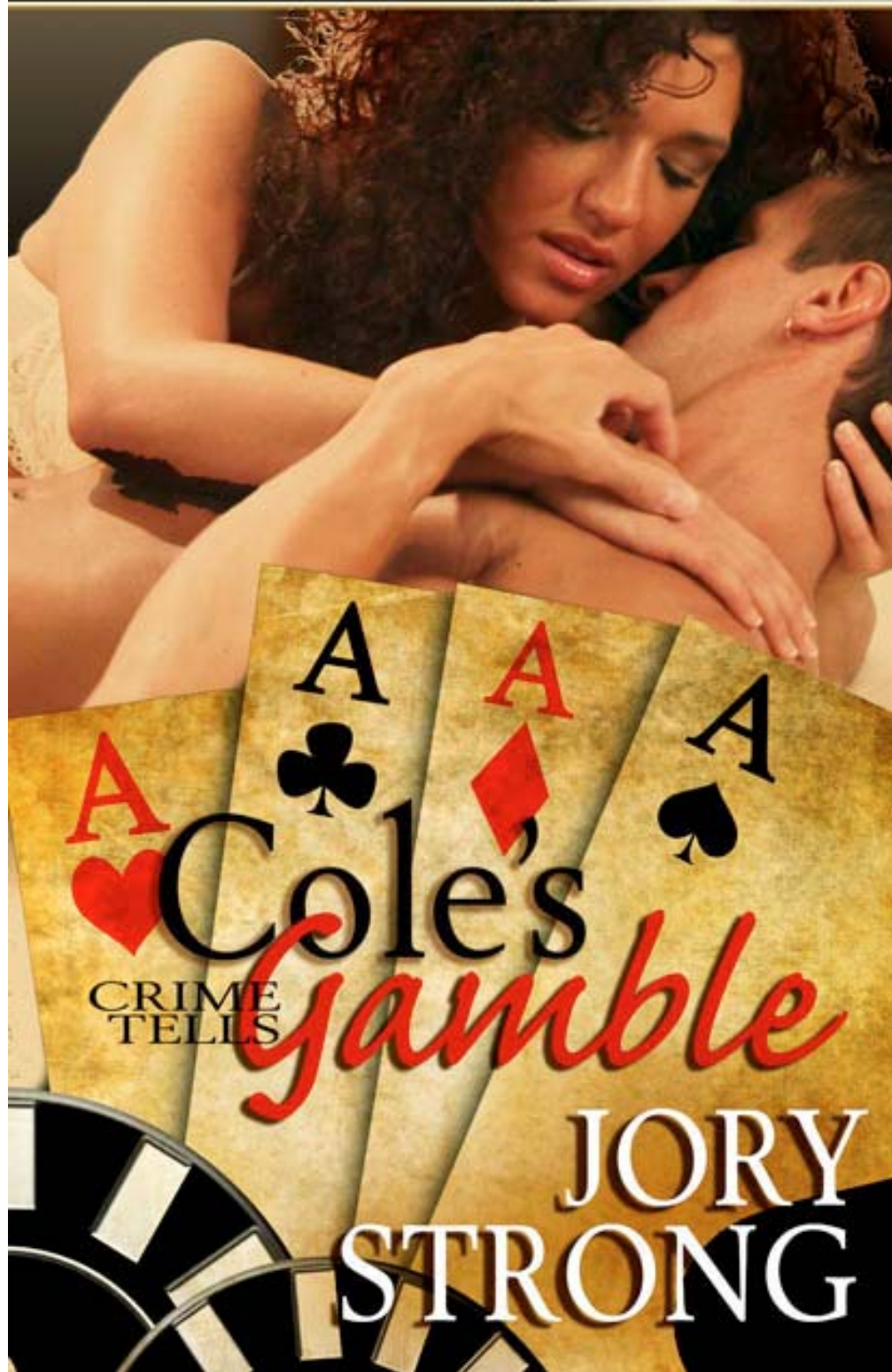


ELLORA'S CAVE *Breathless*



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CRIME  
TELLS

# Coles' Gamble

JORY  
STRONG

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



[www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com)

Cole's Gamble

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*CRIME TELLS:*

*COLE'S GAMBLE*

Jory Strong

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## Prologue

Lyric Montgomery Burke looked at the miniscule stack of chips on the table in front of her and frowned. The night had *not* gone as she'd anticipated. *Not even close*. She'd have been better off hanging out with Tyler, maybe giving in and posing for some more sketches while Kieran was doing his vice cop thing.

A grin replaced the frown. Oh yeah, that would have gone over well with Kieran, especially since her husband knew Tyler also drew pictures for adult comic books.

Then again, Kieran was always looking for an excuse to pull out the handcuffs and administer his own form of carnal punishment. Why not give him one?

Who'd have guessed married life could be so satisfying? Who'd have guessed a cop could be so hot and decadent between the sheets...and in the living room...and on the table...and...?

Not her. But she had a long history of difficulty when it came to staying inside the lines. For that matter, so did her cousins, Shane and Braden Maguire.

Lyric glanced to her left. The sight of their dwindling chips made her feel a little better. A quick count told her that with blinds and antes, Braden could go another round, same as she, Shane another two before he'd be busted.

She needed a serious infusion of chips. If she could add their stacks to hers, she'd be in better shape though still not healthy against the three "big stacks" at the table—her grandfather Bulldog Montgomery, Orrin Kaye, a family friend who owned a local independent newspaper, and Grandma Maguire.

Lyric's eyebrows drew together. What was her grandmother doing here anyway? And how come the poker gods were smiling on her? Grandma Maguire's stack was the biggest at the table.

The sound of cards being shuffled stopped, drawing Lyric's attention away from her grandmother's stack of chips. Two cards came Lyric's way, facedown. She covered them with her hand and used her thumb to lift them just enough to see what they were. A nine and ten of clubs. Worth playing. Maybe even worth making a final stand with.

"So where's Cole tonight?" Lyric asked.

Next to her Shane snorted. "Out of town, where else?"

"Yeah," Braden said, tossing a chip into the pile in the middle of the table. "He's running from Grandma's prediction. Big time."

Shane mucked his hand. Lyric paid to stay in the game. "What's the prediction?"

"Wedding bells with his name on them," Shane said. "Has him scared sh— Well, you get the idea."

Orrin placed his bet with a chuckle. "I don't believe it. Cole's got nerves of steel."

"Yeah, but Grandma's never wrong," Lyric said. "And the last thing Cole wants is to get married."

Nobody at the table had to ask why. Life with a high-stakes gambler could be a roller-coaster ride leading to a major crash and burn. The lows were populated by absence, booze and plenty of temptation provided free of charge by the rail-bunnies. The highs were like manic episodes populated by about the same things—absence, booze and plenty of temptation—only Lady Luck was smiling.

Cole's folks seemed to be in a good place now, solid in fact, and had been for a long while. But the earlier years, yeah, those were tumultuous. Capital T.

Now that Lyric was married, she could understand it better. The thought of Kieran being undercover where passing on the chance to fuck an easy woman might risk blowing his cover—

*Not going there.* She trusted him. End of story.

Three cards were placed face up on the green felt table. The Flop it's called in Texas Hold'em. Another club, the seven. The rest were junk as far as Lyric was concerned.

"Doesn't help that as soon as Grandma started in on her prediction a face popped up in Cole's mind," Braden said, pushing his remaining chips in when the play got around to him.

"Not only that," Shane added, "but then Grandma went on to describe her perfectly. Cole's been taking out-of-town jobs ever since. Won't even go out to Hermosa Ranch and ride his horse unless he can do it when he's sure *she* won't be there."

*What the hell,* Lyric thought, pushing the remainder of her chips in. "I've got Braden covered by two hundred. So who's got Cole running and how come he told you?"

Shane grinned. "He's still so freaked by it that he actually lost a bet when I worked it into some table talk. Had to pay up by filling in the details."

Braden said, "Renata Reynolds."

Orrin laughed outright as he met Lyric's bet. "Now I know you three are practicing your lying skills."

"You know her?" Bulldog asked.

"Works for the paper as a reporter. Human interest stories. Sometimes picks up a crime story."

Bulldog separated out some chips and moved them to the center. "Wouldn't bet against Maggie, not when it comes to her premonitions."

"Sometimes predictions need a little help," Lyric's grandmother said, pushing in enough chips to cover Lyric's *all in* before counting out half her remaining chips. "Why don't we sweeten this game with a little side pot? If I win this hand, Orrin, you agree to put Renata on a crime story and insist she needs the services of Crime Tells. And Patrick, you assign Cole to help her."

"I'm in," Orrin said.

"This is meddling, Maggie," Bulldog said, but it didn't stop him from separating out the chips. "If I win, you'll let Cole take care of his own love life."

Lyric laughed, suddenly understanding why her hunch had brought her to the game tonight—not to take home big winnings, but to set Cole's downfall into motion with a simple question.

Before Kieran and her own marriage, she'd have felt sorry for her cousin. Not now.

Misery might love company, but so did happiness. And if happiness needed a little bit of help...well, she'd make sure she was around to assist.

The play continued, Orrin, Grandma and Bulldog checking each of the remaining betting rounds until all five cards were face-up on the table.

Lyric wasn't a bit surprised when her grandmother won.



## Chapter One

With each stride Renata Reynolds had a little more trouble holding the worry back. Keep going forward? Turn around? If only horses could talk, or better yet, do a *Lassie* and lead the way home – well, not home exactly, but back to camp where her truck and trailer were parked.

She hated to admit it, but not seeing anyone else on the trails since she'd left the lunch stop was starting to erode her confidence and make her feel like a total fool. It didn't help that the weather wasn't cooperating and a freak storm was moving in fast.

"Hang in there, girl," Renata murmured, stoking her mare's mane but knowing the gesture was more for her sake than Solitaire's. Solitaire wasn't freaked – yet – though she was definitely picking up the worried vibes and starting to get jumpy.

*How could this be the wrong trail?* Renata asked herself for about the hundredth time. It'd been marked by red ribbons. Three red ribbons meant *turn*. She'd turned – on two – because they were together and because she guessed somebody had taken the third one.

Renata grimaced. She was starting to have a bad feeling about those ribbons. Now when she pictured them, she couldn't shake the idea that *maybe* they'd had polka-dots on them and been a little sun bleached – like ribbons left over from some other ride.

She should have turned around as soon as the image occurred to her. But she'd seen fresh horse manure and decided to keep going, figuring she'd catch up with whoever was ahead of her and compare notes.

It wasn't a stretch to think the people working the ride had needed to improvise. The ride manager had warned everyone the previous night at the ride meeting that the ribbons marking the trail had a way of disappearing thanks to hikers and bike riders who didn't like to share the trail with horses.

*Just a little bit further. If I don't see a ribbon soon, I'll turn around,* Renata told herself, fighting the knot forming in her stomach. Months ago she would have thought there was a silver lining to being lost. Not now.

Cole Maguire was riding drag behind the Novice group. If he got to the next check point, officially known as a P&R stop – for Pulse and Respiration – and she wasn't marked off as arriving, then he'd be sent back to look for her.

Hell, he might even think she'd *intentionally* gotten lost. That was *not* a pretty thought though her body didn't seem to care. The knot in her stomach melted and flowed in a hot wash to her cunt at the prospect of being trapped in the woods with Cole.

Renata squeezed her thighs together, unintentionally sending Solitaire into trot. "Easy girl," she said—to the horse and herself.

Cole Maguire was a one-way ticket to heartbreak. She'd already gotten a small, unintentional taste of that. And having it come on the heels of finding out the guy she thought she was in a serious relationship with was screwing around on her every time he went out of town...

*Just say no to pain.* It'd been her motto since the breakup with Dennis, and getting Solitaire a short time afterward was a godsend. But of course, getting Solitaire meant meeting Cole...

Damn, that first week at the ranch where they both boarded their horses, Cole had stopped by her tack shed to see how it going. He'd watched and given her tips as she did groundwork with Solitaire. Hell, he'd done more than just offer help to a new horse owner. He'd acted interested.

Renata shivered, remembering the intensity of the connection she felt with him, the way her heart raced the last time they were both at the ranch, when he started to lean in, his mouth on a delicious collision course with hers—only to be aborted when a rider racing back to the ranch lost control of her horse. Up until this morning when he'd pulled into the campsite, she hadn't seen him in months.

His suddenly becoming a "no-show" at the ranch had left her baffled at first, and a little hurt—or maybe that was just her ego being stung. But going with the whole "just say no to pain" thing, she knew she was better off because even though she hadn't seen him in person, she'd caught his picture in the paper several times, complete with the requisite fashion-model-beautiful woman on his arm, and always a different one.

His prerogative. And it'd helped her to nip her fantasies about him in the bud. Sort of.

No way to avoid a relapse now. Not after seeing him this morning. Not after glancing up while eating lunch and catching him looking at her.

Renata's cunt spasmed. She hadn't imagined the flash of heat between them when their eyes met. So what the hell was the deal with him?

Strike that. She did not want to know. She did not want to get involved with Cole Maguire. Doing it would be totally at odds with her plan to just say no to pain.

In her fantasies she may have fucked him a thousand times. In her reality she was a hell of a lot smarter than that. No way did she plan to risk her heart on a player. Been there, done that, even though she'd mistakenly labeled Dennis a family man. And besides, Cole was white, she was black. Who needed to look for additional complications? Dating was tricky enough.

Solitaire's steps quickened. Relief poured into Renata when they stepped into a clearing and she saw the riderless Appaloosa standing in scrub. With his jet-black coloring and the distinctive white blanket on his rump, she recognized him now just as she'd recognized him at the start of the ride though she hadn't met his owner before despite both of them keeping their horses at Hermosa Ranch.

Renata's relief lasted only until she noticed the Appy wasn't tied. His reins hung to the ground and he'd stepped through them.

"Lauren?" Renata called, hoping she had the name right. "Hey, Lauren!"

Nothing. In fact a whole lot of nothing.

Complete silence. The kind that made Renata think of a horror movie, right before the creature lurches out of the woods.

"Get a grip," she told herself. But a snort from Solitaire just about had her turning and bolting.

Renata urged the mare forward, fast, but not so fast they'd get the Appy excited. "Easy," she murmured, mind racing, bracing to find Lauren hurt—not dead. Not face-up with an arrow through her heart.

For an endless second Renata didn't believe what she was seeing. She had the wild thought it was some kind of twisted joke, like a dummy on the side of the road near a crashed bike, or the horsemanship judge going a little psycho and setting up a macabre scenario then hiding in the trees and judging rider reaction.

But the silence. The blank eyes.

Renata wanted to turn and run. Every instinct screamed for her to do it. But what kind of a person would she be if she turned tail and ran?

*A smart one*, a tiny internal voice said.

She slid out of her saddle and moved to the body, kneeling to check for breathing and a heartbeat even though she knew it was too late. There was no pulse. No breath.

Renata stood. There was nothing she could do for Lauren other than summon the authorities and see that the Appaloosa was taken care of.

*At least I didn't freak. Or puke.* She'd have to buy the guys who worked the crime beat some Starbucks coffee and Noah's bagels. They'd tossed her a few stories to play with, but they'd also considered it a rite of passage to give her a chance to see some dead bodies and lose her lunch.

Renata sent a prayer heavenward, wishing for someone else to ride into the clearing. But whoever was manning the prayer hotline was AWOL or on break.

There was nothing. No sounds. The woods remained quiet. Way, way too quiet. So quiet Renata started thinking the monster she'd taunted herself with earlier might be real—the killer waiting for her to leave. Or waiting for a clean shot. It was a thought that stopped her cold, trapping the breath in her chest even while her heart tried to jump out and make a run for it.

The trail she'd just left cut through a small clearing. Three sides of the clearing were bordered by dense woods, the same woods she'd just come through. The fourth was a rocky embankment going into a creek at a steep angle. It was probably a segment of the creek she'd been riding in and out of all day.

There wasn't any movement to be seen. With grim humor, Renata found herself glad that at least the killer wasn't standing nearby, bow ready, waiting to get her

attention. She didn't plan on sticking around long enough to make that necessary. She grabbed the Appaloosa's reins and quickly unclipped them from the bit, figuring he'd follow Solitaire as soon as they headed down the trail.

One last glance at Lauren's body and Renata remounted. The arrow flying past her shoulder let her know she'd taken too long as far as the killer was concerned. She asked Solitaire to move out—fast. Solitaire didn't need to be asked twice.

\* \* \* \* \*

*He should have bailed on the ride when he saw Renata was entered,* Cole thought as he backtracked from the P&R spot. Hell, he *had* tried to bail. Only his attempted defection was the straw that broke the camel's back—or more accurately, the dam holding Jan Edward's tears back. Which meant despite Grandma Maguire's *sight* and the premonition that'd sent him running and kept him that way, he didn't back out on his agreement to ride drag at the competitive trail ride.

*I can handle this,* he told himself—not for the first time. He'd find Renata. He'd lead her to the P&R stop, load the horses in the trailer waiting there and take her back to camp.

Ride over. Interaction complete. Freedom maintained.

He'd survived a close call with her before. Christ, he could still remember the anticipation and the desire coiled in his belly like a live thing as he leaned down to kiss her.

Hell, he'd been obsessed about doing it for days, like it was an itch that'd send him to the hospital if he didn't get it scratched. Only a runaway horse had stopped him from taking her mouth with his—something he'd cursed at the time—until he got to his grandparents' house for dinner that night and Grandma Maguire dropped the "I had a vision" bomb. He'd had a premonition himself, an image flashing through his head even before Grandma went on to describe Renata as the woman he was going to marry.

It wasn't going to happen. He wasn't ready for marriage. Didn't want the commitment. Didn't want to gamble on it.

He'd stick with his plan. Find Renata. Get her back to camp. Stay away from her. And if his guts were tied in knots, so what? They'd be that way regardless of who was lost.

And if his cock was hard? Cole's jaw clenched and refused to consider how no woman had ever slipped into his dreams like Renata.

\* \* \* \* \*

For once Renata was grateful Solitaire spent the first four years of her life on the racetrack. Fast was the mare's favorite way of going and with the Appy charging after them, it was a race as far as Solitaire was concerned. Manzanita, scrub oak, digger pine all whizzed by as they moved down the narrow deer trail.

When the trail finally joined up with a wider dirt road, Renata felt a moment's relief at seeing something she recognized. Even the absence of the red ribbons that had caused her to leave the main trail in the first place didn't freak her out. If anything, they kept her together mentally, confirmed she hadn't been imagining things—especially the arrow just inches away from her head. *Yeah, as if I could convince myself I was hallucinating like some hiker who's been lost for days without food or water.*

She shivered and directed Solitaire down the trail, kept moving, fairly certain the killer wasn't following her but not willing to bet her life on it. Time passed, miles going in a blur as Solitaire settled into a canter so smooth it felt like sitting on a rocking horse, the Appy keeping pace behind them.

Renata's mind was just starting to calm when they rounded a corner and she saw another rider heading her way fast. For a split second fear rushed in, but before she could wheel Solitaire around, her brain—then her cunt—registered who the rider was. Cole Maguire.

That's all it took, just the sight of him. Her body tightened all over and her heart kept racing, past fear and into something that reminded her of a high school crush.

Cole was already reaching for his radio by the time they stopped their horses within easy talking distance. "That's Lauren Hunt's horse," he said with just a hint of a question in his voice.

Renata shuddered, reality catching up with her and hitting like a two-by-four. "She's dead, Cole. I found her with an arrow through the heart. Back a ways. In a clearing. I took a wrong turn and didn't have sense enough to turn around."

She knew she was babbling. But feeling safe had melted some of her calm, cool and collected.

Cole spoke into the radio, telling someone to call the sheriff and why.

*Now let the fun begin,* Renata thought and could almost hear her sister Aiesha saying, "I told you, girl, give up crashing through the boonies on a horse. Get a man in your life."

Renata's eyes traveled over Cole. Aiesha didn't mean "get a white man", but even Aiesha would admit Cole was a fine specimen of manhood.

Tall, dark and handsome. He would have been at home in the Wild West as a gunslinger turned sheriff. Renata could see him shooting it out in the streets then heading into the saloon to play poker and be propositioned by the working girls.

"How far back?" Cole asked, interrupting Renata's thoughts and making the heat rush to her face.

"Maybe four or five miles. There's a smaller trail off to the right of this one. It narrows and becomes almost a deer trail then opens into a small clearing. She's in the clearing."

He passed on the information. A minute later the radio screeched, whoever was at the other end instructing Cole to leave a marker and head to the Novice P&R stop.

Cole pulled some rope from his saddle pack and tied it to a nearby tree. "Ready?"

"Ride on, cowboy."

Cole's eyes glinted and Renata's nipples tightened in response. Damn. He was such a player. She could just picture him between her legs, same as she could picture herself on top of him, riding straight to a mind-blowing orgasm.

Mercifully he wheeled his horse Dealer away and started down the trail, saving her from herself. The Appy trotted after him and she followed at a safe distance.

There were park rangers waiting for them at the P&R stop, surprising Renata. Then again, why not? With a competitive ride in the park there was no better place for rangers to be patrolling in case they were needed to step in and make sure mountain bikers, hikers and equestrians all played nicely together by sharing the trails.

"You Renata Reynolds?" one of them asked.

Her first impulse was to say, *You think I look like a Cole Maguire?* But she didn't give in to it. The ranger could have doubled for Grizzly Adams, Mountain Man, so chances were he wouldn't appreciate a smart-ass comment, even one brought on by the experience of finding a dead body and being shot at.

"That's me," Renata said.

"We'll need you to take us back to the clearing." Grizzly's voice was deep and gruff, no nonsense, his non-vocalized message saying he wasn't going to allow any female hysterics—not that any were forthcoming. She was a hell of a lot tougher than that. If she'd been prone to freaking out, it would have happened the first moment she'd laid eyes on Lauren.

Grizzly's head tilted toward the All Terrain Vehicle parked near a horse trailer. "You can ride with me."

Renata glanced at the ATV, trying to visualize her and Grizzly snuggled up on the seat together and not liking the picture she saw. It was going to be way too up close and personal for her tastes. Now if it was Cole...

Still, she gave Grizzly the I'll-go-peacefully nod because the tiny little voice that tried to keep her out of trouble screamed, *Cooperate!*

The police *shouldn't* look at her as a serious suspect. Hell, until this morning she'd never even met Lauren Hunt—but that didn't mean they wouldn't look.

You didn't grow up being followed by store security afraid you were going to shoplift when you went into an expensive shop as a kid, or stopped by cops and questioned if you were hanging out with brothers when you were in your teens and not understand how things could work when it came to police types. Law and justice weren't colorblind. Never had been. Never would be. Not completely anyway.

"I'll go too," Cole said.

Mountain Man squinted at him—hard. But the battle was already lost.

Renata guessed very few people said no to Cole. He was just that kind of guy. Very law-and-order himself. And yet...a gunslinger too.

She'd tuned in to ESPN and watched him dominate several games in the World Series of Poker. She'd caught him on the Travel Channel playing in the World Poker Tour. The man was formidable. A stone-cold bluffer who could make seasoned champions lose their nerve and back down.

Grizzly didn't stand a chance. "Fine," he said. "You ride with Ted."

Ted looked fresh out of college, pale white with brown hair and a shy smile. Renata wondered how he'd ever gotten paired up with the Mountain Man. Poor guy.

She and Cole tied the horses to the trailer and joined the rangers at the ATVs. The presence of three men had pretty much extinguished the fear she'd felt in the clearing. Her reporter instincts surfaced, not that this story would get more than an inch or so, but...every inch counted.

Heat rose to her cheeks when she caught herself turning, looking back at Cole and thinking about inches that didn't have anything to do with the printed word. *You've got it bad, girl. Get a grip.*

She concentrated on the trail and felt relieved when she was able to recognize the one she'd taken by mistake as they approached it. A tap on Grizzly's shoulder and a point was all it took for him to slow the ATV and turn. She wasn't looking forward to seeing Lauren again. But at least the body was still there when they got back to the clearing.

The arrow was missing. No surprise. Renata guessed that's why the killer had shot at her and missed, to hurry her along.

Ted barely managed to make it to a bush and throw up. Renata cast him a sympathetic glance but decided not to make his life more miserable by saying something, especially since Grizzly was staring at his partner in disgust.

A shake of his head and the Mountain Man shifted his focus to Renata, squinting hard. "How'd you end up here?"

*You need glasses all of a sudden or are you doing a Clint Eastwood impersonation?* Renata grimaced. Maybe this was the true reason she didn't have a man in her life, her smart mouth, which seemed to get worse when she was stressing.

She took a deep breath. "I thought I was supposed to turn. There were a couple of red ribbons at the trail entrance. I thought they meant, 'turn here'."

"I didn't see any ribbons."

"They were gone when I backtracked."

Grizzly kept squinting, maybe hoping to scare more information out of her, but probably just giving himself a headache. Renata knew this routine, thankfully from TV shows instead of personal experience.

She maintained the silence. Grizzly finally relaxed the muscles around his eyes. He retrieved a radio from a holder on his belt and spoke into it.

Maybe dispatch. Maybe a higher-up. Whoever it was ordered him to send the civilians back to camp and tell them to stay there and wait for law enforcement personnel to arrive.

Grizzly put the radio back in its holder and sent another sour look at Ted. "You run these two back to their horses. Mark the trail so you can find it again."

Ted nodded, relieved. "Who wants to go first?"

"Go ahead," Cole told Renata. "The P&R folks left us a truck and trailer so we don't have to ride the rest of the distance into camp."

Renata shivered, cold seeping into her as it began misting. "See you in a few," she said, looking around the clearing one last time then climbing onto the ATV.

Maybe there was a reason she hadn't pushed harder to get assigned to the crime beat. The times she'd tagged along to an actual crime scene had entailed hours of waiting around, watching cops put numbered plastic markers near clues and take notes, followed by, "You know I can't say anything," or sometimes, "This is off the record," when they were asked questions. It was a lot more fun watching a scene get processed in the few minutes it took the guys on *CSI* to do it.

Mist turned into a steady drizzle before Ted got her back to where they'd left the horses. She was soaked to the skin, miserable and actively fantasizing about climbing in the truck and turning the heater on, but she couldn't leave the tack out in the rain.

Renata took the saddle off Solitaire and put it in the backseat of the Dodge truck that'd been left behind. She did the same for Cole's horse, Dealer.

A gust of wind whipped past, taking the chill bone deep and making her teeth chatter as she uncinched the saddle on Lauren's Appy. She pulled it off just as another blast of cold air hit, this one driving rain into her bare flesh like tiny icicles. *No more competitive trail rides*, she thought, only half joking. Maybe she'd take up dressage. If she remembered right, that was Lauren Hunt's usual sport.

Covered arenas. Nice tack rooms. Lounges with heat, a coffeemaker and maybe even a box of pastries.

Renata set Lauren's saddle on the backseat of the truck just as a rumble of thunder sounded in the distance. *Oh this is great*, she thought, hoping Ted put a hustle on and got back with Cole.

She glanced at the horses and felt relief when she saw they weren't freaking out over the storm. She'd come a long way, but she was still new to the whole "horse thing".

Renata started to close the door, her gaze settling on the jacket tied to the back of Lauren's saddle for an instant. *Don't even consider it*, a tiny internal voice said.

Another blast of wind argued otherwise and self-preservation won. She retrieved the jacket and put it on, overriding her misgiving by silently pointing out a simple reality, Lauren Hunt didn't need the jacket anymore. She was well beyond caring about the weather.



## Chapter Two

Ted took his sweet time getting Renata to the P&R stop and returning to the clearing, not that Cole minded. He needed a chance to shore up his defenses and get himself under control.

Damn. He'd almost talked himself into believing he'd been wrong about Renata being the one in Grandma Maguire's prediction. Of course, he hadn't actually seen Renata up close and personal since the night he'd eaten at his grandparents' house. He'd been too busy running and staying as far away from her as he could.

Hell, he'd even half convinced himself Grandma was bluffing about seeing him married. He wouldn't put it past her. The way she'd see it, having Lyric and Cady married off, and Erin out on a case with Dasan and probably heading toward marriage, would mean it was time to turn her focus on the Maguire boys. Gambling ran in Grandma's blood too. Making up a prediction and hoping to scare him into settling down was something she might do if she believed the situation called for it.

Cole shook his head. Contrary to what most people thought when they looked at him, he wasn't footloose and fancy free. Not really. Not anymore. Not since Bulldog started Crime Tells and pressured him into not only signing on and doing what it took to get a PI license, but riding herd over Shane and Braden—as if he hadn't always watched his younger brothers' backs.

Yeah, he had no trouble getting women into his bed. Couldn't go to Vegas and sit down at a poker table without rail-bunnies recognizing him and letting him know they were more than willing to console him if he lost or party with him if he won.

Cole grimaced, remembering the week he'd spent in Vegas after the aborted kiss at the ranch and his grandmother's dinner table pronouncement. It'd been shades of the old days, the years when he should have been in college but was "living large" in the Bahamas instead because he was old enough to drink, gamble and play Mr. Big Shot.

What he remembered of that week was too many hours at the table and too many faceless women. All because his grandmother claimed to hear wedding bells and he knew without a doubt who the woman was. Renata Reynolds.

*No more running*, Cole thought, as the P&R stop came into view. He could control himself around Renata. He hadn't dropped to his knees and proposed at the sight of her, though he'd sure enough fantasized about dropping to his knees and putting his face between her thighs.

Another couple of hours and this'd be over. Compared to a marathon poker game, a couple of hours was no time at all. Then he'd be back to doing what he did these days, working cases for Crime Tells, keeping an eye on his brothers, playing poker and teaching it.

Ted slowed to a halt next to the Dodge truck and Cole slid off the back of the ATV. Renata had already loaded the horses. The truck's engine was running.

Hell, maybe she was as anxious to get away from him as he was to get away from her. Christ, he should have had the guts to go over and say hi to her at the lunch stop. She probably thought he was a total asshole.

Renata's stomach did a flip-flop when Cole opened the driver's side door and climbed into the truck. Did he have any idea how potent he was?

Dumb question. Yeah, he knew. What she didn't quite get was why he'd starred in so many of her fantasies. It'd be easy to claim she was just rebounding – different type of man than she'd thought Dennis was, different color man, only she didn't think that was it.

"You warm enough?" Cole asked, breaking up her thoughts, the sound of his voice alone enough to curl her toes.

*Hot and getting hotter.* "On my way there." After being soaked to the skin she had the heat on full blast and was ready to do battle if Cole tried to change the setting.

He laughed and she couldn't resist turning to look at him. Of all the guys to be riding drag today...

"I'm glad you came along when you did," Renata said, thoughts going back to the murder scene as a car with a sheriff's decal on the side followed by an unmarked vehicle edged into the clearing they were leaving and were met by Ted.

"Me too," Cole said, adjusting the wiper speed as the rain started pelting down even harder. "Good luck finding any evidence now."

"Yeah." Her eyes settled on his hands. They were strong, masculine, his suntanned skin only a few shades of difference away from her caramel-colored flesh. In her mind's eye, she could see their fingers entwined, pressed to the light blue sheets on her bed.

Renata shook her head to clear the image. *Girlfriend, you're in trouble. Probably suffering from some kind of posttraumatic stress syndrome.*

*Bullshit, a different internal voice said. You're horny as hell and he's your fantasy. Go for it. At least with him you know what you're getting. A player.*

"Haven't seen you around the ranch lately," she said, the words coming out of nowhere and making her squirm in her seat. *Pathetic.* But now that the comment was out, it hung between them like a huge uncomfortable question mark.

"I've been out of town pretty much nonstop for months, mostly working cases for Crime Tells."

"And playing poker?"

"Some."

The weird hurt, or more accurately, the sting to her previously bruised ego, eased knowing he'd just been busy rather than avoiding her after the aborted kiss. Renata understood the lure of work, she loved her job and guessed Cole loved his as well, otherwise he wouldn't do it.

She'd never met Bulldog Montgomery, Cole's grandfather. But she knew about him. He'd been a professional poker player himself, then gone on to become one of the most sought-after detectives in the gambling business.

He eventually semiretired and started Crime Tells, turning it into a family business. Cole and his two brothers worked there, as did his cousins, Lyric, Erin and Cady.

Renata knew Lyric by sight. Erin and Cady had horses at Hermosa Ranch. They'd ridden together plus spent time just hanging out at the ranch talking. It still felt weird to have Cady gone, off to Texas with her hunky sheriff.

*Christ*, Cole thought. He was going to regret it later, when he was jerking off in the shower and waking up with the sweats but he couldn't stop himself. He was dying to touch her, to recapture the connection he'd felt when he'd spent time with her at the ranch.

He reached over and took Renata's hand, gave it a little squeeze. "You holding up okay?"

"Yeah. It helps that I didn't know her. What about you?"

Cole opted for interpreting the question as relating to Lauren. "Met her once. Saw her a few times at the ranch checking up on Warpaint."

"The Appy?"

"Yes. Usually she lets Miguel lease him out for the cost of board."

It took more effort than it should have to let Renata's hand go. But holding it was like having a hot wire running from the place their skin touched right to his cock. He did not need that. Just seeing her again was going to mean he had to fight the temptation to gamble on Grandma's prediction being wrong.

Renata forced herself into reporter mode, trying to use her professionalism to shield herself from what being in close confines with Cole and the loss of contact did to her. A woman was dead, for god's sake, shouldn't she be...what?

Crying? She didn't know Lauren.

Freaked? Been there, done that in the moment when she'd known the killer was still hanging around.

"What do you know about Lauren?" she asked, taking refuge in what came naturally, asking questions and exploring stories.

Cole cut a look in Renata's direction, lips curving briefly in a channel-rippling smile. "Her mother is Celeste Hunt. Don't think you've written about her for the *Journal* but I'm sure you've heard about her. Nicknamed the Gold Dust Widow."

"Oh yeah, I've heard about her," Renata said. "Tabloids fed on her. Married a string of guys in their eighties and nineties, scandalized their families and had them foaming at the mouths because of the raunchy pictures that got circulated. She outlived all but the last husband. He took her with him when he lost control of the car he was driving."

"That's the one."

Renata racked her brain and couldn't remember reading anything about the daughter, not that tabloids were high on her reading list. "There was notoriety and scandal but no lawsuits over money. Not like Anna Nicole Smith and the old guy she married."

"Celeste's husbands must have been smart enough to go for prenuptials."

"So who'd want to kill Lauren? Seems like it'd have to be someone at the ride."

"Not necessarily. The list of entered riders has been on the club website for weeks."

"I wonder when her name got posted."

Cole shrugged. "Don't know. The last time I looked at the ride website was a couple of weeks ago."

"What about the ride map?" Renata asked. "Was it posted on the web?"

"I think so. First time it has been. Jan thought seeing it in advance might increase participation."

"Got any suspects in mind?"

"No. But I'm not sure who's here. I trailered in this morning."

"Did Lauren usually show up for these things?"

"No. She was here because of Jan. Jan wanted to promote competitive trail riding as a sport. She had this idea to invite horsemen and women from other disciplines, everything from hotshot rodeo guys to Olympic-caliber dressage riders—which Lauren would be with the right horse according to Jan—then write an article for one of those free magazines at the feed and tack stores."

"Jan was hoping to generate interest by getting quotes from the 'big names' about competitive trail being a nice break and beneficial for the horse. I wouldn't say the sport is dying, but participation has been declining for a while now."

Renata's eyebrows pulled together in concentration. She'd managed to slip in a few horse-related human-interest stories as a reporter, but she'd be the first to admit she didn't know squat when it came to who was who in the horse world. "What kind of response did Jan get?"

"Disappointing. Lauren was the most high-profile rider, I think."

Renata studied Cole's face. There were probably a thousand calculations going on behind his eyes and she didn't have a clue about any of them.

Cole tightened his grip on the steering wheel. He knew he shouldn't have touched her. Now it was a struggle not to reach over and take her hand again. Better yet, take it and place it against his throbbing erection.

He tried for shallow, controlled breaths. Despite the smell of leather and horses and rain, the hint of Renata's perfume was driving him crazy. He was rock hard, his gut churning. Every nerve ending he possessed felt fired up and he was desperately fighting the reaction.

Cole forced himself to concentrate on the murder, not that he'd be working the case. But channeling his thoughts in a direction that didn't lead to him in bed with Renata, thrusting his cock into her while he swallowed her moans of pleasure was the only way he was going to survive the close confines of the truck and keep himself from doing something stupid like asking her out.

"Are you sure there were ribbons bunched together when you took the turn leading to the clearing?"

"Positive, but like I told Grizzly, they were gone when I backtracked. You saw the *lack* of ribbons anywhere near the turn yourself. That's exactly the way it was when I came screaming out of there after an arrow went sailing by me."

"What!" Cole very nearly slammed on the brakes before remembering the horses in the trailer and stopping himself in time. "What?" he repeated, telling himself the wild race of his heart would have been the same regardless of who found Lauren in the clearing.

Renata told him about the silence, the weird feeling straight out of a horror movie. About dismounting, checking for a pulse and moments later having something whiz by her just above her shoulder, fast and close enough to hear and feel. She ended by saying, "Don't worry, not that they'll find the second arrow, but I'll tell the cops about it. I would have told them at the P&R stop if they'd had us stick around. Did you see anyone else on the trail right before you saw me?"

He could barely think around the roar in his head. Christ! *Don't worry*. Did she really say that? Why the hell hadn't she turned around when she first thought she might have taken the wrong turn? Why the hell hadn't she mentioned the close call earlier?

Must have something to do with the reporter gene. The woman probably needed a keeper.

A muscle spasmed in his jaw. *Not going down that road*, he told himself and somehow managed to calm down.

"No. I was the last one in to the P&R stop. All the novice riders except you were accounted for. The drag riders for the Open division haven't reached their P&R stop yet, otherwise it would have been on the radio that Lauren was missing. Good thing the guy who was supposed to be riding drag with me was there. This is his rig. He had a problem at work and was a no-show this morning. Jan had him drive out and wait to catch up to the novice riders at the P&R stop. It came in handy since it meant there was a trailer available to haul a couple of horses that got pulled back to camp. Then when you went missing..."

Cole glanced at Renata and felt his gut tighten at the thought of finding her dead. She was undoing months of avoidance and tying him in knots all over again. To cover it he said, "Leaving the ribbons was a mistake. It might have occurred to the killer afterward. Could be they were afraid someone would make a wrong turn and find Lauren before they could establish an alibi or have time to make sure they'd covered

their tracks. They were taking care of the ribbons while you were heading in the direction of the clearing. Firing the second arrow was to get you to hurry back the way you came. Someone good enough to kill Lauren with one shot could have killed you any number of times."

"You're not giving me the warm fuzzies here, Cole."

He laughed, loving how she was smart and sharp-tongued, tough-minded and handling something that would have reduced another woman to hysteria. But appreciation gave way to a niggling worry in his chest, a shiver of premonition sliding down his spine in a not very subtle reminder that his grandmother's premonitions were almost never wrong.

Cole shook off the uneasiness. In another few minutes they'd be back in camp. Usually competitors camped Saturday night and headed home Sunday morning, but given the unexpected storm and the murder, rather than a barbeque dinner and an awards ceremony, he thought Jan would tell everyone the results would be posted on the site and the ribbons sent through the mail.

He'd stick around as long as he had to then head out. Since he and Renata both boarded their horses at Hermosa Ranch there was a chance he might see her one more time today, a slim one, but after that he was home free.

As if confirming his prediction, when they drew near the road into the campsite Cole saw a few rigs lined up to leave and a sheriff's deputy clearing them. He was waved through.

"Don't worry about Solitaire," he said. "I'll take care of her if whoever's got this case won't let you do it before the interview."

The twist in his gut and the need to go with her made him tighten his grip on the steering wheel. He didn't like the way he wanted to take care of her too.

Renata shrugged. Truth was, she could hardly wait to get it over with and go home, maybe even treat herself to a nice hot soak in the tub. She cut a look over at Cole and almost nixed the idea. A hot soak was sure to lead to her fingers between her thighs and her mind on him – and not for the first time.

Damn, he was a fine-looking man. There was just something about him that worked on her libido and made her want to forget common sense and go for the thrill ride – even after she'd already had a quick brush with the pain that could come of having him in her life and then out of it.

At least that was dealt with. No more wondering if he'd been avoiding her on purpose. He'd probably just felt awkward at the lunch stop earlier, same as she had, otherwise she'd have gone over and talked to him.

Renata turned away to look out the window. The rain was pounding but thankfully the thunder and lightning hadn't arrived.

As soon as she talked to the detective she'd load Solitaire and join the queue of rigs leaving the campsite. There was no cell coverage for a couple of miles but once she got

to a place where there was, she'd call the paper and let them know what happened, get a jump on the crime guys about writing it up.

Cole found a place to park. Renata shivered in anticipation of the temperature change. She did *not* do cold well but she forced herself out of the warmth of the truck and moved around to help unload the horses.

Jan, the ride manager, arrived just as Cole was getting Warpaint out of the trailer. A slicker-clad woman joined them, saying, "Mom sent me over to help out, Jan. Lauren's horse is boarded at Hermosa Ranch. It's only about fifteen minutes from Trent Farms. I can turn him out to pasture on my way home."

"Thanks for the offer, Kim," Jan said, "But I think Cole keeps his horse at Hermosa Ranch too."

"Cole and I both do," Renata said. "If he doesn't have room for Warpaint in his trailer I don't mind hauling him. He and Solitaire are fine together."

"I've got room," Cole said. "It'll save you the extra stop, Kim."

"Okay," Kim said, turning away. "I'll let Mom know he's taken care of."

Jan huddled under her rain hood. "Detective Gaines is waiting for you, Renata. He's in my camper. I'll show you where it is." A rumble of thunder punctuated the sentence.

"I'd like to get Solitaire hitched to the trailer and my saddle put away first."

"I'll help you," Jan said, then told Cole, "We'll be posting the winners on the site and notifying them by phone. The police are taking statements and getting information, then letting people get on the road."

"I figured as much. As soon as I take care of Dealer and Warpaint, I'll find your trailer."

Renata unloaded Solitaire and handed the lead rope to Jan, then retrieved her saddle from the backseat of the Dodge. It was only a short distance to where her rig was parked but Mother Nature seemed to take fiendish delight in opening the skies and pelting her with rain then chilling her with wind.

Her teeth were chattering by the time she opened the truck. She took long enough to wipe down the saddle before peeling off the sodden jacket and dropping it to the vinyl floor mat, replacing it with a GORE-TEX one as Jan secured Solitaire's lead rope to the trailer.

Renata tried to be objective about the temperature, but couldn't. Overheating was more of a problem for horses than getting cold. If Solitaire was at the ranch, free to choose, she'd just as likely be grazing out in the open as standing under a tree to keep dry.

At the moment Solitaire seemed content to be munching hay from the net. She wasn't shivering.

With a sigh Renata glanced around to see what the other riders were doing. Nobody had their horses blanketed though about half the horses were wearing rain

sheets. It made Renata's decision about what to do next easy. She hadn't brought a rain sheet for Solitaire.

"Ready?" Jan asked.

*As I'll ever be.*

Renata followed Jan to a camper, a stand-alone unit being pulled by a Chevy truck. If anyone but Jan owned the truck, Renata would have been tempted to think it was a low-priced dealer special created to lure buyers onto the lot. Because what self-respecting person wanted to drive around in something purple?

Jan was one of those women who picked a color and *lived* it. Last night at the rider meeting it'd been purple shirt, pants and tennis shoes. Hell, even the pencil behind her ear was purple.

They stepped into the camp trailer. Jan pulled back her hood, revealing puffy eyes and a genuine smile. "Are you doing okay? I think I remember you saying last night that this was only your second competitive ride."

"I'm fine." Renata buried her hands into her pockets. "I'm sorry for your loss. Cole said you and Lauren were friends. I only met her this morning."

"Thank you." Jan turned slightly and the man sitting on purple plaid cushions at a foldout table came into focus for Renata.

"Detective Gaines, this is Renata Reynolds."

The detective stood. "Come on over and have a seat."

*Said the spider to the fly*, Renata thought, noting the slight twang in the detective's smooth voice and not all that surprised by it. He had the look of a cowboy, rangy with a pack of Marlboro cigarettes peeking out of his shirt pocket.

They both sat, a little too close for comfort as far as Renata was concerned, but it wasn't as bad as being snuggled up against Grizzly. The detective glanced at Jan, her signal to disappear and she did.

"Let's take it from the top," Detective Gaines said. "Name, address, place of work, phone numbers, then walk me through the events leading up to your finding the body, and what happened afterward."

Renata did as instructed, watching as her words ended up on the detective's yellow legal pad. When she was finished, Gaines said, "Describe the arrow."

She closed her eyes to picture it. "Gold."

"Paint on wood or metal?"

It took a moment of concentration. "Metal. I'm pretty sure it was metal."

"Feathers?"

"Black."

"Length?"

"Of the feathers?"

"The arrow, at least what you could see of it."



Renata opened her eyes and lifted her hand above the table, imagining the linoleum as Lauren's chest, visualizing the arrow as she'd reached to check for a pulse. Her eyebrows furrowed. "That can't be right." Not that she'd been an archery whiz the couple of times she'd attended camp as a kid, but she knew arrows were a hell of a lot longer, even factoring in the possibility it'd gone all the way through Lauren.

