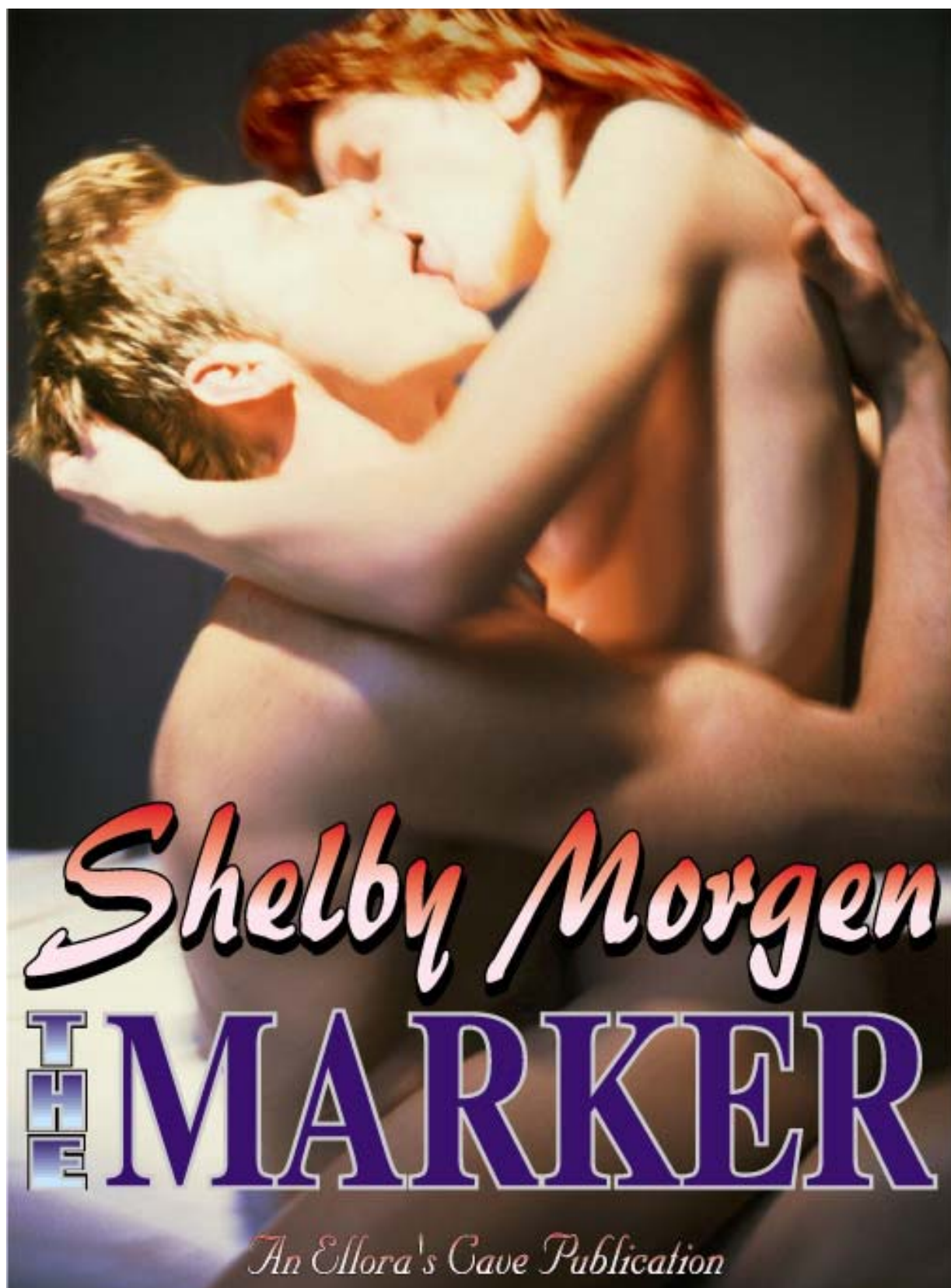


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Shelby Morgen

THE MARKER

An Ellora's Cave Publication

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An Ellora's Cave publication written by

SHELBY MORGEN

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Warning:

The following material contains strong sexual content meant for mature readers. THE MARKER has been rated HARD R, erotic, by three individual reviewers. We strongly suggest storing this electronic file in a place where young readers not meant to view this ebook are unlikely to happen upon it. That said, enjoy...

All characters and events are fictional. No reference to any actual person or event, in whole or in part, is in any way implied by any scene or character representation in this novel.

A heartfelt thanks to the West Virginia State Police, Jefferson and Berkeley County Detachments, and to the staff of the Maryland Correctional Institution-Hagerstown, for answering endless questions with patience and attention to detail.

Special thanks to Treva, Kate, Martha, J.D., Maryam and M.T. for endless hours and encouragement

And to my husband, Bill, for introducing me to all things Irish...

Erin Go Bragh

Prologue

Monday May 1st, 1989

"Just a little farther, now." The lantern cast a dim shadow. The air was thick, heavy with moisture. They were interlopers, intruders disturbing the silence with the sharp intake of their breath. The climb up had been steep, and all of them were winded. They stood, staring as far ahead as the sputtering lantern cast its miserly glow, awed by the scene before them. The only sound other than their breath was a slow drip of water somewhere toward the back of the miniature lake.

"It's gorgeous," the woman whispered.

A tiny metallic click was the only warning they ever had. The woman turned as a blinding flash of light split the dank air. The explosion echoed off the stone walls, a cacophony of sound in that still, quiet place. She had time to scream before the second shot rang out.

* * * * *

Sam Callaghan bolted out of the bed, scrambling for his gunbelt. It took him a moment, hunched there in the darkness beside the bed, to realize the gunshots belonged to another world. The cold, dank world of a dream. His heart hammered out a rhythm that would have done a bass guitarist proud. The adrenaline shooting through his veins was certainly real. He stood up slowly, sliding his service revolver back into its holster. He ran a shaking hand through his hair and glanced at the clock. 4:30 AM. Too late to go back to sleep.

Gunbelt still clasped loosely in one hand, he made a check of the perimeter, rattling the lock on each window and turning every doorknob before he slid the bolt home on the bathroom door and climbed into the shower. He stood there under the pounding spray until the water started to run cold, loath to return to reality. But with the towel and the lights came the reflection looking back at him from the mirror.

"Second Sight," his mother had called it. "God's gift to the Irish." Well, God could have it back, Sam decided. That and all the rest of his Irish heritage. He wanted no more of these dreams that were more real than being awake.

Hope hadn't even been in this one.

Or had she?

In his dream, the shooter had had both hands on the pistol.

Who had been holding that lantern?

Chapter One

Wednesday, May 3rd, 1989

First Sergeant Sam Callaghan pulled his cruiser to a stop outside the main gates of the Maryland Correctional Institution-Hagerstown. It was good to plant his feet back on the ground. He stretched, flexing one vertebra at a time until he stood erect, his stance military in its precision as he reached his full 6'5" in height. He took his time crossing the asphalt drive to the armory door. He was in no real hurry to check his weapon—he always felt naked once he'd surrendered his sidearm.

The dream he'd had three days ago hadn't helped any. He could still hear the echoes of the shots ringing out whenever he closed his eyes. It didn't matter that it had happened—whatever had happened—over eighteen years ago. The dream made it fresh, a raw aching wound, as if it had all been yesterday.

Especially the part about Hope.

These long drives left him a little stiffer now. He was starting to feel his age. He still volunteered for every out of town assignment that came along, though there seemed little point any more. It had been too long—fifteen years. Fifteen years, and all he had was questions, and doubts, and fears, and a hollow ache where his heart should have been. Still he couldn't quite shake the lingering belief that somehow, somewhere, he'd find her again. He'd round a corner, turn the bend, open a door, and there she'd be.

He was a fool. He was a cop. He knew how to find people. If he couldn't find her she didn't want to be found. What was worse, he knew he was a fool, and he still couldn't give it up. What was she to him, anyway? A suspect. Not even that, really. An innocent caught up in a world she'd barely comprehended.

Her very innocence was what had captured him. Despite the filth around her, she'd remained clean—the only clean, pure thing there was to remind him that no matter how far under he went, men like Jesse couldn't destroy all that was good in the world.

Jesse had called her Hope. Sam knew it wasn't her real name, but no matter how hard he'd tried, he couldn't find out who she really was or where she'd come from—or where she'd gone back to. It was partly his own fault. He'd wanted to keep her name out of his reports. The less he knew about her back then, the better it was for her.

By the time he wanted to know more it was too late. She'd vanished without a trace.

Men like Jesse used women like Hope—used them and broke them and left them along the roadside like yesterday's trash. For a while, Sam had been fortunate enough to share some little part of Hope's life. He'd made a difference.

Just not enough of a difference. Because when it came right down to it, the case always came first.

Now, fifteen years later, all he had to show for his dedication was a few extra pieces of brass on his collar, an empty place beside him in his bed at night, and an unclosed homicide nearly two decades old. Still he couldn't let go. Some jobs you just couldn't leave at the office when you went home at night. He'd never been able to get Jesse out of his head. He'd never been able to get Hope out of his heart.

Fifteen years had come and gone, and he was no closer to finding Hope than the day she left. Maybe it was time to let her go.

The asphalt felt slightly sticky with heat under his black oxfords. The air in the Administration Building was already stuffy, though summer wasn't officially here yet. Sam stood waiting at the front desk while the receptionist called for a junior officer who would escort him back to the operations building.

Brenda, his dispatcher, had asked him out a few weeks ago. A man couldn't help noticing how well Brenda filled out that uniform. She wasn't Hope, but she'd been there, been part of his life, every day for the last fifteen years. If she hadn't given up on him yet, Sam decided, he'd accept. Hell. Maybe he'd ask her. He wasn't getting any younger. Besides, there was that betting pool the squad had going. He wasn't supposed to know about it, but there was little in his barracks that escaped his notice.

"Can I help you, Officer?"

Sam pushed his smoke colored sunglasses to the top of his head long enough to let his eyes adjust to the relatively dim interior florescent lighting. He looked down—and down again.

The woman who stood behind the reception desk now had to be less than five foot tall. She stood admiring him with pale blue eyes that were just a little too friendly.

Where had she come from? How had she managed to simply appear right in front of him? He really was losing his edge. "I'm already signed in and stamped," Sam explained. He held out his fist so she could see the ink that looked like a temporary tattoo across the back of his hand.

Her warm appraisal made him uncomfortable, like a piece of meat in a butcher's display case. He always got a sick, guilty feeling in the pit of his stomach when women looked at him that way. He slipped his hand into his pocket, fingering a worn silver chain.

Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord art with thee...

He shifted his gaze away from direct contact with the woman at the front desk, studying the pictures on the wall behind her. Anything but meeting the woman's watercolor eyes. Anything not to encourage her.

The pictures held the usual faces. The Governor. The Commissioner of Corrections. The names changed from one institution to another, but the faces stayed pretty much the same. "Sam Callaghan, West Virginia State Police. I'm waiting for —"

Except that one. Sam stopped mid-sentence as his eyes scanned the picture again. Employee of the Month. "Kristina J. Donovan."

The woman blinked twice. "Excuse me?"

He was hardly aware he'd read the name aloud. Sam rallied himself, forcing his breathing back under control, willing his pulse rate back to normal. He turned his most charming smile on the little woman. Her badge said she was a Unit Manager. Doris White. "I'm waiting for an escort back to Interview, Ms. White, but I'd really like to see Kristina Donovan while I'm here if you could arrange that for me."

Doris studied him for a moment longer, her smile fading. "Tina's in records, pulling some case files for me. I'll take you back."

Sam nodded curtly, dismissing the woman as if she didn't exist. Because, for him, she *didn't* exist. His mouth went dry. His chest felt tight, as if there were some great weight pressing on it. He slid his hand back into his pocket. *Hail Mary, full of grace...*

The hall seemed like the longest walk he'd ever taken. *You're just imagining the resemblance. You've been wrong before.*

The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women...

Why would she be *here*? He'd thought to find her in a restaurant, or a shop somewhere or—or anywhere else. Anything but actually working in law enforcement.

Hope? A caseworker named Kristina Donovan? *That can't be Hope. Not here.*

Doris waved at a doorway where a sign on the wall said records. "I'll be around the corner in the copy room if you need me," she offered.

Hope...

His heart was beating so fast it was bound to explode.

Pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.

He stood staring, drinking in the sight of her, waiting for her to feel his eyes watching, waiting for her to look up, recognize him, call his name.

Control. Get yourself under control. Slow, deep breaths. Can't let her see you falling apart like this.

Her name was different, her hair was shorter, just past shoulder length, but she couldn't change her face—the face that had haunted his dreams. She looked a little older, naturally, but not so much older. Not as much older as he'd been feeling lately. She'd gained some weight, but only enough to give her curves a fuller, softer line. He'd have recognized her anywhere. His arms ached to hold her. He had to try three times before he could find the voice to speak her name.

"Ms. Donovan?"

Tina looked up, startled by the voice from the doorway.

"Ms. Donovan? I'm Sam Callaghan. I'm here for Kelly?"

The voice was rich and deep, flavored with the taste of the South, warm and almost intimate from across the room. Memories came flooding back. Warm breath against her neck in the night. Hot lips pressed against her skin. Promises whispered in a soft southern drawl. Tina closed her eyes, trying to push back the pain.

Spike...

She almost whispered his name, but she knew he wouldn't respond. He'd said his name was Sam. Sam Callaghan. She was imagining the resemblance.

She'd been alone too long.

The Trooper took up the entire doorway, filling it like the moon eclipsing the sun. Tina glanced back down at the files Doris had requested, trying to hide her confusion. The man's voice had sounded so familiar for a moment. It took her back, to another time, another place. But he couldn't be Spike. He was a cop...

"Kelly?" Tina quickly reverted to her professional shell, shutting down her emotions with the ease that came from years of practice. "Doris pulled quite a few files. This may take me a few minutes."

"I don't mind waiting." Although the ghost in the doorway answered with a smile that dimpled his chin, he didn't disappear. He just stood there, one hand in his pocket, staring at her. Maybe not staring. That wasn't quite right.

Waiting.

She just didn't know what the hell he was waiting for.

He settled against the doorframe, one shoulder hiked slightly higher than the other, as if he were planning to wait right there all day.

Spike used to carry...No. He was a cop. Just another cop doing his job.

But that voice....

If she could just get a good close look at his eyes...

She couldn't begin to concentrate on the paperwork in front of her with a uniformed State Trooper standing in her doorway—especially one who looked like a Greek god and who reminded her so much of a ghost from her past. "There are chairs out front, just as you come in," she offered hopefully.

"I'm fine. Unless I'm disturbing you." He added it almost as an afterthought—which it probably was.

There were chairs right here in the records room. Chairs and desks where you could, normally, sit down and read the files you'd just requested. But if he sat down across from her, which she knew he would, that would place the man at her eye level and only four feet away.

She'd be able to get a better look at his eyes.

"Have a seat, Officer Callaghan."

"Thank you, Ma'am."

Tina tried not to stare as she searched through the files Doris had pulled, even though he was worth staring at. But just as he got close enough for her to really see his eyes he did the oddest thing. He put his sunglasses back on.

Damn.

He moved with the sure, strong, confident rhythm of an athlete. "Baseball?" she asked absently.

One eyebrow raised behind the dark glasses. "Was that just a lucky guess?"

Tina hadn't meant to say it out loud, but since it seemed she had, she explained. "You're very athletic, but you don't look like the football type," she reasoned, trying to keep her glance impersonal.

"I used to play baseball, in high-school and college," he admitted. "Now it's softball on the weekends with the guys from the department. We have a charity league. Helps to keep in shape. The bad guys are getting younger and I'm not."

As if he needed to worry about aging. He was the kind of man who would just get better looking with age. Tina found such injustices annoyed her more now that she'd hit forty-something. "I'm sorry," she muttered as she frowned at the stack of files in front of her. "Give me that name again please."

"Kelly," the Trooper repeated. No, not a Trooper. He was an Officer. First Sergeant Sam Callaghan, according to the nametag over his breast pocket. "Liam Kelly."

Liam Kelly? Why did that name sound almost familiar?

Tina frowned down at the stack of paperwork in front of her. She knew that name, damn it, but it wasn't here. This wasn't going well at all. "I don't have that file. The records clerk will have to pull it for you. It'll take her a couple of minutes." Or longer. The nosy old battle-ax was in no hurry these days.

"I'm here for an interview," Callaghan explained. "We may need Kelly to give us a deposition in a double homicide case back in West Virginia."

"West Virginia?" Tina grabbed at the edge of the desk for something to steady herself with. "Where in West Virginia?"

"Near Charleston, Ma'am."

The subtle hint of a Southern drawl did nothing to calm her nerves. There was an angry buzzing noise coming from somewhere at the back of Tina's skull. She stood up too quickly and nearly lost her balance as she circled the end of her desk, only to find herself scooped into the sturdy grasp of one Sam Callaghan, from Charleston West Virginia.

His head tilted toward her. Those full, sensual lips opened just a little. For a moment she was sure he was going to kiss her.

For a moment she wanted him to.

"Whoa, there. Are you all right, Ma'am?"

"I'm fine," she insisted, hoping she really was. "I just stood up too fast, and –"

"Tina, I can't find –" Doris stopped in the doorway, her mouth agape.

Suddenly realizing where she was and how this must look, Tina tried to extract herself from the powerful grip that held her captive. "Doris, I need –"

"Not so fast," Sam Callaghan interceded. "Ms. Donovan says she's all right, but she nearly pitched headfirst into that desk a moment ago. I'm a mite nervous about trusting her on her own pins again."

"Tina!" Doris exclaimed. "What happened?"

"It's nothing, really," Tina assured them both. "I just stood up too fast and lost my balance. If you'll kindly let go of me, Officer Callaghan?"

"Well, if you're sure you're all right," Callaghan agreed reluctantly. "You can't expect a man to be in too much of a hurry to let a pretty lady escape his grasp, though."

Doris laughed. "You're from West Virginia, too," she observed. "Tina used to live in West Virginia."

"Really," Callaghan replied with evident interest. "What part?"

"Southern." Tina abruptly sat back down. "Doris, can you ask Nancy for the file on Liam Kelly, please?"

"Liam Kelly?" Doris questioned. "Then you're not here about the land?"

"What land?" Callaghan's eyes still focused on Tina.

Doris explained, ignoring Tina's look of frustrated warning. "Your Highway Department is taking a piece of land Tina owns down there. Some sort of bypass or something."

"Doris, I'm sure Officer Callaghan doesn't want to hear about my fight with the State of West Virginia."

"Actually, it sounds interesting," Callaghan assured her with an award-winning smile.

"Doris?" Tina repeated.

"I'm on it." Doris flashed another smile at the officer.

"I'm sorry," Tina mumbled, watching Doris head for the file clerk's window. "I'm sure Doris will find your file. Just give her a few minutes."

"So tell me about your fight with the State over this land," Callaghan prompted.

That voice was driving her crazy. She'd almost be willing to believe her past had walked right back into her life. But he couldn't be Spike. Not now. Not after all these years.

She had the most ridiculous urge to cross around to his side of the desk and pull him into her arms, just to be sure. One kiss and she'd know.

She'd likely also make a complete fool out of herself.

Tina wished he'd take off those damn glasses. "It's nothing, really. I haven't been back to the mountain in fifteen years. I just hate to see the land spoiled to build another

road. I've turned it all over to an attorney. He's supposed to file some sort of injunction to stop the construction."

Callaghan shook his head. "Unless you have an Indian burial ground or something to protect, you're likely wasting your money."

The irony of that suggestion hit Tina hard. She bit her lip to keep from laughing hysterically. "Maybe I'll have to dig one up. Thanks for the suggestion."

Doris chose just that moment to return, a manila file folder in her hands and a junior officer in tow. "Liam Kelly is waiting for you in interview three and Officer Emeret is here to walk you back," she announced, presenting the folder with a flourish.

"Thank you, Ma'am." His drawl got just a little thicker.

So did the dimple in his chin.

Only when Officer Callaghan had been escorted out of the building did Tina relax just a little. Callaghan was right, and she knew it. Nothing would stop the State. She was running out of time.

"Are you all right?" Doris sounded so worried. "You've never had a dizzy spell as long as I've known you."

"I just stood up too fast," Tina repeated her favorite new lie. "Doris, I hate to do this to you on such short notice, but I'm afraid I'm going to need to take a few days off." The worst Doris could do was fire her. It wouldn't be the first time Tina went searching for another job. Though she'd been here the longest. Five years, now. She had allowed herself to feel too secure. She bit her lip to keep from crying.

Doris tried to look stern. "I'm very disappointed you feel that way," she managed before her grin broke through. "Take two weeks, you goose. You haven't used so much as a day of sick leave in years. You only use your vacation days because they're use it or lose it. Something that good looking showed up on my doorstep looking for me I'd take a month off! Go after him, girl."

Tina blinked twice, trying to regain her equilibrium. "Callaghan was looking for me, specifically? Are you sure?"

"Asked for you by name," Doris assured her, a worried frown puckering her brow. "I was trying to find toner for the damn copy machines. I saw the uniform and figured Callaghan must be a friend of yours from back home. He wasn't?"

"No," Tina admitted. "But when you mentioned the fight with the State, he said I was wasting my money on the injunction. I guess I've known all along. I just want to wrap up a few loose ends and say good-bye to my mountain before they bulldoze it all."

"Well, you do that, Honey. Take whatever time you need. You be sure to look up that Sam Callaghan while you're down there. That man's too handsome for his own good. I've never seen such gorgeous eyes on a man. They're almost cobalt, you know? A woman could lose her soul in eyes like that."

"His eyes were dark blue?"

"Dark as a three carat sapphire," Doris confirmed. "How could you not notice?"

"I was concentrating on other things," Tina admitted weakly.

"Well, there were other things to look at in that package, too, I guess," Doris acknowledged with a lazy smile. "But I always go for the eyes first. They tell you a lot about a man."

She'd known, as soon as she heard that voice. That soft, southern drawl, with a hint of laughter behind every word. But when she looked up and saw the uniform, the clean-shaven face, the short, almost military haircut, she hadn't been able to put the pieces together.

Spike...couldn't you have said something to me? Anything? Did I mean so little to you?

But he was a cop. A cop.

"What about Kara?" Doris was asking, yanking her back to the present.

Tina glanced up, startled. "Kara?"

"Kara's mature, but I wouldn't leave any teenager alone in my house for a week."

Tina sighed. "No, I can't leave her alone. I'll just have to take her with me. This should be an interesting discussion. Maybe I can get things finished up by the weekend, and she'll only miss tomorrow and Friday."

"Kara won't be happy about that. Not this close to the end of the semester. She'll miss her hours at the hospital, too. You do not want to spend six hours in a car with a pissed off teenager."

Kara's after school "job" at the hospital. It was a volunteer position, but she took the responsibilities seriously, and she always worked Thursday and Friday after school. This week she was working Saturday morning as well. Tina kicked herself mentally. She wasn't thinking clearly. Officer Callaghan had rattled her more than she was willing to admit, even to herself. "Shit. What the hell am I going to do?"

"Let Kara stay with me. Then you can spend as much time as you need working things out with your Trooper. Well, within reason. Can you be back by next weekend?"

Ten days. If she had to search the whole side of the damn mountain for a new hiding spot ten days should do it. "Yeah," Tina agreed. "Yes. That's enough time. I should be back before the end of next week, but at the worst I'll be home next Saturday." She stepped around the desk to give the older woman a quick hug. "Doris, you're so good to me!" she offered by way of thanks. "I owe you so much. How can I ever repay you?"

"Bring in more scenery like Trooper Sam Callaghan," Doris replied with a sigh. "Looking up to see him coming down the runway made my mouth water."

"He's a First Sergeant," Tina corrected automatically.

"First Sergeant?" Doris repeated in puzzled confusion. "What on earth is a First Sergeant doing taking an assignment like this himself?"

Looking for me, Tina thought, though she didn't say it out loud.

They both looked up as Officer Emeret knocked on the door. "Ms. Donavan?"

"Yes?"

"That trooper from West Virginia asked me to give these to you." Looking slightly embarrassed, Emeret dropped a worn set of silver and onyx rosary beads into Tina's hand. "He said they were yours?"

Tina fingered the beads she hadn't seen in over fifteen years.

The fear settled in. Spike was a cop. A First Sergeant with the West Virginia State Police, no less. "Thank you," was all she could manage out loud.

"I didn't know you were Catholic," Doris observed with a frown.

"I was half a lifetime ago," Tina replied with a laugh, hoping her attempt at humor would cover her fear. Her smile faded as soon as she was out of Doris's sight. She was absolutely certain she hadn't seen the last of First Sergeant Sam Callaghan, West Virginia State Police. As certain as she was that her past had finally caught up with her—and that certainty frightened her to the core of her being.

She fingered the worn beads, still warm from his hands. *Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee...*

* * * * *

He'd have recognized her anywhere. Oh, she'd changed. After all, it had been fifteen years. Still, she hadn't changed in the things that mattered. From across a crowded room, he'd have picked her out instantly. His eyes had always been drawn to her. There was just something about her. The way the light caught her hair. The roll of her shoulders when she straightened from a task. The way she tossed her head when she laughed. The willowy grace in the way she moved. That sad, sweet smile. She was a contradiction in terms. Strong, yet vulnerable. Determined, yet, somehow, unsure of herself at the same time. She needed. She always needed.

She just never seemed to need him. That hadn't changed, either. She still wore a wedding ring, and another man's name.

Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been fifteen years since my last confession. I have lusted after a married woman. I have committed adultery. I have compromised my oath as a police officer by failing to report a suspected crime. I may have helped to conceal a murder.

Chapter Two

The setting sun painted the clouds resting along the jagged mountaintop a dusty rose pink. In between the clouds, bright sunlight still streamed through, as if in defiance of the advancing hour. Tina caught her breath, recapturing for a moment the wonder she'd felt when her new husband first brought her here to the side of this mountain twenty-one years ago.

Jesse started the commune in the spring of 1968 with little more than a dream. That first year was hard on all of their dreams. They fixed up the barn and lived in it until the cabin was completed. They were city people, with no more knowledge of log cabins and farming than could be gleaned from the produce section in the local grocery store. Their crops failed. It was bitterly cold that long, hungry first winter. The cabin proved much too small. There were four of them to start with, but Steve and Faith lasted less than a year. Faith got pregnant, and Steve became disillusioned with the whole back to nature thing – and particularly the free love.

The cabin still stood, a testimony to the sheer weight of the old pine logs. The place appeared rustic now, almost picturesque, with vines growing up the porch posts and three deer grazing in the waist high grass beyond the old woodpile. Tina pulled slowly up to the front door, taking her time, in no particular hurry to get out of the car now that she was here.

Time had been good to the cabin. Tina remembered it as little more than a dismal, bug-infested shack sitting in the middle of an ugly, tree stump littered clearing on the side of the mountain where she'd toiled to exhaustion every day for six years. Long, soft grass that folded gently in the breeze covered the once bare clearing now. Vines grew up the stumps. The trees were taking over again. One day cabin and all would disappear into the hillside as if none of it ever existed.

Nothing could block those years from her memory. She'd never forget the cabin, or the man she'd thought she loved, then slowly learned to hate. Jesse had promised her she would never escape. His words were truer than he could have known. Hate stayed with you, she reflected. It ate at you, like a bitter thing, burrowing its way into your soul.

Tina had packed hastily, but she'd remembered the essentials. She brought a small tent, not knowing what shape the cabin would be in, bottled water, a Coleman lantern, and a cook-stove with extra fuel. She carried a spade to dispatch any snakes that might have taken over. Her icebox contained enough hot dogs and sodas to last her until next week, if necessary, and she'd brought a case of canned beef stew and ravioli.

Jesse never put in running water or electricity out here. That was part of the whole back to nature thing. Drinking water came from a spring back up the side of the hill

about a quarter of a mile away. She'd carried bucket after bucket down that long hillside. Her arms ached at the memory. A worse ache came from the way Jesse changed over the years. His idealism and righteous indignation turned to bitterness and sullen anger. Nothing she did seemed to help. Nothing she did was ever enough. She was never enough.

The padlock on the front door was rusted shut, but Tina was prepared. She attacked it with a can of oil and let it soak while she took the spade and the Coleman lantern around to the outhouse. The door had hung open for so long there was no hope of ever shutting it again, but still it seemed solid enough. No snakes. She kicked the framework hard, but the thing held tight. Tina decided she would trust the old outhouse before dropping her jeans in some poison ivy infested weed patch in the middle of the night.

The lock was willing to turn by the time Tina came back around front. The door squeaked open on hinges stiff from disuse. Nothing moved. Nothing scurried. Nothing hissed. Tina hung the lantern on the hook in the center of the room and investigated more closely. Spider webs everywhere, but nothing more sinister. No warning rattles. No trails of old shed skin.

Lord, how she hated snakes.

There wasn't much here. The whole cabin was only fifteen by twenty. Sparse didn't even begin to describe it. To the right, a handmade trestle table Tina had scrubbed so often it was nearly smooth, and two benches. To the left, a pair of wooden bunk style double bed frames. Shuttered windows in the end walls. Dirt floor. A crudely constructed stone fireplace with a huge hearthstone.

Tina had left wood laid out for a fire on the hearth, in the old mountain tradition, even though Daddy had insisted she padlock the door. The logs, seasoned now by more than fifteen years, caught quickly.

She chose the back wall for her bed, as it offered an easy view of anyone coming in the door. Besides, the other one had been Jesse's. Tina never thought of it as theirs. Jesse never shared anything. Jesse allowed Tina to use his things when he was in the mood. She'd slept on the hearth more than once, thankful for the extra blanket Faith left behind.

As she dusted the back bunk with a dry towel, Tina found the stains in the wood. Even after all these years, they still showed. She'd swept the bedding aside when she went into labor, laying down nothing but a few canvas sacks and a clean sheet. When her water broke, everything got soaked. After Jesse, Hope thought she could handle anything. But she was so wrong. The memories came flooding back like the stains that would never fade.

October 14th, 1974

Hope nearly died the night Kara was born, trying to live the lie that Jesse was still alive—that he would be coming back. To keep Jesse's death a secret, she had to do things the way he would have done them.

That meant staying on the mountain, alone, just waiting for him to come home.

It meant not letting Spike take her into town, where she'd be near help when the baby decided to come two weeks early.

It was mid-October, and the weather had turned bitterly cold. The fire burned out long ago. The baby wasn't moving. Hope pushed until she was exhausted, and the baby wasn't moving inside her any more. The baby was going to die, and so was she. She hadn't cried when she found out she was pregnant, although she knew Jesse would never let her leave with the baby. Lord knows she hadn't cried when Jesse died, even though it meant lies and half-truths and living each day like it might be her last chance to breathe free air. Hope didn't cry until she lay there on that bunk, alone and frightened, knowing her baby was dying inside her.

A noise like thunder roused her. As it grew louder she focused enough to recognize the noise. It was the throbbing rumble of that old Harley pulling up in front of the house. Spike's voice called out to her. Hope tried to answer, but she was too far gone to make him hear, and she had barred the door. She tried, but she couldn't make it to the door. Help was so close, but Spike couldn't know she was in here, fading, taking her precious baby girl with her.

Then the ax smashed through the shutters, and Hope felt the last rays of the setting sun burning against her eyelids. She looked up to see Spike, a surrealistic silhouette, calling her name as he scrambled through the broken window, pitching headfirst onto the floor. Spike rolled to his feet as if he did such acrobatics every day, scooped her back up and onto the bed, lit the lantern, and went to work.

Within minutes Spike piled the blankets over Hope, stripped out of his bikers leathers, and scrubbed his arms in Jesse's whiskey. He reached inside of her until his arm disappeared up to the elbow. "You're a lot smaller than a cow," Spike told her blithely. "But you're built about the same inside, I reckon. You just sit tight there while we turn this little calf around. She's been trying to come out butt first, but she's gonna be all right, and so are you, you hear me?"

Hope was too tired to answer him. Too tired to fight when Spike reached inside her. Too tired to think about anything but the fact that her baby was dying.

"Hope!" Spike shouted. "Now you listen to me, God-damn it! This baby needs you!"

Spike shook her, hard. Her head banged against the bed. Hope opened her eyes with a cry of pain. Staring down into hers were the bluest eyes Hope had ever seen. Funny. She'd never really noticed before how beautiful Spike's eyes were. Maybe she was already dead. Maybe Spike was an angel.

"Hope," Spike pleaded, his voice desperate. "I need you. Don't give up on me now, Hope. I can't lose you. Not now." He poured the last of the whiskey down her throat, making her sputter and gag, the fire burning her throat so raw she nearly choked.

Hope coughed a baby right into the world. It surprised them both so much they just stared at each other for a long moment, then Spike scooped up the baby and wiped her down, laughing with Hope as the baby started to scream. She had a girl. They had an angry, squalling, baby girl. Spike washed the baby and bundled her into her first flannel gown, then cleaned up Hope as best he could. She awakened hours later to find Spike lying beside her in the bunk, stripped down to his boxer shorts. Although a fire blazed on the hearth now, it was Spike's body heat that warmed her. He lay beside her, watching the two of them sleep, his eyes filled with wonder.

Spike's face was hidden behind a big, bushy red beard back then. His hair was long and pale, the color of hay weathered in the sun too long, his eyes usually hidden behind mirrored sunglasses, his manner cool and distant. But underneath the tough biker exterior, there was a kind, gentle man—a man who held his newborn daughter in his hands, and let the tears run down his face, unashamed.

Fifteen years later, Tina fell asleep once again to the memory of those gorgeous cobalt blue eyes filled with tears.

* * * * *

Tuesday, July 23rd, 1974

"Hope! Where the hell are you? Get your ass up here! Now!"

Hope swore under her breath as she dashed the sweat from her eyes with the back of her hand. God, he was in a foul mood lately. Everything that went wrong was her fault. Every single thing—and there was a lot going wrong these days.

"Hope!" Jesse's voice boomed out like a foghorn.

It wasn't as if she could have been anywhere his voice wouldn't reach. She doubted there was anywhere on this whole side of the mountain that she could have escaped him, Hope reflected bitterly. Lord, how she'd grown to hate the sound of his voice.

"Hope!"

"I'm right here," she answered from the foot of the ladder leading up to the loft. It took every ounce of her concentration not to let the contempt show.

"Hope, for God's sake, will you get your ass up here and help me? I told you I wanted to re-organize all the lumber this afternoon. Where have you been, anyway? Off picking flowers?"

"I was weeding the garden." She didn't bother to mention the fact that weeding was number three on his list of chores today, and the lumber wasn't there at all. That would have been her fault, too, for not remembering to write the lumber down on the calendar when he mentioned it sometime last week. If he had actually mentioned it at all.

The bitter bile of subjugation rose up in her throat, aching to be released in the form of action. Something. Anything to strike back. She closed her eyes, forcing her temper to hide behind a supposed wall of indifference as she leaned back a little, stretching her overworked spine.

"Don't do that!" Jesse spit. "Jesus! You look like a walrus when you do that!"

Hope straightened self-consciously and pulled her stomach in, hunching her shoulders to help hide her six-month belly. She moved quickly to the ladder and made her way up to the loft, keeping her eyes to herself so he wouldn't see the hatred smoldering there.

Jesse turned away to grab another board. "I want to stack all this loose lumber over by the window." His voice held a growl, like a surly dog just barely mollified by her silent acquiescence. "We've got to make room for more drying racks."

Hope didn't bother to suggest the boards would store perfectly well in the cabin, as, oh, perhaps, a floor, which was what Jesse promised to do with them before last winter. She was in no condition to fight with him now. Besides, there was nothing to be gained by stirring up old arguments. Her chance would come. If there was a God, her chance would come.

Jesse was trying to wrestle loose one of the longest boards in the pile without moving the ones on top of its other end first. Typical, she thought, wondering how this could possibly be her fault. As she got to the top rung of the ladder, she found out.

"If you weren't so damn slow I could have these all moved by now." Jesse gave another hard yank. The board suddenly came loose. Jesse's momentum carried him around in a half-circle, aiming the long end of the board directly for her head. Hope screamed as she lost her footing, clinging to the side of the homemade wooden ladder, her feet flailing wildly in the air. The ladder sagged to the right, but it held together. The large, awkward board struck the center beam of the barn with enough force to rattle the roof.

As if in slow motion, Hope watched Jesse tumble out of the loft, twisting in mid-air like a cat as he tried to right himself. She had time to meet his eyes as he fell, to know he wasn't thinking about her, dangling there off the side of the ladder, or her unborn child. No, he was merely angry at the injustice of it all, that he, Jesse Chapman, should meet such an ignominious fate.

Hope hung there for a minute longer, staring at the twisted body below her, before her own peril seared its way down her aching arms and into her numb brain. Even as she felt her hold slipping, her feet found the rung again, and she pulled herself back to the relative safety of the listing homemade ladder.

Jesse had intended to kill her. Hope knew it, even as his eyes met hers when he swung around with that board. He could have gotten away with it, too. The doctors and nurses down at the hospital all knew how accident-prone she was. She'd been in four times already this summer. The last time the chain flew off the chainsaw while she was cutting firewood, tearing a jagged gash in her left forearm that might well have caused her to bleed to death. Spike came by just in time to see Hope running for the house, blood gushing down her arm.

The ever-resourceful Spike bound up Hope's arm with his T-shirt and a roll of Duct Tape and ran her in to the hospital on the back of his Harley. Hope was sure she was

going to pass out and fall off the bike, but maybe she was just too scared, because she made it all the way in.

"I told you I needed to fix that chain," Jesse reprimanded her as he collected her from the emergency room five hours later. "You were only supposed to split the firewood that was already cut. Now you won't be much use the rest of the summer."

Hope wasn't in any mood to argue at that point, but she was sure the list Jesse left her said "Cut firewood" not "Split firewood." That was when Hope realized that Jesse really was trying to kill her.

Now Jesse lay on the barn floor, his body broken and twisted, and somehow, even in death, Hope knew it would be her fault. Every one would think Hope had finally taken as much abuse as she could stand from Jesse, and somehow managed to kill him.

Looking down at him lying there, she knew she damn well should have. She had reason enough. She should have killed Jesse the night last January when he had used her as a marker in that card game with Spike. Free love be damned. She was little better than his whore.

Jesse had made her into a prostitute.

Hope didn't even argue with Jesse that night. She was too broken in spirit by then to really even care.

Spike cared. Spike was used to winning. When Jesse got this drunk, Spike almost always won. He just hadn't meant to win *her*. When the last hand was over and Spike read Jesse's marker aloud. "Hope."

Cold, raw fury burned in Spike's eyes. "You're giving me your wife? She's not a dog. You can't just hand over her leash."

Jesse laughed, refusing to be offended. "Free love, man. That's what we're all about. You don't get to keep her. You just get to fuck her."

"Did it ever occur to you Hope might have something to say about this?"

Jesse laughed again. "Hope? She fucks whoever I say she fucks."

Spike turned to stare at her. For a moment she was afraid Spike would refuse the marker. He looked like he might kill Jesse himself. He held out the piece of paper. "This all right with you, Hope?"

She couldn't say it. Not out loud. She was too ashamed. She just nodded her head, looking down at the floor. She looked up again as he grabbed his coat and jerked his helmet down over his hair. She watched him fight to get his temper back under control before he turned to face her. Hope wondered, later, if Spike hadn't accepted the marker just to spare her the beating she would have gotten if he had turned her down. "Not here. I ain't providing any free entertainment. I'll pick you up tomorrow afternoon. Three o'clock."

Spike addressed his next remark to Jesse. "Don't mark up the merchandise," he warned with that soft southern drawl barely disguising the hard edge to his voice. "I don't want no damaged goods."

Spike didn't wait for Hope's answer. He just kicked the door open, letting it slam in his wake.

She should have been furious, or at least terrified. She wasn't. Maybe she just didn't care enough about anything any more to be terrified. At least it was Spike. She trusted Spike. He wouldn't hurt her. Not the way Jesse would.

When Jesse stumbled to bed, she stayed well out of his reach, making herself as small and invisible as possible. She curled up on the floor in front of the hearth, without so much as the extra blanket, but Jesse just chuckled whenever he looked at her, inordinately pleased with himself.

Spike would be back soon. By this time tomorrow she'd be out of here.

Tomorrow seemed so far away. Couldn't you have taken me with you tonight?

You didn't really want me, did you? You won't be sorry, I promise. I'll do anything if you just get me out of here.

Please, God. Don't let him change his mind. Not now. You've got to get me out of here. I'll do anything you want. Just give me a sign. Anything. I swear. Just get me off this mountain. Just help me get away from Jesse.

Hope huddled closer to the fire, but somehow she couldn't seem to absorb any of its warmth.

Chapter Three

Thursday, January 24th, 1974

Spike rode up precisely at three o'clock. Hope had done her best to make herself look presentable. She'd washed up as best she could, run a brush through her hair, and bundled up in an old ragged coat she'd had in college. She'd probably get pneumonia riding on that bike in this weather, but then, she was no stranger to hospitals. At least she'd be safe there.

She was standing on the front porch when Spike coasted to a stop in front of the cabin. He handed her a helmet and a thick, heavily padded jump suit that had to be at least three sizes too big, but it would keep her from freezing on their way down the mountain.

Jesse'd disappeared some time after breakfast. He didn't show up to see her off. Sam waited while she struggled into the jumpsuit, then slid her leg carefully over the seat to wrap her arms around his waist.

Hope hadn't given much thought to where they were going. Any place was better than here. Still, Spike's home was nothing like she might have expected. It was a pretty little house in a quiet neighborhood. A neighbor out sweeping his sidewalk waved at them, gawking at Hope as Spike turned into the driveway.

The garage door shut behind them and Spike took her hand to lead her inside. Hope could only stare around her in disbelief. After the cabin, the place looked like a castle.

Spike had hot running water.

He cooked for her—steaks and pasta and salad. Hope picked at first, but when she realized Spike wasn't going to ridicule her, she ate everything in sight. He wouldn't even let her wash the dishes. After dinner, she luxuriated under the spray of the shower until the steam melted the ache of the cold dirt floor out of her bones.

It wouldn't have occurred to Hope to protest when the glass shower door slowly slid open. If, somewhere in the shattered depths of her soul, she might have asked herself what she wanted, she would have been forced to admit the truth. She wanted this. She wanted good food and hot water, and, though it frightened her to admit it, she wanted Spike.

He stood there at the shower door, naked except for a towel. God, he was gorgeous. Excitement ripped through her exhausted body. Broad-shouldered and lean, though his body rippled with muscle, he reminded her of a Viking Warrior come to scoop her up and carry her away.

She was ready to go.

Hope shifted to one side, making room for him beside her in the shower.

"I thought maybe I better join you before the water gets cold." Spike's voice was deeper than normal, almost husky, thick with desire. That surprised Hope. She saw herself with Jesse's eyes. She was too thin. Her breasts were losing their shape. Her hair was too mousy a brown. Certainly there was nothing about Hope to make the big outlaw's voice go all shaky like this. He stood staring at Hope until she flushed with embarrassment.

Too late to run now. He was going to see the rest of her anyway. Might as well get it over with. She braced herself for rejection as she turned and slowly held out the shampoo.

After a long moment, Spike dropped his towel. She tried not to stare, but she was quite sure she'd never seen a more beautiful—or aroused—body. Spike flushed slightly as he stepped into the shower—and proceeded to wash her hair.

She'd never known the feel of a man's hands buried in her hair could awaken such a fierce need in her. Her body came alive under his touch. With a sure, gentle stroke over her skin and a murmured whisper against her neck Spike made love to Hope's soul. He worshipped her body, rebuilding her there under the steaming spray. When the water went cold he bundled her into a huge fluffy towel, letting his fingers brush lightly over her ears and down her neck as he separated the waist length mass of her hair. She closed her eyes, lost in the luxury of his touch.

She knew the terms of the marker. She'd been ready to live up to Jesse's bargain, not out of any sense of obligation to Jesse, but because she'd finally seen some way out of the nightmare she'd trapped herself in.

She'd never expected to feel so much when Spike touched her. She laid her head against Spike's chest as he carried her into his bedroom, her arms wrapped around his shoulders. He kissed her, once, too politely, then tucked her beneath the blankets. She felt her heart twist in rebellion as he turned to walk away. He paused at the doorway to turn out the light. His "Good night" was spoken so softly she barely understood the words.

She shouldn't have been surprised. She'd known all along he didn't really want her. He was just being kind. Always the gentleman. "Spike?" She tried hard to keep the disappointment out of her voice. "You should sleep in your own bed."

"I—" He cleared his throat and tried again. "I don't think that's such a good idea."

She pulled the towel up higher around her breasts as she rolled back out of the bed. "It's all right. It's your bed. I can sleep on the couch. I'm not used to a bed like this anyway."

She tried to slip by him, but an arm snuck out of the darkness to pull her tightly against his chest. "You're not making this any easier." The heat of his cock brushed against her as he buried his face in her hair. She could feel his erection pressed hard against her through the towel, but he captured her hands when she reached for him,

kissing her fingertips lightly. "I'm sorry. I won't—just try to get some sleep. You take the bed."

He sounded so frustrated. It couldn't be that he didn't want her. "Spike?" Her confusion leaked out in her voice. "I don't understand. What's wrong?"

"Wrong? Everything's wrong. I promised myself I wouldn't—I didn't mean to let things go so far. It's just hard to remember the rules when you're this close to me, Hope."

"There aren't any rules, Spike." She rubbed deliberately against his cock. "You can have anything you want from me." She slid her hand down over his smooth, flat stomach, nudging the towel loose as she traced the line of dark hair down. He jumped at her touch. When his cock lunged out to meet her, she stroked the head with her fingertips. "Umm. I love the way you feel. I love that I can get you that hard."

Spike pulled back even as his cock quivered against her fingers. "Hope, you don't have to do this. Not just because of some piece of paper."