Gaines didn't confirm or dispute. He reached for the pack of cigarettes, thought better of it and pulled his hand away from his shirt pocket. "You didn't know the victim prior to the ride?"

"That's right. She keeps her horse at Hermosa Ranch, same as I do. That's why I recognized him but not her. Usually he's leased out, mainly to teenage girls."

"Hear any rumors about the victim?"

"No."

Gaines pulled out a card with his name on it and handed it to her. "Call if you think of anything else. My partner's name is Detective Gillespie. He's working the crime scene right now. If you can't reach me you can ask for him." There was another involuntary reach for the pack of cigarettes, followed by a retreat. "I can't order you to stay quiet, not without a lot of paperwork. But I'd appreciate it if you limited your coverage to one or two lines and didn't say more than Lauren Hunt died under suspicious circumstances and the police are investigating. I especially don't want you to mention the arrow."

"No problem," Renata said, knowing her editor, Max, would be okay with it.

## Chapter Three

The nibbling on her fingers finally pulled Renata from sleep. The sensation wasn't unpleasant, it was just confusing. Because how could Cole Maguire have his wicked tongue stroking her clit and slipping between her folds *and* be nibbling her fingers, all while she was on her stomach with an arm over the side of the bed?

Renata forced her eyes open, reluctant to let go of the dream even as she realized the danger of it. She couldn't make herself pull her hand away from her cunt though she did move enough to confirm the nibbling taking place on the fingers of her other hand was Puff, the rabbit she'd ended up with as a result of a human interest story gone bad.

"Lucky for you Cole is off limits as fantasy material," she murmured, stroking soft bunny ears. "Otherwise I'd have to reconsider my position on rabbit stew. You interrupted just when I was getting close."

Puff didn't react to her threat and Renata contemplated closing her eyes and rolling to her back, finishing what the Cole in her dreams had started. But the moment and the hot spikes in her clit had already faded, even if the wetness between her thighs was still there.

She sat up with a sigh, lifting the rabbit onto her lap and saying what she always said, "Man you get any heavier, Puff, and the vet's going to tell me to put you on a diet."

Puff sprawled across her lap. His whiskers might have twitched in acknowledgement but that was about all.

Renata laughed and bent over to rub her cheek against his soft, clean-smelling fur. Until Puff, her exposure to rabbits was limited to the classroom pet she'd taken turns caring for in third grade. Funny how even as a kid it'd bothered her that Peter—the bunny's very unoriginal name—had spent the majority of his life in a tiny cage.

So when the paper got a tip on a woman who rescued rabbits from bad situations, the story had sparked Renata's interest. Trouble was, the Mother Teresa of rabbits had turned out to be Cruella De Vil. Instead of finding good homes, the majority of the rabbits ended up on sale at various flea markets—as meat, fur and feet.

Puff only escaped that fate because Renata happened to be there when he was brought in by a guy who gave her bad vibes about the entire setup. From bad vibes had come a story, not the human interest kind, but the "humans can be horrible" kind. And Renata ended up with a twenty-pound fawn, red to her eyes, rabbit who acted like a dog.

What she didn't get was how anyone could ever have given Puff up. He was a perfect companion. Gentle. Used the litter box. Didn't argue. A great listener.

Then again, maybe whoever had owned him originally didn't know what he was really like because he'd been in a cage out back or in the kid's room, a source of endless arguments about responsibility. Renata hadn't known exactly what she was going to do with him when she first saw him, only that she wasn't going to leave him, not with her reporter instincts screaming.

She'd taken him right to the vet, half hoping somebody had just lost a rabbit to old age and Puff would be the perfect fix for grief. Instead she'd ended up with an appointment to neuter him and a handout from the House Rabbit Society. And the rest was history.

The phone ringing made Renata's stomach tighten with worry. It was probably her mother, calling about Jamal. Only Renata didn't have any answers about how to reach him.

He was seventeen heading toward eighteen, running on anger and on a path to nowhere. On some level she could relate. She'd lost a father too! But in other ways she couldn't, maybe because it was different for her. She'd actually *had* a father longer than either Aiesha and Jamal. She was four years older than Aiesha, eight years older than Jamal.

She remembered their father when he was still in the Army. Remembered the arguments between their parents, both doctors though their mother was a civilian.

The Army put their father through med school but more than that, he loved being part of the armed services. He would have stayed an active part of it instead of going to reserve status if their mother would have gone for it.

After 9/11, he'd reentered, hadn't waited to be called though he probably would have been. Doctors were in demand. Doctors were supposed to be safe.

Renata sucked in a deep breath, feeling the stab of pain that always came when she thought about him dying in Afghanistan. She was twenty when he left for the first tour. Twenty-two when he died.

She hefted Puff into her arms and took him with her, setting him down in the kitchen where she'd left her cell. There was no suppressing the relief when she saw the call was from the paper.

"Renata here."

"Sorry, dear. You were probably hoping to sleep in. Max has an assignment for you. He wants to see you ASAP."

Renata grinned, thinking how lucky she was to love her job so much that going in on a Sunday was fine with her. "You want me to bring you something from Starbucks, Cora?" she asked the paper's elderly all-around-assistant-slash-secretary-slash-surrogate mother.

"That would be wonderful. Thanks to you reporters I've developed quite a taste for mochas."

"I'll head out in a few minutes," Renata said, closing the cell and putting it down on the counter. She opened her laptop instead of getting dressed. Cole wasn't the only thing she'd dreamed about, he'd just been the best. A lot of her night seemed to have involved being lost in the woods and getting shot at.

It didn't take her long to find the twin of the arrow she'd seen buried in Lauren's chest. "Who'd have guessed it could be purchased through Amazon.com. It comes as part of a set, pistol crossbow plus three handy arrows, also called bolts. Amazing more people don't pack one for those times when others piss them off."

Puff's whiskers twitched as if he were agreeing. Renata reached down to stroke his ears one last time before getting dressed and leaving.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cole rolled his shoulders as he got off the Harley. Damn, it'd been too long since he'd taken it out of the garage. Then again, he hadn't exactly spent much time in Northern California lately.

He'd been back east, to Atlantic City, then down to Florida and over to Mississippi. The first two on Crime Tells business, the third for a poker tournament.

No more running. It'd be nice to hang out here, reconnect with Shane and Braden, though truth was, he saw them pretty often even when he was on the road since they all worked for Bulldog. From now on, no more letting Grandma Maguire's prediction push him off his game.

Yesterday he'd handled being with Renata in pretty tense circumstances. He'd come out of it unscathed and unattached. *But not exactly unaffected*, his cock reminded him, growing as Renata's image—wearing something straight out of the Victoria's Secret catalogue—swam up from the depths of his subconscious.

Christ. Like he hadn't spent all night fucking her in his dreams, then once again in the shower this morning using his hand as a substitute for her slick channel.

Cole grimaced and tugged at the front of his jeans, repositioning them to minimize the pressure of a full-blown erection pressing against the front of them. He pulled off the helmet, put it under his arm and walked the short distance to the Crime Tells front door.

Sleeping in would have been great, but Bulldog's call had forced him out of bed, which was just as well, given how he needed a chance to clear his head of Renata. He'd get this meeting done then head over the hill to the ocean, maybe ride down the coast to Carmel and Big Sur, or if he was in the mood, up to San Francisco. Stop there for coffee then head over to Hector's Gym. Maybe do some sparring if Cruz was there. A lot of times the ex-boxer spent his Sundays helping Hector, mentoring kids and steering them away from the streets.

Cole stepped into Crime Tells and grinned. Think of the devil, Cruz Damascus was sitting at the desk they shared, playing poker on the software Braden was writing.

"My man," Cruz said, standing, offering a hand though the shake went into a shoulder touch greeting. "What brings you into the office this early?"

"Don't know for sure. Bulldog called and asked me to come around. What are you doing here? Thought you'd be at Hector's."

Cruz's teeth flashed white against his brown skin. "Later. Told Lyric I'd go with her to see a man about some wheels this morning, over in East Palo Alto."

Cole shook his head. "You're not aiding and abetting her in one of her schemes, are you?"

"You think I'm crazy? Give Kieran a reason to haul my *delectable* ass into jail?"

Cole laughed. "Delectable, huh? You've been watching *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* again looking for makeover tips."

"Self-improvement never goes out of fashion."

Cole almost asked for more detail about Cruz's run with Lyric, then thought better of it. With her it was safer to go for plausible deniability. Besides, his cousin was Kieran's problem now. He had enough on his plate just keeping an eye out on his brothers when he was in town. He tilted his head toward Bulldog's closed door. "I better go in."

"Catch you later. If you're not on a case, swing by Hector's. The boys are always happy to take you on in the ring."

Cole snorted. "Last time I was there Hector had me tutoring math. Everything from how to figure out how much money was left after paying bills to what the odds of drawing an ace are if you're holding one."

"Practical stuff, my friend. Practical stuff."

Cole laughed and turned away, tapped on Bulldog's door lightly then went in after his grandfather answered.

Bulldog was sitting behind his desk, a dapple dachshund on his lap. Cole smiled at the sight, remembering how excited his two were when he'd retrieved them from Shane's the night before.

Of course, they'd barely reacted when he left this morning. Old farts. They'd just kind of cocked an ear to listen for the sound of kibble hitting a dish, something that'd happened far too often at Shane's place by the looks of them, then closed their eyes when food wasn't forthcoming.

Lyric would have a fit if she saw them. They looked like walking rolls of hamburger.

Thanks to his cousin, almost everyone in the Montgomery and Maguire families, plus their friends, had ended up with a miniature dachshund—or two, or three—as a result of a case she'd been working. But it could have been much worse. A cold shiver went down Cole's spine. Lyric ended up married at the end of it.

Cole took a seat across from his grandfather. Since they'd talked by phone and exchanged e-mails, he didn't think there were any loose ends regarding the last case he'd been working, so he said, "What's up?"

"Heard there was a bit of excitement at the ride."

Cole wasn't a bit surprised Bulldog knew about it. "Yeah, Lauren Hunt was murdered. It already hit the papers?"

Bulldog picked up a newspaper and leaned forward, dropping it in front of Cole. It had Renata's byline, then a short and succinct report of suspicious death. No flash. No detail. Nothing to make it personal. Probably playing it down at the request of Detective Gaines.

Cole was fine with that. Jan had enough on her plate without having the competitive trail ride turned into a tabloid feeding frenzy.

"Orrin Kaye called this morning," Bulldog said. "He's putting his reporter on this. Thinks it'd make a good story, whether the police solve it first or Crime Tells does."

Cole felt the icy slide of premonition down his spine again, only this time it settled in his gut. "You told him no, I take it. We've worked a few cold cases but we don't handle active murder investigations."

"Wanted to say no," Bulldog said, leaning back, steepling his fingers. "The trouble is, Orrin and I were involved in a little side pot a while back. I lost. Now the bet's being called." He glanced at the newspaper. "Contact his reporter. She'll be getting her assignment this morning too. The two of you are working together, closely. Think of her as a new hire and show her the ropes when it comes to investigating. Share information. Orrin says she's mainly done human interest stories. Use her talents. And if you need some grunt work done, call in Shane and Lyric."

Time seemed to shift into slow motion even as Cole's heart raced and thundered in his ears. A shake of his head cleared the sound but not the wild pounding or the cold sweat.

Cole wished Cady hadn't married Kix and taken off for Texas. He desperately wished Erin wasn't off working an Indian casino job. Both of them were into horses. They'd be just as good as he was when it came to hunting down motive for Lauren's murder.

"With all respect, give it to Cruz." It was a measure of his desperation that he added, "Or Lyric."

Bulldog shook his head. "This one's yours, Cole."

Cole studied his grandfather's face and couldn't read a thing. "I can't take it," he said, going for the bluff and hoping things didn't escalate. "I need a break and I've got vacation time accumulated. I'm heading to Vegas to use it."

"Vegas can wait. The bet being called requires you to be the one working the case."

Christ. His grandfather would never welsh on a bet. Short of quitting, he wasn't going to escape having something to do with the case. "Does it require me to be the lead detective?"

Bulldog reached over and idly began shuffling a stack of chips. "How about playing a hand of cards to settle this? I win, you take charge. You win, I'll put Shane on this with you as his assistant."

Son of a bitch. Shane in charge and working with Renata, both of them hunting down a murderer, the same murderer who'd already seen Renata and fired an arrow at her.

Fuck. Bulldog had him. Shane played too fast and loose and Renata —

Cole knew he was going to have to gamble on his ability to come away from the case unscathed and unattached. *But not exactly unaffected*, his cock reminded him. And that was a big part of the trouble—the odds of sleeping with Renata if they were together constantly was close to one hundred percent.

A shudder of desire went through him as he remembered the dreams. "I'll work the case," Cole said, taking the gamble.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cora met Renata just outside Max's glassed-in office. He was inside. Shiny walnut-colored head tilted downward, a phone pressed to his ear and held in place by a shoulder as he fished through the papers on his desk looking for something. His shirt was rumpled, the sleeves rolled up, completing the image of a man with too much to do and too little time to get it done.

There were rumors the editor-in-chief had a life outside of the paper. Renata had never seen convincing evidence of it.

"Max shouldn't be too long," Cora said.

"I'm not in a hurry." Renata handed the Starbucks cup to Cora, thinking Cora was a lot like Max, always at the paper.

Nobody knew Cora's age. Some said eighty, others said just touching seventy. But everybody agreed the place wouldn't be the same without her and no one liked to think she worked because she had to and not because she wanted to.

Renata knew the partial picture. Cora was a native Californian. Grew up in Sacramento. Moved to the Bay Area when she left home. Married late. Had a son.

Both her husband and son were dead, though out of respect, none of the reporters working for the *Journal* had used their investigative skills to determine when, where, how and why.

"One of the reporters told me you were the one who discovered the body," Cora said.

"I did. Took a wrong turn in the woods. Got lost. Found a murder scene."

Cora took a sip of the mocha. "I don't know anything about competitive trail riding. Never heard of it. Is it like endurance riding? I know something about it thanks to the article you wrote last year about the Tevis Cup and the local riders competing in it."

"They're similar, but a world apart in a lot of ways. Having a sound horse at the end of the ride is important in both sports. But in endurance riding, the emphasis is on speed while in competitive trail, the emphasis is on horsemanship."

Renata took a swallow of her own mocha. "Instead of who comes across the finish line in the first through tenth positions, the winners in competitive trail riding are based on scores, not just the riders', but the horses'. There are two separate judges, a vet judge and a horsemanship judge. The rider and horse each start with one hundred points, then get marked down depending on skill and judgment or in the case of the horse, condition and behavior."

Cora laughed. "It's certainly not what I would have imagined you doing for fun over the weekend."

"It was only my second ride. The jury's out about doing more of them." Heat coiled in Renata's stomach. *Especially if Cole Maguire was going to be there.*

"How did you and your horse do?"

"We didn't officially finish it. And even if we had, I don't think either of us were anywhere close to taking home a ribbon. The vet and horsemanship judges stop you and actually ask you to do things. The most nerve-racking is the observed mount. While everyone's watching you have to get on your horse smoothly and safely, with points off if your horse moves. Solitaire and I lost a point there. Then there was a water crossing followed a little while later by a log crossing. The horse is supposed to *walk* across a narrow stream and *step* over the log. Solitaire preferred to jump both of them. More points off. And oh yeah, the horsemanship judge also spends time hiding in the woods and observing riders when they don't know it. Lord only knows what she saw when she was doing that."

Renata finished the last few swallows of her mocha. "I'm probably making it sound like torture. It's not. The people are nice, down-to-earth for the most part. Competitive as hell but also extremely helpful. And for someone like me, who didn't spend time around horses except at camp when I was a kid, it's a great way to see different places and really improve my horsemanship."

"Did you know the woman who was killed?"

Renata stepped away far enough to drop her cup into a wastebasket. "No. I'm not too sure how many people at the ride knew her. She didn't usually participate in competitive trail events. Supposedly she was an Olympic-caliber dressage rider, or close."

"My son was involved with horses. Mark's sport was three-day eventing. He was murdered." Cora's eyes lost their focus. "The police were waiting for me when I got home from the grocery store. At first I thought my neighbor had complained about the dog. Mark had a basset hound someone gave him. Gus was the dog's name. I took care



of Gus when Mark was going to be gone overnight. My neighbor worked nights and was a light sleeper. He was bothered by anything and everything. Kids playing, birds singing, Gus howling inside the house—barely audible from outside—I made sure of that. I was so mad when I saw the police. And then they told me Mark was dead. I couldn't accept it at first, didn't believe it."

Cora's expression held such pain that Renata's throat tightened. She felt awkward, unsure of whether to offer a hug, a change of topic, or silence for Cora to compose herself.

"The police never found the killer. They never could determine why Mark was killed."

"I'm sorry," Renata said, knowing it was totally inadequate and compensating by placing an arm along Cora's frail shoulders and giving her a hug.

Cora reached up and patted Renata's hand. "Thank you. It's a pain that never goes away though it does become manageable. When my husband Everest died we'd had forty-three years together. He was a week away from retiring when he had a heart attack at the office. Just like that it was over. I grieved, but in time I put it away. He was older. Somehow you accept, even if it hurts.

"But Mark was only twenty-four, a miracle baby for us. We'd given up being able to have children by then. I can still remember putting him on his first pony at the fair. He was three years old and from then on, all he wanted was horse stories at bedtime or to go in the car to see horses, and to ride again. Sometimes I think if I just knew *why* Mark died... But after all these years..." She patted Renata's hand again. "Go ahead in to see Max. It looks like he's off the phone now."

Renata tightened her arm on Cora's shoulder in another small hug before tapping on Max's door and going in when he responded with a wave.

"You working on anything time sensitive?" Max asked by way of greeting.

"No."

"Good. I got a call from Orrin this morning after he took a look at your byline. As of now, the only story you're working is the murder. You stay on until it goes cold or it's solved. That's the word from on high."

"Stay on it until it goes cold or gets solved?" There was no hiding her confusion.

Max grinned, giving him a diabolical look. "That's right. You'll be working with Cole Maguire on this. You know who he is? Besides being a private investigator for Crime Tells?"

"I know."

Max ripped off the top sheet from a tablet of paper and handed it to Renata. "Here are his numbers."

Renata's mouth went dry and her lungs seized up. Heat pooled in her labia, sending a flush right up through her breasts. "What the hell is going on, Max?"

"Don't ask me, I'm just passing on the assignment. Orrin said, and this is a quote, 'We'll worry about the story angle later. For now, Renata sticks to Cole like she's glued to him. They go at solving this murder with the intention of beating the cops to the finish line, but if they come across something the cops need to know, they share it.'"

"Why Cole?"

"Now that one I can help you with. Orrin and Bulldog Montgomery—you know who Bulldog is, right?" At Renata's nod, Max continued, "Orrin and Bulldog play poker. My guess is they had some kind of a side bet going and Orrin won. As to Cole, Orrin said he was at the ride too. You see him there?"

"Yeah," Renata said, barely able to get a word out with all the fireworks going off inside her at the prospect of being in continuous, close contact with Cole. Self-preservation made her make one feeble attempt to dodge the inevitable heartbreak that seemed to be in her very near future. "What about the crime beat guys? One of them would kill for an opportunity like this."

"True. But you found the body. You get the story."

## Chapter Four

Cole stepped out of Bulldog's office to find Lyric just arriving. "So are you back in town for a while?" she asked, the gleam in her eyes sending additional trickles of uneasiness through him.

Grandma Maguire wasn't the only one with premonitions. Lyric and Braden also got them, though in Lyric's case it was more of a sixth sense than an actual movie reel of future events.

"I'm back," Cole said, going with *less information shared is best* when it came to his cousin. She'd stir things up and enjoy the hell out of it if she knew about Grandma's prediction and his attraction to Renata.

Lyric's smile widened. "Guess things must be heating up on the case Erin and Dasan are working, either that or *they're* heating up. Betting pool is up to three grand now, most of it having them married before they get back. You want to add to your bet? Spread it around some?"

And tempt fate? Risk having the tables turned on him and finding himself the subject of the next betting pool? Not a chance.

There wasn't a gambler alive who wasn't at least a little bit superstitious. He was no exception, and this thing with Renata... "I'm good," Cole said.

Cruz picked up the motorcycle helmet sitting on their shared desk and tossed it to him. "So Bulldog give you a case?"

"Yeah," Cole said, feeling a phantom noose tighten around his neck.

"Details?" Cruz asked.

"Figure out who killed a rider at the competitive trail event I was at yesterday."

"Not our usual kind of business. Surprised Bulldog would want the heat that's going to generate from the cops." Cruz cut a quick look at Lyric. "Especially now he's got a cop in the family."

"Bulldog said it's a bet being called in. He was involved in a little side pot a while back with Orrin Kaye."

Cruz gave a low whistle. "So you're working a story."

Lyric's eyes danced with knowledge and amusement, enough of it to have the hairs on the back of Cole's neck standing up like they intended to make a run from trouble. He heeded their warning and said, "I've got to head out."

No way was he going to make the call to Renata anywhere near Lyric. Hell, no way was he going to contact Renata until he had a few minutes to shore up his defenses, get

the little head that'd like to call the shots away from imagery of stretching her out and being buried deep inside her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Renata was rattled. Seriously rattled. The paper with Cole's phone numbers felt like it was burning a hole in her jeans and pouring fire into her bloodstream. Her clit was hard, her panties wet and every step sent a little shiver of erotic anticipation through her.

Bad. She had it bad. Which was why she hadn't called him yet, why she'd decided to swing by the tack shop—to fortify her courage the American way by doing a little retail therapy first.

After that, she'd go to Hermosa Ranch. Being with Solitaire would help.

Winston Churchill said it best. "There's something about the outside of a horse that is good for the inside of a man." Or woman in her case. And thanks to wireless technology and her laptop, plus living in the Silicon Valley, she could get online and learn everything she could about Lauren Hunt *before* she contacted Cole. It wouldn't put them on equal footing, but it'd make her feel better.

Renata pushed into the tack shop and was greeted by a thick German accent saying, "Ach, it's you. I was thinking about you this very morning. Otto picked up the *Journal* when he went for bagels. You were at this ride? Yes? Terrible, terrible business. Like that mess with owners and trainers killing their horses for insurance money. You know who Lauren was? You met her at the ride? I ask you, what's the world coming to?"

"Nothing good, probably," Renata said, suppressing a smile. Apparently despite the shock Max delivered in his office, her reporter instincts hadn't shut down completely. They'd led her here and here was a perfect place to start investigating.

Wilma, the store owner, was a talker. Better yet, she'd been around horses and horse people her entire life, some seventy or eighty years of it.

"Did you know Lauren?" Renata asked, banking on a single question opening the floodgates of information.

"Since she was a child. You know who her mother is? Yes? Well, her father was as bad in his way, an alcoholic. His liver gave out when he was only forty." Wilma leaned forward abruptly and whispered, "Addiction was in his genes. Lauren had a younger sister, a half sister. She died of a heroin overdose."

"Any idea who would want to kill Lauren?"

Wilma snorted. "From the outside, the horses and their riders all look so beautiful. But inside, there are some who are very competitive, willing to do anything to win. So many of the other children were jealous of Lauren, but they didn't understand the true cost of winning. Always she was an outsider, the one to beat, the one whose mother was in the tabloids. And in her adult life, she had to choose between her husband and her dreams of Olympic gold!"

Renata's pulse quickened. Money coupled with anger and bitterness always made a good motive for murder. "The divorce was recent?"

"Eight months ago, a year. I'm not sure of the details."

"It was nasty?"

"That is not the impression I got. There was a rumor he wanted children, impossible for her if she wants to accomplish her dreams. But perhaps it was true. He has already married someone else."

Something in Wilma's tone made Renata say, "You don't sound convinced the rumor is true."

Wilma shrugged. "Several times, early in their marriage, Lauren came here with Vincenzo. They seemed a good match, as though they understood what drove the other. And Vincenzo, he didn't strike me as a man who would make the same mistake twice. Ach. Men, who can understand them? This new wife, Nichole, she competes in dressage too."

Renata felt a little thrill of excitement. She'd scanned the rider lists when she got to camp on Friday, just on the off chance she might know someone, or recognize a name from the only other competitive trail ride she'd participated in. She hadn't, but she thought there might have been a Nichole on the list. "What's her last name?"

"Maxwell. She uses her own name."

"Where does Nichole board her horse?"

"She keeps a riding horse over at Trent Farms. Then I think she has her dressage horse at Valley Training Center. I'm not sure which trainer's barn, though. I tell you, there's something about her... Ice on the outside, but inside... There are emotions churning." Wilma hesitated. "This I heard only recently, whispers of Vincenzo buying Lauren a horse worthy of the Olympics, speculation that maybe the two of them regretted their divorce even if they were also seen arguing recently. It wouldn't surprise me a bit to learn Nichole is the one behind Lauren's murder."

Wilma laughed. "My Otto tells me I watch too much television. He says my imagination gets carried away, but... Maybe soon you'll write the story about Lauren's murderer being brought to justice."

"I'd like to. And on that note, I'd better get to work."

Renata pushed away from the counter, anxious to find the packet she'd gotten when she checked in at the ride site on Friday night. But just as she was starting to turn she realized Cora and Wilma were probably close to the same age. Impulsively she asked, "Do you remember a rider by the name of Mark Hansen?"

"Another sad story. They found him down in Carmel. Shot dead on a deserted stretch of beach."

Renata hesitated, not wanting to violate Cora's privacy, yet remembering Cora's voice saying, "Sometimes I think if I just knew why Mark died..."

Hell, if she was going to investigate one murder, why not another? Especially when she'd be working with Cole.

Her body tightened in anticipation. Before fantasy images could follow she asked, "What was Mark like?"

Wilma chortled. "Handsome. If I'd been younger and not married to my Otto, I'd have chased after him like the other women. He was a nice-looking man. And what a rider he was! When he was doing the dressage test, it looked like he was dancing with the horse. Beautiful, a true partnership. And over the jumps, he made it look effortless."

"He was a popular rider?"

"Very. Always he made people smile."

"Any close friends who are still around?"

Wilma's gaze sharpened. She leaned forward to whisper, "You are working on a story. Yes?"

"A personal one. His mother works at the paper. I thought..."

Wilma nodded. "You're a nice person, caring, not so driven you see others as only stepping stones in your career. You thought maybe to use your skills to find some answers for her?"

"Something like that."

Wilma's eyes lost their focus. "A close friend," she murmured, looking into the past. "Yes. There was a young man, Mark's age, his groom. Brian. I don't remember his last name. I think they were perhaps friends from somewhere else first, school maybe."

"Is Brian still around?"

"I don't think so. Not since Mark's death."

"Any other close friends?"

"There were always friends around him at the shows. But when he came here, usually he was alone or sometimes, Brian was with him." She shook her head. "I can't think of a single person who would want to harm him. But who can know the mind of a killer? Yes?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Cole considered his options as he studied the inside of his tack shed. It wasn't trashed and nothing was missing despite the sawed-off combination lock—a mistake on the killer's part—but then again, with Renata's shed broken into, it didn't take a genius to figure out theft wasn't the motive.

The killer was after something, and thought it might be with Lauren's tack, the saddle, complete with saddle bags, he'd hauled to the ranch along with Warpaint. But searching his tack shed *and* Renata's sent an interesting message.

It said the killer knew both he and Renata had handled Lauren's stuff. It also said the cops had missed something when they went through it. Or maybe the killer didn't know it'd been searched.

Cole's gut churned. Unlike his tack shed, which had only gotten tossed and searched, the killer had vented his or her frustration on Renata's stuff. Enough of it so there was no way she could be left unprotected.

He rubbed the back of his neck and factored the odds of making it through the day without ending up inside Renata if he took her home with him. Christ. It was too easy to picture the knowing, amused look in Lyric's eyes. But the thought of racking up a favor with Dante and Benito, owners of Giancotti Security, and asking them to provide bodyguard services for Renata didn't sit well either.

Yeah, Giancotti Security was top notch, not only for systems, but for bodyguards. Hell, they guarded stars, businessmen, foreign "whales"—poker lingo for the super wealthy who liked to play with professionals—dignitaries and the ultrarich. So they had the credentials, but...

Fuck. Benito and Dante shared a woman—Calista—Benito's legal wife, formerly a Burke and now Lyric's sister-in-law. If he asked for protection, Cole didn't doubt for a second Lyric would hear about it and...

*Arrange for some competition,* a small internal voice whispered, making his chest go tight.

Cole forcibly overrode the voice. He told himself the reason he didn't call the Giancottis was because it'd add hassle to the equation.

He was going to fuck Renata. Get it out of his system. Gamble—same as he'd done in Bulldog's office—that he'd come out of it unscathed and unattached.

His cock pulsed in celebration of his resolve. His brain called him a fool even as he was punching in her cell number and going hard when she answered.

"I'm at the ranch," he said. "You close by?"

"Five minutes and on my way there."

"Good, I'll see you then."

He hung up, his jaw clenched as his cock pressed hard against the front of his jeans. Frustration rode him, the need for release making him want to unzip and jerk off, or better yet, pull Renata into his tack shed and pin her to the back of the door with his dick.

To hell with his grandmother's prediction and running from it. Running hadn't gotten him anywhere because here he was, back where he started, only needing to have Renata under him even worse than before.

Cole took a deep breath when Renata pulled into the ranch and parked next to the Harley. He forced his features into the same emotionless mask he used when he played poker as she got out of her truck, long legs encased in jeans and guaranteed to make a man think about peeling them down and off.

A peach-colored shirt caressed her torso, filling his mind with thoughts of slowly unbuttoning it to reveal breasts tipped with dark, dark nipples. Christ, she was beautiful.

The first time he'd seen her he'd thought Halle Berry, only better. Lithe and sleek, utterly feminine and yet she didn't come across as helpless or weak.

Renata was the kind of woman who looked good on a man's arm but didn't need to be there. She could hold her own. Hell, hadn't she proved that at the ride when she'd been in the woods with a body and a killer close by?

"Something up, Cole?" she asked as she approached, making his cock want to tear out of his jeans in order to get to her. "Something besides the fact it looks like we'll be working together to find out who killed Lauren?"

He couldn't stop himself from reaching out, putting his hands on her shoulders. Damn, part of him had been looking for an excuse since yesterday in the truck. "Your tack shed was broken into last night. There's damage."

She trembled slightly, unnoticeable if he hadn't been touching her. "How bad?"

"I'm not sure. I didn't disturb anything, just opened the door and looked inside after I got here and found someone had been in mine."

"Somebody looking for something?"

"That'd be my guess."

"You call the police?"

"No. I called you."

She gave a small nod as though that made sense to her. Beneath his hands he felt her straighten, put steel in her spine. "Guess I'd better see."

He let his hands drop away. Took a step back and turned, emotional self-preservation kicking in when he realized he wanted to take her hand, twine his fingers with hers in comfort and solidarity.

They walked to her shed in silence. Like his, the lock was cut then put back so only someone looking closely would realize it'd been tampered with.

Renata reached toward it, halted midway, shaken though she thought she was doing a pretty good job of holding it together. Whoever broke in was probably wearing gloves, still, she asked, "What about fingerprints?"

"Doubt whoever was here left any." But Cole pulled out a handkerchief and offered it to her.

She took it and removed the lock, stomach churning at what she was going to find inside. Then she took a deep calming breath and opened the door.

Everything she owned was on the floor. It was mixed in with Solitaire's grain, the bag it'd come in slashed and torn until there was barely anything left of it.

Bile rose in Renata's throat at the savagery. Tears formed despite her determination not to shed any. Fear threatened to make her start shaking.



This was rage. Violation. This was the killer saying they were sorry they hadn't killed her when she stumbled onto Lauren's body.

Her bridle lay in pieces. Her saddle was next to it, the stuffing exposed where it'd been stabbed repeatedly.

Renata didn't pretend not to need someone to lean on when Cole's arms went around her, pulling her backward against his chest. Her heart thundered louder as a new fear arrived. "Solitaire."

Cole stopped her with the tightening of his arms when she would have pulled away in panic. "Solitaire's fine. I saw her on the hill when I drove in. I don't think the killer will come back to attack her. Your shed is about loss of control and fear of being caught, not revenge. I think my shed was hit first. That's where Lauren's stuff is. When the killer didn't find what they were looking for they tried yours and lost it."

Renata shuddered. She forced her mind to concentrate on the puzzle, the story. Her sense of humor saved her from despair, from the helplessness that could come with being a victim. "You think Orrin's going to shit a brick when all this ends up on my expense reimbursement request?"

Cole laughed, a masculine rumble of approval against her back that shored up her courage. "If it's a problem I'll get it for you at the poker table. Whenever I'm in town I sit in at the regular game he's got going with Bulldog."

Renata couldn't help smiling. Damn, she was a sucker for a man who was self-aware, confident without being a swaggering asshole. "You sound pretty certain of winning."

"Played with Orrin enough times to justify it." Cole's arm tightened slightly and for a second she let herself believe it was because he didn't want to stop holding her, but then his arms dropped away and he retreated, leaving her feeling bereft even though she knew it'd be a big mistake to get used to having him at her back.

Renata turned her attention to the shed. She didn't have the heart to clean up, to bag her stuff as trash and haul it home. If there was any consolation to be had it was that the saddle and bridle hadn't cost a lot of money. They'd come off eBay because she'd figured it was smarter to go with cheap and used until she knew exactly what she wanted.

A good saddle could cost a thousand dollars or more, not exactly the kind of money she had lying around. And saddles were like new cars, as soon as you used them, the resale value plummeted. "Call the police?"

"We can if you want to. They might pick up trace evidence. Could come in handy when they've got a suspect to compare it to."

Renata's stomach tightened as she realized calling Detective Gaines could tie up hours, hours maybe the killer was trashing her place or venting his or her rage on Puff.

The scene from *Fatal Attraction* flashed into her mind, the one with the kid's pet rabbit boiling on the stove. Nausea threatened. "I think I just want to go home, Cole. Get my rabbit and move him somewhere safe."

"My place. I think you should stay with me until this is over."

Renata's heart stuttered in her chest. Heat rushed in her belly, chasing away the nausea. The part of her brain that wasn't migrating to between her thighs managed to voice itself, "I'm not so sure that's a good idea." There was no way she could stay with him and not sleep with him. No way. She just wasn't that strong.

"Can't think of a better one. I'm guessing you've got the same marching orders as I have. We work this case together. It'll save time and be safer if you stay at my house. I've got the room and the rabbit is welcome."

She swallowed. Hard. Noticed he didn't say, "I've got a separate room."

It was crazy to even consider it. But where else was she going to go? She couldn't take trouble to her mother's house, didn't want to add stress, not with Jamal already causing enough worry. Same was true with her grandparent's place.

Renata delayed giving an answer, said instead, "So what's the killer after?"

"Don't know. The detectives went over Lauren's stuff before I hauled it back to the ranch with Warpaint."

*Lauren's stuff.* Ice slid down Renata's spine. Fear and embarrassment warred and the queasiness returned.

"The jacket," she said, her voice inaudible.

Renata wanted to crawl away in mortification and claim she'd been shell-shocked and not thinking straight the day before. But the truth was, she hadn't been thinking at all. She'd been reacting to cold because she didn't *do* cold. She'd been stupid. And now she got to wallow in humiliation because of it.

"Lauren's jacket." It came out a croaked whisper.

"Lauren's jacket?"

Renata forced herself to turn and meet Cole's eyes. They were standing so close she could feel his erection and the heat simmering off his body. Her cunt spasmed, nearly making her moan with the force of it.

She promised herself she wasn't going to flinch when she saw his reaction. "I took Lauren's jacket off her saddle at the P&R stop, after Ted went back to get you. My jacket was in my truck and I was freezing. That's why I used Lauren's."

Cole's poker face was in place. It was something she should probably be grateful for only she found she wasn't. Not having a clue what he was thinking was worse, especially since she had no trouble *imagining* all the things that could possibly be going through his mind.

"Where's the jacket?" he said.

It took her a second to shift gears, to remember peeling it off because it was soaking wet then exchanging it for her GORE-TEX one. "In my truck."

Cole stepped back, taking his heat and strength with him. Renata turned back to the shed, closing the door and putting the tampered-with lock back the way the killer had left it.

Neither of them spoke as they walked the short distance to her truck.

The jacket was on the floor behind the passenger's seat, dry from the truck's heater blasting as she'd driven home the night before.

"You look," Renata said. She didn't have the stomach to do it.

Cole lifted it out and put it on the seat. The outside pockets were empty but Renata knew they would be since she'd stuffed her hands into them to keep warm.

Some of the knots in her gut started to untie. Maybe...

Cole opened the jacket further, revealing the small internal pockets. They looked flat too.

Renata held her breath, not sure what outcome she really wanted. Find something? Or not?

The first pocket was empty.

The second one wasn't.

Cole used just the edges of his fingernails to pull out a folded piece of paper and open it. Renata's eyes went immediately to the little snippet of ribbon. It was red, faded, polka-dotted, a match to the ones that had caused her to turn.

Next to the piece of ribbon was a typed message. "Before the P&R. Take the turn if you want to see the original." The rest of the paper was a photocopy of a bill of sale dated two days before the ride and selling a horse known as Bold Adventure for the sum of three hundred thousand dollars. The buyer's name had been covered so it wasn't visible. The seller's signature was Vincenzo Alagna.

"Lauren's ex-husband," Renata said, her stomach a tight knot over being in possession of the note. "Wilma at the tack shop said there were rumors he'd bought an Olympic-caliber horse and maybe he and Lauren regretted getting divorced. This note means Lauren's murder was premeditated."

"Looks that way."

Renata closed her eyes and leaned against the truck. They had to call Detective Gaines. That was a given. But even running with lights and siren, it'd take him a while to get to the ranch.

Then there'd be questions. There'd be crime scene guys processing the tack shed.

It could take hours. Hours the killer might be searching her apartment for the jacket.

"I need to get Puff before we call this in," Renata said.

"I can send my brother to get your rabbit and have him pick something up for us to eat while he's at it. We can get whatever else you want from your place after we deal with this."

Cole didn't say it, but she could read between the lines. Since she'd found the body *and* the note, it was probably better if she didn't do anything suspicious, like *wait* to call it in and report the damage done to her stuff.

"I feel like a total idiot," she said, the words escaping before she could stop them.

Admiration overrode Cole's self-restraint. Christ, he'd been struggling to keep his hands off her since she drove in. He'd already given in to the need to touch her twice, to offer support and comfort in a way that felt all too natural when it came to her.

She was wound tighter than a spring but holding it together, not falling apart and becoming hysterical or clingy. She wasn't expecting him to fix things though he was finding he wanted to.

Cole put his arm around her waist and curled her so the front of their bodies were touching. There was the barest resistance in her, a tiny hesitation then a yielding that sent lust pounding through his cock.

It was all he could do to keep from groaning. "There are other ways of looking at this. I say it's a lucky break."

He didn't mean for it to happen, hadn't intended it. But there was no stopping his lips from seeking hers, covering them in a sensual exploration.

She was warm, soft. Her perfume was a tantalizing scent that made him want to trail kisses along her throat and downward to her breasts.

He moaned when her lips parted for him. Couldn't stop himself from accepting her invitation to slide his tongue against hers in a blatantly carnal imitation of what he wanted to do with his cock.

Alarm bells sounded in his head but desire overrode them. He'd run far and fast, thought by avoiding her altogether he could suppress the lust, the desire he experienced whenever he saw her. He should have known better. All he'd accomplished was to make the need for her worse.

## Chapter Five

Renata melted into Cole, a little voice in her head saying, *Give it up.*

God, how could she fight when every erogenous zone in her body was humming?

Being in his arms was devastating. Just having her nipples touching his chest was enough to send a hot surge of need straight down to her pussy.

Everything about Cole Maguire was prime fantasy material. But the reality was even more potent.

No man should be able to kiss the way he did. It felt like he was consuming her soul at the same time he was conquering her body.

There was no holding back a moan as his hands roamed her back, came around to caress the sides of her breasts before sliding downward to cup her hips and hold her tightly against his erection. He was huge. Hard. And her cunt fisted with need at the proximity of his cock.

Renata's hands speared through his hair and liked the texture of it, soft and flexible, so different from the brothers she'd dated. Her pelvis ground against Cole's, her clit erect, spiky hot like it had been when she was dreaming, before Puff's nibbling woke her up.

There was no going back. She wasn't fool enough to tell herself that. There wasn't going to be a "let's keep it professional" speech after this, not with her rubbing against his cock like a cat in heat while his tongue thrust into her mouth in a preview of fucking.

It was time to accept the inevitable, to follow through on the attraction she'd felt the first moment she laid eyes on Cole. She was going to take a walk on the wild side with a player. At least this time there wouldn't be any surprises, thinking she was hooking up with a guy who wanted the same things she did – marriage down the road, a family – only to learn otherwise.

Renata fought against peeling her shirt and bra off so she could feel Cole's hands on her skin, on her breasts. She ached to see the hunger in his eyes and watch as he kissed downward and took her in his mouth—first her nipples, then lower, so his face was buried between her thighs while his tongue proved just how good a lover he was.

She shuddered, came up for a breath before sinking into another kiss, and then another, until finally a car driving past on the frontage road between the mare pasture and the gelding pasture reminded her there was other business to take care of. "We've got calls to make."

Cole pulled away, the poker face sliding into place, as if he'd worn it for so long it was automatic. But Renata wasn't worried about being the only one left needy and hurting. Before the mask was on she'd seen the desire, the masculine promise of *later*.

He took his cell phone out and called his brother, telling him what he wanted then pausing and lowering the phone to say, "Shane wants to know if he should go straight to your place and get the rabbit, or if you'd rather him come by here and get your key first."

Renata's mouth might have dropped open, only she remembered something Cady or Erin had told her. "I take it Shane's like Lyric? He has a little trouble staying inside the lines?"

Cole's smile melted her insides. "Yeah, you could say that."

"Tell him to go ahead. I don't have an alarm system. Puff's carrier is in the closet just inside the front door." Her stomach tightened, not with the thought of Cole's brother letting himself into her apartment, but over how easy it would be for Lauren's killer to do it.

Cole relayed her answer then asked what she wanted for lunch. There was a Taco Bell on the way to the ranch, so she kept things easy by saying, "How about a 7-Layer Burrito and a Diet Coke?"

"On their way," Cole said, passing the order on to Shane along with what he wanted then hanging up. "You want to call Detective Gaines? Or you want me to?"

Renata sighed. She'd like nothing better than to use Cole as a buffer but she wasn't going to. Her bad. Her cleanup. "I'll do it."

The detective's card was in her truck. She found it on the console between the driver and passenger seat and saw the rider packet in the process. She grabbed it along with the card and was tempted to delay long enough to look at the rider list, but didn't.

Detective Gaines was in the area, probably doing follow-up interviews. She gave him directions to the ranch after telling him the reason for her call.

"Didn't sound like it went badly," Cole said.

"Meaning I don't appear to be sporting a new asshole."

His laugh released some of the tension in her shoulders though the lead weight in her stomach remained.

"How soon will he be here?"

"I'd guess less than an hour."

Cole's hand rested against the roof of her truck. "You carry a camera?"

"My good one's at home." She held her cell phone up. "You thinking to photograph the note before we hand it over to Gaines?"

Cole's smile was slow, sweet molasses. "Yeah. We could do a bit of research, too. You've got your laptop."

Renata nodded. "Go ahead and grab it." She handed him the ride information packet. "First name we should check is Nichole Maxwell. She's married to Lauren's ex. I think there's a Nichole on the rider list."

"I'll look. We might as well relocate to the picnic table."

Renata followed with the jacket, being careful not to touch the note perched on top of it. At the table she set the jacket down and draped a sleeve over the note to keep it from blowing away.

Cole had the rider list out by the time she joined him. "Number thirty-one," he said, "Nichole Maxwell. Lauren's number twenty-two. Means Nichole's entry came in later than Lauren's."

"Any other names jump out at you as suspects?"

Cole shook his head. "No, and I recognize a lot of them."

Renata opened her laptop and pulled up the history file. "This looks like the arrow I saw in Lauren's."

Cole gave a low whistle. "Not your usual choice for a murder weapon."

"No."

Renata did a search on the name Nichole Maxwell and clicked on the first link that mentioned both Nichole Maxwell and Vincenzo Alagna. "I remember her." More like she remembered seeing Nichole and thinking, *Cole's type of woman*. Blonde. Head-turning.

She studied the man. Tall, dark, Italian, and was left with an impression of cold, calculating, deadly. "You know anything about him?"

"No. But I wouldn't unless he played high stakes poker or needed Crime Tells to investigate something for him."

Renata dug a little deeper. "Vincenzo's an investment manager. How's that for a catchall? Owns his own company. Roots in Sicily. Lots of pictures of him schmoozing with politicians and wealthy people."

Cole's fingers replaced Renata's on the keyboard, typing in Bold Adventure. Another low whistle followed at the collection of links generated, one of which claimed the horse had been sold to an anonymous buyer for close to a half-million dollars. "People have been murdered for less."

"Yeah, way less. Guess owning a company that manages investments pays some big bucks." Renata grimaced, knowing generalizations about race had the power to piss her off, but was she supposed to ignore the fact that Vincenzo Alagna looked like the poster boy for *Cold-blooded Mafia Hit Man*? "You think Lauren's ex is connected to organized crime?"

"Worth looking into. Let's see if we can find out where Bold Adventure is right now." He clicked on a few links and found the answer. The horse was at Valley Training Center, in the barn run by Alex Martin.

Renata hands nudged Cole's away from the keyboard, her arm touching the length of his and making her think, *I could get used to this*, even as the voice of sanity said, *Don't!* She did a search on Lauren Hunt. Thousands of links came up. She only had the patience to scan through several pages of them before she moved on and typed in Mark Hansen's name.

There were a lot of hits. She went to the very end of them since he'd been dead for over twenty years. But even those had nothing to do with the three-day eventer who was Cora's son.

"Who's he?" Cole asked.

"A murder victim from the Nineties. His mother works at the *Journal*. He was found on deserted beach in Carmel, a gunshot victim though I don't know the details. The case was never solved." Renata shrugged, almost embarrassed to admit what she was doing. "Cora doesn't know I'm looking into it. But I figured as long as I had a hotshot detective from Crime Tells at my beck and call..."

Cole's laugh made Renata feel sixteen and completely at the mercy of hormones. "Two for one. Not a bad payout for the side pot Orrin and Bulldog had going. You'll have to hit Orrin up for a raise."

"I'll work that angle after I turn in my story about Lauren Hunt."

"You play poker?" Cole asked, the husky timber of his voice tightening her nipples until they were painful.

"Not usually with sharks," she said and was rewarded by the flash of teeth.

Cole leaned in, brushing his lips along her jaw and sending a shiver of pure need through her. "Afraid?"

"Not to take you on, Cole."

"Good," he said, his hand settling just beneath her breast as his mouth moved to capture hers.

Heat swamped her, need that had her fighting to remember why she shouldn't nudge his hand upward so her nipple could press into his palm.

She understood sexual desire. She was comfortable with it though she could still remember with complete clarity that first mortifying mother-daughter talk about a woman's obligation to take care of her needs, preferably through masturbation until she was mature enough to make the right choices when it came to men. And she'd made those mature choices when she'd gotten older, taken lovers and known heartbreak. But none of them had prepared her for Cole.

It took the sound of a throbbing engine and the spray of gravel as someone stopped fast in the ranch parking lot to shock Renata back to reality. Even then it was hard to escape the sensual haze though Cole's muttered "Shit" helped by making her laugh.

"Your brother?" she guessed, taking in the jacked-up monster truck that'd parked next to the Harley.



"Yeah, that's Shane." Cole slid from the picnic table bench and took her hand, pulling her up. "Don't let his looks fool you. Be careful. *Everything* is fair game when it comes to my family. They'll bet on where a fly is going to land or what commercial is coming up next on the TV."

"The Maguire version of anything you say or do can and will be used against you?"

Cole laughed. "Yeah, something like that. Don't get freaked if your name ends up in a betting pool."

"I won't."

"Good."

Cole stepped away, his hand slow to release hers. The truck door opened, providing a welcome distraction, one that was intensified when Shane climbed out and Renata got her first look at him.

Whoa. Cole was gorgeous. Tall, dark and handsome. But Shane was downright beautiful in a wild, beach boy fuck-me way that probably had both men and women hitting on him. Wavy, honey-gold hair to his shoulders, a puka shell necklace. And his smile...damn, maybe she was developing a thing for white men.

Shane shook her hand when Cole made the introductions. "That's some mother of a rabbit. Totally awesome."

Renata laughed. "Puff's a Flemish Giant."

Shane glanced at his brother. "I got the lunch. I also brought along a couple of replacement locks for the tack sheds. Need anything else?"

"We're good."

"Yeah, guess I can see that." The way he said it made Renata glad for Cole's warning about his family, otherwise it'd be easy to become seriously paranoid.

They went around to the other side of the truck. *Boys and their toys*, Renata thought, standing between Cole's Hog and the jacked-up, big-tired truck of Shane's.

Shane handed Cole the locks and lunch. "I'm hanging with Lyric for the rest of the day, call if something comes up." The carrier Shane hauled to the shaded picnic table before saying goodbye.

"He play tournament poker too?" Renata asked as Shane drove away. She didn't think she'd ever caught him on TV.

"Some. He doesn't always have the patience for it. Mostly he plays cash games."

They ate their lunch, something Renata regretted when the unmarked police car pulled in and her nerves tensed to the point she felt like puking. Detective Gaines got out and walked over to the table.

"This it?" he said by way of greeting, his attention already on the jacket laid out on the picnic table with the note on top of it.

"Yes," Renata said and his focus shifted lightning fast, like he was hoping to catch some expression besides extreme humiliation and mortification on her face.

"Explain to me again how this came into your possession."

Renata sucked it in, figuring this was penance for screwing up. The man wasn't stupid enough to have forgotten the details she gave him over the phone. But if he wanted to hear it again, maybe try to trip her up, she could deal with it as long as by the end of the conversation he'd satisfied himself she wasn't a suspect.

"I was soaking wet and freezing, and I still needed to load the horses into the trailer. And there was Lauren's jacket, tied to the back of her saddle. So I used it. By the time I got back to camp it was waterlogged. I traded it for mine without thinking because Jan said you were waiting to talk to me."

He dutifully wrote her explanation down, his free hand wandering up to touch the pack of cigarettes in his pocket. "And you only remembered the jacket because there was a break-in at your tack shed?"

"Yes."

He glanced at his watch. His car. The road parallel to the front of the ranch. At Cole. Then at Renata. "Tell me again why you ventured into the clearing where you discovered the body."

Renata's spine stiffened. She refused to play that game, to get twitchy and nervous when she hadn't done anything wrong. Stupid—yeah, she'd cop to that—to herself and a few close friends, but not to anything else.

She explained again about the ribbons on the trail, her error in talking herself into turning at the two red ones then staying on the trail after she'd pretty much decided she made a mistake.

"Interesting that no one else made the mistake," Detective Gaines said.

"The ribbons were gone by the time I got back. Could be no one else saw them. Or it could be everyone else realized they were ribbons left over from some other event."

"I've done some checking. You write human interest stories, a lot of them about people who are also connected to animals in some way. You've also made noises about working the crime beat, and the paper has let you cover a few murders. It occurred to me that someone might have tipped you off..." He let his voice fade away.

It was hard not to react. Renata wanted to slay him with her sharp tongue. Instead she fought him with stony silence.

His fingers lovingly caressed the unopened pack of cigarettes for a long moment. Then he checked his watch again before flipping through a few pages of his legal pad. "According to the ride manager, you left the lunch stop fifteen minutes ahead of the next rider. Is it typical to be so far ahead on a competitive trail ride?"

Renata shrugged, relaxing a little bit because she got the sense he was checking facts, maybe stalling, waiting for the crime scene guys to come along and process the tack shed. "This was only my second ride. I'm not sure if it is typical or not. My horse is a fast walker plus we did some trotting earlier in the ride because she was pretty hot.

When we got to the lunch stop we were fifteen minutes ahead of the next rider. We had to stay at the lunch stop for one hour before we could leave. That part's not optional."

She wasn't about to admit that hanging around, lusting after Cole also wasn't an option. "I left almost exactly one hour after I got to the lunch stop. It would have been fifteen minutes before the next rider *could* leave."

"Do you remember seeing Lauren Hunt leave the lunch stop?"

Renata thought she'd answered that question when he interviewed her before. She answered it again, the same way. "No. But I wouldn't have. The day of the ride was the first and only time I've talked to her. It was the first time I met her. I wouldn't have noticed her in particular."

"Her horse is boarded at this ranch." Gaines' attention roamed to Cole then back to her."

"Boarded, yes. But he's usually leased out for the cost of his upkeep."

"And from the time you left the lunch stop, you didn't encounter another rider before you discovered the body and were spotted by Mr. Maguire on the trail?"

"That's correct."

His pen began lightly tapping on the memo pad. He broke down and removed the pack of Marlboros, placing them on the scarred wood of the picnic table. He seemed to be lost in contemplation of the unopened box and the forbidden promise of nicotine, but just as he'd done earlier, his eyes shifted upward, lightning fast, only this time focused on Cole. "You hear any rumors about the deceased? Ever had contact with the ex-husband?"

Cole's smile was easy, confident. "Not that I know of."

Detective Gaines indicated the note with a slight tilt of his head. "Are you two the only ones who know about this?"

"Yes."

His gaze swung to Renata. "I'd like to keep it that way."

"No problem," she said, grateful her orders were to worry about the story angle later, after the murder was solved.

"Good." Gaines stood as an SUV pulled into the lot.

*Crime scene guys*, Renata thought, counting the minutes until she'd be free to go, feeling relieved until Detective Gaines said, "The budget doesn't allow for putting you into protective custody at this point since you didn't witness the crime."

"She's staying with me," Cole said, his cock stirring to life now that their business with the police was almost over. "It'd be helpful to know who was at camp besides those officially entered in the ride."

Gaines picked up the pack of Marlboros and slid them in his shirt pocket. "Might be. Trouble is, that information is sensitive." His stared hard at the laptop computer. "I've done some checking up on you too. The outfit you're with has a good reputation. Takes the oddball case every once in a while but mainly sticks to gaming scams."

Gaines' good old boy expression faded away. He glanced at Renata for a split second, then back to Cole. "I'd hate to find that's changed. And it sure wouldn't set too well with me if I found out you were now working a case for the *Bay Area Independent Journal*."

Cole didn't respond to Gaines' comment, but Gaines hadn't expected him to. The detective walked off to talk to the technicians without saying anything more.

"I don't think we're going to get the official time of death out of him," Cole murmured.

"No shit, Sherlock."

He laughed. Damn, he loved her smart mouth.

Cole turned his head to look at her. His eyes went to her lips and his cock hardened further, remembering the way she'd ground her pussy against him when they kissed. "They'll probably want fingerprints and hair, for reference purposes. But afterward I'm betting we can leave. They can lock the sheds when they're done and we can swing by your place for whatever you want before going to mine."

"Sounds good to me."

\* \* \* \* \*

Cole's place wasn't anything like Renata imagined it would be. She'd pictured him living in fancy digs in San Francisco or in Santana Row down near Valley Fair, or maybe Atherton, where guys like Jerry Rice lived. Instead he lived in a modest house, smaller than the one she'd grown up in.

"Bulldog owns it," Cole said, surprising her further as he grabbed her suitcase and laptop, along with Puff's litter box, and left her to tote the camera case and Puff's carrier. "He owns the houses on either side too. Shane lives to the right. Braden to the left. Around the corner are Tyler and Cruz, along with Erin's place and another cousin's. The housing comes with working for Crime Tells."

"That's a sweet deal." She paid an arm and a leg for her studio apartment but being able to live alone and have some mental space was important to her.

Cole laughed. "You've met Shane. He's trouble walking. So is Braden. Put them together with Lyric... I'm not so sure you'd think it was a sweet deal if you had to ride herd on them."

The quirk of Cole's lips sent a rush of heat to her labia, a swelling that had her fighting the need to clamp her legs together. Damn, he was getting to her.

She followed Cole into the house. The inside wasn't as modest as the outside. But it was exactly what you'd expect of a single guy — one with money or without it.

Big-screen TV. Big-assed sofa. Blow-your-eardrums-out stereo system. Clutter — the kind that said lived-in instead of pigsty.

Renata knew she was a goner when the dachshunds came waddling in. They were old, gray-faced and shaped like salamis, their tails wagging a mile a minute as they made a beeline straight to Cole.

He crouched down and fussed over them, so totally confident in his masculinity that he didn't need to own pit bulls or Rottweilers.

"Looks like they could stand to lose a little weight," she said, her heart doing a crazy skipping dance in her chest.

Cole grinned and shot her a look. "Says the woman whose rabbit weighs in at twenty pounds."

"Like I told Shane, Puff is a Flemish *Giant*. If I'm not mistaken, those are supposed to be *miniature* dachshunds."

"Okay, busted. Braden and Shane have been taking turns caring for the old farts while I've been out of town. This is the end result."

Renata set the carrier on the floor next to the dogs and crouched beside Cole. "You think they'll be okay with Puff?"

"Yeah. And if they give Puff any trouble, my money's on Puff. He'll kick ass and take names." Cole scratched one of the dogs behind the ears. "Speaking of which, this is Julius." He moved to the second dog. "And this is Caesar."

"Very classical."

"Not my doing. Erin saddled them with those names."

Cole stopped petting the dogs and they edged closer to Renata, checking her out for treats before peering into the carrier, tails wagging slightly, not maniacally.

Puff hopped forward, luxurious whiskers sliding through the grid of the cage door.

"Looks promising," Renata murmured when Puff's whiskers remained attached.

"I say go for it."

"Yeah, might as well." The experts would probably say set up a baby gate or a huge cage in the middle of the room, but Cole's dogs seemed as mellow as Puff. And if they turned Jekyll and Hyde, her money was on Puff too.

Renata opened the door, gently blocking the dachshunds when they would have crowded Puff before he could get out of the carrier. Once he was out, he sniffed the dogs. The dogs sniffed him.

He hopped off to explore the house. The dogs waddled after him.

"Good thing I didn't have time to work myself into a sweat worrying about how Puff was going to handle this," Renata said, standing and turning, the blood going straight to her cunt lips at the look on Cole's face.

"I can think of a lot better ways to work up a sweat," he said, hands going to her hips and pulling her against his hot, hard body.

"I bet you can."

## **Chapter Six**

Cole gave her every chance to pull away and say no because he couldn't. Touching her at the ranch had only whetted his appetite. Kissing her had stoked the fires of a hunger that'd been burning for months, since the day she'd driven into the ranch and he'd first seen her.

His hands glided up her sides, around to her back as his mouth lowered to hers. The little hitch in her breath, the low murmur of satisfaction when their lips touched was more potent than any aphrodisiac.

He doubted they'd leave again until they'd gone multiple rounds, and even then it was going to be tough putting clothes on. He closed his eyes as her tongue found his, stroked boldly, confidently. Christ, he couldn't wait to touch all of her, to see her standing in front of him naked.

His cock spasmed with the thought of it. His hips bucked. A moan escaped when her fingers speared through his hair, holding him in place as she deepened the kiss.

She didn't have to worry. He had no desire to escape, no intention of being apart from her.

Cole tugged at her shirt, pulling it out of her jeans and sliding his hands under it. Her skin was hot and smooth.

One kiss merged seamlessly into another, then another, until they were both panting slightly, out of breath and fevered. He wondered if Renata had any idea how beautiful she was, how desirable.

Her eyelids were lowered, making him think of a sleek cat. Her head was tilted back in a subtle invitation for him to trail his lips over her neck, downward to the slopes of her breasts, the puckered nipples, the taut belly and finally to the intoxicating place between her thighs.

She moaned when his hands went to the front of her shirt, didn't protest when he slowly unbuttoned and parted it, revealing a nearly transparent blue bra that almost sent him to his knees. Her breasts lifted, the nipples dark temptation he couldn't resist.

He bent his head, kissed her through the sheer material. Took the hard peak in his mouth and sucked.

Fire streaked through his veins, an agony of lust that poured into his cock and his testicles. Reality narrowed to the scent of her, the way she moaned and writhed, her fingers pulling the wet fabric away so nothing separated them.

He needed to slow down, but slowing down was beyond him. He'd never been so enthralled with a woman's breasts, with nipples that dared him to suck and bite, to

leave them marked, love-tender, so every movement would bring a reminder of passion, a craving to experience it again with him.

Cole straightened, lifting Renata and shoving his thigh between her legs, nearly coming at the way she cried out, rubbed her cloth-hidden clit in time to his sucking.

He wanted her to come. Needed it.

His fingers found her other nipple and claimed it possessively, worked it mercilessly until his name was a litany repeated over and over again in a husky, feminine tone of pleasure and surrender.

Her cry of orgasm should have been enough to free him to find his own. But instead it only made him hungry for more.

He kissed downward, his hands preceding his lips. His fingers loosening her jeans, curling around panties of the same sheer blue as the bra and jerking them to her ankles. Baring her and leaving him totally enthralled, mesmerized by a cunt that was smooth save for a tiny triangle of hair.

Renata kicked her shoes off, then the jeans and panties. The shirt and bra followed for good measure.

If she got any hotter she was going to melt into a caramel puddle at Cole's feet. She'd never had a man make her so horny she humped herself to an orgasm on his leg. And the way he was looking at her pussy...

Her hands tightened in his hair, telling him without words how much she wanted that wicked mouth of his to do its worst. "Don't you dare stop," she said, her cunt clenching painfully when his husky laugh sent a heated puff of air over her slick, swollen flesh.

He moved as if he had all the time in the world, leaned forward in a slow motion dance of anticipation that left her trembling, arousal sliding from her slit as the hood of her clitoris pulled back. Her breath caught when he touched his lips to her mound, reverently, as if he wanted to worship every inch of flesh, memorize it by touch alone.

His eyes were closed, dark sooty lashes against suntanned skin. His breathing was fast but he didn't hurry.

He kissed, laved, sent ecstasy shooting upward. He made her shake with need by holding back, by teasing her entrance with his tongue, torturing her clit with its nearness but never swirling his tongue over the hard knot or sucking it between his lips. She should have known a man who'd won millions by outlasting and outplaying his opponents would have the patience to completely shatter a woman with his lovemaking.

Powerful masculine hands cupped her buttocks, preventing escape. If she could have forced her hands away from his hair she would have touched her breasts, plucked and pinched at the nipples he'd left tender, in an effort to find a measure of relief. But she couldn't let him go, not any more than she could prevent her head from tipping backward, her eyes from closing as wave after wave of exquisite sensation washed over her.

She was torn between desires, unable to issue a command or form a coherent plea. She wanted to feel his lips close around her clit, wanted him to suck her with the same wild passion he'd unleashed on her nipple. But she also wanted to feel his tongue thrusting into her.

"Make me come, Cole," she said, compromising, leaving the choice up to him.

His fingers tightened on her buttocks as if everything that'd happened before was play, as if he was only just now beginning his assault on her pussy and he wanted to ensure its success.

Cole's head was spinning and his heart roaring. His cock screamed for mercy in the straightjacket confinement of his jeans but he couldn't force his hands away from Renata long enough to free it.

He'd be lucky if he didn't come when she did, if he didn't come in his pants like a teenage boy seeing his first cunt. Christ, he couldn't remember all the women he'd been with, but he knew none of them had left him feeling like this, half crazed.

Gaining his own physical release was only part of it. The other part was a caveman instinct to give Renata something she'd never gotten from anyone else.

His gut clenched, the ice-cold shiver of his grandmother's prediction sliding down his spine only to melt against the sultry feminine heat radiating from Renata's pussy. He could spend hours between her thighs, wished now he'd laid her on the couch so he could wring orgasm after orgasm from her until she was limp, exquisitely vulnerable, something he didn't think she'd be for just any man.

He felt like a hot wire ran from her hands to his dick. Every time her fingers tightened on his hair as if it'd kill her if he stopped touching her, it sent a shock to his penis.

Cole sucked on the smooth skin of her cunt, thought the tiny bush of pubic hair was Nature's stamp of perfection rather than human design. He kissed over to her clit, latched onto it and groaned when she cried out in pleasure, rubbing and thrusting, driving her hardened knob through his lips in carnal demand for him to suckle.

She was so responsive, so uninhibited. He gave her what she wanted, felt her buttocks flex beneath his hands. He sucked her hard and fast, as if he'd swallow her all way down.

Her moans turned his blood into molten lust, had his cock pulsing in time to the thrust of her clit through his lips. Her scent swamped his senses, became a trigger that would never fail to make him want to fuck when he was around her.

Need twisted in his gut. His balls pulled tight in warning and he intensified his assault, stroked his tongue repeatedly against the bare head of her clit until she finally gave him what he needed, the violent shudder of her release.

The urge to pull Renata down to her hands and knees or sprawl her onto her back was there, but so was the nearly feral desire to swallow her essence, to thrust his tongue into her channel. She made him lightheaded and feverish.



Nothing could stop him from greedily pressing his mouth to her swollen, parted cunt lips. From dipping his tongue into her, feeling her inner muscles clamp desperately on him.

Her words seemed to come to him from a distance. Pleas to stop. Commands not to stop. A tangled mix generated by a lust that threatened to transcend the physical.

He fucked her with his tongue. Knew after the first stroke he wouldn't be satisfied until she'd come for him again.

His hands roamed over the smooth, sleek globes of her ass, gripped and released as he alternated his attention between hardened clit and wet slit.

She fought to get away from him. Fought to get closer. Finally gave him what he had to have. Her cry of orgasm, the bowstring tight arch of her body followed by a soft release of tension.

He stood then, pressed his mouth to hers in a deeply carnal kiss. Shared the taste of passion and ecstasy with her.

Renata clung to him, afraid her legs would give out if she didn't. She murmured in protest when Cole ended the kiss. "You've got too many clothes on," she whispered against the sinful mouth that'd made her come repeatedly, regaining her strength at the thought of getting him naked. "Let me help you with that."

His husky laugh became a moan of pleasure when she made quick work of the buttons on his shirt and found his nipples with her fingers. They hardened for her, making her want to lean in and torment them with her teeth and tongue, but she wanted to see him first. She was hungry for that first glimpse of his cock.

She stroked downward, over smooth skin and taut muscle. He was in seriously fine shape.

His abdomen quivered as she slid her fingers along the waistband of his jeans. She dipped beneath the material, felt her cunt spasm when she encountered the wet, silky crown of his cock.

A wild pulse beat in her pussy, one that wasn't about to let her tease Cole by taking it slow, not when she needed to feel him inside her, shoving hard and deep. She undid his belt, limited herself to one stroke of her fingers down his length before she opened his fly and freed him.

Just the sight of his jutting cock filled her with raw hunger. Her knees buckled, desire driving her downward so she could take him in her mouth.

Cole nearly came from her intention alone. Christ he wanted it. But he grabbed her arms instead, stopped her only a breath away from his penis and somehow found the strength to pull her to her feet.

"I won't last," he said, fighting not to coat her belly and pussy with semen as she rubbed against his cock and just about blew his control.

"Who said you have to last?"

White fire shot straight to his penis. He tried to remember why he'd stopped her from sucking him. At the moment thrusting into her mouth was his definition of heaven.

Cole captured her lips, hoping he'd find his answer there. His hands left her long enough to peel off his shirt and kick off his shoes, to step out of the jeans and boxers.

They both groaned at the first feel of skin against skin. His cock pulsed between them, eager to be inside her, held tight in wet heat.

He guided Renata backward to the oversized sofa, eased her onto it and came down on top of her. Having her underneath him stirred primitive, possessive emotions to life, something that should have terrified him but his cock head was already poised at her entrance, bathed in honeyed arousal and lured by a siren call to thrust.

"Protection," Renata gasped, her words jarring, making no sense to him at first.

Pain screamed through his penis when he realized what she was saying. His buttocks clenched in protest as he drew back, away from temptation. "I'm clean," he said before he could stop himself, pure terror settling in as he realized what he said, what he wanted. Desperately.

He hadn't tried to get out of wearing a condom since he won his first million and realized he was a nice annuity waiting to happen. Family was important to him. Important enough not to *ever* want to father a child whose chance to belong to the Maguires and Montgomerys could be held hostage by a mother only interested in fame or fortune.

Cole reached for the drawer set in the coffee table, unsure if he'd find a rubber there. He couldn't remember the last woman he'd brought home. He rarely did it, not with Shane and Braden living on either side of him.

The sight of the foil package made his cock want to shrivel—until Renata reached over and plucked the condom out of the drawer. His penis wept then, bobbed in anticipation like a dog waiting for its master to slip the leash on so it could go out for a walk.

He groaned when one corner of the foil package disappeared between her teeth. "Hurry," he said, back arching, the muscles of his forearms taut as he held himself above her.

Watching her slide the condom onto his cock was torturous foreplay, pain and pleasure blending into a nearly unbearable mix. He shuddered between her fingers, felt his testicles pull harder and tighter against his body.

"Christ, you're killing me."

"You deserve a lot worse for getting me so turned on I humped your leg."

He bucked. In another second *he* was going to be air-humping. "Make me pay later."

"I'll hold you to that," she said, guiding him to her entrance.

A heartbeat later he was inside her, his mouth covering hers, swallowing her cries of pleasure. His hips pistoned forcefully, frantically.

It was too late for holding back, for making it last. He was too close to coming.

Their tongues tangled, their breaths mingling and bodies writhing. All reality narrowing to the pleasure of fucking, of skin touching skin, gasps and moans and finally a shout of orgasm when her channel clamped around him viciously and semen jetted through his penis in violent release.

Cole wanted to collapse on top of her but he found the strength to roll away and deal with the condom. His heart was a thunder beat in his mind as he stretched out next to her, his arm going around her waist, pulling her close so the smooth hot skin of her back was pressed to his chest and his partially softened cock was nestled against her buttocks. Christ, it was a sweet torture.

Renata's nipples tightened into hard knots when Cole's hand lazily stroked her arm, his tanned fingers looking so right against her skin. She was tempted to roll onto her back so she could see his face, see the contentment and masculine satisfaction that came after great sex. But she didn't because she didn't want to see him pulling back emotionally, getting wary even though she knew maybe she *needed* to see those things so her heart would stop dancing in her chest like this was something more than two adults having consensual intercourse.

Separating the heart and body came a lot tougher for women despite what magazine articles and television story lines said about being modern and liberated. Renata knew—could admit it to herself—that having sex with Cole was never going to get him out of her system.

It was a little late now to confront that truth head-on, but there it was. And now the question was, pull back—kind of hard to do and exceedingly awkward given they were going to be together a lot—or just live in the moment and go for it even though there was a good chance the cure for Cole would be delivered shortly and was spelled “heartbreak”.

Renata knew she'd be lying to herself if she thought she could slide out of Cole's arms now and stay out of them. She closed her eyes and shut down the part of her issuing dire warnings and arguing for emotional self-preservation. She'd never been one to cut and run because things weren't exactly the way she wanted them to be.

And the truth was, she didn't know what she wanted from Cole beyond more of what they'd just had. She didn't know him well enough to be thinking about picking out china and baby names, even if the little flutter in her belly and the race of her heart said otherwise.

“I've watched you play poker on TV,” she said. “I expected you to have a place in San Francisco or Atherton or on Santana Row.”

“This place suits me. Less worry for all of us if I keep an eye on my brothers, and before Lyric got married, on her too. Her parents are still off in some South American jungle, saving nature and photographing it. Mine are working a cruise ship. Mom's

managing tournaments. Dad's the pro all the whales on the ship swim to. But even when they're home, they've got the whole 'boys will be boys' mindset going, so they're not likely to step in and keep Shane and Braden from walking a little too far on the wild side."

A little more of her heart gave itself over to him and there was nothing she could do about it. Where a man came from didn't tell the entire story, but it told a lot, especially about what kind of a husband and father he'd make.

Maybe that's why she hadn't been utterly devastated when her friend sent her the picture of Dennis doing Vegas. Some buried part of her heart had wondered if he was really different from his brothers. Both of them had children with a couple of different women, and neither of them had married.

"You're all close?" Renata asked.

"Yeah. Very. We work together and play together. When gambling's in your blood, it's too easy to fall through the cracks otherwise."

"You talking addiction, Cole?"

"That's a hazard. I was talking more about lifestyle. It works out just fine for some people. But it's easy to lose touch with the world *outside* of playing poker and gambling. It's easy to lose the desire to be *more* than a poker player. Does that make sense?"

"Yeah, it does. I shake my head every time one of the hosts on the World Poker Tour says some 'young gun' sitting at the final table quit college just as they're getting close to graduating so they could play poker professionally. It's an amazing life experience and college will always be there, I get that. But I couldn't handle the risk. To me it'd make more sense to finish college, have that as a fallback position if poker doesn't work out."

Cole smiled against her shoulder then kissed his way up her neck, sending shivers of heated need through her. "I was eighteen and in the Bahamas to kick back before starting college when I won my first million playing in a poker tournament. Want to guess how old I was when I lost my first million in cash games?"

"Eighteen."

"Yeah. I was down to my stake money a month later and only marginally smarter."

"And now?"

Cole's laugh rubbed over her swollen cunt lips and clit like a hot tongue. "I'm much, much smarter. I don't regret the choices I made, but only because Bulldog stepped in and got me out before it was too late."

"You like the detective work?"

"Yeah, I do."

Not that she'd actually *done* much detective work, but Renata thought she might enjoy it too. In a lot of ways it was similar to researching a story.

A thought nudged at the edge of her consciousness. She let her mind drift. It went to the picnic table, the laptop and how good it felt sitting next to Cole and pulling out

pieces of the puzzles around Lauren's life. Then Detective Gaines was there, a lanky cowboy whose demeanor probably got a lot of people to open up and talk. The thought sharpened, honing her focus to something he'd said. *According to the ride manager, you left the lunch stop fifteen minutes ahead of the next rider.*

"Cole, you think Jan has copies of the timesheets? If we had them we'd know when everyone left lunch and when they got to the next P&R stop."

"We'll call her later," he murmured, his mouth settling on the spot where Renata's neck met her shoulders.

Cole sucked, bit. And something primitive came to life inside her, something she hadn't experienced since the heady days of high school when she'd finally given in to teenage hormones and explored sex. She wanted Cole to bruise her, wanted to look in the mirror and see his mark of passion and possession.

The hand on her arm moved to cup her breast. Her back arched when Cole's fingers tormented her nipple. "God, that feels so good," she whispered, loving the way he touched her.

"Tell me what else you like."

Her channel spasmed as erotic images flashed through her mind, things she'd done and things she'd only fantasized about. "If I start on that the police will have the case solved before we leave the house again."

"You could be right," Cole said, fingers tightening on her nipple, making her moan in protest when they left to stroke lazy patterns on her belly. "You wanted to know about my family, what's yours like?"

"Stressed right now, thanks to my brother. Jamal's seventeen, angry. Coasting without goals or thinking about the future."

"Just typical teenage acting out? Or is there a reason behind it?"

"My grandfather's about the only one Jamal will listen to anymore. He says Jamal's still working through Dad going from reserve status to active duty, then dying in Afghanistan. Jamal was twelve when Dad shipped out, fourteen when they came around to tell us Dad was coming home in a box." Her throat tightened and she couldn't say any more, didn't want to ruin this time with Cole by talking politics or religion and the waste of life that came with either of them.

Cole brushed his lips over her earlobe. "Cruz and I both spend time at Hector's Gym. It's in the city. Hector's got a way with teens, especially those just starting to go off the rails. You think Jamal might be open to going, I could talk to him, or Cruz could. Cruz boxed professionally. Doesn't do it now but he's sufficiently badass looking to impress a teenage boy."

Renata's breath eased out on a shaky sigh. God, he was dangerous. She could feel her heart melting. "You're pretty badass looking yourself, Cole. I'll talk to Granddad about Hector's. Maybe he can get Jamal to consider it. What's Cruz's last name?"

"Damascus. Cruz Damascus. He was a hell of a fighter. Won all of his professional fights, half of them by knockout before he hung up the gloves."

"I'll pass the information on to Granddad."

"What about the rest of your family?"

"My sister Aiesha will start grad school this year. She's got a full ride scholarship to Stanford. My mother lives at the hospital or her office. Not completely unusual but it's more intense now. That's her way of coping with Dad being gone. She's a plastic surgeon."

Cole's hand swept upward, closed over Renata's breast again. "Feels like the real thing. Perfect size and texture. My money says Mom hasn't taken the knife to you. You're beautiful as is."

Renata's cheeks warmed. Pretty she could handle, but beautiful... The crazy quivering in the pit of her stomach was a warning she didn't need about how easy it'd be to start hoping for long-term with Cole.

"You're full of it, Cole," she said, trying to distance herself from the effects of him saying she was beautiful. "Besides, Mom's not that kind of plastic surgeon."

"I thought you said I was a badass."

His fingers took control of her nipple, tweaking and pulling, twisting until she was moaning. When he captured her earlobe in his mouth and sucked, Renata pressed her buttocks against him, rubbed against his rapidly hardening cock, withstanding his sensual torture for as long as she could before covering his hand with hers, gliding it downward, over her belly, only stopping when he cupped her mound and her clit throbbed against his palm.

"You want to guess how many times I saw you at the ranch and thought about being with you like this?" he said.

"Probably the same number of times I saw you and imagined having you between my legs and riding you to a mind-blowing orgasm."

Cole laughed. "Riding me, huh?"

He found her clit with his fingers and made her hips buck as he manipulated the sensitive knob, sending streaks of nearly painful sensation through it. His soft lips brushed her earlobe, sucked, his hot tongue tracing, slipping into her ear canal.

She'd never considered her ears an erogenous zone before. But what Cole was doing to her...

"Please," she said, thrashing, pressing her buttocks against his cock. Rubbing like she was in heat, arousal gushing from her slit, coating her inner thighs and his hard penis as she tried to entice him into penetrating her.

He put protection on without her asking. But she didn't lie to herself about wanting to have him inside her without anything between them.

God, he did it for her. He filled her. Stretched her. Felt so good as he slid in and out, slowly at first then faster, harder until she cried out in release and he followed her over the edge.

They made it to the shower. Much later and after a short nap.

It scared Renata how natural it seemed for her to be with Cole. To step into the shower and use it as an excuse to run soap-lathered hands over every inch of him, then have him do the same to her.

Sex should have been the furthest thing from her mind, but his touch stirred her in a way no other man's had even come close to doing. And the sight of him hard and ready, slick from the water made her want him again.

"You take a Viagra this morning along with your Wheaties?" she asked, loving the quick flash of his smile, the way he *got* her humor.

She wrapped her fingers around his cock, rubbed her thumb over the darkened head before pulling him to her. This time she didn't say anything but "yes" as he lifted her up and slid his hot, hard penis inside her.

## Chapter Seven

Jan's office would be a neatness freak's worst nightmare. Papers, magazines and computer printouts occupied almost every available inch of space. The trash basket looked as if its contents might spill over at any moment. And purple dominated the room to the point Renata seriously considered getting rid of anything she owned in that color.

"Sorry about the mess," Jan said, clearing chairs so they could sit down.

"You holding up okay?" Cole asked.

The ride manager took a deep, shuddering breath. "Pretty well, all things considered." She started shuffling through papers, her hands shaking slightly. "Detective Gaines has the original timesheets but thanks to so many of our members being involved with computers, there was time to capture the data."

Cole claimed the papers from Jan when she found them. Renata said, "What kind of relationship did Vincenzo and Lauren have?"

Tears gathered in Jan's eyes. She opened a desk drawer and pulled out a box of tissues, liberated one of them only to ball it into her fist and stare blankly at her closed hand.

"Anything you can tell us will help," Cole said, voice gentle.

Jan nodded. "I'm sorry. It's been such a shock. I think I'm managing and then it hits me again." She dabbed at the tears. Blew her nose. "I never saw them together except in public venues, horse shows mainly and occasionally a photograph in the newspaper. So I can only tell you my impressions from talking to Lauren, and she wasn't one to share personal details. Their marriage was more like a business arrangement. Vincenzo is a very controlled individual, very goal oriented. She understood him, and I think he understood her."

"Then why'd they split?" Renata asked.

"Lauren said her goals and Vincenzo's weren't as compatible as they once were."

"So buying Bold Adventure was part of the divorce settlement?"

Jan frowned. "I'm not sure what you're talking about. As far as I know Vincenzo wasn't behind Lauren's getting Bold Adventure to ride."

Cole looked up from the papers in his hand to give Renata a subtle go-ahead. "There's a rumor that Vincenzo bought the horse for her. It's coupled with speculation they regretted divorcing, and I'm guessing here, might be getting back together."

Jan shook her head. "No. Lauren was involved with someone else. You must be mistaken about Bold Adventure. There was a prenuptial agreement. I don't know the



details, only that one existed and it wasn't particularly generous, which Lauren didn't care about. Lauren wouldn't have accepted a horse from Vincenzo after the divorce."

Renata couldn't imagine someone turning down a horse worth a half a million and labeled Olympic-caliber. "Why not?"

Jan's fingers worried the tissue in her hand, twisting it until it began to shred. "Lauren was sensitive about her public image. After growing up in the shadow of her mother's exploits... You've read about them?"

"Yes."

"Lauren was very...contained. She didn't want her accomplishments tainted. Even as a child her dream was Olympic gold." Jan hesitated, tossed the tissue into the overflowing purple trashcan. "This is speculation based on something Lauren said when I met her for lunch shortly after she married. She said someone told her Vincenzo had ties to organized crime. She didn't believe it of course, but it bothered her. Later, when they divorced, I wondered if she'd found there was some truth in the rumors and wanted to avoid having any of her success diminished."

"They were seen arguing recently, or so another rumor goes. Do you know anything about it?"

"No."

Cole said, "Who was Lauren involved with?"

"Ian, I don't know his last name."

"Any idea how or where she met him?"

"I'm sorry, Cole." Jan teared up again.

"Hang in there," he said. "Did you know Nichole Maxwell is Vincenzo's current wife?"

"Not until she showed up at the ride and Lauren pointed her out. I don't travel in the same social circles." Jan's smile was watery. "I checked the timesheets even before I got your call. Nichole was the first Open rider out of the lunch stop. Kim was the point rider for the Open division. I just talked to her. She said Nichole keeps a pleasure horse at Trent Farms. They didn't ride together, but she said Nichole was right behind her for most of the day. I don't see how Nichole could have killed Lauren."

Cole wasn't ready to write Nichole off as being completely innocent, but on the surface, he didn't have a reason to think Kim was lying in order to alibi her. Not that he knew Kim well, he didn't. But he'd known her mother Gloria for years.

Gloria was Jan's right hand in putting on the ride. She was a tireless worker when it came to the club.

"Competitive trail isn't Nichole's sport, dressage is," Cole said. "Did she RSVP to one of the club invitations?"

"Yes."

"Did Kim put Nichole's name on the list?"

"I don't know. I didn't think to ask Kim when I called her. You were out of town during the last meeting. By then I'd pretty much given up on getting a positive response from the riders on my original invitation list. Nichole wasn't on that list. At the meeting, I encouraged members to take one or two invitations with them and send them out since the club had already voted to try to get new riders involved in the sport by waiving entry fees. Gloria processed the ride registration forms using the honor system. Anyone who indicated they'd received an invitation was entered without any questions being asked about what discipline they normally participate in."

"Did you see Lauren at the lunch stop?"

"Yes."

"How did she seem?"

"On edge. At the time I thought maybe Warpaint was acting up and the ride wasn't going well. Lauren was competitive. She would expect to be in contention for a ribbon even though she hasn't been involved in competitive trail riding since I sponsored her as a Junior."

"How was Lauren at the beginning of the ride?"

"Intense. Controlled. Focused. There was a judged mount for the Open riders. I watched part of it."

Cole smiled slightly, thinking about the note they'd recovered from Lauren's jacket. He doubted it'd been in her possession at the beginning of the ride. But obviously it had been by the lunch stop. Smart.

If she'd had it earlier she might have scratched from the ride in order to confront Vincenzo about Bold Adventure. And if she'd been carrying her cell during the ride, well, good luck finding coverage anywhere on the trails. The only way to contact someone or be contacted by phone was to leave the ride site and find a spot where cell phones worked.

On a hunch, Cole asked, "Do you know what Lauren sent her lunch out to the lunch stop in?"

His cooler was distinctive, easy to spot and grab because of the decal of a full house, aces over kings, Erin had put on it. Even if Lauren's wasn't recognizable, it would still have been easy enough for someone to drop a note in before the ride started, when all the lunches were sitting on the bed of a pickup waiting to be hauled out to the lunch site.

"I've got it here." Jan's eyes watered. "Her cooler was left on the picnic table and unclaimed."

Cole grimaced slightly. Damn. If this wasn't an open murder investigation he'd think he'd gotten dealt pocket aces. But there was no way they could turn over a lunch cooler already processed for fingerprints to Detective Gaines.

"Lauren's name is on the cooler?"

"Yes. It's written on the top."

Cole's hand settled on Renata's knee. The tension there told him her thoughts were in sync with his. No way did either one of them want to show up on Gaines' radar again so soon after his none-too-subtle warning.

"You should probably call Detective Gaines or his partner and let them know about the cooler, just to be on the safe side," Cole said, passing off the timesheets to Renata in preparation for heading back to his place.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lyric pushed the paper plate away and lifted a beer bottle to her lips. "Got anything good saved on TiVo?"

Shane snagged the last piece of pizza. "Couple of episodes of *Dexter* and a documentary about a week on the job at the LA County medical examiner's office." He started to take bite then added, "Oh yeah, got some old *Don't Forget the Lyrics* too. You interested in going to a bar and doing some karaoke tonight?"

"What I'm interested in, is *doing* Kieran tonight. He's supposed to be home early."

Shane grinned, lifted the pizza in a salute before taking out about half of the slice in a single bite.

Lyric waited for him to finish chewing before saying, "Your birthday is getting close, anything special you've been fantasizing about?"

Shane's poker face would have held against anyone but her. "No," he said, standing and grabbing the pizza box, folding it and turning his back to her as he went to the trash can.

Lyric bit back a smile even though she'd been losing plenty of sleep over what she thought was going on with Shane. Since his last trip to Vegas he'd been subdued, quiet for him but that wasn't the real tell. The real tell was the way he made sure not to drink around Tyler, not to spend too much time around Tyler, like somehow he was afraid some barrier was going to drop if he did either.

She didn't blame Shane. In fact, she was really, really glad he was handling it that way.

Her loyalties were torn and having Tyler hurt would screw things up totally. It'd be better if Shane figured himself out first and got a handle on what he wanted to do about it.

Lyric could see how Calista hooking up with Dante and Benito and living an alternative lifestyle—without drawing attention to it—had opened the Pandora's box for Shane, that and whatever had happened in Vegas the last time he was there.

She was starting to have a gut feeling about the way things were going to play out, but not a strong enough hunch yet to act on. And in the meantime, Tyler meant too much to her. Hell, Shane did too. But the stakes were way different between the two of them.

Shane had Maguire and Montgomery relatives coming out of the woodwork. Tyler grew up in foster care.

Family was important to Shane but he had it without doing anything. Tyler loved being connected to Crime Tells and the extended family that came with it. He'd never risk a casual relationship. He had too much to lose. Plus he wasn't exactly out in the open about his leanings. She knew about them because Tyler showed her drawings he didn't show anyone else.

Lyric took another sip of beer and decided to let Shane off the hook. "So you think Cole's already a goner?"

Shane reclaimed his hastily abandoned seat. "Might as well send the tux to the cleaner."

"You don't own a tux."

He grinned and opened a beer. "Oh yeah."

They drank in companionable silence until Lyric cocked her head and said, "Sound's like Cole's truck. Want to go over and see how the case is going?"

"You mean check out the situation with Renata."

"That too."

Shane stood. "Sounds good. A thousand bucks says they've already done the wild thing."

"Yeah, like I'm dumb enough to take that sucker bet."

Shane grinned. "Can't blame a guy for trying."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Here comes trouble," Cole said as the door to his brother's house opened and Shane emerged with Lyric. "You remember the warning I gave you at the ranch when Shane got there?"

Renata laughed. "The bit about anything I say or do can and will be used for wagering purposes?"

"That's the one."

"Consider me duly warned. Should I expect the third degree from them?"

"Not until they get you alone, then all bets are off."

She laughed again. "I'll keep that in mind."

They got out of the truck, paused only long enough for Cole to make sure Lyric and Renata knew each other. Inside they were greeted by two dogs and a rabbit.

"Yours?" Lyric asked Renata before scowling at Cole. "I can't believe you're letting this happen to your dogs."

"Blame Shane."

The glare turned on Shane. "Food does not equal love."

"Sorry. What can I say? They're crazy about pizza."

The smile Shane gave Lyric made Cole's stomach tighten even before his brother said, "Cole can whip them back in shape now that he's in town. He and Renata can do the couple's thing, you know, walking around the block in the evening before bedtime. Maybe they'll even take Bunz along with them. How cool a sight would that be?"

"Puff," Renata corrected, not having much luck suppressing the image of Cole and her walking hand in hand, their pets a Yuppie precursor to baby carriages and strollers.

"You two need help with the case tomorrow?" Shane asked. "I'm kind of at loose ends. I wouldn't mind having something to keep me occupied."

They moved from just inside the doorway to the living room, making heat slide through Renata along with memories of what had happened there. Her eyes met Cole's. He had his poker face on but she thought he was remembering too and wishing they were alone so they could take up where they left off.

Renata bit her lip, hoping a little pain would keep her thoughts from being obvious. She better get her own poker face pretty damn soon. She had a bad feeling she was an open book to Shane and Lyric.

"We can use you," Cole said to Shane before quickly summarizing what they had so far and ending with, "Renata and I are going to swing by Valley Training Center first thing tomorrow morning and take a look at Bold Adventure, see if we can catch up with Alex Martin and find out what he knows."

Shane laughed. "Doesn't hurt that he's probably feeling very grateful to Crime Tells for not only helping Adrienne McKay get her trainer's license reinstated but for Cady getting rid of his competition by marrying Kix."

Lyric said, "Speaking of Bay Downs, I'm doing a favor for Erin tomorrow since she's still out of town with Dasan. I'm handling a photo shoot for her." An eyebrow quirked upward as Lyric's attention shifted to Renata. "You want to go to the track with me? It could lead to a great human interest story. The horse belongs to Ed and Meredith Lanier. Ed's company went public a couple of months ago and he donated a chunk of stock to a group dedicated to finding good homes for racehorses that don't make it on the track."