"You don't have to do this, either, Spike. Not just because of some piece of paper. Not if you don't want me."

Bitter laughter tinged his voice. "Want you? Damn it, Hope, I want you more than I've ever wanted anything in my life, but that doesn't make it right. He's your husband, Hope, not your damn pimp. He doesn't have the right to pass you around like some sort of — of —"

"Where? Prostitute?" She knew what he was thinking. She'd thought the same thing herself when Spike read Jesse's marker.

"Slave, damn it. You're not just a piece of property to be traded around when Jesse gets tired of you."

Don't take me back there, she wanted to scream. Don't leave me trapped up there with Jesse! "What about what I want?" she asked instead. "What if I want to be with you? Doesn't that matter?"

"I can't do that to you, Hope." His voice sounded desperate. "I can't. It's wrong. It's adultery."

She wanted to scream, and laugh at the same time. He was worried about her soul? It seemed a little late. "It's *not* adultery. Jesse hasn't been my husband for a long, long time. Leave the world and anyone who'd condemn us outside, Spike. There's just you and me and the time we have together, and I know what I want to do with that time." She leaned against him, kissing the hollow spot over his breastbone. "I doubt even God would consider this a mortal sin, but I promise to say my Hail Mary's and go to confession next time I'm anywhere near a church."

"Hope, I —"

"Shhh." She stroked her fingers over the length of his rigid cock, smiling when he moaned his surrender into her hair. If he thought that was too much for his self-control...

Hope let her towel fall to the floor. Her kisses outlined his collarbone, then moved lower, her tongue swirling patterns around his nipple before she sucked the hard little bud into her mouth. She felt him tense as her kisses moved closer, felt him trembling beneath her touch almost as if he was afraid of her.

He didn't resist when she pushed him back toward the bed. Didn't fight when she pressed him back against the cool, clean sheets as she knelt between his knees. The tip of that amazingly hard penis was already wet with the first drops of his cum. She touched him with the tip of her tongue, tasting. Mmm. Sweet and a little salty.

"Sweet Jesus."

Was he actually saying his rosaries under his breath? She covered her laughter by sucking, hard, pulling him into her mouth. His hips jerked up off the bed to meet her more than half way. She pushed him back down against the bed, her breasts dragging against his thighs as she began to move her mouth rhythmically up and down his cock. His hands moved to tangle themselves in her hair, but he wasn't trying to push her away. Instead they stroked through her hair in cadence to her movements.

"Oh, God, Hope, I can't —"

Faster, now, as his control shattered beneath her insistent tongue.

"I can't..."

She cupped his balls, squeezing gently.

"Hope!"

Then he was thrusting into her mouth in wild abandon as his hands stroked through her hair, her name on his lips as he shattered beneath her, spurting into her mouth in long, hot gushes that just kept coming as she squeezed his balls again and again.

When at last he lay quiet she curled beside him, content in his arms. "I'm sorry," he whispered at last.

"What is there to be sorry about?"

"I didn't — you —" His hand slid down to stroke through the curls that covered her own aching desire. "Let me make it up to you."

"You don't have to. You don't owe me anything. Not tonight, Spike. I've got all I need for now. Just hold me." His arms closed around her. Their legs intertwined as she fell asleep, her face still nuzzled against the broad expanse of his chest, her body still wrapped in his warmth.

* * * * *

Hope woke up rested and clean to a desire stronger than anything she'd ever felt before. She opened her eyes to find Spike lying beside her, watching her sleep. She closed her eyes, pressing them tightly shut, and then looked again. He was still there. He was real. This was all real. She slid her hands up his chest until they skimmed over

his shoulders and into that long blond tangle. His hair was impossibly unruly now that it was clean and free of the ponytail. No wonder he'd kept it banded every few inches.

He let her lead, almost as if he wasn't sure what she wanted. Hope pulled his head down into a slow, delicious kiss, savoring the taste of morning desire. His eyes slid closed, but she kept hers open, not wanting to miss anything. This was a memory in the making, and she knew she'd cling to it in the long winter still ahead.

She slipped the tip of her tongue between his lips to stroke over the roof of his mouth. He shuddered beneath her touch. With Spike, each move seemed new, as if she were rediscovering the joys of sex for the first time.

Spike moved slowly at first, touching gently, as if afraid she might break, then becoming bolder. A fingertip traced over her nipple, a shy smile teasing his lips as the coral nub tightened, beading into a hard point of desire.

His kisses trailed lower, until his lips joined his hands on her breast. Hope moaned as she pushed herself against him, surprised at the sudden urgency of her desire.

Hope wrapped her fingers around his swollen cock, stroking slowly over his length until Spike lost his constraint, thrusting restlessly at her. She curled her leg over his hip, pulling him closer. "I want you," Hope assured him. "I want to feel your cock buried deep inside me."

She would always remember the look of wonder on his face as he slid into her for the first time. She was sure he'd forgotten to breathe.

He felt so perfect within her. So right. Everything about Spike felt right.

Jesse faded into the past, a nightmare from another lifetime.

They made love, they ate, and they slept, in no particular order. Whenever she woke up, he'd be there, his tall frame jackknifed around her. Her head would be cradled in his arms, his hands waiting, ready to worship her, his eyes, framed in thick, sooty lashes, half closed, hooded with desire.

He made her feel beautiful. Feminine. Powerful.

It was a glorious weekend. She didn't want it to end.

Neither did Spike.

"Stay here," Spike whispered Monday morning, his voice thick with desperation. "Stay with me. I'll take care of you. I'll protect you. You don't have to go back there."

Wasn't that what she'd wanted? Wasn't that what she'd come here for? But something had changed between them. She could hide here, lock the world outside, and every day would be like this weekend. Safe and perfect and warm.

Until Jesse found them.

"He'll kill you." It was just a fact. Jesse'd made her a promise he wouldn't forget.

"I can take care of myself. I can take care of both of us."

She wanted desperately to believe she could stay here and everything would be perfect. She just couldn't make herself believe that lie. A man like Spike, a good man, would never understand the evil a man like Jesse was capable of. Not until it was too late.

She couldn't let that happen. "He needs me." A lie born of desperation.

Spike just stared at her.

"I have to go home," Hope told him, her voice urgent.

Spike's voice turned a shade harsher. "Tell me you love him."

Hope closed her eyes and imagined Spike's big, beautiful body lying in this bed, the sheets soaked in blood. A sob shook her. "I love him."

"Then this weekend meant nothing to you?"

That was one lie she couldn't get past her lips. "I love him. Please. Just take me home."

Spike rolled out of bed without another word, pulled on his jeans, and waited for her on the bike. If she held on a little too tight on the ride home, Spike pretended not to notice. Nor did he notice the tears in Hope's eyes when he dropped her off and rode away without so much as a wave good-bye.

It wasn't till much later she realized she'd lost her rosary beads somewhere along the way. No matter. She'd lost something much more important. Her heart.

* * * * *

Friday, May 5th, 1989

Sam Callaghan woke up in a cold sweat, breathing like he'd just run a marathon. He'd had the dream again—the dream about the day Hope's baby was born. His beautiful baby girl.

In the dream, Spike got there too late. He broke the door down just to have Hope die in his arms. When he opened the receiving blanket he found Jesse's battered, decomposing body.

Sam nearly retched. He was shaking like a child after a nightmare. God, he was cold. How could he be sweating like this when he was so cold?

It was useless to try to go back to sleep after one of those dreams. Sam knew better. He jerked a T-shirt over his head and pulled on his faded old jeans. He'd have been up in an hour, anyway. He headed for the kitchen and the coffeepot he kept on a timer. He always set it to start early. Usually the smell got him out of bed before the alarm ever had a chance to go off.

If the dreams were going to start again, he'd have to reset the timer, Sam reflected, pulling the pot off the warming pad without waiting for it to finish dripping. He wasn't sure he could go through this again. Maybe he ought to see a shrink or something.

He dismissed the notion with the first gulp of scalding hot coffee.

He hadn't had the dream in years. Not that dream. Not since he was Spike, the feared red-bearded outlaw biker.

There were other dreams about her—softer, gentler memories. But he hadn't had this dream since...since the morning Hope left. The dream hadn't always been exactly the same. Or rather, it was the same to a point. Each time, Hope was pregnant, and she was going into labor, alone. Each time the dream was a little sharper, a little more vivid, a little more detailed. Three times he'd gone to Hope. Three times he'd found her in trouble. Three times he'd nearly been too late.

The first dream hit like a sniper's bullet, catching him totally off guard. He'd dreamed of her almost nightly after the poker game, but those dreams had been sweet, guilty fantasies—memories sent to torture him with what he couldn't have.

This dream was different.

It was Memorial Day weekend. Spike finally crashed after spending three days at a biker bash up in the mountains. In the dream he raced to the cabin, knowing Hope was in trouble. He broke through the door to find her pregnant and dying. The dream was so real that he stared around in bewilderment when he opened his eyes, trying to figure out where he was and how he had gotten there. He was standing in the shower a few minutes later, trying to rinse the fog from his brain, when it occurred to him that it wasn't just a dream. Hope really needed him. Spike didn't try to reason it out. He just pulled on his clothes, jumped on the Harley, and headed for the mountain.

He hadn't seen Hope since he'd won her from Jesse for the weekend. He'd never wanted anything the way he'd wanted Hope. *Just tell me. Say you want to stay*, he thought. *Just say the words and I'll tell you everything. I'll take this asshole down, and you'll be free of him once and for all.*

Hope just wouldn't walk away from Jesse. Instead she lay there beside him in his bed and lied to him, as if he couldn't read her face. Sam wanted desperately to hear her whisper his name, tell him she loved him. Tell him almost anything, and make him believe. But the best Hope could do was a lie.

Four months later the dream had him flying up the mountain. As soon as Sam pulled up to the cabin he saw Hope running down the hillside from the woodpile out back, blood gushing from a long tear in her arm. Spike pulled off his T-shirt to use as a dressing and grabbed for the roll of Duct Tape he always carried in his saddlebags. He wrapped Hope's arm so tight he was afraid he'd cut off the circulation to her fingers. Spike thought about Duct Taping Hope to theissy bar, too, in case she passed out before they got to the hospital, but that would have taken more time. She was scared, and pale as death, but conscious.

He leaned back against her, pinning her to the backrest with his weight, as he twisted his way down the steep mountain roads. She clung to him, holding on so tightly that he could feel the outlines of her breasts smashed against his jacket, her grip a subtle reassurance as they raced into town. She was alive, and he would keep her that way.

Maybe, just maybe, he could make her see that Jesse was killing her, a little more each day.

God forgive him. Even now all he could think about was getting her away from Jesse. He was no better than Jesse himself, coveting another man's wife.

They passed Crazy Horse, a drunken, drugged-out biker without a drop of Native American blood who rode an old Indian motorcycle, near the city limits. With a wave of his arm Spike flagged the ragged old outlaw down. "Find Jesse!" Spike ordered. "Tell him I'm taking Hope to the hospital. Blade flew off the chainsaw. Tell Jesse to meet us at the hospital!"

Crazy Horse saluted and rode off. Spike knew the fool was too scared to do anything but what he was told. Jesse would have the message in less than half an hour.

Still it took the bastard more than five hours to show up at the hospital. By then, Spike knew Hope would live. Knew she would keep her arm.

Knew Hope was carrying his baby.

Hope had been with Jesse for at least five years, and she'd never gotten pregnant. One of Jesse's biggest bitches was that Hope had failed to give him a child. Now, four months after Hope spent the weekend with him, she was four months pregnant. Shit. He might as well have hired himself out for stud service. If Hope hadn't been lying about wanting to go home to Jesse then she was in on his game.

Sam nearly walked out of the hospital then. Maybe he would have, except a nurse had come out to say, "You can see your wife now, sir."

All he had to do was tell Hope and watch her face. The woman couldn't lie for shit. She was asleep when he entered the room, laying there pale as death on the clean white sheets, her skin scrubbed clean once again. She woke up as he eased the door shut.

What a ridiculous name Jesse'd pinned on her. Hope. The one thing she didn't have. She lay there, her long mahogany hair dirty and dull again, her eyes defeated. She lit up when she saw him, and for one brief moment she was beautiful again, before the fire slid out of those tired eyes.

"You saved my life." Her tone asked why he'd even bothered.

"Hope, I—" He hated himself for doubting her. He hated himself more for what he had done to her, and for what he was about to do. "Hope, you're four months pregnant." He couldn't accuse her of anything more.

Surprise. Shock. Fear. "Four months..." Then understanding hit. "Oh my God," she whispered. "Jesse did this on purpose." Hope looked up at Sam then, her eyes misted with tears. "I'm sorry, Spike."

Sam felt his jaws work into an angry knot. "I'm sorry, Hope. I acted like some sex-crazy school kid. You and Jesse—I mean you'd been together a long time. I thought—" Sam ran his fingers through his ragged red beard. "It doesn't matter what I thought, Hope. What I did was wrong. I'll make this right somehow." It went against everything he believed in, but he had to make the offer. "I—if you want an abortion I'll pay for it.

Jesse doesn't have to know." Anything, rather than see her trapped with that man for another lifetime.

"No!" Hope shrieked. "I could never do that!"

"He'll never let you go, Hope. Not if you give him this baby."

"This isn't about Jesse. It isn't about blame, either. Can't you see that? You didn't do anything with me I didn't want you to do, Spike. I don't care about Jesse. I'm going to have a baby. *Our* baby. I want this baby more than anything. Don't you ever, ever think otherwise. No matter what happens, I'll take good care of her. I'll never let him lay a hand on her. I promise you that. I'd kill him first."

He pressed her hand against his cheek. "I want this baby too, Hope. I don't care if it's wrong. I want both of you. Leave him," Sam begged her again. "Let me take care of you both."

"I can't do that," Hope sobbed. "You know I can't. He's my *husband*."

"Look at you, Hope. He's killing you, one day at a time."

"I can handle Jesse!" Hope assured him. "I'm not giving up my baby."

Sam could have pointed out that divorce was legal in all the states now. That Hope wasn't Jesse's property. That women left abusive husbands every day.

What was the point? She'd already made up her mind. This was the punishment for his sins – to love a woman he couldn't have.

He stopped at the door. "If you stay with him, Hope, he's going to kill both of you. Don't wait till it's too late. You know how to find me. When you're ready, I'll be there."

He listened for her voice as he walked down the hallway, but all he heard was the sound of the door swinging closed behind him.

Sam heard Jesse's whining voice out in the parking lot before he even saw the worm. Spike knew he needed to walk on by, but Sam laid Jesse out on the asphalt with one solid right to the temple. Crazy Horse backed away, hands held up, palms out. Sam planted a boot on Jesse's shoulder, none too gently. "You ever lay a hand on Hope again, and I swear I'll kill you," he promised.

Sam had never seen Jesse alive again.

Three months later another dream sent Spike up the mountain to find Hope scared and alone. Jesse had been gone over a month. Hope didn't know where he was or when he was coming back.

If it hadn't been for the dream, Sam might have believed her story.

Spike offered once again to take Hope off the mountain, to let her stay with him, but all he'd seen in Hope's eyes was fear. He couldn't ask Hope if she'd killed Jesse – not after what she'd said in the hospital. But in his heart, Sam knew Jesse couldn't come back. That's what the dream meant.

Without a body or Hope's confession, Spike couldn't prove Jesse was dead, and he wasn't sure he wanted to know what Hope was trying to hide or why. So Sam brought

Hope food and carried water for her. He sat with Hope when she cried, and told her the names of the stars.

If he wanted more, he did his best to hide his thoughts. There was right, and there was wrong, and he wouldn't be caught on the wrong side again. Not this time.

* * * * *

There on the other side of the mountain, in a small clearing back up in the woods, Jesse had found one crop he could actually grow. Now Jesse was gone, and all he'd left Hope was his plants. Sam went to work with a machete, harvesting the six-foot tall marijuana plants and hanging them to dry in the space Jesse had been preparing in the loft when he disappeared. After three years of deep cover, Spike knew how to dry pot.

The next step was harder. Sam had to convince his superiors Hope had never been part of Spike's investigation and the Department ought to come up with enough cash to buy Hope's crop, so that Spike, in turn, could use the pot to infiltrate the biker gang's hierarchy.

Sam pulled it off.

The third dream hit the morning Spike was to take the money to Hope. He squealed the old Harley's tires so loudly that his neighbor hollered at him through the window. Sam saw it again and again. Hope lay there, her belly huge and ungainly, her breathing shallow. When he called to her, she looked up at him and breathed his name. "Sam," she whispered, although she never had never known his true identity. "I love you, Sam," she told him at last, before she slipped away.

Spike nearly put the bike down on the twisting turns that climbed the mountain. The door was barred, just as it had been in his dream. Sam headed for the window instead. On the way he spotted the ax.

He was there every day after the baby was born, afraid to leave for more than a few hours, afraid to sleep for fear the dream was a premonition, afraid he would dream again, and this time he *would* be too late.

Now that he thought about it, he knew he had always been too late.

Three weeks later Spike pulled the old Harley to a stop in front of the cabin to find a limousine parked in the clearing. After the baby was born Hope had given him a letter to mail to an address in Connecticut. The limo bore Connecticut plates.

Hope came out of the house, the baby in her arms, followed by a distinguished looking man in an impeccable three-piece suit. "Spike! This is my father..."

Spike didn't stay for the introduction. It was already too late. Now that he thought about it, he knew he had always been too late. Looking back, it seemed he'd always been one step behind.

Hope needed so much. She just didn't need him.

Chapter Four

Friday, May 5th, 1989

Tina stood in her doorway, watching him over the top of her coffee cup. Sam Callaghan climbed out of his patrol car, his expression flat, detached, his mouth a straight line. He touched the brim of his Campaign Hat. His eyes were hidden behind those mirrored sunglasses again. She needed to see his eyes, damn it.

"Morning."

Even his voice was flat.

She wasn't surprised to see him again. Not really. If he hadn't shown up she'd have gone looking for him. Now she didn't have to. Spike always showed up when she was in trouble. One look at him told her she was damn sure in trouble again. She'd never had any self-control when it came to this man.

Tina stood waiting, just soaking up the sight of him. He was older, of course, but then, so was she. The years had been damn good to him. He was all hard, lean muscle stretched across a broad, solid frame. His hair was short, but she'd wager that underneath that hat it was still wild and unruly. She needed to sink her hands into his hair just to make sure. Everything about him, from the tailored uniform to the brilliantly polished black oxfords, seemed to scream sex.

God. Maybe she'd just been alone too long. Maybe...Maybe nothing. She knew what she wanted. Had always known what she wanted when it came to this man.

Spike had been so good to Hope. She'd never thanked him properly. That debt was long overdue.

Tina set her coffee mug on the ground, making sure the T-shirt slipped enough that he'd get a clear view of what she wasn't wearing underneath. She might be older, but her body wasn't in bad shape. She knew men still looked at her. She might be out of practice, but she still remembered how to catch a man's attention. If he still felt anything for her she'd know soon enough.

If he didn't, maybe she'd have to change his mind. He wouldn't get away this time.

She pushed slowly away from the doorframe, crossing the space of the front porch with a seductive stroll that Hope would never have mustered the courage to attempt. He stood poised on the bottom step, his hand apparently frozen on the railing. She met him half way, pausing on the step just above him, her breasts conveniently at his eye-level. She reached out with both hands to pull him closer, raking her fingers through his hair. She didn't notice where his Campaign Hat landed. He flinched at her touch, though he didn't back away. He just stood there, as if incapable of moving. Tina smiled as she tilted Sam's head back, claiming his mouth with her own.

First Sergeant Sam Callaghan let himself be taken without offering a single sign of resistance.

She hooked one naked leg around his waist, pulling him closer, her hands buried in his thick, sun-streaked hair. His breath came as a ragged gasp against her lips. The electric surge of wild desire that swept through her came as such a shock she could barely stand. His arms tightened around her almost convulsively. He lifted higher, pulling her completely off the ground. She wrapped her other leg around his waist for support—and because she could feel his cock straining to reach her as the tip of her tongue traced over his lips. She teased, seeking entrance, asking first, then demanding, then plundering wantonly.

Fifteen years fell away in the time it took to pull off those dark glasses. Beautiful cobalt blue eyes framed with thick, dark lashes stared at her, their depths an unfathomable pool. But his lips told her what his eyes would not, sharing a need as strong as her own—a hunger that would not be satisfied with just one kiss.

* * * * *

No. He'd been a rookie that first time, damn it. He would *not* lose himself in her this time.

She wasn't wearing anything under that T-shirt.

He would not forget who he was, what he stood for.

Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou amongst women...

He was a cop. He was here because...

She hadn't even touched him yet and his rebellious cock was ready to burst.

He had principles. He had to do something. Tell her to stop. Back away from her. He could not lose sight of...

Her hands swept up, sinking into his hair. She raked her nails gently across his scalp. A long, slow shudder mocked his efforts at self-control. He was...He would...

Her tongue traced over his mouth. Almost against his will, his lips opened to her.

The years fell away. He was twenty-four again, sneaking off to meet her in the woods while Jesse drank whiskey and rolled joints the size of a Cuban cigar.

Bless me father, for I have sinned...

Sam closed his eyes, trying to find his equilibrium. She pulled at him, dragging him back down to her hungry mouth. His traitorous hands worshipped her skin, sliding up under the old T-shirt she wore like a nightgown. Warm cotton over soft, yielding woman, built just to complement his own overwhelming desires. He curled a hand around behind her back, cupping that gorgeous ass, lifting her off her feet. Her other leg slid around his waist until she molded against his aching cock. He could feel the heat of her through his uniform, molten fire where she rubbed back against him.

This was wrong. So wrong. He was in uniform, damn it. He was on his way to work. He'd just stopped by here to...

His cock was already so painfully swollen the friction of her body arched against the heavy twill was rubbing him raw. If she was just teasing him, if she changed her mind...

He remembered now. He'd stopped here because if she didn't fuck him right now his fragile hold on sanity would snap. Yeah. That must be it.

No. That wouldn't work. Damn it to hell, why hadn't he thought to pick up a package of condoms?

Because he'd never really expected to find her here, that was why. Because he'd given up hope.

His hands were rougher than he intended them to be, increasing the pressure on her hips, though the pain that cost him was nearly unbearable. Supporting her with the porch railing's help he pushed her shoulders back from his chest and stripped off the T-shirt that was in his way. He kissed his way down her throat, then licked his way down to her breastbone. He felt her breath catch as he swept his fingers along the curve of her breast, lifting the coral blush of her nipple towards his lips. Yes. That was what he needed. Yes. His universe focused down to the taste of her skin under his tongue, the feel of her body responding to his, the sound of her sharply indrawn breath as she rocked against him.

Not here. Not out here in the open like this. Inside. In the cabin. It wasn't Jesse's cabin any more.

He reached blindly for the door. Now. Now, before it was too late. Before he blinked and she was gone again, shattering his universe one more time.

But first there was something he needed to know. He made himself stop long enough to ask. "You're here alone?"

"What?"

"What?" Tina pulled herself back together enough to try to make sense out of whatever Spike was saying. Sam. Not Spike. Sam.

"This is not the way I want to introduce myself to my daughter."

Kara. He was asking about Kara. "She's at home, with Doris, my friend from work. I couldn't take her out of school this time of year. She's fine. She's a great kid. I brought you pictures."

She felt him swallow hard as his arms closed tightly around her again. He cared. All these years and he still cared. About both of them.

Tina hid her tears against his chest. She fumbled with the buttons of his uniform shirt as Sam carried her into the cabin. He paused to drop the bar on the door in place. She almost laughed. Did he think she would try to get away? He backed her up against the old trestle table. His hands demanded now, taking, long past asking permission.

She unwound herself from his waist long enough to help him out of his clothes. The leather gunbelt was tricky, but once Tina managed it, Sam focused long enough to put

his service revolver aside carefully, well out of the way of an accidental blow. The uniform pants were next, tossed over the bench beside the carefully pressed shirt. The light that filtered through the cracks between the logs showed hard, angular plains of muscle twisting across a frame that would have done a runner proud.

His hands skimmed over her, as if he were trying to touch her everywhere at once. She wrapped her legs back around him, needing to feel that hot, delicious cock pushing inside her, stretching her, easing this tension that was about to break her.

He pulled back, laying her down on the table. What was he...Oh, God. She bit back a cry, almost ready to beg, as his exploring fingers parted the soft fur of her mons. She thrust against his fingers as they slid between the folds of her labia, exploring, testing. She heard a low, moaning keen that must have been her as his touch traced her opening, then one thick finger slid inside. She cried out in a voice she'd thought long forgotten.

Then there was nothing. She jerked her head up in wild desperation, looking down the length of her body, spread on the table like a feast. He was laughing at her as he sank slowly to his knees, nudging her thighs apart with his shoulders. No. No. Too much. She couldn't—

He sat back, watching her for a moment, as he spread her open, leaning in just close enough that his breath blew over her in a hard, hot waves. Her senses were spinning out of control. She moaned as his tongue made the first teasing pass over her clit, arching hard against him. Then his fingers slid into her while he busied himself with sucking her clit, running his tongue over her like he was eating an ice-cream cone. She moaned again as she broke.

Too much. Too fast. She called his name as she writhed against him, trying to push him away. She wanted *him*, damn it. Wanted to feel the silk-covered steel of his cock moving inside her. Wanted...the room went black as she broke under his touch, her cry as much anguish as pleasure. But he wasn't through. Before she could catch her breath, his tongue was back, stroking, teasing, pushing her farther, demanding more.

Tina pulled herself up, tangled her fingers in his hair as she pulled him back to his feet. She reached for his swollen cock, wanting, needing, demanding. His balls were so hard they felt as if they might burst at her touch. She squeezed, biting his earlobe as he moaned in protest. "Fuck me, damn it! Now."

"Can't," he managed. "Didn't exactly come prepared."

What? What did he—oh, shit. Well, they'd been *there* before. Tina fished over her head in the box of canned goods, crying out in triumph as she found what she was looking for. She brandished the package of condoms victoriously.

That was too much, even for Sam's carefully maintained control. Laughing, he untangled their bodies enough to lay her back on the table, tearing open the package with his teeth as she wrapped her legs back around his waist. Tina cried out in pleasure that was nearly pain as he slid his thick, swollen cock deep into her. Heat like an iron from the fire seared her as his cock slid home. It had been so long, so long...

Sam stood at the end of the table, the only movement the ragged gasps of his breathing, his fingertips digging into her hips. Tina focused enough to open her eyes, staring up at him.

Long curling black lashes pressed tightly together. His head arched back, his muscles bulging with the strain as fought to hold himself perfectly still. His rigid body gleamed with sweat, a thing of beauty in the soft morning light that filtered through the open window.

She tightened around him, wanting to hold him there, within her, forever.

His eyes opened and he smiled again as he looked down at her. That smile was so predatory, so possessive, she was almost frightened. Then he started to move.

Each long, slow, lazy thrust brought her inextricably closer to something she wanted, needed, had to have. She fought him, fighting to pull him closer with her heels, trying to speed up his infuriatingly slow pace. She clenched around him, hard, harder, trying to break his composure.

She couldn't reach anything. Couldn't—

Her hands moved to cup her breasts, lifting, teasing, drawing the nipples into sharp, stabbing points as he looked down at her. He slammed into her, hard, harder, his control exhausted. His grip shifted until he could slide one hand up to join hers. She pressed her nipples against his fingers. Her hand over his, kneading, squeezing in rhythm to his thrusts.

Yes. This was what she wanted. Wild and reckless and desperate, they drove together. Yes! Now!

She cried out as she came, jerking hard against his frenzied thrusts, her waves of pleasure clamping down on his cock like a vise. When she remembered to breathe at last, when she could move again, Sam eased her farther up the table, looking down at her with a self-satisfied grin as he lifted her hips, raising her heels over his shoulders, burying himself deeper within her. No. Oh no. He'd break her. She couldn't—

Tina screamed as the next orgasm ripped her apart. She flung her arms back over her head, looking for something to hold on to. Anything to steady her as wave after wave of pleasure ripped through her. Cans of ravioli went everywhere. They laughed as the cans went crashing, rolling across the uneven dirt floor.

Their fingers intertwined, her need adding to his as he pushed into her again, slower at first, then building once more, his strength anchoring her, her grip tightening now as she urged him on. He tried to hold back, but she felt the tide turning, and she pushed him harder, demanding, desperately needing to see him lose that control.

When he let go, it was hard and fast and everything she wanted. He exploded within her in a wild frenzy, hot seed searing her as she tightened around him yet again, her heels straining against his shoulders to take even more of him, as if she could capture him there within her forever, never having to face the world outside again.

When it was over, she lay spent and exhausted, her legs dangling off the table at awkward angles. He collapsed over her, his head resting against her shoulder, his cock

still buried within her, her fingers tangled once again in his hair, their breathing like the panting of a steam engine.

"Good morning," Tina finally responded, her voice a contented purr.

* * * * *

When he could move again he curled against her on the wide oak tabletop. "Jesus Christ, woman, are you trying to kill me? Where the hell did *that* come from?"

Tina laughed a low, seductive laugh. "I've been saving up for this morning for fifteen years. I think I deserved *that*, and a whole lot more."

Sam took a full minute to digest that little piece of information. Was she trying to tell him that there'd been no one else in all these years?

Did it really matter?

Sam brushed gently at her hair where it lay across her face. "I didn't think you even recognized me."

Tina's arms locked around him possessively. "I recognized your voice, or at least I thought I did, but you looked so different." She lifted one hand to trace the outline of his clean-shaven jaw with her fingertips, smiling when he kissed her fingers. "The hair. The beard. The uniform—especially the uniform. I just wasn't sure at first. When you didn't say anything, I was afraid it was too late."

Sam nuzzled her ear, promising without words that it would never be too late. "I thought you'd remarried. I figured there was no point in complicating your life again. You've always deserved more than anything I ever had to offer you."

"You're all I ever wanted," Tina assured him. "You and Kara. There's never been anyone else. How could there be, after you?"

Sam propped himself up on one elbow to look down at her face. Her skin shone pale against the dark tan of his hand, but there was a healthy glow to it that had been missing before. Her dark hair fanned out over the tabletop, shoulder length now, with an occasional streak of silver highlighting. "I was never sure about anything with you back then. I wasn't sure you'd even want to remember me."

Tina opened her eyes wider at that, beautiful coffee-colored eyes that stared up at him from beneath long, curling black lashes. "Remember you? You saved my life. You saved my sanity. You brought our daughter into this world."

As if he could forget that morning. "It was never easy for you, before or after Jesse disappeared. Then just like that, you were gone, and I didn't know how to find you. I didn't think you wanted me to find you." Some of the hurt leaked out in his voice, though he tried to swallow it. He thought he'd buried it deep, all those years ago, but the pain felt dangerously close to the surface now.

"I didn't want to go. You let him take me."

Sam frowned heavily, his eyes betraying his confusion. "You had me mail that letter to Connecticut—I checked the address. It was a law firm. The limo had Connecticut plates."

"I notified my father's lawyers that I had a daughter. I wanted access to the trust funds my mother set up for my children. Not all of the money. I just needed an allowance out of the interest, so we'd have something to live on until I could find a job. I never expected my father to show up down here. Daddy hated Jesse. Hated that I turned away from his politics and his religion and his idea of right and wrong. I knew he was going to try to force me to go back there with him. I was so relieved when I heard the sound of your old Harley coming up the mountain that morning. But then you just drove off. I didn't care after that. I knew I couldn't make it here alone."

The accusation hit hard. "That was what the dream meant," Sam whispered.

"What dream? What are you talking about?"

Sam took a deep breath. He hadn't meant to talk about the dreams, but perhaps it was best she knew. "I had a dream the morning your father showed up. I thought you were in danger. I came out here..."

"It was that stupid car, wasn't it?" Bitterness tinted her voice. She turned her head, staring at the back wall. "You thought I was just some spoiled little rich girl who'd run away from Daddy and his big shiny car and his money and now I was going back. I knew that's what you'd think once you saw that car. That's what he wanted you to think."

"I thought I was too late," Sam corrected, his voice soft against her hair. "I thought you didn't need me any more. Your father was there to rescue you."

"Rescue me?" she repeated bitterly. "God, it took me two years to get away again. He knew I'd leave as soon as I got my hands on enough money to survive, so he locked Kara's trust funds until her 18th birthday. When Kara was old enough to stay with a babysitter a few hours a day I went back to school at night. Later I waitressed in a little Irish pub a few miles from home. Anything to make money. I kept looking for you every time the door opened. I always thought you'd come for me. Just a silly daydream, I guess."

The dream...he'd been so certain. But he'd been wrong. He'd done this to himself. Sam closed his eyes and rested his forehead against hers. "It's not enough, but I'm sorry, Hope. I should have been there for you."

At that she pulled away and swung her legs over the edge of the table. She shook back her hair with an impatient gesture. "Tina. I'm Kristina Donovan, and you're Sam Callaghan. Hope and Spike don't exist any more. Spike didn't owe Hope anything back then and you don't owe me anything now. We've made something better of ourselves. There's nothing for either of us to be sorry about after all these years."

The distance was creeping back in between them. Sam reached out to caress her face, half afraid she'd pull away. His heart nearly exploded as she nuzzled against his

hand momentarily. "I'm sorry anyway. For all the lost years. For all the mornings like this we missed."

Tina sighed as she moved away, apparently completely at ease with her nakedness. She picked up the scattered pieces of Sam's clothing, shaking each one out and folding it neatly into a stack on the bench beside the table. She didn't touch his gunbelt. Her jeans were still across the room, folded neatly beside her bed, where she must have laid them last night. Her T-shirt draped across one of the porch posts outside. She left the door open as she went to get it, letting the sunlight stream in. Sam watched her stop suddenly, the T-shirt forgotten, as her gaze swept over his patrol car. "Are you on duty?" she called back over her shoulder.

Sam pulled on his boxers and buttoned his uniform shirt as he moved to stand in the doorway, eyeing her warily. He'd never been any good at reading her moods. "Now? No. I'm officially on at 4:00 PM. I was going to go in early, pull a double shift, try to get some of the paperwork caught up." *Anything but sitting at home staring at my empty bed.*

A devious smile pulled at the corners of her lips. "I distracted you."

Well, at least she wasn't pissed off at him. At the moment anyway. "I've been distracted for two days. I couldn't stop thinking about you after I saw you Wednesday. Sometimes I come up here when I need to feel close to you." He didn't tell her that for quite a while, now, she'd been slipping away. That he'd been almost ready to give up.

Tina turned to face him from across the porch. "I couldn't stop thinking about you, either. Not any time in the last fifteen years. I missed you, Sam."

Sam crossed the porch to take her in his arms. He closed his eyes, soaking up the feel of her, the taste of her still lingering on his tongue. So many lies. So many years. She would hate him for it, but he had to tell her everything. There was too much at stake.

He tried, but when he opened his mouth, no words came out. "I thought you'd remarried. You changed your name."

"Hope was just a name Jesse picked for me. I was always Tina. That's what it says on my birth certificate. Kristina J. Donovan. I took my maiden name back when I divorced Jesse."

Sam nearly choked on that. "You *divorced* him?"

She shrugged. "Daddy's lawyers handled everything. They called it desertion."

"But Jesse was dead!"

Tina stared at him, her eyes half wild. "What made you think Jesse was dead?"

"He had to be dead," Sam insisted. "In the dream—I mean, I always knew Jesse was dead. He would never have walked off and left all that pot behind."

He didn't say *Jesse would never have left you behind*. They both knew that would've been a lie. Tina shrugged as she turned away again, looking out over the mountainside. "I couldn't prove that, and it would've taken seven years to have Jesse legally declared

dead. Daddy insisted I file for divorce. The courts gave me everything. This mountain. Sole custody of Kara. Child support if they ever found Jesse."

"Child support. That should have come from me."

Tina's eyes stayed focused on the tree line. "You weren't my husband."

"I would have been, if it had been up to me."

She offered no response to that.

"I asked you to stay," Sam reminded her, his throat feeling tight. "I practically begged you to stay with me. I would have begged, if I'd thought it would do any good. I knew you were going to rip my heart out. I should never have touched you in the first place, but you were like an addiction to me. I just couldn't seem to make myself stay away from you."

Her voice trembled, thick with denial. "I was just a marker you won in a poker game. You—you didn't even want me. You tried to lose."

"If I hadn't have wanted to win, I'd have folded." He needed to make her understand, or he'd lose her again. He couldn't let her go. Not this time. "I didn't have to take Jesse's marker, Tina. I had a choice. I wanted to win that hand." He brushed his lips over her shoulder. "I didn't care that it was wrong. I wanted to win you."

Tina flinched as if he'd struck her. She spun around to face Sam, shock bringing her soft features into sharp relief. "No. No, Sam. You—"

"God forgive me, but I wanted you from the first moment I saw you, Tina," he confessed, his voice barely above a whisper. "Then I found out you were married. After that I tried to stay away, but I couldn't. I told myself I had to get over you. It went against everything I was raised to believe in. But the longer I knew you, the worse it got. Jesse knew I couldn't turn down his marker. He knew you wouldn't leave him. Maybe he even knew you'd get pregnant."

Tina's gaze drifted away, her eyes troubled. "I thought Jesse was just trying to humiliate me, to prove he could make me do anything, even whore for him. I suppose I should have hated him for it, but by that point, my body was a small price to pay for a weekend of freedom. Or so I thought—until you touched me. Then I knew I'd paid with my soul."

"I'm sorry," Sam repeated. It was all he could think to say.

"Don't be," Tina assured him, turning to stare out across the trees again. "I wasn't sorry then and I'm certainly not now. You showed me there was something left to live for. That I could still feel. That I could still love."

Sam's heart stopped. It seemed to take forever to start again. He took three deep breaths, trying to force his emotions back under control. He went to her then, slipping his arms around her from behind, holding her tightly.

"There's never been another woman for me, Tina," he whispered, his face buried in her hair. "There are so many things I could have done better. I should have taken you home with me when I was sure Jesse wasn't coming back. I should have gone to that

law firm in Connecticut and made them tell me where you were. I can't undo any of that. But nothing's changed for me. I'll always love you."

Chapter Five

She was free falling, tumbling from a towering cliff without a parachute. He couldn't mean it that way. Not the "Till death do us part" kind of love. She couldn't have gone through this, all these years of alone, for no better reason than an address on an envelope and a black limousine.

But she knew Spike. Sam. He wouldn't have said *I love you* if he hadn't meant it.

All those years. All those wasted years...

"There's been no one since you," she told him, trusting him with her heart. "Whatever there had been between Jesse and me died long before that poker game. I only stayed because I had no way out. Jesse never even tried to touch me after that. I think I would have killed him if he had." She turned in his arms, looking up into his eyes. "Kara has your smile," she whispered. "Sometimes it almost breaks my heart."

She was pretty sure he'd forgotten to breathe.

"I love you, Sam Callaghan," Tina admitted at last. "I have for years. I guess I always will. I should have tried to find you. I should have at least told you how I felt. I should have let you get to know our daughter. So many should haves."

She loved him. Nothing else mattered. He wouldn't let anything else matter, Sam promised himself. He brushed his lips over hers, kissed the tears from her eyes, kissed the bridge of her nose, kissed the spot behind her ear that made her giggle. When she laughed as he nibbled on her bottom lip, he kissed her again. Her hands tangled in his hair as the kissed deepened, taking on a life of its own. His cock jumped back to attention, already as stiff and painfully swollen as if it had been years since he'd been inside her, not minutes.

"Why don't you just quit putting this shirt back on," Tina teased as she undid his buttons again. "Is there someone you should call on that radio of yours? Let your boss know you've been kidnapped? I don't think you're going anywhere today. I've been alone for far too long."

"I am the boss." He fingered the gold rockers on the collar she was unbuttoning. "I'll call in later just to let dispatch know I'm still alive."

If I am, he thought as her teeth skimmed lightly across the under side of his jaw. If I am...

Her hands slid down to cover his, laughter still glittering in her eyes, as she backed across the porch, leading him back inside. She led him to the bed this time.

He pushed her gently onto the bed, pausing only long enough to toss his pants back towards the table as he ripped open another condom. "You know what this place needs?"

"Electricity? Running water? Indoor plumbing?"

"That too." He winced as he knelt beside her on the wooden platform. "But I was thinking along the lines of a mattress."

"Good idea."

"There's a real bed at my place." Kneeling over her, he dropped his head to lick at her nipples, which was more difficult because she was laughing so hard. "I might even be persuaded to cook you dinner."

"Dinner?"

His cock brushed her soft, springy curls each time he bent his head to lick her. He stopped to rub himself slowly against those curls, soaking up the feel of her, the textures of their lovemaking. "It's going to take us a while to get to my place."

"I like this plan."

She changed her tactics and wrapped her legs around his waist, pinning his cock between them. "Sam?"

"What?" Her hands were in his hair again. He'd have sworn every nerve in his body was somehow attuned to twang in harmony as she raked her fingers through his hair. He wouldn't even think about what it must look like by now. Undoubtedly even more of a chaotic jumble than it had been to begin with.

"Promise me something."

"Right now I'd promise you anything." She wanted to talk? Now? Sam rolled, their bodies intertwined, until his shoulders lay flat on the bed, her knees on either side of his hips now.

"I'm serious."

"So am I." As if he could argue with her while she was sliding her hands up and down his cock.

"We're going to have disagreements, Sam. We'll even fight sometimes."

"Not me." He tried to reach for her hips, but she managed to evade his grasp without letting go of his cock. "I'm the mildest, most even-tempered man you'll ever meet."

"Yeah, right. Well, if we do fight, promise me there'll be a making up part."

"Always." He caught her this time, lifting her up until she hovered over him for a delicious instant, that moment of heightened anticipation before he slid inside her, and all was right with the world. If only he could stay here, inside of her, with her safe and protected in his arms, forever.

* * * * *

Sam limped slowly across the clearing to the cruiser. Dear Lord. He was sore in places he didn't know a man could be sore. He eased himself onto the seat, reaching for the microphone, wondering what the hell he would say to Brenda. He keyed the mike, but nothing came out. Sam cleared his throat and tried again. "Unit One to dispatch."

"First Sergeant? Is that you, sir?" Brenda's voice sounded just short of panicked.

Damn. He should have called in earlier, but Tina had fallen asleep in his arms, and he hadn't wanted to wake her. "10-4 Dispatch. Take me off call, would you please, Brenda? I'm not going to make it in today." At this rate he wouldn't make it in tomorrow either. It was going to take him days to recover.

"Sam? Are you all right, sir?"

"I'm fine, Brenda," Sam assured her. "I—something came up." He jumped as bare toes caressed his calves. Something was about to come up again. Sam pressed his eyes shut tight. He didn't have to look up to know she was standing there, laughing at him. Control. He needed some control here. All she had to do was touch him and he was hard. He'd lived for years without sex in his life. Hell. His celibacy was something of a joke around the Detachment. Though of course he wasn't supposed to know about the bets.

The toes slid up his leg and across his lap, pausing to tickle his cock though the thin fabric of his boxers. Like he wasn't hard enough already from just being within reaching distance of her. The rest of her body followed her toes. Now how the hell did she think *this* was going to work?

The horn beeped as Tina folded herself through the car door and onto his lap. Sam just barely closed the mike in time to keep the noise from going out over the radio. She fit, but just barely. She was going to have an imprint of the steering wheel in her butt. He slid his hands around to her ass, just to make sure she wasn't going to get hurt. Yeah. That was why, of course. To protect her. Not because he could help her slide just a little closer...

She wasn't wearing anything at all, and she was unbuttoning his shirt again. With her teeth this time.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners...

"First Sergeant?"

For a moment he thought Mary just might be answering him. He cleared his voice twice before any suitable response would come out. "I'm fine, Brenda." He'd be even more fine if he could somehow manage to get his cock into Tina at this angle.

"Brenda sounds pretty concerned. Why don't you let me tell Brenda just how fine you really are?" Tina slid the tip of her tongue in a tight circle around his nipple. He jerked convulsively and the horn sounded again.

"Dear Lord, woman, are you trying to kill me?"

"Sir?"

Oh, God. The mike had fallen on the talk button. Sam wondered vaguely just how much Brenda had heard. He held a finger to his lips as he pulled the mike up by the cord. "Brenda, I have—company." His *company* chose that moment to suck his nipple into her mouth. He had to fight to catch his breath. "An—an old friend of mine is in town, Brenda. I'm going to be—tied up for—for a while. Just take me off call, all right?"

"That's wonderful!" Brenda responded with a most unprofessional squeal.

Tina looked up, her eyebrows arched in surprise, as she slid a condom down over him. "Tied up...that's a definite possibility."

She was kidding, wasn't she? Sam started to ask, then decided not to. Let her think what she wanted to about the way his cock jumped against her. His reaction could just have easily have been from the heat of her waiting pussy, only inches away from his cock, scalding him like a blowtorch.

Trying hard to project a calmness he certainly didn't feel, he keyed the mike again. "How much was the pool, Brenda?"

This time Brenda was slow to respond. "The pool, sir?"

Sam shifted his hips, trying desperately to find a position where he could slide into Tina. So close, but so impossible to reach. "They had a betting pool going at work," he managed to explain. "I'm not supposed to know about it, of course. Half the force thinks I'm gay."

Tina burst out laughed and wrestled him for the mike, her breasts brushing over his chest like red-hot streaks of too-long suppressed desire. Sam let Tina win.

"Brenda, I assure you, Sam is most definitely not gay." Tina used that special voice, the one that sounded somewhere between red wine and liquid sex.

Sam took the mike back before Tina could add to her defense of his sexuality. "Cut me in on the pot, Brenda, and I'll bring my lady friend by the station house later."

"Ten percent?"

"How much am I worth?"

There was another long pause. "Fifteen hundred dollars, sir."

"Shit!" Sam nearly dropped the microphone again. He hesitated before he re-keyed the mike. "Isn't that a little high?"

"It's had a long time to accumulate, sir."