Renata was tempted. Solitaire was an ex-racer. Unfortunately her marching orders were to stick with Cole and concentrate on Lauren's murder. "I'd like to but —"

"Might be a good idea," Cole said. "The Laniers travel in the same circle Vincenzo does."

"You seriously looking at the ex-husband for this?" Shane asked.

"Can't rule him out." Cole captured Renata's gaze. "I can work on coming up with a last name for Ian tomorrow and rounding up some background information on Vincenzo. It's likely to be a lot of grunt work. Why don't we hook up with Shane and Lyric after Valley Training Center? You go with Lyric, see if the Laniers give you anything interesting on Vincenzo or his former or current wife. I'll take Shane for the legwork."

"Makes sense to me," Renata said, giving in, the voice of sanity approving of the decision.

Cole was like a crack cocaine addiction. The more she was with him the more she wanted to be with him.

She wondered if there was a twelve-step program covering him. It was way too easy to imagine herself standing up in a room full of beautiful woman and saying, "My name is Renata Reynolds and I'm a Cole Maguire addict."

Lyric and Shane left a few minutes later. Renata wasn't sure whether she was glad or not. Having them there was an effective buffer against her heart giving up more ground to Cole but the wait to feel Cole's mouth on her and his cock inside her was physical torture.

Her body was definitely at war with her instinct for emotional self-preservation—the part of her that'd come up with the "just say no to pain" rule. But Renata knew rational thought wasn't going to win out when he caught her hands in his then pressed her against the back of the front door, arms over her head, their bodies flush.

"I want you again," Cole murmured, not giving her a chance to say anything before his lips captured hers.

*God, the man can kiss.*

It was her last coherent thought.

*This is bad*, Cole thought, not even sure how long they'd been plastered to the back of his door and still unable to lift his lips from hers for more than a quick intake of breath.

By now the edge should be off, the curiosity about what it would be like to have sex with Renata satisfied. Instead it had intensified, turned into a compulsion to not only repeat what they'd already done, but expand on it.

He was rock hard, ready almost to the point of hurting. It would have been smarter to get her to the bedroom first, smarter still to pull out the cards and force his mind onto playing poker instead of giving in to the need to touch her.

Christ. It'd felt like Lyric and Shane were there for hours when it'd probably been forty-five minutes tops.

His cock strained upward, pushing against the material of his jeans. Images crowded in from earlier in the day, Renata freeing his penis, kissing downward with the intention of taking him in her mouth and giving him the same pleasure he'd given her.

He was afraid to free her lips. Afraid he'd start begging for what he'd denied himself if he did.

Cole moaned, thought he'd probably be dry-humping her if they were in any other position. His buttocks clenched as he remembered the feel of her legs wrapping around him in the shower, the hot wet welcome as he thrust into her that first time without a condom.

He'd never be able to suit up with her again. There was no way he'd be able to deny himself the ecstasy of fucking her without any barrier between them.

Cole forced his lips away for hers, changing the focus of his assault to her ear. "I want to be inside you."

"I want you there," she said, hips jerking as he sucked her lobe before tracing the shell of her ear with his kisses and slipping his tongue into the canal.

Her breasts were hard-tipped, firm and inviting against his chest. "I think we both have too many clothes on."

"Let go of my hands and the problem will take care of itself."

His fingers tightened where they were interwoven with hers. One day he'd like to tie her to the bed, hold her open, vulnerable and exposed. And when he did...

Christ. His gut clenched against a wave of panic. Self-preservation made him cut the thought off though it cost him.

A shudder went through him, leaving him balanced on the razor edge of need. His mouth returned to hers, his tongue pushed between her parted lips and he nearly came when she sucked instead of battling it with her own.

He released her hands because he thought he'd go crazy if he couldn't get closer to her. His arms went around her waist, pulling her a step from the door then holding her in place as his hips made small thrusts and he prayed he wouldn't come as a result of the exquisite pulse of sensation going through his cock.

When the need for air forced her to release his tongue, they were both left panting. Renata's hands went to the front of his shirt, fingers rushing to unbutton it. He shivered when she tugged it apart and immediately leaned forward to capture a nipple in her mouth.

Raw lust exploded in Cole's belly with the first suck, making him lightheaded. He placed his palms on the door to keep him upright, groaned when her fingertips brushed over the taut skin of his abdomen on their way to the front of his jeans.

She made quick work of the belt, even quicker work of the front of his pants. "I won't stop you this time," he whispered, quivering as she kissed her way over to his other nipple as her fingers curled underneath the waistband of his jeans and boxers.

Her teeth gripped him, sending white-hot lust from his nipple straight through his shaft just as she tugged his clothing downward, freeing his cock and testicles.

He moaned when her tongue soothed the nipple, bucked when she bit down again, sending another jolt of need and holding him completely enthralled by the display of feminine power.

"Please," Cole said, knowing he'd beg harder if she demanded it, that he'd promise just about anything if only she'd kiss downward and take him in her mouth.

## Chapter Eight

Renata released Cole's nipple in favor of crouching down in front of him. "Damn you're gorgeous," she murmured, her eyes roaming over his jutting erection, the primitive part of her coming to life at the proud display of fierce masculinity.

His penis bobbed under her perusal, glistened where arousal leaked through the slit in its head. And his testicles... They hung like a stallion's and made her want to play the part of mare.

She imagined being on her hands and knees, spreading her legs and letting Cole come at her like a stud in a mating frenzy. Her cunt spasmed in reaction, soaking her panties.

Her nipples went so hard and tight she couldn't stand the feel of anything against them. And the thought of having them hanging free as Cole pounded into her was enough to have her peeling her shirt and bra off in preparation.

A thrill went through her when his hips jerked and more arousal escaped from his slit. She'd have stood then and stripped out of the rest of her clothing but she knew where that was going to lead and she wanted something else first.

She wanted to put her mouth on him. To blow his mind with pleasure and leave him enslaved, needing it from her again and again. Craving it *only* from her.

Renata leaned forward, brushed her lips over silky steel and reveled in the way he moaned, bucked. Her hands slid up his thighs, felt hard muscle tensed with anticipation.

God he was something else. Decadent. The lack of a tan line proof of just how sensual a creature he was.

She could imagine him lying out in the Bahamas, sprawled naked on a lounge chair. And she hungered to be the one lying naked next to him, the one he straddled and took care of with coconut-scented sunscreen on his hands.

Her pussy throbbed from wanting him. Her clit pressed against sheer panties and too-stiff denim.

His groan made her glance upward and lust pooled hot and powerful in her belly at the raw need of his expression, the taut features and half-closed eyes. She could make him beg. The truth of it was in every line of his body, in the subtle vibration as he fought to hold himself still.

One day she *would* make him beg. Maybe even tie him to the bed and make him see she was the only —



Renata cut the thought off ruthlessly by circling his cock with one hand and capturing his testicles with the other, by leaning forward and losing herself in the scent and taste of him, in the feel of him beneath her lips, and then sliding through them.

It became a sensual battle. Him fighting to last as she used the suction of her mouth and the lash of her tongue, the stroke of fingers on the smooth skin of his sac to become the victor.

He panted her name. Thrust in a controlled rhythm until pleasure led to frenzied movement and his defeat. With a shout he came, smooth motion giving way to uneven jerks and finally to a partial collapse against the door.

Renata practically purred at the sight of him. Eyes closed with his breath shuddering in and out of his chest violently. Jeans and boxers in a tangle around his ankles.

Any other man would have been done, if not for the rest of the night, then at least for the rest of the evening. Not Cole. As if he felt her eyes on him and knew she still knelt close enough to take him in her mouth again, his cock started to harden.

She stood and kicked her shoes off. Removed the rest of her clothing and felt a primal thrill when his eyes opened and filled with masculine hunger. He looked at her as if he was memorizing every inch so she could star in his fantasies when they weren't together.

Cole pushed away from door and finished stripping. Stood with his legs slightly parted. Hard again. His testicles hanging beneath his thick cock, reminding Renata of her earlier thoughts, of playing mare to his stallion.

"You like it raw, Cole?" she asked, not waiting for him to answer before she turned her back to him and dropped onto her hands and knees, looked over her shoulder as she spread her thighs, letting him get a glimpse of her wet slit.

He was on her in a heartbeat. Up and over her, his cock lodged at the entrance to her pussy before she could do more than gasp.

"I like it anyway I can get it with you," he said, shoving himself into her and taking her as if the most important thing in his world was filling her with his seed.

Renata gave herself over to the pleasure, to the fantasy. She was primitive woman, her breasts unbound and hanging beneath her in a symbolic display of fertility.

She was powerful woman. One strong enough to entice a male in his prime to mount her, to rut on her with savage intensity, to make her scream in ecstasy as her channel tightened on him violently and milked him of his semen until they were both weak and sated, reduced to a tangle of arms and legs on a hardwood floor.

"You got a thing about having sex anywhere except bed?" Renata said long minutes later, and only then because Puff had come to investigate and was tickling her with his whiskers.

"Why don't we find out?" Cole said, his voice husky and dangerous. "How about this, we hit the shower and after that we eat some dinner and take care of the pets, then

we crawl under the covers and maybe watch a movie on the big screen in my bedroom, see what happens between the sheets.”

She pressed her buttocks against his cock and took pleasure in the soft sound of his moan and the way his penis instantly started to harden. “I like the way you think, Cole.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Waking up in Cole’s arms with the sun streaming in through the windows was pure heaven—and a surprise. Renata hadn’t figured him for the kind of man who curled around a woman and kept her pulled against him snug and tight during the night. Then again, maybe she’d worn him out so thoroughly with lovemaking that he didn’t have the strength to roll away.

A slow, satisfied smile formed on her lips. And if the hardness of his morning wood was any indication, he’d want a piece of her before they officially started their day.

The tightening of his arm around her waist and the subtle rub of his penis against the cleft of her ass signaled he was waking up. The touch of lips to the spot where her neck met her shoulder sent liquid heat to her nipples.

“I think we answered the question about whether or not I like it in bed,” he murmured, hand gliding upward to take possession of her breast and make her moan.

“Maybe you better remind me what we decided.”

“I can do that.” He rubbed his lips back and forth over the erogenous zone she’d rediscovered because of him, sucked and let her feel the hint of his teeth on her shoulder.

“Cole,” she said, pressing her breast against his palm and canting her hips so he could slide into her for a slow, sweet morning fuck, an echo of the one they’d had on the couch the day before and just as dangerous to her heart.

Afterward they showered and dressed, tended their pets and ate breakfast before getting into Cole’s truck and heading to Valley Training Center.

“You ride as a kid?” Cole asked as they neared their destination.

“At camp a couple of times. Owning a horse when I grew up was something I always said I wanted to do, but I kept putting it off. Then I hit my twenty-fourth birthday and looked at my list of life goals the way I do every year on my birthday. That’s something I got from my dad, the life goals list. He was really big on it.” She had to stop because her throat closed up remembering how he’d say, “Life goes by fast. Before you know it’s over and you never got even half the things done you said you wanted to do.”

Cole’s hand found hers, shooting emotion straight to Renata’s heart with his sensitivity. She cleared her throat, continued, “Anyway, I was faced with the hard, cold truth that I’d only seriously pursued and accomplished one of my goals since he went to Afghanistan, getting a job as a reporter. I decided it was time to put up or shut up

about the horse thing. So I signed up for riding lessons, found I hated using lesson horses and felt like I'd get further *owning* a horse, so I took the plunge."

She didn't mention Dennis, and how getting a horse dovetailed perfectly as part of her therapy for getting over his betrayal. Thank God what happened in Vegas didn't really stay in Vegas—not in the age of cell phones equipped with cameras.

A picture was worth a thousand words. Having a friend send her one showing Dennis in a club with a barely dressed woman on his lap and his hand disappearing under her skirt hadn't needed even a single word.

"Solitaire's a nice mare," Cole said, distracting her from her thoughts. "She seems pretty sane."

"I got lucky with her." Renata smiled at the memory of seeing the liver chestnut Thoroughbred with the flaxen mane and tail for the first time. "I took one look at her and said, 'If she's affectionate at all, she's going to be mine.' She had a sore on her back, where the saddle would sit, from playing in the pasture with other horses and running under a low tree branch before I got there. But she nickered a greeting, came right over and nuzzled me and I didn't want a reason to say no. I bought her without even riding her first. How's that for crazy?"

"I call it gutsy and it doesn't surprise me at all coming from you."

"Damn, Cole, you sure know how to go to a woman's head."

"Yeah, and you've perfected the art of keeping me hard and ready." He put her hand on the bulge at the front of his jeans. "It makes sense to split up for part of the day, but at the moment I'm sorry I suggested it."

"Poor thing." She cupped him through the fabric of his jeans, rubbed him until his hips lifted subtly and his breathing quickened.

"Keep that up and I'm going to drive the truck off the road."

"Then maybe I'd have to unzip you and give a little mouth-to-cock resuscitation."

His laugh edged into a moan as Valley Training Center came into sight. "Remind me never to start anything with you that I can't finish."

"It works both ways," Renata said, clamping her legs together and pulling her hand away from where it very much wanted to stay.

She turned her attention to the training center. She'd visited once, taken a grand tour and been impressed and intimidated at the same time. Not so much by money—though she'd be lying if she said she hadn't noticed money wasn't an issue, probably wasn't even a consideration for the people who boarded and trained at VTC—she'd been overwhelmed by the riding expertise.

Alex Martin couldn't have known it, but the interview with him, the trip to Valley Training Center had been a turning point—a "piss or get off the pot" moment as her grandmother was known to say after a few glasses of wine. The next time Renata looked at her life goals list, she'd signed-up for riding lessons and stopped saying "one day."

"I'd be surprised if Alex isn't here," Cole said as he parked the truck near the barn housing the former Olympian's client horses. "But even if he's not, we can nose around a bit and find out if Lauren and Nichole boarded their competition horses in the same barn or were seen interacting."

Renata nodded. "It's possible they came and went without seeing each other."

From her tour, she knew the place was huge. Training *center* summed it up. There were several covered arenas, jumping courses, a training track, a veterinary facility and a swimming pool built specifically for horses.

Adjacent to the training and veterinary facilities were multiple barns, each leased from the training center and operated by a different person, with each barn "owner" setting policies, collecting training center usage fees, and deciding which horses and owners would be allowed to board in their facility.

Renata had come out on a story about Alex Martin, a two-time Olympic medal winner in dressage. Not that she could tell by looking at him, but he'd been injured in a car wreck when a drunk driver crossed the median and plowed into him headfirst.

His injuries were severe enough to have doctors telling him he might never walk again, much less ride. Alex had proven them wrong, beating the odds for the most part, though the accident ended his competitive career.

When she'd interviewed him, he admitted to having dark days. But overall she'd been left with an impression of a man happy with his life, and if the wins his clients were racking up were any indication, he was an excellent teacher and coach.

They found Alex in his office. He ushered them in and told them to grab a seat. Cole didn't waste any time asking, "What can you tell us about Bold Adventure?"

Alex's eyes practically glittered with interest. "If I didn't know better, Cole, I'd think you were investigating a murder instead of your usual crimes against casinos. But in answer to your question, Bold Adventure is an incredible horse, truly amazing."

"Who's officially listed as his owner?"

"Interesting you should ask that. A Detective Gaines was here yesterday with that same question. And since he didn't forbid me from repeating what I told him, I will. Lauren Hunt was the person responsible for paying the fees and making emergency decisions related to him. Did I think she actually owned him? No. And though I heard the whisper going around that Lauren's ex bought him for her, I didn't put any stock in it. I suspected a wealthy sponsor who wanted to remain anonymous had purchased the horse. So you can imagine my surprise when Vincenzo Alagna's current wife, Nichole, appeared this morning, bill of sale in hand."

"Bill of sale?" Cole asked, his voice without a hint of emotion when Renata could only barely hold back a squeal of excitement.

Alex's eyebrows lifted. "Yes. Proving her husband bought the horse for a tidy sum."

Renata almost slumped in her chair with disappointment. Cole said, "Nichole wants to keep Bold Adventure in training with you?"

"Yes. He'll be wasted on her quite frankly. I've seen her ride. She keeps a horse over in Ruth Davies' barn."

"You agreed to keep the horse on?"

"Yes. I'm gambling Vincenzo will make more satisfactory arrangements for the horse. He did buy the horse for Lauren to ride after all, and not for Nichole. And just in case you're in the neighborhood, Nichole's first session with me is scheduled for tomorrow afternoon at three. I'd expect her to get here around two."

Cole nodded. "You happen to have Lauren and Nichole's addresses handy?"

Alex pursed his lips for a second before saying, "I don't see any harm in sharing them. You'd no doubt find the information easily enough elsewhere." He opened a desk drawer and pulled out two folders, opened them and wrote down the addresses.

Cole picked up the paper Alex pushed in his direction and slipped it into his pocket. "How well do you know Vincenzo?"

"I've interacted with him several times but I wouldn't claim to know him at all."

"What makes Bold Adventure so special?" Renata asked, wondering if he was worth killing for or if the real motive was jealousy and insecurity—assuming Nichole had something to do with Lauren's death.

"Everything. His movement. His attitude. His innate ability and intelligence. His persona. I could go on and on. Trust me. He's Olympic talent. He's one of the finest horses I've seen in a long time. With the right rider—insert the name Lauren Hunt here—and proper training, vis-à-vis, me, it was a foregone conclusion he'd be a top-notch international competitor."

"Any rumors going around, specifically about Lauren, Nichole and Vincenzo?" Cole asked.

Alex rolled his eyes. "There are always rumors going around. But of interest to you? Nothing about Lauren and Nichole. If they encountered one another at the training center it didn't become fodder for the gossip mill. I already mentioned the one about Vincenzo purchasing Bold Adventure for Lauren. Along that same vein was speculation they regretted divorcing and were considering a reconciliation, which would of course make the current Mrs. Alagna an ex."

Cole shook his head. "It sounds like Peyton Place around here, Alex. You have a take on Vincenzo and Lauren? Someone else told us Lauren was involved with a man named Ian."

"I don't know the name and she didn't bring anyone with her to the barn. But in consideration for what Cady and Crime Tells did for Adrienne, I'll ask around. And as far as Vincenzo and Lauren go..." He shrugged. "I was way off base about Bold Adventure. I'd hate to hazard a guess, though I'll confess I'm dying to know what

Crime Tells involvement in all this is. I almost dread hearing the rumors your visit is going to generate."

Cole cracked a smile. "You've been around horse people your entire life, you'll handle it."

Alex laughed. "A little notoriety is good for a man's reputation."

It was a long shot but Renata asked anyway, "He's dead now, but have you ever heard of a rider named Mark Hansen?"

A look of surprise crossed Alex's face. "Now that's a name from the past. He was my uncle's chief rival 'back in the day'. I believe my uncle still has tapes of Mark riding." Elegant eyebrows lifted. "If I'm not mistaken, Mark also met an unfortunate and untimely end."

"He was murdered on a beach in Carmel. The case was never solved."

Alex stood. A few steps took him to a bookcase filled with photo albums. He ran his finger along several book spines. "Ah, here it is. 1991. The year Magic Johnson told the world he had HIV and rock lost a legend, Freddie Mercury, to AIDS-related pneumonia."

He flipped through the album, finding the picture he wanted before setting the book down on the desk in front of Renata. She recognized Mark immediately, though not the horse with a ribbon hanging from its bridle or the man standing on its opposite side and holding a silver trophy.

She tapped the stranger's image. "Who's this?"

"Lew Kingston. He was a big sponsor for quite a while, three-day eventers with Olympic promise mainly, though he dabbled in other areas also. My uncle was fond of saying Lew had more money than he knew what to do with and would have been a lot better off with less of it."

Renata studied the man in the picture. He was older than Mark, not attractive, at least not to her. But Alex's lead-in had her reporter instincts buzzing. "Any significance in pointing out Freddie Mercury's death and Magic Johnson's coming out of the closet with HIV?"

Alex laughed, a rich honest sound. "I thought you'd catch that. My uncle was naturally reticent about sharing the details, but I remember him saying quite clearly once that he was afraid Lew's money would ultimately come with strings and he preferred not to be attached to them."

"Are you saying Lew was sponsoring Mark and Mark didn't mind the strings?"

"That I can't tell you. As incomprehensible as it seems to us now, given Gay Pride days, gay advertisements in the personals, and the push for gay marriage, back in those days being in the closet was the norm. Was Lew gay? Probably, though I doubt openly. And as to Mark?"

Alex shrugged. "I don't know. I was a hero-worshipping twelve-year-old at the time, doggedly following in my uncle's footsteps. For the most part my world back then

was made up almost entirely of horses, though I do have a memory of the United States being wrought with fear and prejudice in that first decade of the AIDS epidemic. Freddie Mercury's death left its mark because becoming a rock star was my fallback position if Olympic gold wasn't in my future. The year Queen's lead singer died there was enough fervor over AIDS to make even a twelve-year-old boy take notice of what was going on around him."

Renata nodded. She'd been eight to Alex's twelve, anxious that year because her parents were fighting about her father staying in the Army and Jamal was about to arrive, but she'd still been aware of the headlines and fear over AIDS. "Does Lew still sponsor horses and riders?"

"No. He's dead." Alex's eyebrows drew together. "Died quite a while back if I remember correctly."

"What about Mark's groom, Brian?"

Alex chuckled. "Now *he* made an impression on me the first time I saw him. He was pure Berkeley. Long hair and sandals. Sandals for god's sake, around horses! A hippy born about twenty years too late. But he cleaned up well and fit in, had a way with horses I admit to being a bit envious of since I didn't think he'd know a curry brush from a hair brush given my initial impression. And before you ask, he didn't groom for anyone else or hang out around the horse scene after Mark's death."

"Do you remember his last name?"

"Elliot. Brian Elliot."

"Was he from Berkeley? Or did he just make you think 'Berkeley'?"

"Good question." Alex drummed his fingers lightly on the desk. "I think perhaps he was from that great bastion of liberal flower children."

Renata laughed. She couldn't exactly argue with his assessment. The Berkeley City Council and the UC Berkeley students provided a lot of fodder for news stories, especially of the antiwar variety.

Alex checked his wristwatch and sighed. "As much as I've enjoyed this, duty calls. One of my clients should be warming up in the arena."

"Thanks for talking to us," Cole said.

"My pleasure. In case you're interested in seeing him, Bold Adventure should be in his stall. He's to the right, halfway down the aisle and on the left-hand side."

By silent accord Renata and Cole headed in that direction. When they stopped in front of the beautiful chestnut's stall, Renata said, "Good thing you were doing the talking when Alex mentioned the bill of sale. I was a second away from doing a victory dance."

Cole circled her wrist with his fingers and tugged her closer. "Sometimes you're dealt a winning hand right off the top, but usually you have to sweat the cards."

"We didn't really get anything new from him, not related to Lauren's murder anyway."

"Not true. We got confirmation in a roundabout way that Vincenzo didn't want it known he'd bought the horse. What doesn't play right is Nichole showing up this soon after Lauren's murder and bringing Bold Adventure's ownership out in the open."

"It's a pretty ballsy move if she had something to do with the murder."

"Yeah. I have to wonder what Vincenzo thinks about her going public with the information."

Ice slid down Renata's spine as she pictured Lauren's ex. He did not look like a man to cross. "Guess by the time we hook up again later you'll know more about him."

"Or you will. Just don't let Lyric get you into trouble."

Renata snorted. "Or get me to tell tales about you?"

"That too." Cole glanced around then pulled her into his arms. Her labia grew flush and slick at the heat in his eyes. The poker face he'd worn in Alex's office was gone. "You want to guess what I'm thinking about?"

"Sex."

"More specifically."

Renata cocked her head, mentally replaying the day's timeline, from waking up in his arms through the trip to Valley Training Center. A grin settled on her face as she remembered promising to give him a little mouth-to-cock resuscitation if he ran off the road because her hand was caressing him through his jeans.

"Parking and making out in the truck is shades of high school, Cole," she teased, but damn she was tempted. Being with him was like that first rush of sexual discovery and emotional possibility. "Maybe if you ask me nicely when we get back to your place, I'll put my mouth on you."

His laugh was dark as sin. "Maybe I'll put my mouth on you at the same time."

"Oh yeah, I'd like that."

Their lips met, tongues seeking, twining. Bodies pressed tightly together, their intentions sealed in a kiss that made anticipation painful.



## Chapter Nine

Shane didn't bother with subtlety. Not much point in it. One, Cole was too good a detective not to notice he was under the microscope, and two, they were closer than most brothers, despite Cole being a law-and-order type.

"Don't ask about anything not directly related to the case," Cole said.

Shane grinned. Cole's problem was that he was the type of gambler who liked to calculate the odds a hundred different ways. Yeah, from the outside his play might look overly aggressive and risky, but that was an illusion.

Cole liked control. And marriage...not a good bet in Cole's books, despite how things had turned out okay with their parents over the long haul.

"I was only going to say I feel for you, brother." God's truth he did. Not that he didn't enjoy seeing Cole fighting against the fate Grandma Maguire predicted for him, but it was already pretty clear Cole was a goner.

Hell, if he could have seen himself saying goodbye to Renata and watching her take off with Lyric... Oh man, pathetic, really.

And now? When they should be coming up with a plan of action, Cole was prickly and silent, like a man wrestling a serious hard-on and trying hard to deny there was only one woman who could help him with it.

"You could always throw in the towel," Shane said, taking advantage of Cole's hands being on the steering wheel. "Save your energy for fighting other battles. Like what color to paint the bedroom and what to name the kids."

Cole tapped the brake. "You want to walk?"

"Just saying—"

"Don't."

Shane relented. Hell, he had his own shit to work out.

Cady getting married was a slam-dunk. She'd been a trip to the altar waiting to happen even if she didn't see it in herself. Erin was the same way, and Shane's money was on Dasan being the one to pull it off.

But Lyric, that still blew his mind. Before that'd happened, even the thought of playing house with someone was enough to give him a case of the sweats. Then came Calista, a kindergarten teacher for god's sake, having the guts to go for what she wanted, two men in her bed, permanently.

Shane's stomach tightened, his mind shying away before he could contemplate what he wanted for himself. "So what's the plan?" he asked, hoping conversation would keep the fantasies at bay.

Cole tried to force his thoughts away from Renata. Christ, he should be more than ready for a little space, a time-out to reestablish boundaries. Instead he was remembering conversations and reliving the sex, practically counting the minutes until they were back at his place again and going at it like newly –

*Shit!*

Shane's snicker sent a string of silent curses through Cole's mind and told him the lag in answering the question was a guaranteed tell as to what was occupying his thoughts. His jaw clenched when his brother followed up by saying, "You do have a plan, right?"

"First stop is Lauren's apartment. We're almost there."

Cole could feel the deepening of Shane's amusement. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Shane lift his hands and wriggle his fingers like a safe-man limbering up before tackling a bank vault.

"Now I see why you invited me along for the ride."

Cole snorted. Like his brothers or Lyric had to work at gaining access very often, not since Braden took a set of master keys off a guy in Vegas during a poker game. "We'll play it straight if we can." Straight was the way he preferred it.

"Whatever you say. It's your case."

Cole pulled into Lauren's apartment complex and drove past Lauren's place to be sure the cops didn't have it staked out. On the second pass he stopped.

"Wait for my call," he said as Shane got out of the truck.

"I hear you." Which for his brother didn't necessarily mean, "I'll listen to you."

Cole let it go in favor of finding the rental office and seeing if he could fast-talk whoever was there into letting him into Lauren's apartment. He pulled his cell phone out and speed-dialed Shane's number. When Shane picked up, Cole said, "I'm going in," then carefully put the phone back, keeping the line open.

There were perks to being well known, thanks to televised poker. Cole felt the odds of playing it straight go up sharply when he entered the rental office and the man sitting behind a desk immediately rose to his feet and said, "You look like Cole Maguire."

"I am." For good measure Cole fished out the photo ID issued by the Bureau of Security and Investigative Services.

The man glanced at it and said, "Oh yeah, I forgot you did that when you weren't playing poker. Guess it makes a nice break from sitting at the table day after day." He paused and offered his hand. "Lance, Lance Davies. I caught you on TV during the World Series of Poker. That was a bad beat Phil put on you at the final table. Talk about catching lightning in a bottle, you had him until he got lucky on the river."

"That's poker for you."

"Ain't it the truth. So what brings you here?"

"I'm working on a case and hoping I can get a look inside Lauren Hunt's apartment." Even before he'd finished the sentence, Lance was shaking his head.

"I'd like to help, seriously, but I can't. Best I can do is not mention to the cops that you came around asking to be let in. Detective Gaines – you know him?"

"Sure. He's Homicide."

"He asked me to keep an eye on Lauren's apartment. Report anyone I saw going in." Lance's voice dropped. "I think he's wondering if the ex-husband's got something to do with the murder. Detective Gaines showed me a picture and asked if I'd seen the guy around. I said yeah, I think I might have seen him a couple of times. I can't be sure. I mean, people coming and going, not causing any trouble, I'm not paid to stick my nose into a tenant's business unless it's a potential problem for management. I didn't know who the guy was and Detective Gaines didn't tell me, but it was easy enough to find it on the Internet."

"Lauren have anyone else over? Maybe another man?"

Lance shrugged. "I don't know. I don't have line-of-sight to her complex. So I can't say who comes and goes. The truth is I've hardly ever seen her."

"Thanks for the information. I appreciate it."

"You're welcome. I'm sorry about not being able to help you out with the other thing."

"No hard feelings, Lance. You're just doing your job." No reason to push it. Shane would already be in by now.

Lance hesitated. Cole waited for the inevitable question, giving Lance plenty of time to work up the courage for it.

"You got time for a few hands of poker, maybe give me a few pointers?"

"Sure. I'd be happy to."

\* \* \* \* \*

From the way Cole talked Renata half expected an inquisition on the drive to Bay Downs. Instead she found herself interviewing Lyric on what she did outside Crime Tells, the pet detective sideline that'd led to Lyric meeting her vice-cop husband Kieran, and to Julius and Caesar ending up with Cole.

"There are a lot of human interest story possibilities in what you do and a good chance to work in some information about keeping pets safe," Renata said. "I wish I could have scooped the story on the dachshunds but it's probably better Celine VanDenbergh at the *Tribune* did. I like her stuff, but it reads a little too pro-animal-rights-extremist for the *Journal*."

"Talking human interest, did Cole tell you anything about Grandma Maguire?"

Renata could hear mischief in Lyric's voice and a glance at Lyric's face told her she wasn't imagining it. She knew better than to say there hadn't been time to talk about

much of anything besides Lauren's death, because that still left a whole lot of hours for nonverbal and very physical communication.

"No. He hasn't mentioned her. I don't remember Cady or Erin saying anything either. What's the story angle?"

"Grandma gets premonitions, like a movie clip rolling out. She's pretty much always right about what she sees. I think Cole was in one of her visions a couple months back. You should ask him about it. I don't know the details but it sure as hell spooked him."

Lyric was definitely amused. Seriously amused. Enough for Renata to wonder if Lyric was setting her up.

"Give me an example of one of your grandmother's premonitions."

"The scariest one has to do with my parents. This happened four years ago. You might know this from Cady or Erin, Dad's a biologist working to preserve habitat around the world and Mom always goes with him. She's an amazing nature photographer, as in *National Geographic* stuff. Anyway, they were at a hotel in Columbia, supposed to head out the next day with a group of other people involved in saving wildlife and ecosystems. Only Grandma had this premonition that if they did, something bad was going to happen."

Lyric paused for effect and Renata shivered, hooked despite Lyric's earlier amusement and the possibility Lyric was going to say *Psych!* at the end of her story. "What'd your grandmother see?"

"Well, here's the thing. She didn't see *what* was going to happen *in* the jungle. But the way it played out, it was like a camera had been positioned at the jungle entrance to make a time-lapse movie.

"Grandma saw them all go in. She knew it was supposed to be a short trip, except by the way the lighting changed and the rains came and went, she could tell a lot of time had passed. Then when people from the group started coming out, they came one by one. They were thin and haggard, their clothes ragged, and she could see by their expression that they were glad to be coming out of the jungle alive."

Lyric cut a look over at Renata. "My mother was the only woman on the trip. She's beautiful. Erin looks a lot like her. In Grandma's premonition, Mom was the only one in the group who didn't come out of the jungle."

"This is turning into one hell of a scary campfire story," Renata said, icicles pricking her spine. "What'd your folks do?"

"After Dad got the phone call from Grandma he went to the expedition leader and told him he had a bad feeling about going into the jungle and they should postpone the trip. He tried to talk the others out of going too. But that's the downside to scientists, they can get totally anal about needing proof. My parents were on a plane out of the country the next day. The others went into the jungle and ended up being taken hostage by anti-government guerrillas. It took two years before the last of them was ransomed and released.

"Shit."

"Yeah. Kidnapping for ransom is big business in a lot of places and getting bigger. That's one thing I really hate about what my parents do. But they can't *not* go, that'd be giving up a dream just to play it safe. What they do is more than a job. It's a calling with them, a passion."

"Interesting stories there too."

"Lots of them and they're always happy to talk to reporters. Of course, said reporters usually feel like their brains are leaking out of their ears from too much information. My parents will be thrilled when they meet you. You might even avoid the information dump altogether since it won't be a 'captive reporter' situation." The amusement was back in Lyric's voice as she added, "For the record, my money is on you. Anyway, ask Cole about Grandma Maguire's prediction."

Despite the sentence sequence, Renata had the distinct impression Lyric wasn't talking about her parents when it came to placing a bet. Her gut said Lyric was talking about the long term with Cole.

No way was Renata going there with Lyric. Hell, she wasn't even brave enough to go there with herself.

"I'll ask him," Renata said, leaving the rest of it alone.

Lyric maneuvered the Jeep into a parking spot and they got out of the car. "This is known as the backside," she said as they approached a booth housing a security guard. "It's like a small city, though it's shrinking thanks to Internet gambling and Indian casinos. They've got a cafeteria, church, doctor and dentist's office, a tack shop, alcohol and drug rehab program, and a recreation center."

Erin's clients, Ed Lanier and his wife Meredith, were waiting at the guard station. Lyric made the introductions.

"We've known Orrin for years," Ed said as they headed toward the area where the horses were stabled. "He's a brilliant businessman to have positioned the *Journal* as a niche publisher. So many of the nation's newspapers are struggling to stay alive."

Renata nodded. "One of the reasons I decided on the *Journal* was because of the stability and the potential for a growth in circulation rather than the decline other newspapers are seeing. Even if we stopped dropping papers off at coffee shops, as the population grows older and more people spend time in hospital and doctor waiting rooms, there's not going to be a shortage of audience. Most of those people love the human interest and local focus. Plus it's a lot cheaper to deliver to buildings and complexes rather than residences, and to cut costs by printing fewer copies on Saturday and Sundays."

Meredith surprised Renata by saying, "I saw your byline yesterday. I hope you'll do a human interest piece on Lauren Hunt. By all accounts she was an extraordinary rider with a bright future. I didn't know her, but one of the charities Ed and I support is the therapeutic riding program on Woodside Road. Lauren was involved with it personally, I believe."

"I definitely plan to write a story about her," Renata said, making a mental note to check into the riding program and get a different take on Lauren. "I heard something about you and Ed donating stock to a group dedicated to finding good homes for race horses that don't make it on the track. That's sounds like a story with some excellent potential."

"We've been so fortunate, in life and business," Meredith said. "Giving back is important to both Ed and me. We don't like to make a fuss about it. Neither of us thinks good works should be used to draw attention to ourselves. But if you'd like to learn more about some great local charities, I'd love to meet sometime for coffee. Ed and I are very cautious when it comes to donating money. We vet the organizations carefully." She laughed. "In fact, we've used Crime Tells more than once to investigate potential beneficiaries. That's how we initially met Erin and then Cady."

"I'll get your number from Lyric and give you a call, maybe closer to Thanksgiving. People seem a lot more open to stories about giving then."

"I look forward to it."

They moved deeper into the backside. Renata's fingers itched to pull out her camera. "Do you think it'd be okay if I take some pictures as we walk?" she asked. The grandstand area would be fair game, but given the guard stationed at the backside entrance she didn't want to risk doing anything that might get her ejected or Lyric in trouble.

"I don't see why not," Ed said. "But before you use any of them in an article, I'd appreciate it if you'd check with track management, just to make sure they don't have an objection."

"No problem."

They made a series of turns, traveling past stalls housing racehorses. Renata captured what pictures she could without causing a delay.

The Lanier's trainer, Mannie, saw them approaching and fired off a rapid string of Spanish. By the time they reached him, a high-spirited bay colt was being led out of his stall.

"Isn't he beautiful?" Meredith said, bubbling with enthusiasm. She reached over and squeezed Lyric's arm. "I'm so glad you could fill in for Erin! She said you're every bit as good as she and Cady are and I don't doubt it. Your mother's work is extraordinary."

"You got him last week?" Lyric asked.

Meredith released Lyric in favor of entwining her fingers with her husband's. "Last Wednesday. He was in a twenty-thousand dollar maiden claiming race for three-year-old colts and geldings."

*Say what?* Renata looked at Lyric for an interpretation.

Lyric grinned. "In English it means he won his first race and whoever owned him had to sell him for twenty thousand dollars if someone had their name in as a claimer."

Ed smiled big. "Mannie thinks Dare Me was a steal at that price."

"Then why did someone enter him in a claiming race?" Renata asked.

"Claiming races are calculated gambles for both the buyer and seller," Lyric said. "Sometimes the owners *hope* the horse will be claimed because they don't think the horse can win enough races to cover costs and they want to get out from under the financial burden. The buyer on the other hand, sees potential and thinks the horse can be a consistent winner. Other times, the owners enter because they're trying for the winner's purse and they're praying no one's going to call their bluff and buy the horse out from under them."

"Sounds like high stakes gambling," Renata said. "Too risky for me."

Lyric laughed. "Guess you haven't played poker with Cole yet."

Ed chuckled. "And if you're smart you never will. Orrin brought Cole to a game I was hosting once." He touched his receding hairline and joked, "It was a scalping. You can see the hair still hasn't come back."

They turned their attention to the waiting horse. Renata stepped back and was impressed by how easily Lyric handled the scene, finding a suitable backdrop and working the shoot like a professional.

When the photo shoot was done and the horse put away, Renata peeked into the trainer's office. An African grey parrot sat on a perch inside a large cage. As soon as it saw her, it bobbed up and down, shifting from one leg to the other in a welcome dance. There was no way she could resist saying, "Hello."

Mannie joined her at the doorway. "Paco. Where are your manners?"

The bird stopped dancing. He looked at Mannie then at Renata. "Hola," he said, following it with a wolf whistle, then "Hello. *Hola. Ho-la.*"

Renata laughed, getting a kick out of a bilingual bird. "Mind if I take his picture?"

"No problem," Mannie said, going to his desk with Ed and Meredith accompanying him.

Ed and the trainer began discussing strategy and dealing with paperwork. Renata took a few pictures of Paco before stepping outside where Lyric waited.

Meredith followed almost immediately. "I didn't want to ask in front of Ed. How did Lauren die?"

"The police aren't releasing that information," Renata said. "Why?"

"Back when Ed was looking for private financing to get his company off the ground, he went to Vincenzo Alagna. Lauren was married to him at the time.

"Ed and Vincenzo hit it off extremely well. They were both interested in target shooting. Ed shot competitively in college. I don't know about Vincenzo. But he and Ed went to the range several times. Ed said Vincenzo had the steadiest hand of anyone he's ever shot with.

"We were both so excited that things were looking promising for getting Ed's company going. Then one night we were at a dinner party at my parent's house and

one of my father's friends took Ed aside. He's with the Organized Crime Task Force. He didn't say outright that Vincenzo was involved in organized crime, but he suggested Ed look elsewhere for financing. And that's what we did."

Renata exchange a glance with Lyric, Lyric asked, "Were Ed and Vincenzo shooting rifles or pistols?"

"Both, though I remember Ed saying Vincenzo favored pistols."

Lyric had Cole's perfect poker face and Renata was glad Meredith's attention was directed there. She was afraid what her own might reveal. A pistol and a pistol crossbow were different, but they were similar enough to move Vincenzo up a notch on her suspect list.

\* \* \* \* \*

"What'd you find?" Cole asked as he joined Shane at a coffee shop within walking distance of Lauren's apartment complex.

"Cops already got the good stuff. Looked like she had a laptop computer and probably a desktop appointment book. They missed the horse calendar on the fridge. Or else they didn't think it was important. A couple of months ago she had the name *Ian*, along with *Reilly's Pub, eight p.m.* written down on a Friday night."

Shane limbered his fingers then reached under the table and pulled out a photo, handing it to Cole with a flourish. "Am I good, or am I good?"

"Damn," Cole said, giving credit where credit was due. "You're good."

"I'm guessing that's Ian seeing as how it's taken right outside the pub. Probably caught it on a cell phone camera. I'm also guessing maybe Ian wasn't too crazy about having his picture taken. Either that or the police have all the rest of them. She was using this one as a bookmark."

Cole studied the picture. The man wasn't looking toward the camera though he definitely seemed to be waiting for someone. "You get an address for Reilly's Pub."

"Of course."

"Let's roll then."

Shane grinned. "Not tempted to call the future Mrs. Cole—"

"Shut up, Shane."

"Just thought you'd want to share—"

"You want to walk?"

"Okay, okay. Just trying to keep you out of trouble since you and Renata are supposed to be working *closely* together. You know, Lyric and Braden and I were there the night Grandma Maguire sat in on Bulldog and Orrin's regular poker game and got a little side pot action going. If it's any consolation, Orrin's money is on you."

Cole clenched his jaw to keep from saying anything. Christ, he felt like he'd been hit with a two-by-four. Not that he hadn't suspected... But son of a bitch, he was a grown



man. He'd been perfectly content with his life before Grandma Maguire turned her famous third eye on him.

"Let's go," he said, getting to his feet and heading to the truck. The sooner he and Renata wrapped this thing up, the sooner — His thoughts hit a blank wall and his cock filled in the space, making him nearly double over in pain at the prospect of never being with Renata again.

Fuck. As far he was concerned, friends with benefits was a load of bullshit. Maybe it worked for other guys. But he sure as hell couldn't see Renata going for anything but steady and exclusive once they were out of each other's back pockets.

He'd never done steady or exclusive, not for more than a few months in high school, and not since he'd started playing poker afterward. Never needed to, never wanted to, never even been tempted until —

Cole slammed the door on the thought. Or tried to. His heart gave a hard thump in his chest and tripped into a racing beat as he reminded himself what serious involvement with a woman meant, even a woman like Renata who had his cock in a permanent state of hard, and whose intelligence and quick wit made him want to stay close to enjoy it.

The Maguires and Montgomerys bucked the trend. But marriage wasn't a good bet once you started factoring time and added stressors, like children and lifestyle choices.

He wasn't positive he could settle down. Besides, he didn't have to look very far to see how settling down could be a passing phase. That's the way it'd been for his father. Hell, if the truth were told, he thought his mother had finally figured out that she wasn't exactly the stay in one place type either — which was probably why his parents were still together and solidly happy. Their kids were grown and the world was their home.

Right now his life was mostly about working Crime Tells cases. And yeah, on some level he knew Bulldog was grooming him to one day take over the entire show and he liked the idea of it. But that was different from committing to a woman, putting her needs on the same level or above his own. He already felt guilty as hell when he left the dogs and he *knew* they loved going to Shane's place and eating pizza day after day.

Cole got in the truck and started the engine, forcing himself into a calm he suspected didn't go very deep. He'd taken a gamble when he accepted the case. Now the cards were going to play out the way they played out.

That didn't stop him from giving Shane a warning. "Another word about Grandma's prediction and I'm going to beat the shit out of you."

Shane's snicker nearly peeled away the thin layer of calm Cole had managed. But at least his brother had the sense to limit his response to, "I hear you." Which Cole knew all too well translated into "It might happen again."

## Chapter Ten

A picture and a first name were all it took at Reilly's Pub. "Oh sure, I know where you can find him," the female bartender said. "That's Ian Shaw. He's in here a lot, though I haven't seen him in a couple of days. He owns an import-export business. It's in the building at the corner, the adobe one, not the crap brick one."

"Thanks," Cole said, dropping a ten dollar bill on the bar along with his Crime Tells card. "If you see him, pass this on, okay? Just in case I miss him."

"Sure thing." She picked the card up and tucked it into a pocket along with the ten.

They left the bar and headed for the adobe building. Shane said, "Import-export. Sometimes that's synonymous with organized crime. Interesting that lover boy hasn't been around for a few days."

"I was thinking the same thing." Cole's stomach knotted, not liking the direction this case was heading, not with Renata involved in it too. He was glad now that he'd encouraged her to go with Lyric. "After we've checked out the ex-husband, I'm going to give Kieran a call. See if he'll run the names through the Vice computers."

"Smart move, though he'll probably ream your ass for involving Lyric if he gets a hit."

"He can try."

Shane laughed. "Just hope there's enough warning so I can get some betting action going."

A receptionist looked up when they stepped into Shaw's office. She gave Cole the once-over, then gave Shane the come-hither.

Cole let Shane take the lead and was glad he'd long ago mastered the muscles of his face when Shane went into action. Christ, *he* could almost feel the pheromones oozing off his brother as Shane made himself comfortable at the edge of the receptionist's desk.