Tina straightened one leg out, sliding it between his. Oh, yeah. That helped a lot. "You think you could leave my clothes on me long enough to go out to dinner later?"

"You mean like a *date*?"

"We could try it. Normal people do that sort of thing."

"You going to take me by the station to meet Brenda?"

"That was part of my plan."

Tina treated him to a grin. "I packed a dress. It's red velvet. Laces up the back. You might have to help me with it."

Sam groaned as he searched for the microphone. It had ended up down on the floorboards somehow. "Twenty percent. My share goes to the Children's Christmas fund."

"Yes, sir. When should we expect you?"

"She wants witnesses," Sam deduced.

Tina's eyes glittered with laughter. "Maybe we could go by your place first. I'll need to clean up for this show. I think maybe I need a shower."

"Sir?"

The microphone had disappeared again. Sam reached blindly for the off switch, groping in the radio's general direction until he located something that felt right. The static faded away until there was only the sound of their breathing, already coming in the short, swift pants of need.

He pushed himself a little farther up on the seat, still trying to reach her, sliding his left leg back out the door. Her clever fingers found the front opening in his boxers and freed his cock. With one leg straight she slid down his body, neatly impaling herself on his cock as she went. They couldn't move very far. Each quick, hard thrust came up short as the steering wheel got in the way.

She clenched hard around him, trying to get the most out of each stroke. He caught her breast in his mouth, sucking, licking, teasing as her nipple turned as hard as his cock, stabbing furiously at him as she rode him in short little jerks. Their bodies shook with need, their desperation made more intense by the limitations of space. They ground together like pistons, demanding, punishing, pushing the limits of their physical strength. He could feel the orgasm when it ripped through her, squeezing his cock like an angry fist, riding up her body in a hot flush, the waves wrenching her until she cried out, her hands clawing at him as she fought to steady herself.

Her blistering fever pushed him over as he surrendered to her, giving her all he had, all her body demanded, as she tightened around him, as they blended together until he couldn't remember where one stopped and the other began. They cried out together, primeval lusts joined until they were reborn as one.

Once before he'd lost himself in her. He would have given up everything he was, everything he'd believed in, if she'd been willing to stay with him. She wouldn't stay this time, either, and it would hurt just as badly when she was gone again, but he couldn't push her away, couldn't let her go. Not now. Not this time.

This time would be different. It wouldn't be like last time. They'd make it work. Somehow this time they'd make it work.

He repeated the lie to himself as he reached over and turned the radio off.

* * * * *

Monday, May 8th, 1989

"What the hell are you doing down there? Trying to get yourself killed?"

Tina changed her grip on the rocks long enough to shove the hair out of her eyes. She looked up to find herself staring into those piercing cobalt blue eyes. Waking up in his own bed didn't seem to have improved his mood any. In fact, judging by the tone of his voice, sleeping alone last night had only made his mood worse.

She could have told him that, but there was no point. He was all cop today. "You think you could just help me up the rest of the way, Officer?" She reached out with her free hand.

Sam pulled her up over the edge of the cliff with one swift tug that nearly sent her sprawling in the dirt. She leaned against his cruiser, her hands on her knees, gasping for breath, stalling for time.

It had been his idea to stay at his house, alone, so he could be at work on time this morning. So why the hell wasn't he *at* work? Or was he? Just how the hell was she going to cover her ass with him this time? She couldn't very well tell him she'd just spent the last three hours searching for Jesse's body, now could she?

She couldn't tell him the man she'd seen die, than man whose body she'd disposed of, had come back to life to take away everything she'd worked so hard to build.

Could she?

She really was breathing too heavily to talk, anyway. She stood bent nearly double, trying to catch her breath. Sam didn't try to rush her, but he didn't offer her any support, either, physically or otherwise.

He might be her lover, but he was still a cop.

His cruiser was sitting almost exactly where she'd parked the truck before she rolled it over the edge of the cliff. Why on earth had he driven up here? What had made him think to look for her here?

She bent her head forward to pour water from her canteen over her neck, stalling for time as she tried to work out some sort of plan. "I'm too old for this kind of stuff." Might as well go for the truth. She straightened enough to point toward the cliff. "That's where they want to put it." Or at least some portion of the truth. "The bypass. Right across this side of the mountain. Thinking of asking for a geologist's report. Mountainside's full of limestone caves. The whole cliff face might become unstable if they start blasting."

What was she hiding? How much did she know? Sam backed away, still afraid to ask the questions he wanted answered. "I thought your property ended at the top of the ridge up there. Jesse always said the plants weren't even on his land."

Tina nodded. "They weren't. This wasn't our land back then. I bought the other half of the mountain five years ago."

Why would she buy a piece of land she hadn't even been back to visit in fifteen years? Sam was afraid he knew the answer. If Tina had murdered Jesse, would he be able to arrest her? Could he still do that?

He wasn't sure he wanted that question answered, either. But if Tina *hadn't* killed Jesse, what had she expected to find at the bottom of that cliff?

"Even if the cliff face collapses, it's not going to take the whole mountain with it."

Tina turned to look back over the cliff. "I can't stop them, can I?"

Sam ran a hand through his hair, trying to keep the worry off of his face. "If the State has to take you to court, you'll lose, and you'll have to pay court costs out of the settlement. Why fight them, anyway? Sentimental value?" he commented dryly. "You must have so many fond memories of this place."

Tina's lips curved into a tired mockery of a smile. "My favorite memories are all of hearing that old Harley and looking up to see you coming."

Then let me help you, he wanted to say. "I tried to stay away after that poker game. I was afraid Jesse would use me to hurt you again."

"Jesse would have used whatever was handy to hurt me. It didn't have to be you. You were the one thing that made my life better. I missed you that summer. After that poker game, I thought...I said some things I didn't mean, Sam. I didn't want Jesse to hurt you."

"I know." Sam didn't tell her he'd known she was lying, even then. He pulled her into his arms. Whatever she wasn't telling him, this was where she belonged. She softened against him, her breath coming in a half-restrained sob.

"I have to go home," she said at last. "I don't want to. Not this time. But I have a job, and Kara. I guess I just came up here to say goodbye to it all. I'm afraid, Sam. Afraid everything will go back to the way it was. Afraid it never will. Everything's all coming apart. I've just found you, and I'm going to lose you again. I don't know if I can go through this a second time."

He could feel the dampness of Tina's tears soaking through his shirt. He wanted to tell her everything would be all right, but he couldn't manage another lie. There was too much at stake.

He couldn't let her go again. Not now.

He didn't have to. The lies would tear them apart.

He buried his nose in her hair, breathing in the soft scent of her, wanting her more than he'd ever thought possible. "I've got to ask you something. I hope you trust me enough to tell me the truth." He didn't add *for once*. He didn't have to.

She looked up at him, her eyes wary beneath long, wet lashes. "I'll try," she promised.

It was a start. Sam held her at arms' length, now, watching her face. He took a deep breath, trying to keep his mind focused and objective. *Hail Mary, full of grace, The Lord is with thee...* "What am I going to find if I climb down over this cliff?"

She had that wild, terrified look of a trapped animal. The silence lasted too long. He was still a cop, and this case was still open. He turned toward the cliff.

"Sam! Sam, don't. There's nothing to see down there."

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners... He stopped, still facing the path. *The truth. All I want from you is the truth. Please, Tina.* "What did think you'd find down there, Hope?"

"I'm not Hope! I was never Hope. I'm Kristina Donovan. Hope is dead! The past is dead. Let it be, Sam. Let the past stay buried where it belongs."

He turned slowly back to face her. "That's what this was all about all along, wasn't it? That's why you came here. To bury the past. You've found out what you needed to know. Whatever it was, it's over. You can go home now." She looked for a moment like she thought he would hit her. Instead he struck her with the knife edge of his anger. "Goodbye, Tina. Look me up again in another fifteen years. On second thought, don't bother."

She took a step closer, her hands coming to rest on his upper arms as she searched his face with those sad coffee eyes. "I did not kill Jesse, Sam. That's what you really want to know, isn't it? I swear to you on all I hold sacred, I didn't murder Jesse."

He could feel his pulse pounding under her hands. "Murder's a strong word. Jesse was a violent man, and accidents happen to violent men." Sam looked off over her head, across the valley toward Charleston. "I should have killed him myself. I promised myself if I ever saw him raise a hand to you I'd kill him there on the spot."

"Jesse used me to try to provoke you. He was looking for a reason to kill you," Tina insisted. "Do you think I wanted to stay with him? Every time I tried to run away, Jesse found me before I even got off the mountain. The punishment got worse each time. When he caught me the last time, he swore no matter how far I got, he would hunt me down and bring me back. Jesse promised he would kill anyone who tried to help me."

Sam searched her eyes, trying to understand. "I promised you I would take care of you. Didn't that mean anything?"

"You're a good man, Sam. You fight fair. Jesse wouldn't have. He'd have pulled a gun or a knife when your back was turned, or he'd have run you down in the road with his truck. One way or the other, he would have killed you. All he needed was a reason."

Sam heard the old, remembered fear in her voice. "You lied to me, when I asked you to stay, because you thought Jesse would go after me? You were trying to protect me? I thought you just didn't want to take a chance on me."

"He would have killed you!" Tina insisted again. "Now he's coming between us again. I don't want to lose you, Sam. I can't let Jesse win this time."

The lies fell into place, all making sense now. He was a fool not to have seen what Jesse was doing to her. To both of them. "You're not going to lose me this time," Sam promised. "I don't know how just yet, but we'll make things work between us." He crushed her against his chest.

Yet even as he said it, he knew it was another lie. They could solve the problems of distance somehow, but they couldn't change the past, and Sam knew Jesse was not going to let them be.

"Sam?" Tina's breath blew hot over his chest. "You're right. This place doesn't mean anything to me any more. There's nothing to keep me here now. The State will start construction sometime this month. I won't do anything else to stop them. The memories of you were all I really wanted to hold on to."

He closed his eyes, willing the doubts away. He hadn't come here to try to catch her at something. He just didn't want things left the way they were last night. He'd given her his word. This was supposed to be the making up part. "Do you have to leave today?"

"Do you want me to stay?"

"I've always wanted you to stay."

Her voice changed abruptly, teasing, challenging. "If I'm through answering questions, Officer, I could really use a shower."

His hand skimmed down over her back, cupping her ass to yank her hard against his straining cock. "I don't think this investigation's over just yet."

She growled, as if thinking of trying to fight back against him. "Are you planning to search me, too, Officer?"

He'd never make it back to the cabin. But he'd be damned if he'd try the cruiser again. "I think I need to do a full body search."

"But I haven't done anything," she protested. "I assure you I'm innocent."

Innocent? Sam tried hard not to laugh. Even his imagination couldn't handle that one. He ran his hands over her, carefully searching every inch of her body. He found nipples that stabbed out to meet his touch, and a sweetly curving ass that just begged for his cock. He found the condoms still stuck in the pocket of her jeans. Next his search brought his fingers in contact with the button on the waistband. They slid cooperatively down her legs, revealing shapely thighs and deliciously curving legs. She kicked free of her sneakers and left the jeans in the grass as he prodded her toward his cruiser. "Turn around and put your hands on the car."

She spread her hands wide, leaning far forward across the fender of the cruiser, her bare ass offering him an open invitation. "Are you arresting me, Officer?"

"You have the right to remain silent, but I bet you can't." He thought briefly about his handcuffs, but there was too much he didn't know about her past with Jesse. He didn't need to reopen old wounds. Another time. After they'd talked more.

If there was another time.

She was leaving. Again. Sam wasn't sure of anything any more beyond the need to possess her, to hold her, to mark her, the desperate desire to brand her with his scent, his imprint so strong she wouldn't be able to stay away. He spread her legs farther, slipping his hand between them, his gesture rougher than he'd meant it to be. He

watched her hands fist, then release as he caught her by surprise, his first caress almost throwing her off balance.

He wanted her off balance—as off balance as he was. He kept one hand on her ass as he unzipped his pants, ripping the condom open with his teeth. The pain welled up fresh and hot again as he thrust his cock into her.

She braced herself with her hands as they slammed together. He could tell she wanted to touch, wanted to do something, almost anything, but this time he was completely in control. He reached around her hip to slide his fingers over her clit, changing his pace, pushing into her with slow, measured thrusts designed to drive her completely insane. "I love your pussy," he whispered against her ear. "You're always so wet for me."

She arched against him, her voice an inarticulate cry. He slipped his other hand up under her T-shirt to toy with her nipples, first one, then the other, rolling them between his thumb and forefinger until she shuddered against his hand and clenched around his cock. "You have gorgeous tits, too. But you know what I like best about you?"

"What?" she gasped, her breathing coming now in stolen lungfuls as she lunged against his fingers.

"I like the way you can make me want to fuck you, even when I'm so angry with you I want to arrest you."

"Then fuck me, Sam. Now! I can't—I've got to—now, damn it!"

He did his best to oblige.

He filled her with deep, hard thrusts that buried him within her up to his balls, his own urgency taking over now as she broke, her hot juices washed over his fingers. He lost all control as she screamed her release to the mountain, clenching around him with a strength that nearly brought him to his knees.

There was a bitter desperation to their rhythm, as if even as they came together in frenzied passion they were already being torn apart. Lies and half truths warred with secrets revealed and hopes confessed until all that was certain was the sound of their bodies, wet with desire, slapping together in a rhythm older than time.

When he broke she came with him again, their passions igniting with an electricity that darkened the afternoon sky and set off fireworks so real he could hear their warning scream ringing in his ears.

Still it was not enough. With her it would never be enough. She was right. He had to let go of the past. Until he could do that they would never have a future. Any future without her held out a prospect as bleak as a starless night sky.

Chapter Six

Friday, May 12th, 1989

"We have to talk."

Kara's tone was so serious. "I'm kind of busy right now," Tina pleaded evasively.

"You've been busy ever since you got back from Charleston, Mom."

Tina tucked her hair back behind her ears, letting her finger twirl a wayward strand. She sighed deeply as she dropped onto the couch. "You're right, Honey. I knew you were going to have questions. I'm just not sure how I'm going to answer them."

Kara perched on the edge of the seat cushion, her eyes worried. "Mom, you're forty-four years old."

"What does that..."

"Just let me get this said, all right, Ma? Please." Kara clasped her hands loosely between her knees. "As long as I can remember, there's been just you and me. I don't remember you ever dating. Granddad's pretty strict. I doubt you had very much...experience. With men, I mean. Before you got married."

Oh, God. This was about sex? Tina bit her lip to keep from laughing.

Kara frowned, her Irish temper too near the surface to be ignored. "This is serious, Ma. Things have changed since you were a teenager. Free love went the way of 'Sex, Drugs, and Rock and Roll.' I see things at the hospital. I read the memos that come around. There are diseases out there that didn't even exist back in the '50's and '60's. There are new strains of VD, and Herpes, and AIDS. Things the doctors don't have a clue how to treat. You can't just run off with some guy for a week. That's just not safe any more."

Tina let out her breath with a whoosh. "I love you," she told Kara as she planted a kiss on her forehead. "I love you so much, Darling."

Kara wasn't about to drop it that easily. "I'm serious about this! You can't just be taking off into the mountains with some strange man! You're old enough to know better!"

"I know you're serious, Honey." Tina settled back against the worn couch cushions, Al the cat draped across her knees. "There are so many things I've never told you. I'm not sure just where to begin." Tina sighed again, remembering as if it were another lifetime. "You know I got married while I was in college. There was a war going on. Vietnam. Kids my age were protesting, staging sit-ins and marches all across the country. I didn't understand why people were protesting. We didn't discuss such things in my father's house. So I started to listen, to find out what was happening. Kids my age

were dying over there by the thousands. The more I learned, the more I realized it had to be stopped."

The past came drifting back in as if it were only yesterday. The crowds, the noise, the emotional high of being part of something that was bigger than all of them. The movement had taken on a life of its own. "There was this young man who came to our campus. A sort of a lay preacher. He wasn't a member of any church that he ever talked about, but he always carried a Bible, and he talked about God and peace and love and freedom to anyone who would listen. He had a presence. He seemed vibrant and alive and charged with an energy that made him seem so powerful, because he believed."

Hearing the emotion in her voice, Al stirred himself sufficiently to knead his claws into her jeans. "I fell in love with Jesse Chapman the first time I saw him, standing behind a podium shouting out over the crowd because the campus administration had cut the power to the sound system. I loved his passion, his energy, his commitment. He was everything that my father wasn't, and he hated everything that my father stood for. Jesse came back to our campus three times before the end of the school year. When the spring semester was over, I couldn't stand the thought of going home to my father's for the summer. I called it the Donovan Prison Camp. I ran away with Jesse Chapman. We were married by a Justice of the Peace down in Virginia."

Tina hugged the cat fiercely. "Jesse had two friends, a couple named Steve and Lettie. Letticia."

"And you all moved to Southern West Virginia and started a commune. I know, Mom. I've heard this story before." Kara rolled her eyes impatiently.

Tina spoke with an unaccustomed sternness. "No, no, you haven't, Kara. Not all of it. Not the way I'm going to tell it this time."

Kara frowned skeptically but settled in for the long haul. Al offered a deep, hypnotic rumble of a purr, punctuating the occasional silences in Tina's narrative. Tina held him as if he could provide her with a lifeline to safety. "We changed our names, Lettie and I did, because Jesse said that was the way God wanted it. Lettie was Faith. I was Hope. Jesse said when we had a daughter, she would be Charity. Faith, Hope, and Charity. The three most important things in the Bible. He said Charity meant 'The love of God in manifestation.' Our daughter would be the physical representation of God's love."

"I was supposed to be named Charity? Ugh!"

"My father ran our household like a military camp. His word was law. I'd never questioned anything my father said, at least not out loud. At first, I thought Jesse was so different, but in many ways he was very much like my father. The Bible says that if a man wants to be a leader, he must first rule his own house. Jesse took that pretty literally. He was the head of the household, and everything in the house was his. Including me and Faith. One morning we woke up and Steve and Faith were gone. They just walked away with nothing but the clothes on their backs. They never even said good-bye. I guess I didn't really want to know why, because I never asked. Even if I

had, Jesse wouldn't really have answered me, except maybe to knock me across the room and tell me never to question God's plan for us."

"He hit you? Jesse hit you?"

Al finally twisted in her arms until he was right side up again. Tina turned her head far enough to meet Kara's distressed eyes. "Jesse wasn't who I thought he was, Kara. He wasn't a man of vision. He wasn't a man of God. He was a man who used and twisted religion to make it mean whatever he wanted it to mean. He used the Bible to make us believe we should do whatever he said we should do. People have been doing that for almost two thousand years. When they do that, it isn't love. It isn't God. It isn't religion. It's small, petty men searching for power over people's minds." She leaned forward, anxious to make Kara understand her. "Jesse was an evil man, Kara. I lived with him for six years. In the beginning, I thought I loved him. At the end, I thought I would have to kill myself to get away from him. I was raised Catholic, and I knew suicide was wrong, but I didn't care any more. Then I got pregnant. You gave me a reason to live."

Kara's face pruned up like she'd just tasted sour milk. "That's why you never talk about my father? He was a frickin' terrorist with a Bible?"

"No," Tina answered softly. "No, Honey. Jesse Chapman was many things in my life, but he was not your father."

"You mean you cheated on him? You actually did it with some other guy while you were still married to Jesse?" Kara looked like she was about to be sick.

"Yes. No. Not like that. Jesse...Jesse liked drugs. He liked to drink and get high on whatever was handy. He'd get drunk, then get angry at the world, and he'd usually take it out on me. One Thursday night towards the end of January in 1974 Jesse was playing cards with some bikers who bought marijuana from him. None of them really liked Jesse, but he wouldn't sell to them unless they did what he wanted, and that night he wanted to play poker."

Tina twisted the wedding ring she still wore. "Jesse lost all our money that night, even the grocery money. After a while there were only two men left playing—Jesse and a biker they called Spike. Spike raised the bet by more money than Jesse had left, so Jesse had to put in a marker. That's like an IOU. You had to name something on the marker, like a bag of marijuana or something. If you win, you get your marker back. If you lose, the winner gets whatever was on the marker. Jesse wrote my name on the marker. He lost."

Disgust tinted Kara's face. "You mean Jesse bet *you* in a poker game? This man Spike won you in a poker game? You had sex with some greasy biker dude just because Jesse wrote your name on a piece of paper? That's—that's prostitution!"

Tina met her daughter's eyes, willing her to understand. "Jesse would have killed me if I'd argued with him. If Spike had refused Jesse's marker Jesse would have killed Spike. Spike tried to give me a chance to get away from Jesse, Kara. Spike begged me to leave Jesse. I would have, but you see, I'd fallen in love with Spike, and I knew that if I

left, Jesse would kill him. So I spent the weekend with Spike, and I never told Spike that I loved him. I had that one wonderful, perfect weekend, and then I went back to hell."

Kara just stared at Tina as if she'd never seen her before. "My father was a biker named Spike. You actually fell in love with some greasy low-life biker and had his kid while you were married to some other asshole who beat you up and traded you away in a poker game?"

Tina wished fervently that she had some of Jesse's whiskey. "Your father," she managed, then had to stop and try again. "Your father was the man who wrapped my arm up with Duct Tape and took me to the hospital on his motorcycle. Your father was the man who saved both of our lives the night you were born. I'll admit, none of us were too clean back then. Bathing's a luxury when you don't have running water. Spike looked the part, but he kept pretty clean even then. He was never greasy and he wasn't a low life. Now he's a State Trooper. Your father is First Sergeant Sam Callaghan."

Kara stared blankly at her mother, as if unable to comprehend what she was hearing. "The cop from West Virginia? You went off to spend a week with my father and you didn't even tell me?"

"I didn't recognize him, Honey. He looked so different! Spike was a biker on a Harley with a big, full, red beard, and a ponytail half way down his back. I never knew his real name. Sam Callaghan is a First Sergeant with the West Virginia State Police. I had a hard time convincing myself they could possibly be same person. I went back to West Virginia because I had to find out. I didn't want to tell you anything until I was sure."

"Why didn't you just ask him when he was here?" Kara demanded.

"I—I wasn't sure he recognized me, either, or that he'd want to see me again. I hurt him, Kara. Sam thought I'd just walked off and left him, taken you and disappeared. He's been looking for me—for us—for years. He didn't know my real name, either. It was only by accident that he found us. Sam took every out of town assignment that came along, in the hopes that someday he might find us. Then when he did find me, I had a different name. He thought I was married again, so he just walked away."

Kara blinked twice, her tone still resentful. "He walked away from me, too, you know."

"Sam knew he'd told me enough that I could find him if I wanted too."

Kara stared out the window, watching the night sky lighten as the moon moved from behind a veil of clouds. She was as pale as the shimmering silver sphere that hovered beside them. Her voice shook when she spoke again. "Are you still in love with Spike?"

"I love your father very much, Kara."

Distressed eyes turned at last to meet Tina's. "I'm sorry I said it was prostitution. I—I wasn't there, you know?"

"I know, Baby. It's all right."

"Those stories you used to tell never seemed real before. Like the chainsaw and the Duct Tape. They were just funny stories, you know?" Kara looked like she wished she could go back to being a kid again. "It really happened, didn't it? I mean, you would have died if Spike hadn't driven you to the hospital on that Harley."

"All the stories I told you are true. All of it really happened."

"So, now what? Do we just pretend nothing's changed and everything goes back the way it was? Or are you gonna take off again?"

"I don't know how Sam and I are going to deal with things. But I'm not going to run off again without telling you what's going on. Whatever happens, whatever decisions we make, you'll be a part of it, all right?"

Kara frowned skeptically. "Tell me he doesn't still have that Harley."

Tina laughed. "Sorry, kid. He's still got the Harley."

"Did you ride on it last week?" Kara shrieked.

"Oh, yeah."

"Mom! Motorcycles are dangerous!"

Tina gathered Kara into her arms. "I love you so much, Baby," she told her daughter, tears leaking out from the corners of her eyes. "I love you so much."

"Great! Then use some common sense and stay off the damn motorcycle! It's practically the '90's, and my mother has reverted to her Hippie past. Free love and motorcycles. Next thing you know, bell-bottoms will be making a comeback. I warn you, Mom, if you start smoking pot again, you're out a here."

Tina laughed as she sagged back against the worn couch cushions, holding up the first two fingers on her right hand in the shape of the letter V. "Peace, man," she managed. "Peace and love."

Kara shook her head in exasperated resignation. "Yeah. Well, at least wear a helmet."

* * * * *

Wednesday, May 16th, 1989

First Sergeant Sam Callaghan stood staring out his office window, his back to everything he'd worked to achieve over the last fifteen years. With that first kiss, Tina stripped it all away. The order. The purpose. The distance he'd put between himself and his past.

He'd told himself for years that Hope was nothing more than a youthful infatuation. That, no matter how much her leaving had hurt, what he felt for her couldn't really have been love. That he wasn't really looking for her every time he walked into a strange office, or sat down at a table in a restaurant he'd never been to before.

He was a liar, and a fool.

Sam Callaghan walked into the Administration Building at the Maryland Correctional Institution-Hagerstown, saw her picture on the wall, and knew his own lies for what they were. Nothing had changed. Not inside him. Not where it counted. She was still the dark, empty hole where his heart should have been.

Then he'd looked into Tina's eyes, held her in his arms, and seen nothing but fear.

If she really hadn't recognized him, why had she been afraid of him? If she had recognized him, would he have seen anything different?

What had she been afraid the construction crews would find at the bottom of that cliff?

He wasn't sure any more what was real and what was the illusion she'd always wanted him to see. He wanted to trust her, but she just wouldn't let him. She told him stories within stories and never quite got to the truth.

He hadn't wanted to tell her that he drove by her place at least once a week, just to see if she'd decided to wander back to his world. Hadn't told her he'd tried to trace her through the land office, only to be told the tax bills were still sent to Hope Chapman at the rural route box out at the farm. The post office told him there was an active forward on that address, even after all these years, but they wouldn't release it without a federal court order.

Sam supposed he could reach Tina at the prison any time, now that he knew where she worked, but it nagged at him that he still didn't know her home address. She hadn't given him her phone number, either. She hadn't asked for his.

If she really hadn't killed Jesse, what was she hiding this time? He'd spent a week searching databases all over the world for any sign that Jesse Chapman was still alive. Nothing. Still, he had no proof Jesse was dead.

Proof meant a body. An autopsy. A probable cause of death. Proof meant something you could take before a judge.

Sam had a bad feeling about Jesse. That man wasn't done with him yet. Sam had come way too close to jeopardizing his career years ago because of Jesse. Having sex with a suspect was definitely not part of his job description. If Tina had put the pieces together she could have blown his cover. He could have gotten himself killed, as well as fired.

Sam had set out to take Hope away for the weekend, remind her there was a world beyond Jesse. He promised himself it would end there. Then Hope walked through his house, naked, on her way to the shower. She was too thin, and her eyes still had that lost, wounded look, but she was the most beautiful woman Sam ever expected to lay eyes on. He followed her like a puppy trailing after a child with an ice-cream cone.

Fifteen years later, Tina was still a drug Sam couldn't seem to get out of his system. He'd driven by her cabin again last weekend because of the dream, and because, after seeing Tina two days earlier in Maryland, he felt so shaken, he couldn't get anything done at work. He always went to the cabin when he was troubled. Not that he really expected to find Hope there any more. Seeing that old Eagle in the cabin's front yard

had nearly stopped his heart. Had there been a burglary in progress, he would probably be dead now.

But it hadn't been a burglar, or a vandal, or even a homeless person, looking for a place to spend the night. It had been Hope. Tina. There was no doubt, this time, that she knew who he was. When their lips met, the years had flown away, and he was right back where he'd always been. Trapped, like the worm in the bottom of a bottle of Tequila. Worse yet, he didn't want to find a way out. Standing here now, staring out that window, he could still feel her, could still catch the scent of her lingering in the air, could still taste her.

On Sam's desk was a stack of paperwork Brenda had gathered for him. Vacation forms. Administrative leave requests. Tacit hints that Sam was no good to himself or anyone else the way he was going.

Those things would help, at least temporarily, but there was only one permanent solution. In Sam's pocket was the ring he'd bought after his daughter was born. He fingered it thoughtfully. She'd lied to him, true enough, but she'd done it to save his life. Because she loved him.

She was lying to him still.

Why? What was she trying to protect him from now?

Before he could ask Tina to be his wife, he had to dispose of one little problem.

What had happened to Jesse?

Chapter Seven

Friday, May 19th, 1989

"There's just something about a man in a uniform."

Doris's voice from the doorway yanked Tina back to the present. She looked up with a puzzled frown. "You see men in uniforms every day, Doris."

Doris sighed wistfully as she fingered the pendant on her chain unconsciously. It was a small St. Jude's medal, worn nearly smooth. The patron Saint of Lost Causes. "I know. But that don't stop me from looking. Especially when they look like Sam Callaghan." She turned to face Tina directly. "You got company, girl. He's just standing outside the front gates, looking like he's trying to get up the nerve to come sign himself in."

Tina ran down the hallway toward the Administration Building, ignoring Doris's mock protest about security. Sure enough, Sam Callaghan was standing in the parking lot in front of his cruiser, his feet spread slightly, his hat in his hands, staring at the front gate.

Sam either couldn't see Tina's co-workers watching him or he just didn't care. His hat revolved over his fingertips, as if he were so lost in thought he didn't even know what they were doing. Tina turned around to find Doris had followed her across the compound. "Doris, I..."

"Just go. I'll see you Monday. Do you want me to keep Kara for the weekend?"

That brought Tina up short. "I...No. I've got to—it's time they met. But could you pick her up from work for me?"

"Sure, Honey. We might even stop for an ice-cream on the way home."

"Thank you so much, Doris. I don't know what I'd do without you!" Tina gave Doris an impulsive hug before she turned toward the security gates.

Sam looked up at the sound of the big chain link gate rolling back. His face transformed. The effect was like the clouds opening to make way for a mountain sunrise. If Tina ever needed confirmation of Sam's feelings for her, that smile would have done it.

Tina slowed her stride, trying to recapture some of her missing dignity. "Hi!" she managed, amazed she'd gotten even that out. What was it about this man that left her so speechless?

A smile crinkled the weathered corners of Sam's eyes. His hat sailed across the hood of his patrol car as he pulled Tina against his chest for a kiss that did nothing to help her composure. One large, strong hand rested in the small of her back. The other buried

itself in her hair. Behind her, Tina could swear she heard a cheer, though the thick plate glass windows at the front of the Administration Building were supposed to be soundproof.

Sam must have heard it too, for he looked up without taking his lips off hers, laughter crinkling his eyes again. He dipped her backwards like a dancer, and Tina obligingly pointed one black leather pump toward the sky in her best Ginger Rogers imitation.

Their lips parted as he pulled her back up, mostly for breathing's sake, but Sam didn't loosen his hold on Tina. "We need to talk."

The words sounded surprisingly like Kara's announcement from a week ago. "I know," Tina agreed. "We've never really done that."

"Is there somewhere a little more private we could go?"

"We could—" No. If Jesse was watching he already knew Sam was here. With any luck, he didn't know Sam was Spike, though. Tina willed the fear away. They'd deal with that later. She just couldn't see herself dashing off to some cheap motel for a few hours. "How about my place?"

Sam's smile looked a little uncertain, but his hands promised he wanted to do more than talk. "What about Kara?"

"She has an after school job. Well, not exactly a job. She volunteers at the hospital as a candy-striper. They call them Volunteens now. Doris said she'd pick Kara up after work. She'll be home around seven." Tina ran her hands over his arms, feeling the muscles bunch in response to her touch. "She knows, Sam. I had to tell her. Things were just getting too complicated."

"How'd she take it?"

"Better than I expected." This wasn't the time or the place to discuss Kara's advice about safe sex. "Let's get out of here."

Sam's hands lingered, as if reluctant to let her go for even long enough to drive across town. "You want me to follow you?"

Tina glanced at his patrol car. Hardly an inconspicuous item. "No. Let's leave your cruiser here. It'll be safe. You can drive my car, and I'll navigate."

"You drive. I'm really not *too* bad a passenger."

Tina took a deep breath and pulled out her keys. "All right."

He didn't bitch about her driving, not the way Jesse used to, but Sam didn't talk, either. Somehow that was almost worse. Tina was all nerves again by the time she unlocked the door to her apartment. Al launched himself at Sam as soon as they walked in the door. "You have a cat," Sam observed dryly as he peeled the weighty feline off the front of his uniform.

Tina tried not to laugh as she helped brush the cat hair off his spotless uniform. "He's Kara's. His name's Al—short for Alley Cat. He came with our first apartment." Her hands stilled on his chest as she smiled up at him, her tensions melting away as she

felt his heartbeat thudding rhythmically under her fingertips. "He's sort of been our good luck charm."

"Does that mean he likes me?" The cat stretched to put its paws on Sam's thigh.

"Go away, Al," Tina ordered by way of an answer. "Now. Where were we?"

Sam gathered her back into his arms. "We need to talk," he whispered, and then proceeded to kiss her, instead.

"Let's talk about how fast you can get out of that uniform. It'll be at least four hours before Kara gets here."

"I feel like a thief," Sam muttered, still eyeing the cat warily. "What are we, a couple of teenagers?"

"The details need some work, but I've been going crazy without you. Every time a man in a uniform walks by my office, I look to see if it's you. I can't get anything done. You know how many times a day a uniform walks by my door?"

"Good." Sam busied himself with her buttons. "I'd hate to think I'm in this alone. You've turned my whole world upside down." His fingers fumbled with the tiny hooks of her bra. "I'm not very good at this."

"Maybe that's because you've never done it before." Tina turned around so he could see how it worked. "Sam, that weekend, at your place, I had no idea that it was your first time. I'd have tried to make it more—more memorable for you."

Sam pulled her back into his arms. "You weren't supposed to know. If you'd made that weekend any more memorable I believe you'd have killed me." She felt the hesitancy in his voice. "Unless—I mean, I thought you were happy that weekend."

"Sam, you were wonderful. Perfect. I just—I didn't know all that much about sex. There were things I could have done...I've read a lot since then, you know?"

He groaned, hiding his face against her shoulder. She giggled when he nipped at her neck. "What have you been reading? You—ah—you're not really into bondage, are you?"

Tina tried valiantly to swallow her giggles but it just didn't work. "Bondage might be fun, if we both agreed ahead of time, but that's really not what I meant." The giggles died away. "I don't quite know how to say this, Sam. I'm—I'm not a very inventive sexual partner. Maybe if we'd been together all these years I'd have learned more. I just don't want you to get tired of me."

He pulled back, holding her at arms length again. "Christ Jesus, woman, whenever we're together I can't keep my hands off you. When we're not together all I can think about is making love to you. How could you possibly believe I'd get tired of you?"

She felt the blood rush to her face as she stared down at his shirt buttons. "It took Jesse less than a year. It was different with you, Sam. I—you didn't have anything to compare me too. I just want you to know I'm willing to learn."

Jesse again. God damn the man to eternal hell. After all these years Jesse could still get to her. Sam pushed the anger away. It didn't belong here with them. He leaned in to kiss her, letting his eyes close as the need took over. "Jesse was a fool. I don't need to compare you to anyone else to know you're perfect for me, Tina, just the way you are. I don't think I could ever get tired of making love to you, but I'll make a deal with you. Give me fifty years, and ask me again, all right? If I'm bored I'll be sure to let you know."

Tina relaxed against him as his hands moved up her back to tangle in her hair again. "All right. If I remember."

His breathing was already ragged. "Where's your bedroom?"

"Since when do you care about bedrooms?"

"Oh, no you don't. My daughter's not going to catch me with my pants down." My daughter. The words sounded foreign on his tongue. He'd never really allowed himself to think about the baby that way. Now she was nearly grown. My daughter. Sam knew exactly what words would sound right beside those two. My wife. My daughter and my wife. They went together perfectly.

Tina bent over to pick up her shoes, her lovely ass presenting itself as a gift that made his cock nearly burst with hunger. Sam groaned audibly. "I think if you knew any more about sex I might not survive. I actually thought we could talk."

Tina's laugh reminded Sam of the sound of the wind chimes tinkling softly on his back porch. "We can talk," she assured him. "We can talk now, if that's what you want."

Talk was not what he wanted.

Sam followed her down the hallway, helpless as ever to resist. The bedroom was serviceable, nothing more. No knickknacks or souvenirs. Not even a picture of Kara. The room belonged to a woman who moved, and moved often. No clutter to pack. No history that could be left behind. It could have been a motel room, for that matter, except for the cat glaring at him from the foot of the bed. "You just moved in?" he managed at last.

"We just found this place a couple of months ago. It's twice the size of our last apartment. I stayed there too long, but the rent was cheap. I'm glad I had to move, now. I love this place!" Tina assured him with another of those brilliant smiles. "It's got closets all over the place and a full-size kitchen and wait till you see the shower!" She chased off the cat and turned back the bedspread to reveal sheets sprinkled with violets. On the pillowcases the violets formed an elaborate ring, purple and white flowers surrounded by long green leaves. The edges of the pillowcases were trimmed in old-fashioned lace. Here, at least, she'd actually spent a few extra dollars on herself.

Tina rolled across the bed like a child playing some naughty game, laughing as she scrambled to her knees. "I'm glad you came back. Nothing in my life has been right without you." Her smile turned predatory. "You're still dressed, Sam. Take off your uniform for me."

Sam unbuckled his gunbelt and laid it carefully out of reach. "That's why I'm here. Everything's falling apart. I can't eat. I can't sleep. Nobody wants to be around me."

He turned to find her watching him, her lips slightly parted, her smile a little more intense than he remembered it. "I want to be around you, Sam."

She looked like she wanted to devour him. He'd seen that look before, on other women's faces. Usually it made him uncomfortable. He paused with his hands on his waistband, knowing he was blushing. "I turned forty last fall, Tina. I felt like a fool taking off my clothes in front of you. There's a lot better stuff to look at out there than this old man."

"Forty? You're practically a baby. This old woman thinks you're pretty damn hot, in or out of that uniform."

He swallowed hard. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

The way she was watching him, eating him up with her eyes, made him feel incredibly sexy. He turned around, bending over rather deliberately to untie his shoes.

"Umm," she murmured appreciatively. "Have I mentioned lately what a really great ass you have?"

She liked his ass? Women actually paid attention to things like the shape of a man's ass? Well, why not. Hers sure impressed him. He unbuttoned the uniform trousers, letting them slid down over his hips, taking his boxers with them. When they reached the floor, he had to bend over again to pick them up. Feeling like an idiot, he wiggled his butt, peeking between his legs for a moment to watch her trying hard not to laugh. But she looked incredibly happy. That was good enough. He unbuttoned his shirt as he turned back to face her, the tails in the front already tented out over his engorged cock.

His heart almost stopped when he saw her. Her eyes were on him, but her hands were occupied. One held her left breast, lifting the nipple out toward him like an offering while she stroked and pinched her nipple. The other hand spread her pussy wide while a single finger dipped inside.

She got that hot just watching him undress?

His cock throbbed like a raw, open wound just watching her watch him. He undid the shirt buttons one by one, suddenly a lot more serious, letting the shirt slide back off his shoulders a little at a time. As the shirt went back the tails came up. She could see his cock long before he reached the last button. She licked her lips, and her fingers moved faster. His cock vibrated in rhythm to her fingers as if she was stroking him. He let the shirt slide off of his fingertips onto the floor. The undershirt didn't take long at all. He tossed it to her.

Tina caught the shirt with both hands, then held it to her nose for a moment, breathing deeply. Then she rubbed it across her body.

Sam was beside her before she finished, his hands touching everywhere hers had touched, his tongue not far behind. She tasted sweet, like vanilla and cinnamon and

spices. She pushed her pussy against his fingers as his touch went lower. "Fuck me, Sam," she whispered as she nipped at his earlobe.

"Not yet. Not this time. I've read a few books myself. There's such a thing as foreplay. Women are supposed to like that."

"Foreplay was when you stepped out of your cruiser." Her breasts raked over his chest as she lunged against his fingers. She buried her fingers in his ass cheeks, as if she could draw him close enough to mount him. Instead she just forced his fingers deeper into her pussy.

"So hot and wet," he murmured. "Just watching me undress does that for you?"

"Knowing you're in the state does that for me. Fuck me, Sam. Now. Now!" she demanded as she shuddered against him, her fingers curling so hard they'd probably leave bruises.

He held her close as the orgasm shook her, kissing her neck, supporting her as he pushed her farther, making it last as long as he could. When she could breathe again she bit him, hard. He yelped, pulling away slightly. That was all she needed. She had enough room between them now to grab his cock, producing a condom from somewhere. "No you don't, big guy. My turn now."

She shoved him back until he landed on her pillows, apparently right where she wanted him. Then she was over him, sliding down onto his cock, but facing his knees. His heart was beating like a bass drum by the time her slick, wet pussy reached bottom. Then she rose up to slide down again.

She wanted him to fuck her, did she? He grasped her hips and drove up into her, arching hard off the bed to bury himself fully within her. Both of her hands were on her breasts, now, driving him wild with what he couldn't really see. He closed his eyes, concentrating on his rhythm, pumping into her with all the strength his body had to offer her.

"Oh, God. Sam!" she screamed, arching her back as she clenched around him again. The waves of orgasm fisting around him were more than he could stand. His pace became harder, more demanding, but she met him thrust for thrust, urgently seeking her own final release.

Too much. Too fast. He had wanted to savor, damn it. He had wanted to make this last. She hissed in displeasure as he rolled out from under her, but she didn't argue as he pulled her to the side of the bed. Standing over her, her knees pulled up over his elbows, he could see her tits perfectly as her fingers worked the nipples into tight, sharp peaks. She cried out as he slid home, his balls slapping hard against her upturned ass. Their flesh made a sucking sound that drove him wild as he thrust into her, and a sound like tearing as he pulled back out.

"Yes!" she cried as she pinched her nipples harder. "Now, Sam. Now!"

The coral tips blushed bright red under her abuse. His pace quickened as the need built beyond his control. "Sam!" she shrieked. *Now. Now. Now!* He heard the word with each jab at oblivion, driving him, forcing him, demanding his sacrifice at the altar of her

body. Then he was coming, coming until he didn't know where he ended and she began but he was sure he was lost within her and he didn't want to find his way back.

When he collapsed beside her, barely enough strength left to draw a few short, ragged breaths, she wrapped her leg around him, holding him deep inside her as they finally grew still in each other's arms.

Reality returned, one breath at a time, and he gradually became aware of the laughter that shook her.

"What?" he gasped, more than a little annoyed.

"If that's your idea of foreplay, the sex itself just might kill me."

Before he could think of any kind of a comeback she dragged his head down, stopping the conversation with a kiss that locked the nagging questions, like the cat, outside the door. For a little while.

* * * * *

"Sam?"

"Umm?"

Tina kissed his shoulder blade. "You didn't make a six hour drive just to get me into bed with you."

He snuggled deeper into the blankets. "Can't think of any other way to do it."

Tina laughed at that. "You're a liar, Sam Callaghan. A poor one, at that. You could have called me. Asked me to come down for the weekend. Offered to meet me somewhere in the middle. Anything. I was afraid you didn't want to see me again."

"Don't have your number."

"It's in the phone book."

The answer was so obvious it stunned him. "Never thought of that."

"Sam, why are you really here?"

He snuggled deeper in the sheets. "Interview."

"An interview? You mean for a job? Sam, you can't quit your job for me! That's—that's—you just can't do that!"

Sam gave up and rolled over to face her. "What is it with you, woman? When I want to talk, you want me in bed. You only want to talk when I'm exhausted and defenseless, is that it?"

"Sam!" Tina raised a pillow, but apparently resisted the urge to clobber him with it.

He yawned and stretched, enjoying the fire in her eyes. "I suppose you like Hagerstown."

"It's all right," she replied cautiously. "I like my job."

"I don't suppose you'd consider moving across the river?"

Worry lines pulled at the corners of her eyes. "What did you have in mind?"

Sam took a deep breath, nervous despite himself. "I looked at a little place over in Morgan County this morning. Three-bedroom house. Seven acres. Small barn. It would take you about twenty-five minutes to get to work."

She sat up, looking baffled and more than a little distressed. "Sam? You really need to start at the beginning."

She hadn't said yes. But then again, she hadn't said no, either. "The First Sergeant in Morgan County's retiring. I put in for a transfer."

"You'd move? You would change jobs, move up here, just for me?"

"Tina, I would go to the ends of the earth for you."

Tina buried her head against his chest. Hot tears spilled across his skin. "I love you," she murmured, her voice barely audible.

Not exactly the reaction he'd been hoping for. "Tina?" Sam tried to raise her face enough to look into her eyes, but she hid from him. "Tina, what's wrong? What are you so frightened of? Let me help you."

"I love you, Sam. I love you. Why can't that ever be enough?"

Frustration took over. "Because relationships are built on trust, Tina, and we don't have that. We've never had that." Sam rolled out of bed in one swift, sure move, and began sorting through the clothing methodically, dressing with precision and an economy of movement. Traces of her tears ran down his chest in cold rivulets.

"I'm frightened, Sam."

Sam stopped, less than a foot from the bedroom door, his back still to her. "Because I'm a cop?"

"No! I'm not afraid of cops. I work with cops!"

He ran a hand through his hair. "Then what is it?"

"You're too easy a target, Sam. Eventually Jesse's bound to make the connection."

"For Christ's sake, woman, Jesse's dead!"

"He's not dead, damn it!" Tina insisted, her voice rising in pitch. "Jesse's alive, and he's never going to leave me alone. He wants his money and I can't pay him and he's going to kill you."

It was so hard not to gather her into his arms, promise her anything, everything, but he couldn't do that. Sam grasped her firmly by the shoulders and held her at arms length. "Tina, you're not making any sense. Take a deep breath, and start at the beginning."