"What can I do for you?" she purred, leaning forward and displaying enough cleavage Cole was pretty sure she was going to pop out of her blouse before Shane finished questioning her.

His cock stirred. Shit, he was a red-blooded American male and some things were purely biological. But it didn't stiffen until his mind replaced the lightly tanned melons of the blonde behind the desk with the dark-tipped perfection of Renata's firm caramel-colored breasts.

Cole hooked his thumbs in the front pockets of his jeans, hoping to ease the zipper to the side and take some pressure off his throbbing penis. He concentrated on the conversation between Shane and the receptionist in an effort not to get sucked into the

downward spiral of thinking about Renata and the way she was making him feel like a poker player on tilt.

"We were hoping to hook up with your boss," Shane said. "He around?"

"No. He won't be back in the office until tomorrow, at the earliest." She picked up a pen and slid it back and forth suggestively between fingers tipped with long, red nails. "But he expects me to do what I can to make potential clients happy."

Cole believed it. He doubted Ian had hired this woman for anything but one reason, and filing skills meant, "Where should I put the cock?"

"I bet you're great at your job," Shane murmured, leaning closer, making it intimate. "I can't believe Ian's girlfriend didn't feel threatened by having you here alone with him."

The woman's fingers abandoned the pen in favor of walking on Shane's thigh. "Which girlfriend? Ian keeps them both away from here. In fact, the only time I've ever seen him uptight is when they dropped in unexpectedly. One of them barely gave me a glance. The other would have scratched my eyes out if she could."

"I can see why she'd feel threatened," Shane said.

"There's nothing between Ian and me." She pouted. "And he told me if I gave either one of them a different idea then I'm out on my ass."

The fingers were getting closer to Shane's crotch. Cole didn't know whether to leave so Shane could get a fast, uncomplicated fuck, or to ask a question and remind the woman she had an audience, though he wasn't entirely convinced she wouldn't offer to do him just to get Shane into bed.

Shane stopped the fingers just shy of his jeans-covered erection. "I can't remember his girlfriends' names. One of them is involved in horses, right?"

A heartfelt sigh threatened to eject the receptionist's breasts. "That's Lauren."

"She a blonde?"

"No, she's the brunette. The other one's blonde. But I don't remember her name."

Shane glanced at Cole then, bringing him into focus for Ian's receptionist. Cole took it as a cue to speak up so his brother could disengage. "You said your boss wouldn't be in until tomorrow?"

She blinked, as if coming out of a Shane-induced trance. "At the earliest."

"Is he out of town?"

A hint of caution entered her eyes for the first time. Cole could almost hear her thinking, realizing she had no idea who they were. "Why don't you leave your card? I'll put it on Ian's desk and tell him you stopped by."

Cole retrieved one from his pocket and stepped forward, handing it to her. Shane slid off the desk then flashed a smile to ease their departure.

At the truck Shane adjusted the front of his jeans before climbing in. "You owe me."

"If you want to go back and lose the wood, do it. Just make it quick or take a cab home."

"No, thanks. She's not my type."

Cole paused in the act of sliding the key into the ignition. He cut a look at his brother. Something in Shane's voice said he wasn't bullshitting, despite the statement being totally outrageous. "Since when has attractive, big breasted and *easy* not been your type?"

Shane's shoulders moved up and down in a shrug he didn't manage to pull off as casual. "Tastes change."

"You going for flat chests now?"

Color crawled up Shane's neck and into his face, nearly making Cole's jaw drop. His brother hunched forward, using his hair to shield his expression. Cole didn't know whether to tease mercilessly or dump this case back on Bulldog's desk and start running. Christ, if Shane didn't care about breast size and wasn't tempted by easy, it had to mean he was halfway in love. And if it happened to Shane...

Shit. It was almost unfathomable to Cole, and to make it worse, he'd spent so much time out of town lately he didn't know when Shane had headed off into relationship territory.

"You serious about someone?" Cole asked, knowing he had to be careful since he sure as hell didn't want Shane to turn the questioning back on him.

"Working my way there."

Shane pulled out his cell phone and started playing a video game, his way of saying the subject was now closed. Cole let it go, his brain still grappling with the image of Shane willingly heading toward a serious relationship.

Lyric, yeah, that'd been a shocker, but Shane... Cole shook his head. It hadn't happened yet.

Cole took a few minutes to jot down notes on a legal pad and go over the ones he'd written after the visit with Alex Martin. He found the number for Vincenzo's company and dialed it, got lucky that whoever answered the phone recognized his name and patched him straight through to Vincenzo's personal secretary.

"The earliest Mr. Alagna might possibly be available to see you is on Thursday," she said.

"I was hoping to see him a little sooner. It's somewhat urgent."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Maguire. I can call you back and schedule an appointment after I've spoken with Mr. Alagna to make sure he hasn't made other commitments. He is checking in for messages, but he'll want to meet with you personally before he's able to advise you on your investment needs."

Cole didn't correct her about the nature of his call. "He's out of town then?"

"Is there a specific message you'd like to leave for Mr. Alagna?"

Cole decided not to push. "No," he said before leaving his cell number and hanging up.

Shane ended the video game. "What next?"

"Let's see how well you do with Vincenzo's receptionist."

Shane groaned but didn't protest. When they got to the office complex housing Vincenzo's investment company, Cole said, "His personal secretary is protective. The receptionist might be too. Get what you can but don't linger."

The flash of Shane's smile served as a warning his oddly introspective mood had passed. "Got it. Kind of like a casual fuck though I'm guessing after almost two days with Renata, you're starting to forget what those are like."

Shane scrambled out of the truck and closed the door before Cole could retaliate. Cole didn't know what was worse, having Shane quiet and thinking serious thoughts, or Shane amusing himself at his expense. He ground his teeth together and punched in Kieran's number, figuring he might as well get that conversation over with too.

"Lyric tell you what I'm up to?" Cole asked after his cousin's vice-cop husband answered.

Kieran's laugh was enough of an answer, not that he left it there. "Speaking as a guy who recently had ideas similar to yours, for what it's worth, marriage to the right woman has a lot going for it. But hey, do me a favor, keep fighting your grandmother's prediction until next Sunday between the hours of noon and three, that's where my money is."

"Son of a bitch."

Kieran laughed again. "Sorry. I had to go for the win. Later this year I want to take Lyric to Hawaii. You know Dasan gets visions a lot like your grandmother does?"

"Can we get to the reason I called you in the first place?"

"Sure. I'm just trying to let you know you're not alone. Before Dasan left with Erin he had another one of his dreams about Cash and some woman. It's got Cash so damn edgy he's hard to work with. He was even spooked enough that he broke open his piggy bank and put his money on you. Kind of a solidarity bet if you know what I mean. He wants to think if you can avoid your fate, he can too."

"Christ," Cole muttered, feeling for Kieran's partner though he'd only been around Cash a few times.

"So you want to tell me why you called if it wasn't to find out the details of the betting pool?" Kieran asked.

"I've got a couple of names. Vincenzo Alagna and Ian Shaw."

There was a sigh on the other end. "Lyric and your brothers suffer from this same confusion even though I have tried multiple times to explain it using small words and short sentences. I am a cop. I work for the police department. I do not work for Crime Tells."

Cole couldn't help grinning. "I hear you. I understand your position. But you might have a personal interest in these names since I've pulled Lyric in to help on the case."

Another sigh. "What are you looking for?"

"A link to organized crime."

"And if I find one? You will no longer need my hot little wife on the case, right?"

"How about we compromise? I'll keep her away from Alagna and Shaw. If it's any consolation, Lauren's death still doesn't play as a mob hit to me."

It was the best Cole could offer and Kieran knew it. Trying to take Lyric off the case was the same as cutting her loose and letting her go solo.

"I'll call you back in a few," Kieran said and hung up.

Shane arrived moments later. "Out of town since last Thursday," he said, taking his seat and pulling the door closed.

"The receptionist say where he is?"

"She thought Europe but she might be guessing. Which means either Vincenzo or Ian could have been hunkered down in the woods with a crossbow."

"Can't rule them out yet." Cole started the engine and headed home. "Ian's secretary hasn't clued in to Lauren being dead. You catch that?"

"Yeah. She spoke in the present tense. What color hair does Vincenzo's new wife have?"

"Blonde."

"You got to admit, an arrow through the heart plays nicely with a jealous woman as a killer."

"It works better if Lauren and Nichole were fighting over Vincenzo or Bold Adventure, not Ian."

"True. Worth looking into though. Lyric and I can see if there's a history between the women besides dressage and Vincenzo. We can head to Reilly's Pub and try to get a name to go with the hair color.

Cole grinned. "Afraid of going solo and meeting up with Ian's receptionist?"

Shane put his feet on the dashboard. "Bet these running shoes will get me a lot further than yours are going to get you. What do you think?"

A muscle spasmed in Cole's jaw. He bit off a retort because letting one loose would only extend the conversation and right now that was the last thing he wanted to do.

Fuck. As soon as he'd pointed the truck toward home and where Renata was probably waiting, his cock had focused on one thing.

*Maybe if you ask me nicely when we get back to your place, I'll put my mouth on you.*

Cole's fingers tightened on the steering wheel. "If you have time, see if you can hunt down an address for Brian Elliot. He was Mark Hansen's groom. Alex thought he may have grown up in Berkeley. It's also possible Brian and Mark knew each other from school."

"I'll check into it."

They turned onto their street. Lyric's Jeep was in front of Cole's house. The sight of it was enough to send a hot pulse of anticipation through Cole. He wondered how quickly he could get Lyric out of his house.

His phone rang as he was pulling to a stop in the driveway. Kieran didn't waste time on pleasantries. "They both come up clean, though I haven't been able to find a home address for Shaw. I'll keep digging, make a few calls to see if anyone is looking at them besides you and whatever homicide cop drew the case."

"Appreciate it."

"Yeah, well, appreciate it by holding out until next Sunday between the hours of noon and three."

Cole snapped his phone closed and made a beeline for the front door. Lyric made it easy for him by exiting before he got there, giving him a knowing smile as they passed on the sidewalk.

\* \* \* \* \*

Renata tried to keep her nerves calm and expectations low. She tried not to watch Cole's face as he walked through his front door and caught a whiff of spaghetti sauce and garlic bread.

She failed on all counts but his expression made it worth it. Cole's smile kicked the butterflies out of her belly and filled it with liquid heat instead.

"I thought fixing dinner was the least I could do considering you're offering a safe place for Puff and me to stay," she said, the desire triggered by the look on his face heading south, sliding from her abdomen to pool in her labia.

She wasn't even aware of moving until she was in Cole's arms, her own going around his neck as she pressed her body to his. God, they hadn't been apart for that long. What was it going to be like later, when she was back in her everyday life and Cole was in his?

A sharp, twisting ache stabbed through her chest, sending her heart skipping into an irregular beat and threatening to turn her breathing harsh and ragged—not from pleasure, but from pain.

*Don't think about the future, she told herself. Now is what you have.*

And now felt so good, so right. Worth whatever price she was going to have to pay later.

Her lips sought his. Or his sought hers. There was satisfaction in knowing the burning lust wasn't one-sided. In feeling the way his pelvis ground into hers as his hands roamed her back, as his mouth ate hungrily at hers, their tongues stroking and rubbing in a heated prelude to something more carnal.

One kiss merged into the next. Breathing was secondary to passion, an agonizing necessity that required them to separate but allowed a space for words.

"How long until dinner's ready?" Cole asked, fingers working feverishly on the buttons of her shirt.

"Long enough," she managed, her mouth finding his again as her hands went to the front of his jeans.

Between kisses they managed to shed their clothing. But they didn't manage to make it to the sofa or the bed. They made it as far as the carpet in the living room and neither of them cared.

"Put your mouth on me," Cole said, his voice husky, desperate, telling Renata he'd been thinking about it all day, fantasizing about it since she'd teased him in the truck.

A heady sense of feminine power pulsed through her and she pushed Cole onto his back. "I want your mouth on me too," she said, straddling him so her pussy was above him, so he could see the slick parted folds, the slit that was hungry for his tongue.

The tip of his cock glistened with arousal, the head purpled, tempting her to lean forward, to give him what he wanted. She resisted, some primitive part of her demanding it, wanting the wicked satisfaction that would come with taking control and having him pleasure her.

"Christ, you're beautiful," Cole said, his hands gripping her thighs.

The wet lips of her cunt were a temptation no man could resist. He lifted his head to press his mouth to her slick flesh.

She was killing him. He'd been consumed by thoughts of her all day, his cock screaming to get back to her, to have her on her knees in front of him, taking him in her mouth, driving *him* to his knees with the lash of her tongue and the sweet suction of her lips.

The scent of her made his head spin and the heady taste of her arousal fed his hunger. The sheer eroticism of having her above him, her back arched, her fingers on her nipples threatened to make him come.

His cock jerked, licking across his abdomen and he tightened his hands on her thighs so she couldn't escape his tongue as it thrust into her channel then pulled back to circle and rasp over her clit before finding her opening again, his groan both a surrender and a claim of victory.

Renata's nipples throbbed between her fingers. Her buttocks clenched with each tug, each twist, the pleasure she was giving herself joining with the pleasure Cole was giving her.

It was decadent, shameless—empowering—to have him between her thighs, to be rubbing her pussy against his face in a carnal demand for service. To look down the line of his body and see the straining length of his cock, its head glistening, leaving his belly slick with desire.

She gasped as his lips closed around her clit, could almost feel his determination, his intention to make her come. Sheer ecstasy streaked through her, bolts of sensation that were almost too intense, that had her head tilting backward and her toes curling



when finally it arrived, the force of the orgasm shifting her forward onto her hands as well as her knees.

His hips lifted from the carpet, the taut muscles of his abdomen quivering. His chest rose and fell in rapid succession, his body begging for the same release she'd just experienced.

With a moan Renata leaned forward, her hands traveling ahead of her mouth, reaching his cock and testicles as she kissed downward. God she loved the texture of his skin, the satin smooth shaft and heavy testicles, the taut muscles of his abdomen. Even Cole's scent turned her on, musky, masculine, *his*.

His penis jerked when she captured it in her hand, pulsed against her palm in time to the throbbing beat between her thighs. She touched the tip of him with her tongue and was rewarded by his panted groan. And when she captured his cock head between her lips he palmed her buttocks, forcing her pussy against his face again.

Fire streaked through her as Cole took control despite who was on the bottom and who was on the top. Hot, jagged bursts of exquisite sensation ended the teasing. She ground her cunt against his face, humped mindlessly and sucked to the rhythm he set with his wicked tongue and merciless lips.

It lasted forever and not long enough. He came in a hot violent rush but didn't leave her parted thighs until orgasm took her.

The oven timer buzzed as they lay sprawled on the rug, struggling for breath and focus. Cole laughed, the sound melting into Renata's heart and becoming a part of it. "Good thing I didn't know we were racing the clock," he said. "A guy can wilt under that kind of pressure."

Renata snorted and forced herself to sit. "Fishing for compliments, Cole? I doubt you ever have a *wilting* problem."

As proof she trailed her fingers across his abdomen and his cock began to stiffen. He gave a little grunt, thrilled her by grabbing her hand and taking it to his penis.

She loved the feel of him. Satin smooth. Hot beneath her palms. She reveled in the way her touch could make him harden and lengthen, throb.

"We're going to end up with a burned dinner," she said, almost able to ignore the irritating buzz of the timer in favor of going another round with Cole.

It stroked her ego that long seconds passed before he released her hand. "Guess that'd be a waste. I'll round up some wine and set the table."

"Already taken care of."

She stood and went to the kitchen, snagging her shirt and putting it on as she went. Cole followed a few minutes later wearing just his jeans.

"Where are the old farts and Puff?"

"In the backyard. Puff figured out the doggie door." She smiled thinking about finding Puff stretched out on the grass like he was in paradise. "I don't know how safe

it is for him, but with the dogs there, I'm hoping a cat won't be tempted to go after Puff. I didn't have the heart to bring him inside."

"If you're worried we can block the door at night or when we're gone." Cole leaned against the counter, the heat his presence generated more intense than the stove and oven combined. "How'd it go at the track?"

"Good. I enjoyed it. I like Ed and Meredith." She laughed as she remembered Ed touching his receding hairline and making a joke about Cole scalping him. "Ed warned me against playing poker with you. Meredith told me Ed went to Vincenzo when he was looking for financing to get his company off the ground."

"She said Ed and Vincenzo hit it off to the extent they went to the gun range together several times. Vincenzo is an excellent shot, especially with a pistol. But Ed didn't pursue the financing after a friend of Meredith's father, someone on the Organized Crime Task Force, took him aside and suggested he look elsewhere."

Cole frowned at that. Renata added, "Lyric set up computerized case files for Lauren's murder and Mark's. I already entered everything I had in my notes. She set the security so the files are accessible to you, me, her and Shane."

"Good. I've got Shane trying to hunt down an address for Mark's groom, Brian. It'll help if he's got all the facts we have."

"What about Lauren's boyfriend? Did you and Shane find anything?"

Cole gave her the details over dinner. And afterward, at her insistence, he updated the case files while she took care of cleanup.

"Feel like a walk?" Cole asked when the last of the information was typed in. "Usually when I'm home I try to take the boys around the block in the evening."

"Sounds good to me. I've got a harness and leash for Puff, but mainly he hops and I follow. We can leave him here."

Renata recovered the rest of her clothing and put it on. Cole did the same before herding the dachshunds and rabbit into the house.

"Dog door's closed," he said, producing leashes and handing one to her.

Renata took the leash and snapped it onto Caesar's collar. Cole knelt next to Julius and did the same.

They left, turning the corner and walking past Erin's house and the others Bulldog owned, stopped when a couple of young girls playing hopscotch wanted to pet the dogs.

Cole crouched down, answering questions. Laughing when one of the girls said Julius and Caesar looked like walking hot dogs.

Renata's heart did a crazy little flip-flop in her chest at the sight of him with the girls. And for a minute she allowed herself to imagine what it'd be like to have kids with him.

There were places in the country where being in a mixed marriage or having mixed-race children would be hard, she wasn't fool enough to tell herself otherwise. And there

was prejudice here too. But on the whole, the Bay Area was pretty much a do your own thing and mind your own business kind of place. *Not that you should be thinking about any of this with Cole*, she reminded herself, though she cut herself some slack. The whole baby-making thing seemed to be a biological imperative hardwired into women when they saw the man they were sleeping with interacting with kids.

A black Town Car was parked along the curb in front of Cole's house when they got back. The windows were tinted, giving it a sinister cast in the evening light.

"You expecting company, Cole?"

"No." He kept moving forward and Renata stayed with him despite the urge to turn around and go the other direction.

Doors swung open when they got near the car. Two dark suited men emerged. It was shades of *Men In Black* only a hell of a lot scarier than having Tommy Lee Jones and that fine brother Will Smith show up.

"I'm Agent Walters and this is Agent Strout. We're with the FBI," one of them said, his attention focused on Cole after a polite nod at Renata to acknowledge her presence. "If we could have a moment of your time, Mr. Maguire, we'd appreciate it."

"You've got ID?"

They produced it.

Cole asked, "What can I do for you?"

Walters glanced at Renata in a silent question to Cole. Cole said, "You can talk in front of her."

"The Bureau would appreciate your cooperation on a certain matter."

"And that is?"

"Don't concern yourself with the activities of Vincenzo Alagna or Ian Shaw."

"They're Organized Crime?"

Neither agent spoke.

Cole wasn't surprised. He hadn't expected them to give him anything, and if they had, there wasn't any guarantee it was the truth. "Can you alibi Alagna and Shaw for Saturday, when Lauren Hunt was killed?"

Strout and Walters exchanged a glance. Walters said, "Neither of them was anywhere near the site of the murder."

Which wasn't the same thing as saying Vincenzo or Ian weren't somehow involved in it. Cole let it go. He'd didn't want to tangle with the FBI if it wasn't necessary, not with The Patriot Act in place. "Good enough," he said, implying cooperation without promising anything.

The answer satisfied the agents. They returned to the Town Car and drove away.

"I'll say one thing. There's never a dull moment around you, Cole."

He laughed and took Renata's hand, the feel of her palm against his sending a visceral message to his cock and a wave of panic through his chest. Christ, he'd been

fighting the urge to touch her since they left the house, fighting to keep from thinking how much he enjoyed walking the dogs with her, hell, just being with her.

They went inside. "Good thing you and Lyric got the case file set up on the Crime Tells' server," Cole said, unclipping the leash from Julius' collar before walking to where the laptop was set up on the dinner table. "We're all pretty good about checking for updates. I'll make a note in the file about our friendly FBI visit."

Renata followed him, leaned against the table. "What do think triggered it?"

"Considering how brief the visit was and how it didn't escalate into threats, I'm guessing Kieran hit a nerve when he started asking around."

"What does it say about Ian and Vincenzo?"

"Harder to answer that one. They came up clean when Kieran ran them. Given what Meredith told you, it means Vincenzo has been under the microscope for at least a few years without any dirt showing."

"Walters sounded like he was telling the truth about Vincenzo and Ian not being near the clearing where I found Lauren."

"Not being there isn't the same as not being involved."

"True."

"For the record, I'm inclined to accept Walter's statement until something says otherwise. We've got other angles to pursue."

Cole finished updating the file and straightened, taking a step so he was directly in front of Renata. Her breath caught when his fingers went to the front of her shirt. He parted it, opened the front clasp of her bra before cupping her hips, lifting her so she sat on the edge of the table. Christ, he loved looking at her breasts almost as much as touching and sucking them.

She spread her thighs so he could stand between them. Put her hands on the wood behind her, arching her back in a provocative display that had him opening the front of his jeans and freeing his cock.

"Lyric said I should ask you about your grandmother's premonition."

The question tore his eyes away from Renata's dark, dark nipples. It should have sent him running or shriveled his dick. Neither happened.

"I don't want to talk about it."

She moaned when he cupped her breasts. Trembled as he turned his attention back to them and latched onto a nipple, suckled and released.

"Let me guess," Renata said, her husky voice fisting around Cole's cock and making it scream with the need to get inside her. "You don't want to talk at all."

He brushed his lips over her nipple, knew they wouldn't leave the table until he'd feasted on her again, fucked her there. "That's right. We've had dinner. Now it's time for dessert."

## Chapter Eleven

"You up for a few hands of poker?" Cole asked as Renata handed him the last of the breakfast plates to dry and put away.

She cocked her head, her heart doing crazy things in her chest at the way Cole's eyes sparkled, like a little boy up to mischief. Her cunt clenching and unclenching reminded her Cole was a man and his kind of trouble was pure pleasure. "Now?"

"No. Once we get to the city. There's someone I want you to meet."

"Who?"

"A private client of mine." He grinned. "I think you'll hit it off. She's in her eighties, the last of six brothers and sisters and the widow of a doctor."

Renata blinked, wrapping her mind around an eighty-year-old woman taking poker lessons from Cole. "You sure she's interested in cards and not paying for home delivery of some serious eye candy?"

Cole's laugh stirred up an ache that ought to be appeased after another night in bed together.

He ditched the plate, his hands settling on her hips and pulling her close.

Renata melted into him, meeting his kiss with a moan.

God, she couldn't get enough of him. He was a major addiction and she felt like a mainlining junkie.

"I thought we'd take the Harley," he said long moments later, voice husky with pleasure. "We should be back in plenty of time to get to Alex's barn for an accidental encounter with Nichole."

"Works for me," Renata said, wondering if it was possible to have an orgasm from the vibration of the bike. Her clit was standing at attention and throbbing, practically begging to feel Cole's mouth on it again.

This was bad. She knew it was bad. Playing house with Cole felt so natural, even if intellectually she knew she was living in a bubble and the bubble was going to pop.

Renata took a minute to check on Puff and get a jacket before following Cole into the garage. He tossed her a helmet then straddled the Hog.

*Damn he's a natural on a Harley*, she thought. The bad-boy bike between his legs was the perfect metaphor for Cole's potent masculinity.

She swung on behind him and wrapped her arms around his waist, pressed her chest to his back, telling herself even as she did it that she needed to put some space between them *soon* in order to keep things in perspective. He wasn't a permanent fixture in her life no matter how right being with him felt.

The garage door opened. The Harley rumbled to life and they headed toward San Francisco.

Cole stuck to highways and city streets, a direct path to their destination, but as he maneuvered the bike through traffic, she imagined riding along the coast with him, heading south, down to Big Sur and beyond.

The voice of self-preservation intervened, saying, *Girlfriend, are you trying set yourself up for major pain?* And Renata had no answer. Cole was so much more than she'd thought he was, so different in lot of ways.

She'd labeled him a player but the label wasn't really accurate. He wasn't some slick ladies man with notches on his bedpost and an eye out for his next conquest. The truth was—though she knew the danger to her heart acknowledging it—that from what she'd seen and experienced, he'd make a good husband, a good partner.

Family was important to him. He was hard working and loyal. Took his responsibilities seriously. And the sex—he was an amazing lover—but it was more than that really. So much more.

It made her heart ache thinking about it, wondering if Cole wasn't married because he knew the travel, the poker and the fame he'd gained as result of it, all meant he couldn't commit to a single woman, couldn't promise to stay only in her bed.

There were a lot of women who were willing to look the other way in order to stay married to their man. She knew some of them, could even understand the *why* of it—at least on an intellectual level. But at a gut level...hell no. She'd rather be without a man than to have one who cheated on her.

The Hog slowed, granting her a reprieve from her thoughts. They were buzzed through a security gate to reveal a house built on a cliff overlooking the bay.

Cole parked the Harley in front and they left their helmets draped over the handlebars. The front door opened just as they arrived at it.

"You must be Renata," an elderly woman said. "When I talked to Cole yesterday he said he hoped he'd be able to convince you to come with him. I'm Lenora Weisman. And this beautiful girl is Hershey."

The beautiful girl was a petite red Doberman wearing a diamond collar Renata didn't think was fake.

Lenora ushered them inside and down a hallway. The floors were covered in Oriental rugs, the walls with original artwork. Lenora paused in front of an office doorway. "Have you met Cole's cousin Erin, Renata?"

"Yes. We keep our horses at the same place."

"Erin did these portraits of Hershey a while back. In fact, Erin is how I managed to get Cole for a private instructor."

Renata glanced into the office. Not only did the red Doberman have other jeweled collars, but she had an assortment to match various designer coats so regardless of the weather outside, Hershey would be comfortable. Considering the care she herself had

taken in finding just the right harness and leash to bring out the color in Puff's coat, Renata understood the sentiment behind the portraits. She said, "Erin does great work. She's captured Hershey perfectly."

Lenora beamed. "I think so too."

They continued to a room with windows that rose from floor to ceiling, offering a spectacular view of the Golden Gate Bridge and the Marin Headlands. "Would you like something to drink before we start?" Lenora asked after they'd taken seats, Hershey stretching out underneath the table.

Cole shook his head. "Nothing for me, thanks."

"I'm good," Renata said.

"The usual chip values, Cole?" Lenora asked, opening an elegant case set at the edge of the table and revealing several unopened decks of cards and row after row of beautiful, multi-colored chips.

"That's fine," Cole said, removing chips and dividing them equally, placing one stack in front of Renata, making her stomach flip over and her mouth go dry.

It probably hadn't been too smart to sit down at the poker table without thinking through the implications. It'd be outright stupid to keep sitting there given the likelihood that Cole and Lenora were playing for *real* money, not nickels and dimes.

Renata pushed the stack toward Cole. "You know I'm just here to watch a pro at work, not swim with sharks," she said, grateful she was a quick enough thinker to salvage her pride.

Lenora's laugh eased some of Renata's panic. "He is that, isn't he? But I'm afraid I still fall into the 'whale' category."

Cole's smile was bad-boy temptation and wicked challenge. He pushed the stack back toward Renata and added another one next to it. "I'm staking you. Consider yourself my assistant today. Three players will change up the dynamic."

He glanced at his client, mischief in his eyes. "And don't let Lenora fool you with her claim about being a whale. Last time I was the one writing a check when we finished playing. She's already got a couple of tournament wins to her credit and she just bought a condo in Vegas so she could spend more time there."

Renata gave in. Her grandfather would disown her if she passed up an opportunity like this one. "What are they worth?" she asked as Cole added a much smaller third stack.

"We're all playing with a ten-thousand-dollar stake." His thumb stroked a white chip with gray and black edge color. "These are worth a hundred, the red are worth five hundred, and the blue a thousand."

"Got it," Renata said, feeling like a modern day Alice dropped into one hell of a Wonderland and knowing she was going to get eaten alive if she didn't get her emotions under control and find herself a poker face.

She managed it, somehow lasting long enough to be able to hold her head high and look forward to telling her grandfather stories about playing with Cole and Lenora. And even after her chips were gone, she found it absolutely amazing to watch Cole in action.

It was impossible not fall a little deeper into the dangerous spell she was already trapped in. She had it bad. It was becoming a steady refrain but she didn't know what to do about Cole.

He was such an amazing man. He played to win but he also played to make Lenora better, taking time to replay hands and go over strategy, reveal a thought process or a different way of looking at the odds.

Lenora was as gracious in defeat, when Cole possessed all the chips at the table, as she'd been when they arrived. "Should I have Maria fix your usual?" she asked him.

"That would hit the spot right now." His eyes met Renata's. "My usual is a chicken salad sandwich served with iced water."

"Sounds wonderful."

Lenora stood and the Doberman at her feet stood too. "If you'll excuse me, I'll let Maria know we're ready to eat."

Dog and owner left the room. Cole put the chips and cards away.

A few minutes later a woman, most likely Maria, entered the room, setting plates and glasses, napkins and silverware on the table, before leaving.

"I enjoyed this," Renata said. "Thanks for asking me to come with you." *Even if I did almost hyperventilate when I saw the chips and realized we were playing for serious money.*

"Enough to want a private lesson?"

"Depends on what it's going to cost me," she said, nipples tightening at just what he might want in payment.

Cole leaned forward, brushing his lips over hers. "Nothing you won't enjoy paying."

Liquid heat spread through Renata. Need rising from the depths of her soul.

She drank some of the iced water. Wanted to press the chilled glass against her forehead and cheeks. Damn, she'd probably have to be standing under a shower of it to bring her body temperature down.

Lenora returned and took her seat, placing a check on the table. The script was elegant, ten thousand dollars, payable to Cole Maguire. He picked up the check and folded it, casually slipped it into his shirt pocket and began eating. A chill hit Renata with the realization that he would have written a twenty-thousand-dollar check if Lenora had ended up with all the chips.

Renata's gaze went to the windows rising from floor to ceiling and offering a multi-multi-million view. This was part of Cole's world, too. And she'd held her own here.

As they ate, talk about poker drifted to conversations about local events and some of the stories Renata had written. Heat returned, blossoming in Renata's heart and



making it ache with a hope she refused to acknowledge when it became clear that Cole had not only read a lot of her stories, but remembered them.

She wondered if Cole would ask Lenora about Vincenzo Alagna. He surprised her by asking about Mark Hansen's sponsor instead.

"Lew Kingston. Now there's a name I haven't heard in over twenty years," Lenora said, taking a sip of ice tea. "He was an avid gun collector. That's how I met him. My husband Frank never missed a chance to go to a gun show. Lew was the same way.

"They had a friendly competition, and they were both hunters. It's something I never understood about Frank, how he could spend long hours tending to the sick, then go off with his friends to shoot ducks or deer."

Sadness aged Lenora's face. "Lew's gone too. I saw him once after that accident on his yacht. He looked terrible, haunted almost, and less than a year later he'd passed. A hunting accident, in Montana, I believe. He was there for bighorn sheep."

"What accident?" Cole asked.

"A young artist Lew was sponsoring drowned. They never recovered the body."

The conversation returned to poker, and a short time later Renata and Cole said goodbye to Lenora. At the bike, they both checked for messages.

Renata's took only a few minutes to deal with. Cole's took longer, and ended with a phone call to Shane to get an address and to ask his brother to find out if there was a gun show in Carmel around the same time Mark was murdered.

"Shane thinks he located Brian Elliot's parents," Cole said, slipping the cell phone into his pocket. "They're in Berkeley. We've got time to go by there before we head to Valley Training. You game?"

"Always."

Cole laughed and pulled her into his arms. "Remember that when we get back to my place."

\* \* \* \* \*

The Elliot's home was old, in need of repair work, the yard long past when it should have been mowed and the paint on the shutters a couple of years beyond its prime.

"Doesn't look promising," Cole said.

Renata nodded. The place definitely had a "no one home and hasn't been for a while" feel to it.

The doorbell sounded a tune, something religious, Renata thought, the name of it just out of reach.

An elderly neighbor came out on his porch next door. He squinted suspiciously. "You Jehovah's Witnesses?"

"No," Cole said, stepping off the porch and crossing to the neighbor to offer his hand. "Private detectives. Any idea when the Elliots might be back?"

"Don't know."

Renata joined Cole, figured what the hell and said, "We're trying to locate their son, Brian."

"Brian in some kind of trouble?"

A measure of relief settled in. At least they were at the right house. "Not that I'm aware of," she said.

"You got a business card on you?"

Cole pulled out his wallet, extracted one and handed it to the man. Renata decided to hold off offering hers. Sometimes people lit up and started talking when they found out she was a reporter, other times they shut down tight.

The old man's squint deepened. He held Cole's card close to his eye before accepting defeat and pulling a pair of glasses from his pocket. "Haven't had a chance to get a replacement pair," he mumbled, apparently embarrassed by the broken frame.

He peered at the card, silently mouthed Cole's name. Gray-blue eyes widened. His attention shifted to Cole's face. "You're the poker player. Saw you on television just last month. That was a bad beat, Phil drawing out on you and making the flush."

"That's poker for you."

The old guy laughed. "Lady Luck's a fickle mistress. You want to come in for coffee?"

"We can't today. We've got to head down the peninsula on another case."

"Well, anytime you're in the neighborhood, coffee is always on." The old man glanced at the Elliot's house. "I haven't seen Brian in years. Can't even remember the last time I saw him. His parents have been on a cruise. Supposed to be back later today. Stella might know where her brother is. She comes by every day to pick up their mail and check to make sure everything's okay. You could leave your card, or go around to her house. She's on the next street over, a pink stucco with wind chimes on the porch."

"Appreciate it," Cole said, offering his hand again.

The man took it, grinned sheepishly. "You mind signing your card? Nobody'll believe you came around here otherwise."

"No problem." Cole pulled out a pen and autographed the card.

When they got back to the Harley, Renata said, "You get that a lot?"

"Yeah. Not so much when I'm out in the field, but definitely when I'm at a casino." He swung his leg over the bike. "You want me to sign something?"

"What, my boob?" Renata joked, hating the raw flash of jealousy that came with knowing Cole probably had boob-signing down to an art.

"Maybe." He pulled her against him. "Or maybe something lower. Might take me a while to find the perfect spot to leave my name on you."

God, he made her so wet. She shivered and his smile was pure masculine satisfaction. He gave her a hard, quick kiss before handing her the helmet and reaching for his own.

They found Stella's house easily enough. It was small, with a cozy look to it and a slot for mail in the front door.

"My card or yours?" Renata asked after they'd rung the bell without getting a response.

"The neighbor will probably tell her we were at her parents' house. Might be better not to change our stories."

"Works for me."

Cole neatly printed the reason for stopping, adding Renata's name and cell number to the card then dropping it through the slot. "Now for the main event. Let's go get a read on the current Mrs. Vincenzo Alagna."

"Do you have a plan?"

"Other than to wing it?"

Damn she loved his confidence. "Yes."

"No."

"Figures. You are definitely a gambler."

They made it to Valley Training Center just as Bold Adventure was being led toward the saddling area by one of the working students. A trickle of ice slid down Renata's spine as she remembered the rage let loose in her tack shed.

An encounter with Nichole sounded like a great idea from the safety of Alex Martin's office and Cole's house, but now that the moment was rapidly approaching, Renata's personal inclination was to slink and creep, stick to imaginary shadows, or better yet, carry a small, extremely handy pair of high-powered binoculars and observe Nichole from a safe distance.

Cole, of course, didn't seem inclined to stealth, not that there was any chance of it in the wide-open barn.

"You sure this is a smart move?" Renata joked. "This could turn out to be a lot like bear-baiting."

Cole laughed. Damn, he loved her quick humor and smart mouth.

He glanced at her, a pulse of pure heat going straight to his cock at the sight of said mouth. He'd like to have it on him, like to be thrusting through her lips again.

It took more effort than it should have to turn away from the thought, from wanting to get back to his place with Renata. "Let me work Nichole unless she pulls you into the conversation."

"No problem. She's all yours."

Cole contemplated approaches as they neared the saddling area. Surprise would have been best. But it wasn't an option here.

They stopped a short distance from where Bold Adventure was cross-tied. The working student had finished brushing the horse and was now positioning the saddle pad.

Nichole stood back, watching, coolly composed, her attention apparently centered entirely on supervising the quality of the student's work. Cole wasn't fooled.

Years of playing poker gave him an advantage when it came to reading people. Nichole was acutely aware of his presence and Renata's. Her breathing was shallow and fast, then slow and deep as she tried to consciously relax.

"Beautiful horse," Cole said, curious as to whether Nichole would admit to recognizing either him or Renata from the ride.

Nichole didn't look away from the horse and student. "Thank you." Her voice was as cool as the icy mask of her face, an acknowledgment and a dismissal at the same time.

Cole decided to raise the stakes and run a bluff. "I've been trying to connect with Vincenzo and see if he wants to sit in on a game of poker. I take it he's out of town. When will he be back?"

Nichole looked at him then and despite her best efforts she couldn't entirely hide the frantic nature of her emotions. She was unnerved by their presence, by the mention of her husband. She was torn between asking questions and the desire to escape so she wouldn't have to answer them. Cole read frightened rabbit instead of the raging bear Renata thought they might be baiting.

"He'll be home tomorrow," she said, turning back toward the student and telling her to hurry up.

Cole pushed, guessing since Nichole didn't ask his name that she already knew it. "Weren't you at the competitive trail ride this past weekend?"

There was only the barest tremor, confirmation enough she'd been expecting the question. She didn't risk looking at him again. "My lawyer has instructed me not to discuss the ride."

Cole decided against further questions. Chose instead to stand and watch, to see what Nichole would do.

She grew more agitated. The tell was in the way her fingers tightened on the dressage whip, in the stiffness of her body and the continued effort to control her breathing.

When Bold Adventure was saddled and bridled, Nichole took possession and led him away. By silent accord, Renata and Cole retraced their steps, heading for the Harley.

Alex hailed them near the door. "I spoke with my uncle last night, about Mark Hansen and Lew Kingston. I've got a name for you. Earl Young. He was a friend of Lew's back in the day when Lew was sponsoring Mark. My uncle thinks he remembers something about Earl owning a club in San Francisco called the Cadillac Lounge."

"Appreciate it, Alex," Cole said and Renata echoed the sentiment with a thanks.

They returned to the Harley.

"What was your take on her?" Renata asked as she slid the helmet off the bike's handlebar.

"Nichole knows something. Or she's scared of something, possibly Vincenzo and what's going to happen when he gets home." Cole shook his head. "I'm surprised she was so quick to make a fuss over the horse. That takes more courage than I see her possessing."

"Could be she's worried about Vincenzo divorcing her even with Lauren out of the picture and she wants to make sure his ownership of Bold Adventure is in the open."

"You might be right. Guess it would depend on how their prenuptial reads. You can bet if Vincenzo had Lauren sign one, he'd do the same for wife number two."

Renata sighed. "You're right. Maybe Nichole is going for reverse psychology. She knows it's going to look suspicious, her showing up not only at a competitive trail ride but at the one Lauren also happens to enter and get murdered doing. So instead of lying low and waiting to claim Bold Adventure, she does it right away. Kind of an 'only an innocent person would do this' statement."

"Feels like a possibility. You know what she made me think of?"

"What?"

"Puff. Only without his kick-ass potential."

"A rabbit?"

"Yeah."

"You saying you don't think she's got it in her to kill?"

"No. Almost everybody's got it in them under the right circumstances."

"So the question becomes, what would be the right circumstances for Nichole?"

"That's the question."

Renata nodded. "Okay. I can buy that. It seems like we have three circumstances. She might kill to get the horse, thinking she'd become a world-class competitor with him. She might kill because she's afraid of losing Vincenzo to Lauren—which combined with reason number one makes for a great motive. Or there's Shane's theory. This is about Ian."

"Shane's hunch is a long shot. Ian's receptionist isn't going to ID Nichole as the blonde who wanted to tear her apart. At most I'd put Nichole as an accomplice. The timing doesn't work for her actually pulling the trigger, dealing with the ribbons and arrows, and making it into the P&R stop in two hours. But I can see her as the person who slipped the note in Lauren's lunch cooler."

"Which would mesh in a way with her showing up at the barn with the original bill of sale. It makes the same kind of 'only an innocent person would do this' statement."

"Especially when you consider that right now we don't know whether the bill of sale used to lure Lauren into the clearing was real or not. Only way to find that out is to talk to Vincenzo."

"Which isn't going to sit well with the FBI. Or Detective Gaines."

Cole shrugged. "We'll play that hand when it's dealt."

"What next then?"

"See if we can talk to Kim Calloway." At Renata's puzzled expression, he added, "You saw her when we got to camp. She came over and offered to haul Warpaint back to the ranch. Her mother is Jan's right-hand person. Kim was the point rider for the Open division, and Nichole's alibi."

"Okay. I remember the name. Doesn't she keep her horse at the same place Nichole keeps a pleasure horse?"

"Yes."

"You're looking to find out if she's the one who invited Nichole to the ride?"

"For starters. A lot's going to depend on how well she knows Nichole and whether or not they're friends."

"Any reason to think Kim's lying about Nichole being right behind her?"

Cole shrugged. "Kim's only been coming to rides and club functions for the last year or so and I've had to miss a lot of those. I know she went through a bad divorce, but not much more. Her mother's been around for years. She actually pointed me in the direction of the guy who sold me Dealer."

He pulled out his cell phone along with the small notepad he carried with him, flipped through his notes until he found what he was looking for. A couple of quick calls later and Cole said, "We're in luck. Kim's at Trent Farms. She says she'll wait for us. There was also a message from Shane. Turns out the gun show is an annual event in Carmel. According to the Chamber of Commerce records, there was one going on during the weekend when Cora's son was killed."

## Chapter Twelve

Renata remembered Trent Farms. She'd been there once when she was checking out places to take riding lessons. Despite the name, Trent Farms was essentially a seventeen-acre pasture and riding arena at the bottom of a shallow ravine behind an old farm house.

The place was grandfathered in, allowing twenty horses in a now expensive residential neighborhood where most of the rich were limited to two, and those were kept in custom-built stables behind elegant homes and manicured lawns.

The real draw of Trent Farms was its nearness to a designated open space preserve and hours of riding. Renata had briefly considered boarding Solitaire there, but not seriously. It was more expensive than Hermosa Ranch, and beyond that, there was a loss of freedom that came with keeping a horse in someone else's backyard.

Kim was waiting for them outside the stable office, next to an old schoolhouse-type bell with a plaque above it that read, "Ring For Service." She was attractive. Makeup and jewelry in place even for coming out to do something with her horse. Blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail. Riding pants and short boots coming together for a trim, stylish look.

"Thanks for waiting," Cole said.

"No problem. Mom told me she'd talked to Jan and you were looking into Lauren's death. What gives?"

"We just left Valley Training Center. I wanted to ask you about Nichole."

Kim grimaced. "You and the police both. I'll tell you what I told them. Just because Nichole boards her horse here and we were at the same ride doesn't mean we're friends."

"So you didn't invite her?"

"No. And if I could have, I would have backed out of being there myself when I found out she'd registered. But you know how easy that is to do."

"I know." Son of a bitch, it was hard to remember why Renata being entered in the ride had made him so desperate to get out of riding drag. "What made you want to back out when you found out about Nichole?"

"I didn't want to end up babysitting or getting sucked into the drama over Vincenzo. I knew Lauren was going to be there."

"You expected trouble?"

"Not really. That's why I didn't say anything to Mom or Jan. At most I expected Nichole to corner Lauren and snivel and beg and grovel—like that'd change anything. She knew Vincenzo was going back to Lauren. That's why he bought Bold Adventure."

Kim shrugged. "As it turns out, Nichole went to all the trouble of going to the ride and then stayed away from Lauren altogether."

Contempt had edged into Kim's voice. Renata glanced at Cole to see if he'd noted it but his poker face was in place.

"Why go to the ride to confront Lauren?" he asked. "Why not confront her at her apartment or at Valley Training Center?"

"Nichole registered late. Maybe she thought Vincenzo was going to tell her he was divorcing her when he got back from Europe." Kim's eyes narrowed. "Or maybe she worried he'd skip the divorce part altogether and just make her disappear unless she could convince Lauren to break it off with him. Nichole's afraid of Vincenzo. She won't admit it, but I think it's pretty obvious."

Yeah, Renata could believe that based on the *Cold-blooded Mafia Hit Man* photo alone. Plus she had the benefit of talking to Meredith Lanier at Bay Downs and being with Cole for the FBI chat.

"So you don't see Nichole killing Lauren?" Cole said.

"You've met her. Can you picture her having the guts to do it?"