She followed his orders, obviously working hard at regaining her composure, but it didn't work. "Jesse promised me he'd kill anyone who helped me get away. Who do you think he meant? You were the only one who gave a damn about me. No one else ever tried to stop him. Just you. He never dared raise his hand against me after you told him off at the hospital. But he hated you for it. Nothing's changed. At first I wasn't worried. How would he find you, after all? He didn't know where you lived, and I wasn't going

to lead him to you. But now you're here, and Jesse will know. He's going to kill you unless I pay him, and I don't have his money."

Sam shook Tina gently. "Tina," he insisted. "Tina, look at me." Wild, frightened eyes met his. "I'm a cop. People have tried to kill me before. Have a little faith in me, Tina. Let me help you. Tell me what happened."

"I wanted him dead, but I swear to you, I didn't kill him, Sam. He fell and I panicked. I ran his truck over the cliff. But his body's gone. The son-of-a-whore has come back. You can't stay here, Sam. He's going to find you."

The pieces began to fall together, like the last few bits of a jigsaw puzzle, so that the picture finally made sense. "Are you saying someone is trying to blackmail you?"

"Not someone. Jesse! Even with Jesse dead I still can't get away from him!"

"Jesse's not superhuman. People don't come back from the dead, Tina. I'm a cop. I'm trained to deal with criminals, and that's all Jesse is."

Tina ran a palm across her face, smearing the tears that seemed so close to the surface these days. "I'm so scared. I don't want to lose you. Not now. I just got you back."

That was more than his resolution was good for. He gathered her into his arms, running his hands over her back, through her hair, doing his best to comfort and reassure her. "You're not going to lose me. I won't let you go."

"God help me, I want him dead, Sam. I just want him out of my life."

"I think you better tell me the rest of the story. Let's start with Jesse and how his truck got to the bottom of the cliff."

Tina sighed as she pulled him back toward the edge of the bed. "You better get comfortable."

Sam held her close for a moment longer, wondering whether he really wanted to hear this story. But it was too late to turn back now.

Tuesday, July 23rd, 1974

As if in slow motion, Hope watched Jesse tumble out of the loft, twisting in mid-air like a cat as he tried to right himself. Even as Jesse lay on the barn floor, broken and twisted, Hope knew somehow she would pay for Jesse's death. No one would believe she hadn't killed the bastard.

She should have killed him that night last January when he used her for a marker in that poker game. She might have gotten away with it then. She'd had a lot less to lose. Now there was the baby to think about.

Why should she have to prove anything? She hadn't done anything wrong. This was Jesse's own fault. God help her, she'd wanted him dead, but she hadn't done a thing to cause this.

If she went to prison, her baby would end up in some foster home somewhere. Or, worse yet, with her father in Connecticut. She needed...

Spike.

If she could just find Spike, he would know what to do.

No. That wouldn't work. Spike might end up in prison, too. At least this way if things went bad she could give the baby to Spike. She would list his name on the birth certificate as the father. Spike would be a good father. He deserved that chance.

She didn't even know Spike's real name. You couldn't list the father as just "Spike" could you? Surely that wouldn't work.

One thing she sure as hell wouldn't do—she wouldn't list Jesse as the father. That was one lie she couldn't live with.

She'd deal with the birth certificate when the time came. Right now she had to figure out how to make Jesse's death look like an accident. Anger bubbled up like a wave of bile. It was an accident! But it had to look like an accident she couldn't have been involved in.

Time was a key factor. There was no telling when someone would drop by to see Jesse. It could be this afternoon or not for weeks. "Don't panic," Hope told herself. "You have to think this thing through."

She could fix it so that if he was ever found, it would look like he'd died alone, from an accident with the truck. Everyone knew she couldn't drive the old International farm truck. It was a flatbed with a four-speed manual transmission and no power steering. If she ran it over the cliff up by the pot fields it might stay hidden for years. If she did it right, she could wait long enough for everyone to realize that Jesse wasn't coming back, maybe even think he'd abandoned her, and she could leave here.

She could go somewhere and get a job. Take care of her baby.

Maybe, just maybe, Spike would still want her. Lord, how she wanted to stay in his cozy little house, safe and protected in those strong, competent arms. Everything in her cried out for him. Hope sobbed as she stared down at Jesse. "God damn you to eternal hell, Jesse Chapman! God damn you for what you've done to me!"

As if she were outside the woman standing over the body there in the barn, Hope watched, organized, directed. Everyone knew she couldn't drive the truck because the one time Jesse'd tried to teach her she missed second gear. He made her feel like such a fool she refused to try it again. There was no one here now to care whether she missed second gear or not.

It took Hope thirty minutes to get the truck backed into the barn, but she did it. But that was as far as she got, because she couldn't move Jesse. She dropped to her knees beside him, sobbing in frustration and fear. To make matters worse, the baby was kicking and turning, as if she sensed her mother's anxiety.

Jesse'd used the winch on the back of the truck to get the boards up in the loft. She could use the board that had killed Jesse as a ramp and hitch him up onto the bed of the truck with the come-along.

It sounded easier than it was. Hope could barely manage to get the board up onto the back of the truck. The come-along worked like a jack handle, moving the body only inches at a time, and the strain started pains shooting through Hope's side. She wanted to curl up and rest once she had Jesse loaded onto the back of the truck, but if someone dropped by now she would look worse than if she just let Jesse lay where he fell.

Hope wound her way up the side of the mountain, doing barely five miles an hour in first gear all the way. The road ended just over the top of the ridge beside Jesse's pot field, at the edge of a cliff. Over the edge, the rocky ground dropped away, bottoming out into a sea of trees. Jesse could well have driven up here to check on the plants and had some sort of accident.

Hope put the truck in neutral and set the emergency brake. Any other time, it would have rolled right over the cliff. Not this time. Hope pushed and shoved, but it wouldn't budge. She started it up, put it in first, and took her foot off the gas. The truck sputtered and spit, but it kept rolling toward the cliff.

Hope swung out onto the running board, suddenly afraid. The truck was already moving too fast. If she didn't jump Jesse's body wouldn't be the only one that would never be found. Hope closed her eyes and pitched into a rolling ball. The ground came up fast and hard, knocking the wind out of her. When she finally recovered enough to raise her head, she realized the edge of the cliff was only inches away. She crawled to the edge to see what had happened.

The truck was gone. Jesse was gone. There was a path through the weeds and brush showing where it had passed on its way down to the river, but it seemed to have been swallowed up by the trees. Jesse must have stayed on the bed of the truck all the way down the long, steep, rocky slope. The truck had just disappeared into the trees, leaving not a sign of itself visible from up here. It should have hit something and gone up in flames, like trucks always did in the movies.

But then, in the movies, all sorts of strange things happened.

People got married and lived happily ever after.

Chapter Eight

Sam held her, running his hands in slow circles over her back, waiting for her tears to subside, letting the pieces fall into place in his mind.

"Does knowing what happened really change anything?" she asked at last.

"It changes everything," Sam assured her. "Because you trusted me enough to tell me the truth."

"So what happens now?"

"First, although I hate to say it, you better get dressed."

Tina clung to him, hiding her face against his chest. "Why?"

"Because it's nearly impossible for me to concentrate enough to run even a preliminary investigation with a beautiful, naked woman in my arms."

Tina laughed at that. She kissed him before she broke away and headed for the closet. "I'm forty-four years old, Sam. In all that time, you're the only one who's ever told me I was beautiful."

Sam watched her suck in her breath to fasten a freshly laundered pair of jeans and felt fresh, hot desire wash over him again. He tore his eyes away and set himself to straightening the bed. He settled the sheet back in place with a crisp snap. "Good. I shared you with another man once. I've no intention of ever doing it again."

"You won't have to," Tina assured him.

Looking at the bed didn't exactly help. He forced his mind to consider the situation as if it were any other investigation, and not just a diversion keeping his hands off the woman he'd wanted for almost half his lifetime. "You said the blackmailer wanted money. How did he get in touch with you?"

"Letters. He's been sending me letters in the mail."

"Letters? More than one? Did you keep them?"

Tina turned back to the closet and reached for a metal storage box toward the back of the top shelf. A small document safe. Sam noticed her fingers were shaking. She fumbled over the combination, yanking at the handle in frustration.

Sam held out his hand, his face a calm facade that denied the turmoil he felt. He would deal with this crisis the same way he dealt with any emergency, he promised himself. One thing at a time. The most critical thing first. At the moment, that apparently meant opening this box for Tina. "What's the combination?"

"My birthday."

Sam waited a moment, but Tina offered no further information. "I've never known your birthday," he reminded her gently.

Tina turned back to face him at that. "But you came. Three weeks after Jesse died. You were the only one who remembered. When everything was going so wrong I wasn't sure I could hang on any more, you showed up. I was hungry. I was out of everything. No one had been by in weeks. You brought me groceries, and a rose."

Sam took a deep breath. She'd told him about Jesse. It was his turn. "I used to have dreams about you, Tina. Nightmares, really. Whenever you were in trouble."

Her eyes went wide. "Dreams? You came because of a dream?"

"Every time."

"Even when Kara was born?"

"Especially when Kara was born."

Tina just stared at him, as if she were trying to adjust her view of the world. "Callaghan. I grew up around so many Callaghans and O'Briens and Murphys I never gave any thought to your name. You're Irish."

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Second sight, Grandma called it. She always said it was one of God's gifts to the Irish."

"I don't know much about my Irish heritage. My mother died when I was ten. My father was a drunk. I was raised by foster parents."

Her reactions were never what he expected. Tina looked more sad than anything else. "Did they love you?" she asked at last. "The people who raised you, did they really love you?"

Sam turned to look out the window. "There were a lot of families at first. I spent more time on the street than anywhere else. Chronic runaway. Then I got busted. This cop named David Mahoney picked me up for stealing cigarettes from a gas station. David and Clara couldn't have any kids of their own, so they took in foster kids. They were strict, but we always knew they loved us. Sometimes there were as many as six of us at a time. David and Clara played good cop, bad cop. Clara was always the good cop, but we were more afraid of disappointing her than we were of pissing David off. I don't remember ever being lonely after that, but I do remember David Mahoney tanning my backside with his belt more than once. Most of us went on to be cops."

There was a long pause before Tina answered. He turned back to see her pulling on her T-shirt. "August 23rd, 1945. As far as I can remember, that was the last day my mother took any responsibility for me. She didn't have time. Charities and fund-raisers for the poor children in Ireland. My father hired a governess to raise me. Mrs. Ketchin. My mother died trying to give birth to my brother when I was six. I remember finding it odd that everyone was so concerned about me losing her. I didn't even know her."

"You almost died with Kara. Some family tradition."

Tina crossed the room to him, knowing what he needed to hear. "I didn't die, Sam. Kara and I are alive because you had a dream, and you came to me. Where would I be without your dreams?" It was no more than the truth.

She took his face in her hands and kissed him gently. "Did you think I would love you less because you grew up with foster parents? If Jesse really had been Kara's father, would it change the way you feel about me? About us?"

"Of course not!"

"I don't give a damn who your parents were. I care that you were there for me. You're here for me now. You care enough for me to have gone out today and interviewed for a new job, and looked at a house. Do you honestly think I'd turn that down because David Mahoney was smart enough to see the potential others missed? It might have taken you a while to turn your life around, but David's faith in you was justified, Sam."

Sam set the fire-safe down on the bed. Just as slowly, just as gently, he gathered Tina close, enfolding her in an embrace that promised her everything he had to give. Tina laid her head against his chest, listening to the sound of his heartbeat. It was pounding as wildly as if he'd just chased a criminal down a dark alley. When he finally spoke, Sam's voice was low, so that Tina had to listen intently to understand him.

"I was raised on a farm outside Charleston. I can fix a tractor. I can deliver a calf—or a baby. I can shoot a deer and skin it out and cook you a three-course dinner. Give me something I can do with my hands and I'm fine. But these dreams—these dreams have got me running scared. I didn't try to stop your father from taking you away, because I was afraid I wouldn't measure up in a world where a limo like that existed. All along, I knew there were things you weren't telling me, and I didn't ask, because I was afraid of the answers. More than anything, I was afraid you didn't trust me, and I knew it was my own fault, because I couldn't be honest with you."

Tina looked up into his eyes. "So tell me the rest," she urged.

Sam would have pulled away, but this time she wouldn't let go. She felt him stiffen, as if preparing himself for a blow. "I've worked for the State of West Virginia since 1971. Ever since I graduated from college."

Tina stared back at him blankly.

"I was a cop, Tina. Spike was my cover. I've always been a cop."

Angry voices buzzed at the back of Tina's head. She shook it savagely, willing them away. The pieces slid together like a kaleidoscope coming into focus. She shook her head again, and the buzzing faded away. As it left, the anger rolled in. "You were an undercover cop? All that time? You knew Jesse was dealing pot and tied in with some of the worst criminals on the East Coast, and you took me to your own home?"

"It was a safe house we used. I was going to keep you there, in protective custody, until I found a permanent place for us. I bought the house when the department put it on the market later, so you'd always know where to find me."

"A safe house. Better yet! You idiot! You could have been killed! What if Jesse had had one of those bikers follow us down off that mountain? What if I had talked about what happened that weekend? What the bloody hell were you thinking?"

The silence lasted for about ten seconds. Ten of the longest seconds of Sam's entire life. He stood staring at Tina as if frozen in time and space.

A young woman's voice broke the spell. "Don't take the yelling too seriously. Mom only does this when she's really scared."

Kara. Perfect timing.

Tina yanked herself out of Sam's arms and spun to face Kara, as if ready to give her an equally warm welcome, but then stormed out of the room, brushing by Kara and Al, both of whom wisely stepped aside.

Sam followed Tina's retreating form with his eyes. He stuffed his hands in his pockets, fingering the ring he'd carried there for the last fifteen years. "Does she usually stay angry very long?"

"Nah," Kara assured him. "Just give her a minute, then go after her. She won't go any farther than the kitchen. She's about worn herself out already."

Sam nodded slowly. "Thanks. I was a little worried."

Kara bent to scoop up the cat. "Mom says you're my father."

Sam blinked at the abruptness of the comment. "I reckon I am," he agreed. "How do you feel about that?"

"That depends, I guess. Are you gonna make Mom this mad very often?"

Sam sighed. "I sure hope not."

Her fingers tangled in the cat's fluffy fur. "I got along fine without you the last fifteen years. Why do I need you now?"

Sam looked down at Kara, his heart in his eyes. "You probably don't. But I sure need you."

Kara smiled at Sam and shook her head. "You'll never make it as a child psychologist, but at least you're honest. Come on. Let's go find Mom before she eats all the ice-cream."

* * * * *

Did you think you could get away from me, Hope?

You owe me. I want my money.

Sam turned the note over in his hands. There was no signature. The paper had no sign of a watermark. "You didn't keep the envelope?"

Tina shook her head. "No. Not on that one."

"When did you get this?"

"Early February. The first letter came from the State at the end of November, informing me that they were going to take my land. Then, about two months later, I got this note."

Sam tapped the folded sheet of paper against his palm. "What did you do? About the letter from the State, I mean? What was the first thing you did?"

"I called a James Perry, our county prosecutor. I asked him for some unofficial advice. He referred me to a friend of his from law school who practices in Charleston now."

Sam's eyebrows raised in surprise. "Did you go to meet this lawyer?"

"Until this month I hadn't been back to West Virginia since 1974."

Sam held out his hand like a traffic cop. "I didn't mean..."

Tina ran the tips of her fingers across his jaw line. "I never tried to find you, Sam. I was a coward. I was afraid of what I'd find. Afraid you wouldn't want me."

Sam quit studying the note and met her eyes directly, trusting Tina with a piece of his soul. "I shouldn't have let you leave in the first place. I should have trusted you, told you about the case."

"Save the mushy stuff for later, guys," Kara interrupted. "I want to see the rest of these letters. I'm having a hard time understanding why you didn't tell me about this, Mom."

"I just didn't want to worry you, Darling," Tina explained again.

Sam swallowed his smile as he removed the remaining envelopes from the little lock box. Kara didn't argue, not now, but her expression told him the discussion wasn't over. There was too much of his own obstinance in her face.

The second note was addressed to a different apartment. "You moved in February?"

Al jumped into Tina's lap as she slid into the kitchen chair. "March."

He watched the way her fingers stroked the cat's fluffy fur, almost as if she wasn't aware of what she was doing. "So, whoever wrote these knew where you lived."

Kara frowned sharply. "Is that why we moved, Mom?"

"Partly." The cat seemed to calm Tina's nervous energy. "Someone broke into my car, remember?"

"They stole my dirty gym clothes," Kara reminded her mother with a grimace of distaste. "How could I forget?"

Sam put the letters down abruptly. "Someone stole your dirty clothes?"

Kara made a face that bordered on disgust. "Took my whole gym bag. Dirty clothes and all."

"Not to mention a thirty dollar pair of Nikes," Tina threw in. "Along with my brief case and my registration and insurance certificate."

"What was in your brief case?"

Tina shrugged, disturbing the cat slightly. "The usual stuff. It was the weekend. There were a couple of case files I needed to do some work on. Copies of the correspondence with the lawyer. My daily planner."

Sam took out a little notebook and began jotting things down. "Was your car broken into before or after the first letter came?"

"After. In March. We moved a few weeks after that."

"How did the thieves get into the car?"

"They smashed out the window in the driver's side door."

"Did you file a police report?"

Tina looked up quickly, her hold on the cat tightening as a little frown pulled at the bridge of her nose. "Of course. But they didn't ask nearly as many questions as you have. What're you thinking, Sam?"

Sam slid note out of its envelope. "I'm just wondering whether the break-in and the letters are related."

Tina's hands went still. The cat raised his head questioningly. "Why would you think that?"

Sam looked at the postmark on the second letter and flipped his notebook back open. "Because this letter was postmarked in Hagerstown. Only local mail gets postmarked locally. Your out-of-town gets postmarked in Baltimore, which is the clearing center for Delaware, Maryland, and DC. Our mail back home clears through North Carolina. Also, there's the car itself. The driver's side window was broken out. That puts glass right in the driver's seat. Kids out for a joy ride don't want to sit in broken glass. Mostly because I've seen what you drive. Even desperate crooks won't steal an Eagle."

Kara started to snicker. Tina threatened her with a ferocious look. "I had a Ford Pinto. I just bought the Eagle."

"Sorry. The Pinto's still not on the top ten list of stolen cars."

Kara's snickers turned into full-fledged laughter.

Sam smiled at them both indulgently, but his smile faded as he opened the second letter, postmarked February 27th, 1989.

I know where to find you. I want what's mine.

Same bold printed letters. Still no signature. The next letter was mailed to the old address and forwarded. Same postmark, dated for March 27th.

You've had fifteen years of freedom. You owe me.

Letter number four was addressed to the new apartment. April 27th.

I made you a promise, Hope. I haven't forgotten. I want \$180,000 in small, unmarked bills. Leave the money in a gym bag like Charity's under the spare tire in the Eagle on May 26th.

Kara had read each letter as Sam set them down. Her face pale, she scanned the final letter, then turned her eyes on her mother. "What promise, Mom?"

The old haunted look was back in Tina's eyes. Her hands moved rhythmically through the cat's chaotic fur. "Jesse told me that if I ever tried to get away, he would kill anyone who tried to help me."

Sam reached out and covered Tina's hands with his. "Jesse's dead, Tina, whether you found his body or not. Jesse is not writing these letters."

"If it's not Jesse, then who is writing them?"

"Someone else who was there the night of the poker game. Someone who was around Jesse often enough to have heard him threaten you. Someone who knew about the bet."

"The poker game?"

"All of these letters are postmarked on the 27th. Even though the envelope for the first one is missing, I'm willing to bet it was postmarked January 27th, 1989. Fifteen years to the day from the poker game."

Tina pushed the cat off her lap and gathered the letters back up. "It doesn't matter whether Jesse is still alive or not. The threat is still the same. Either I come up with \$180,000 by next week, or someone is going to kill you, Sam."

"Nobody's going to kill me. If you pay off somebody like this, he'll just keep coming back for more. Whoever's writing these letters was at the cabin that night. My guess is this guy is someone you see regularly. Someone who knows enough to make you feel threatened. I'm going to call in the Maryland State Police. Let them handle this."

Tina shook her head violently. "You can't do that, Sam! If they start investigating, they'll find out about the money! What do you think that's going to do to your career?"

Sam treated her to a puzzled frown. "What do you mean?"

"That's drug money, Sam! If anybody finds out about it, your career is over!"

Surprise and then anger washed across his face. "You think I was dirty?"

"Cops don't carry around \$50,000 dollars!"

"What are you two talking about!" Kara demanded.

"I had to fill out fifteen forms to requisition that money. We worked from a budget made up of cash we confiscated on other drug raids. Not one penny ever crossed my hands without my commanding officer knowing about it."

"Then why didn't you arrest me after you made the buy?"

"Arrest you? You were the reason I arranged the buy. I was sure Jesse was dead, and I knew he'd left you with nothing to live on. I told my First Sergeant you didn't

know what Jesse was up to. I told him about Jesse disappearing and leaving that crop just standing in the field. I convinced him I could get enough of a haul to bring down the biker gangs we were after. We used that crop three times that fall. Sold it, arrested the guys who bought it, then took it back out of evidence and sold it again. The State made a pretty good investment, I'd say."

Tina just stared at him blankly. "All these years. All these years, even when I was so broke I didn't know how I was going to buy groceries, I was afraid to spend any of it, because it was drug money."

Al settled slowly back into her arms.

Chapter Nine

"Jesse's pot plants were worth \$50,000?" Kara demanded.

"No," Tina insisted. "Jesse hardly made any money at all off the pot. He —"

"Yes," Sam interrupted. "That crop was worth every penny I paid for it. Jesse knew what he was doing. He had over two hundred plants. I'd already cut the deal with Jesse, before he disappeared. He was charging \$275 a pound. He figured to get four bales off the mountain that year—210 pounds. I agreed to take all four bales for \$50,000. On top of that Jesse always kept enough back for his own use and to take care of his local customers. He was always nickel and dime-ing off the plants during the growing season for pocket money. He knew pretty well on the money what to expect from that crop."

Tina's jaw dropped, but she snapped it shut, her expression tight around the eyes and lips.

Kara tapped her pencil against the edge of the steno pad. "You didn't have an electric bill or a water bill or anything, Mom, and you said the land was paid for—Jesse inherited it or something. So what happened to the rest of the money?"

"Until now I never realized there was any 'rest of the money,'" Tina snapped.

"Mom, you knew Jesse was growing pot. You lived on that mountain with him for six years. You had to have known how big the field was—that much pot would be impossible to hide. You might not have known exactly how much Jesse sold the final harvest off for, but you had to at least know he sold it. Jesse couldn't have blown it all on poker."

Tina's lips drew into a thin, flat line. "No. Jesse never lost more than he made selling dime bags to the same guys he was always playing poker with. He never touched any of that money. I lived hand to mouth like—like an *animal* for six years. All that time that bastard was stashing money somewhere. You're not the only one who wants to know where that damn money is, Kara. If there's a quarter of a million dollars around somewhere, I want it in a trust fund so I know you'll be able to go to any college you choose."

He'd never seen her this angry before. Sam reached out to brush a finger over her lips. "That's already taken care of."

Tina stared at him, then looked away, blinking hard, but he saw the mist of tears in her eyes. "Bless you," she whispered.

"It still doesn't add up," Kara interrupted, still scribbling on her steno pad. "The blackmailer's asking for \$180,000. If someone knew Jesse had stashed his pot money somewhere they'd be asking for his \$250,000 plus the \$50,000 Spike paid for the last

crop. I don't think we're talking about the same money. \$180,000's a pretty specific amount. Maybe Jesse invested the money somewhere. Could he have had a partner? Someone he owed that kind of money to when he disappeared?"

Sam studied the girl thoughtfully. She had Tina's face. But he'd have sworn she saw through his eyes. She tore things apart the way he did. Analyzed, instead of just reacting.

Tina smashed the cat in a fierce hug, shaking her head in denial. "Jesse never trusted anybody. We were alone out there after that first year. When we first moved out to the farm there were four of us—Jesse and me and Steve and Faith—her real name was Lettie. But Steve wasn't Jesse's partner. Steve and Faith were just groupies, like me. They heard Jesse preach and joined his commune. There were supposed to be others coming, but no one else ever showed up."

The cat wriggled, trying to break free, but Tina held on to him as if he were a lifeline. Sam let his eyes drift over Tina's features, comparing her with the woman he'd fallen in love with so long ago. There was a strength about her that had seen Hope through the hell she'd lived with Jesse.

He'd never figured Jesse for a preacher. He kept his voice low, as if the question was no more important than any other he'd asked that afternoon. "What happened to Steve and Lettie? Faith?"

"They left after the first year."

As if that were all there was to it. She said it quietly, dispassionately. Sam still couldn't be sure how much she knew. He sighed, running his blunt fingertips along a scratch in the old wooden tabletop. He noticed other things, too. The carpet in the third floor walk up was old-'70's green shag-that should have been replaced years ago. Tina said they'd only lived in this apartment a few months, yet the walls were yellowed with old kitchen stains that wouldn't scrub out. Grease and smoke and time. The landlord hadn't painted between tenants.

Tina had a government job. She was making decent money. If he'd been a gambling man, Sam would have wagered his last ten-spot that Tina had put all her money into buying the other side of that mountain, trying to keep Jesse's body hidden. Probably had a mortgage payment the size of the rent she paid on this place to cover, as well.

There were no pictures on the walls anywhere, except of Kara. No dust catchers or little trinkets that friends brought back from trips. Had she moved too often to bother to unpack? Did she even have any friends outside of work? Was there anyone at all she really trusted besides Kara and the cat? Or had she kept the secrets locked inside all these years?

Had Steve and Lettie been her friends? Or just more bodies to keep hidden?

Sam sighed again. "We're right back where we started."

Kara flipped to a new page in her notebook. "Not really. We know we're not looking for Jesse. The money's wrong. Jesse'd either ask for \$50,000 or \$300,000 if he thought Ma had all of his money. So who else would have known about the marker?"

"Anyone who was at that poker game."

Sam snorted derisively at the memory. "Besides me and Jesse, there was Crazy Horse, and Doc and Gunner and Clyde, the three top guns from a Charleston area biker gang called 'The Rangers.' I busted them before the year was over. Took down two other gangs as well."

Kara stabbed her pencil into the names she'd written. "Well, that's no help. If these men are all in prison, they can't be writing letters to Mom."

"Men in prison can still write letters," Tina pointed out.

Kara's hands fascinated Sam. They were never still. She'd begun drawing cellblocks around the names she'd written. Not just grid lines either. Full three-dimensional stone walls. He chuckled at that. "Those guys all got ten and twelve year sentences, and probably only served five or six years. Doc and Gunner and Clyde have been in and out twice by now."

"What about Crazy Horse?" Kara's cells were joining together now to form a cellblock. She was really a pretty good artist.

Sam's eyes sought Tina's, but she didn't answer. Could she really not know? He watched her face carefully as he answered. "Crazy Horse is currently serving time at the Maryland Correctional Institution-Hagerstown."

The color slowly drained out of Tina's face. "Liam Kelly. That's why his name sounded familiar."

Sam only nodded.

"Mom?"

"This is still an open case, isn't it?"

Sam didn't answer. This case would always remain open. There was no statute of limitations on murder.

"Am I a suspect, Sam? Is that why you're here?"

"No." He smiled, though it took real effort. "I thought it was pretty evident why I was here."

Tina blushed, but she didn't laugh, not the way she should have. She didn't relax, either. "So I'm just some kind of an idiot? Thousands of dollars change hands under my nose and I have no idea what's going on? Jesse's closest friend is serving a sentence in my prison and I don't even know? And you just accidentally run into me after fifteen years?"

Sam smiled grimly, remembering her reaction when he'd walked into the records room. "I've lost track of Doc and Gunner again, but at least we know where to find Crazy Horse. I'm willing to bet he's getting out on the 26th of this month. As for why you wouldn't recognize him, if he's not in your unit, you'd never have any reason to see him or his files. I bet you don't know but about ten percent of the prisoners at MCIH. If I put Crazy Horse in a line-up for you right now you wouldn't recognize him. You didn't even recognize me. Change the way a man looks, give him a haircut and a shave,

change his name, and you've got a new identity. What I can't figure out is the connection to the money. Why would Crazy Horse be blackmailing you?"

"Why would anyone blackmail me? I haven't got anyone's money!"

"When we catch him, we'll ask him."

Tina's eyes focused on the wall clock above the stove, a round plastic disk ticking away the moments they had together. "You make it all sound so simple."

Sam folded her hands within his, willing her to believe him. To believe in him. "It is simple."

Tina's voice sounded tired, frustrated, but she didn't pull her hands away. "Crazy Horse couldn't have broken into my car while he was in prison, Sam. If any one of those guys is after this money, they all are. Think about who we're dealing with here. These guys aren't exactly your model citizens. Doc and Gunner and Clyde used to mainline speed for days at a time. I don't think any of them ever slept, except when they played poker. Then they added Jesse's whiskey to the mix and drank till they just plain passed out. I made them crawl out to the barn so the cabin wouldn't stink so bad. Then there's Crazy Horse, chasing his speed with moonshine. Damn shame that man never killed himself with alcohol poisoning. The point is they did everything together. That means they're all after you, because you're the one who took them down."

Sam shook his head. "They don't know that."

Tina raised one delicately arched eyebrow. "How do you figure?"

"Spike got busted right along with them. Far as they know, Spike jumped bail and split town. He's still on the run."

Her hands went stiff within his, but hope slowly resurfaced in her eyes. "If nobody knows you're Spike, then —"

"Then nobody's coming after me. Precisely."

Tina's brows drew together in a puzzled frown. "But Jesse—*whoever* wrote these notes—found out about you, somehow. What else could he mean by keeping his promise?"

Sam shifted uncomfortably in the ladder-back kitchen chair and released her hands. "Let's not worry about what some con might do just now, all right? We'll deal with it next Friday. I'll be here. If someone wants a piece of me, there's enough to go around. I'll catch whoever's doing this, and that'll be the end of it."

Kara's pencil fell still. "Doesn't anything ever rattle you?"

Sam met her eyes—adult eyes in a face that still held remembered traces of childish innocence. Hazel eyes brightened now to an intense sky blue as they met his. He'd missed so much. The years of changing her diapers, holding her hands as she learned to walk, the first grade pictures, maybe even the first date. Yet so much of her was a reflection of himself. "Lots of things rattle me," he confided. "Just not criminals. I've been trained to deal with men like Jesse, and Doc, Gunner, Clyde and Crazy Horse."

"So what kind of things scare you?"

Sam let down his guard enough to trust her with a piece of his soul. "The things I haven't been trained for. There's no manual anywhere that tells me how to be a father. I don't have a clue where to start."

Kara studied him thoughtfully. "You won my mother in a poker game. That's not exactly the kind of relationship that prepares you for being a father."

Sam's gaze wandered back to the clock on the wall. "You can't imagine what it was like for your mother. In the summer when it was hot she always wore cut off jeans and a T-shirt. Jesse left bruises all over her. He was a big man. I've seen him grab her by the arm or the shoulder and yank her around like a dog on a leash. If I hadn't been under cover, I'd have arrested him on the spot more than once. As it was, the best I could do was to try to convince Hope she didn't have to live that way."

He ran his fingers through his hair, pushing it back away from his eyes. It was way past time to get it cut again. "I didn't have to take Jesse's marker. Some people would have called it adultery. I saw a way to get Hope off that mountain. I just wanted Hope to know there was a way out. But it didn't work. I couldn't persuade her to leave Jesse. Even after Jesse was gone, I couldn't get her off that mountain."

Tina reached out and laid a small, soft hand over his. "You gave me the courage to keep going, Sam. Without you, I'd have given up. I'd forgotten that there was another world out there. I'd have gladly stayed with you after that weekend, but I knew Jesse would keep his promise. He'd have killed you."

Sam's voice came out as a deep, menacing growl. "He might have tried."

In the other room, some old rocker on TV was still trying to act twenty, pounding on an electric guitar and jumping all over the stage. Kara's pencil tapped softly against the steno pad, in rhythm to the driving beat. "You'd have liked that, wouldn't you? A good clean fight. Get it over with. The winner gets the girl."

A tight smile pulled at Sam's lips. "I'd have preferred it that way, but it never would have worked. Jesse had been telling Hope what to do for years. I had to let her make her own decisions. I still do. You too, for that matter."

Eyes as intense as the sunlight on the ocean burned into his. "What do you mean?"

Sam reached in his breast pocket for the neatly folded paper he'd picked up from the real estate agent. "I've applied for a transfer to the Eastern Panhandle. Morgan County. If I get the transfer, I'm planning to make an offer on this place. It's a little farm off of Route 9, about 30 miles from here. I'm hoping you and your mother might want to move over there."

Kara's face wrinkled in distaste. "Morgan County? In West Virginia?"

"Morgan County. In West Virginia. Seven acres. A little barn. Room for a few chickens," he teased, "Maybe a pig or two."

Kara rolled her eyes, grimacing in disgust. "I bet it's a hundred miles to the nearest shopping mall. I bet there's no cable. Probably one TV station, and then only if it's not raining."

A genuine smile tipped Sam's lips. "Less than ten miles to the Martinsburg Mall and the Outlet Centers. We could put in a satellite dish. I was thinking maybe a horse or two might go good in that barn, too."

Kara tilted her head to one side, looking incredibly like her mother at that moment. "Are you trying to bribe me?"

"Don't know. Might, if I thought it would work. Would it?"

"Don't know. Might, if I had a car."

Tina interrupted at that point. "You *might* get a car, when you're old enough, if I decide we're going to move, if Sam gets his transfer, if your grades are good enough, and if I think you need one."

Sam smiled and winked at Kara conspiratorially. This time, he just knew, things were going to work out his way. They just had to. He had too much to lose this time.

Kara smiled back at Sam and spun an imaginary key ring around and around on her right index finger while her mother rolled her eyes skyward. Sam laughed softly, his heart full to overflowing. Kara was going to accept him. He'd spent two weeks agonizing over the best way to approach this stranger who was his daughter. He found she wasn't really a stranger after all. Kara was a piece of himself, with a lot of her mother thrown in for good measure, creating a mixture that was strictly her own.

There was no doubt about it. It wasn't just Tina who'd found her way back into the small, secret place Sam had guarded so well. The door to his heart opened wide enough for two.

Chapter Ten

Tuesday, May 22nd, 1989

The logging crews hit first, shearing the trees from the hillside like clippers through a new recruit's hair at boot camp. They moved up the valley relentlessly, leaving destruction and oozing mud in their wake. The river ran brown with topsoil as the spring rains absorbed the carnage.

The earthmovers came close on the heels of the loggers, shearing away the hillside as if it were nothing, laying it open like a gutted fish. The old International Harvester flatbed truck was hardly worthy of notice. Within minutes of its discovery it was bound for the junkyard, though a few heads turned to look speculatively at the steep slope leading down from above and wonder how the old truck had ever made it down here in one piece. One of the loggers wondered aloud why the keys still dangled from the ignition. No one came up with an answer before the rollback's driver winched the old wreck out of the mud and on its way.

No one asked too many questions. They knew better. Questions meant delays. Delays cost money. No one wanted to sit around and wait while someone investigated. Not for one ugly old green truck.

Later, as the earthmovers began to haul away that same steep embankment the truck had once traversed, the construction crews quickly discovered why the craggy slope had never turned to mud like the rest of the hillside. Beneath a few inches of loose, shifting slit and age-old debris the slope was solid rock. The backbone of the mountain stood before them. Operations came to a halt as the blasting team moved in.

The geologists combed the face of the slide while the blasters took their measurements. A series of small explosions, contained within the ancient rock, would reduce the old limestone cliff face to rubble. One way or another, the road would go through. The men sat back and waited. They'd been here before. They knew what to expect.

It wasn't until the second round of blasting began to settle that the foreman, Jerry Steel, noticed something out of the ordinary. Too large a chunk of the old mountain came down at the east end of the rockslide. Twice as much cliff fell away as should have been shaken loose by the carefully measured blast. Jerry waited for the dust to settle, let his men check their loads to see that everything had fired as expected, then ordered the men back from the site.

Jerry was a careful man. He knew his job. Knew what to expect of his blasting caps and of his men. He didn't like it when things didn't go the way he expected them to. When friends teased him about his reluctance with women, Jerry was known to

comment that he'd rather trust a stick of dynamite than a woman any day. The dynamite was so much more predictable.

One thing dynamite didn't do—it didn't leave a perfectly round hole in the ground seven feet to the northeast side of where the charge had been set off. Jerry grabbed his battery-powered lantern from his Jeep, along with a length of safety line. Carefully, almost reluctantly, testing his footing every step of the way, Jerry made his way across the fresh-strewn rubble to the dark shadow of a hole in the side of the mountain. The closer he got, the stronger his litany of curses.

At the opening, he lit the lantern and turned its beam into the black hole.

"What is it, Jerry?" one of the boys called up to him.

"It's a son-of-a-bitch of a cave. Get that God damned geologist back out here. I don't know how the hell he missed this thing. Couple of you guys grab this safety line. Tie me off to the Jeep just in case. I'm going in. Might as well get an idea how big the damn thing is. This could set us back months."

The men lowered Jerry into the cave, playing out the line in a slow, steady rhythm. They'd played out less than fifty feet of line when his voice carried back to them. "Christ Jesus! Get me the hell out of here!" The explosion of cursing had the men pulling wildly on the safety line, raking Jerry across the rocks before they had time to register that he was whole and sound and back in the sunlight. His lantern was nowhere to be seen. He threw off the safety line and scrambled to his feet, managing only a few steps before he retched up his long forgotten lunch.

"Shit, Jerry, you all right? What the hell's down there?"

"Christ, no! I'm not all right. Get on the radio and call the cops."

The men looked silently toward the cave, wondering what Jerry could possibly have seen that had shaken him so badly. Nothing ever rattled Jerry. No one moved toward the Jeep or the radio.

"Jesus Christ! This is going to hold us up for weeks! Tom, call the God damn cops for Christ's sake!"

Tom blinked like an owl. "What do I tell 'em, Boss?"

"Tell 'em you got two dead Hippies with the backs of their skulls blown off!"

Thirty men went so still that every ear on the mountainside could hear the static as Tom fired up the radio. "Yeah, Base, this is team two. We got a problem."

* * * * *

First Sergeant Sam Callaghan stood at the rear of the stone ledge, watching the earth crumble away from the mouth of the cave as the last of the cameramen cleared the site. He knew. He didn't have to wait for any coroner's report. He could see it all in his mind, as clearly as if he'd been standing there watching it all twenty years ago. The crime scene matched the vision he'd had all those weeks ago to the smallest detail.

In his mind, he watched Jesse luring the young couple into the cave. Could see Lettie—Faith, Tina'd said Jesse had called her—her pregnancy already starting to show, scrambling down the steep slope from the entrance. Could picture Jesse setting down the lantern where they'd found it, beside the bodies, the light reflecting off the little lake there in the bottom of the cave.

Jesse'd slipped around behind them. They hadn't known until the last minute. Hadn't had time to struggle or fight. It had been quick. One round each, execution style. Steve would have gone first, before he could fight back. It had taken but a single shot to the back of the head, down low, splitting the strand of beads on the leather thong that lay scattered now across the cold stone floor. Then Lettie was next, not as clean a shot, quickly, before she could recover, taking out the whole left side of her skull. Sam could still see her sprawled across the stone floor, her legs tangled in the loose, flowing cotton print skirt.

Could Jesse have done it alone, without Hope's knowledge?

Sam had never understood what had made a woman like Tina follow a man like Jesse into hell. Now he wondered just how far Hope really would have followed Jesse—and how far he would follow her.

He didn't want to think about that. Didn't want to picture her standing there beside Jesse, holding the lantern, or maybe even the second gun, maybe pulling a trigger herself. Absurdly, he found himself tasting the mint of her freshly brushed teeth. How he wanted to sink his hands into that mahogany hair, pulling her into his arms, and hear just one more of her lies. He could deal with reality tomorrow. For tonight, just for tonight, he wanted to be there in her arms, no matter what the cost.

Two hours later, sitting at his own desk, writing up his report on the preliminary investigation, Sam found his mood had changed little. He thought about putting everything he knew in his report, then decided against it. It would only point a finger back at himself. Somebody else was sure to mention the commune that once sat just over the top of the mountain. What better place to look for Hippies than at a commune. Someone was bound to remember that Spike had been investigating those same Hippies fifteen years ago. Eventually they'd put two and two together and realize that Sam had been seen with the woman who once lived there, and not so long ago.

Well, let them ask. He wasn't drawing any conclusions in this report.

In the morning he would go to the junkyard and examine the truck the foreman had hauled off the mountain earlier in the week. The truck with the windows all rolled up and the keys still in the ignition. Evidently nobody'd thought anything about it at the time the truck was found, or, more to the point, hadn't thought it worth the delay an investigation would have cost, but Sam could put the clues together. The truck had been sitting at the bottom of the cliff, just inside the tree line.

He'd check to make sure, but he already knew it had to have been Jesse's truck. The descriptions matched. Four people went up onto that mountain to start a commune. Only one was around now. It didn't look good for the single survivor.

Alone in his office, Sam bowed his head over his paperwork and wished he could allow himself to break down and cry, but it had been fifteen years since he'd last shed a tear, and he wasn't about to start again now. Last week it had all seemed so close. The job. The farm. The woman. The girl. Everything he'd ever wanted, everything he'd ever dared to dream about. All within his reach. What was one blackmailer, compared to fifteen years of emptiness, fifteen years of looking up at the sound of every door that opened, wondering if this time, her face would be the one he'd see?

Could their fragile relationship survive if Sam was forced to bring Tina in? Would she ever forgive him if he had to question her about these murders? What if he had to arrest her?

Sam wasn't even sure he could do it. He'd rather cut out his own heart than slap the cuffs on those fragile wrists. Yet he knew it was coming. Felt it burning in his gut like the start of an ulcer. After all these years, Tina was going down.

The worst of it was, Sam feared he was going down with her—if not for what he'd done, then for what he hadn't done. For the questions he hadn't asked, and the reports he hadn't made. If it all came down as bad as it looked right now, it was going to look like a cover-up on his part.

What would that do to Kara? Where would they take her? Where would she end up?

Sam knew too well the emotional scars a child without parents suffered. He couldn't let that happen to her. Not to Kara. He would do whatever he had to do to keep that from happening.

So would Tina, and that was the worst of it. He knew she'd do whatever she had to do to protect Kara from Jesse, and from her own past. Including lying to him, if she thought she needed to. If Tina hadn't been involved in the shootings, if she really was innocent, why had Sam started the month with that damned dream?

* * * * *

"Mom! Sam's picture is in the paper!"

There was one reason most cops got their pictures printed in the paper, and it wasn't good. Tina flew out of the kitchen to grab the paper from Kara's hands. The headline didn't help a bit.

"Double Homicide Exposed!" the caption read, with Sam's picture juxtaposed in such a way that you couldn't be sure which article it went with. Tina skimmed the article frantically, her heart thudding against her ribs so hard she could barely breathe.

Bizarre twist of fate re-opens 19-year-old case:

Blasting crews for the Charleston Bypass made a gruesome discovery when they uncovered the bodies of two murder victims in a small cave. First Sergeant Samuel Callaghan announced the remains have been positively identified as those

of Trooper Gail M. Forrest and Trooper Calvin P. Detworst, two undercover police officers missing since 1968. According to Callaghan, Forrest and Detworst were both shot execution style through the back of the head at close range.

continued on page B3.

Tina never turned the page.

Steve and Faith. Lettie. Hope had called her that in private, when they were away from Jesse. Lettie was the first true friend Tina had ever had. More like a sister, really. They told each other everything.

Almost everything.

Except that Letticia wasn't her real name. She was Gail Forrest. Steve had been Calvin Detworst. Cops, both of them. None of it had been real. All the stolen moments, all the confidences, all part of an investigation of Jesse. If they'd had been investigating Jesse, they'd been investigating Hope, as well.

That discovery warred with the other. Lettie hadn't just left without a word of warning. She'd been murdered. Executed, there on the other side of the mountain, down near where Hope had crashed Jesse's truck five years later. Tina searched the rest of the article. Someone had led the couple into a small, hidden cave, forced them to kneel in front of a pool of water, an underground lake, and shot them both through the back of the head.

Someone. Jesse. Who else would have had the power to persuade the two of them to climb around on the side of the mountain and explore some old cave in the middle of the night?

It didn't make any sense. Lettie was pregnant. Hope had spent enough time with Lettie—no, Gail, she reminded herself again—to know that she hadn't been faking the pregnancy. The article in the paper didn't mention that small detail, but then, perhaps Sam decided it was better to keep that information under wraps. Still, Gail wouldn't willingly have gone off on some hair-brained notion to climb around in the dark. Not even for Jesse.

If Jesse had gone, why hadn't Hope known about it? Back then they still shared the same bed. Still did nearly everything together. Tina remembered that night clearly. She and Jesse had gone to bed, back when they made love instead of just occasionally having sex. Steve and Faith had gone outside to allow them a little privacy. When Hope woke up the next morning, she and Jesse were alone.

Could Jesse have done it? Slunk out while she was asleep, lured the couple across the mountain, and murdered them in cold blood?

It didn't seem possible.

Yet Jesse would be the logical suspect. If Jesse had been a suspect, then she would be a suspect as well. The cops weren't going to find Jesse to question him. If they hadn't

found his body by now, then they weren't going to find it. They'd come looking for her, next.

The bodies were found Thursday. Someone should have already knocked on her door. They could be waiting for her when she went into work this morning.

It was Sam's investigation. Would he have to question her himself? Why hadn't he called her, told her what was going on? Why had she had to learn this from a newspaper article? The more she thought about it, the more certain Tina became that no one had come because Sam hadn't sent them. That meant he was trying to protect her. Why would he do that unless he thought she had something to hide?

She did have something to hide. Jesse's body. Had already hidden it. But she could truthfully say she had no idea where Jesse was now, and hadn't seen him for fourteen years. Sam knew that, too.

Or did he?

Sam had been an undercover cop, too. He'd never mentioned anything about two other undercover cops disappearing. It wasn't like he wouldn't have known. Especially when they sent him into the same area on what was probably the same assignment, though the paper didn't say. Sam had to have known about Steve and...Calvin and Gail. They wouldn't have sent Sam in and not told him.

They wouldn't have given up two officers without trying to find out what happened to them, either. They'd have sent someone in to find them. Someone like Sam. Someone like Spike. Someone who could get close to the people involved. Someone who would take his time and get people to trust him.

If Spike thought Jesse was involved, what better way was there to get information about him than through his wife?

Sam had always said the marker was Jesse's idea. She'd been shocked when Spike read the marker. Jesse laughed when Spike read it aloud. Spike and Jesse had argued about it. Spike wanted a dime bag. Jesse'd sold her cheap. She wasn't worth the ten dollars the dime bag would have brought him.

If Hope had known anything, she probably would have told Spike, had he asked. By that time, Hope had harbored no more illusions about Jesse. His glow had faded from a halo to a dim flicker which no longer blinded the eyes.

But Spike hadn't asked. Sam hadn't asked. The man and the persona he'd created were beginning to blend together in Tina's mind, until she could no longer tell which was which, which man she loved, which man to trust.

Sam hadn't called since he'd headed home Sunday afternoon.

She needed to hear his voice. Even then she wasn't sure she'd be able to tell for sure. Sam was a master at hiding from her. Tina reached for the phone. By now she knew the number by heart.

No answer. The answering machine wasn't even on. Sam always left the answering machine on. He used it to screen his calls.

Tina hung up and tried the number again, punching it in slowly this time, one digit at a time, listening for each note. Again, it rang and rang without any answer. She hung up and tried the barracks. "First Sergeant Sam Callaghan, please," she told the secretary.

"I'm sorry, Ma'am. First Sergeant Callaghan is not available. May I help you?"

"I really need to talk to Sam. When will he be back in?"

"I don't know, Ma'am."

Tina hesitated. The voice on the other end of the phone didn't exactly sound friendly. Or helpful. "You're Brenda, the dispatcher, aren't you?"

"Yes, Ma'am," the woman replied, her tone guarded.

"Don't you have a schedule?"

"Yes, Ma'am, but—I'm sorry. Who are you?"

"This is Tina. Sam brought me by the barracks to meet you."

Brenda's tone changed to genuine concern. "Sam—I thought he was with you, Ma'am."

Tina felt the panic creeping in. "I haven't seen him since Sunday. He had to be back to work Monday morning."

"I'm sorry, Ma'am. First Sergeant Callaghan has taken a leave of absence."

Tina nearly dropped the phone. "He *what*?"

"The First Sergeant—Sam just walked out. He left his badge on his desk. Didn't say when or if he was coming back. He—you read the article in the paper? They finally found his brother's body."

Tina felt the panic rising like the floodwaters behind a dam. "Calvin Detworst was Sam's brother?"

Brenda sounded close to tears, now. "Yes, Ma'am. The coroner has positively identified the bodies, but there never was much doubt. Sam was pretty sure as soon as he got to the site. He took it pretty bad."

He'd had to investigate the site himself. His own brother's murder. "Oh, God...."

"Ma'am, we've all been worried about Sam. Would you call if you hear from him?"

"I—of course. Thank you, Brenda." Tina laid the phone back in its cradle. She sat, staring into space, for several minutes, before Kara handed her a cup of hot tea. Kara, who listened, the way her father did, listened and observed. Kara, who reached for the phone now, and dialed a number she knew by heart.

"Grandpa? Hi, it's me, Kara. Grandpa, I think we're in some pretty serious trouble here."

Chapter Eleven

Friday, May 26th, 1989

Tina forced herself to go through the day as if it were just like any other day. Inside, her nerves were screaming. What if the blackmailer didn't know she'd bought the Eagle after the Pinto had been broken into? What if the blackmailer got away with the money? Daddy wouldn't expect it, but she'd have to pay it back. She couldn't take his money. Not now. Not after all these years of fighting to prove her independence.

Where the hell was Sam? He'd promised to see this thing through with them. He'd been gone now for almost a week. Just when she needed him most, he'd disappeared.

That wasn't fair. He'd lost his brother. Granted, the murders happened twenty years ago, but finding the bodies had to make it seem like a fresh wound.

Tina pulled the file Sam had requested three weeks ago. Liam Kelly. She stared at the picture until she'd memorized the face. Almost impossible to believe that the old man who was being released today was one of the most vicious criminals she'd ever known.

Could all of this be part of a twenty-year-old investigation? The cops who'd been here to question her so far hadn't even asked her about Steve and Lettie and the New Faith Commune. They were only interested in the land she'd sold to the State, and Jesse.

Daddy's lawyer was handling everything now. It was Daddy's money out there in the parking lot under the spare tire in the criminally ugly little Eagle, sitting out of sight in the main parking lot, while Tina waited here inside.

She hated waiting. She gave up pretending to be pulling records as she haunted the front lobby of the Administration Building. Shortly after 1:00 p.m. the main gate opened to release three men who'd served their time. Two of the three had rides waiting. The third man looked around briefly, then took off on foot, rounding the corner of the parking lot just out of sight. Tina lunged at the front window, hatred stronger than fear as she watched the man who had to be Crazy Horse head for her car.

A sound like raging thunder split the air, shaking the thick plate glass windows. She could feel the vibration as the glass quivered beneath her hands. She knew that sound. With a cry she spun and headed for the front door. The guards all knew her. The gates rolled open as she ran screaming toward the sound. She rounded the corner toward the parking lot in time to see the Harley slide to a halt, shooting gravel across the lot.

"Crazy Horse!" Spike roared.

For it was Spike, without a doubt. Light fractured off the heavy chrome studs attached to the black leather jacket's epaulets. His fists bristled with them. The

helmet...God, that helmet. A four-inch long spear tip protruded from its crown, some remnant of some forgotten war.

The hair beneath the helmet was short, of course. There hadn't been time for that to grow out. But a week's worth of heavy red beard blazed across that familiar yet alien face. The dark goggles rode high over the helmet, leaving the angry eyes exposed.

"Time to die, Crazy Horse!" The kickstand ground into the dirt. Spike vaulted off the Harley, his long legs eating up the ground that separated them.

"What the hell!" Crazy Horse spun to face the glittering chrome daemon headed for him on a collision course. "Spike? Why you want to kill me now?"

"Maybe you ain't been readin' your newspaper in here, Crazy Horse. They found my brother last week. In that cave where you put him."

"Now wait! You wait just a minute, there, Spike! I didn't have nothing to do with that! That was all Jesse and Clyde! Me an' Doc had no part of that! Besides, he was a cop, for God's sake! A friggin' cop!"

"He was my brother. He's dead, and somebody's gonna pay. If you don't want it to be you, you better give me Jesse and Clyde."

"Jesus Christ, Spike, Jesse's been gone for fifteen years, and even if I knew where to find him or Clyde, they'd kill me! You know they would!"

"Then I'll take you out first, so you can quit worrying about them." Spike raised one huge leather cover fist, bristling with deadly silver studs.

"All right! All right. I'll help you find them. Just don't kill me."

Spike turned on his heel like a soldier and vaulted back onto the Harley. He pitched a helmet at Crazy Horse. Looking around anxiously, Crazy Horse hesitated, then finally strapped on the helmet and swung up behind Spike, sitting well back to avoid the armored leather jacket.

"Sam!" Tina screamed, finding her voice and her feet at last. "Spike!"

She couldn't tell whether he'd even heard her. The old Hog shot off down the curving drive without a backward glance from Spike. Crazy Horse, however, had his eyes fixed over his shoulder on a '70 Buick LaSabre. The old boat crunched in the gravel and took off after the Harley at a discreet distance.

"Spike!" Tina screamed again as the old Harley roared out of sight. It was no good, and she knew it. Tina wondered if Sam had heard her at all over the noise of the revving Harley. She wondered if the Sam she knew even existed any more.

* * * * *

Sunday, May 28th, 1989

"Ma. You're wearing a hole in the carpet."

Tina glanced at Kara, then resumed her pacing.

"Ma, you're driving me friggin' nuts."

"Why hasn't he called? Why haven't I heard anything from anyone?"

Kara threw up her hands in frustration. "Who else is there to hear from? Crazy Horse, maybe? The man in the green Buick? I'm betting ol' Spike there has those boys pretty well occupied right now."

Tina continued her restless pacing.

Kara closed her notebook and stuffed the folders back in her backpack. "Who do you think was in the green Buick, anyway?"

Tina shrugged. "I'm not sure. None of these guys look like I remember them."

"Well, duh," Kara snorted. "Neither do you! I've seen pictures of you from your commune days. Long stringy hair and long wrinkled skirts and beads. You look stoned, too, and not very clean. What was this thing Hippies had with not bathing, anyway?"

Tina ignored the question. "I can't stand this. I've got to find out what's going on. I've got to find Sam."

"Well, you're not going to find him by wearing a hole in the carpet," Kara observed as she rooted around in the refrigerator. Her head disappeared from view.

Tina stopped her pacing to stare at the back of her daughter's shoulders. "You got any better ideas?"

Kara slammed the refrigerator with a resounding thud. "Well, we could try his *house*."

"I've called his house. There's no one there."

"That doesn't mean he hasn't been there. We can talk to Sam's neighbors. See if anybody's seen him. We check out your cabin. Anything's better than watching you mat down that ugly rug."

Tina crossed the living room now to place a damp kiss on her daughter's forehead. "Kara, you're a genius. Have I mentioned lately how much I love you? Go throw some stuff in an overnight bag. I'll call Doris and ask her to let you stay for a few days."

"Forget it, Ma. I'm going with you."

Kara was already halfway down the hall. "You have school!" Tina protested.

"Nothing's gonna happen this last week. We're off Thursday and Friday anyway and my tests are all over. I'll call the hospital and tell them I won't be in. Pack some warm stuff, Ma. It can get cold in the mountains, even if it is June."

Tina wondered vaguely when their roles had gotten reversed.

Seven hours later the ancient Eagle squeaked to a stop in front of the house where Tina had first come to realize how desperately she loved the big, red-bearded giant. Sam's little house was empty, now, but there was no mail in the mailbox and the garbage can sat beside the driveway ready for Monday morning's pick-up. Tina found the spare key Sam left under the flowerpot and let herself in to wait.

Three hours later she was about to give up and head for the cabin when she heard thunder rolling in. There was no mistaking the sound of that old Harley coming up the

road. Kara rushed out the door. Tina smiled at the excitement in her daughter's eyes. Despite her reservations about motorcycles in general, this one belonged to her father, and that, somehow, made all the difference.

For just a moment, Tina thought Sam, or rather Spike, from the looks of him, might keep right on going. It could have been her imagination, but it seemed as if he hesitated at the sight of the Eagle, before the helmet swiveled toward Kara. Tina waited on the bottom step of the front porch, hesitant to run after Kara, hanging onto her last shred of dignity. Then the Harley coasted to a stop, and the noise faded away. Spike caught Kara up in a fierce hug. As she slid back to the ground Sam's eyes sought Tina's across the driveway.

Dignity and reserve be damned. Tina flung herself off the bottom step and across the patch of concrete that separated them. Sam's long, unhurried strides closed the distance between them. He faced into the setting sun, his eyes wrinkled against the glare, making his expression difficult to read, but for once Tina didn't care. She met him more than half way, the last of the distance traversed by a leap that landed her with her arms around his neck.

"Sam, I — "

Strong arms crushed her against a hot leather jacket, and the world twirled by as Sam spun with her in a circle. A deep, rumbling laugh shook his towering frame. He silenced her babbling with a kiss that promised it was only the beginning. "Damn it's good to see you. It's been a hell of a long week."

"I couldn't stand it, Sam. Not knowing where you were, if you were all right. I called the barracks and Brenda said you'd turned in your gun and your badge, and..."

Tina fell silent as Sam kissed her again. His laughter settled itself into a quiet smile that crinkled the corners of his eyes. "You know, in all the time I've known you, this is the first time you've ever come looking for me."

"Oh, Sam," Tina breathed, his name a benediction. "I've looked for you every moment of every day since the first time I met you. I knew it was wrong, because I made a promise when I married Jesse, but you were always there, in a corner of my mind. I need you, Sam. You're all the things I've always wanted to be. You've always been faithful and loyal. God knows why you love me. I swear to you, if Jesse did this, he did it on his own. I didn't know, Sam. I really thought they just walked out on us. I missed Faith so badly. It must have been so terrible for you, not knowing what happened to your brother."

Sam wrapped an arm around her shoulders and propelled her toward the house and Kara. "Don't sell yourself short, Tina. You were more loyal to Jesse than any man ever deserved. You were faithful to your vows beyond all reason. I admit, I did wonder whether you might have been involved in the shootings, but then I realized you've always been honest with me, at least as far as what you have told me. When you didn't tell me things, it was because you were trying to protect me." Sam stopped and looked down into Tina's eyes. "Promise me something."

"Anything," Tina whispered, her soul in her eyes.

"Promise me you'll quit trying to take on the world by yourself. Promise me you'll let me help, just a little, from time to time, all right?"

"All right." She sealed the promise with another kiss.

"Ma!" Kara hissed, waving a hand toward the curious neighbors. "You're in public."

Sam turned his attention to Kara as well. "Daughter, I want you to know that I intend to kiss your mother as often as I possibly can. In fact, I rather thought I might ask her to marry me. With your permission, of course."

Kara made a face like sipping sour apples through a straw. "Well, you don't need to put on a show for the neighbors. That's embarrassing."

Tina laughed at that, and Sam let go of her long enough to give his daughter another hug. She laughed, too, at the way Kara's nose wrinkled up when Sam got close. "You need a bath," Kara informed him.

Sam tried to look affronted. "I had a bath just last week!"

"You need another one," Kara argued. "And clean clothes." Her nose wrinkled in distress. "You smell like burnt oil and wood smoke and a week's worth of missed showers!" She looked over at her mother suspiciously. "Did he smell this bad when you fell in love with him?"

Tina laughed again, enjoying the sound, and slipped an arm back around Sam's waist. "I lived in a house with no electricity and no running water. Sam was always a lot cleaner than I was, back then. Hippies didn't believe in deodorant and perfume and other artificial chemicals. We were all about the whole back to nature thing."

"I could never have been a Hippie," Kara decided, practicing her sour apple face again.

Tina smiled fondly at her daughter. "I can't say that breaks my heart, Darling."

Sam hugged them both again. "Come on in the house while I grab a shower, then I'll see what I can throw together for dinner." He bet to kiss Tina again. "Or maybe I should take you both out to dinner, and we'll come back to my place for dessert."

A blush rode high over Tina's cheeks. "Maybe you'll need another shower by then."

* * * * *

The sun was sinking low across the horizon as the three gathered around Sam's small kitchen table. Tina stabbed her last snow pea with more force than was necessary. "What I don't understand is why you were interviewing Craze Horse when you rode up to MCIH at the beginning of the month. What did you need to know that you couldn't have asked fifteen years ago?"

"I had another one of those dreams," Sam explained. "Like I was watching the murder take place. I was pretty sure Jesse didn't do it alone. So I started looking for 'The Rangers' again. Crazy Horse was the first one I found. Since then I've located Gunner

and Clyde, but they're doing time in Moundsville. That left Doc on the loose, and once I found Crazy Horse, Doc wasn't far behind."

"The green Buick."

"Yup." Sam gathered the dishes.

Kara shooed him away from the sink with surprising forcefulness. "You cooked. Mom and I will clean up."

Tina reluctantly moved to find a dishtowel. "You knew he was following you?"

"I figured once I rode off with Crazy Horse, Doc would try to get him back, rather than turn around and go after you and the money. There were half a dozen guards watching everything that was going on around you at that point. You were pretty safe."

"Where are Crazy Horse and Doc now?"

"In the regional jail, booked as accessories to murder."

Tina stopped her pacing. "For Steve and Lettie?"

"Yeah," Sam agreed. "Neither of them pulled the trigger, but they were all there."

Tina gave up the towel she wasn't using anyway and sat back down beside him. "Maybe you better start at the beginning."

* * * * *

Friday, May 26th, 1989

Sam pulled up at Jesse's cabin, ready to give the old Harley a rest. The bike had taken the trip pretty much in stride, even though it was almost thirty years old. Crazy Horse slid off the back, practically crawling up onto the porch. "Man, Spike," he complained, "If you're gonna kill me, you could a done it six hours ago. I gotta piss so bad I'm surprised I didn't lose it on the last stretch of road."

"You rode a bike half your life. Don't give me crap over a six-hour ride."

"Man, I spent the last six years behind bars, you know? I'm out a practice."

"Quit your bitching. You know where the outhouse is."

Crazy Horse looked surprised. "You ain't afraid I'll run off?"

Sam just smiled. "Go ahead. I might even give you a couple of hours head start before I track you down."

Crazy Horse scuttled off.

That old green Buick had shadowed them all the way from Hagerstown. Gunner and Clyde were behind bars again. That meant Doc would be the one hiding the car about now. Crazy Horse would be skulking off through the woods, looking over his shoulder, watching for Sam.

Sam drifted the Harley into the trees, hiding it well enough that neither of the old bikers would find it if they got away. He found the Buick less than a quarter of a mile down the lane. He popped the hood and pulled the coil wire, then made himself comfortable. Crazy Horse and Doc appeared in less than five minutes.

When the car wouldn't start, Doc went to look under the hood. Sam slammed the heavy hood down on Doc's head, knocking him out cold. He pulled his service revolver out of his shoulder holster as he turned to face Crazy Horse. "Step out of the car with your hands up!" Sam ordered. "Bring the car keys with you."

"The keys? Why you want the keys, man? She don't want to run."

"Don't try and think, Crazy Horse. It was never one of your strong points."

Crazy Horse climbed out slowly, keys in hand.

"Go open the trunk." Crazy Horse didn't look too happy, but he did what he was ordered to do. "Put Doc in the trunk."

"Oh, no, man. You can't put Doc in the trunk! He's, like, claustrophobic."

"Crazy Horse," Sam warned him "Put the God-damn body in the trunk before I blow your fucking head off!"

Crazy Horse dragged Doc around, but Sam had to help lift the body in. While Crazy Horse was bent over, trying to straighten Doc out, Sam grabbed him by the legs and flipped him in beside Doc. Sam slammed the truck lid just for good measure.

"Hey, man, don't leave me in here! I'm gonna die! I can't breathe, man!"

Sam fired one round from the .357 into the trunk where it wouldn't do any damage. Once the echo faded away, there was complete silence. "Crazy Horse. You still in there?"

"Yeah. Yeah, man. I'm still here."

"You gonna be quiet now till I tell you to talk?"

"Yeah. I can do that, man."

"All right."

"Spike?"

"What now?"

"I still gotta piss, man."

"Use the hole in the floor."

* * * * *

"So you left them in the trunk and drove them to the county jail?" Kara surmised.

Sam shrugged nonchalantly. "That's pretty much it."

"So why were they blackmailing me, and who killed Steve and Lettie?"

"Jesse had Clyde do it."

Tina 's voice broke as she turned to look out the window. "Why? What did Steve or Lettie ever do to Jesse?"

Sam took a deep breath. "It was all about money. Jesse was an illegal arms dealer, Tina. That's what he did with the pot money. Doc and Gunner were buying from Jesse and selling to other biker gangs all over the country. The story around the bikers was

that Jesse was going to start one of those survivalist camps up there on that mountain, but Calvin never bought it. He wasn't sure exactly what Jesse was up to or why, but he knew Jesse had guns and money stashed everywhere. That's what Calvin was there to investigate. I think Calvin was getting too close. Jesse told Doc and Gunner he thought Calvin was a Fed.

"Crazy Horse said Jesse told them Calvin and Gail would be down at the cave that night. That's where Clyde found them. You know the rest. Calvin went for his gun, and Clyde shot them both."

"That's absurd!" Tina snapped. "Jesse hated guns!"

Sam met anger levelly. "It wasn't marijuana I was up there on the mountain investigating, Tina. I picked up the case where Calvin left off. He was trying to track down the source of a major gun smuggling operation. He found it, but he got killed in the process. Unfortunately he didn't leave me much to go on. It took me four years to get close to Jesse. If Jesse hadn't disappeared, I'd have brought him in by the end of the summer, for buying and selling stolen military weapons. Doc was blackmailing you because Jesse still owed them a final shipment of \$180,000 worth of weapons when he disappeared."

Chapter Twelve

"I don't believe it." Tina was pacing across Sam's carpet again.

"Tina, why would I lie to you? Now? After all these years?"

"Why *would* you lie to me, Sam? Why didn't you mention anything about guns back in my apartment when we were talking about where Jesse's pot money went?"

Sam's eyes took on the wounded, worried look of a man in way over his head. "I was working a Cop Killing, Tina. It was still an open case. I know now who killed Calvin and Gail. I didn't last Friday. We weren't working on this case last Friday. We were trying to catch a blackmailer. I've taken care of that. Crazy Horse and Doc are back behind bars, where they belong, and they going to stay there this time."

Tina's eyes flashed with anger. "We were supposed to be coming clean about the past, Sam. My ex-husband was dealing with hundreds of thousands of dollars, selling weapons to outlaw bikers, stealing money from them, and two people were murdered, all behind my back, and it didn't matter? What if Crazy Horse hadn't confessed? When were you going to tell me, Sam? You said we'd never had trust between us. I thought that was all my fault, but it wasn't, was it? When were you going to trust me enough to tell me the truth?"

Sam's flushed dark red.

Tina continued, her voice soft now, soft, yet amplified in its condemnation. "You didn't tell me because you couldn't tell me, could you, Sam? You couldn't tell me because I was part of your investigation. An investigation that was never closed."

Sam shook his head at that. "No. No, it's not an open investigation, not now, Tina. I don't believe you had anything to do with Calvin and Gail's deaths. If I did, I wouldn't have told you even now. I have some integrity left. I wouldn't compromise an investigation. Not even to save our relationship."

His voice was low and tinged with bitterness. The cool voice of reason called to Tina, begging her to pull back from this precipice before it was too late, but, much like Jesse's old truck once it finally started rolling, there was nothing to do now but try to keep from getting swept over the edge with it. The rest of the questions would be asked. The ones that had nagged at her once Sam disappeared. Her voice was cold, now, cold and unforgiving. "Whose idea was it to put my name on that marker, Sam?"

Sam met her eyes, his own a bleak sea of defeat. "Is that what you're thinking? Is that what you want to hear? Fine. It was my idea, Tina. Mine. Everything was my fault, all right?"

"No! No, it's not all right! Did you think, if I really had known what Jesse was up to, that I would sell out my husband for a hot shower and a good fuck? Jesse didn't drag

me up that mountain at gunpoint. I was there because I believed in a dream. But I watched Jesse's dream twist him into something horrible and ugly, and still, I couldn't give up on him until that poker game. I thought if Jesse valued me that little, then there was nothing left."

Angry tears streamed down her face, but her voice didn't falter. "I trusted you, Sam. I loved you! I would have left my husband for you, if I hadn't thought it would get you killed. I've told you things I could go to prison for. But you stood there in my apartment one week ago and promised to be honest with me, and it was all a lie. Jesse had his objectives, and now you have yours, and I've never been anything more than a pawn in a game where I never knew all the rules. Well, I'll tell you something. In the end, you and Jesse, you're the same. I've had enough. I'm through with the lies and with playing by other people's rules. From now on, I make the rules."

Tina turned and stalked out the door, barely giving Kara time to hurry after her before the Eagle left a surprising screech of tires in its wake as it peeled away from the curb.

Blaring 70's rock faded to silence as still as the hole in Sam's heart.

* * * * *

They rode in silence for a while, winding through the back roads up the side of the mountain.

"Mom?"

"What is it, Dear?"

"I been thinkin'."

"Yeah? What have you been *thinkin'*?" Tina teased, trying to lighten the mood a notch.

Kara's pencil was tapping again. "Jesse stole \$180,000 from a pretty nasty bunch of outlaw bikers."

Tina sighed. "I doubt Doc would lie about that."

"I figured Jesse had money stashed. A quarter of a million dollars."

Tina let her tone go serious. "I'm with you so far."

"But I was all wrong about the money. I had to have been. Jesse wasn't holding on to that money, he was investing it. Let's say he took his \$50,000 every year and invested it in weapons. He'd have had to make a huge markup to make it worth the risk."

"Good Lord! You're talking about...How much money are you talking about?"

"I don't know. Maybe as much as a quarter of a million a year in profit. At the end of those five years, Jesse could have had over a million in cash and another \$200,000 in ripped off weapons. He also has a wife he no longer needs—a woman who's six months pregnant with another man's child. Then, to top it all off, there's an undercover cop hard on his trail and two more dead cops less than a mile away, lying in the cave he

used to use for his stash. Try to think about this from his point of view. If you were Jesse, what would you do next?"

Tina had to work to keep her attention focused on the road. Kara sat waiting for her mother to work it through in her mind, waiting and tapping her pencil against the worn steno pad to the beat of a discordant drummer.

It was nearly impossible to struggle past the one million-dollar mark. When she did, she ran through the whole scenario again, just to make sure. The conclusion she came to sent icicles down her spine. "I'd split. Disappear. Leave town. Fake my own death. Leave a witness behind who'd swear I was dead, should anyone ever come looking for me."

"Could he have done it? Could Jesse have convinced you he was dead?"

Tina thought about it, still struggling to force all the pieces to fit into her changing reality. "If he'd been prepared, if he'd planned it, he could have taken that fall and survived. Stunt men do things like that all the time."

Kara sped up her beat, still the syncopated drummer. "What about the breathing thing, and the pulse?"

Tina nodded slowly, as if agreeing with herself. "He was lying there, all twisted up, and he wasn't moving. I never even checked his pulse."

Kara abandoned her drumstick to doodle on the pad again, her brows drawing down into a perplexed frown. "Still, that all leaves too much to chance. You could have killed him, trying to dump his body."

"No. No, I don't think so." Tina focused her eyes on the past. "I think he planted some of those ideas in my head. I remembered him saying, more than once, that if the truck ever ran off that cliff, up by the pot field, it would get lost down there in those trees, and it would be years before anyone ever found it. I thought he was threatening me. Telling me he could kill me and get away with it. But he could have been planting the idea in my head. If he is dead, why didn't the State find his body down there, too?"

Kara put down her pen. "If he's alive, where is Jesse now? Is he the one that broke into the car, after all? And where's all that money? What did he need that kind of money for in the first place?"

For the first time in years, Tina thought of Jesse without a trace of the old fear. "Jesse's alive, that son-of-a-whore. One way or the other, this has to end. I can't live the rest of my life looking over my shoulder for Jesse Chapman. This has got to end."

Kara drew a hangman game on her steno pad. "So if Jesse's alive, where do we look for him? With that kind of money he could be anywhere."

"I'm willing to bet it was Jesse who trashed the car back in February. Chances are, the money is gone. Whatever wild scheme he had in mind probably blew up in his face. No matter what Doc told Sam, I think Jesse's somewhere close. He's been shadowing my movements for months."

The hangman game had two legs and a body now. "So how do we find him, and, more important, what do we do when we find him?"

I kill him, Tina thought, like I should have had the guts to do before you were born. She didn't voice the thought aloud. Kara had enough to worry about. "I can't just wait for him to find us. If Jesse wants me, he's going to find me. I think I just need to pick the time and place."

Kara broke the point on her pencil. "You mean set a trap for him? That's pretty dangerous, Mom!"

Tina studied Kara's face, memorizing, once again, the curve of her jaw, so much like her own, the tilt of her lips, which always reminded her of Sam's quirky smile. "You're right. It could be dangerous. Which is why it's time for you to go home."

"Mom! You can't take me home now!"

Tina laughed at that. "Kara, that was dangerously close to a whine."

Kara laughed, too, and did a better job of it. "Ma!"

Tina's laughter trailed away. "I love you, Baby. You're the most important thing in my life. You're the one thing Jesse could use against me. Things are going to heat up around here, and I can't risk that. I'm going to send you to my father's."

Kara sighed dramatically. "Well, I haven't spent much time with Grandpa lately. He is getting older."

He is, Tina thought. *I've never really gotten to know him*. "We'll stop and get some ice-cream at the little store up ahead, and I'll use the pay phone and ask Dad to send a car down for you. It's about a thirteen-hour drive from Connecticut. We can pick up a few groceries, and spend the night at the cabin. It's not much, but it's cheaper than a motel, and you really ought to see the place where you were born."

"Oh, goody," Kara muttered. "Outhouses and snakes. I can hardly wait."

* * * * *

As she banked the fire for the night, Tina glanced over at her sleeping daughter. She should have brought Kara here years ago. Without Jesse's memory hanging over the place, it had a kind of rustic charm. They could have spent some of those missed vacations here, walking the woods together, hiking the trails. There were so many things she still needed to teach Kara. So many things they still had to learn together. She prayed, silently, that they would get the chance. Before she slipped into bed, Tina checked the bar on the door once again, and the hasp on the shuttered windows.

In her duffel bag beside the bed, within easy reach, lay the .38 Special she'd purchased. Tina said yet another prayer that, somehow, she could manage to stop Jesse without having to use the gun. She felt calm, now, calm and determined. It was easier, knowing Jesse was alive, facing a real threat, instead of living in fear of the past. For she knew, without a doubt, that Jesse was out there, and that their showdown was coming.

If an inner voice cried out with an echoing grief over the hole in her heart where Sam should have fit, Tina refused to listen, for it was he who'd framed the betrayal. With all his talk of honesty, it was Sam who'd failed to measure up. Yet as she pressed her lashes tight together, trying to find the sweet release of sleep, it was Sam's anguished eyes that haunted her.

* * * * *

"Daddy! Daddy, help me!"

Sam woke up, drenched in sweat, his arms raised, reaching for his little girl. He didn't stop to wonder how dragons had made it into his world. He didn't need to know, and he didn't care. His baby was in trouble. Kara was in trouble, and she had called him Daddy.

* * * * *

"Mom?" Kara rolled upright, examining the dirt floor doubtfully before she carefully placed her feet on it. "I been thinkin'."

"Last time you did that my ex-husband came back to life."

"Yeah." Kara pulled her jeans back on. "What you're going to try to do, catching Jesse, it could be pretty dangerous. You could use some help."

Tina shook her head vehemently. "No way, Honey. I have to know you're safe. I can't take a chance on Jesse getting his hands on you."

"That's not what I meant." Kara met her mother's eyes directly, adopting her lecturing stance. "You were really hard on Sam last night. I know what Sam did was wrong, but I can understand why he did it, too. He's a cop. He had a job to do. That job didn't include falling in love with you or trying to get you to leave Jesse. He took Jesse's marker to try to get you off this mountain."

Kara took a deep breath, apparently realizing this just wasn't going to get any easier. "Mom, you don't have to forgive Sam. But I want you to promise me, if you get in trouble, you'll let Sam help you. He is still a cop, Mom, and he loves you. Whatever else he's done, I have to believe that part. You can trust him."

Tina stared at her daughter, this stranger who was so familiar, silently for a moment before she circled the table to take Kara in her arms. "I love you, Honey," was all she could think to say.

Kara wasn't about to relent that easily. "Promise me, Mom."

"I promise."

Kara frowned suspiciously. "What are you promising?"

Tina laughed at that, a shaky little ghost of a laugh. "I promise that, if I get in trouble, I'll trust Sam enough to let him help me, even if he is an egotistical overbearing ass."

"Because?"

Tina hugged Kara more tightly. "Because you asked me to, and because Sam loves me, and because, no matter how mad I am at him, I still love him, and I guess I really do trust him, even if he didn't tell me everything. He didn't do it to hurt me."

Kara pushed Tina away gently. "Good. Go tell him that. He just pulled up out front."

Tina tugged a hand through her hair self-consciously as she moved quickly—she wasn't running—to unbar the door. Tina wasn't running, either, as she crossed the front porch and nearly tripped down the steps toward the cruiser parked in front of her door.

"Where's Kara?" Sam demanded by way of a greeting. His eyes were tight and worried. He looked older than he had just yesterday.

Tina felt her enthusiasm dim abruptly. "She's just getting dressed. Why?"

Sam shut the door and slumped back against the car, wiping a hand across his face in a gesture that was somehow heart wrenching. "Everything's all right, then."

"Sam? What aren't you telling me?"

His eyes focused on the cabin's roofline. "I guess it was just a dream. A bad dream, that's all. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come out here."

His hand was in his pocket, touching whatever it was he comforted himself with when he was distraught. Tina took a step closer, and laid a hand on his arm. His skin felt warm, almost hot beneath her fingers. "Sam?"

His eyes met hers again. Hollow, aching eyes.

"Most people, when they argue, both sides have something to say."

"What do I say, Tina? You were right. I did exactly what you said I did. I knew I should tell you everything, and I didn't."

"Why?"

"Isn't that obvious? To get you into my bed. Why else?" He would have moved, turned away, gotten back into his car, she supposed, and driven back out of her life, but the pressure of her hand held him there.

Tina stared up at the big man, marveling at her own power. He had eight inches on her in height. He could easily have picked her up and set her out of his way. But he stayed. One hand on his arm, and he stayed. "Sam, you didn't wait that long without some good reason. I was a married woman—married to Jesse. You knew how dangerous he was, even more than I did. Why then? Why me?"

Sam's voice was little more than a whisper. "I violated the first rule of undercover work, Tina. I knew it was wrong. You were married to the primary suspect in a major investigation. But the farther I got into this thing, the closer I got to Jesse. I could see he was killing you, a little at a time. I thought if I could just get you away from him, even

for a weekend, you'd see you didn't have to put up with a man who'd treat you the way Jesse did. I was never supposed to make love to you. I'd waited for years. I thought I could wait a little longer. Long enough for you to leave him on your own. Long enough to marry you. But I was wrong."

The tendons in his arm jumped steadily under her hand, as if his fingers were turning a coin over and over. Tina frowned up at him, trying to understand. "You waited for years? What are you talking about? You didn't even know me, Sam."

A wistful smile of remembrance played across Sam's face. "I've known you since I was a kid. For as long as I can remember, I dreamed about you. We were two kids, at first. You followed me from one foster home to another. I knew your laughter. The sound of your voice. The curve of your lips. The color of your hair. In the dreams, I knew everything about you. Sometimes the dreams were more real than being awake. As I got older, I realized I was falling in love with you. I looked for you everywhere, but I found you when I wasn't even looking. You were bent over, hair hanging almost to the ground, weeding the garden. When you heard the Harley, you looked up. Everything about you was just the way I'd always pictured you. Except that you were married to Jesse."

Tina slipped her arms around him and laid her head against his chest. "Oh, Sam. I wish I'd waited for you. I wish I'd had that kind of believing, to know that there was someone out there like you, looking for me, waiting to love me. I've made so many mistakes in my life. I don't want you to be one of them. Whatever happens, I'll always love you."

Strong arms wrapped around her, like a steel trap closing its jaws. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "I made a mess of things right from the first. I wanted to tell you the truth, but I was afraid. Afraid you wouldn't be able to trust me. Afraid I'd lose you."

"I love you, Sam," Tina offered, because it was all she had to give. "Things are probably never going to be really easy with us. I have a nasty temper and I jump to conclusions, and they're usually the wrong ones, but I do love you. If we make it through this I'll move to your little farm in Morgan County or to Charleston or to wherever I have to go to be with you, if you'll still have me, because I need to be wherever you are, Sam. I need to know I'll always be with you."

Those steel arms shifted their hold until gentle fingers tilted her face up, so that those incredibly blue eyes met hers. "Would you marry me?"

Tina just blinked at him in confusion. "What?"

"Tina, I love you. I want you to be my wife. Will you marry me?"

Jesse and the guns and the money all seemed so far away, like a surreal twist in a novel somewhere. "There's nothing on this earth I'd rather do than marry you."

His eyes closed and he took several long, deep breaths. "When?"

"Today. This afternoon. I bet you know a judge somewhere in Charleston."

He laughed at that. "I want a real wedding, Tina. In a church. I didn't wait this long to drag you off to some Justice of the Peace."

Tina sighed, and let reality creep back in. "That's going to take a while. Churches take time, and Catholic churches take even more time. Before we can plan anything like that we've got to solve one little problem. I'm not quite sure how to tell you this, but I'm afraid Jesse's really not quite dead just yet."

At first she thought it was a sob that shook Sam's chest. But it came again, and the harder he tried not to, the harder he laughed, until finally he had to sit down on the bottom step next to the cruiser, pulling her down beside him. "Is that all?" he managed at last.

Her eyes flashed with anger again. "Is that all? Isn't that enough?"

"Hell, I may just have to kill Jesse myself this time!" Sam decided. "It looks like that's the only way the son-of-a-bitch is ever going to leave us alone."

Chapter Thirteen

It was Sam, temporarily stripped of his uniform shirt, who finally managed to coax breakfast from the finicky little camping stove, while Tina and Kara explained their theories about Jesse's disappearance.

"I just don't understand how I could have known so little about Jesse's other life," Tina finished with a frustrated sigh. "Guns and money and clandestine meetings. What I don't understand is why? All of that risk, all of the work, and for what? Jesse was living just the same as I was. What did he gain by all of that?"

Sam looked out the front door, knowing it was time to lay everything out on the table. "Some men will do anything for a cause. Jesse was a passionate man."

Tina froze at that. She felt something oppressive settle in the air around her. "There's more, isn't there? Tell me the rest, Sam."

"Did your father ever talk to you about *Clan Na Gaul*?"

"If he did I was doing my best not to listen. Dad was involved in a lot of Irish organizations."

Sam settled on the cabin steps, looking out across the mountains. "Jesse's real name was James McFarland. He was born in County Cork, Ireland. Jesse's father Colin was a member of the militant, non-sanctioned branch of the IRA. He was forced to leave Ireland when things got too hot during the Border Campaigns in the late '50's. Colin McFarland brought his wife and two young sons to the U.S. under the sponsorship of members of the Irish National Caucus—a Catholic human rights group based in this country. Jesse's father was asked to leave the Irish National Caucus back in the early '60's. He was just too militant.

"After they were thrown out, McFarland and his supporters formed a new group of their own. We think they were associated loosely with *Clan Na Gaul*, a secret U.S. arm of the provisional IRA, nominally in charge of raising money. We couldn't be sure just where Colin's group fit into the puzzle. No one can even prove *Clan Na Gaul* actually exists. Theory has it they're a group of prominent US businessmen with Irish ancestry. They don't allow anything that would attract attention to themselves. Jesse's drug money and arms running would have been way too flashy for those guys. In any case Jesse was supplying a lot of money to somebody, and he was breaking a lot of laws to get that money."

Tina just stared at Sam, trying to work her mind around the sudden onslaught of information. It was Kara, the analytical one, who caught the flaw in Sam's story. "That all sounds more like a job for the Feds than a State Police Officer."

Sam met her eyes, a lopsided grin pulling at his mouth. "You're right. It was a coordinated investigation, spearheaded by the FBI. I was lucky. I was unknown as a cop

and I looked the part. I doubt the Fed's would have even considered me if they'd realized I was only twenty-one at the time. It was a pretty big assignment for a rookie cop."

"And you risked it all to get me off this mountain," Tina marveled.

Sam ran his fingers along the curve of her jaw. "I thought you were worth it. I still do."

Tina moved into the circle of his arms, feeling a little chilled. "I bought every lie Jesse ever told me. Including that last, big one. I was convinced he was dead before I even got down off that ladder. I never really considered anything else. Maybe I wanted him to be dead so badly that I saw what I wanted to see. Even when the letters came, I felt like I was dealing with a ghost."

Sam shook his head, looking puzzled. "I never even looked for Jesse after he disappeared, I was so sure he was dead. When I saw him in my dream, there was no question about it. Sometimes the dreams are clear as day, and sometimes they're more-sort of symbolic, I guess. This morning I dreamed that Kara had been snatched away by a big black dragon."

Kara laughed at that. "My grandfather's sending a car down for me, but I doubt it'll look much like a dragon."

Tina smiled. "I don't think even Daddy could get anything that flies in here. There isn't even room for a helicopter to land."

Sam looked up in surprise. "You're sending Kara to your father's?"

Tina sighed. "I know, I don't usually have much good to say about the man, but he's Kara's grandfather. I don't always agree with him, in fact I hardly ever agree with him, but I do trust him. Kara will be safe there until this is over."

"He's got lots of high tech security stuff all around his place," Kara put in. "Mom calls it Fort Knox."

Sam smiled at that, at least a little smile pulled at one side of his mouth, but he still looked troubled, and Tina laid her hand over his. "The dreams don't always have to mean there's a disaster coming, Sam. You said you used to dream about me, and I'm not always a disaster, am I?"

That, at last, coaxed a full-fledged smile that reached clear to his eyes. "No. You aren't always a disaster. Most of the time, but not always. It's only emotional havoc you set loose in my life."

"It's my mission," Tina agreed.

A limo pulled into the yard at 10 AM, surprising even Tina with its early arrival. "That's not Granddaddy's driver," Kara pointed out, sounding a little worried, as a tall, thin man emerged from the driver's door. He wore the uniform of a limo driver, but without the expensive tailored look Ward would have insisted on. Instantly on the alert, Sam circled the car, examining the license plate before he reached the driver's side. He didn't have his weapon drawn, but his hand rested on the .357's worn wooden grip.

"Virginia?" Sam made the word an accusation.

"Yes, sir. We're out of Lexington, Virginia. Dispatch received the instructions by fax a little after 8 AM. I had a hell of a time finding this place, or I'd have been here earlier." The driver extended a printed order.

Sam held it out to Tina without ever taking his eyes off the driver or his hand off his service revolver. "Stay in the house, Kara," he ordered brusquely. "I'm going to need a couple of minutes to check this company out."

If Sam was surprised to see the .38 special in Tina's hand, he didn't let it show. She read the order carefully, then handed it back to Sam. "It's Daddy's address and phone number, although I don't recognize the fax number. I didn't know Daddy had a fax line put in, but it figures he would. As for the credit card information, I can't tell you anything about that, except that Daddy's perfectly capable of charging a bill like that without thinking twice about it. It would keep his driver from having to make a twenty-six hour round trip."

Sam nodded curtly. "Keep a close eye on things while I have Brenda check out the company." He took the fax back and headed for his car radio.

"I'm not handing my daughter over to a stranger without knowing everything's legitimate, you understand?"

"I understand, Ma'am," the driver agreed. "I would expect nothing less, if she was my daughter."

Sam returned within minutes. "The company's legit, and they did send out this car at 8 AM," Sam confirmed. "I asked Brenda to authenticate the order with your father, but she couldn't get through. The line was busy. Do you want to wait and have her try again?"

Tina looked the fax over carefully again. The pistol disappeared into the back of her waistband. "No, I guess not. It looks like my dad's signature on the letter. I guess I'm just getting a little paranoid."

"A little paranoia can be a good thing," Sam reflected.

Tina packed Kara and her things into the limo. She had to bite her lip to keep it from trembling as she bestowed a parting hug. "I love you, Baby. Have a safe trip."

"Be careful, Ma. I love you too."

Sam stepped forward, a little shyly, as if unsure whether he had a place in those good-byes, but Kara settled the question by throwing her arms around his neck. "Take good care of Ma!"

"I will, Honey. I love you."

Kara squirmed uncomfortably at the unfamiliar sentimentality. "Yeah, I know. You're growing on me, big guy. Take care of yourself, too, you know?"

"I will," Sam promised.

Tina waved long after she was out of sight. Tina was the first to speak, her voice low. "Tell me I did the right thing."

Sam pulled her close. "You did what you had to do, Tina, and you know it. Jesse'd have used her against you. You know he would have. I'd rather have her here, but she'll be safer at your father's."

They stood side by side, looking out across the valley, until a cool breeze washed over them. Tina rubbed her arms, shivering slightly. Sam turned her gently, his arm around her waist, and they walked back to the cabin.

The silence between them felt heavy, oppressive.

Sam reached into his pocket again as they climbed the front steps. He started to pull something out, then once again he seemed to change his mind.

"Say it, Sam. Whatever is on your mind, just say it."

"I was serious. About getting married."

"I know you were. So was I. Nothing would make me happier. Well, dancing a jig at Jesse's funeral might come close."

He didn't laugh. Instead he stopped at the doorway and turned to face her. "I bought this for you, years ago."

She gaped at the small, worn box he placed in her hand. Once it had been covered with deep blue velvet. It was worn, now, with the cares of the years showing plainly across its surface, as if he'd handled it like a worry stone in his pocket. Tina opened it cautiously, afraid the box might fall apart in her hands. There was a ring inside. A ruby, surrounded by a ring of tiny diamonds. "It's beautiful," she exclaimed, her voice an awed whisper. "I've never seen a more lovely ring."

Sam stuffed his hands back in his pockets, looking embarrassed. "I'll probably have to have it re-sized. I didn't have a clue what size you were. Your hands always looked so small, and fragile. I was supposed to take you in to have it sized to fit you."

"You meant to give this to me, that weekend, after the poker game," she deduced. "When you asked me to stay. When you asked me not to come back here to the mountain."

His eyes focused somewhere out across the tree line. "That was the plan."

Tina gently pried the ring from the tiny box. She started to slide it on, then changed her mind, and held out her hand to him. "Here. You do this. That's the way it's supposed to be done, isn't it?"

Her hand did look almost tiny against his two larger ones. His felt warm and slightly damp. For some reason, the knowledge that she could affect him so brought a jolt of pleasure to Tina's heart.

Sam reached for her hand. Tina suddenly remembered the plain gold band she'd worn all these years. "Wait," she insisted.

He paled. "You're not going to change your mind are you?"