The contempt was still there, muted with an undertone of anger that had Renata's reporter instincts tingling despite the truth of Kim's words. Seeing Nichole and knowing who she was married to, Renata had a hard time imagining Nichole had acted on her own.

"Any idea who invited Nichole to the ride?" Cole asked.

"No, but there was almost no control over the 'ride free' invitations as we got close to the entry deadline. Everyone felt bad for Jan. We wanted a huge turnout, even if there weren't any huge names from other riding disciplines." Kim glanced down at her watch. "I need to head out."

"One last question. You rode with Nichole from lunch to the Open P&R stop?"

Kim worried her bottom lip. "I tried to stick to the rules about not letting competitors ride *with* you when you're the drag or point rider. There might have been a few times when Nichole and I were close enough to talk. But for most of the ride I stayed far enough ahead of her that she couldn't use me to keep from taking a wrong turn or for pacing the ride.

"I told Detective Gaines I was close enough to hear Nichole's horse on the trail behind me, and I did catch glimpses of her pretty regularly, so I don't know how she could have managed to kill Lauren and then get to the Open P&R stop on time, but I didn't see her constantly."

Kim ran her hand over her ponytail and seemed to shake off the mood. "Anyway, Nichole didn't have the guts to do it. And now I really do need to head out."

Head out meant driving away in a Saab convertible. As Kim gunned it up the steep driveway, Renata said, "You notice how many times she said Nichole didn't have the



guts, like having the guts to kill 'the other woman' was a good thing. I also assume you noticed she was blonde."

"I noticed," Cole said. "And I'm guessing her ugly divorce involved another woman and that's the reason for her anger. But if she's involved, why would she back off from giving Nichole a tight alibi?"

Renata shrugged. "I don't know. I guess she just rubbed me the wrong way. But considering she's the one who volunteered to take Warpaint, which would include Lauren's stuff, when we got back to camp, maybe we should look a little harder at her and also take another look at the ride timesheets and maps."

"Okay, Shane or Lyric can do some checking on Kim. The timesheets and maps can wait until later. What do you say about paying a visit to the Cadillac Lounge and seeing if Earl Young's still around?"

"I'd like to," Renata said, giving in to the urge to kiss Cole. "Thanks for helping me hunt down some answers for Cora."

Cole smiled, slow and sexy. "You haven't seen my bill yet."

\* \* \* \* \*

Despite the name, the Cadillac Lounge was a hole-in-the-wall joint in the Castro District. A quick glance around told Renata she and Cole were the only straight people in the place, and more than one patron was doing some serious fantasizing about Cole.

"Anybody hits on you, I'll tell them you belong to me and I don't share," she said, immediately regretting it when she heard the underlying truth in her words.

Cole laughed. "You do that," he said, leading her to the bar.

She had to hand it to him, he was confident enough in his own masculinity to appear perfectly at ease in a place that catered to gay men. Not many of the guys she knew would be able to pull it off.

The bartender cruised over. He was older, easily in his sixties. His shirt was unbuttoned almost to his navel, showing off gold chains and highlighting the gray hairs on his chest and the beginning swell of a gut. "Cole Maguire?"

Cole offered his hand. "That's me."

God she loved his confidence. He lived so large, lived by his own code and didn't seem worried about where he was seen or with whom.

"What brings you here?"

"I'm looking for someone. Earl Young. I heard he used to own this place."

"Still does," the bartender said. "And you've found him. You want something to drink? Something to eat? Choices are wide open on the first. On the second you're limited to bar snacks, potato skins, or hamburgers with a side of fries."

"A hamburger would hit the spot. And a Coke."

"What about you?" Earl asked Renata.

"The same. Only make it a Diet Coke."

"Coming up." He turned away from them and used a key pad to transmit the food order, then got the drinks himself, setting them down on the counter between them. "So what can I do for you?"

Cole glanced at Renata. She squeezed his thigh, silently telling him to handle the questions since he'd already connected with Earl.

"Do you remember a guy by the name of Mark Hansen?"

"Sure. A long time ago." Earl's eyebrows drew together. "What's this about?"

Cole took a minute to introduce Renata and she had to admit, it gave her a little thrill of pleasure when Earl said, "Do you write for the *Journal*?"

"Yes."

"Your work's good. The *Journal's* about the only paper I can read cover to cover."

"Thanks."

Understanding slid into Earl's expression. "This is for a story?" He turned toward Cole. "If I remember right, one of the World Poker Tour hosts said you're a PI when you're not playing poker."

"I am," Cole said. "We're looking into Mark's death but not for a story. Renata knows Mark's mother, Cora. We're trying to find some closure for her if possible. And if we can't, we'll let it go."

"I'm not sure I can help you too much there. Mark came to some parties at a friend's house. But I didn't know him well."

"Was the friend Lew Kingston?"

"Yes."

"Mark and Lew were a couple?"

Earl glanced at Renata. She said, "This is completely off the record. If I can't offer Cora something that'll ease her mind and give her a little peace, she'll never know I went looking for answers."

Earl thought it over. "Fair enough," he finally said. "Mark and Lew weren't a couple the few times I saw them together, but they were heading that way."

"Lew was openly gay?" Cole asked.

"Depended on the company. And on his mood. Sometimes he cared less about what *normal* people thought than other times."

"And Mark?"

"No. Not even close."

"The closets were full back in those days," Renata said.

Earl laughed and ran a finger along the gold necklaces. "Tell me about it. Things changed after the *Ellen* episode. It was good for business. Almost every week I had two or three 'coming out' parties here."

A waiter in skintight leather arrived with the food. He set the plates down in front of them along with a bottle of ketchup then left.

Cole said, "So you thought Lew and Mark were heading toward a relationship?"

"Relationship probably isn't the right word. Lew was obsessed with Mark and wanted him. That's closer to the truth. You had to know Lew."

"Someone else described him as a guy with more money than he knew what to do with."

"That was Lew. He inherited a bundle and never had to worry about working. As far as I can tell he spent his life going from one obsession to the next. Sometimes it was people, sometimes it was owning something that was the best of its kind. Sometimes it was sponsoring someone who was the best at what they did, or would be. He set his sights on Mark the first time he laid eyes on him. I witnessed it myself."

"Was Mark interested?" Renata asked.

"Not at first. My take on it was that Mark was already involved with someone." Earl held up his hand to stop the inevitable follow-up question. "I don't know who. It was just a feeling I had and I remember thinking it because I knew whoever he—or she—was, they didn't stand a chance against Lew. Lew wasn't a quitter when he really wanted something."

Cole said, "Carmel was a place Lew liked to hang out. Any rumors floating around about him being there at the time of Mark's murder?"

"Lew was devastated by Mark's death. In fact, he was completely changed by it. If he had a handful of relationships afterward I'd be surprised. And to some extent, the desire to collect slowed. He stopped sponsoring horses and riders altogether."

"And began sponsoring artists instead?"

Renata knew Cole was thinking about the artist who'd disappeared from Lew's yacht and was presumed dead. The small shake of Earl's head made her think he remembered it too.

"Lew sponsored artists and dancers all along. Let's face it, back then *they* at least were more open about their sexuality, as a rule, than the vast majority of people."

"Was Lew the kind of guy who would destroy something rather than let someone else have it?" Cole asked.

"Not a chance. Lew didn't care that much."

*Say what?* Renata frowned, wondering if maybe she was missing something. "I thought you said Lew was a collector of things and people."

"He was, but not a true collector, not the way you usually think of one. Except for the guns. He inherited the start of that collection from his father and kept adding to it.

"Lew liked *the challenge* of collecting and *acquiring*. He liked the newness that came with it. But as soon as he'd get together a collection or the novelty wore off, something or someone else would catch his interest and off he'd go.

"You'd think it would mean there'd be a trail of jealous or cast-off lovers who wanted to murder *him*, but Lew was charismatic. He liked to be liked, *needed* to be liked. And he was extremely generous when he parted company with his lovers."

Earl poured himself a glass of water and lifted it in a silent toast to Lew. "He gave me the funds to open this place. It's seen better days. So have I, for that matter. But back in the day, it was a hot spot for guys like Lew and me."

"What do you know about the dead artist?" Renata asked, not willing to let it drop completely.

"Not much. I had the club by then and very little free time for yacht trips and days-on-end partying, at least not offsite. Lew told me about it of course. We were friends, good friends before we were briefly a couple and good friends after. Lew was in a lot of pain by then, HIV edging into full-blown AIDS. It was getting harder for him to deny his condition though he was still trying to."

Earl shook his head. "Those were terrible times, the Eighties and early Nineties. It seems like a lifetime ago. Nationwide, they'd only just started testing multiple-drug combinations against HIV and AIDS and only a handful had even been invented.

"The doctors had Lew on all kinds of medicine. None of it helped. There was no hope then. There was only fear, hate and death."

He took a sip of water. "Lew partied even more than usual to try to block out what was happening to him. That's how it was on the yacht trip. He and his friend were drinking most of the day. Lew mixed his pills with alcohol and passed out. When he woke up, his friend was missing. And six months later Lew was dead."

"Pills and alcohol, that's a good way to end up killing yourself but not a sure one," Cole said, jolting Renata. "Not like a hunting accident."

"I don't think Lew was consciously trying to kill himself with the pills and alcohol."

"But Montana was different?"

Earl closed his eyes, pressed the cool glass to his forehead. "Yeah. Montana was different. A lot of guys we both knew were dead or dying. For the first time since the nightmare of HIV and AIDS started it was the leading cause of death for men our age. I don't remember how many died that year, twenty thousand? Forty? A drop in the bucket compared to the twenty-five million it's now claimed. But in a lot of ways, the disease was more terrifying back then. Like I said, there was no hope. There was just the promise of a slow, painful death."

"Did you know he intended to kill himself?" Cole asked.

Earl finished his drink and set the empty glass on the counter. "No. Looking back on it I should have. But I didn't at the time. We had a big party, kind of like old times, then the next day, early in the morning before anyone was up, he shot himself."

Renata didn't think Earl's earlier answer would change, but she knew she couldn't leave without asking her question again, in a different way. "You said Lew was devastated by Mark's death. Changed by it. I believe he was in Carmel when Mark was

killed. There was a gun show that weekend and he was an avid collector who probably wouldn't have missed that particular show. Do you think he could have killed Mark? Accidentally if not intentionally?"

She expected a vehement no. Instead Earl's fingers went to the gold necklaces, tracing the links as if they were worry beads. His face seemed to age under the weight of memory. "Not on purpose," he finally said. "Never on purpose. But Lew was never the same after Mark's death."

"Thanks," Renata said. *For the truth*, she added silently, finishing her meal as Cole let the conversation drift to poker and kept it there until they left.

They went back to Cole's place. Renata set the timesheets on the kitchen counter, next to the map. Cole marked the position of the after-lunch Open P&R stop with a star. It was different than the one Novice riders were using and based on the timing indicated on the map, approximately two hours of ride time after leaving lunch.

Cole ran his finger along the trail the Open riders would have taken. It separated from the one the Novice riders stayed on just a little ways past the spot where Renata mistakenly turned.

"There aren't many places to trot and canter on this section if you're trying to make up time," he said. "It's mostly single track with a lot of switchbacks. It's also one of the few places for Open riders where most of it's timed at a walk."

His attention shifted to the timesheets. "Nichole was right at two hours getting into the P&R stop. I don't see how she could have gotten to the clearing, waited for Lauren, who couldn't leave the lunch stop until ten minutes after she did, killed Lauren, then made it to the P&R stop on schedule.

"And if you throw panicking, going back to pull the ribbons, returning to find you at the murder scene... You get the idea. At a minimum she'd probably need an hour to do all that, meaning she'd have to trim an hour off her ride time plus manage to retake her position without anyone seeing her."

Renata sighed. "Maybe you're right and Nichole's part in this was to drop a note in Lauren's lunch box and go on her way. Even if Kim was involved—and I recognize we have no motive for that at the moment, and maybe I'm grasping at straws because she's blonde—it'd still be tough to get back to the front of the ride without being seen by another rider."

"Something will pop," Cole said, setting his pencil down on the map, its tip at the Open P&R stop and the body passing over the place they'd marked as the murder site.

The sight of it jolted Renata, reminding her of high school math and how the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. "Have you ever been to the spot where the Open P&R was?"

"Sure, as a rider and a volunteer. It's a strip of clearing along the trail. No shade. But after the horses have cleared the stop you can take them down to the creek for water."

"The creek," Renata said, putting her thumb on the murder site, her index finger on the P&R spot. "If it's fairly straight, riding in it would cut the distance considerably."

Cole studied the map. "It would mean she either did a test ride or knows someone who has ridden in the creek. Or she took a hell of a gamble that she could make up time that way. This map isn't detailed enough for someone to figure out the creek might serve as a shortcut."

"Kim would know."

Cole frowned. "I'm still not convinced she's involved. If two people were there when Lauren was killed, one of them could have gone back for the ribbons while the other dealt with the crossbow and arrows. And, again, why would Kim back off on giving Nichole a solid alibi? Or if you switch it around, Nichole is Kim's alibi, too."

Renata sighed. "I hear you."

Cole laughed. "You sound like Shane. What do you say to trailering the horses to the ride site tomorrow? We can test your theory about the creek."

"I'd like that."

"Good," he said, pulling her into his arms and chasing thoughts of murder and suspects from her mind.

Renata's moan of pleasure turned into a frustrated groan with the sound of a knock followed by metal sliding against metal. "Speak of the devil," she said, pulling out of Cole's arms.

Shane let himself in, pheromones pouring off him and making Renata mumble, "What is it with you Maguire boys? Is your other brother as potent?"

Cole's laugh told her he wasn't threatened. "Braden? Yeah. He'll be back in town in a couple of days and over to check you out."

Her stomach flip-flopped and her heart raced. Renata could feel herself sinking deeper and deeper into a fantasy that held a future with Cole.

She was in love with him. God, how could she not be?

But then she'd known from the start she didn't have any sense when it came to Cole. She'd rationalized all the way down the line, was still doing it. Even now, when it was probably safe to go to her mother's house—hell, maybe even back to her own apartment—she wasn't about to suggest it. She'd take every minute she could with Cole and pay for it later.

"I just checked the case file on Lauren Hunt," Shane said. "You had a note in there about wanting to visit the therapeutic riding program on Woodside Road. I'm heading there now if you want to go with me. I called ahead and told Brenda I might bring a reporter with me, just in case you wanted to work the story angle."

"Let me grab my camera," Renata said. She sent an inquiring glance at Cole, her emotions perversely alternating between wanting him to go with her and wanting the space.

"You two go. I've got stuff to take care of while you're checking out the riding program."

\* \* \* \* \*

"This is Cady's doing," Shane said a little while later as he parked at the end of a row of cars, a couple of them expensive with personalized plates, the others a range of ordinary and held together with duct tape.

"She volunteered here before she left for Texas. And if you haven't figured it out yet, you've got to be careful when you sit down at the table with a Montgomery or a Maguire. Usually the game is poker but we don't even play Scrabble without betting on the outcome—which is how I came to be doing this. Scrabble is not my game. Low points took over putting in Cady's time so Brenda wouldn't be left in a lurch until she could find a fresh volunteer."

An attractive woman stepped out of a small modular unit next to the barn. She waved and changed course, heading toward them. Shane made the introductions when she arrived.

"Let me show you the layout," Brenda said. "Feel free to photograph at will. I checked after Shane's call, the kids here right now have release forms signed that cover pictures taken to promote or support the program. Most of the parents don't mind having their children's pictures used, but a few are sensitive and uncomfortable with it. If you need photos from the next group let me know so I can make sure they're covered."

"I'll do that," Renata said as Brenda led them into a barn.

"The horses on the right-hand side are part of the program. We've got ten of them all together. Five have been donated to us. The other five are on loan. The horses on the left are lesson horses belonging to the stable. Sometimes in a pinch we're able to borrow one or two of them but we try not to ask for favors."

"Where does your support come from?"

"Mostly from the horse community. Several Silicon Valley entrepreneurs help underwrite the board bill every month. We're extremely lucky to be able to operate out of this stable. There aren't many places with a covered arena and without one we'd be at the mercy of the weather."

They moved from the barn to the arena. At one end an instructor was giving a dressage lesson to a young girl. At the other end a large group of adults accompanied five children of horseback.

"Oops, I'd better get over there," Shane said. "Lost track of the time."

Shane climbed the fence and fast-walked across the sand. An older man, probably a grandfather, gave up his position beside one of the riders and went to where a book rested on a chair.

Damn, Renata thought, watching Shane walking next to the horse and its rider. How was she going to avoid devastation when it was so easy to fall in love with Cole's family and want to be a part of it?

"As you can see," Brenda said, "our program is very labor intensive. We couldn't pull it off if we didn't have volunteers to help us. The number varies depending on who is riding. This group has three adults helping with each child, one on either side of the horse and one to lead the horse if necessary."

Renata noticed the children were all boys, about the same age as the girl at the other end of the arena but that's where the similarity ended. A couple of the kids wore leg braces and there was more than one wheelchair leaning against the arena wall.

Brenda anticipated her question and said, "These children have Muscular Dystrophy. They're here every week at this time."

Renata couldn't get over how many adults it took to pull off a riding session. "How do you come up with the manpower?"

"We've got two fulltime staff members, plus me. Parents help out, not only out here with the horses but with things like fundraising and office work, and then we've got volunteers from the community. It'd be difficult to pull it off without them. Sometimes children come here from residential treatment facilities or their parents can't be here or aren't able to help with the horses."

"I've heard from a couple of people that Lauren Hunt was involved with this program."

"Yes. I'm still reeling from the news she was murdered."

"I'm working on a story about her, but I only met her one time, briefly," Renata said, deciding against mentioning where and when. "What was she like?"



## Chapter Thirteen

Brenda's hands settled on the top rail of the fence surrounding the arena. Her foot settled on the bottom one. "If you'd asked while Lauren was alive, I wouldn't answer at all unless she gave me permission. You know who her mother is?"

"Yes."

"Then you can understand why Lauren was so contained and controlled in public. Oh, she could play the game of course, giving interviews and doing the public relations work necessary to get sponsors and be asked to ride top-notch horses, but she wasn't what anyone would call a warm person. She was driven, goal oriented, and—this is purely conjecture—determined not to have her reputation tainted."

Renata nodded, Brenda's words jibed with Jan's. "I'd think being involved with a program like yours would be a positive thing for her reputation, not a negative one."

"Yes, it would have been. But—again, this is just speculation—Lauren's reason for volunteering was personal. I think it was a way for her to atone or make peace or to find some sort of closure."

Renata was totally intrigued. "What kind of kids did she work with?"

"Kids who have been impacted by drug use—either their own or their mother's during pregnancy."

"Lauren's sister died of a heroin overdose and her father died of cirrhosis of the liver."

"Yes. That's why I believe Lauren's reason for volunteering was personal though we never talked about it. She was friendlier here than I suspect she was elsewhere, but she didn't invite confidences and only a handful of people in the program realized *who* she was in the world of competitive dressage."

It sounded like a lonely, isolated life to Renata, a cold one with not much to show for it at the end except a dusty collection of ribbons and trophies. She'd take friendship and family over fame and fortune any day of the week.

Renata turned her attention to Shane, watched as he laughed and teased the kid he was gently holding in place on the saddle. She wondered if she could pull it off as easily as he did, as Lauren apparently did, and be there for kids facing hardships that weren't fixed by love, money or time.

"How do you do it? How do you stick with it?"

"Miracles," Brenda said. "Not anything big like the parting of a sea. Just small ones. Like a child who has never spoken before saying a word. Or a child being able to sit upright rather than being propped up."

Brenda pulled a business card from her pocket and handed it to Renata. "I'll get out of your way now and let you take pictures. If you need anything, I'll be in the modular unit. It serves as office and meeting room. And if you have questions later, please call."

"Will do," Renata said, pocketing the card but resisting the urge to start taking pictures immediately. Choosing instead to let the bigger story come to her first. Finding it in the contrast between the young, healthy dressage student in a private lesson and the boys with their large ensemble of adult helpers. Seeing how different their realities were but also how the horses offered them all the same thing, freedom and joy, mobility beyond what they were capable of otherwise.

Renata raised the camera and began capturing the images of individual struggle and victory. Time passed in a blur marked by the opening and closing of the lens shutter, and was only interrupted when Shane said, "I'm done. But take as much time as you want."

She captured one last image then lowered the camera, fished the lens cap out of her pocket and put it on. "I'm good. If I need more when I start working on the story, I can come back. Thanks for bringing me here."

Shane's smile was pure mischief. "No problem. You and Cole have practically been living together. Absence makes the heart grow fonder, or so they say."

"I'm not touching that one."

The smile deepened into pure sin. "You ask Cole about Grandma's premonition?"

"Why? You have a bet going with Lyric?"

"Yeah, but only about Cole's reaction," Shane said, totally unrepentant.

The laughter in his voice tempted Renata into saying, "Cole said he didn't want to talk about it."

"That all?"

"Yes."

"And he seemed okay afterward?"

Renata's entire body tightened, remembering Cole suckling at her breasts while she perched on the edge of the table, him laving and biting until she lay back so he could pull her jeans off and bury his face against her pussy.

A small shudder passed through her, a physical memory of the orgasm he'd given her with his mouth and tongue. Her labia grew slick and her clit hard as she thought about the second release, the one that'd come from Cole's cock filling her, from him fucking her, all of it happening after she'd asked about his grandmother's prediction.

A blink freed Renata. A look at Shane's expression brought a blush and a silent curse. God she needed to get a poker face. But somehow she actually managed to *remember* the question responsible for her current state and answer it. "He seemed like Cole."

Shane grinned. Mercifully he spared her the details of his bet with Lyric and who'd won it as they headed toward the parking area.

Renata checked for messages after climbing into Shane's Jeep and stowing the camera in its case. She was surprised to find one from Stella, Brian Elliot's sister. Her message was limited to providing an address in a tone that didn't invite a callback.

"You interested in going to the city?" Renata asked.

"You got a lead?"

"An address for Brian Elliot."

"Sure. I'll go with you. Just do me a favor. Clear it with Cole first. I don't want big brother to get jealous and beat me up."

Renata snorted. But a small part of her remembered the flash of jealousy she'd experienced when she imagined Cole autographing some groupie's boob or belly, and that part hoped Cole cared enough to feel a tinge of it himself—though not over her and Shane.

Cole answered her call immediately, the sound of his voice stroking over her and feeding the need the memories of after-dinner sex had stirred up.

"Go ahead with Shane," he said after she'd told him about Stella's call. "I've got Puff and boys to hang out with."

\* \* \* \* \*

The address Stella left was in a rundown area of San Francisco. The sign in front labeled it a hospice run by an AIDS charity.

Renata's chest tightened as she and Shane approached the front door. Her footsteps slowed and she wanted to tell Shane to go on without her but she didn't. This was her story, her case and she'd have to handle it even if she didn't do "sick" any better than she did "cold"—a major irony given how other people's need for doctors had paid for her upbringing. Then again, in a lot of ways, she'd competed against sick people for her parents' attention the whole time she was growing up.

They walked along the cracked sidewalk in silence and let themselves in. The place smelled of antiseptic and death, dry rot and old carpet.

An older woman looked up from the magazine she was reading. "Can I help you?"

"We were hoping to visit Brian Elliot," Renata said. "His sister said he was here."

"Let me see if he's awake."

The woman disappeared down a hallway. Renata wandered the tiny waiting room, looking at the paintings and photographs adorning the walls and thinking they'd probably been done by people staying at the hospice.

Shane's thoughts held the same flavor as hers, only darker. "You think they take the stuff off the walls and put up new ones when people die?"

"Maybe."

"Makes a depressing story."

Behind where the woman had been sitting was a large photograph of the AIDS quilt. Shane skirted the desk, unconcerned about violating rules or personal space, and somehow it eased Renata's nerves, reminded her of Cole's saying his brothers and Lyric all had a little bit of trouble staying inside the lines.

"You ever do a story about the AIDS quilt?" Shane asked.

"No. Not specifically about the quilt. The stories I've written have been mostly about AIDS and the African American community."

Shane shoved his hands into his back pockets. "The quilt is so big now it's impossible to display the entire thing. They send blocks of it around the country. The blocks are twelve feet by twelve feet, with eight names per block. Last time I looked at the website there were almost six thousand blocks."

Curiosity made Renata ask, "You know someone whose name is on the quilt?"

"Yeah, a guy I went to high school with. Tyler came up with the design. Cady and Erin did the complicated parts of the panel. Lyric and I did the simple stuff."

The woman returned. If she was bothered by Shane being behind her desk it didn't show. "Brian's awake," she said, motioning for them to follow her. "Stay as long as you want. He doesn't get many visitors."

Renata's stomach knotted thinking about Brian's parents going on a cruise while their son was dying in a hospice. "His parents don't come to see him?"

"No. As far as I know they've never been here."

"What about his sister?"

"She's been here once." The woman stopped next to a doorway and waited until Renata and Shane entered before leaving.

Brian was pale and emaciated, his features ravaged by the disease. Shane sat down in a chair, offered his hand and introduced himself. Renata did the same, adding she worked with Cora and that's why she'd sought Brian out.

"I never met Mark's mother," Brian said, his breath coming in short gasps, his eyes closing, making it seem as if he'd shrink into himself. "I wanted to but he kept putting it off."

Renata could hear pain in Brian's voice. Twenty years should have made it fade to nothing, but maybe this close to death...

"I've been thinking about him a lot lately," Brian said and the hairs rose on Renata's neck at having her thoughts reflected back at her. "I'd like to talk about him."

It seemed to take extraordinary effort for Brian to open his eyes again and turn his head toward the small dresser by the bed. "My photo album's in there. Would you like to see it?"

A coughing spell followed his question. Renata answered by retrieving the well-worn album, its cover torn and stained. She handed it to Brian after the coughing finally subsided.

He flipped through the first part of the album without comment. Renata caught glimpses of him as a child, sometimes alone, sometimes with his sister. When he got to the years capturing his late teens, he paused.

Renata recognized Mark immediately and had to smile when she saw Brian as a young man because the image made her remember Alex saying, *Now he made an impression on me the first time I saw him. He was pure Berkeley. Long hair and sandals. Sandals for god's sake, around horses!*

"We met in Santa Cruz, during a beach volleyball festival," Brian said and began to slowly turn the pages, giving Renata and Shane plenty of time to study the pictures as he lost himself in the memories they represented.

As the faces in the photographs matured, Renata thought she could see, in some of the candid shots, how the relationship between the two friends had changed. It wasn't overt, and maybe if she hadn't been looking for it she wouldn't have seen it all. Love. At least in Brian's face. Hope for a future together that was captured best in the last picture, one of Brian and Mark sitting close together, a basset puppy sprawled across their laps.

"That's Gus, isn't it?" Renata said. "Cora told me she used to keep him for Mark sometimes."

Brian's fingers trembled as they stroked the faded picture of the puppy. "Yes. I gave him to Mark."

Renata's throat clogged, closing off, some part of her not wanting to ask the hard questions. It was obvious Brian was the partner Earl Young had mentioned, the partner who didn't stand a chance against Lew. And it was equally obvious that with Lew dead and Brian dying, any chance of finding answers for Cora would be gone soon.

Brian closed his eyes, the tears glistening at their corners almost keeping Renata from asking, "Do you know why Mark was in Carmel?"

"He was with Lew."

It was confirmation of what she'd already guessed. "Do you think Lew killed him?"

The tears escaped, sliding down to the sterile white pillowcase. "I don't want to remember him dying. It still hurts. He was the only one I ever loved."

Renata let it go and Brian fell into an exhausted, uneasy sleep. Shane removed the album from where it lay on Brian's chest, handed it to her. She put it back into the small dresser. The drawer was empty save for the album, a testament to what Brian held as valuable at life's end.

They returned to the car, somber in their thoughts. "He doesn't have much time left," she said.

"No," Shane agreed.

"His parents have been on a cruise. I think they're back today. They live in Berkeley, same as his sister."

"Probably can't handle him being gay. Might even think dying of AIDS is God's punishment for it."

"Hope they rot in hell if that's the case. Sanctimonious is a pet peeve of mine."

Shane laughed. "Cole better watch himself around you. You'll kick his ass if he steps out of line."

His comment gave her the warm fuzzies, at least for a few minutes, until she thought about Brian's tears. "I hate it that he's alone." *Dying alone.*

"I'll visit him tomorrow," Shane said, the words coming out of nowhere but feeling right, something driving him to add, "Let's swing by his parents' house."

Renata cut a look over at him. "Reconciliation doesn't seem to be in the picture for this family."

Shane shrugged, couldn't explain what motivated him to suggest the side trip or what he wanted it to accomplish. Hell, he was only barely willing to face the need to come to terms with his own sexuality and what that would ultimately mean. "Worth a try."

"If you say so." Her voice said clearly she didn't and this was going to be his deal when they got to Berkeley.

Shane's grimace edged into a smile. Damn, she was perfect for Cole. Not that his brother would ever admit it, but before Renata, Cole had always gone for dumb. It was safer that way. No chance of falling in love because without the brain engaged, any attractive female who was willing to spread her legs would do.

He shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Knew he was as guilty as Cole. Or had been. It was too soon to tell whether he would be again.

There was a car parked in the driveway of Brian's parents' house, an old Buick that seemed to fit right in with the shabby look of the place, the unpainted shutters and unmowed lawn.

"Needs work," he said, getting out of the Jeep. Not that he enjoyed maintenance projects or yard duty himself, but taking care of what needed to be done was a source of pride with him, a way of proving to Bulldog that despite living on the wild side, he could be trusted, not just with the house but with Crime Tells' cases.

A breeze blew past as they climbed the stairs to the front door. It set off a multitude of wind chimes hanging from the porch and nearby trees.

Shane pressed the doorbell.

A curtain moved at one of the windows first, before the old woman opened the door just wide enough to ask, "What do you want?"

Heavy footsteps sounded from behind her. Shane caught a glimpse of an old man dressed in a black suit. *American Gothic* without the farmhouse or the bib overalls, though Shane was guessing the pitchfork was there, only wrapped in words and thoughts.

"It's about Brian," Shane said.

Only someone used to watching for tells would have seen the glimmer of emotion in the old woman's eyes. It was there and gone in a blink.

The old man grasped the edge of the door. "We have no son," he said, closing it firmly.

Renata's hand settled on Shane's arm, warm and reassuring. He smiled. Shit, she was already feeling like family.

"Didn't turn out different than we thought it would," she said, telling it like it was.

"Yeah."

They returned to the Jeep. The prospect of being alone with his thoughts made Shane feel jittery. The thought of going out and partying made him feel panicked.

It was a relief when his phone rang, providing a distraction when one of his information sources gave him a home address for Ian Shaw.

"You feel like living dangerously?" Shane asked.

"Depends on how dangerous you're talking about."

"How about dropping in on Ian Shaw and seeing if he's home?"

"And ignore the little visit from the FBI?" Renata's tone said she thought he might be crazy.

Shane laughed. "The way it's written up in the notes, Walters and Strout said the agency would appreciate *Cole's* cooperation. They didn't say anything about Crime Tells. They didn't ask you to cooperate. Truth is, if they were at the top of their game, they would have done both. They should have known you're a reporter."

"So it's their own damn fault for not asking?"

"Exactly."

There was something about the Maguire boys that brought out a side of her she wasn't used to, Renata thought, feeling herself being sucked in despite a lifetime of having a healthy respect for staying far away from the focused eye of law enforcement.

"All right," she said, thinking the risk would be worth it if they could find out who Ian Shaw's jealous blonde girlfriend was, or if he had any idea who else might want to kill Lauren.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Fuck," Cole said, throwing away winning poker hands as well as losing ones by abruptly closing all the windows he had open on the computer screen. "What's taking them so long?"

He got only the barest thump of a dachshund's tail from somewhere under his desk in response.

Goddamn, this was bad.

He only barely stopped himself from picking up his phone and dialing Renata's cell. It felt like she'd been gone forever.

*Better get used to. She's not here to stay.*

Cole gritted his teeth. Irritation flared along his nerve endings and he chose to make Shane the target of it by promising himself he'd beat the crap out of his brother if Renata got home — *back* — and asked about Grandma Maguire's prediction.

He pushed away from his desk and stalked to the bathroom, resisting the urge to strip out of his clothing along the way but giving into it once he got there. It was a mistake. A big mistake.

As soon as he stepped into the shower, memory assaulted him, making him moan. Christ, he could see Renata wrapping her fingers around his cock and rubbing her thumb over the head as she pulled him to her, the hot water cascading over both of them and turning the stall into a tropical paradise as she let him take her with nothing between them.

Cole gripped himself, his hand a poor substitute for Renata's slick channel. He closed his eyes and imagined her long legs locking around his waist as they had in the shower, as they'd done once again when he held her at the edge of the table and fucked her there.

Reality and fantasy blended. He imagined her kneeling in front of him, taking him in her mouth. Sucking him until he forced her to stand and turned her to the wall, plunged into her, his balls slapping against her flesh, her moans joining his as his hands cupped her breasts possessively and the water trapped the heat and scent of sex, turning it into a steamy sensual fog they could remain lost in forever.

Fire raced up his spine as his hand moved up and down on his shaft. Lava-hot need building to a fevered need for release. His buttocks clenched. The sound of his heart beating in his ears drowned out the noise of the shower, filled his thoughts with a single word, Renata's name silently repeated until it escaped on a groan as semen jetted through his cock.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ian Shaw's neighborhood was similar to Cole and Shane's. Quiet, nondescript. Like a hundred others in an area crowded with people who lived tightly packed together and differing only in that there seemed to be a lot of houses with For Sale signs driven into their lawns at curbside.

"This is the street," Shane said, turning. There were lights on in many of the houses and the flicker of television screens in more than one.

Ian Shaw's house was dark.

"Could be he's still out of town," Renata said.

"Could be."

Shane turned the corner, then the next one so they were on the street running parallel and behind Ian's. He slowed the Jeep in front of a house with a For Sale sign at the curb.



Renata's stomach nosedived when she realized the house shared a fence line with Ian's. She could guess at the thoughts going through Shane's mind.

"Not a good idea," she said, remembering how easily he'd gotten into her place to retrieve Puff.

The Jeep accelerated, turned the corner. Renata breathed a sigh of relief only to have Shane pull over to the curb and say, "Drive around the block a couple of times. Slow down in front of the ones with For Sale signs if you get nervous about someone seeing you. Stop and pick me up the next time you see me."

"Tell me you're not seriously thinking of breaking into Ian Shaw's house."

"I'm just going to take a look around."

"I think we should run this by Cole first."

Shane's smile flashed. "I think not. Don't worry. I know what I'm doing."

"Yeah? Those sound like famous last words to me."

"Trust me. I won't do anything stupid."

"Define stupid."

Shane laughed and got out of the Jeep. "See you in a few."

Short of trying to tackle him, truss him up and toss him in the car, Renata knew she couldn't do anything to stop him. It gave her a new respect for Cole and what he had to deal with.

She slid into the driver's seat, heart racing too fast and palms sweaty. Indecision kept her from putting the car into gear. She wanted to call Cole, if not to lay the entire mess in his lap then at least to share the burden of it with him.

But what was the point in worrying him? There was nothing he could do. Even if he left immediately, this situation would play out before he got here.

With a sigh she put the Jeep in drive and eased around the block and onto Ian's street. Nothing had changed. His house was still dark.

She didn't slow, just kept going. Her stomach knotted when there was no sign of Shane on the next street.

The thought of doing another drive-by on Ian's street so soon was nerve-racking. But the fear of Shane getting caught doing whatever he was doing was worse.

"Note to self," she said, fingers tightening on the steering wheel. "Do not let Shane talk you into living dangerously again."

Renata kept the Jeep moving, turning the corner and passing the spot where Shane had gotten out. The sound of her cell tone had the blood pounding in her ears. She answered it without stopping to see who was calling.

"Are you and Shane still in the city?" Cole asked, making Renata's mouth go dry.

"No."

She could almost feel Cole's tension ratchet up on the other end of the line. "Where are you?"

Oh yeah, he knew his brother well. Renata bit her lip. "You don't want to know."  
"Christ!"

She turned the corner and white noise filled her mind when she saw a car pulling into Ian's driveway, the garage door already in the process of lifting. "Let me call you back," she said, folding the phone and dropping it onto the passenger seat.

God, she was as crazy as Shane. But the only thing she could think to do was to pull into the driveway and hope she could stall Ian with the questions she wanted to ask him.

## Chapter Fourteen

Renata pulled into Ian's driveway just as the garage door started its descent. A jolt of fear went through her when his hand made an aborted movement toward the gun she could too easily imagine him wearing in a shoulder rig. He ducked out of the garage as she opened the Jeep door, and she hoped with the interior lights of the car illuminating her, he'd think, *Harmless! Do not shoot.*

"Ian Shaw?" Not that she needed to ask. He matched the picture from Lauren's apartment.

"Who are you? And what are you doing here?"

As greetings went, it could have been worse. Renata offered her hand and introduced herself, adding, "I'm working on a story about Lauren Hunt. I assume you know she was killed Saturday."

A muscle spasmed in his cheek. She thought she saw a glimmer of emotion. But all he said was, "I'm afraid I can't help you there. How did you find me?"

"A confidential source."

Ian tensed and glanced down the street. Renata heard the sound of a car but before she could turn to look his fingers were locked around her forearms and he was jerking her forward, crushing her mouth with his.

Reason prevailed despite the raging instinct to struggle against the bruising strength of his grip and the unwelcome kiss. He released her as soon as the car reached the end of the street. "Don't come back here," he said, dismissing Renata by turning away.

She grabbed his arm, remembering too late the earlier movement of his hand toward a hidden gun. "You were seeing someone else. A jealous blonde. Who is she? Give me just that much."

Ian glanced back at her, something she couldn't quite read in his eyes. "Sorry. I don't kiss and tell."

His attention shifted to where the car had disappeared around the corner. "It'll be healthier for you if you stay away from me," he said, pulling away from her and striding toward his front door.

Renata returned to the Jeep, stomach nearly cramping from tension as she worried about Shane and mentally replayed the exchange with Ian, including the kiss whose purpose she could only guess at, though she knew it had nothing to do with her personally.

Relief almost made her lightheaded when she saw Shane waiting for her on the street behind Ian's. She stopped next to him, locking the driver's side door as he

reached to open it. There was no way in hell she was going to let him decide their next stop.

Shane laughed and went around, climbed into the passenger seat grinning, totally unrepentant. Despite her intentions not to offer anything that might even remotely be interpreted as positive feedback regarding his activities, she couldn't stop herself from asking, "Find anything?"

"Nope. Just confirmed what I suspected. He's got a top notch security system. He's very serious about having no surprise visitors."

Goose bumps prickled her skin as the deep chill of reaction set in. "Yeah, I got that from him."

Shane stilled completely. "You talked to Shaw?"

Renata gave Shane a detailed version and felt better for it, especially when he said, "Cole's going to kill me."

"You think?"

Shane grinned, completely irrepressible. "Just to be on the safe side, you can drop me off at my grandparents' place. I'll spend the night there. They've got a vested interest in keeping me alive."

She thought he was joking until he started giving her directions and they ended up parked in front of an elegant old residence not far from Stanford University. "This is Bulldog's house?"

"No. Grandpa and Grandma Maguire." Shane's eyes danced with amusement. "You want to come in?"

Renata was tempted, if for no other reason than to meet the woman whose premonition had saved Lyric's parents from disappearing in the jungles of Columbia. But before she could answer, her cell rang and she remembered her hastily aborted conversation with Cole. "It's your brother," she said, recognizing the number.

"Then I'm history." Shane slid from the car as she answered the phone.

"Where are you?" Cole asked, enough steel in his voice for Renata to feel a shiver of misgiving.

"Right now I'm parked in front of your Grandmother Maguire's house."

"Son of a bitch, I'm going to kill Shane."

She laughed, honest humor and nervous reaction combined. "That's what he's trying to avoid."

"Let me talk to him."

Renata glanced at the front door. Shane was already inside. "You'll have to call your grandparents' house. Shane hightailed it to the front door as soon as I told him you were on the line. He's spending the night."

She heard Cole take a deep breath. "You're on your way back now?"

"Yes." Renata put Shane's Jeep in drive and pulled away from the curb.

"Where were you earlier?"

Renata grimaced and directed a silent curse at Shane herself for leaving her to tell Cole what they'd been up to. *But on the plus side*, she thought as she started to give Cole the details, *it's probably better to tell him over the phone than in person*. That way he had time to calm down if he was inclined to go ballistic.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cole had a whole new respect for Kieran as he paced the house waiting for the sound of Shane's Jeep. Christ, what was Renata thinking going along with his brother's harebrained idea?

She *knew* Ian Shaw was off limits. She should have said no. And if she didn't want to play the heavy, all it would have taken was a call and he'd have put a stop to things.

As far as Crime Tells was concerned this was his case and Shane would toe the line if given a direct order. Some things weren't flexible, not in a company where almost everyone in it was related.

Cole speared his fingers through his hair. Fuck! He was still worked up. He knew he needed to chill before Renata got back. If they were married —

His thoughts screeched to a halt even as his cock went rock hard at the idea of burning her ass with the palm of his hand before tumbling her onto the bed and fucking her senseless.

Ice-cold sweat drenched him. He forced his mind away from the fantasy, a deviation from anything he'd ever imagined doing with a woman.

He blamed the images of carnal punishment on Kieran and Lyric. There weren't a hell of a lot of secrets between Montgomery and Maguire cousins. Not when information served as currency at the poker table.

Cole closed his eyes and worked at regaining the control that had always defined his relationships when it came to women. It helped knowing Renata would probably castrate him if he went caveman on her when she walked into the house, if he whipped off his belt and —

A shudder went through him, originating in his cock. Cole gripped himself through the fabric of his jeans. Contemplated unzipping and jerking off in the hopes that coming would leave him calm. The sound of the Jeep stopped him from doing it.

Cole took a deep breath. Then another. He mentally followed Renata as she parked in Shane's driveway and walked to his front door.

He was barely aware of moving from the couch, didn't even remember her stepping into the house before he was there, crowding her, trapping her between him and the door.

"What the fuck were you thinking?" he said, the words ripped from him, escaping before he could stop them.

Some semblance of sanity kept him from making it worse, urged him to cover her mouth with his as a way to keep from saying anything more.

She met his kiss. Matched it.

If she regretted her actions, it didn't show.

The lack of remorse inflamed him.

Clothes peeled away. Shoes were kicked off.

With a strength born of desperation and fear, Cole lifted Renata, thrust inside her as he held her pinned to the door.

She wrapped her legs around him, clung to him. Took what he gave her—a hard, frantic fuck that left them both trembling, breathless.

"You feel better now?" Renata asked, wondering what the hell had just happened.

Cole grunted in response, making her smile. If this was his way of going ballistic it worked for her.

"I think I've got to go lie down now," he said.

"Poor thing. Must be because you didn't have your Wheaties this morning."

His laugh vibrated through her. "I'm not done blowing off steam. I just need to do it horizontally."

Cole levered himself away from her far enough so their eyes could meet. "What were you thinking, going to Shaw's house?"

Renata grimaced. "How about, it seemed like a good idea at the time? Shane did have a valid point. The men in black didn't ask *me* to stay away from Ian. Besides, now we know Ian's a dead end as far as telling us who the blonde is."

"Promise you won't go near him again."

Renata's heart did a crazy, shivery dance in her chest at the fierceness of Cole's expression and the rough edge in his voice. She opened her mouth to agree but the words didn't form.

She was too much of a reporter to cut herself off completely from a piece of the story. "I don't plan to."

The answer didn't sit well with him. She felt it in the stiffening of his body, the return of tension, but she didn't rush in to reassure him because it occurred to her that maybe Cole was used to women going along with whatever he said or wanted without questioning or fighting him on it.

Well, tough. He'd have to settle for the answer she'd given him.

*Was she trying to drive him crazy?* Cole wondered, pushing away from the door he'd been using as a support. *I don't plan to* was exactly the same as Shane's *I hear you*. It didn't promise shit and it made him feel edgy all over again.

Christ! This was exactly why he didn't want a permanent woman in his life. He could get sex anywhere and settling down with one woman wasn't worth the emotional turmoil that came with it.

*Liar!*

Cole clenched his jaw in denial even as his cock seemed to throb with the word. He just needed to fuck, he told himself.

*Liar!*

Being pressed against the smooth, hot skin of Renata's cunt was giving the little head a louder voice than the big one. And for now he was done with conversation.

It was a caveman move. Cole knew it even as he draped Renata over his shoulder.

His hand caressed her buttocks as he carried her to the bedroom. But her laugh told him he didn't have to worry about castration later. And her expression when he dumped her on the bed and came down on top of her was a sultry invitation he was more than willing to accept.

His hands held hers against the mattress, their fingers entwined, palms touching so it felt as though their hearts beat there in sync, a symbolism he didn't want to acknowledge or think about. One he avoided by taking what Renata offered with the cant of her hips, the touch of her lips to his, by thrusting his tongue into her mouth as his cock slid into the hot, silky heaven it had come to crave.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Looks like I get spared the hike around the hills in search of my horse," Renata said when she saw the mares gathered in the catch pen as Cole pulled into the ranch and swung the rig around, parking so they were facing the entrance.

"I shouldn't be too long. Dealer's usually not hard to find."