"No! It's just—I need to take this one off. I bought it at a pawn shop, years ago, when I worked as a waitress. I didn't—I mean I know we never made any promises to

each other, Sam, but I didn't want to date anyone else. I always felt sort of slimy when guys hit on me. Like I was somehow being unfaithful to you."

"I felt the same way," he confessed. "Keep it, until I can replace it with something better." He left her worn gold band where it was, sliding the ruby ring, warmed from his touch, into place beside it. "I love you, Tina. I love you with all my heart."

Tina answered him the only way she knew how, not with words, but with a kiss that conveyed better than words her hopes, her fears, her dreams for their future. "Make love to me," she whispered. "Lock the world outside, just for a little while longer, and make me forget that there's anyone in it but you and me. Make me believe I'll always be this happy. That everything will always be as perfect as this ring."

Deep blue eyes studied hers for a long moment, as if searching for the secrets of her soul, before he scooped her up and carried her inside the cabin. Without setting her back on the ground, he turned and dropped the bar across the door.

When he set her down in front of the bed, his hands were shaking. "Tina, last night –"

"I said some pretty awful things."

Sam swallowed hard. "I deserved every word of it. I should have given the ring to you all those years ago, trusted you with all of it back then. We lost so many years because I was afraid. I realized last night just what that fear has cost me. I thought I'd lost you again, Tina. I was afraid that by the time I got here this morning you'd be gone. I almost tossed that ring out into the river. It's come to represent for me all the things that have been missing in my life, and all those things are wrapped up in you." His hands were busy as he spoke, unbuttoning her jeans and pulling her T-shirt over her head, his fingers worshipping the skin they touched as he stripped the fabric away. His eyes were dark with a desire that went far beyond the flesh, a desire to touch more than her skin.

When she stood before him, naked, Sam lowered his mouth to caress everywhere his fingers had been with tiny kisses. He traced his way down until the difference in their heights made the journey awkward, when he stopped to lead her to the bed. His hands left her skin long enough to fumble with his clothing.

"Let me do that," she whispered, her voice thick with desire, as his fingers reached for the buttons on the green uniform shirt. He smiled down at her tenderly, satisfying himself with just one kiss as he laid the gunbelt out of the way. His eyes slid almost closed as she ran her fingers down long, hard muscled arms, following the crisp fabric of the shirt with the clean white undershirt. Her hands kept busy as she played a dozen kisses across that hard, lean chest. By the time the pants hit the floor, his cock was as hard as a randy teenager's. His breath came in deep drags as he worked to maintain his control.

Tina shattered that control with just one kiss, circling the head of his engorged shaft with the tip of her tongue.

A shudder shook his frame. "Christ!" Sam exploded. "Have mercy, woman!"

Tina teased him with a low, seductive laugh as she pulled him down onto the bed. "No mercy. No mercy for the wicked. As for me, I intend to be very wicked today."

Sam caught her in those powerful arms and held her where he could reach her mouth with a fiercely possessive kiss. "I—Tina, there's a lot I don't know about being wicked yet. Maybe—maybe you'll have to teach me."

"It'll take some time, but I think you're worth the investment," Tina assured him, both amused and pleased with his tongue-tied response. "There's a whole lot I'm looking forward to teaching you."

Sam opened his eyes again, drawing a sharp breath. "I promise to be an avid pupil. But if you try that again just now, I'm liable to embarrass myself." He reached for her again, kissing his way slowly down the underside of her chin, then drifted lower, until he gently nuzzled her breasts. Her body arched toward his questing tongue.

His kisses spread down over her belly and along the ridge of her hip bone as demanding fingers parted the dark triangle of soft curls below. A cry of surprise and delight shook her as his one finger on the hand caressing her ass pressed gently against her anus. "I definitely didn't teach you that!" she gasped as his finger gently demanded entry.

"Some things I can figure out on my own."

She couldn't. She couldn't take any more. Tina wanted to protest, but the room seemed to be going dimmer, and someone was screaming as the waves of pleasure washed over her. Sam sucked hard on her clit as his fingers probed her, punishing as they rode in and out of her slick, wet pussy, stretching her anus as he slid his finger up farther. She screamed again, her hands fisted in his hair, pushing his face down harder against her as he sent her spiraling into oblivion.

When she could breathe again, Tina set about exacting her revenge. Sam fought to hold her captive, but she twisted in his arms, turning until she could reach her prize—his cock, ripe as a fresh peach, and ready to burst at the seams. She wrapped both fists around him until nothing showed above her fingers but the rich, dark maroon of the head. She ran her tongue around the outside ridge, then slowly, deliberately, across the delicate crown. The fingers invading her pussy pushed harder, attacking, demanding her concentration. She wrapped her lips around the thick, dark head of his penis and sucked.

The tongue working her pussy went still. "Sweet Jesus, woman. Can't you see I'm working, here? You're distracting me."

Laughing, she slid her hands down to his balls, rolling them gently in her fingers as she took his length into her mouth. She was pretty sure he was saying his rosaries again. Laughter shook her as she tongued the large vein that pulsed down the underside of his cock, alternately teasing and soothing as he trembled beneath her touch.

The rosaries weren't working. His hips thrust toward her, a first light, experimental thrust, almost against his will, then stronger, in a cadence that moved with his fingers,

working again in her pussy now, stronger, faster. The rhythm built again as his tongue went to work once more, finding every sensitive nerve she tried to hide from his onslaught and attacking. Soon her hips moved with his, so that they danced to the same music, faster, faster now, her body aching for release even as his balls tightened and contracted in her hands.

He fought her for a moment, trying to hold off, but she demanded, slipping one hand back behind his balls to probe for the opening that he tried to hide from her. She distracted him, sucking harder as she slid her lips up and down the length of his hot, slippery shaft. He softened, relaxing again as his attention shifted back to assaulting her clit, his fingers once again driving into her in short, hard jabs.

She broke, her hips curling hard against him as her muscles tightened convulsively around his fingers. She couldn't scream with his cock pulsing hot and demanding in her mouth. So she did the next best thing, slipping her forgotten finger deep into his ass. She wasn't sure if she'd done it right—she knew she hadn't had time to find his prostate yet, but his thrusting went wild. He bucked against her helplessly, no longer trying to hold back.

"Sweet Jesus," she heard him murmur against her clit. Her laughter bubbled in waves over the length of his cock. And then she didn't hear anything as his tongue went to work again. A noise like the ocean roared in her ears even as his balls pulled up hard, delivering a hot gushing release into her mouth. She found the hard lump of his prostate and rubbed, sending him thrashing against her even as she convulsed around his fingers and demanding tongue, wave after wave of pleasure pushing her past her endurance.

"You are trying to kill me," he gasped when they both remembered to breathe at last. He shifted his grip, pulling her up and into his arms.

When they lay together quietly at last, Tina's head resting on Sam's chest, she allowed her thoughts to drift into the past. "I thought I knew a good bit about sex. I was married, after all. But I don't remember it being fun before. I don't remember laughing much before I met you, Sam. Thank you for that. Thank you for bringing laughter into my life."

Sam smiled at her, a lazy, wondering smile, and pulled her up to where he could kiss her again. "I love you," was all he could think of to say.

It was enough. It would always be enough.

Chapter Fourteen

"Tina. Tina, wake up, darlin'. You've got to get dressed. There's a car coming up the lane. I think we've got trouble."

Sam's voice sounded worried.

Tina roused herself with an effort, feeling confused and disoriented. Fortunately, she hadn't had many articles of clothing to begin with. She yanked her T-shirt over her head, then nearly fell flat on her face trying to pull on her panties and shake out her jeans at the same time. She could only find one of her sandals. "Can you see who it is?"

Sam didn't answer. Tina stopped searching for her other shoe long enough to look up at him. She hadn't taken the time to do that since his voice had called her back from the land of pleasant dreams. What she saw now was his backside, broad at the shoulders, narrowing in the hips, all muscle and raw power, blocking the doorway. He was already neatly decked out in his short-sleeve summer uniform as he stood rigid, one hand still poised on the edge of the door, the other resting on the butt of his Smith & Wesson. Tina couldn't see anything around his solid obstruction. She tugged on his arm, but he didn't move. Didn't react at all. She felt her panic rising. "Sam? Sam, please, tell me who's out there."

Sam's reply was a long time coming. Too long. When Tina was about to ask again, he turned his head, just slightly, to look down at her, his face gray. His voice was little more than a whisper. "A limousine. A black Mercedes limousine with Connecticut license plates."

Tina took a step back, away from the door. Funny. She hadn't noticed how cold it had gotten in here. Early June could be that way. Hot one minute, cold the next. It was probably because she was barefoot. Tina began searching desperately for her other sandal. She settled the top sheet back evenly across the bed with a quick flick of the wrists, searching the perimeter for the missing footwear. "I have to find my other shoe. I can't go out there barefoot. I have to find my shoe."

Strong arms pulled at her, lifting her, turning her to face the top button of that crisp, clean, neat uniform. "Kara is going to be all right, Tina. We'll find her. Whatever's happened, we'll deal with it. Together. We're going to get through this, Tina."

Tina's voice rose to a shrill, hysterical screech. She shoved at his shoulders, but Sam wouldn't let go. "Don't lie to me! It's not going to be all right! That son-of-a-whore has my baby! If he could take her with a cop standing right here beside me she'll never be safe anywhere! You were the one who insisted I didn't need to be afraid of Jesse. I told you he'd keep his promise!"

She whirled away, only to spot her sandal lying on the front porch. She stumbled as she reached it, blinded by her tears, unable to guide her foot into the leather straps. A

low, keening wail escaped her lips as she sank slowly to the floor of the porch, burying her head in her arms.

Sam couldn't ever remember feeling more helpless. He forced himself to respond as he'd been trained, to remain calm, professional—to keep thinking. He crossed the porch, his footsteps echoing, like the sound of his heartbeat. Hollow. Alone.

The black limousine crunched slowly to a stop in front of the tiny cabin. The chauffeur rounded the car to open the rear door on the passenger's side. Sam recognized the man from their one brief meeting years ago. He'd aged well.

As if he were outside of himself watching it all happen through another's eyes, Sam descended the steps. There were questions to be asked and answered. Time was of the essence. Sam marched out to meet the man, for the second time, although he doubted Donovan would recognize him. Steel-gray eyes assessed him. Sam nodded his head curtly. "First Sergeant Sam Callaghan, West Virginia State Police."

He stood stiffly erect, despite his nearly seventy years, his bearing suggesting a military influence. He let his eyes rake over the scene behind Sam before he returned his attention to introductions. "A First Sergeant, no less. This does not look good."

"No, sir," Sam agreed. "Although I'm not here in an official capacity. Or at least I wasn't. I'm Kara's father. I have reason to believe my daughter has been kidnapped. She left here three hours ago in a hired limo ordered in your name and dispatched to your home address."

Ward drew a deep breath, letting it out in one word. "Jesse."

"I think so, sir. That would seem to be the logical conclusion at this point."

"I should have killed that son-of-a-bitch years ago."

Sam nodded curtly. "As it is, sir, you're going to have to stand in line."

Steel-gray eyes studied Sam's again before a hand was offered. "Ward. Ward Donovan." That handshake was brief, but firm. "We shall discuss your relationship to my daughter at some future, more appropriate time. Kara informed me when she phoned last night that she feared Chapman was still alive. Is Jesse aware that Kara is not his daughter?"

Sam met the cold steel eyes levelly. "Yes, sir. He's always known."

"Then I assume Jesse's after money again, and we've played right into his hands. He'll contact us with his ransom demands. The question is where?"

Sam thought about that, assessing the options quickly. "Certainly not back to the Barracks. He knows we could trace his call there. Maybe to my house. My picture was all over the papers two weeks ago, and my number is listed. I look a good deal different than I did back when Jesse knew me, but he might have recognized me. Especially if he's been watching Tina lately."

Ward nodded once, as if accepting Sam's assessment of the situation. "Then we go to your house for now. Use your place as a base of operations. I'll follow you in." His eyes raked the porch. "Can you do anything with Tina?"

Sam glanced back at her, dragging his emotions quickly back under control before the desolation could take hold again. "No, sir. I don't believe I can. Not this time." He turned on his heel and headed for his patrol car.

Slow, steady steps echoed across the hollow porch floor, invading her desolation. "Kristina."

The low, firm voice demanded her attention, as it always had, although she refused to look up or acknowledge his presence. "Kristina, I need you to pull yourself back together. I should hate to leave here without you."

Tina took a deep breath, forcing herself to gather her courage and face the world, just as she'd always done. "Give me three minutes to gather up some things from the cabin. I'm not leaving my car here." She forced herself to walk back into the cabin, to play her part, to become the rational creature she wanted to appear. It was the only way to conquer the terror. Bury it. Deny it. Force it back into hiding. Force it to accept the shape of her anger.

As she stuffed the .38 Special under the clothes in the gym bag, a shadow moved across the room. Tina looked up, an apology forming on her lips, but the shadow belonged to Ward, not Sam.

He looked older. Sadder. Almost unsure of himself. "One of the hardest things about being a parent is never knowing whether you've done the right thing. You want the best for your child. Always the best. Unfortunately, children don't come with instruction manuals. Sometimes it takes years to see your mistakes."

Tina felt the fear knotting in her stomach again. She turned away, so that he wouldn't see it leak out in hot, damp stains across her cheeks. "I know this is my fault, for ever being fool enough to believe in a man like Jesse. If I'd listened to you, none of this would even have happened."

A hand touched her arm. Not holding, not pulling, just touching. "No, Tina. I'm trying to tell you I'm sorry. I love you. I promise you I'll do whatever it takes to get Kara back. Jesse will never have the chance to hurt anyone in my family again."

Tina threw her arms around him impulsively, letting one strangled sob escape. "I love you too, Daddy. I'm just so scared."

"I know." He turned and offered her his arm. "Let's get out of here. You got what you wanted. Nothing else really matters. For God's sake, ditch that ugly old car. Let me help you out for once. What have I got money for, if I can't spend it on my daughter?"

Tina ran a hand over her eyes again, sniffing none too gently as she took the offered arm and headed back toward the sunlight. She stopped, however, to put the lock on the cabin door. Not that there was anything left there to steal.

Her most precious possession was already gone.

Tina hesitated at the door to the limo, looking fifty feet down the road to where Sam's patrol car now sat idling. "Daddy, I think I need..."

"Go ahead," he interrupted. "We'll be right behind you."

Tina pulled her courage close around her as she walked down the lane to the cruiser. When she finally got up the nerve to press her fingers to the door handle, it wouldn't budge. Frustrated, Tina rapped her knuckles on the glass, but Sam didn't even swivel his head. A long moment later, however, she heard the automatic door locks pop. With a shaking hand, she opened the door and slid inside, before she could lose her nerve. Before Sam changed his mind.

"Fasten your seat belt."

Tina did that, quickly enough, afraid she was about to be tossed about on a ride as wild as the emotional roller coaster she seemed caught up in, but Sam drove the way he did everything else—professionally. They'd reached the nearest paved road before Tina found her voice. "I'm sorry, Sam. You were just trying to help me. I shouldn't have pushed you away."

She thought for a moment that Sam wasn't going to bother to respond, but at last he spoke, his voice low and desolate. "You always shut me out. I think in terms of us, and I keep finding myself alone. There's a message there somewhere that I've been trying not to listen to. I know this hasn't occurred to you yet, but that's my daughter out there, too. I haven't known where she was, if she was all right, anything about her for the last fifteen years. I was just starting to get to know her, and now she's been ripped away again. When I get her back, and I will get her back, I still won't be a part of her life, because you'll never let me get that close to either of you."

Tina looked down at her hands, studying the ring Sam had carried in his pocket all these years. "What are you saying, Sam? Do you want your ring back?"

He glanced over at her, the muscles in his jaws working, then turned his attention back to the road. "No. I bought it for you. I should have given it to you, all those years ago. Maybe there would have been a chance for us if I had."

She tried to search his eyes, but the smoky lenses hid everything. "There isn't now?"

Sam kept his eyes on the road. "Is there, Tina? Do you really think you'll ever trust me enough to marry me? I made sure you knew how to find me, no matter what name I was using. You never came looking. I have to ask myself why. The only answer I can come up with is that you didn't want to find me. You were doing just fine on your own. I shouldn't have intruded."

Tina fixed her gaze on a point a little above the tops of the mountains. "I wasn't doing just fine, Sam. I was alone, and I was afraid. Afraid I wasn't a good enough mother. Afraid I had too many secrets in my past. Afraid that everything Jesse ever said about me was true. I didn't come looking for you because I was afraid I was nothing more to you than a wager in a poker game. Afraid I'd fallen in love with you by myself.

It was easier, not knowing. Because I couldn't take the chance on losing you a second time."

Sam took his time answering. "Who's to say whose fault it is? Maybe it was all Jesse, all along, planting the seeds of doubt there for us from the very first. One thing's for sure. In the end, we both lose. So does Kara. We could have given her a family."

Tina wanted to tell him they still could, but the desolation in his voice didn't leave room for other possibilities. "If—if something happens, Sam, I want you to promise me you'll take care of Kara. I mean, if I can't, for any reason."

Sam looked over at her, pinpoints of alarm glittering in his eyes. "What do you mean, Tina?" His voice was still a little too harsh, a little too suspicious.

"I don't really know. I've just got a bad feeling about this. Like everything's spinning out of control, and the only thing I'm sure of is that I want Kara to be with you if somehow something should happen to me."

"Nothing's going to happen to you, Tina. I'm not going to let anything happen to either of you."

Tina fingered the weight of the gun under the clothes in her gym bag. "Just humor me, then. I want your word on this. In any case, you're right about Kara. You should have had joint custody all these years, even if we were living apart. There's no reason we can't work that out on our own. I think the Eagle's up to quite a few more trips across the mountains."

A flicker of a smile crossed Sam's face. "I'd like that. Though Kara's old enough to decide for herself."

"She'll see the logic of it. She tends to be rather analytical. Much like her father."

"For now, I think I'll take that as a compliment."

"It was meant as one." Tina focused her eyes back onto the tree line atop the mountains ahead of them. "I want your word, Sam. Promise me you'll take care of her."

"What makes you think your father would even allow such a thing? I can't even prove she's my daughter."

Tina blushed a bright red at that. "I put your name on her birth certificate. What little I knew. Under Father, it just says 'Spike.' It was the '70's. All the nurse said was thank God I wasn't naming this one after another mushroom."

Sam just stared at Tina for a few miles, a lopsided grin slowly taking its place on his face. "All right, Tina. You have my word. If anything happens to you, I'll take care of our daughter."

Tina sighed and relaxed a little against the back of the seat. "Thank you, Sam. You're a good man. I do love you, you know. When it comes down to it, there's no one I trust more. If you say we'll get Kara back, I've got to believe you. That's the only thing holding me together right now."

"You have my word on it."

Tina closed her eyes, and forced her fear into the background. There was no room for fear, now. She had a job to do. No matter what happened, Jesse would never put Kara through anything like this again.

* * * * *

"Tina, you're wearing a hole in Sam's carpet."

Tina glanced over at her father without breaking her stride. "I don't know how you can stay so calm. I hate waiting like this. I think we should be on our way to Connecticut instead of sitting here waiting for the phone to ring."

Sam looked up, puzzled. "What on earth makes you think Jesse's taking Kara to Connecticut? Why would he do that?"

Tina paused her pacing at that, unable to believe the two men hadn't come to the same conclusion she had. "We know the limo company's legit. They'll take her right to Daddy's house, won't they? They have to. That's what the contract called for."

Sam shook his head. "We don't even know he was in Connecticut when he sent that fax. He could have used any fax machine anywhere. The Station Identifier Codes are set manually. They can be reprogrammed to read anything you want them to."

"Why set it for anything at all, then," Tina argued. "Just leave it blank. Or put Daddy's home telephone number on it. I'd have recognized that right away. He didn't think of that because he didn't need to. He didn't have to reset anything if he was already in the house. How did Jesse even know we called you?"

Sam shrugged at that. "He could have had the phones tapped."

Ward objected to that, as well. "I have the place debugged regularly. My security team is very thorough about that sort of thing."

Sam frowned speculatively. "Then how did Jesse intercept that message from Tina? He could hardly have been following her closely enough to hear her call you from a phone booth and still have had time to steal your credit card information and get all your personal information back from Connecticut."

"If Jesse's taking Kara some place local, why haven't we heard from him yet?" Tina put in. "It's been three hours. I'll tell you why. Because it's a twelve hour drive to Connecticut."

Sam turned his attention back to Ward. "Mr. Donovan, have you had any unusual turnover in your staff lately?"

"No," Ward answered curtly. A little too quickly, perhaps.

Tina pivoted, riveting her stare at her father. "Since when, Daddy? You always have people coming and going. It's because he only hires immigrants," she told Sam, almost as an afterthought.

"Immigrants?" Sam repeated in surprise. "You mean illegal Mexicans?"

"No, of course not." Tina's tone was almost resentful at the suggestion. "Daddy helps newly arrived Irish families get their feet planted firmly, so to speak. It's a tradition my great-grandparents started."

The pieces were coming together. Sam had the urge to unbutton a few more buttons at the collar of his uniform shirt. "Your grandparents were from Ireland?" How many other clues had she given him that he hadn't really heard?

"Just Grandma. She came over as a little girl, but Grandpa was second generation American born. His grandparents came over during the Potato Famine in 1851. Granddad's grandfather fought for the North in the Civil War. Grandma said it was because of the Potato Famine that we've always helped out Irish immigrants."

Ward looked decidedly uncomfortable with the way the conversation was running. "It's just something we do when we can. My employees aren't all Irish, but I'll hire them if they come along."

Sam was standing now, staring hard at Ward. "They come along pretty regularly, don't they? Always have. Not surprising, really. Just the kind of tradition a member of the Fenian Brotherhood might start, I'm thinking."

Tina had forgotten all about pacing by now. "The Fenian Brotherhood? Who the hell are they?"

Sam's voice came through low, but easy enough to understand. "They were the first Free Ireland movement. Over half of the Irishmen who fought in the Civil War here belonged to the Fenian Brotherhood. They were a secret organization who met across enemy lines. They pledged to use their time in the Army to learn all they could about warfare. They were supposed to use overt military actions to take Ireland back from the British. After the Civil War ended, 6000 Fenians invaded Canada."

Tina started at that. "They invaded Canada? I don't remember reading about that in my high school text books!"

Sam shrugged. "A lot of things have happened through the years that never made it into text books. As wars go, this one was pretty short. Lasted about six months. The US sent troops in to help put them down. About a year later 30,000 Fenians invaded Ireland, but only about 4,000 of them were armed, and they lost. But it was the first organized military action against English troops on Irish soil."

Tina shifted her eyes from Sam to her father, as if trying to follow his line of thinking. "Are they still active? The Fenians?"

Sam gave her a tight little smile, although his eyes were still on Ward. "The Fenians splintered, like most Irish resistance groups have through the years. They spawned a group called the Irish Republican Brotherhood. They, in turn, splintered into the three major groups we have now. The Irish Republican Army, both the regulars, the recognized organization, and the radical offshoot of it, the IRA Provisionals, who are the outlaw rebel branch, and a third group, the Irish Republican Party, Sinn Féin, who wanted to effect change politically. Then there are the American groups. The Irish Northern Aid Committee, the American Irish Political Education Committee, and the

Irish National Caucus, and of course the descendants of the original American Fenians, *Clan Na Gaul*."

Ward would have made a great poker player, Sam decided. None of the names got the reaction from the man he'd hoped for. Instead, Ward managed to look almost bored. "None of this helps find my granddaughter, does it?" the old man asked, his eyes hard as they met Sam's.

"Does it?" Sam returned. "There's something personal between you and Jesse, isn't there, Mr. Donovan. You said, 'I assume Jesse is after money again.' Why again? What do you know about Jesse that you haven't told me?"

Ward appeared unruffled. "Jesse's always been after money. He offered to sell my daughter back to me that first summer, after he persuaded her to drop out of college."

"He did what?" Tina screeched, her voice outraged. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Ward shrugged. "I'd have paid him if I thought you'd leave him, but I knew you wouldn't, just as I knew you wouldn't have believed me if I'd told you the truth."

Sam stared hard at the man. "You knew Jesse. James McFarland. Before he married Tina."

Ward stared off across the room, not bothering to answer.

"Jesse went after Tina on purpose, didn't he?" Sam continued. "To get back at you. Because you were instrumental in getting his father thrown out of the Irish National Caucus. I'm thinking you got Colin thrown out of *Clan Na Gaul*, as well."

At that Ward looked Sam straight in the eyes. "I never heard of your *Clan Na Gaul*, but you're right about Colin McFarland. I was on the board that voted him and his band out of the INC. Damn militant terrorists, they were. Couldn't afford to be associated with a group like that."

Tina stared at her father as if seeing him for the first time. "Daddy?"

Ward looked up at his daughter, his eyes softening. "You said you weren't interested in my old-fashioned political ideas, Tina. I had to respect your wishes. I quit trying to talk to you about what I believed in. I know you felt like you were growing up in a prison, but I had to keep tight security around you. I knew I'd always be a target for men like Jesse, and so would my family."

Understanding dawned slowly in Tina's eyes. "They weren't there to keep me in. They were there to keep men like Jesse out."

"I'm afraid so, Dear." Ward turned his attention back to Sam. "Just how do you happen to be so well-versed on Irish history, First Sergeant Callaghan?"

It was Sam's turn to shrug into his poker façade. "Jesse was the target of an undercover police investigation during the early '70's. I was the field agent involved."

Recognition dawned in Ward's eyes. "The biker with the red beard. I thought there was something familiar about you!"

Sam nodded. Once. "That was me."

Ward studied him thoughtfully. "Callaghan. I knew your mother. Her death was a tragedy. She was missed."

How had—No. He would not be distracted. "Colin McFarland was an active member of *Clan Na Gaul*. That's where you met him, and that's why Jesse has my daughter, isn't it?"

Ward stood up slowly, advancing until he was only inches from Sam. "I'm going to tell you this only once more, Son. I know nothing about *Clan Na Gaul*. As far as I know, no such organization exists or has ever existed. I knew Colin McFarland. I know Colin McFarland ordered Irene Callaghan's death. Whatever vendetta you're on, it doesn't involve me. Our only objective here must be to find my granddaughter. Don't make this personal between us. That will only get in the way of our objective."

Ward's voice was low, calm, yet powerful in its warning. They locked eyes for a long heartbeat before Sam forced himself to relax, step down, and accept the proffered truce. "You're right," Sam agreed. "If Tina's right, if Jesse really is in Connecticut, we aren't going to hear anything from him for another nine hours or more. The waiting is going to make us all a little crazy."

"So let's quit waiting. We can take a private charter service and be there before the limo arrives."

"If Jesse's men have the house, he must have had a plant in my security team. We'll never be able to get in there. My security's impenetrable."

Tina laughed bitterly at that. "No, it's not. The Fort Knox thing was a joke. I figured out how to get in and out of the house whenever I wanted to years ago. If I could get out back then, I can get in now."

Ward raised an eyebrow, but didn't argue. "I'll use the phone in my limo to let my contacts back home know what's going on."

Sam started in surprise. "You have a telephone in your limo?"

Ward shrugged. "It's the wave of the future. Car phones. If you have any money to invest, get in now."

Tina shook her head. "I hide out in my car to get away from the phone. It'll never catch on."

Chapter Fifteen

The tarmac airstrip was hot and dusty in the late afternoon sun. Tina paced while Ward negotiated with a man in greasy overalls standing outside a small hanger. Tina turned to pace the other way, searching for something to take her mind off killing the little man with his own greasy wrench.

Sam was sitting in his patrol car, talking on the radio to Brenda. Tina had to fight the urge to pace just a little closer to the open windows, just to hear what he was saying. She'd seen the way Brenda looked at Sam.

What did it matter? Sam hadn't really looked at Tina since she'd pushed him away. Something fragile had shattered between them. Jesse was alive, Kara was gone, and Sam looked at her like there was no tomorrow. Through it all she had only one ally. The last one she'd ever have expected.

Her father.

If who Ward Donovan was and what he stood for were the things in life she wanted most to escape, why was it that he always seemed to be the one who ended up picking up the pieces whenever her life shattered around her?

Turning to observe the negotiations again, Tina glanced at the next hangar. O'Reilly's Charter Service. She moved to intercept her father. "If this man's little plane isn't up to the flight, let's just go next door. That man's plane looks capable of flying us to Hartford without any problems."

"Now wait just a minute," the greasy pilot sputtered. "I never said she couldn't make the flight! It's just that it's my daughter's birthday, and..."

"Good. I like a family man," Ward interrupted. His cash disappeared. "Spend the day with your daughter. They grow up way too fast." He turned on his heel and headed for the plane Tina had pointed out. The one with the gold harp painted on the tail.

A black-haired man who appeared to be the O'Reilly of O'Reilly's Charter Service emerged from the hanger, almost running into Ward as he reached for the doorknob. Tina could have sworn she caught the musical singsong notes of a phrase in Gaelic. Whatever Ward said, the man's smile dampened considerably. He pushed the door to the office back open far enough to holler across the room at someone.

"File a flight plan for Hartford, Connecticut for me. Leaving in fifteen minutes. I'm going to go top off the fuel tanks."

As the small plane taxied down the runway barely ten minutes later, Tina wondered just how much she'd missed, never really getting to know this stranger who was her father. Ward opened his eyes to catch her watching him. "What're you thinking, Princess?"

"I was just thinking."

"What were you thinking about?"

She let a hint of warmth she'd never really shared with him slip into her eyes. "I was speculating, really. I think maybe it's time you taught me to speak Gaelic."

Ward chuckled at that and let his eyes drift back shut again. "Any time, Princess. Any time you're ready."

* * * * *

There was a certain intimacy to an airplane of this size. Just the three of them, with the pilot up front, sealed off behind the bulkhead. It should have been cozy, but the tension in the air got worse the longer they sat together without speaking.

Ward shifted on his seat, surveying his companions. His daughter looked frightened. That was to be expected. But there was something else there, too. She was hurting, and it wasn't all Jesse.

Things had shifted a little between them. He hesitated, not wanting to take a chance on damaging the tenuous thread that tied them together like the gossamer of a spider's web. Still, she was his daughter. He'd always done what he thought was right, despite the cost. Ward shifted his attention to the tall man in uniform. "It never ends, does it?" Ward observed with a sigh of regret.

Sam snapped his head up, coming back from whatever realm of contemplation he'd been visiting. "Sir?"

"People wonder why the wars in Ireland have lasted so long. It's because we Irish never forget anything. Over thirty years ago, I voted to rescind Colin McFarland's membership in the IRC. The rift left in Colin's wake took a third of our local membership, including Irene Dougherty. Colin started his own group, the Irish Sons of Liberty. Colin's son James McFarland took his vengeance on me by stealing my only daughter. Irene Dougherty married Ray Callaghan, another co-founder of the Irish Sons of Liberty. Colin had his son Jesse kill Irene when she tried to leave Ray and the Sons. Now her son is on a mission to kill Colin's son.

"Would it have made a difference, do you think, if I'd voted the other way back then? Would my daughter have come to understand what I was all about and what we've been fighting for these last two hundred years? If we die tonight, will Kara's children hunt down the remaining members of the Irish Sons? Will anyone remember, years from now, that this was all supposed to be about driving the English out of Ireland? Or will they only see a bunch of crazy Irishmen, too busy fighting amongst themselves to accomplish anything?"

Sam stared hard at Ward, trying to sort through all the implied warnings in the old man's words. Was his heritage so strong? "I barely remember my mother," he admitted. "My father was a bitter, angry drunk. That's all he ever taught me about being Irish. One hell of a heritage, I'd say."

Ward nodded thoughtfully, never breaking the contact he'd established with Sam. "The anger between the two of you, is that the heritage you wish to pass along to your daughter?"

Sam accepted the rebuke with a mild flush of embarrassment. "No. No, sir, it isn't." Sam let his gaze leave the old man and slide across the aisle to where Tina sat, her eyes seeking his, her face suddenly alive with hope. Sam looked away, treading helplessly in unfamiliar waters. "I don't even know where to start."

Ward chuckled at that. "Son, there was only one woman I ever loved, and I had her for but a few short years. She died when Tina was just a child. But if there was one thing I learned from Kathleen, it's that there's no wrong way to apologize. I think I'll go visit with the pilot for a while. Maybe he'll let me fly this thing."

"You're a pilot, too?"

"Not yet. But it's never too late to learn."

Tina and Sam both laughed at that, though a bit unsteadily, their eyes fixed on Ward's departing back until the door snapped shut behind him. Reluctantly they turned to face each other.

"Tina, I —"

"Sam —"

Sam held up his hand like a traffic cop. "Just listen, all right? I love you, Tina. Nothing you can say or do will ever change that. If you take that ring off, you might as well shoot me between the eyes like a racehorse with a broken leg."

Dignity be damned. Tina scrambled across the plane's narrow aisle to climb into Sam's arms. She felt his hands tremble as they caressed her face, wiping the tears from her eyes. "I thought I'd lost you both in the same day."

"You can't lose me," he promised, his voice deep and throaty, like he, too, was trying to hold back tears. "We haven't lost Kara. I can't believe I was stupid enough to let this happen. I'm supposed to be trained to prevent things like this. I swear to you, I'll get her back. We'll get her back. Together."

"This wasn't your fault, Sam. How can you let yourself think that?"

Guilt tinged his voice with bitterness. "Because I was acting like some teenage boy. If I hadn't been so busy trying to get you out of your clothes, maybe I'd have done my job, and we wouldn't be here now."

She framed his face with her hands, kissing him lightly on the bridge of the nose. "Your memory's a little off there, big guy. You practically put that driver through the grand inquisition. You did your job. The sex came later, and it was my idea. I seem to recall it as a pretty good idea at the time. There's no point in blaming yourself. You have a right to be scared. Jesse won this round, but we can take that bastard. I know we can. We just have to stick together."

Sam pulled her tight against his chest. "Do you know how much I love you?"

Tina met his gaze again, her heart unshielded. "Enough to forgive my Irish temper?"

Sam kissed the tip of her nose. "Maybe."

"What would I have to do to persuade you?"

"I bet I could think of something."

A shiver passed through her. "Here?"

Sam nibbled lightly on her earlobe. "That might be fun, but I really don't think I'm up to having Ward catch us. I already feel pretty unprofessional."

She rested her head against his once neat uniform shirt. "Sam?"

He looked down, his voice feigning sternness. "What now, woman?"

Her voice broke under the strain. "I love you."

Sam ran a thumb across her cheek, chasing away the tears. "That's good. I'd hate to think I'm going to spend the rest of my life with a woman who can't stand the sight of me."

"Say that again."

His voice teased gently. "Which part?"

"The part about spending the rest of your life with me," she told the third button of his dampened uniform shirt.

"I love you, Tina." Sam prayed silently that it would be enough.

* * * * *

There was yet another limo waiting when they touched down in Hartford. If Sam thought it a bit ostentatious, he said nothing, though his hand felt suddenly warm in Tina's smaller one. If he was surprised, too, to find the car already occupied when they climbed inside, he held his tongue at that, as well.

There were three powerfully built men in the opposite seat. They waited patiently, saying nothing, although they each inclined their heads respectfully toward Ward. Tina speculated silently that their names, should she ever be introduced, would be Mulcahey, O'Brien, and Fitzsimmons, or something equally Irish.

At Ward's insistence, Tina sketched out her plan for evading the security system again for the benefit of the three new men. It would be totally dark by the time they reached the estate. Kara would be arriving in less than three hours. That gave the little group a very small window of opportunity to circumvent the security system, find Jesse's guards and eliminate them, and secure the estate.

Tina prayed it would be time enough. Without prompting she reviewed the plan again, going over each detail with precise instructions. "You understand how important your job is, Kyle," she told her father's chauffeur again. "You can't let the hired limo deliver my baby to the house. Jesse must not get his hands on her."

Kyle glanced at her in the rear view mirror. "I understand, Miss Tina. I'll take care of everything. Nobody's going to hurt Miss Kara."

"Thank you, Kyle," Tina replied. "I'm counting on you."

The limo pulled to a stop at the side of a high stone wall. Tina led them toward the delivery entrance at the kitchen. Kyle pulled away as instructed, parking near the main gates, a little more than a quarter mile away. Once he was parked, Kyle got out of the limo, training a pair of binoculars across the stone fence toward the third floor of the colonial mansion. He found what he was looking for almost immediately. A man stood on the balcony, dressed in black fatigue pants and a black T-shirt. The sentry trained his own binoculars back at the limo. Satisfied, Kyle put his glasses away and got back into the car, almost casually flashing his headlights.

* * * * *

A stone wall, about eight feet high and at least two feet thick, surrounded the entire estate. Sam surveyed the Donovan estate with a sense of impending doom. This wasn't a house. Even "Mansion" didn't begin to cover it. All it needed was a drawbridge and a moat. The place was the size of a small feudal kingdom. Welcome to Clan Donovan. Ward Donovan wasn't joking when he called Tina his princess.

Had Ray Callaghan's grandfather helped build that stone wall? Certainly if any of Sam's ancestors had been under the protective wing of the Donovan Clan, they, too, had come in the back door, along with the rest of the hired help.

He glanced at Tina again. "Are you sure this will work?"

"I did this every weekend when I was in high school. I never got caught." She turned to her father. "Are you sure nothing's been changed in the security system?"

Ward treated her to a disgruntled frown. "Not yet."

The heart of the security system, which consisted of an armed guard monitoring point of entry alarms which activated cameras, was aimed at the front of the main house. The servants' entrance was unbelievably easy to penetrate. The gate in the stone wall had been installed over a century ago. Tina opened it using a small flathead screwdriver.

The lock was the first step. There was an electronic continuity sensor on the latch which activated the cameras and transmitted a signal warning the security office whenever the gate was opened. The guard monitoring the cameras had the option of turning any camera on at any time.

Jesse would be expecting them. All the cameras would be on and monitored closely. However Tina was prepared. Once the lock on the gate was sprung, preserving the continuity of the latch was a simple matter of attaching something metal to both sides while the gate swung open. As a teenager she'd used a length of gold chain with

sweater clips on both ends. Tonight, she used two feet of bare copper wire, snagged from the repair parts the pilot kept on his plane.

After the latch was wired, there was only the camera to disable. Sam gave Tina a boost up the stone wall, where she dropped a handkerchief over the lens. Once the gate was latched behind them again Sam reached up and pulled fabric back off the lens. The whole procedure took less than thirty seconds. Less time than the average static caused by the rather frequent camera glitches.

Ward glanced speculatively at the camera covering the side entrance. "What did this gain us? We can't just walk up to the door and walk in. We'll be right back in front of the camera."

Tina nodded. "We would be, if we used any of the main doors. So we stay right here along the fence for thirty feet or so and then cross over to the pool, then enter through the cabana. There are no cameras covering the pool side of the house." She glanced at Sam with a tight little smile. "Daddy didn't want the security guys spying on skinny-dipping daughters."

She led the way with the easy surety of familiar moves remembered. The cabana was the size of Sam's house. He had to fight off a sense of despair, reminding himself that Tina had left all this voluntarily, more than once. He concentrated on the way she moved, the tilt of her head as she scanned the room, small details that remained constant and familiar.

At the back of the cabana was an enormous walk-in towel closet. Tina stopped in front of the back wall. In the dim lighting they could just make out the outlines of a sliding door panel. "We come out of here in the back of the pantry," she advised, her voice little more than a whisper. "We'll be right at the base of the servants' stair case. From there we've got access to all the upper levels of the house."

Sam glanced at the little party with evident misgivings. "We should have brought in the FBI. They're trained to handle situations like this. It's their jurisdiction."

Ward met Sam's eyes with a hard, demanding look. "You're trained to handle situations like this, too. We'll follow you."

Sam nodded curtly, pushing his doubts aside. "All right. We're committed now, one way or the other. We do it just the way we planned. Top floor first. Standard perimeter search. You find a lookout, you put him down before he has a chance to get off a warning. It only takes one slip to blow our element of surprise."

"How many do you expect and where do you expect them, sir?"

Sam shrugged. "Where would you put them?"

The man glanced about in the dim lighting, as if seeing the entire house layout in his mind. "Six on the top floor, sir. Four corners plus two extras on the front side, center wing at the outer points. Same on the ground floor, plus one at each entrance."

"That's where I'd put them," Sam agreed. "But we don't know how big a force McFarland was able to raise, and he's never had any formal military training. All the damn guards could be on the ground floor for all we know. So expect a guard in every

room, no matter how small. Don't take any unnecessary chances, and try not to kill anybody. This will be a whole lot less messy tomorrow if we don't leave any dead bodies behind. Understood?"

The three men all nodded in unison. Tina wouldn't have been surprised if they'd snapped to attention and saluted.

The stairs were thickly carpeted, so that members of the household wouldn't be disturbed by noisy footfalls coming and going. Her heart beat wildly as she led Sam toward the east wing. This floor had evidently been closed off for years, and there were signs of benign neglect everywhere. Tina studied the dust on the floor with a growing sense of dismay, then straightened up with a snap as she finally saw beyond the years of neglect. When Sam emerged from the room he was checking she signaled him, then pointed to the floor. It took Sam only a moment to notice the footprints in the dust. All they had to do was follow the trail.

The little lines around Sam's eyes pulled into a tight knot. Tina knew what he was thinking. It felt like a trap. Nevertheless, their job was to sweep the wing. They moved soundlessly down the hallway. The footprints led straight to the large sunroom at the end of the hall.

Tina's pulse beat like a bass drum against the side of her temple. If only it would be quiet, there was something she was sure she should remember about the floor layout up here. She had spent countless hours wandering through all these rooms as a child, often playing a defiant game of hide and seek with her governess.

That was it. Tina tugged gently on Sam's sleeve. The dust coating the floor made a perfect place to draw a map. Tina knelt to sketch the floor plan, with a box on either side of her map representing the third and fourth bedrooms, and then a half octagon for the huge glass sunroom that capped off the end of the hallway. What she'd forgotten until now was that the solarium was accessible from each end bedroom, as well. If there were guards waiting for them, they could be on either side. Backing up the imaginary hallway in her map, Tina added the two sitting rooms, with doors connecting them to the third and fourth bedrooms.

Sam flicked the fingers of his right hand three times. Tina nodded in understanding. Fifteen seconds. She was to wait fifteen seconds after the men disappeared into the sitting rooms, then open the end door, perhaps with just a little more noise than was necessary.

She moved quickly to the right-hand side of the solarium's wide oak door. One thousand one. One thousand two. On fifteen, she turned the knob, pulling hard, making the old-fashioned skeleton keyed lock snap with a noise like a gunshot. From there, she quickly retreated down the hall to back up Sam. She reached him just as he wrestled a sandy haired man to the floor. A hand held radio skidded across the floor and landed off to one side. Tina shoved it into her back pocket.

Within seconds, the guard lay trussed up on the floor. They headed back down the hallway, their strides long and determined. It had all taken less than two minutes from

the time they entered the sitting room doors till the guard was secured face down in the dust.

At the top of the main stairs, they waited less than a minute more for Ward and his other men to re-appear. Sam held up one finger, to which Ward concurred with a curt nod. The central hallway remained. The teams stuck together this time, one team to each side of the hallway. Two more guards were dispatched in short order.

The second floor proved predictably empty, although the heart pounding adrenaline was not lessened by rounding each corner to confront nothing, or, worse yet, members of their own teams.

Ward drew a crude map of the downstairs of the house, shaped something like a capitol letter E. They had entered along the backside of the house nearest the west wall. "He'll be here," Ward speculated, pointing to the base of the middle leg of the E. "He'll be in my office waiting for us. Cocky, arrogant little son-of-a bitch. I'm sure of it."

Sam merely nodded. The downstairs sweep netted two additional guards, again placed exactly where Sam had predicted they would be. They came together at the base of the central wing. Tina thought suddenly of tribal fishermen she'd read about, beating their sticks in the water, driving the fish before them into large nets. Only this drive would not feed them over the winter.

Ward's office was the last room on the right, the one with a clear view of the entire front lawn. There were two doors in, one from the hall near the main entranceway to the house, and the second from the large parlor just behind the office.

The plan was simple. Enter through both doors at the same time. Expect armed resistance. Sam slowly turned the doorknob. The door swung open silently on well-oiled hinges. There was no reaction from within. He executed a shoulder roll across the doorway that surprised Tina with its accuracy and agility. His talent, however, netted them nothing. Ward and his men burst through the opposite door at the same time, to find themselves facing three drawn weapons from Sam's team. There was no one else in the room.

Tina looked anxiously at her watch. It was a little after 11:00 PM. Time enough for Kara's limo to be here. And where the hell was Jesse?

Chapter Sixteen

Ward walked over to his desk, surveying its ever-neat surface with a look that would have sent servants scurrying in fear. "Son-of-a-bitch."

You betrayed your friendships as well as our cause that night, old man. Bring two million in cash in small bills to the place where it all began tomorrow at 4:00 PM or you'll betray your granddaughter as well.

Tina jerked the small two-way radio out of her hip pocket. "You son-of-a-whore! Give me my daughter!"

The voice that answered her held a faint, mocking trace of an Irish lilt. "Welcome home, Hope. I've missed ya. Though I've never really been all that far away. Did ya like the roses I sent for your birthday?"

Tina remembered the anonymous flowers she'd received and felt her stomach twist. "I'll kill you, you snake! If you hurt my baby I swear I'll kill you with my own two hands! I'll rip your heart out!"

"See ya tomorrow, Darling."

When she finally became aware that the arms which had scooped her up were none other than Sam's, she made no move to pull away. It seemed right and fitting, somehow, that his cheeks, too, were wet with tears.

"What are we going to do?" Tina asked at last.

It was Ward who answered. "We're going to pay. We'll do whatever it takes to get Kara back. Then Sam and I are going to hunt James McFarland down like the dog that he is, and we're going to kill the bastard."