Renata's hand went to the door handle. "You're sure Erin won't mind me borrowing her tack?"

Cole leaned over, gave her a quick hard kiss. "It's fine. Trust me."

"Okay. I'll load your stuff into the trailer too. That'll save us some time."

"You've got the combination?"

"In my pocket."

Cole climbed out of the truck and grabbed a halter from the horse trailer behind it. "See you in a few," he said, stopping next to her and giving her another kiss before heading toward the gelding pasture on the opposite side of the road.

Need coiled in Renata's belly even as an ache formed in her chest as she watched him walk away. He was confusing her with his quick kisses and spontaneous touches, with the open displays of affection that made it seem like they were a couple instead of two people enjoying some great sex while they worked on a project together.

She wasn't going to lie to herself and say she didn't want what he was giving her. She just wanted it to be more than what she kept telling herself it was.

Renata shook her head, clearing it, refusing to let herself get tangled up in thoughts of the future when there was plenty in the present to deal with. She hauled what they needed to the rig then haltered Solitaire and tied her lead rope to the trailer.

Cole was nowhere in sight but that didn't surprise her. She'd ridden in the gelding pasture and knew the horses liked to hang out at the far end, past a stream that cut through it, or on top of the hill and behind a strand of trees.

The ranch was deserted except for her, Cole and Miguel Hermosa, the man who ran it. Renata headed over to where Miguel sat in a white plastic chair under a shade tree.

She'd done a story on him once, before she'd gotten Solitaire and needed a place to board a horse. It was the kind of story she loved, gritty in parts but with a good ending and a message of hope.

He'd been an exercise rider on the track as a young man. Then later a very successful jockey, until he lost himself in the bottle when the stress of keeping his weight down so he could ride took its toll.

Somewhere in his forties he climbed out of the bottle and swore off racetracks. He met a good woman, got married, had a son. A friend helped him lease the land and acquire a herd of quarter horses. It was the birth of Hermosa Ranch and thirty years later Miguel was still running it though he didn't do much breeding or horse training anymore.

Renata reached the shade tree and said, "Not that I'm complaining, but what's up with the mares?"

"Shoer's coming today."

Enough said. Since about fifteen of the forty or so mares belonged to Miguel it was easier for him to round them all up instead of cutting his horses out of the herd.

She settled into a vacant chair and a quiet companionship stretched between them, leaving plenty of room to hear the pigeons scrambling around on top of the hay barn and the chirp of ground squirrels before they darted for holes.

"You and Cole Maguire an item now?" Miguel asked, breaking the silence.

A heaviness settled on Renata, giving her a glimpse of the future she was trying hard not to think about. How it was going to be later, coming out to the ranch and seeing him here. Remembering.

"Just working a case together," she said.

Miguel shifted in his chair and pushed his cowboy hat back, the deeply tanned and heavily wrinkled face giving him the look of a man full of hard-earned wisdom. "Lauren Hunt's murder?"

"How'd you guess?"

Miguel chuckled. He pulled a pouch of tobacco and some rolling paper from a frayed shirt pocket. "I got eyes and ears, sweetie. And I see more than you're telling me."



His glance at the truck was enough of a reminder of the kisses to heat Renata's cheeks. "It's for a story I'm going to write," she said, not wanting to get into a discussion about her and Cole. "You knew Lauren, any ideas about who'd want to kill her?"

"The husband."

Renata startled at the swiftness of the answer. "You mean the ex-husband, Vincenzo? You've met him?"

"Husband, ex-husband. Don't need to meet him. Same as I don't need to know Lauren better than to talk to her about leasing Warpaint for the cost of board." Miguel measured out some tobacco and fashioned himself a cigarette. "I've seen this kind of thing play out before."

Renata smiled then, guessing where Miguel's certainty about Vincenzo's guilt came from. "At the track?"

"That's right. At the track. Over a horse called Trouble Me. And I'm telling you, a man don't give a woman an expensive horse without some strings attached. You find what her husband wanted and didn't get, you'll find why she was murdered."

"Ex-husband. And how do you know about Vincenzo giving Lauren a horse?"

Miguel took a drag on his cigarette. "Like I said, sweetie, I've got eyes and ears. They go wherever I go."

The farrier drove in and Miguel rose from his chair. He stopped next to Renata and put his hand on her shoulder. "You be smart when it comes to Cole. Use your eyes to see what's there right in front of you. Don't seem to me he's the kind to let on how he's feeling unless he forgets himself, and him forgetting himself would be pretty telling too."

Miguel headed for the catch pen holding the mares. Renata glanced across the road and saw Cole leading Dealer toward the pasture gate.

Emotion filled her. Hope blossoming in her chest with such force it was painful.

She wanted to believe. God she wanted to believe that he was falling in love with her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Lyric took a deep breath as she entered the tack shop. She liked the smell of leather, always had, even if she preferred to have the smell of it coming off a Harley jacket instead of a saddle.

Wilma stood in front of a display of knickknacks, supervising an assistant Lyric recognized from another trip to the shop. The assistant was wearing riding breeches, like she might head off to a dressage event at any moment, but Lyric was willing to bet money the only place the woman was going after work was home.

That was the downside of horse people, though in all fairness, Lyric knew they weren't any guiltier of it than anyone else. There was a certain pretentiousness to a lot of them and she preferred things cut and dried – or as Kieran knew – down and dirty.

Yeah. Down and dirty was definitely her preference.

Good thing she was married to a vice cop. Kiernan had a lock on down and dirty.

"Ach, tell me you've finally gotten a horse," Wilma said, leaving her assistant and joining Lyric near the entrance, the German accent as heavy as if Wilma had just left the homeland.

Lyric gave her usual refrain. "No time for a horse."

Wilma tsked. "Young people, always in such a hurry! How's Cady?"

"Good. Happy in Texas."

"And Erin. I keep hoping she'll stop by and give me some more of her cards."

"I'll tell her when she gets back in town. She's still on a case."

"Your cousin Cole?"

Lyric grinned. "He's the reason I'm here. I need to ask you some questions."

Wilma nodded, glanced at her assistant and lowered her voice. "He's working on a case, yes?"

"Yes."

"Come to the stockroom then. You can ask me the questions there."

Lyric followed Wilma through a curtained doorway at the back of the shop. The scent of leather intensified, blending with the smell of the clear plastic covering a long clothes bar holding solid black jackets and white breeches, the items so similar in appearance Lyric guessed the biggest difference was size.

Boxes littered the area. Most of them were large enough to contain saddles and only a few of them were on tables.

"You've got almost as much stuff in here as you do out front," Lyric said, momentarily distracted from her task.

Wilma chuckled. "My Otto, he tells me I'm a packrat. But it's good to be prepared, yes? The people who come to my shop, almost always they find what they've come for. At a good price, too. And here they can touch, not like buying things on the Internet and opening the box to find junk."

"Is Kim Calloway one of the people who come here to shop?"

Wilma's eyebrows rose. "She is the person Cole sent you to ask about?"

"Yes. But I can't give you any details about the case he's working on." Lyric had been to the tack store often enough with Erin and Cady to know once Wilma got going, she was a great source of information. The trick was in asking the right starting question. "You know her then?"

"Since she was a little girl. And her parents, delightful people. Her mother comes here often, buying prizes for the raffles. Just delightful people. Cole knows this, yes?"

There was hesitancy in Wilma's voice, the desire to help Cole standing against concern for people she genuinely cared for.

"I'm not sure how well he knows Kim's father, but I do know he respects her mother," Lyric said, wanting to set Wilma's mind at ease. "That's one of the reasons I'm here, to see if we can get answers without worrying her parents if there's no reason to."

Wilma sighed and nodded. "Yes, I can see this. And I trust Cole to use what I say only as it should be used.

"Gloria and David were older when they had Kim. How they spoiled her when she was a child. Ach, the temper tantrums she would throw in my store!" Wilma shook her head. "It doesn't prepare children for growing up. This I can tell you.

"Kim lost interest in the horses when she went off to college. I didn't see her for many years, but Gloria would tell me things."

"What kind of things?"

"There was trouble at the first college. Over a boy. She went to his apartment and found another girl there. Naked, yes? So you can imagine what was happening. Hormones, they do not make for clear thinking. This girl claims later that Kim pushes her down a flight of stairs. There are no witnesses and the girl has hit her head hard enough to be in the hospital. So at first, there is no reason to think the trouble will continue. But after she leaves the hospital, there are more complaints, she claims she is afraid.

"Gloria and David decide it is best for Kim to come back to California and finish college here. It is a good decision. There is no other trouble and after college, Kim meets a man and they marry."

Wilma sighed. "Some people, they are not lucky in love. She is only married a little while before her husband leaves her for another woman. Terrible, terrible business, and so much pain. That is when her mother coaxes her back into horses. Horses, they are good for the soul. This is something you could find too. Yes?"

Lyric laughed. "No time for a horse. Besides, riding the Harley works for me. Did Kim compete against Lauren when they were kids?"

Surprise widened Wilma's eyes. A canniness followed and Lyric could practically hear Wilma saying, *Ach, now I know what this is about*, though what Wilma actually said was, "I think there was only a short time, perhaps only one summer they competed against each other, when Lauren was doing the competitive trail riding."

"Any idea if Kim is seeing anyone?"

Wilma shook her head. "No. She does not come here often, and when she does come, she's not one to chat like her mother is."

"Her mother hasn't mentioned a new man?"

"No. But the divorce is not so old."

"Is the ex-husband in the area?"

"No. Gloria told me he moved away after he remarried."

"Do you know where he went?"

"No."

"Do you remember his name?"

"No."

"Should be easy enough to find out," Lyric said, her instincts meshing with Renata's. Kim definitely deserved a closer look. A much closer look.

## **Chapter Fifteen**

There was no logical reason for optimism but Renata couldn't shake the feeling they were going to get lucky at the park. And the feeling got stronger when they pulled through the entrance and she saw Ted, the young ranger who'd puked at the crime scene.

Cole stopped next to the honor box left for people to pay their fees. Renata rolled down her window as Ted recognized them and came over.

"Where's Grizzly today?" she asked.

Ted didn't miss a beat. "It's his day off."

"Do the police have the clearing where Lauren was killed roped-off?"

Ted shuddered. "You want to go back there?"

"Yes. That okay?"

"Sure. Sure. I guess. The police didn't leave crime scene tape or anything. You can take your rig to the lake instead of parking it here if you want. That'll save you time."

"Thanks, we appreciate it."

Ted glanced at the staging lot where a couple of other riders were saddling their horses. "I'll lead so it looks official."

"That'd be great."

Cole placed some folded bills into the payment envelope, sealed it and dropped it into the box. "Grizzly?" he said, watching as Ted returned to his truck then following as the ranger led them out of the staging area.

"As in Grizzly Adams, Mountain Man."

"It fits."

"Yeah, I thought so."

Cole's hand captured hers and took it to his thigh. "Makes me wonder what you call me."

Renata cut him a look. "There are a lot of names that'd fit."

A nudge upward and her palm settled on his cock. "Tell me one of them and I'll make sure you're glad you did."

"Like you need the stroke to your ego, Cole."

His grin sent a wash of arousal escaping from her slit. "Never hurts to have chips in reserve. Besides that, I like your strokes."

Renata shook her head in denial, but temptation got the better of her when she remembered what happened the last time she teased him in the truck. She turned

toward him, massaging the hardening bulge at the front of his jeans until he was breathing faster.

"You sure you want this?" she asked. "You want to know how I've got you pegged?"

"Oh yeah."

"Okay. How about this? You're like a gunslinger in the Wild West. One who's turned sheriff but is still a bad boy at heart. A guy who enjoys shooting up the streets when the outlaws ride into town but who heads to the saloon for a game of poker and a freebie from the working girls when it's all over."

"A freebie? I'm that good?"

Renata snorted. "Leave it to a man to jump past the heroic deeds and right to the part that has to do with his cock."

"Guilty as charged," he said, his hand moving hers up and down along his cloth-covered erection. "So I'm good enough for a freebie?"

"Like you'd ever have to pay for sex. Women would pay *you* for a night in your bed. And if they thought they could get away with it, most of them would tie you down and keep you there."

"Is that what you'd like to do? Tie me to the bed?"

God, she should never have started playing with him. She'd forgotten he was a pro, a man who knew how to use trash talk at the poker table to gather information. But the way Cole's cock throbbed beneath her hand, like he'd come if she gave him the truth made it impossible *not* to answer. "Yeah, Cole," she said, and damn the consequences. "I'd do that to you."

*Christ*, Cole thought, white heat scorching through his mind. He *knew* better than play this game with her. It was one of the few he was guaranteed to lose—at least in the short term.

With a groan of defeat he forced her hand back down to his thigh. "You got any idea how painful it is to ride with a hard-on?"

"No. I don't exactly have the same equipment as you do."

"Good thing."

"You did bring this *hardship* on yourself by grabbing my hand in the first place."

Damn he loved her smart mouth, on him or off. "Yeah, and I'm paying for it. Now. But later, when we get back to my place, I'm going to remember this conversation."

A glance showed nipples pressed hard and tight against the front of her shirt. Cole called himself all kinds of a fool but he couldn't stop himself from reaching over and wedging his hand between her thighs, cupping her mound through her jeans. "Tell me you're not wet thinking about what I might let you do to me later."

It cost her. God it cost her. But there was no way Renata could lie to him. "I'm wet. Satisfied?"

"Oh yeah. For now."

Thirty minutes later they pulled to a stop by the lake—and it took all thirty of them to cool down from playing with Cole. Even then, Renata couldn't resist asking, "You good to ride?"

His laugh promised all kinds of wicked retribution, and threatened to get her hot and bothered all over again. "I'm good."

They got out of the truck. Renata took a moment to stretch and look around.

There were several adults sitting on a blanket. A couple of kids with fishing poles sat at the water's edge. It seemed strangely abandoned, surreal when she thought about all the horses and riders who'd been gathered in the same spot for lunch on Saturday.

They unloaded the horses and started to saddle them. Ted joined them by the trailer.

"So how'd you get paired with Grizzly?" Renata asked, the part of her that made human interest stories a perfect fit kicking in. Fresh out of college with white, white skin and a city look, Ted wasn't exactly a likely partner for a mountain man.

Pale cheeks turned pink. "Dad helped me get the job but he's not exactly thrilled one of the 'and sons' in his plumbing business wants to do something else for a living. I'm sure he hopes a month or two with Kurt will have me running back to the family business."

"He's in for a disappointment I take it."

Ted nodded. "Ever since I was a kid I've wanted to be a park ranger. In Boy Scouts we used to come to this park and camp. It's been on my mind a lot of years. I almost couldn't believe it when there was an opening here just when my job application was accepted."

Renata gave him an encouraging smile. "Everyone's got to listen to their own drummer."

"That's what I think too."

Ted shifted from one foot to the other then back again. Repeated it a couple of times. Renata guessed he was wondering if it was a mistake to bring them to the lake but there was no way she was going to suggest they go back to the staging area.

He finally worked through it and said, "Look, the police went over the clearing pretty thoroughly. I don't think they found anything. But well, I'll hang around here for a little while, patrol the lake. Let me know if you find anything, okay?"

"No problem."

"Great. Great. Okay. I'll leave you guys to it."

Renata finished tacking up just as Cole did. Once they were both in the saddle he took the lead, trotting and cantering until they reached the clearing where Lauren was murdered.

"Looks promising," Cole said, surveying the bank down to the creek. "No hoofprints, but I wouldn't expect any, even before it rained. If Nichole was here—alone

or with someone—she would have left her horse tied somewhere and walked to the clearing to wait for Lauren. Less chance of leaving evidence behind that way.”

“Makes sense.”

There were a couple of deer paths leading to the water. They were steep and rocky, but not impossible. Cole chose the trail and Renata followed at a safe distance, the horses picking their way carefully through the rock.

When they finally got to the bottom, Cole looked down at his watch and noted the time. “If Nichole was here, she would have traveled as fast as possible to make up time, but I think we should travel at a walk. That’ll give us the maximum time it would take to reach the Open P&R stop from here.”

“Sounds reasonable.”

The creek started out shallow and narrow but changed as they moved down stream. It widened and deepened the further they got from the clearing, banks falling away to become jagged, rocky walls created by erosion.

It was a harsh landscape, but beautiful all the same. Riding through it filled Renata with a peace she couldn’t find in the city, a longing she couldn’t hide from—to share these kinds of moments with Cole over and over again.

They rounded a bend to find a gently sloping embankment crowded with poison oak. A deer trail led away from the creek. It was the first place since shortly after they’d entered the water where a rider could easily scramble out of the creek.

“What do you think?” Renata asked.

Cole checked his watch. “Too soon to get out. My gut tells me to keep going down the creek. We can check this path on the way back.”

“How are we on time?”

“Twenty minutes in.”

“That’s not too bad.”

The creek became shallow again, and narrow. Five minutes later Cole stopped at a path to the right of the creek. “See it?”

A hoofprint was captured in one of the few places not covered with rock. “I see it.”

Cole urged his horse forward. It was a tight squeeze with brush on either side of the narrow trail. But moments later the deer path widened and finally crossed a larger, much-used trail.

“I recognize where we are,” Cole said, pointing to the left. “The P&R stop for the Open riders is about ten minutes up the road.”

It was hard to keep to a walk, especially with Solitaire picking up on Renata’s excitement and jiggling. But somehow she kept the mare from breaking out into a trot or canter.

At the P&R spot, Cole checked his watch. “Forty-four minutes from the clearing to here.”



Renata let out a little victory whoop. "Nichole or Kim could have killed Lauren and gotten here fast enough for the timekeepers to provide a pretty good alibi."

"I'd say we proved your theory."

Cole dismounted and moved to stand next to Solitaire. The look in his eyes made heat curl in Renata's belly even before he said, "Time for a break."

She arched an eyebrow though her cunt grew slick with anticipation. "Now?"

"Anything wrong with now?" His voice was dark and husky, his smile pure sin.

Renata dismounted, her body temperature going nova in the amount of time it took to secure Solitaire and join Cole underneath a tree. He pulled her on top of him and she smiled, loving the feel of him underneath her, the press of her breasts against the muscles of his chest. "You'll have to double as a blanket. That whole Be Prepared thing might have come in handy. I take it you weren't a Boy Scout."

His hands tugged her shirt out of her pants and slipped underneath it to caress her back and sides. "My parents figured there wasn't any point in enrolling me. I'd only get kicked out. By the time I was nine I was already running dice and poker games to supplement my allowance."

Damn he was irresistible. She brushed a kiss across his lips. "Like I said earlier, definitely a gunslinger from the Wild West. One who's turned sheriff but is still a bad boy at heart."

"That's not the only thing you said."

"I'm not likely to forget."

"Good, because I'm going to want to talk about fantasies when we get home."

Renata's heart did a summersault in her chest at his use of the word home. Hope filled her with enough force to beat back intellectual arguments.

A shiver of urgent, raw desire slid through her as she imagined Cole tied, helpless against her as she made him ache, crave, need in a way no other woman could. As she showed him what he'd be missing if he ever moved on to someone else.

*Don't go there!* an internal voice warned, but it was quickly subdued by a courage that had been slowly building, gaining strength as she spent time in Cole's company and saw him as much more than the player she'd once labeled him.

Everything was a gamble when it came to Cole. And she was coming to realize she was a lot more of a gambler than she would have thought possible.

Renata levered herself up onto her elbows. His hands came around to unfasten her bra and touch her the way she needed to be touched.

A moan escaped when skin met skin and her nipples pressed into his palms. "Seems like you always have too many clothes on," she said, her pelvis rubbing against his, feeling the hard length of him and wanting it inside her.

There was a glint of challenge in his eyes, a dare-you look. "Feel free to take charge."

Her cunt clenched painfully, urging something quick and dirty. Her heart hungered for more, to give pleasure as well as take it.

Renata covered his lips with hers, sucked and bit, slowing time and putting all the words she couldn't speak, the feelings still half hidden even from herself into a kiss. She teased him with the hint of her tongue, let him have only the tip of it as their breathing grew rougher and their bodies strained against one another.

His hands roamed, communicating his hunger, his desire to sheathe his cock in her. She let him have her tongue, gave it to him in a slow, sensuous slide, a hot tangle of sensation that had her heart thundering in her chest, her panties wet with arousal.

Cole moaned, lifted his hips off the ground in shallow thrusts as she pressed downward, rubbing, building the hunger toward the moment when she would free him and guide his penis to her entrance.

It took discipline to remain in control. Part of her wanted him to roll her onto her back and take over. But another part found it intoxicating to be the aggressor, heady to have him under her, at her mercy.

Somehow she forced herself to end the kiss and get to her knees, straddling him. "Unbutton my shirt, Cole," she said, barely recognizing the husky command in her voice.

His face was all harsh lines, his eyes dark with desire. "Practicing for later?" he said, obeying her all the same.

"Maybe giving you a taste of what to expect," she said, deciding to take a taste for herself.

Renata parted his unbuttoned shirt and pushed the material aside, leaned down. Her mouth zeroed in on a tiny dark nipple, her lips latching onto it, her tongue exploring.

His scent had become as much of an aphrodisiac as the feel of his skin and the sound of his voice. She kissed. Sucked. Laved first one tiny nipple and then its twin.

She moaned when Cole returned the favor, fondling her breasts and tormenting her with talented fingers.

Lust built. Became a sharp, clawing hunger that couldn't be denied.

Renata kissed downward, freeing his cock before she got there. His hips jerked violently when she took the purpled head in her mouth, lashed it with her tongue and sucked him until the sounds of Cole's pleas for release filled the air.

His cock pulsed against her palm and there was an echoing throb deep inside her, a hard spasming of her channel. Renata rose to her feet and stripped out of the boots and jeans and panties before returning to him.

Her hand closed around his cock, took it to her hot, wet opening. "This what you want, Cole?"

"You know it is."

"Guess it's a good thing I'm in the mood to give it to you then," she said, loving the way his smile flashed, the way lust and play could be intertwined with him.

She took him inside her slowly. Savored every velvet-over-steel inch of him.

He stretched her, filled her, his heat and presence burning its way to her soul.

She held him deep. Only began moving, sliding up and down on his shaft when she could no longer bear to remain still.

Beneath her he was the image of masculine perfection. His chest heaving, dark lashes lowered but not so much he wasn't watching, his taut features just one indication of how turned on he was by her riding him.

His visual caress was as potent as the hands on her breasts. His expression as erotic as the thick cock she held inside her.

Renata changed the angle, ecstasy shuddering through her on each downstroke as her clit struck his skin and his fingers tightened on her nipples.

The pressure built with the pleasure, making her fuck herself on him faster and faster until his hips bucked violently and the frenzied movement of his release was enough to bring about her own.

She didn't have the energy to get up and get dressed. Or the desire to lie on the ground.

Renata settled on top of him and lay there, letting her mind wander for a long time afterward as he lazily stroked her back. The companionship and intimacy of it made her think what they had was more than just good sex but she wasn't ready to talk openly about her feelings, or to ask him about his. Not yet. Not until after the story was put to bed and there was no longer an external reason for being together.

It'd be too awkward, too difficult if...

Renata refused to think about it, to ruin the here and now, though the tightening of her stomach that arrived with thoughts of the future gave her the willpower to stand and get dressed. Cole grunted when she left him, but he followed her example, rising to his feet and tucking his cock back into his jeans before buttoning his shirt.

They went to where the horses were waiting. Solitaire with partially closed eyes and a rear hoof cocked. Dealer looking for stray bites of grass.

"There's no way Nichole or Kim could have concealed the crossbow in a saddle pack," Renata said once she and Cole were mounted.

"No. The smartest thing would be to dump it far away from the crime scene, maybe toss it from the creek bed into the scrub."

Renata took a drink of water then slid the bottle back into the pouch at the front of the saddle. "There were only a couple of places where the steep banks make that possible. Maybe we'll get lucky on the way back."

Cole shot her a lazy smile. "I've already gotten lucky once at the park. Wouldn't mind getting lucky again."

"In your fantasies, Cole."

"Tell me when you're brave enough to hear one of those," Cole said, nudging Dealer forward and leaving Renata curious about just what he would fantasize about.

They retraced their steps, traveling at an unhurried pace. When they got to the creek, Cole said, "Why don't you concentrate on the right side. I'll take the left."

"I'm on it."

Renata looked for places a horse might have gotten off the trail, for broken scrub or a flash of color that didn't belong. It was a beautiful day for riding, the air clean and filled with the scent of woods and water, exactly what she thought it could be like when she'd taken the plunge and gotten Solitaire.

They were nearing the spot where the banks began to rise steeply when she saw a hint of red in the brush. "Hold on, Cole," she said and he crossed the creek, followed the direction of her pointed finger. "You see it?"

"Yeah. Might be the missing ribbons."

Renata's stomach did a little twist, nerves and excitement both. Finding actual evidence was a mixed blessing after the humiliation of being in possession of Lauren's jacket and the note.

"We can't call Gaines unless we're sure," Renata said, knowing it was the truth even if the thought of possibly disturbing the evidence made her feel queasy.

Cole nodded. "If it's the ribbons, they've got to be attached to something. There's no way to toss them otherwise and it doesn't look like someone carried them up there."

Renata took a deep breath and carefully dismounted onto the rocky bank. "I'll go."

Cole swung out of his saddle. "We both go."

They dug out lead ropes and left the horses at the edge of the creek in order to keep from disturbing the area more than they had to. Then climbed upward, stopping as soon as they got close enough to see the crossbow.

"Gaines is going to love this," Cole murmured.

Renata pulled her cell phone from her pocket. There was no signal but she didn't need one to take a picture. "No crossbow bolts."

"Probably ditched them first. Might have even buried them under a pile of rocks in the creek bed."

"What do you say to turning this over to Ted and letting him take the credit for it?" Renata joked.

Cole laughed. "And get the hell out of here ourselves?"

"Something like that."

"I agree with the sentiment but I'm guessing Gaines would have a problem with it."

"I was afraid you were going to say that." Renata looked around, relieved to hear birds singing and bugs humming. "Now that we've found it, you think one of us should stay until someone official takes over?"

Cole's arms went around her waist, pulling her against him and giving her a hard kiss. "No. We're not splitting up. The crossbow and ribbons will be here for the police or they won't be. Making sure of it isn't our problem."

Renata leaned in and initiated another kiss. Closed her eyes when Cole's tongue met hers in sensual dance of solidarity.

He made her feel safe, protected.

Her hands roamed over his back and shoulders. Traced his muscles downward.

His smoothed over her buttocks. Held her against his hardening cock.

"In another minute it's going to be very unpleasant to sit in the saddle," he murmured against her lips when their kiss ended. "You got any idea how painful it is to ride with a hard-on?"

She laughed. "We covered that question earlier. And I think I already proved I don't have the same equipment as you do. But if you want, I could do something about your problem, give the guys who are going to process this scene something to capture in plaster of Paris while I'm at it. A nice set of knee impressions on the ground in front of a pair of boot prints."

Cole's laugh slid into a moan as his cock got even harder. "And maybe I should punish you for making things worse instead of better."

"That one of your fantasies, Cole? Bending me over your knees and spanking my ass?"

"Ask me later. If you're brave enough to handle the answer."

## Chapter Sixteen

"We have ourselves a little problem," Detective Gaines said, fingers drumming on the picnic table they were sitting at, the sound of it chasing away the tranquility of the lake scene.

Renata could guess what the problem was though she tried to cut the man some slack for his aggravation. His trousers were wet from the knees down and he'd had a long walk—even if that'd been his choice.

She'd offered Solitaire and Cole had offered Dealer. But the detective preferred to wade through the creek to and from the place they'd found the crossbow.

Her eyes went to where it sat on the table, properly bagged and tagged. Cute weapon, almost like a toy except she'd seen the damage it could do.

She was happy knowing it was in his possession. She'd be happier still if he'd let them leave.

As far as she was concerned everything had been said that needed to be said. He knew their reasons for being in the park. Knew their suspicions and how they'd proven the arrival times recorded by the volunteers at the Open P&R stop didn't provide any kind of alibi. And though she hadn't said it out loud, she was betting Gaines was smart enough to figure out if Nichole could be linked to the murder, then that might pull Kim Calloway in too since she'd provided an alibi for Nichole.

The drumming stopped, making Renata realize how much it'd been scraping across her nerve endings. Gaines reached for the pack of Marlboros in his shirt pocket, caressed the unopened package with his fingertips—a man still fighting temptation and winning.

"Having you two keep coming up with clues at opportune moments, that's making me think someone out there believes I'm like a dog on a leash, and all that's needed is to walk me where I'm supposed to go so I can close this case. And thinking that makes me start wondering other things, like who's really holding the leash? You two? Looking for a story and some publicity? Because I'm not going to buy any bullshit about this being simply a matter of satisfying your curiosity."

His hand fell away from his shirt pocket. The drumming on the tabletop started again. "Or maybe those hotshots from the FBI are holding the leash."

The mention of the FBI caused Renata's attention to jump upward, to Gaines' face. His expression said *got you* and she cursed silently, knowing without looking that Cole probably hadn't given anything away.

Renata bit her lip, her first instinct to say nothing, her second to glance at Cole for a clue. Then she thought, *To hell with it. This could cut both ways.* "I take it Strout and Walters paid you a visit and provided an alibi for Vincenzo Alagna and Ian Shaw."

The drumming stopped. "So you've made their acquaintance."

This time Renata did turn her head to look at Cole. He said, "They came by the house and said the agency would appreciate it if I stayed away from Alagna and Shaw."

"And in exchange for doing the agency a favor..."

Cole laughed. "You know those guys better than that. I told them staying away from Alagna and Shaw wasn't a problem."

"Because you liked Nichole Maxwell for the murder?"

Cole shrugged. "I think she's involved in this."

Gaines reached for the bagged crossbow, pulling it over so it was on the table directly in front of Renata. It was as close as she'd gotten to it and she couldn't stop the goose bumps from prickling her skin as she imagined it aimed at her, remembered the sudden silence in the clearing and the realization Lauren's killer was close.

"It'd wrap this thing up nice and tight," Gaines mused, lightly tapping the plastic bag. "It'd be convenient for everyone if we found the current Mrs. Alagna's fingerprints on this, wouldn't it? Especially considering she's no longer around to answer the charges."

Renata's gaze jerked upward. "She's dead?"

"Interesting you'd leap to that conclusion."

Her sharp tongue saved her. "Isn't that where you wanted me to leap?"

Gaines smiled, startling her into realizing he was actually a good-looking man. "So you didn't know she's dead?"

"Hell no."

The detective looked at Cole.

"You want to give us the details?" Cole asked.

"Don't think I do," Gaines said, standing and gathering the things on the picnic table before walking to his unmarked sedan.

"Convenient," Cole murmured. "I'll buy that. The question is, who is Nichole's death convenient for?"

He took Renata's hand, rubbed his thumb over her knuckles. "You were perfect."

She snorted. "I was a disaster waiting to happen. You could have jumped in at any time."

"I knew Gaines was fishing. Me taking the bait wouldn't have been as convincing as you doing it. Now he knows we're working a story. But since it's not leaking out in installments and we're calling him when we stumble across anything solid, we're not necessarily a problem for him, despite what he said."

"Gaines got all that from me?"

"Pretty much."

Renata slanted a look over at Cole but couldn't find it in her to be aggravated, not when his gaze settled on her lips and his eyes darkened. She shivered as the heat flashed between them.

"What do you think about turning Nichole's death over to Shane and letting him run with it?" Cole asked.

"Works for me."

Need built sharp and painful as Cole's thoughts returned to their earlier discussion, their talk of fantasies and being brave enough to explore them. If she wanted to tie him to the bed and torture him with her mouth, her hands, her pussy, he'd let her. But if he could lure her into a poker game, up the stakes by playing to decide which one of them was going to control the pleasure, that'd be even better.

Christ. He didn't even know where he'd start. She wasn't like any woman he'd ever been with. Not even close.

He rose from the picnic table. "Let's head out," he said, trying to force his thoughts away from all the things he wanted to do to her, all the things he wanted her to do to him.

It was harder than it should have been. The fantasies continued to stream across his consciousness as they loaded horses into the trailer then left the park.

In the confines of the truck her scent was everywhere, her presence next to him impossible to ignore. He struggled to remember why he was fighting so hard against his grandmother's prediction when everything about Renata felt so right.

A cold sweat broke out on his skin when he realized he was no longer scared shitless at the prospect of *hearing* wedding bells. It was what came *afterward* that made him want to keep running.

It wasn't just the responsibility and the work of keeping a relationship going that had him scared, it was the devastation if things went bad. He'd seen guys swallowed by drugs, alcohol and gambling after having their hearts shredded. He'd known guys who blew their brains out. And seeing his parents' marriage come close to disintegrating when he was a kid...

Yeah, he was a gambler who could push a million dollars worth of chips into the center of the table without blinking. But it was only money, a quantifiable measure of success, a bet placed knowing the odds, calculating the risk and accepting it—something he'd never been willing to do when it came to tying his future to a woman's.

He glanced over at Renata and felt his cock harden further as the need to get naked and intimate burned in his belly. Christ, this was bad and could only get worse.

There was no way he could stay away from her while they were working this case together. Maybe when it was done...

Every muscle tensed. His brain wouldn't even go there.



It was a relief when they crossed some unseen boundary and his cell phone chimed, telling him they were back in range and he had a message. Surprise flashed through him when he retrieved the message and heard an unfamiliar voice say, "This is Vincenzo Alagna. I'd like to arrange a meeting with you as soon as possible."

\* \* \* \* \*

Shane shuffled the cards, his movements smooth and easy, the sound offering comfort despite the antiseptic smell assailing his nose, the hint of dry rot and old carpet. Death hovered, a wraith-elephant present in every room of the hospice, maybe spoken about openly in some of them, but not in this one. Not by him.

*What the hell am I doing here?* he wondered, gut tightening, his mind shying away from the answer as quickly as he tried to avoid the sharp edge of pity slicing through his chest as he looked at Brian.

He finished shuffling. Dealt five cards.

Brian picked them up, hands shaking, arms weak.

In the room next door there was the murmur of voices. From the hallway came the sound of shuffling feet.

The smell of sickness and death pressed in on Shane as they played hand after hand of poker, pausing between games and sometimes between cards as Brian closed his eyes and leaned back against the pillows in exhaustion, until finally Shane stopped dealing altogether.

Minutes slowed to a crawl, forcing Shane's thoughts to something besides poker. Leaving an opportunity for him to remember, to sink into the turmoil of his own unresolved sexuality.

A memory crowded in—a stream of consciousness that was like a train barreling down a track, heading toward derailment but going too fast for him to jump off.

Vegas. Poker. A winning streak that left him on rush and with a roll of cash in his pocket.

Alcohol. More than he'd let himself drink in a long time. Too much of it because he was trying to drown demons. Or maybe he'd meant to free them all along.

It wasn't the first time it'd happened. Giving in to temptation. Letting alcohol be the excuse, the thing that lowered the barriers and let him continue to lie to himself about what the choice meant.

Only this time was different. Devastating. A curtain ripping away in the moment of climax. Leaving him naked in front of an internal mirror, unable to avoid the truth locked inside him as he came, ramming his cock into some guy he didn't know and calling Tyler's name as he did it.

Fuck. He was screwed.

Tyler would probably freak if he knew. The guy might call the three dachshunds Lyric had saddled him with babe magnets, but Tyler did all right on his own. He practically had to beat women off with a stick.

Shane rubbed his chest in an effort to soothe the panic building inside him. He could remember the summer he turned thirteen. His first crush leading to his first fuck, then to his first heartbreak.

This felt a lot like that. His emotions were all over the place and his cock got hard anytime he saw Tyler or thought about him.

But it was more complicated than a crush because it wasn't like he *only* wanted Tyler. It wasn't like *he* was only *one* way.

The agony came in knowing he'd never be able to give up women, even if Tyler shocked him by turning out to be secretly gay or bi. The hell of it was wondering whether he was too much of a coward to live the way he fantasized about living—like Calista—with two lovers in his bed.

"Are you afraid of dying?" Brian asked, jerking Shane from the turmoil of his thoughts.

"I don't think about it much."

Brian's laugh became a cough. When it ended he said, "I can remember being like that. So what scares you? Coming out about being gay?"

Shane jerked, the tell so noticeable it didn't take a poker pro to read it. "I'm not gay," he said automatically, with enough truth in it that Brian didn't call him a liar.

"Bi then." And heat crawled up Shane's neck because hearing Brian say it, he knew he was tired of running from it. Hearing Brian say it, he understood why he'd volunteered to come here.

"Yeah, I'm bi," Shane said, admitting it for the first time to someone. Saying it out loud, protected by the fact he and Brian were strangers with little time to form a friendship.

"Mark always had to be seduced," Brian whispered, his voice so low Shane had to lean forward to hear it. "That way he could pretend he was just weak instead of gay."

Shane's stomach soured. The words were an ugly mirror he saw himself in too clearly. Him holding back the need to be with another man until he couldn't any longer, then letting alcohol be the excuse, the thing that relieved him of responsibility and choice.

"It was easier for Mark to lie to himself with Lew," Brian said.

"Because Lew was sponsoring him?"

"Yes." A violent fit of coughing followed the answer, bringing with it phlegm and blood. Making the air smell like death as Brian closed his eyes again and was swallowed completely by exhaustion.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cole gave a low whistle when he saw the black McLaren Roadster parked in front of Crime Tells. "You're looking at half a million dollars worth of car."

"Then you better be sure you don't ding it when you open your door. Might be bad for your health and your bank account."

He laughed as he pulled in next to the McLaren. Vincenzo got out of his car as they emerged from the truck. If he was surprised by Renata's presence, it didn't show.

"You wanted to meet?" Cole said after they'd taken seats in a room set up for talking with clients.

"Technically, I believe you sought me out first. My secretary was left with the impression you were calling regarding investment matters. You and I know otherwise. I trust anything I tell you will be used...judiciously." His eyes flicked to Renata and back, tightening Cole's gut though Vincenzo's expression hadn't changed.

"If you're worrying about it ending up in print, why tell us anything at all?" Cole said.

"Let's just say I'm hedging my bets. Riding horses in the woods has apparently become quite deadly of late. I imagine any number of people are now speculating that I arranged Lauren's death then had Nichole meet with a fatal accident to eliminate the possibility she'd grow remorseful or try to cut a deal as the police closed in on her."

"You think she killed Lauren?"

One corner of Vincenzo's mouth lifted slightly. "I think she was involved in it. A pistol crossbow is missing from my weapon collection, a toy really, one given to me by someone unlikely to step forward and tell the police about it."

The smile widened but didn't reach his eyes. "Thankfully I take precautions. What weapons I do handle are always wiped down carefully afterward."

Son of bitch, Vincenzo was good. Cole couldn't tell whether he was being played or not. "Why tell us? Why not pick up the phone and call Detective Gaines?"

An eyebrow went up. "There's every possibility that would close the case prematurely. I am very much interested in seeing Lauren's murderer brought to justice?"

"And Nichole's?"

"A bonus since they're one and the same, despite Nichole's death being made to look like a riding accident in the preserve next to Trent Farms."

Cole didn't disagree with Vincenzo's assertion. Nichole's death was cleanup. Insurance against her talking because under pressure, Nichole would have talked.

"When did you get back?" he asked on a hunch.

The half-smile returned to Vincenzo's face. "Shortly before I left the message for you. If I'd gotten back sooner, before Nichole met with her *accident*, I doubt we'd be having this conversation. I would already know everything I need to know."

Cole believed it. "When did you find out about Lauren's death?"

"The day after it happened." He glanced at Renata. "My secretary saw it mentioned in the *Journal* and contacted me."

"Did you know Nichole was at the competitive trail ride?"

"No. I left a few days before the event. She may have mentioned she'd be off doing something with horses. As you can imagine, she no doubt hoped I would never find out she was there."

Cole shifted gears mentally. "Why did you buy Bold Adventure?"

The question earned him an assessing look, long moments of silence as Vincenzo contemplated just how much he was willing to reveal. Finally Vincenzo said, "Lauren had something, from the days before our marriage ended. I wanted it back. She wanted a horse that would finally give her a shot at the Olympics. We agreed to a trade."

"Sounds more like blackmail."

Vincenzo shrugged. "If it had been anyone other than Lauren, I would have treated it that way and dealt with it accordingly. But Lauren and I understood each other quite well."

"There are rumors you argued."

"Lauren was mad that word of the purchase leaked out. Short of making the sale contingent on complete anonymity and taking the risk of losing the horse to another buyer, there was no way to guarantee someone wouldn't find out. I warned her of that, offered to give her money enough to buy the horse directly if she would turn over the item I wanted first. She preferred to handle the matter differently."

"That must have gone over well with Nichole," Cole said, changing things up again. "By all accounts you married her suddenly."

"Since it's relevant I'll provide details I normally wouldn't. Despite taking precautions against it, Nichole came to me saying she was pregnant with my child. Tests confirmed the pregnancy. We married, with a prenuptial agreement in place, one containing explicit conditions relating to the child.

"She lost the baby several months ago. A miscarriage the doctors attributed to natural causes. But because of certain business negotiations I'm currently involved in, I didn't have the time or inclination to decide whether Nichole and I would remain married. My mistake, one I regret given Nichole's involvement in Lauren's murder.

"Despite Lauren being in possession of something of mine, I harbored no ill will toward her. We parted peacefully and reasonably, in a very civilized manner. I would have enjoyed seeing her ride Bold Adventure to a gold medal."

"So you didn't sell him after you and Lauren argued?"

"No, why would I?"

Cole hesitated for a moment then excused himself to go to the computer at his desk and open the case file. He printed out the picture Renata had taken of the bill of sale with Vincenzo's signature then returned to the meeting room.

"Look familiar?" he asked, placing it in front of Vincenzo.

Vincenzo frowned. "Not in the least."

"Your signature?"

The frown deepened. "It would appear so. You saw the original?"

Cole wasn't willing to give Vincenzo anything that could land Detective Gaines on the Crime Tells' doorstep. "I saw a photocopy of the bill of sale."

It was true enough, and the same thing Lauren saw. Meaning it was something that could have easily been created and forged, then photocopied to hide the fact and make it appear genuine.

"Did Nichole confront you about purchasing Bold Adventure?"

Vincenzo leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. "No."

"Did Nichole confront you with rumors that you regretted divorcing Lauren and might possibly be thinking about reconciling with her?"

"No. Given the tenuous nature of Nichole's standing as the current Mrs. Alagna, she was very careful to avoid confrontation of any kind."

"She made a very public claim to Bold Adventure as soon as Lauren was dead."

The muscles around Vincenzo's eyes tightened, the first real tell Cole had seen. "Another mistake, one I didn't foresee when the prenuptial agreement was drafted. But at that time I had no way of knowing I'd own Bold Adventure."

"Nichole would have gotten the horse if you'd divorced her?"

"Yes."

There were enough undercurrents in Vincenzo's voice to drown in, and plenty of warning to keep Cole from mentioning either Ian Shaw or Kim Calloway. He had to settle for, "You have any ideas about who killed Lauren and Nichole?"

"Not yet," Vincenzo said. "That's why I contacted you, in the hopes of ensuring justice is served."

Cole could imagine the nature of Vincenzo's justice. He'd met men like Vincenzo before, as a gambler and in the course of working for Bulldog, and he was willing to believe Vincenzo was just as lethal as he appeared.

"Anything solid I come up with goes to Detective Gaines," Cole said, wanting to be very clear about where he stood.

Vincenzo shrugged. "Of course." He checked his watch. "If you don't have any further questions, I'll let you get back to your evening."

Cole sent a questioning look at Renata. A small shake of her head said she didn't have anything to ask.

They stood and left the room. At the front door Vincenzo stopped, eyes meeting Renata's then Cole's to indicate what he intended to say was for both of them. "As I said earlier, I trust you'll use what I've told you judiciously. Money of course, is the usual way of guaranteeing such things, but I won't put any of us on the spot by offering

it. If you're instrumental in seeing that Lauren's murderer is identified, I'll consider myself in your debt."

Vincenzo offered his hand to Renata first. Then to Cole. "I'll instruct my secretary to put either of you through immediately should you call."

Cole nodded and opened the door, remaining silent as Vincenzo climbed into the McLaren and drove away.

"Well, that was interesting," Renata said, hearing the shakiness in her own voice. If Vincenzo wasn't the real deal, he was a hell of an actor. She rubbed her arms, still feeling the chill he'd caused.

"Yeah, it was. But what's his game?"

Cole circled her waist, pulling her up against him and warming her with the heat of his body. Renata said, "As in, does he really want justice? Or does he want to make sure he can't be implicated."

"Exactly. Care to bet?"

"I'll go with justice on this one. My guess is Nichole was already emotionally unstable because of the miscarriage and her shaky marriage. The horse coupled with the rumor about Vincenzo and Lauren reconciling are what tipped her over the edge."

Cole rubbed his cheek against Renata's. "Your gut read was better than mine at Trent Farms. Kim was in the right place to see Nichole's fears and instability then play on them."

Renata laced her fingers through his, falling a little bit more in love with Cole for his lack of ego, for how easily he gave her credit for suspecting Kim a lot earlier than he did. "You didn't want it to be her because you like and respect her mother. Besides, we don't have any solid evidence. We don't have proof yet that Kim wanted Lauren dead because of Ian."