Sam nodded slowly. "I can live with that plan."

The FBI and jurisdictions and proper protocol seemed a lifetime ago.

* * * * *

"What's bothering you, Sam?"

Sam turned intense blue eyes on her. "You mean besides the fact that my daughter's been kidnapped and held for ransom, the kidnapper seems to out-think us every step of the way, and I'm planning to break every oath of office I ever took tomorrow?"

Tina offered a frail smile in return. "Yeah. Besides all that. I can see the gears turning in your head."

Sam sat back down on the leather-clad divan, his hands dangling loosely across his knees. "Three things. Jesse's been one step ahead of us all the way. He knew exactly where we were going to be and when we were going to be there. He knew things I didn't know until moments before they happened. He's got men inside. Way inside. Someone who was in that limo with us this evening."

The three bouncers bore the accusation stoically, like champion poker players. Ward, too, took it in stride, as if the information was unimportant, or, perhaps, a forgone conclusion. "What are numbers two and three?" he asked in a voice as smooth as the Jameson Irish Whiskey he poured for them all.

Sam's lips pulled up a little at the corners in a travesty of a smile. "Two. That note Jesse left was worded almost exactly like the blackmail notes from earlier in the year, which means that Doc and Crazy Horse were working with or for Jesse all along. If Crazy Horse lied to me about that, what else did he lie about?"

No one had a response to that. Sam continued, his voice tinged with foreboding. "Three. Jesse wants two million dollars in cash in less than twenty-four hours, and you don't seem to have any problem with that." Sam rose to stalk across the room. "That's the one I'm having the hardest time with. Even people who have that kind of money can't pull it together at the drop of a hat. Not in cash. No bank keeps that kind of money on hand. The kind of man who'd have access to that kind of money would have it tied up in investments, not liquid assets. Unless he was expecting to need a great deal of cash in a hurry."

Ward's lips pulled into a thin, straight line. "I never said putting the money together would be easy. Bank managers all over town will be furious with me. But I can do it, and I will. In the long run, it doesn't really matter where the money comes from, does it? I can make more money. I can't replace my granddaughter."

Ward placed the ransom note back on the surface of the old mahogany desk and came around to stand directly in front of Sam. "Tina and Kara are my only heirs. So if you put that ring on my daughter's finger for more than scenery, you'll be marrying into one of the wealthiest families in the country, Sam. I don't have a problem with that if you don't. As long as you're what Tina wants, that's good enough for me. She's old enough to know her mind."

Sam twined his fingers through Tina's without lowering his gaze. "I'll do my best, sir."

Ward nodded his head gravely. "That's all anyone can do. Now I'd really like to know what's become of my staff. I'd also like to know how that other limo got by Kyle. He's been with me for over twenty years. I'd have bet money on his loyalty. In fact, I probably have a time or two."

"Someone let Jesse know we were coming," Sam argued. "What do you want to bet those six men aren't still where we left them?"

Ward nodded, only the tightness around his eyes betraying his anger. "My guess is, they're gone, as you've already surmised, and so's my second limo, Kyle Adams with it."

Let's locate the staff, make sure they're all right, get a bite to eat, because I'm starving, and at least try to get a little sleep. I have a feeling tomorrow's going to be a very long day."

Sam and Tina finally found the staff, including the cook, the butler, and the gardener, locked in the guesthouse, along with the two security guards. Their story was simple enough. Armed men had shown up just as the guards were changing shifts around 6 AM and caught the guards by surprise. The staff had been held in the main house until about three hours before Mr. Donovan returned, at which point they were all driven out back at gunpoint and warned not to try to get loose.

It was just like Ward, Tina thought, to find the servants, set them loose, and expect them all to return to work, as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened. Then again, there was some comfort in sitting down around the kitchen table, as they did that night, sharing observations and conclusions. There were no lines drawn that night between employee and employer. They were just victims, family, and friends. People united by Jesse's terrorism and Moiré Jameson's cooking.

"I thought you said the staff here turned over fairly often," Sam reminded Tina thoughtfully. "Yet it appears that most of these people were here when you were a child."

Tina nodded. "I grew up with all of these people. It's the day help that turns over. The maids, the pool boy, Mrs. Jameson's assistant in the kitchen, the boys who help Mr. Murray with the lawns. Those people come and go every year or two."

Sam nodded and looked around the small gathering. "Any of you notice anyone who didn't fit in lately? Maybe someone with strong political views?"

Tom Jameson, the gardener, answered. "No one new. The only one around here who gives a damn about politics is that infernal chauffeur, Kyle Adams. You'd think the man had just come over, the way he goes on about things that happened before any of us were so much as a gleam in our daddy's eye."

"Now Tom, just because you find the man's conversation annoying, that does not make him a spy," Moiré admonished. "Kyle's been here as long as you have, and his daughter grew up in this house. His late wife, Sara, was in charge of housekeeping. I find it hard to believe Kyle would sell us out to the likes of a thieving snake like Jesse McFarland." She cleared the dishes and set them beside the sink. "Get yourselves to bed, children. You'll need your strength tomorrow."

Tina shook her head, doing her best not to look like the lost waif she felt. "I don't think I can sleep. Not now."

"You need to at least try," Moiré admonished. "Lie down, in your own bed, and let go of the day's worries. Tomorrow has enough of its own."

"I'll try," Tina promised.

* * * * *

There was a subtle comfort in waking up with a warm, muscular body jackknifed around her. Despite her concerns that she'd never get to sleep, the familiar bed, the soothing sound of Sam's breathing near her ear, and the steady rhythm of his heartbeat had lulled her into a land of dreams.

There was something so comforting about the feel of his arm wrapped around her waist. Tina turned carefully in his arms, trying not to disturb him. She was too late. He was already awake, studying her through dark, sooty lashes that curled long and thick around those gorgeous cobalt eyes.

Troubled eyes.

Tina stretched to place her lips over his in a soft, gentle good morning kiss. "What are you thinking?"

"How much I love you."

"Sam?" A hint of worry pulled at the corners of her eyes. "Sam, you may be a great poker player, but when it comes to up close and personal, you can't lie to me."

Sam laughed softly and rolled to lay looking up at the ceiling. "It's this place. It's a little...intimidating."

"I've worked all my adult life to escape this place, this way of life. All I wanted was to be an ordinary person. But you know what I thought when I saw those footprints in the dust upstairs last night?"

Sam snorted. "You wanted to know why the maids hadn't been up there to clean in so long."

She laughed at that. "How'd you know?"

"You can't escape who you are, Tina. This place is a great deal of responsibility. The people are a responsibility. Your father's not getting any younger. There are corporations you're going to have to learn how to run. Whole communities are dependent on you. If you don't take the responsibility, what happens to the people who work in those businesses? The secretaries and the bookkeepers and the janitors all have families to feed. They need those jobs. You can't afford your independence much longer."

Tina nodded. "I didn't understand that until I saw that dust upstairs. I never felt the responsibility of it all before. Daddy's in great shape, and he's held up to a rough couple of days like a trooper, but he should be able to retire if he wants to, and he can't, because there's no one else to do what he does. I don't know how much longer I can escape this place. I feel it sucking me back in."

His eyes drifted off to focus on the ceiling. "I thought I might impress you with seven acres in the middle of nowhere."

"Sam, your seven acres means more to me than any estate ever could. You always have put me first, no matter what it's cost you. Tell me you won't let this place scare you off. Tell me I don't have to choose between the man I love and the responsibilities I seem to have been born with."

Sam ran his fingers around her chin, turning her face toward his. "You don't have to choose, Tina. I'll never force you to make a decision like that. I love you. I wouldn't do that to you." He silenced any further comments she might have made with a kiss that left no more room for doubts.

Sam rolled to cover her, sliding his cock home with little fanfare, resting quietly within her until just the feel of his pulse beating up and down the length of his burning shaft melted away the strain of the day. Still he didn't move, as if just holding himself buried in her lent him comfort.

His lips on her throat, on her breastbone, and finally on her nipples, that ached now for his touch, slowly awakened her desire to a fever pitch, even as her hips began to move restlessly under his. She ran her hands down his back, cupping his ass, pushing hard enough against him to feel the coarse, dark hair that adorned the base of his cock lightly abrading her. "Fuck me," she whispered into his hair.

His cock quivered within her. "I love it when you talk dirty to me."

"I love it when you suck my tits," she laughed. "You make me so hot for you. I want to feel your cock pumping into me. I want to feel your sanity slipping as you come for me."

He sucked harder, laughing softly against her breast. As if there was a low voltage electrical connection between her clit and her nipple, she quivered around him, her need building until his stillness within her was driving her crazy. The small movements she could manage just made the need worse. "Fuck me," she demanded. "I need you now!"

"Not yet," he whispered, his hot breath sending shivers over her breast.

"What the hell are you waiting for?"

He shifted to the other breast. Raising his body weight off of her with a hand on either side of her shoulders, he bent his head to kiss her, his tongue gently swiping over the sudden hard ridges that appeared on the roof of her mouth. "You're not ready yet."

"If I was any more ready I'd be coming!" she argued, biting his lip as she pulled at him, raising her hips to meet his. She arched against him, trying to grind her hips against his. She could feel the weight of his balls hanging against her now, sliding over her delicate skin as she pressed herself closer to him. He lowered himself, slowly, sliding into her with a steady, even thrust, kissed her again, then pushed back away.

"Damn you," she hissed, lunging to nip at his lip. "Would you hurry up and fuck me?"

"Why does it always have to be in a hurry? What's wrong with slow?"

"What's wrong with slow is that you're driving me insane!"

He laughed at that and pushed slowly, deeply, back into her, penetrating her fully as she wrapped her legs around his waist, opening herself up to him. One more thrust like that and she would come, as much from anticipation as from the feel of his hot, throbbing cock moving within her.

Pushups. He was doing fucking pushups over her, in a slow, mind bending cadence designed to break her, turn her into a babbling idiot. His hips pulled away from her again. She twisted and thrashed, trying to set the rhythm herself, but she didn't have room to raise her hips hard enough against his. He was too strong, too immovable, too rock solid above her to be effected by her laughable attempts to change his slow, steady pace. She smiled as she changed her assault.

"If I could reach you, I'd have my fingers wrapped around your balls by now, squeezing them, licking them, sucking them into my mouth. Then I'd run my tongue over your nipples, and I'd suck them until you moaned for me." He wasn't moving any faster, but she could feel his breathing change. Tighter, harder now, as if he was having trouble catching his breath. His cock pushed a little farther into her, dragged a little more roughly against her on the up-thrust.

She moved her hands to his ass, curling her fingers into the hard flesh of his cheeks. "I love your ass. So smooth and curved and firm. I love the way your muscles feel under my hands when you're fucking me. You go from soft curves to hard lines...Your cock feels like hot steel sliding into me. My pussy's so tight, wanting you, needing to feel you pounding into me. I want to come for you. Fuck me, Sam. Now. Please."

His cock convulsed within her.

"Please, Sam. I'm begging you. Fuck me now. I want to feel you. Please."

"Oh, yeah." He couldn't stand up to that. She almost laughed as he drove into her, harder, deeper, faster, his balls slapping against her. Her fingers curled against the tight planes of his ass. "That's it. Faster. Faster. I want you. Please, Sam. Fuck me. Make me come for you."

The bed squeaked in protest, the old cherry wood whining as he drove into her hard and fast, shaking the bed with his demanding thrusts. Her own breathing came harder now as she rocked against him, hard and fast, pushing herself toward the climax she could feel just around the corner.

"Is that what you want? Yeah?"

"Yeah," she gasped. "That's — perfect." She bit his shoulder, hard, to stifle the scream that threatened to rip loose as she burst, stars exploding across her vision. She tightened, her contractions fisting around his hot, pounding shaft.

He laughed against her ear, quickening his pace, his cock shooting into her faster and faster, spiraling hard toward his own pounding release.

"Fuck me, Sam," she demanded. She reached around farther, sliding her fingers up against his tightly puckered asshole. He growled as he bit her neck, convulsing helplessly as he emptied himself into her.

She shattered around him again as she milked the last few drops of cum from his quivering cock. "Oh, yeah," she groaned. She held him tightly, still wrapped around him, not wanting him to move just yet, needing to hold him within her.

He collapsed over her, gasping for breath as he rolled them both to their sides, but still locked together.

Tina laughed softly as she nipped at his earlobe. "I thought you wanted slow."

"I did. But then I remembered what's wrong with slow."

"Yeah? What?"

"You have too much time to think up new ways to torture me."

* * * * *

Ward Donovan didn't act seventy, Sam decided with a disgruntled attempt to relieve the ache in his shoulder. Whatever seventy was supposed to act like. Sam personally had no real expectations of what seventy might be all about, but he knew forty had left him feeling a little slower, a little less self-confident, just a shade more fragile. Certainly after a day like yesterday, the last thing he expected of a seventy-year-old man was that he'd be up and dressed and ready to get to work before 7:30 in the morning.

Yet that was exactly the case. They'd all gone to bed well after midnight, and yet by the time Tina and Sam made it to the dining room at 8 AM, Ward was long gone. Evidently his limo had shown up from Charleston sometime during the night and Tom Jameson, the gardener was today's acting chauffeur. Sean, the driver who'd taken Ward to Charleston just yesterday morning, was busy dealing with the police over the missing second limo.

And Kyle Adams.

Tina laughed tolerantly when she discovered her father was already gone. "I'm surprised Daddy didn't make Sean drive him downtown this morning. The poor man must have gotten at least what? Four hours sleep? He's only been to Charleston and back with less than a two hour layover."

Moiré Jameson shook her head reprovably. "Kristina Donovan, you know your father never asks anything from any one of us he wouldn't do himself. Nobody had to haul Sean Dwyer out of bed. He was that upset that we didn't tell him as soon as he got in about Kyle and the second car disappearing. He took Tom's truck and went out looking for the car as soon as Mr. Ward told him what happened this morning. He was afraid at first something had happened to Kyle. But there was no sign of Kyle or the other car."

"I don't expect you'll be locating either any time soon," Sam agreed. "Someone had to alert Jesse that we were here, and there was only Kyle and the three boys."

"Well, I didn't want to believe anything bad of Kyle Adams, but we all know it couldn't have been one of my sons," Moiré Jameson agreed. "They know better than to get mixed up in politics. Besides, they know how much they owe Mr. Ward. I'd never have been able to send them through college on my own, let alone graduate schools."

Tina had to swallow a gasp of surprise. Those three men she'd thought of as bouncers were Moiré Jameson's three little boys? They were the same skinny school kids who had helped her with Kara when she was just a toddler? The oldest of those

boys would be less than ten years older than Kara! Yet she'd seen them yesterday as—well, as men!

Tina struggled to adjust her view of reality. "What are your boys studying in school, Moiré?"

"Computers!" Moiré exclaimed. "All about computers! They all say that within ten years, everything will be done on computers." It was just the opening a proud mother needed. For the next half-hour, Tina and Sam got to hear the tales of the three Jameson boys and their ambitions, as well as the future of the computer industry. She and Sam were still listening to Moiré when Ward returned from his morning errands.

All conversation stopped as he set an ancient leather satchel on the table. Tina stared at it, a heavy lump blocking her throat.

It was Sam who finally broke the silence. "What did Jesse mean in that note? About meeting him where it all began."

Ward looked older, and tired. "It all began with Jesse's father, Colin McFarland, and the meeting of the Irish National Caucus. We met once a month in the basement of an old pub. It burned, twenty-five years ago. The police suspected it was arson, but they couldn't prove anything. Now it's just another abandoned building in the worst part of Hartford."

Sam's jaws clenched in helpless anger. "You intend to walk into a burnt-out shell of a building carrying a briefcase with two million dollars in it."

"Do I have a choice?"

Sam let out a slow, defeated breath. "No. Not that I can see."

"Jesse didn't ask me to come alone."

Tina spoke up at that. "There's no way we'd let you do that anyway, Daddy. I want to see Jesse's face one last time. I have to know this is really over. I need to be there for Kara. We both need to be there for her."

Ward nodded, as if he'd expected nothing less. "We'll take the Jameson boys, too, and Sean Dwyer. Jesse will have a small army. We should do the same. This isn't a standard kidnapping. It's more like a meeting of enemies around a bargaining table. Whatever happens, don't ever turn your back on McFarland. For him, this is war, and there are no rules in his kind of war."

"If it's a war he wants, let's take it to him."

Chapter Seventeen

This was a side of Hartford Tina hadn't seen before. It had the look of elegance sunken into defeat. The old Grande Hotel appeared to be a low-end rooming house. The office buildings were empty or abandoned, waiting to be torn down. Some of them had been waiting a very long time. The only businesses that survived here—a deli and convenience store and a laundry—had bars over the windows and doors.

It wasn't hard to spot the arranged meeting place. The former Shamrock Club stood out even on this street. The blackened windows and broken glass spoke of a neighborhood where no one cared to rebuild any longer.

Their long black limo, too, stood out, like a relic of a bygone age. "You better have Sean stay with the car, Daddy, if you want it here when we come back," Tina observed. "The neighborhood doesn't look too hospitable."

Ward looked around regretfully. "The place was in a long spiral down thirty years ago. I still remember it from when my father first brought me here. I was just a boy. I thought this street was a symbol of what the Irish community could be. Now, even the Irish won't live here." He nodded to Sean, who dipped his chin once, then carefully checked all the windows, and locked the doors. The car alarm beeped twice.

It was Sean who spotted the other limo. Little more than the nose was showing from behind the dumpster in the alley. They could see the license plates, though. Ward Donovan's personalized license plates.

The limo was empty, except for Kyle Adams. Kyle got out of the car when they approached, hands held high. The man looked pale and shaken. Sam had his weapon drawn, but he stayed in the background as Ward approached the limo. Only a career criminal would have been able to stand up to the accusation in those steel-gray eyes. Ward's physical presence was still intimidating, despite or perhaps even enhanced by his seventy years, the veneer of refined gentility barely masking something savage you just didn't want to see let loose.

"You've worked for me since you were strong enough to pull up a dandelion," Ward spit, bearing down on the younger man, his eyes hard and dangerous. "I think you owe me an explanation."

Kyle nodded, swallowing nervously. "Jamie McFarland and me go way back, Boss. You know that. We were kids together growing up in the old neighborhood. But that's no excuse for what he's done here, nor my being a part of it. Not with Miss Kara involved. I've helped him out a time or two in the past. My Sara, she didn't think too highly of Jamie. Said he was a common hoodlum. I should have listened to her. I'm not so sure everything I've done was too above the board, if you know what I mean, but no one's ever got hurt by it before. But this time, Jamie's gone too far, sir. I told him I'd not

do it, but that pissed him off. He said if I didn't help him out, he'd hurt Miss Kara, and fix things so's I'd take the blame for it. I didn't see as I had much choice. So I parked tonight where you'd be sure to see me. I wanted you to know what you're going into."

Ward's eyes never wavered. "What are we going into?"

"He's got seven men, sir, not including Jamie himself. You remember how the old club was laid out. Inside the front door there's a second set of doors, where they used to collect the cover fees on the nights when there was a band or something. There'll be one man off to the right in the coatroom watching those doors. He has a two-way radio. At the back upstairs is the old kitchen door that opens on the alley. Guard posted there just the same."

"Down the stairs where the old meeting room was is primarily one big open room, but towards the back there's what used to be the storage room, and there's an outside stairs runs up from there. That entrance will be guarded, as well. That leaves four men in the room with Jamie. He'll be down stairs, near the back, at one of the old gaming tables. Whatever way you come in, the guard's just supposed to stay hidden until you've gone by, then radio ahead to warn Jamie you're on the way. Then the other three will cover the exits. You're not to leave with the money or the girl."

Ward's gaze didn't waver. "Why should I trust you now?" he demanded.

Kyle didn't back down, either. "I've no reason to lie to you, sir. All Jamie had on me was the threat of exposing my misdeeds, and I've done that for myself. Miss Kara's like one of my own grandchildren. I'll not see her hurt just to save my job."

"And the price of today's honesty?"

Kyle laughed at that, a bitter, humorless laugh. "I'd not be an embarrassment to my only daughter at this time of my life, sir. It would do her no good to see the old man spend his last years on this earth behind bars as a felon for one night's use of your limo."

Ward seemed to weigh the issue for a moment, then nodded curtly. "If I come through this thing in good enough shape to tell the police anything, I'll tell them you recovered the car for me, at no small personal risk. Which had better be the truth, or so help me, I'll hunt you down myself."

"Thank you, sir. I'll not forget the debt."

"I'll do it for Sara, and for your daughter, but I'll not forgive the breach of faith, Kyle. That's a wound that won't be fast to heal."

"I'd expect nothing less, sir."

Dismissed, the man turned away, but Tina's voice called him back. "Kyle? What about Kara? Have you seen her? Is she all right?"

Kyle smiled at that, a tired, defeated smile. "Oh, aye, I have that, Ma'am. She's got a fierce temper on her, that one has, and a tongue like a viper. Jamie will regret the day he pinched that one, I'm sure."

"He will, indeed," Tina agreed. "He will indeed."

* * * * *

The guard in the kitchen had been almost too easy. Tina had simply walked up to him and said hello, as if she were lost. The moment's hesitation was all it took for Ethan, Mrs. Jameson's oldest son, to slip a powerful arm around the man's throat and put him to sleep like a wrestler on TV. The action was the easy part. You had a job to do. All by the numbers. The hard part came afterwards.

Afterwards there was always the waiting.

Sam's plan called for one team at each entrance, disabling Jesse's vanguard and skewing the odds in their favor. Sam was sure James McFarland wanted more than money. Jesse wanted Ward Donovan to pay for the insult to Jesse's father with his life—and if Jesse settled an old score with a certain State Trooper along the way, so much the better.

Sam had no problem with that. He had a few scores of his own that needed to be settled as well.

Ward Donovan and Sean Dwyer slipped down the back stairs less than three minutes after Tina and Ethan Jameson had taken up their positions at the rear entrance to the old gaming room. Tina spun around, weapon ready, ready to strike, when she heard her father's warning hiss. Where had he learned to sneak quietly along dark passages? Where had he learned to speak of death so dispassionately, as if it were an everyday thing to take a man's life? She wondered again just how much she didn't know about this man—how much she'd missed, thinking she knew all the answers when she didn't even know the questions.

She was definitely going to have to learn to speak Gaelic.

Precisely at 3:30 PM Ward Donovan pushed the rear door open, a .38 service revolver in his hand. Tina kept her pistol out of sight. Jesse'd not even think to search her. He knew her too well—or at least he thought he did.

Two Coleman lanterns shot white-hot light through the room. Battered and scarred gaming tables littered the floor. On the side wall, under the remnants of a once cheerful leprechaun, sat James McFarland. She'd not have known him if she'd passed him on the street. He had the look of a street bum who might hang out in a place like this.

Tina's voice echoed hollowly across the empty cavern of a room. "You look good, for a dead man, Jesse."

He laughed at that. Jesse always had appreciated a good joke.

Kara fought her way into view from a darkened corner of the stage, elbowing her guard hard in the ribs as she kicked him in the shins. "Mom! I..."

"Hush, now, child. Did I no' tell ya to keep your thoughts to yourself?" His voice was harsher, now, the whiskey having scraped off the veneer of polish he'd once

worked to acquire. The accent was stronger, slipping from Boston to the west of County Cork, but she'd have recognized his voice anywhere.

"Or you'll what?" Kara sneered as the guard secured his hold on her again. "You're a coward, James McFarland. If you hurt me, my father will kill you, and you know it." Kara raised calm eyes to Sam's face as the other party of four entered from the front of the room. "Hello, Daddy."

"Hi, there, Sweetheart," Sam answered, his voice a gentle caress. "You all right?"

"Sure," Kara replied, her voice a brave façade. "But if I ever get kidnapped again, I want someone smart enough to know that teenagers can't live on take-out pizza."

Whether or not Jesse had known that Sam and Spike were the same person before, he certainly knew now. The knowledge made no obvious impact. "Sorry to cut the chit-chat short," Jesse interrupted, "But it's time to hand over my money. Put my satchel on the table then back on out of the room. I leave the girl here and you never see me again. That should make all of you happy."

Ward shook his head. "I don't think so. An even exchange out in the open where everyone can see what's going on. The girl for the money. "

"So you can fill me full of lead while I try to escape? I don't *think* so," Jesse mimicked.

Tina felt a black wave of anger drown out the fear. "This was never about money anyway, was it, Jesse?"

Jesse smiled at that, flicking a strand of long black hair tinged with dye back from his too pale face. "You know what I want, Hope. I want to see the high and mighty heiress humbled before me. I want to see you slave the way my mother did to make a day's wages and feed a family, while your precious father sits by with all his money and watches the family name turn to dust. And I *do* want my money. I want it all."

Tina nodded slowly. "Fine." She reached into her coat pocket. Jesse laid his hand over the butt of his pistol, but Tina ignored him. "Here are my terms." Tina drew out an ancient square of folded paper and a sealed deck of playing cards. Carefully she unfolded the yellowed paper and laid it on the table. It contained one word, in large, crude block letters.

Hope.

"Kara leaves now with Sean Dwyer. He radios us when he's in the car and out of this neighborhood. Once I know Kara is clear, we settle this just the way it was fifteen years ago. Winner take all."

A broad grin split Jesse's once handsome face. "I accept."

Cold rage lit Sam's eyes. "Tina! You can't be serious!"

Tina met his fury with simple faith. "You better not lose." She shifted her attention to her father.

"I accept." Ward opened the leather satchel to reveal rows of neatly bundled bills. "I'll stake you each to one million dollars. The money is in bundles of \$10,000. Nobody breaks the bundles. Seven-card stud. Winner take all."

"This is insane!" Sam protested. "You cannot...."

"Sam?" Her voice was calm. Cool. Insistent. "Play the game, Spike."

Something went cold in the depths of those cobalt eyes. "Fine. If that's the way you want it."

"That's the way I want it."

Jesse laughed, not a pleasant sound, and reached for the deck. His sleeve slipped up, revealing the body of the faded tattoo that wrapped around his forearm. Tina's hand came down hard on the head of the snake. Hard enough to make Jesse flinch. "Not until my daughter is safe."

She could see him force that anger back under control. Finally he nodded to the guard holding Kara to release her. Kara flew around the table to wrap her arms around Tina for a frightened hug.

Kara's eyes went big, but she said nothing. Tina slowly pulled the girl's arms away from the pistol in her waistband and pushed her toward Sean with a parting kiss. "Everything's going to be all right, Honey. I promise."

Kara paused long enough to stop in front of Sam. She held out her arms and Sam pulled her into a fierce hug. If she whispered something in Sam's ear, Tina couldn't catch it, but there was a change in his eyes when they met hers again from across the room. An understanding Tina hadn't seen before.

Then Sam faded into the background.

It was Spike's turn to run the show.

From the far end of the hall, a Grandfather Clock sounded 4 PM. Jesse must have had one of his men wind it. He'd always had a flare for the dramatic. Amazing the thing still ran. It was scarred and scored from the fire. Evidently no one had thought it worth stealing. How appropriate.

Seven-card stud, Tina decided, must be one of the most complicated games ever invented. First the men anted. Then the first two cards—the hole cards—were dealt face-down. Next came the four face-up cards, each followed by a round of betting. The seventh, and final, card was dealt face-down. Bidding in \$10,000 increments, the money added up fast. If they made it to the final round of betting without either man folding, there was a minimum of \$120,000 in play.

Tina understood the basics of the game. She knew that five cards of the same suit made a flush, and five cards in a numerical sequence made a straight. What she'd never understood before was the subtle psychology of the game. She studied the way Spike watched Jesse's every move, listened to the rhythm of his breathing, focused on the tic around his left eye.

Jesse wasn't a bad card player. He had the natural luck of the Irish, Tina supposed, for he consistently played good hands. But still he lost. With a calm, efficient skill, Spike decimated Jesse's holdings. Sam bet high when he had nothing, undermining Jesse's confidence, taking one pot at \$260,000 with a pair of aces when Jesse was holding a full house. In another hand, Spike folded with a straight, letting Jesse take \$140,000 with a pair of nines.

Spike wore a ring on his right hand. She'd noticed it before—a college ring from the University of Virginia. He twisted it on his finger whenever he wanted Jesse to think he was holding higher cards. Sometimes he was. Like the straight. Sometimes he wasn't. From where Tina was sitting she could see Spike's hand. He wasn't trying to hide it from her. It was almost as if he wanted her to know what he was doing.

When Spike folded, Jesse never knew what he had been holding. Spike always laid the cards face down on the pile. Either Jesse was too proud to look or it was considered bad manners.

Another subtle change was taking place at that table. Both men were drinking. According to Jesse, poker and Jameson Irish Whiskey went together. But, though Spike's glass was always full, he wasn't getting drunk. Spike refilled Jesse's glass as soon as it was empty. While Jesse downed his whiskey by the shot, Spike merely topped off his glass every time he refilled Jesse's.

The stakes were getting higher. Jesse won now. The bankrolls on either side evened out again as the clock struck 9 PM. She hadn't realized the game had lasted so long. A heavy sense of foreboding settled over her.

Everything paused when the deep tones of the clock pealed through the hall. Spike looked up, then back at Jesse. "Let's end this." He shoved his entire bankroll into the pot. "Winner take all."

The hole cards and the four face cards had all been dealt. Sam was showing a two of Clubs, and the Queen, eight and three of Hearts. A possible flush, Tina assessed. Jesse looked at his cards again. He had a pair of Kings showing. A slow, malicious smile spread over his face. "Sure. Why not? It must be past your bedtime."

"I'm just tired of your company."

Jesse looked at his cards again, and slowly pushed the rest of the money into the pot. "I think you're out of luck, Hope. Pretty-boy here doesn't really care whether he takes your marker or not."

"Never did," Spike agreed. "That was your idea, remember?"

Jesse shrugged, as if it didn't matter. "I knew you wanted her. You'd been coming around just to sniff at her for months."

Tina took a deep breath and let it out slowly. He'd lied. Sam had lied when she asked him whose idea the bet was. What had happened at his little house had been real, not just part of some undercover operations.

Sam shrugged, keeping his voice level. They could have been discussing the weather. "She's a nice enough piece of ass, but it was you I was after. I knew you'd had

Steve and Faith murdered. If I could have proved that, the investigation would have ended there. As it was, you gave me every biker gang working the East Coast before that summer was over."

"We thought it was you," Jesse offered amicably. "I should have had you killed, but it was more amusing to dangle Hope in front of you. She wasn't so difficult back then. Deal the final card. I thought about having her kill you. I think she'd have done it if I'd asked her to."

Spike dealt the last two cards. Tina couldn't see his hand any more. "She might have. You could beat her into almost anything in those days, as I remember it."

"I'm going to have the chance again," Jesse predicted. He spread his hand on the table. Four Kings showed their solemn faces. Jesse laughed as he started to reach for the pot.

Tina slid her hand back along the waist of her jeans under her jacket.

"Not so fast," Spike warned with a chuckle. "At least look at what I'm holding. You paid for the privilege."

Jesse sat back, looking amused. "Go ahead."

Spike laid out his hole cards, one at a time, as if teasing the room. A ten of Hearts. The Jack. And, finally, the nine. It wasn't just a flush. It was a straight flush. The only hand that could beat four of a kind. Spike sat back and gave his ring a final, deliberate, twist.

Jesse glanced sharply at the ring, then Sam's cards. Then he began to laugh in earnest. "You drew to an inside flush. Two million dollars on the line, and you drew to an inside flush."

Spike rose and began stacking the bills neatly back into the leather satchel. "That's why they call it poker."

For a moment or two, Tina thought it might end there. Jesse might actually let them go. She'd really wanted to believe it would be that simple. But Jesse hated to lose. He hated even more to look like a fool. Sam had done both.

The room grew quiet as Jesse's laughter faded and he swayed slowly to his feet. "Kill them," he ordered. "Kill them all."

Chapter Eighteen

Tina never knew who fired the first shot, but Sam was the closest, and she saw the bullet take him high in the left shoulder, even as he knocked the table over and dropped down for cover. As if in slow motion, she reached for the pistol in her waistband and aimed at Jesse's head. He turned, staring at her in disbelief as she pulled the trigger. His shot went wild, whizzing by her right ear.

At least four shots hit Jesse's body, making it dance like a string puppet as he tumbled backwards toward the floor. Shots rang out around the room as Jesse's men scrambled to fulfill his final order.

Sam went down again, hit by a second shot, and Tina screamed his name, knowing she'd be too late to reach him. Help came from the place she'd have least expected it. Kyle Adams rolled across the floor to pull Sam's body back behind the heavy oak table, though he, himself, had no weapon. He grabbed up Sam's service revolver and fired until he was out of rounds. Two of Jesse's remaining henchmen fell before his wild barrage.

It might have lasted less than ninety seconds, though it seemed a lifetime passed before silence returned to the room. Tina stood up slowly from behind the table she'd overturned, following Sam's example. She looked around the room, stunned by the carnage.

"Daddy?" she whispered. "Daddy?" It wasn't a whisper that time. She tripped on a tear in the shredded carpeting and landed next to him on the floor.

"Daddy?"

Ward slowly roused himself. Blood was spreading down his pinstriped suit from a wound in the upper left chest. He took a deep breath. "I don't think it hit anything vital. Check on the others. Sam doesn't look so good."

Tina looked around, guilt tearing at her features. "Sam!" she shrieked.

He was down, behind the table, blood pooling much too quickly beneath him. She scrambled to his side. There were at least three wounds evident. The two she'd seen him take, in his left shoulder and his upper chest, high and to the right side. The third was low on his right hip.

Cobalt eyes opened to hers as she bent over him. He lifted his left arm, his face twisting in pain at the effort it cost him. He clutched a faded piece of paper in his hand. "This is the second time I've returned this to you," he whispered. "Maybe you better hang on to it this time."

Tina accepted the marker, tears streaming down her face. "I'll hold this for you, but only until you're out of the hospital. I expect you to claim it personally. A deal's a deal."

A half smile quirked at Sam's lips. "What would you have done if I'd lost?"

Tina met his eyes with all the honesty she had ever mustered. "I'd have waited until all of you were out of the room, and then I'd have shot Jesse through the heart at very close range."

Sam laughed, though the effort must have cost him dearly. "Still trying to protect me."

"I love you," she explained softly.

"I've never doubted that," Sam agreed as his eyes slid closed.

* * * * *

"Mom, you're wearing a hole in the carpet," Kara pointed out with an indulgently scolding tone.

"The sun will be up soon! Why haven't they told us anything yet?" Tina demanded for the hundredth time.

It was Moiré Jameson who answered, her voice calm, despite the handkerchief she held crumpled in her clenched hands. "They'll tell us something when there's something to tell."

Ethan laid his hand over his mother's, waiting patiently while she put away the handkerchief and allowed him to wrap her two tired hands in his huge paw. His youngest brother Jeffrey sat on the other side of their mother, looking only a shade less stoic.

A nurse stuck her head in, her smile a shade too bright to steady Tina's nerves. "Mrs. Jameson, Patrick is being moved to the recovery room. You can see him in just a few minutes."

They'd been waiting for hours.

The police had come back, eventually, and Tina had gone with them to the morgue to identify as many of the bodies as she could. There was Jesse, of course. Surprisingly enough she felt no joy at seeing him there. No relief that it was finally over. Just a terrible sense of waste and emptiness. Four more of Jesse's men lay dead beside him on those cold steel tables. Only those who'd been left handcuffed and gagged upstairs had survived.

They were not alone. Of Tina's party, Ward was in recovery, Sam and Patrick Jameson were still in surgery, and Kyle Adams had given his life to save Sam's.

If, indeed, he had saved Sam's life. Hours later Tina still didn't know if Sam would recover. She didn't know what was going on with Daddy, either. Although Ward was out of surgery, she still wasn't allowed to see him. The urge to smash the vase of fake plastic flowers into the wall became nearly irresistible. Tina turned on her heel and strode out of the little waiting room, ignoring the nurse's bark of protest.

A tired looking surgeon nearly collided with Tina in the hallway. He offered a hand to steady her. "Mrs. Callaghan?"

"I—yes," Tina agreed. It didn't seem the time or the place to qualify her relationship with Sam.

"I'm Dr. Taylor, your husband's orthopedic surgeon. I was just coming to talk to you."

"Is he all right, Doctor? Is he still alive?"

"Sam's alive. His condition has stabilized, but he's still listed as critical. That's standard procedure after surgery of this kind. He is on his way to the Intensive Care Unit now. We should be able to move him to a room within twenty-four hours, if all goes as expected. His wounds are very serious. The bullet that entered his left shoulder didn't do too much damage. However, there was a second gunshot wound through his chest, high on the right side. The Pulmonary Team had to remove fragments of a shattered rib and repair a tear in the lung. The third wound to the right thigh was my job. We had to reconstruct parts of the hipbone. We won't know for some time just how much permanent damage there will be. We did the best we could."

Tina blinked like an owl, trying to digest the onslaught of information. "But Sam will live."

The doctor nodded with a trace of a smile. "There's always a risk with any surgery, but Officer Callaghan's injuries don't appear to be life threatening at this time."

"He'll be able to walk?"

The surgeon offered her a tired smile. "We were able to reconstruct his hip. He should be able to walk fairly well, although he may need to use a cane, at least for a while."

Tina laid her hand on the surgeon's arm. "Thank you, Doctor. I know you worked very hard to put Sam back together. I appreciate everything you've done for us. I especially appreciate your honesty."

"Would you like to see him now?"

"Oh, yes!" Tina exclaimed.

"You can't stay very long, but you can let him know you're here. He should be coming out of the anesthesia soon."

Tina followed the doctor into a plastic nightmare. Sam was sheltered in an oxygen tent and attached to a dozen lines and tubes. A strange looking contraption with steel bands and long screw like things immobilized his right thigh. It was hard to find the man she knew under the plastic.

The eyes that slowly opened to hers, however, were unmistakably blue. A little dazed and confused, perhaps, but wonderfully familiar.

"Hi there, Beautiful," he mumbled around the tubes.

The effort of the words cost him a harsh cough. "Shhh," Tina warned. "Don't try to talk. They'll throw me out if they think I'm getting you too excited."

He smiled softly at that. "Always," he managed. He let his eyes wander down what he could see of his body. "How bad is it?"

Honesty. He always wanted honesty. Tina took a deep breath. "You lost some pieces of one rib along with a little bit of your lung and they had to rebuild your leg. You're going to be here a little while, but it's nothing we can't handle."

Sam nodded, his eyes blinking slowly as he tried to focus. "How bad is the leg?"

She wanted to lie, to at least gloss the truth over a little, but that wasn't what he wanted. There'd been enough lies between them over the years. "You may not ever run the Boston Marathon, but you'll be able to do most of the things any other forty year old man can do."

Cobalt eyes turned gray. "Except be a cop."

"It's too early to tell. You're going to be pretty sore for a while, that's for sure." Tina put on her best smile. "But then, you won two million dollars in a poker game last night. You could probably afford to retire."

Sam tried for a brave smile. It almost worked. "I did, didn't I? You still holding that marker for me?"

She had to swallow hard to find her voice again. "Yeah. It'll be waiting when you get out of here."

"Good," Sam whispered. "Keep it safe for me."

"I will," Tina promised. "I love you, Sam."

His eyes drifted back shut. "I love you too," he managed. "I always have. I always will."

* * * * *

Tina looked up as Kara opened the office door.

"We need to talk."

"I suppose so," Tina agreed with a sigh.

Kara slid onto the leather-clad divan that was one of the mainstays of Ward's personal office. "The dust on the third floor is three feet thick, Mom, and Sean says that the dock workers are going to strike again, which means the shipping division of Donovan's Industries is in major trouble. Not to mention the fact that the dollar's taking a nose dive in Germany again, and about half of our exports are to Germany."

Tina blinked several times, staring at her daughter. "Who are you? Do I know you?"

Kara shrugged. "Sam says being rich is a big responsibility. People depend on you for more than just their paychecks. They want to know you're going to be around long enough to get their kids through college and pay off their mortgages and stuff. I figure if I'm going to run it all some day, I better learn as much about it as I can."

Tina nodded slowly. "Your father's a very wise man. It's a big responsibility. One I've been avoiding for much too long."

"So why are you just sitting in here this afternoon?"

"I was trying to write a letter to Doris. I was trying, too, to figure out how to explain to you why I have to stay here now. But it looks like you've already figured that out."

Kara nodded before her eyes turned stormy again. "What about Sam?"

Tina looked across the desk at this stranger she knew almost as well as she knew herself. "What about Sam?"

Kara focused her eyes out the window toward her retreating childhood. "I think he was kinda counting on seven acres and a three bedroom farmhouse and even a couple of horses. He really wanted to give that whole family thing a try. Looks like he even bought you a ring."

Tina fingered the ruby self-consciously. "Things got a little crazy after you were kidnapped. I thought I'd wait until he was better to talk to him about where we go from here."

Kara nodded. "Well, Ma, I wouldn't wait too long. Sam thinks too much, you know? I came in here to tell you Sean is taking me back to the hospital after lunch. I'm taking those books you gave me. It's time Sam learned about Hobbits. You want me to tell Sam we're staying up here?"

The offer was tempting, but just another evasion of responsibility. "No. No, I think I better do that myself. You stick to the Hobbits. I'll be over later this afternoon, around four. I'm trying to divide my time between the businesses and the hospital. Sam and I have a lot of things to talk about. And you're right. He does think too much." Tina stared down at the letter she'd been trying to write. "I guess maybe I do, too."

Kara shook her head. "Why don't you just give Doris a call? Leave the official stuff for the letter to the personnel office. Doris is your friend. Invite her up to visit. Get her to bring Al along with her. I'm actually starting to miss that crazy cat. Have one of the Jameson boys go get them in the limo. She'll love it."

"I haven't even thought about getting our stuff out of the apartment," Tina admitted with a frustrated sigh. "I wonder when I'm supposed to find time to do that?"

"Rich people don't pack boxes, Mom. You call a moving company, then ask Doris to be there with the key and let them in. That's it. They box everything up and it shows up here a few days later."

"Yeah?" Tina countered with a tired laugh. "How do you know so much, anyway?"

Kara shrugged. "I ask a lot of questions, and I listen when people actually take the time to answer me instead of just treating me like a kid."

Tina flushed slightly. "I'll try to remember that."

Kara looked around the room as if she could see through the walls. "You know what this place needs?"

Tina laughed again and shook her head. "No. What?"

"Noise," Kara pronounced. "It's as quiet as a tomb around here. All these rooms and no one lives in them. We need a couple of dogs and a dozen more kids to fill the place up."

"We'll see about the dogs, but there's no way I'm having a dozen kids. I'm done with babies, remember? Unless there's something you need to talk to me about."

Kara made her sour apple face. "Ma, get real! It's not the '60's, you know? I'm an '80's kid. We believe in prevention. Besides, I don't even have a boyfriend. If I did and he tried anything like that, he wouldn't be my boyfriend for long, that's for sure."

"Kara?"

"Yeah?" Her voice was still thick with distaste.

"I love you."

Kara folded her legs out from under her and headed for the door. "I love you too, Ma. Now call Doris."

"Yes, Ma'am."

* * * * *

"Hey!" Sam observed, trying to blink the haze from his eyes. "You been here long?"

"A little while," she lied, glancing up at the clock. The sun had set hours before, while she'd waited, dreading the conversation they had to have.

Sam must have felt the tension in her lie. "Your life must have gotten pretty boring if you can't find anything better to do than to watch me sleep."

Tina bent carefully across the bed rail and kissed Sam gently on the forehead. "My life is anything but boring. Watching you sleep happens to be one of my greatest pleasures at the moment." That, at least, was the truth.

Sam tried to smile, but the effort didn't reach its full potential. "Kara was here earlier. I'm afraid I fell asleep somewhere in the murky woods."

"I know. She told me. I always know exactly where my daughter is these days. But that's not what we were talking about. We were talking about how much I like to look at you. Asleep. Awake. Dressed. Undressed. Wrapped up in blankets. Doesn't really matter. You always give my eyes a comfortable place to rest."

Sam looked away, avoiding her eyes. "Can't really see how you'd find the sight too appealing at the moment."

Tina swept him carefully with her gaze, slowly, doing a thorough inspection. "Do you think I'm so shallow that I can't see past a few wires and tubes? I'll admit, they frightened me at first. So I found out what each one is for." She ran a finger lightly over one of the wires. "This one monitors your breathing. See this screen here? Sixteen breaths per minute. These lines show how deeply you're breathing. See how far up this line climbs each time you take a breath? That tells me your lung is healing. It's working the way it's supposed to again. I've watched these lines get taller every day. This one over here is your heartbeat. It climbs steadily when you're about to wake up. I like the way it takes a little jump whenever you first open your eyes and see me here."

Tina moved away from the monitor and traced the wires gently back to the electrodes under the sheets against his chest. Sam's eyes closed with a look that was

almost pain when she laid her hand over his breastbone. She moved her hand away gently, long enough to lower the bedrail. The bed was narrow, and there wasn't much room, but she managed to arrange herself next to him, ever mindful of the wires, her hand once again finding its way to his chest.

"I love you, Sam. Did you think I could quit loving you because you nearly lost your life saving mine? I knew, from the very first, that we were meant to be together. I knew what a terrible mistake I'd made, not waiting for you to find me. When I saw you lying there, and all that blood, I was so scared, Sam. I can't lose you. Not after everything it's taken to get us back together."

Sam's free hand moved to the back of her head, burying itself in her hair as he pulled her closer. "I'm scared, Tina," he admitted in a shaky voice. "All I've ever wanted was to be a cop. I don't know who I am without that."

"You're the man I love!" she assured him. "You're still the same man, Sam, no matter what you do for a living. You don't have to do anything, for that matter. You've got two million dollars, remember?"

He snorted at that. "I can't keep your father's money. I couldn't even if I wanted to. It's against the law. All the paperwork the department's pulled together says I was working as an undercover cop, following up on a fifteen-year-old case. I can't keep any money associated with that case."