"We'll get it. Lyric and Shane are still working that angle." His lips brushed her ear, sending a shiver of delight through her. "Which means we've got time for some poker."

"Poker as foreplay?"

"Something like that. I'll even spot you some chips."

He sucked her earlobe and Renata's cunt clenched in painful desire, voting for anything that would lead to sex with Cole. "Must mean the stakes are going to be pretty high."

"Nothing you can't afford to pay."

Renata turned into him and put her hand on his chest, stroked downward until it rested on Cole's taut abdomen, inches above the very noticeable bulge at the front of his jeans. "Who says I'm going to lose?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Lyric dialed the number for Kim's ex-husband and his current wife, the same woman he'd been caught having an affair with. It always amazed her when women married men who cheated *with them* and then expected them not to eventually cheat *on them*.

She was glad Crime Tells didn't typically handle those kinds of cases. She didn't enjoy them, didn't find the photos or details titillating in the least. Usually they turned her stomach—or irritated her—which meant she was going above and beyond the call of duty here, but hey, anything to help Cole and Renata wind up their case so the real fun could begin and the betting pool would pay off.

A woman's voice answered, "This is Julie," and Lyric introduced herself, giving a stripped down version of what she was after—details of Kim's state of mind at the time she discovered her husband's infidelity—and that was plenty for the new Mrs. Larry Eckhardt.

"We never could prove anything," Julie said. "But right after Larry moved in with me we got calls at all hours of the day and night. It gave me the creeps. If I answered the call, there would be silence. I knew it was her but she wouldn't say anything. If Larry picked up the phone she would hang up immediately. We resorted to caller ID. It didn't help. The calls came from pay phones. Finally we had to get an unlisted phone line, which made the situation worse.

"It seemed like everywhere we went, Kim would show up. She would sit or stand near us. She didn't do anything overtly threatening, nothing that'd give us enough reason to ask for a restraining order. She just stared at me. It sounds melodramatic now, but back then, seeing her would send shivers down my spine. I just got the feeling if she and I were ever alone, it'd be a really, really bad thing."

"She never showed up when it was just you?"

"I never gave her the chance. But there were times she followed me in her car. It made me so nervous I almost wrecked. Finally I gave Larry an ultimatum and he agreed to move, even if it meant longer commutes for both of us."

"And it worked?"

"It might have been that. Or it could have been that Larry and I getting married was enough to convince Kim she couldn't scare me away and somehow get him back. Larry and I did a quick run to Reno then made sure to get the announcement in the newspapers and the word out to anyone who might have contact with Kim. Whatever the reason, I'm just glad she's leaving us alone."

Lyric thanked Julie and hung up. But unlike Julie, she wasn't convinced the move or the marriage had anything to do with Kim losing interest—her money was Ian Shaw being the cause of it.

## Chapter Seventeen

Renata's phone rang just as they sat down at the poker table. A glance told her it was Aiesha. "My sister. Let me take it. Then we can play."

"Go ahead," Cole said.

Renata answered the phone.

The first words out of Aiesha's mouth were, "Are you with a man?"

Heat worked its way into Renata's cheeks. "What makes you ask that?"

"Because you're not at home and neither is Puff."

"Where are you?"

"Driving away from your place. I was in the neighborhood yesterday and today and let myself in both times. So where are you?"

Renata decided against warning Aiesha to stay away from the apartment. Her sister rarely dropped in and with the crossbow and note in Detective Gaines' possession, she didn't think there was much danger of Lauren's killer coming after her.

"I'm working on a story."

"Out of town?"

"No." Renata rubbed her palm over her jeans. "I'm at Cole Maguire's house."

"The poker player Granddad watches on TV?"

"Yes."

"You're staying with him?"

Renata glanced at Cole and her body tightened. "Yes."

Silence greeted the comment. "You sleeping with him?"

"Is that any of your business?"

"Meaning yes, you are." There was a pause, longer than the first one. "He's white."

"I noticed."

"I can't believe you're with a white man."

Renata stiffened, but before she could think of a retort Aiesha surprised her by saying, "You go, girl."

"What?"

Her sister laughed. "You think I care? These days the brothers knock you aside to get to the blondes at a party. Fair is fair. What's Cole like?"

"Amazing. We're getting ready to play some poker."

"So he's sitting there and you can't talk?"



"That's right."

"I'll hang up then. Call me when you can give me the dirt."

"I will." Renata hated to ask but she did. "Everything okay at home?"

"Better, at least for the next couple of days. Granddad talked Jamal into driving with him to Arizona."

"What for?"

"Some kind of veteran's reunion. Call me, okay?"

"Okay."

Renata closed the phone and put it aside. Cole said, "Everything under control?"

"Yeah. My sister swung by my place and wondered where I was since Puff wasn't there."

Cole handed her a deck of cards to shuffle. "Dealer chooses the game?"

"Nice try, Cole. You've got World Series bracelets for more games than just Texas Hold'em."

His grin did nothing to settle the butterflies in Renata's stomach. "Texas Hold'em it is then. No limits. Whoever wins gets to name their fantasy."

Her cunt clenched mercilessly. "Name it or have it?"

"Have it."

Heat flashed through Renata, an inferno blast that left her rubbing damp palms against her thighs. Was she really brave enough?

"Maybe we better set some ground rules here. If your fantasy involves inviting some blonde woman over for a threesome, you're destined for disappointment."

Cole laughed, his voice dark and husky, stroking places deep inside her. "This is just between the two of us."

She was already wet and needy, her nipples hard and her breasts aching for his hands and mouth. *This is crazy*, the tiny voice of self-preservation said, but where Cole was concerned it had lost the battle right from the very start. She trusted Cole, wanted him even if in the end all she'd have of him were memories.

"Winner names their fantasy," she said, a shiver of erotic fear whipping through her when she saw fierce hunger and masculine determination in Cole's expression before his poker face slid into place. He intended to win.

Cole stacked multicolored chips into level towers, keeping his promise to spot her some chips by pushing two-thirds of them to her side of the table. Renata didn't protest or let pride make her a fool. She needed every advantage she could get—a truth that was amply demonstrated when it took only a short amount of time before she was left with two small towers against the solid fortress wall of Cole's winnings.

Every hand had become an *all in* decision for her, with Cole using the power of his big stacks in the same ruthless way she'd watched him do on television. He intended to

control the rest of the evening, but then she'd known that—and maybe even a part of her had wanted it because it meant she'd be *his* fantasy for the night.

Renata clamped her legs together. Her cunt lips were so swollen it felt like she had a second heartbeat pulsing through them. She'd joked about poker as foreplay, not guessing how intensely aroused she could become when the stakes were high and involved carnal pleasure.

There was a wicked thrill to gambling with her body, with her submission—or his. She wasn't ready to give up the fight yet.

"It's getting awful hot in here," she said, making a show of fanning herself before letting her fingers settle on the buttons of her shirt.

Cole smiled and leaned back in his chair, the smooth sound of his shuffling the cards uninterrupted though his eyes grew dark and heated as her shirt parted then fell to the floor.

God it turned her on to know how much he liked looking at her.

The bra followed, leaving her bare and feeling powerful despite the negligible chips on the table in front of her.

Across the table Cole's breathing quickened. He shifted in his seat, the shuffling stopping abruptly.

He dealt.

They played.

But even with the distraction of naked skin, the odds favored Cole.

He didn't bother raking the final pot to his side of the table. The chips remained where they were as he stood and said, "Bedroom."

It was a command, not a request, and Renata shivered, desire and trepidation clashing, threatening to unnerve her. She wanted this, but there was fear too, of being completely at someone else's mercy.

Cole came around the table and she rose, expecting dominance but getting reassurance instead when his arms went around her waist and he held her in a gentle embrace, whispered, "Nothing will happen that you don't want to happen."

She nodded, words momentarily trapped in her throat by emotion. He did things to her, touched her in a way she'd never been touched before.

"I'm not afraid of you," she managed, falling back on her earlier claim and feeling his smile against her cheek.

"Good. I don't want you to be."

He led her to the bedroom and said, "Strip," aggression replacing the tenderness and turning her on instead of stirring fear.

Renata obeyed. Slowly. And felt the flush of her own power as Cole's nostrils flared and his body tensed. The poker face was long gone, replaced by masculine appreciation and blatant hunger, by wicked intention.

He waited until she was completely naked before ordering her onto the bed. She went willingly, sprawled wantonly, her thighs splaying so he could see her wet slit.

"Christ," he muttered, his breathing growing more ragged when her hands went to her breasts, caressing swollen flesh and plucking aching nipples, their color darker now for all the attention he'd given them.

"Do you want to see me touch my pussy?" she asked, shocking herself with the offer, by her willingness to play naughty games with him.

She'd never considered herself inhibited, but then sex had never been like this for her, an exploration of all the senses, a testing of boundaries.

Her hand left her breast, sliding downward toward her hardened clit and parted folds.

"Stop," Cole said, voice harsh, desires torn.

He wanted to see her fingers playing between her thighs, dipping into her channel and emerging wet to fondle her clit. Renata read it on him easily, his hand gripping his cock through the front of his jeans only one of many tells.

"Let me come for you," she said and watched as his fingers tightened reflexively on his erection.

"Christ," he said again. "I should have known when you took off your shirt that you were a cheater."

The tone of his voice and the look on his face kept her from being offended. Her sense of humor made her say, "Show me the rule book, Cole. I don't think there's anything in there banning what I'm doing."

"I'll show you something," he said, stripping out of his clothing, his hand going back to his cock immediately.

Her cunt clenched at the sight of him holding himself, strong tanned fingers locked around steel-hard flesh. Her hand slid downward. This time he stopped her by kneeling between her parted thighs and shackling her wrist.

Fantasies writhed and raged inside Cole. He'd meant to tie her, had imagined her spread-eagled and helpless, blindfolded and trembling as she waited for his touch. But all it had taken was the flash of skin, the view of her slick, parted folds and glistening slit to throw him off his game.

He shuddered, remembering her taunt in the park.

*That one of your fantasies, Cole? Bending me over your knees and spanking my ass?*

It'd never been before, but now... All bets were off.

"Here's the way it is," Cole said, freeing her wrist as the fingers of his other hand tightened on his penis enough for pain to clear his thoughts and help him regain control. "You lost. I won. You'll do what I say or you'll suffer the consequences. Now grab the comforter and don't let go until I tell you that you can."

Fire flashed in her eyes, rebellion that sent a wave of lust burning through him. He silently dared her to challenge him, let her see his willingness to administer carnal discipline in the form of a sharp, erotic spank to her pussy or ass.

She read his intention, thought to fight it. But in the end her hands curled around the patterned material of the comforter.

"That's right, you don't want to fight me," he said, desire driving him to places he'd never been before though he knew he'd pay the price later.

He hardly recognized himself. Bedroom games had never been important to him. He'd rarely spent more time with a woman than was necessary to ease the need and make sure she walked away satisfied.

But with Renata... Cole blocked the thought before it could form. He didn't want to think about how she was different, how being with her was different. He just wanted to collect on a bet.

"Don't let go of the comforter until I give you permission," he reminded her, the sight of her slick, flushed skin making him ache.

Her scent was driving him crazy. *She* was driving him crazy.

Cole pinned her thighs to the mattress and leaned down, pressed his mouth to her pussy. He groaned at the touch of fevered flesh to fevered flesh. Loved the way she moaned in pleasure as he kissed and sucked, trailed his tongue through the silky moisture of her slit and finally, when she was begging, thrust it inside her.

She cried out, arching upward to drive his tongue deeper into her channel, her hands releasing the comforter to fist in his hair.

Lust held Cole in a smoldering grip. It urged him to forget about what he'd said and keep fucking her with his tongue until she screamed in orgasm, made him ignore the way her fingers were tangled in his hair for long moments. It was pure torture to lift his face from between her thighs, to pull away from her in order to deliver the carnal punishment he'd promised.

"I warned you," Cole said, something primitive and savage inside him enjoying the widening of her eyes, the hot acceptance in them as her fingers once again curled around the material of the comforter.

He brought his hand down in a series of stinging spanks to her pussy. Nearly came when she said, "God, that feels so good," her pupils dilating in shocked ecstasy, her hips rising, silently begging for more.

Cole couldn't deny her. He couldn't deny himself. He delivered another round of punishment, his mind and cock filling with white-hot urgency as she grew wetter and wetter, arousal gushing from her slit and sliding over the rosette of her anus.

The sight of it stirred an ancient need to completely possess a woman. He abandoned the earlier fantasies of tying her to the bed in favor of those where he lodged his cock head against her back entrance, took her in the one way he'd yet to have her.

Cole thrust into her channel to coat himself with her juices, almost lost control of himself when he pulled out and she begged him to fuck her.

He'd been a fool to think he could control this game. He'd be lucky if he didn't spew his seed over her mound or buttocks.

A shudder went through him at the image of coming on her like that. Marking her in such a raw, primitive way.

"Get on your hands and knees," he said, palming the globes of her ass when she obeyed him, his will nearly deserting him at the sight of her flushed cunt lips and wet, wet slit. It was easy to imagine mounting her as he had before, thrusting into the welcome heat, his testicles slapping against her as he gave her a hard, fast fuck.

His fingers tightened on her buttocks. Somehow he managed to resist the temptation of what she blatantly offered with her parted thighs and canted hips.

He guided himself to the tiny rosette of her back entrance and felt her stiffen. "This is my fantasy," he said, his hand going around, stroking over her belly and downward to her clit. "I want you this way."

"Yes," Renata said, pushing backward, moaning, helping him work himself in.

It was unlike anything he'd ever experienced. She was so tight, a vise around his cock, the throb of her heartbeat pulsing through him so it felt as though it beat in his chest, indistinguishable from his own.

"Okay?" he asked, closing his eyes, forcing himself to remain still when he was finally all the way in.

"Oh yeah," she whispered, rocking, almost making him convulse with pleasure as she slid up and down on his shaft.

He gave in to the need to move, to control, began pushing into her in shallow, slow thrusts at first. His fingers tugging on her clit, stroking the tiny naked head as she quivered, begged. Her skin becoming as slick as his as their movements grew rougher, faster, more urgent, until she cried out first and then he did, his hips jerking as semen erupted in hot splashes of pleasure.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Is she gone yet?" Shane mumbled from the back of the Jeep.

Lyric glared at the rearview mirror. "No, and if you ask me that question again I'm going to make you go back to your own damn car. I told you I can handle this one solo."

"Yeah right, like I want both Kieran *and* Cole coming after my ass if something goes sideways."

"That's not going to happen."

Shane grunted and went blissfully silent, only to start up again a few minutes later. "You want to know what I'm fantasizing about right now?"

From the tone of his voice, Lyric was willing to bet it wasn't Tyler though she was tempted to give that answer. "What?"

"A double cheeseburger with a side order of fries, followed by a milkshake chaser from Angel's."

Lyric's stomach gurgled. "We've already eaten dinner," she said, reminding him and herself.

"I know. There's just something about being on a stakeout that makes me hungry."

"It could be worse."

"You think?"

"I *know*." She felt itchy, and the itch had a name, Kieran. Only it wasn't just sex. That'd be *easy*.

Marriage definitely made the lines in her life a little more solid, which didn't always fit her style very well. Like now, when all she wanted to do was get into Kim's place, take a look around, then get out and spend the rest of the night in *law abiding* pursuits.

It was enough to turn her stomach. Shane should be glad he only had to deal with being hungry.

The door to Kim's apartment opened. "There she is," Lyric said.

"She heading for her car?"

"Looks that way.

Shane sat up. "Time to head to mine then. I'll call if there's trouble. Let me know when you're clear."

Lyric nodded. They both knew the drill.

Shane slid from the Jeep and sauntered to where his was parked. Luckily Kim lived in mixed-use housing, the new rage among city planners. Apartments and townhouses built on top of and next to a shopping area loaded with expensive shops as well as places to get the basics. Convenient, especially for doing a stakeout.

Lyric watched Kim climb into the Saab convertible, her skirt pulling tight against her ass as she did it. *Bet I know where you're heading*, Lyric thought, resisting the urge to call Shane.

She had a feeling they were both going to get lucky with their tasks. And if they got lucky, things would get interesting between Cole and Renata. With the case closed, the betting pool would heat up. Big time. And the thought of a couple of grand in winnings was enough to make Lyric grin as she slipped on thin gloves, their color a close enough match to her skin, someone would have to be standing next to her to notice them and wonder why she was wearing them in the summer.

Lyric gave it a few minutes for Shane to call and say the situation looked dicey. When he didn't, she got out of the Jeep and went to Kim's apartment, the set of master keys already in her hand.

Thanks to an earlier visit to the rental office she knew the layout of Kim's place. More importantly, she knew there was no alarm system.

It took less than a minute to gain entrance. Another benefit derived from her earlier visit and the tour she'd taken of several available units.

A quick glance around told Lyric that Kim was organized, maybe even compulsive about everything being in its place. *Good*, Lyric thought, going straight for the desk.

Neat people loved to keep things in files and hopefully Kim preferred paper, something a hell of a lot easier to wade through than a computer hard drive. Lyric smiled when she opened a drawer and saw the hanging file folders, all nicely alphabetized.

Her fingers danced to *L* and *H* first, just in case Lauren Hunt had her own folder, then started at the beginning when she didn't find anything. She hit pay dirt under Bloor, Toby G., a private investigator who liked the sleaze of working the unfaithful spouse angle. *Oh yeah*, Lyric thought, flipping past the invoices marked paid to get to the pictures. *Shades of your ex and your college boyfriend, isn't it, Kim? Enough for you to want Lauren dead.*

Toby had captured plenty of action, like a cameraman on a porn set who *loved* his work. He'd caught Lauren and Ian going at it on a couch somewhere. Ian's house, Lyric guessed, from what she could see of the exterior of the building.

Lyric got to the last picture of Ian and Lauren and kept flipping through the file, past another bill marked paid, only to hit a photograph that erased all trace of amusement and satisfaction.

Bloor had captured the kiss Ian gave Renata. And even knowing the story behind it, it looked real, Ian gripping Renata's arms, passionate and possessive, their mouths fused together like they were going to eat each other alive where they stood.

Shit. It made Lyric's stomach tighten, and not in a good way. She closed the folder and set it on the desk long enough to browse through the others.

A fax machine doubling as a copier saved her the trouble of using a camera. She made copies of everything relevant before going back to her car and calling Shane first, then heading home to upload what she had in the case file and let Cole know it was there.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Got you," Shane murmured, lowering the camera lens after he'd taken a picture of Kim going into Ian Shaw's office. The import-export business was the only one with a light still on. All the other businesses clustered at the end of the street were dark, workers and bosses all gone for the day.

Shane wondered if this was a surprise drop-in, or if Shaw had arranged the meeting. He was almost tempted to follow and stir the shit, but there was no advantage

to it and it came with a significant downside given the pictures and PI invoices Lyric had found in Kim's place.

Better to let Kim think no one was looking at her for Lauren's murder, or Nichole's—though Shane would give credit where credit was due. Even the cops were having a hard time tagging Nichole's death as suspicious. They wouldn't have given it a second look if it hadn't been so convenient in terms of an ongoing murder investigation.

It seemed straightforward enough. A woman goes out riding alone in the evening, gets tossed by her horse in the preserve near where she boards, dies from blunt-force trauma to the head and isn't discovered until the next morning, when the feeders arrive and find her horse saddled and standing near the fence, its buddies close so all of them stay calm through the night and don't attract attention.

Beautiful plan really, in a totally creepy way. Consistent with the MO Lyric fashioned after talking to Wilma and the woman Kim's ex was now married to.

Kim preferred to handle things by arranging accidents. She'd screwed up when she changed the MO and tried to use Nichole as a murder weapon. But she'd managed to fix the mistake.

The cops were going to have a hard time getting a confession out of her. Hell, even if Nichole left a note behind implicating Kim, Shane doubted there was enough evidence to charge her and get a conviction.

He settled back in his seat, figuring since he was there he might as well hang out and see if he could get a shot of Ian and Kim together. He didn't have long to wait. But instead of them coming out together, Kim emerged, her body posture rigid, practically shouting that things hadn't gone well with Shaw.

Shane lifted the camera, grateful for the streetlight on the corner in front of Ian's office. He zoomed in on Kim's face, captured the anger and grief there.

"I bet lover boy decided you were too much of a liability," Shane murmured. "Invited you to his office to give you the news instead of risking a public scene, only you thought he was asking you there for something else."

The Saab convertible squealed away as Kim floored it. Shane set the camera on the passenger seat.

His cell rang. He answered it automatically, thoughts still on Shaw and Kim.

"Brian Elliot passed earlier this evening," a woman said in a gentle voice, tilting Shane's world on its axis. "I'm sorry. He asked that you be told. He also left something here for you. We don't have a lot of space to store belongings..."

"I'll head there now."

\* \* \* \* \*

The woman who'd called was at the reception desk when Shane entered the hospice. He recognized her from before, same as she recognized him.



"I'm sorry," she said again. "If it's any consolation, he went peacefully."

She opened a desk drawer and pulled out Brian's photo album. Shane could see an envelope taped to the cover with his name and phone number on it.

"Thanks," he said, taking the album from her.

She shook her head. "No. Thank you for coming to see him. I know he wasn't any relation to you, but you came anyway."

The smell of antiseptic and death, dry rot and old carpet closed in on Shane. His eyes strayed briefly to the picture of the AIDS quilt on the wall behind her desk, making him realize he'd come full circle, reminding him of the boy he'd been in high school. Wild, but not wild enough to accept the hard-on he'd gotten for a guy a year ahead of him and openly gay.

"Thanks again," Shane said, turning away and going back to the Jeep.

He delayed opening the envelope addressed to him. Paid a silent tribute to Brian's life instead by leafing through the pages of the album, pausing to really see the story they told.

The early years held images of the stern, grim-faced man who'd denied having a son. The later years were scenes from another city, New York, Shane thought, Brian's companions hollow-eyed with the gaunt faces of junkies, people running from themselves or their pasts. Maybe not even knowing anymore what they were running from.

The only time Brian seemed at peace, happy, was in the pictures where he was with Mark.

Shane closed the album and peeled the envelope off the front of it. Inside was a folded note for him and a second envelope with Renata's name on it. He opened the note to him and read:

*The hardest thing is looking back and realizing it was all for nothing.*

*When I was with Mark I lived a lie. I told myself it didn't matter if he ever accepted being gay, or if he introduced me to his mother, or looked at me in public the way he would in private, but it did.*

*I threw my life away because of him.*

*I hope you find someone who accepts who they are, and who you are – all of it.*

*Brian*

## Chapter Eighteen

Puff's long furry ears slid through Renata's fingers in what was her rabbit-shaped version of worry beads. "I'm guessing I don't want to ask exactly how these came into Lyric's possession," she said, studying the pictures and PI invoices Cole printed out after getting a call from his cousin.

"With Lyric and my brothers it's safer not to."

Cole leaned forward on the couch, his hair still damp from the shower they'd taken a short while earlier, his attention on the shot of Ian kissing Renata. "I'm going to kill Shane for this."

There was real anger in his voice, enough to make Renata's heart do crazy things in her chest. "I thought we already dealt with the trip to Ian Shaw's place."

Heat blossomed in her cunt lips with the memory of the fuck against the door. She reached over and traced his naked spine, felt the tension ease in him and knew she wasn't going to be able to put off asking the hard questions much longer.

The investigation had pretty much wound down. Short of getting a confession from Kim themselves, the only thing they lacked was having the police make an arrest.

Somehow Renata didn't think Orrin meant for her to sit around on the *Journal's* payroll and do nothing until that happened. And besides, she liked being busy, enjoyed hunting down human interest stories. She was content with her everyday life—or had been. Now it'd be tough going back to her apartment, just her and Puff.

Renata buried her fingers in luxurious rabbit fur and blinked away sudden tears. *It's not over yet*, she told herself. *Cole may surprise you by wanting more than something casual.*

She could not do casual. Not with him. Not after everything they'd done together.

A shiver went through her, remembering what'd happened earlier. Her pussy still burned from the discipline he'd administered.

She'd never imagined being turned on by something like that. And one thing was for sure, it hadn't *seemed* casual. It'd been pretty damn intense.

The easy thing would be to say nothing. Just wait and see what happened after she was back at her own place. But Renata couldn't see herself doing that. She'd rather have things out in the open and make an informed decision. Sitting around wondering if some man was going to call wasn't her style. Same as sharing one wasn't an option.

Her hand returned to Puff's ears, sliding them through her fingers as she stroked him. *One more night*, Renata thought. It was already late, closing in on eleven thanks to the nap they'd taken before hitting the shower. Tomorrow was soon enough to talk to Cole about where this thing between them was heading.

Or not. Seeing the picture of Ian kissing her and knowing it'd been in Kim's possession made her distinctly uneasy. "So what are we going to do with this stuff?"

"We point Detective Gaines toward Toby Bloor and tell him Kim hired Bloor to find out if Ian Shaw was cheating on her, and that Bloor caught Ian at it with Lauren. I know Bloor. His ethics are slippery. He'll roll under pressure. And if Gaines needs more convincing, we throw in Lyric's summary of the talks she had with Julie Eckhardt and Wilma along with what Kim herself told us at Trent Farms."

Renata studied the pictures of Ian and Lauren doing the nasty. "When we talked to Kim she kept saying Nichole didn't have the guts to kill 'the other woman' but until Ian, maybe she didn't either."

"My guess is she was forced into it when Nichole couldn't pull the trigger. Nichole signed her own death warrant then. Kim couldn't afford to let Lauren leave the clearing alive and she couldn't risk Nichole breaking under pressure—though more than likely, she already had Nichole's accident planned."

Renata nodded. "You think it'll be enough for Gaines to work a confession out of Kim?"

"I don't know." Cole's face hardened as he looked at the picture of Ian kissing Renata. "I want you to stay with me until we know Kim's not a threat to you."

A knock on the door kept Renata from answering. Shane let himself in.

"I got a call from the hospice," he said. "Brian's gone."

A lump formed in Renata's throat despite not knowing Brian well, despite expecting his death.

Shane crossed the room and dropped into a chair. He held out an envelope to Renata. "Brian left a note for you."

She took the envelope and opened it, decided to read the note out loud.

"I never met Mark's mother. I wanted to but Mark kept putting it off. He was afraid she'd see us together and know."

"My parents never accepted me being gay. I hope Mark's mother is different. But if she's not, you can leave out that part of the story and hopefully give her some of what you came to the hospice looking for."

"Mark's death was an accident. I never meant for him to get hurt when I went to Carmel. I just wanted him back."

"I found them at the beach, at a private place that used to be ours. Lew had guns there, from the show I guess."

"I picked one up and things got crazy. I got crazy."

"It happened so fast but I've spent my entire life seeing it over and over again, and trying to forget it. One minute Mark was standing there, then the next he was grabbing the gun. I must have pulled the trigger but I don't even remember doing it."

"I never meant to hurt him. I loved him. Brian."

Renata sighed and put the letter on the table. She felt heavy hearted, not because Brian's confession shocked her, but because deep down, when she'd seen the pictures of Mark and Brian together, the basset hound puppy sprawled across their laps, she'd known. And yet, she'd wanted the answer to be different.

"Are you going to tell his mother?" Shane asked.

Renata nodded. "Once I get back to work I'll find a way to do it privately. Maybe arrange to drop by her house with a mocha from Starbucks. Cora's crazy about those."

"You think she'll care he was gay?"

"I don't know how she would have felt twenty years ago, but I don't think it would matter to her now."

"Good."

Shane opened the photo album on his lap and pulled out two prints. "I've already uploaded the pictures I took of Kim at Shaw's office." He dropped a picture on the table. "This is her going in." The second one followed. "This is her coming out."

Cole felt his gut tighten. "Looks like Shaw gave Kim her walking papers."

"Yeah, that's what I thought. She's a liability to him." Shane glanced at the picture of Ian kissing Renata, then shocked the hell out of Cole by saying, "Look, I'm sorry about taking Renata on a drive-by of Shaw's place."

"Excuse me," Renata said before Cole could either accept Shane's apology or proceed to rip his brother a new asshole. "But I'm fully capable of making my own decisions and I *decided* that going by Ian's house was an acceptable idea."

Shane jumped at being off the hook. He stood. "If you guys don't need me for anything else, I'm out of here."

"We're good," Cole said, letting it go.

Shane put the photo album on the coffee table. "I'd like it back. But I'll leave it with you in case you want to show it to Cora."

He left and Cole returned to the conversation his brother's arrival had interrupted. "I think you should stay here until we know Kim's not a threat to you."

"Let's see what Gaines does with what we send him. I think there was an e-mail address on his business card." Renata lifted Puff from her lap and set him on the floor, but instead of reaching for the case file she picked up the photo album and opened it.

Cole slid his arm around her shoulders, took in the story of Brian's life as Renata slowly flipped through the pages. "Looks like his life was all downhill after Mark."

"What a waste," Renata said, closing the album and setting it back on the table, her voice holding a sadness Cole wanted to chase away.

He tumbled her onto the sofa cushions and pinned her there with his chest on hers, with his mouth on hers. She gave a little sigh of appreciation, melting beneath him, her hands tangling in his hair as her ankles locked around his.

She felt so good underneath him. He'd meant to offer comfort but his heart and body wanted to offer more.

The thought of Renata taking Puff and going back to her place made him feel tense, uptight, and not just because of the threat Kim posed. He wasn't going to lie to himself by claiming that was the only reason.

Her hands left his hair, traveling down his back, the tips of her nails scratching lightly over his skin. A moan escaped when her lips closed around his tongue and began sucking, sending flashes of icy-hot sensation straight to his cock.

He levered himself up enough to get his hand between their bodies, intending to open her shirt, needing the feel of her skin against his and wanting to be able to kiss downward to her breast. The sound of her cell phone stopped him. Her sudden tension became his. Late phone calls weren't the norm for her, not since coming to stay with him anyway.

Cole rolled to his feet. The swiftness with which she got off the couch and went to where her phone lay on the poker table confirmed his suspicion.

He listened as she said, "Yes, of course. I'll leave right away and meet Dr. Lacey when he gets there."

Cole's stomach knotted hearing the name of the veterinarian most of the horse owners at Hermosa Ranch used. For a split second he worried something had happened to Solitaire. But a quick glance at the coffee table strewn with case notes and photographs, including the latest one depicting an angry, upset Kim, told him differently. A horse emergency tonight, one that would draw Renata out to a place with no lights was too damn coincidental – and convenient.

His attention returned to Renata. The knots in his stomach tightened further at the expression on her face.

"Have you got any recording devices, something like the police use undercover?" she asked.

"You're not going out there." The words left his mouth before he could stop them.

Renata's eyebrows rose. "Think about it, Cole. This is the perfect chance to work a confession out of Kim. This isn't about her being worried we've figured out she's the killer. This is about her thinking Ian dumped her for me. She's acting on impulse."

Fear drenched him like a bucket of ice water as he thought about the damage done to Renata's tack, the slashed saddle and destroyed bridle. "This is also the perfect chance for her to kill you."

"You think I don't know that? She'll try but she won't succeed. She wants it to look like an *accident*. I didn't recognize her voice, but she was convincing. She claimed she was from Dr. Lacey's answering service and said someone had called in because they saw Solitaire on the ground thrashing with colic. She wanted to know if she should have Dr. Lacey meet me at the ranch."

"Forget it. It's too risky."

"Say what? Like you never take chances when you're working a case? If I can get a confession out of Kim, it'll make a hell of an ending to the story. Besides, this is better than looking over my shoulder. There's no guarantee Gaines will make an arrest anytime soon."

A muscle spasmed in Cole's cheek. He didn't like the glitter of determination in Renata's eyes. "There's another way to handle this. We meet with Vincenzo, give him a look at the case file then wait and see if he was just talking shit or if he meant what he said about wanting justice done."

Surprise replaced the determination. "You'd do that?"

"If I had to. If that's what it took to keep you safe."

The determination returned with the shake of her head. "No. This way is better. If you don't own listening equipment, I'm betting Shane does."

Cole's temper skyrocketed along with his worry. "My room," he said, tempted to get her in there and tie her to the bed to keep her there.

\* \* \* \* \*

The closer they got to the ranch, the harder it became for Renata to pull off calm, cool and collected. She was hot and cold, sweating beneath the snug fit of the bulletproof vest Cole insisted she wear but covered in goose pimples at the same time.

She glanced at the rearview mirror, nervousness and habit combined. No one was following and she couldn't see Cole where he was lying flat in the bed of her pickup so he could emerge unseen.

A shiver went through her as she thought about him taking a pistol from a gun safe and making sure it was loaded before slipping it into a shoulder harness. The Wild West sheriff she'd imagined, only the sight of the gun had brought the danger home to her and very nearly made her chicken out.

Her fingers tightened on the steering wheel as she turned onto the sparsely lit road running between the mare and gelding pastures. There were only six streetlamps on the entire stretch, leaving much of the ranch's parking lot dark. Renata hit the gas, accelerating with the ranch in view as if she was in a hurry to get to her horse.

"Think of the story," she muttered, trying to shore up her confidence but not completely succeeding. Part of her—a large part—wouldn't mind knowing Kim had come to her senses and decided to hold off trying to kill her until Bloor came up with the money shots—not something that was going to happen since she didn't intend to encounter Ian again, much less do the nasty with him.

Renata's heart tripped into an all-out race as she turned into the ranch, Ian's voice whispering through her mind like a bad omen. *It'll be healthier for you if you stay away from me.*

She took her hand off the steering wheel long enough to activate the two listening devices. Like the vest, Cole wasn't taking any chances. One recorded, one transmitted,

making a copy on a receiver underneath her seat and forwarding the audio to the Crime Tells computer at the same time—a computer Lyric and her cop husband were monitoring so they could call in reinforcements, a friend of Kieran's who had jurisdiction where the ranch was and could come in and make the arrest—if there was an arrest to make.

She cut the engine and got out of the truck holding a flashlight heavy enough and long enough to double as a weapon—another thing Cole insisted on. And having it boosted her confidence where the shaky sound of her voice hadn't.

Renata moved away from the truck and headed toward the place where Solitaire was supposedly in distress. She listened hard for the sound of Cole dropping onto the gravel but all she heard was the hot popping of the engine along with her own breathing.

The moon was a tiny sliver giving only enough light to catch the eerie glow of horse eyes on the hill closest to the catch pen and parking lot. Renata's breathing grew more rapid as she approached the long row of tack sheds. She strained harder, listening for Cole behind her as backup, listening for Kim somewhere to her right, getting ready to emerge from a hiding place.

Renata held her breath in an effort to create silence. Instead the sound of her heart beating grew louder in her ears.

Her muscles tensed in preparation for deflecting a blow to the head. Logic dictated that's what Kim would attempt—not just because of the way Nichole was killed but because the fall down the steps orchestrated over Kim's college boyfriend was probably meant to result in a broken neck or fractured skull.

She knew she'd have to act quickly. And despite the hope of gaining a full confession, realistically she'd be happy with anything that'd incriminate Kim.

There was no predicting how this would go down, whether she and Kim would circle one another, waiting for an opportunity to attack and allowing Renata a chance to goad Kimberly into talking. Or whether Kim would slide into the mindless rage she'd succumbed to in the tack shed.

Renata's fingers tightened on the flashlight. If fury won out, Cole was there. She trusted him with her life.

*And with your heart?* a small internal voice asked.

But any answer she might have given was lost in a rush of fear as Kim stepped from between two tack sheds, a gun in her hand.

White noise filled Renata's mind for an instant. And though she didn't disgrace herself by peeing, she understood viscerally how it could happen that someone would.

Her mouth saved her, kicking into gear even without her brain totally engaged, as if her subconscious had planned for this contingency. "Going to be hard to make a gunshot wound look like an accident, Kim. Or have you developed a taste for the dramatic?"

Renata tapped her chest lightly, drawing strength from the feel of the vest, taunting, "You going to shoot me in the heart over Ian Shaw the same as you did Lauren? Or did Nichole pull the trigger? She seemed weak to me but then she thought Lauren was going to take her man. She didn't know Lauren was already doing yours. Well, I'm not sure Ian actually belongs to any woman."

"Shut up! He belongs to me. There's no other choice for him."

"He know that? Or are you just going to kill every new girlfriend he gets?"

Kim's hand shook as her face took on the same expression Shane had captured as she left Ian's office, fury and pain twisting into a vengeful mask. "If I have to, I'll kill all of them. Before Lauren I didn't know how easy it was."

"Lauren wasn't exactly easy. Your plan backfired, didn't it? Nichole didn't have the guts."

"She didn't show up at the creek. She went straight to the P&R stop. If she'd gotten there before me it would have cost me my alibi."

"That was reason enough to kill her. Or did you plan to do it all along?"

"She deserved what she got. She was useless, pathetic."

*Good enough*, Cole thought, nerves stretched to the breaking point. The only thing keeping him sane was knowing Renata wore a vest.

"Put the gun down, Kim, it's all over now," he said, moving out of the darkness and into the beam of her flashlight so she could see he was armed. "Nobody needs to be hurt tonight."

Her gun wavered, started to drop, only to lift again as the surprise on Kim's face was replaced by the same wild jealousy that'd made her kill Lauren, a reasoning that said if she couldn't have Shaw, she wasn't going to let Renata have him either.

Cole pulled the trigger at the same time Kim did, his heart stopping for an instant as Renata cried out and was knocked backward by the impact of Kim's bullet.

The recoil of Kim's pistol was probably the only thing that saved her life. Instead of blood blossoming across her chest, it spread across her right shoulder.

On some level Cole knew Renata was okay. He could see the shirt tear over her chest and the vest beneath it. He knew Kim's gun was a small caliber one, survivable even without the vest. But it was still the hardest thing he'd ever done, to go to Kimberly instead of Renata, to cuff her and stay with her, applying pressure to the wound so Kim wouldn't bleed out as Renata gasped and struggled to regain her breath.

Panic held Renata in its grip for long moments, Kim's shrieks ratcheting up the tension.

Intellectually Renata knew she'd just had the wind knocked out of her, and the pain in her chest was going to result in a hell of a bruise instead of a funeral, but that didn't keep her heart from racing so fast it felt like it was going to explode.

If Kim had aimed higher, gone for a head shot —



Renata tried to shut the thought off, but all the ways things could have gone so very wrong kept circling through her mind. She'd known the risks, but there was knowing and then there was *knowing*.

God, she could have been killed. It'd happened so fast. There wasn't an instant of seeing her life flash before her eyes. Hell, there hadn't even been an instant to throw herself to the ground and try to roll away.

A shuddering, deep gasp and finally Renata's lungs and heart seemed to be coordinating their efforts to keep her alive. She breathed. In and out. In and out. And the cool night air had never seemed so rich in texture and scent.

Kim's shrieks had subsided into wretched keening sobs. Sirens screamed, one on the car roaring into the ranch parking lot, others in the distance.

"Nice shooting, Cole," Renata said, her mouth coming to the rescue, doing its part in restoring her to normalcy as adrenaline washed out of her in a dizzying, nearly nauseating rush.

"Christ!" It was the only thing he had a chance to say before Kieran's cop buddy was on the scene, followed by other cops, an ambulance, and they were separated to give statements.

The recordings cut their interview time down. And after a once-over by a paramedic, Renata signed a release form to avoid a trip to the hospital. There was no way she was going to freak her mother out by showing up there, or having a bunch of nurses and doctors call her mother because she'd been brought in by ambulance.

Cole's guts were twisted into a vicious knot by the time they were free to leave and driving away in Renata's truck. Son of a bitch, he should take her straight to the hospital and make them run an MRI or something, just to be sure there wasn't any internal damage. But he couldn't stand the thought of being separated from her. It'd been bad enough at the ranch, being separated by the cops but still being able to look over and make sure she was still alive.

Christ, he never wanted to go through that again. All his reasons for running from his grandmother's prediction had disappeared in the instant he'd seen the gun pointed at Renata. In less than a heartbeat he'd known what true devastation would be, losing her because he was too chickenshit to commit and do what it took to make a relationship work over the long haul.

His parents had managed it despite some rough times. So had his grandparents.

He could too.

Cole's fingers tightened on the steering wheel, bleaching white in the dash panel light. Words were beyond him now that he was alone with Renata. For the first time in his life, he was afraid he'd lose all semblance of control and alternate between shouting and crying.

Son of a bitch, he could empathize with Kieran, not just when Lyric went missing but when he'd let her go into a potential hostage situation with a gun. It tore a man up to think his woman was in danger.

*His woman.* The truth of it reverberated through Cole's heart and soul. And his cock kicked in, rising like an exclamation point. Now he just had to find a way to convince Renata she wasn't going anywhere.

Renata glanced at Cole as he stopped the truck in his driveway. He had his poker face on, though it didn't match the tension vibrating from his body.

She hadn't expected total silence in the truck. But then she hadn't been guilty of breaking it either. What was there to say? Sorry you had to shoot someone because I wanted a story.

At least Kim was going to live. Renata was glad, not because Kim deserved it, but because she didn't want Kim's death on Cole's conscience. It was bad enough that Cole was friends with Kim's mother and was playing a role in sending Kim to jail, if not the psych ward.

As soon as she and Cole stepped through the front door, Julius and Caesar came waddling in with Puff right behind them. Sudden tears sprang to Renata's eyes at the sight of them, at the way it seemed so natural, like coming home and being greeted by family. Pain speared through Renata's chest, not the dull ache left over from Kim's bullet—but of impending heartbreak. There was no reason to stay at Cole's place any longer, and no reason to think he wanted her to.

*He's a player,* she reminded herself. She'd known that going in. She'd made a conscious decision to walk on the wild side with him and she was damn glad she'd done it. She sure as hell wasn't going to make a fool of herself now by carrying on like a dumped girlfriend.

Part of her knew she wasn't thinking completely straight, that she was reeling and off balance, still unconsciously processing how easily things could have gone wrong with Kim. She'd been so sure Kim would stick to a pattern, one that didn't involve a firearm. But it was like the urge for self-preservation had gone into overdrive, expanding to cover her emotions, telling her it'd only be worse to spend one last night in Cole's arms and have to face this tomorrow. It'd be better to do it now, to take Puff and head to her mother's house. She'd find comfort there, even if she ended up dragged to the hospital for her mother's peace of mind.

Renata knelt down, hating the way her hands shook slightly as she stroked the two dachshunds in a silent goodbye before gathering Puff in her arms and saying, "Time to go, big guy." Her throat closed, making it impossible to say anything more.

Son of a bitch. Did she really think she was leaving?

Cole removed Puff from Renata's arms before hauling her to her feet. "You're not going anywhere."

"Look, if you're worried about—"

Cole cut her off with a savage kiss as his hands roamed her back, need building, urgent and hot, not just for sex but for the intimacy he felt when he made love with her. And it was making love. He recognized that now. Accepted it.

"Christ. You can't think I'm going to let you leave," he said, face against the warm skin of her neck, inhaling her scent as small tremors originated from his chest, expanding into body shakes that had her murmuring soothing words as her arms tightened around his waist.

"It's okay, Cole. Everything turned out okay."

"The hell it is if you think you're walking out of my life now." He pulled back, letting the poker face that was as natural to him as breathing fall away. "I want you to stay with me. Permanently."

Renata thought she might be hallucinating but Cole's expression was like nothing she'd ever seen before. "What did you say?"

"I want to get married—now or later, it doesn't matter as long as you say yes. And down the road, if you want kids, we'll have them. Grandma had it right. I'm not stupid enough to keep running from her premonition about you and me."

Renata stiffened, her emotions on a roller-coaster ride, her brain trying to process what was happening between Cole and her.

God, it killed her to say it, but she had to. "I know your family believes in your grandmother's predictions—hell, after the story Lyric told me about her parents in Columbia, I'm inclined to believe in your grandmother's second sight too—but that's not a good enough reason for getting married, Cole. It'd tear me up if you got tired of having the same woman in your bed year after year, and I'm not one who's ever going to turn a blind eye on a cheating husband. It'd destroy me if one day you up and decided your grandmother had it wrong after all."

"Fuck it, I'm making a mess of this. Grandma's not wrong and I'm never going to get tired of having just one woman in my bed—you, Renata. No bluff, no trash talk. This is the truth. I've never felt like this about anyone. I was pretty close to figuring it on my own, but seeing Kim pointing a gun at you—"

He broke off, swallowed hard, as if to force nightmare images of what could have happened away. "I love you. If you'd died..."

For an instant, it felt as though her heart stopped beating. "Did you just say—"

His mouth took hers in a hot, possessive kiss that answered the question and left her clinging to him, wanting to strip so she could take him inside her and fuse their bodies and souls together as if that's the way they were meant to be.

"Yeah, I just said I love you. You think you might feel the same about me?"

She'd lost that battle right from the start. "You looking for a stroke to your ego, Cole?" she teased. "How could I *not* love you?"

Cole's smile was pure sex and masculine satisfaction. "Good question."

His lips found hers again. His arms tightening as he savored the feel of her in them, knowing she was safe and they had a future together.

In Bulldog's office he'd gambled on his ability to come away from the case unscathed and unattached—and he'd lost. Only it sure as hell felt like he'd won, and now the chips were all on his side of the table.

## **About the Author**

Jory has been writing since childhood and has never outgrown being a daydreamer. When she's not hunched over her computer, lost in the muse and conjuring up new heroes and heroines, she can usually be found reading, riding her horses, or hiking with her dogs.

Jory welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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