"I was kind of hoping you'd be coming around to cash in that marker before too long."

Sam turned his head to look out the window, avoiding her eyes. "You better hold on to that marker. The shape I'm in, it might be a while before I can claim it."

"You'll be out of that brace in another six weeks. I know that seems like forever right now, but it'll go quicker than you think it will. You're still the man I fell in love with, Sam. All these wires can't change that."

But things had changed between them. She could feel Sam drifting away.

"You won't be going back to your old job in Hagerstown."

"No, I won't," she agreed. "You said it yourself, Sam. There's a great deal of responsibility that goes with my name, and I've been running away for too long. Daddy will be coming home at the end of this week, but he won't be in any shape to take all his old jobs back right away. He may not ever take all of them back. He isn't a young man, and he's healing slower than he used to. I have to stay here. I was hoping you'd stay here with me, Sam."

Sam's eyes were focused on a spot on the wall. "I can't see how I can fit into your life here, Tina. I can see myself turning into an ornament in that house. The man who escorts you to functions and fundraisers and occasionally visits the businesses you own with you. That's not me. I suppose there are men who could do that for you. I'm just not one of them."

Panic pulled at her heart. "I don't want an escort. I need a husband, and Kara needs a father. I need a partner, and there's no one I'd consider for that job but you. I love you, Sam Callaghan. I need you."

Sam closed his eyes and held onto her with more strength than she'd thought he could muster. "I love you," he managed. "Right now that's the only thing I have going for me."

"It'll always be enough, Sam. No matter where you are, no matter what you're doing, we'll always have each other. That will always be enough." But even as she said it, Tina knew it was another lie. She could feel him slipping away, and she just didn't know what else to do about it.

Chapter Nineteen

"What do you mean, he's not here? He didn't just disappear. He can't even walk, for God's sake! How did he leave? Find the last nurse to see him. I want to see the orderly who took him to the door. I want to know what vehicle he got into. And I want to know now! Do you understand?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

The printer was buzzing away madly. The clerk ripped off a sheet of strange looking code and handed it to Tina.

"What does all of this mean?"

The little man pushed his glasses back up on his nose. "Well, these bills here are for phone calls. Looks like three of them to a 304 area code. These bills here are from Radiology. From the log I'd say he was down in Radiology at 8:00 AM this morning. This item here is for casting plaster. Must have been a big one. Took six rolls of pre-coated plaster wrap, and a set of crutches. Extra large."

"What about drugs? There was an IV with antibiotics and fluids. You can't just walk out wearing something like that!"

The little man studied the forms again. "It looks like the last solution of five percent sodium chloride was logged in at midnight. Yesterday there was a fresh bag at 8 AM. There wasn't one on today's bill. There was a prescription filled in-house for pain medicine, a three day supply."

"So they took the IV out, put him in a plaster cast, he made three phone calls, and then he just walked out of here. Thank you very much." She spun on her black spiked heel, wishing she could drill it through the little man's forehead.

"You're welcome, Ma'am," the clerk replied automatically, either missing or ignoring the sarcasm in her tone.

Tina turned back on him once again. "One more thing. I want that phone bill. I want to know who he called and how long he talked to them."

"I'm not sure..."

Tina reached over the desk and snatched it out of his hands. "I'm paying this bill. I want to know what I'm paying. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Ma'am. It looks like First Sergeant Callaghan has made several calls while he was here. If you'd like, I can print out a detailed phone record for the last three weeks. It might be easier to read than this billing code."

"Please do that," Tina agreed.

* * * * *

The little party was halfway home before Ward Donovan voiced his lingering doubts. He spoke hesitantly, as if unsure as to the current state of Tina's temper. "Princess, are you sure this is wise? I think we should have waited for the doctor to check me out. He was supposed to do that today anyway."

"Then he should have done it," Tina snapped. She immediately regretted her show of temper. "I'm sorry, Daddy. I'm upset, but I'm not upset with you. I just can't understand why Sam would walk out like that, and not even bother to say good-bye. Especially to Kara. I thought they'd gotten so much closer lately. I really wanted him to be a father to her."

"Don't judge him too harshly until you know all the facts," Ward admonished gently.

But she knew the facts. That phone bill was one piece of information Tina wasn't going to let her father or Kara get a look at. Not with sixteen calls to Brenda at the West Virginia State Police Barracks on it.

* * * * *

Tina grabbed the phone on the first ring.

"Hi." His voice sounded strained. Not quite worried. More...cautious. "You have every right to be angry with me, Tina. I'm sorry I haven't called."

Tina swallowed her anger, forcing herself to keep her voice calm. It wouldn't accomplish anything for her to set her temper loose on him now, or even let Sam know how upset she'd been. It would just push him farther away. She sighed, letting anger slip away with the outlet of air. "First I was frightened. Then I was angry, for a while. But I guess I understand. You were alone here. Your friends are all back there. Charleston is your home."

"That's part of it," Sam agreed. "But only a very small part. I'm in trouble, Tina. I'm not sure how much, yet. I'm under investigation back here. IAD isn't too happy with me."

"Internal Affairs? You should get some of an award for this, a service commendation or something. Don't they understand what Jesse was? What he'd have done if we hadn't stopped him?"

Sam's voice sounded tired. "I knew what I was doing, Tina. Your father was right. I was after vengeance. I wanted Jesse dead. I went in there like some kind of a fucking vigilante. I went well beyond my jurisdiction on this one, and I involved civilians. Kyle's dead. I'm responsible for that, Tina. I'd probably be up on charges if it hadn't been for Brenda. She's got the Fed's backing me on this, at least publicly. Privately, they've read me the riot act, too. I expect you'll be hearing from the FBI's Internal Affairs investigators sometime soon. I'm trying hard to keep you out of it. As far as anyone

here knows, you're the mother of the kidnap victim, and the suspect's ex-wife. That's it. It'll be easier for both of us if we keep it that way for now."

Isn't that convenient. "I don't want to be kept out of your life, Sam. It feels like half my heart has been ripped out of my chest. I miss you so much."

His voice softened a little, losing some of its crisp, official tone. "I miss you, too. I'm sorry I ran out on you like that. You deserved more. You have the right to expect a few things of me, you know. I should have called you sooner. I know this sounds paranoid, but I think the Feds have my phone tapped. I'm at a friend's house, now, using his phone. I figured I better check in with you before you send the National Guard out looking for me."

There was something else he wanted to say. Tina waited, trying to be patient.

"Thank you. For giving me the time and the space to work through all of this. I really do love you, you know."

Tina shoved aside her jealousy and let her heart come through. "I know you do. That's the only thing that's keeping me going. You can have as much time as you need, Sam. Whatever it takes. I'll be here. I'll be waiting for you. But don't disappear on me again, all right? Keep in touch, you know? Let me know I'm still a part of your life, at least a thought in the back of your mind. I miss you so much it's driving me crazy."

"I'll try to call more often," Sam promised. "I'll write. There's not a day that goes by that you're not the first thought on my mind, and the last one before I go to sleep at night. Try to be patient with me, please. We can get through this."

"I'll try," Tina promised. "But waiting is not one of the things I do best."

"I know." There was a long pause. "There're a lot of things I haven't told the Feds, Tina. I didn't say anything about the connection between my real father and Colin McFarland, because I didn't know about that until your father told us. I didn't want this to sound like some sort of a twenty-year long vendetta. It wasn't. I promise you that. I was after my brother's killers." She heard him swallow, hard. "I—I had no idea McFarland had ordered my mother's hit. I really thought her death was an accident. I need you to believe that."

"I do, Sam! I never thought otherwise."

"I just didn't want you to think I set this all up from the beginning. I certainly never planned on getting involved with one of the suspects in a murder investigation."

"Don't worry," Tina assured him with a tight little laugh. "I won't say anything to the Feds that might incriminate you."

Sam took her response seriously. "I'm not asking you to lie, Tina. Not about any of it. I just wanted you to know what's going on."

It wouldn't do any good to tell him it had been a feeble attempt at a joke. "I know that, too," Tina assured him. "I love you, Sam."

There was another long pause. "I love you, too. At the moment, that's all that I seem to have in my favor."

Tina took a deep breath. "You have resources here you're not using, Sam. Kara wasn't just any kidnap victim. She's the granddaughter of one of the wealthiest men in the country. Use my father's name. Use my name. There's more than just responsibility here, Sam. There's power. I'm just beginning to learn how to use that power. I won't stand by while they pull your career down around you, Sam. If the Feds want to interview me, they're welcome. I'll remind them just who Kara is, and what you did for us. I won't ever forget that. Maybe they need to be reminded."

Sam laughed at that. "Sometimes I forget just how tough you are. I used to wonder how anyone as soft and fragile as you seemed could ever stand up to a man like Jesse. I've always underestimated you. I pity the IAD man who tries to take you on."

"Let 'em try," Tina challenged. "Just let 'em try."

* * * * *

Sam sat at his desk, stacks of paperwork piled haphazardly about him. Apparently he didn't hear her come in—he didn't look up, at any rate. He looked older, somehow. Tired, perhaps, but it was more than that. He looked smaller. A shadow of the man she remembered. She could see it in the droop of his shoulders, the careless way he'd arranged his body in the chair, the way his hair had grown out just a little too long.

Tina shut the office door behind her. Sam finally raised his head at the sound of the latch.

For just a moment, there was something there, a spark in his eyes, a fire that faded quickly, either burning itself out or squelched from within. He didn't get up. Didn't come around the desk to greet her.

"Hi," Tina offered.

His uniform looked like he'd slept in it.

She forced a smile. "This is the part where you tell me how good it is to see me. How much you've missed me. How sorry you are that you haven't called me in almost a month."

His eyes had faded to a dull gray. "You shouldn't be here."

Tina nodded in agreement, keeping her voice calm. "You've been saying that. All summer."

"I...You're right, I should have called. I've just been kind of busy here, trying to get a handle on things. I was off work for so long that the paperwork got a little out of hand."

Tina ran her gaze over the littered desk slowly. Deliberately. "I see."

Sam looked as if he was searching for something to say, some safe subject to fill the void with. "I've been back to work less than a month. IAD finally decided not to pursue any formal charges."

"So you've been cleared?"

A long strand of dark blond hair tumbled across his eyes as he shook his head. "No, not really. There never were any formal charges brought, so they didn't have any to

drop. Officially, I'm supposed to receive some sort of commendation for being wounded in the line of duty. Unofficially, my career is pretty well over. I'll be stuck on a desk until I retire."

Tina kept her voice level, as if it didn't matter. "So retire."

Anger flared in Sam's eyes. "And do what? Plant flowers with Tom Jameson?"

Tina shrugged. "I told you before, I've got a hell of a mess on my hands, and I could use a partner."

The anger faded to a bitter frown. "What do I know about running multimillion dollar corporations?"

Some of her temper leaked out, despite her resolve. "You know as much as I do, Sam. Maybe more. You know how to organize people. You know how to get things done. Do you know Donovan Industries owns one of the largest security firms in New England? And you and I broke into my father's house with a piece of copper wire and a handkerchief. I could use some help, Sam!"

That spark she'd seen when she first entered his office re-ignited, then died away again, almost as if it had never been there. Almost. The void between that spark and almost was just what she'd been looking for. No matter how hard he wanted to pretend he didn't, Sam still cared. It was a small thing to place her faith in, but it was all she had. She had to believe she could still bring him back.

"I don't need some charity job just to keep me occupied, Tina. I'm not another responsibility for you to juggle into your busy schedule."

Anger washed over her, and for once she did nothing to hold it back. "Charity? I ask for your help and you accuse me of offering you charity? I could have sworn you asked me to marry you. Someday, when you've sat at this desk long enough to get it all neat and organized again, maybe you can explain to me why having money makes me less of a woman. Because I could have sworn you told me you loved me. But if you'd rather wallow here in self-pity, I understand."

She dropped a folded square of yellowed paper on his desk as she wrenched the ruby off her finger. "I'll tell you what you can do with this ring, Sam. Hang it on a chain around your neck. Another reminder of all the reasons you have to feel sorry for yourself. But when you look in the mirror at night, you remember this. You're looking at the face of the man who shut me out when I needed him most." The ring didn't slide across the desk. It stood where she'd tossed it for a moment, spinning like a top, sending flashing red lights through the small office.

When it finally fell over, making a tiny clink in the silent wake of her anger, Tina spun on her heel and stalked out the door, slamming it shut again to punctuate her anger. The echo reverberated down the length of the corridor. She made only one stop on the way out, opening the door to the dispatchers room long enough to stick her head in and meet Brenda's wide-eyed look with a disdainful glare.

"You want him, Brenda? He's all yours. With my blessings. I'll dance a jig at your wedding. He's even got a ring that ought to fit you just about right."

Tina slammed that door behind her, too, just for good measure.

* * * * *

Sam didn't realize until he stepped out of the cruiser that he'd forgotten the cane. No matter. There wouldn't be any place on the bike for it anyway. He stood there a minute, staring down at the folded piece of paper in his hand. He didn't have to open it up to know what it said. He'd memorized it years ago.

Hope.

Back then, it had seemed like such an inappropriate name. A mockery for a woman who had none. Now, it held his only lifeline.

In the back of the bedroom closet he found what he'd come here for. With an energy he'd not felt in some time, Sam stripped out of the uniform that had once meant so much to him. He tossed it toward the hamper in the corner. It almost made the basket.

The jeans were there, where he'd left them, in the bottom of the closet, under a pile of motorcycle rags. He pulled them on, grunting a little as he hopped on one leg, trying to keep his balance. On the first shelf was the stained olive drab T-shirt with the arms and neck cut out. The chaps took a little more work, as bending over to buckle them around his legs was still a trial.

He stepped over to the mirror to tie the ragged red bandanna across his forehead. The jacket came next. He pulled it on and squared his shoulders before he stamped into the battered black square-toed boots and pulled on the armored gloves.

There was only one thing left.

With a hand that shook, just a little, at the thought of what he was about to do, Sam reached back into the far corner of the upper shelf. An old towel covered it. He pulled it out, using the towel to scare away the remnants of the dust. He took a little extra time, now, polishing the heavy chrome spike.

Back then, that old helmet seemed to stand for everything that had gone wrong in his life. It represented the job that had cost him the woman he had been born to love. He'd sworn, that day fourteen years ago when he put the old helmet away, that he'd never take it out again.

Clara Mahoney had taught him that swearing was tempting fate. He'd proven her right when he'd dusted off the helmet a few months ago – when Doc and Crazy Horse had dropped back into his life.

He was about to prove her right again.

Chapter Twenty

A sound like thunder rolled up the valley. Tina looked up quickly, her breath catching in her throat. She pulled at her old T-shirt, smoothing it down over her hips. The jeans were worn and faded, but cleaner than they'd been all those years ago. She yanked out the clip that held her hair knotted against the back of her head.

He'd always liked her hair best when it was down. He'd never said so, but she could tell. A woman always noticed things like that.

She wasn't posing. Not exactly. She was just waiting. There, on the porch, where the breeze fanned her face, and the valley spread out before her like a mother opening her arms to her child.

Tina didn't have to wait long. The old Harley was getting closer. The dull sound of thunder grew to a mighty roar. Tina gripped the porch railing like it was the handrail of a ship tossed about on a rolling sea. How she hated waiting.

He drifted to a stop at the last right-hand turn, nearly losing his nerve. It was the end of the blacktop road, and the end of a way of life. If he hadn't known she'd be able to hear the noisy old bike for the last three miles, he might have driven right on by, but as it was, it was a little too late to change his mind now. Spike shifted his weight on the seat, trying to ease the throbbing pain in his right hip. The leg wasn't really up to this. Not yet.

Bolstering his courage with a fatalistic resolve, Spike kicked the bike back into gear. He kept his speed low, telling himself it was to avoid the dust cloud he would otherwise leave in his wake. Only a little farther, now. Half a mile and he would know. He rounded the final curve, barely remembering to breathe.

She was there, on the porch, her gaze searching the tree line for him as he emerged. The neat little business suit was gone. The tight little knot on the back of her head had been freed. She was just standing there on the ivy-covered porch, the breeze lifting her hair around her face like a halo.

Waiting.

He coasted to a stop along the steps to the front porch, as close as he could remember to the spot where he'd parked that day fifteen years ago. She didn't move. The knot of fear was back, sitting like a hard lump under his breastbone. This would have been so much easier if she'd come to him, if she'd not make him climb those steps while she watched. He knew what she'd see. A shadow of the man he had been. Someone to feel sorry for. Someone to pity.

What the hell, he thought fatalistically. Get it over with. If she was to judge him and find him wanting, so be it.

He killed the engine, startled, now, by the deafening silence. Putting the kickstand down with his left toe while balancing the weight of the Harley against his right leg brought a mist of perspiration to his face. He bit the inside edge of his lip and endured the pain. She'd know soon enough how helpless he was without making a point of it.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.

His progress up the porch steps was slow and ponderous—the gait of a cripple. To think there was a time when women had devoured him with their eyes like a piece of fresh meat in a butcher's display case. He'd gladly put up with the stares now if it meant he could regain whatever it was he'd had back then that had brought this particular woman into his arms.

Control. Get yourself under control. Slow, deep breaths. Can't let her see you falling apart like this.

If all that had ever been between them was that poker game and this little piece of paper, then maybe the marker he held would have to be enough. It was another lie, and he knew it, but one he thought perhaps he could live with.

Tina didn't stare at him. She watched him, but her eyes were focused on his face as he climbed the stairs, not on his awkward gait. She still didn't speak. Didn't come to him. She just waited.

Sometimes it seemed like she had always been waiting for him.

He unzipped the top breast pocket of the ancient leather jacket, reaching in to pull out the old, faded yellow marker. He held it out silently. She moved, finally. Moved toward him, crossing the last three feet that still separated them. Moved into his arms with a noiseless sob that threatened to tear his heart from his chest. He would wonder, later, why he'd questioned, why he'd doubted, why he'd ever thought he could live without this. Without the feel of her skin beneath his fingers. Without the scent of her hair filling his senses.

When her hold loosened at last, he offered his arm and led her back to the bike. If she slowed her stride just a little to match his pace on the stairs, it didn't feel awkward. It only felt right. The ride back to his place suddenly seemed too long a time to endure, but then she slid her leg over the seat to wrap her arms around him and lay her cheek against his back, and he knew he could make it home.

* * * * *

An air conditioner had chased away the last traces of the fading summer heat. That was new in the last fifteen years. The cool air was different. But then, not so different, because it had been January that first time. The last weekend in January.

The other things were just the way she remembered them. She knew what he'd done as soon as he pulled that old Harley into the garage. The scent of cinnamon drifted

out from the kitchen door to greet her. There was something wonderful baking in the oven. He slid off the bike, moving a little more stiffly than he had back then, perhaps, but looking, to her, even more handsome than he had that January afternoon. He offered her his hand and led her inside.

The house was lit with the soft glow of a hundred flickering candles. Scented candles—vanilla and peach and the faint odor of spices, like some special treat in Mrs. Jameson's kitchen. Tina had been amazed, back then, that he'd gone to so much trouble for her. That hadn't changed. Tina found she was still amazed by the time and trouble Sam had taken to stage this rendezvous.

Tina closed her eyes, remembering.

If Hope had given it any thought, she supposed she would have expected Spike to take her straight to his bedroom. She'd been naive when she married Jesse. She wasn't any more. She knew Spike found her attractive, although she didn't really understand why. She didn't feel attractive. Not any more. Hope knew, as well, that Jesse had not been blind to Spike's interest. She knew what her name on that piece of paper meant. She belonged to Spike for the weekend, for whatever he wanted. He was to enjoy all the privileges of a husband.

She'd thought she could endure it, because she didn't care any more.

Because he was Spike.

Because when it came right down to it, he hadn't been the only one looking.

Hope had thought it through, and made up her mind. She'd wash his dishes and do his laundry and even clean his house. She'd cook for him, if he asked her to, although he'd tasted her cooking, and she didn't think he'd ask. She'd sleep in his bed, if he wanted her. On the floor if he didn't. But she'd allow no man to raise a hand to her ever again.

In the end, she'd use this fearsome giant to escape Jesse and the living hell her life had become.

Hope made her decision long before that Harley ever coasted to a stop at their front steps. She thought she knew what to expect. Somehow, she didn't think Spike would try to hurt her. He was big, taller than Jesse by at least 6 inches, and strong enough to break her in two if he tried, but she wasn't afraid of him. His eyes seemed to promise he'd be gentle.

She'd never expected romance. That had been her undoing.

Spike parked the bike in the garage of a cozy little brick house on the edge of town and pushed a button that made the garage door shut. Strangely enough, Hope didn't feel trapped in the dimly lit little room. Perhaps because Spike had taken her hand and laid it gently over his arm as he led her across the room to the kitchen door.

His kitchen smelled like something wonderful baking in the oven.

He'd left that awful looking helmet on the back of the bike. The leathers he removed here in the kitchen, without speaking, hanging them on hooks on the back of the door leading to the garage. He went to the sink next and washed his hands, then ran a damp towel across his face before he came to her, still standing where he'd left her, there beside the kitchen table.

She could have stood there all evening, just drinking in the sights and the smells. Of all the wonderful places she'd ever been, none could compare to this cozy little kitchen. She held her breath, waiting for him to speak and destroy an otherwise perfect moment.

Waiting for the demands to begin.

Instead, he held out that folded square of paper. The one where Jesse had written her name, effectively signing her into slavery. As if that could be any worse than living with Jesse.

"I can't hold you to some promise Jesse made. You're a woman, Hope, not some piece of chattel to be auctioned off to the highest bidder. Nothing will happen here that you don't want to happen. You're safe, here, Hope. I'd want no woman who didn't come to me of her own free will."

Tina opened her eyes, hearing those words again. But it wasn't in her memory. Sam was repeating them, almost word for word, as he placed the folded paper on the table along with the ruby ring. "I won't hold you to some promise you made a lifetime ago, Tina. You're not bound by this piece of paper. I wasn't trying to bind you with this ring. You owe me nothing, and I don't expect anything of you. Nothing will happen here that you don't want to happen. I'd want no woman who didn't come to me of her own free will."

Tina slowly circled the table until she stood directly in front of him. She stopped so close that she could see his pulse racing in the hollow of his throat. She let her eyes travel over him slowly, deliberately, drinking up the sight of him like water after a trip across the desert. She raised her hands, slowly, to his face, feeling the heat of his skin burning her fingertips. "After all these years, you still don't know what I want," she mused.

Sam's eyes slid shut as her fingers traced down his jaw line, then slid out across the wide expanse of his shoulders, then across his chest, lingering where they touched, absorbing the feel of him again, as if learning him by heart. "Sometimes I'm pretty dense. Maybe you better tell me what you want," he managed at last.

"You. All I want is you, Sam. You're everything I want. All of you. Not just your body, but your heart and your soul. I want to mean as much to you as you do to me. I want to know when you close your eyes at night, I'm the last thought in your mind. I want to be the first thing you think about when you look out on the morning. I want to be the one you trust with your heart and your soul. I want to know that my heart and my soul are safe in your hands and in your heart. Most of all, I want to know that whatever happens, nothing can come between us, because you won't allow it to. Because we won't allow it, ever again."

Impossibly blue eyes bore down into hers with an intensity that had once frightened her. Now she understood, and accepted that intensity. "You have it, Tina. You have it all. I love you beyond the bounds of the flesh or the limits of this lifetime."

A slow, possessive smile spread across Tina's lips. "I love you, Sam Callaghan. I don't care who your people were or which little wars they carried to their graves. I don't care whether you wear a uniform or a biker's helmet or a business suit. I'm always going to love you. If you can't come to Connecticut I'll come to you here, or out on that seven acres in Morgan County, or up at my cabin in the woods. I won't leave you again, Sam. Not now. Not ever."

Blue eyes sought hers again. "Take back your ring."

She held out her hand, her finger naked where Jesse's ring had once rested. "Put it back where it belongs."

Trembling fingers scooped the ring up and placed it gently on her finger. "Promise me you'll leave it there this time."

"You have my word. You put it there, and you're the only one who'll ever take it off again."

"Tell me you'll marry me, Tina."

"I'll marry you, Sam."

"When?"

She hesitated for only a moment. "The last weekend in January. It's always been our anniversary, anyway."

Sam lowered his head to bury his face in the sweet aroma of her hair. "Make love to me, Tina. I need you so much."

Tina treated him to a low, seductive laugh. Her hands slid lower, until they slipped around his hips, pulling him against her as she tasted his lips. She found herself amazed once again at the way he trembled under her touch. Her fingers slipped under the old olive-drab T-shirt.

Panic rose to the surface. It was too soon. Too soon. He pulled away a little, taking her hand. "The bedroom."

The bedroom was ready, the curtains all drawn, and the shades pulled down. Tina reached for the switch on the small lamp beside the bed. He reached out to stop her. He could feel her turning to face him, questioning.

"There are scars," he whispered.

"No shit," she laughed. "You got shot, Sam."

She didn't understand. He wasn't doing this right. "I—Doc says they won't look so bad in another few months."

"Look so bad?" She pulled away, flipping on the overhead light switch instead, making no attempt to disguise the anger in her eyes. "Sam, you're an idiot. You know that, don't you? You think I care what you *look* like?"

He was smart enough not to say anything, though he backed up a step when she pushed her finger against his breastbone.

"You've been hiding from me because you didn't want me to see what you looked like, haven't you? You have so little faith in me you thought I wouldn't be able to handle a few scars?"

His mouth opened and closed again, but no words came out.

"Show me," she ordered.

He wanted to run, but he couldn't. There was no where to go. Fighting down the panic, he pulled the old T-shirt over his head.

"All of them," she insisted.

A wave of dark red heat spread up his neck and over his face. He let his jeans slide down over his ass. She pushed him gently towards his dresser, turning him to face the mirror. She stood at his shoulder, her arms around him, her fingers tracing the angry red lines. He tried to look away, his hands knotted into fists at his sides, but she turned him profile to the mirror, coming to stand face to face with him.

"Which one bothers you the most, Sam? This one?" She moved to kiss the ugly red line that ran across his shoulder towards his chest. She moved from the scar to the nipple beside it, running her tongue lightly over his skin. His cock bucked against her as the nipple puckered and hardened. "Or this one?" Down lower, near the bottom of his rib cage, where her kisses traced the long ugly red lines around to his side.

The worst one was lower still, mercifully covered from view by the sweep of her hair. She kissed her way from his waist to the center of the scar where his once shattered hip faced the unforgiving glass. Slowly, very slowly, she slid down his body, kneeling before him on the thick carpet. The line of the scar traced the hollow between his hip and his groin. She followed it with her kisses until his cock rose to meet her. If he looked in the mirror he could watch her mouth open to slide over his cock. But not without seeing the scars.

She pulled her hair around over her shoulder, giving him a better view of her mouth, sliding up and down his thick, trembling cock. Of his balls, supported now by fingers that cupped and lifted and squeezed. Of her acceptance as she took him, all of him, into her heart.

Sam closed his eyes again. "I love you," he whispered as his hands caressed her head. "I love you, Tina." And under her gentle ministrations, he finally let himself begin to heal.

She didn't fight him when he pulled her to her feet. She let him lead her back to the bed. It was her turn to tease, now, slowly stripping out of her T-shirt and jeans. She pushed him back onto the bed, moving to straddle his legs. Their hands linked as she

rose over him, sliding down over his rigid cock with a slow, careful concentration. Sam's eyes drifted shut as he strained to maintain control.

Tina watched his face as she slid down over his cock. She could swear he was saying his rosaries again. His look was closer to pain than pleasure. Maybe she was hurting him. "Is this going to be all right? How does it feel?"

His eyes snapped open at that. "How does it feel? Christ, woman! I'm forty years old, and I can still count the number of times I've been with a woman. How do you think it feels?"

Tina laughed down at him, her eyes tender with unspoken love. "I meant your leg, you clown."

He treated her to a puzzled frown. "My leg?"

"You know, the one with all the hardware in it? I don't want to overexert that leg before it's healed fully."

Sam glanced down, looking mildly amazed. "Oh. Well. I guess I forgot."

"I take it that means you don't want me to stop."

"If you stop now, I may lose what little is left of my sanity."

She leaned over to kiss him, riding back up the length of his straining cock. "You'll let me know if anything hurts?"

"Everything hurts," he assured her.

She kissed the scar on his shoulder again. "Here?"

"Oh, yeah."

She leaned down to lick his nipple. "Here?"

"There too."

She flexed her thighs to squeezed his cock hard. "How about there?"

His hands fisted in the sheets as he arched up hard into her. "Especially there."

She rode up the length of his cock again, then slipped back down, leaning forward just enough to thrust her breasts at him, crying out in pleasure when he remembered where his hands should be and what they ought to be doing. She rode him harder, faster, as he teased her nipples into coals of desire so hot they threatened to ignite. More. More. She needed. She wanted. More. Harder. Faster. More.

As always, he gave her what she wanted, driving up into her, his cock filling her, stretching her, pushing her over the cliff till she was freefalling down the other side, her wings spread to catch the air currents.

When she landed, spiraling back towards the earth from a dizzying height, he was there, catching her, holding her, calling her name as he exploded inside her.

When she finally collapsed beside him, cradled in his arms, she curled her head against his chest, listening to the strong, steady beat of his heart.

"I've missed you so much," she whispered against his skin. "When you're ready to talk, I'll be here."

But his breathing had already settled into the deep, peaceful rhythm of sleep.

She smiled as she curled back against him. They could fight his demons together. Tomorrow. The healing had to start somewhere. Sleep was a good place to begin.

Chapter Twenty-One

A cool breeze blew in from the ocean. The waves against the rocks made a fine mist in the air that left a salty taste lingering on his tongue. The sun was just coming up behind him, casting his own shadow long across the inlet's narrow beach. The beach was lonely, desolate this time of day. He might have been the last soul left on earth.

A woman's laughter drifted down to him, shattering the illusion, calling him back. He turned at the sound of his name to see her walking across the grass toward the rocks where he sat.

"Sam?"

The sea spray in the air dampened her dress, plastering it against her skin in the morning breeze, revealing soft curves and firm, high breasts that he longed to run his fingers over once again.

"What're you doing out here? I woke up alone, and I missed you."

"I wanted to watch the sun come up. The sunrise here seems to promise so much."

Tina smiled softly. "You're an incurable romantic, Sam Callaghan. Have I told you lately just how much I love you?"

"No. Not in years. I thought you might have grown tired of me."

Tina moved into the circle of his arms, draping her hands over his shoulders in a comfortable, familiar way. "I remember saying something just a few days ago about love and honor and cherish. There was something about till death do us part in there, too."

The breeze blew her hair across his face. "That was two weeks ago tomorrow, my love. Somehow it seems like a lifetime, though, doesn't it? Time moves differently here."

She touched her lips to his forehead. "It was a lifetime ago. We're supposed to be packing to go home this afternoon. Unless you've come to your senses, and decided to stay another week."

Tina bent a little lower to kiss his eyelids lightly, first the right and then the left, in an odd gesture that always seemed to send shivers of anticipation through him. Sam brushed his lips across her cheeks, finding his hunger for her rising again. "I could stay here forever with you. But we have our responsibilities. Reality will catch up with us eventually."

Sam let his kisses drift down, until his teeth raked lightly across the gauzy fabric of her cotton dress. His hands drifted lower, until they found the swell of her hips, pulling her against the length of his body. He breathed in the smell of her, enjoying the feel of her skin, warm through the soft fabric, chasing away the winter's chill. "You shouldn't be out here without a jacket. You'll catch cold."

Tina's hands slid under his coat, pulling him closer, as if she, too, could taste the need in the air. "I won't get cold. I have you to warm me."

Sam rose, his pace still unhurried, his arms still wrapped around her soft, warm body. "Let's go back to the cottage. I'm hungry." His thumb drifted across the tip of one small, taut breast, even as the other arm turned her around to coax her back up the beach with a gentle caress. "I'll cook breakfast," he promised.

"I just bet you will."

"I will," he argued. "Eventually."

"Make it lunch," Tina agreed.

* * * * *

"Sam?"

Her voice was a sleepy mumble, and he almost regretted waking her up. He let his hand drift over the curve of her hip, enjoying the warmth of her skin, and the soft, heady perfume that hadn't come from any bottle. "Umm?"

She snuggled against him with a languid stretch. Coffee-colored eyes blinked in fuzzy recognition at the morning light streaming in the window. "I wasn't sure you were really awake."

Sam pulled her closer, letting her feel the evidence of his need, skimming his teeth over the nape of her neck until he found the tiny pink earlobe he'd been searching for. Her breath caught as he pulled the soft skin between his lips. "Are you sure now?" he whispered.

Tina rolled to her side, slipping her hands into his hair, raking it gently back in a way that sent shivers along his spine. "I'm not sure I'm awake," she teased. "I may be lost in a wonderful dream where this handsome man takes me away to his cottage and spends hours making love to me."

"Umm. Not a bad dream. Not as interesting as mine, but not bad."

Her hands fell still. Her eyes lost that fuzzy look. Her voice held a note of concern. "Tell me about your dream."

"I am," Sam assured her as he lowered his mouth to taste the curve of her shoulder. Her breath caught in her throat with a slight quiver of sound. His right hand stroked up the soft skin of her inner thigh, searching gently until he found the warm, moist heat of her pussy, ready to open for him, wanting all he had to give. He slipped his fingers inside, brushing, caressing. She pushed against him, impatient with his gentle touch.

"Sam!"

He smiled a quiet smile of victory. "Is there something you want?"

Fully awake now, she broke free of his arms, tossing the sheet aside as she rose to her knees beside him. "Yeah. There's something I want, all right." With a sultry laugh, Tina bent to kiss each of his nipples in turn. "Your turn. You tell me what you want."

There was no hesitation in his answer this time. "You. I love you, Tina."

"You have me, Sam," she assured him. "You have me, and I'll never let you get away again."

She sank over him, burying his cock deep inside her, already wet and wanting, riding him hard as his hips rose up off the bed to meet her. It was hot and fast and everything she wanted, everything he needed. She broke around him, crying out his name as she shattered, laughing as he rolled with her, pinning her underneath his weight, pounding into her in hard, hot thrusts that drove her over the top again before she'd had a chance to catch her breath.

Her hands gripped his ass, demanding more as the final fever gripped him, sending him slamming against her in frenzied fury. "Sweet Jesus," he groaned as he rocketed against her. She felt the fear in his voice. "I can't—"

"Now!" she demanded. "Oh, fuck! Now!"

Her hips arched up hard against him, battling his furor as she squeezed herself shut against the invasion. She couldn't take any more. She couldn't. She...

"Oh, God. I can't..." He shattered within her, pouring into her in a hot stream of cum that threatened to scorch her.

Tina gathered him into her arms as he collapsed on top of her, holding him, raking her fingers through his hair as the damn broke and the tears drenched her skin.

"Shhh," she whispered. "It's all right. It's all right. We're going to get through this, together. Everything's going to be all right."

His arms tightened around her almost convulsively. "I was so afraid..."

"It's all right, Sam."

"You—women—I never understood what it was you saw in me, Tina. Never understood why any woman would look at me that way. I'm—I'm just not the kind of guy that ends up with his picture in girly magazines, you know? You were the only one I ever wanted to look at me like that. I was afraid whatever it is you see when you look at me would be gone. I felt so...useless."

"Sam?"

"Yeah?"

"You really are an idiot."

He laughed at that. "I wish I knew why that made me feel so much better."

"You got shot, Sam. You're not bullet proof. You're not immortal. You're going to feel different. You're going to feel a little more vulnerable for a while. Frightened, even. That's normal. You have to talk to somebody, Sam. Me. A counselor. Whoever you can trust. You can't just let it fester inside you. It'll eat you alive."

"There's no one I trust more than you, Tina."

"Then believe me when I tell you that whatever it is, you've still got it."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." She kissed him again, her hands still trying to touch him everywhere at once. "I love you, Sam. Nothing's ever changed that. Not since the first time you held me and I looked into your eyes. I remember the way you looked at me, so strong, so tough, so fragile all at the same time. I knew I could destroy you with just one word. And I knew I'd sooner tear my own heart out."

"I love you," was all he could think to say.

It was enough. It would always be enough.

* * * * *

The Mayor was officiating the ceremonies. He'd introduced first the two Senators, whose speeches had nearly put her to sleep. Now he was introducing Ward Donovan as a respected businessman, philanthropist, and, last but not least, a doting grandfather.

Next to Sam, Ward Donovan was undoubtedly the best looking man on that stage. He nodded his head politely and waited for the applause to die down, looking thoroughly at home behind the podium. Tina remembered as a child seeing him speak at a rally, and being awed by his presence. He commanded an audience's attention the moment he stood up to speak. Time had not dimmed that presence. If anything, the silver in his hair and the lines around his eyes only made him look more distinguished.

This appearance, this favor he was doing for her, had done something for him, as well. Perhaps Ward needed to know she needed him, occasionally, she decided with a flash of insight. He looked happier than he had since the shooting last summer. Some of the lines of strain around his eyes seemed to be fading.

A hush fell over the crowd of spectators and reporters as Ward began to speak. "Ladies and gentlemen, there is nothing in life more important to a man than the safety and well being of his children. We do everything we can for them, to keep them happy, and healthy, and safe. But sometimes, everything we can do is simply not enough. I was reminded of this fact earlier this year, on June 14th, when my only granddaughter was taken from me, held for ransom by a man as evil as any I've ever known. James McFarland was a terrorist wanted by both our own Federal agents here in the United States and by many other agencies around the world.

"Fortunately for my family, my granddaughter was kidnapped within the jurisdiction of West Virginia State Police First Sergeant Samuel Callaghan. Thanks to First Sergeant Callaghan's quick and decisive actions, and at great personal risk, and indeed, harm to himself, First Sergeant Callaghan saw to it that my granddaughter was returned to us, safe and sound. First Sergeant Callaghan, it is my honor and privilege to be here to pay tribute to you today."

Then the Mayor was back, and it was time for the Governor to have his turn. His speech was short and to the point. "First Sergeant Callaghan, it is my privilege to present to you today the Distinguished West Virginian award, as well as The West Virginia Trooper of the Year Commendation for your selfless act of bravery and courage above and beyond the call of duty. Thank you, First Sergeant Callaghan!"

Sam stepped up to the podium, leaning heavily, and perhaps just a little melodramatically, Tina chuckled to herself, on the old wooden cane as he accepted the engraved plaque and the parchment certificate.

Ward had pulled it off. There could be no doubt, now, that IAD would never be allowed to embarrass the Governor by reopening the case.

"Thank you, Governor, Senators, Mister Mayor, and Colonel Donovan," Sam's voice boomed, quieting the crowd. "It is with great humility that I stand here before you today to accept these awards. Some of you know just how lucky I am to be here at all. Thirty-six years ago, Officer David Mahoney of the City of Charleston pulled me off of the city streets and gave me a home. He and his wife Clara taught me how to be a child again, and then how to be a man. They gave me hope, and a dream. For over twenty years, I have lived that dream as a Civil Servant with the State of West Virginia. It is, then, with some regret, but also with a sense of a job completed, that I take this opportunity to announce my plans to retire. It has been an honor and a privilege to serve this community."

"First Sergeant Callaghan!" a reporter shouted as he turned to leave the podium. "What are you going to do now?"

Sam turned back and reached for the microphone with a slow smile. "Colonel Donovan has offered me a position as General Manager of Donovan Securities in Connecticut. And I'm going to try an even tougher role. I'm going to be a husband and a father. After fifteen years and three proposals, Kristina Donovan has finally agreed to marry me."

"First Sergeant Callaghan, do you feel there was a personal vendetta between you and the kidnappers?"

Sam's face lost its smile. "Hell, yes. If an international terrorist murdered your brother and kidnapped your daughter, wouldn't you take it personally?"

A murmur ran through the crowd at that. The reporter looked startled, but answered with a firm, "Yes, sir. I believe I would."

There. It was out. It was all laid out in black and white. All the little lies and half-truths laid naked before the world. The reporters were turning their cameras on her. Tina took a deep breath to steady herself. She knew what to say. They'd gone over this for days, now, yet still, she found herself feeling nervous. But then Ward was there, sliding his arm around her waist as the reporters closed in around her. She could do this. She could pull it off.

"Tell them the truth," Ward had said, "But tell it our way."

* * * * *

Kara let out a whoop, unrolling the morning newspaper as she ran into the room, nearly tripping over the edge of the carpet. "Hey, guys, the paper's here! We made the front page! Listen to this."

Local Hero Retires.

State Police First Sergeant Samuel J. Callaghan was honored yesterday with the Distinguished West Virginian award and the West Virginia Trooper of the Year Commendation. In a surprise move after the ceremony, First Sergeant Callaghan announced his plans to retire. Callaghan was wounded earlier this summer in a shoot-out with international terrorist James McFarland, who has headed Interpol's most wanted list for the last ten years.

Callaghan plans to marry millionaire heiress Kristina Donovan next January. Ms. Donovan is the daughter of Colonel Ward Donovan, U.S. Air Force, Retired, and CEO of the prestigious Donovan Industries. Ms. Donovan explained that she first met Callaghan fifteen years ago, when Callaghan was working as an undercover agent assigned to the Federal Bureau of Investigations. Callaghan won Ms. Donovan, a member of the New Faith Commune, near Charleston, West Virginia, from McFarland in a poker game.

"First Sergeant Callaghan saved my life," Donovan stated, "And somewhere along the line we fell in love. We're planning to be married next January, on the fifteenth anniversary of that poker game." The couple will honeymoon in Ireland.

Tina threw her arms around Sam's neck. "We did it, Sam! We did it."

Sam kissed her, laughing. "We did it," he agreed.

"Wow! Look at this!" Kara exclaimed, waving yet another page of the paper.

"There's more?"

"Yeah! Irish Wolf-Hound puppies for sale!"

* * * * *

The church was packed. It was a small church and a prestigious wedding, making the gold embossed invitations a precious commodity. Tina smiled to herself as she stood before the mirror, remembering the hours she'd spent with Kara pouring over the selection of the wedding invitations alone.

She caught sight of Kara in the mirror behind her and held her breath for a moment. A woman stood beside her. "You're growing up so fast," she managed, reaching for another tissue. "You look lovely, Darling."

"The music's starting," Kara warned.

"Blow your nose," Tina warned.

"I'm not crying, you are," Kara argued.

"Right," Tina laughed. They both reached for the tissues.

The stairway from the small upstairs room led down to the front entryway. They had arrived in separate limos this morning, and Sam hadn't seen the dress, nor her in it. Nor had she seen the interior of the church, at least not beyond the foyer. Kara went through the wide double doors first, spreading handfuls of rose petals. Tina counted three before she followed.

She stopped, right there in the doorway, her heart doing somersaults. The ancient church hadn't looked this good in years. Light shown through the beautiful, polished stained glass windows, even though the day was overcast, setting them all aglow. The pews looked freshly scrubbed and oiled, and the altar was decked out in fresh altar cloths, all in antique ivory, and embroidered with tiny green shamrocks. The church itself dripped with ivory roses, and the brass wall sconces had been filled with hundreds of flickering ivory candles. Green ribbons fluttered in the breeze of the slowly rotating ceiling fans.

For once, the heat was working.

Father Donovan, who was, to the best of Tina's recollection, either her third or fourth cousin, looked up and smiled at her. She reminded herself to breathe as she stepped forward to take her father's arm. He smiled down at her, looking incredibly pleased with himself, as if this day was all his doing.

"You look lovely," he whispered as they fell into step.

"And you," she countered, "Look like the Cheshire cat."

"I can only take credit for the cleaning crew. The flowers were all Sam's doing. You, however, I do take credit for. You're the most beautiful bride I've ever had the pleasure to witness."

"I love you, Daddy."

"I love you, too, Princess." He looked up at Sam as he handed her off, the smile still lingering on his lips. "Take good care of my baby," he instructed.

"I shall, sir."

Sam draped her arm through his, squeezing her fingers as he did so. The pressure was comforting, as she seemed to have developed a sudden case of nerves. She'd have thought it foolish, but Sam's fingers felt warm, and slightly damp. She smiled up at him through the veil, their eyes meeting for two long heartbeats.

"Last chance to duck and run," he whispered as he turned to lead her to the altar.

"Not on your life," she whispered back.

Kara and Ward and Father Donovan and the crowd all blended together until all she could really focus on was Sam's face, his lips moving as he repeated his vows, his hands warm in hers, his voice tender with emotion.

She knew there was a foolish grin on her face, but it didn't seem to matter as the long service drew to a close. Sam lifted her veil to kiss her with a slow fire that seemed to wipe out the long, lonely years and the fears of the past.

The reception lunch swept by in a blur of champagne toasts and warm kisses before she slipped away to change into her traveling dress and Sam led her out to the waiting limo. Fourteen hours and a change of planes later, they stepped out onto a tiny tarmac field to a hearty greeting in a singsong lilt. "Welcome to Ireland, Mr. and Mrs. Callaghan!"

* * * * *

A cool breeze blew in from the ocean. Still, it was warmer than January would have been back in Connecticut. The waves against the rocks made a fine mist that hung in the air that left a salty taste on his tongue, giving it the unreal feeling it had had in his dream so many months ago. The sun was just coming up behind him, casting his own shadow long across the inlet's narrow beach. The beach was lonely, washed clean, the sand as yet unmarred by human feet. The place seemed desolate. Sam felt as if he might have been the last soul left on earth.

He smiled as a voice full of laughter drifted down to him, calling him back. He turned to see Tina walking towards him across the green, green grass.

"Good morning, Sam!"

The sea spray in the air dampened her dress, plastering it against her skin in the morning breeze, revealing soft curves and firm, high breasts that he longed to run his fingers over once again. She could have been a mermaid, who'd just walked out of the sea to enchant him. If so, he'd gladly have followed her back into the water, he decided.

Tina laughed again, taking his hands between her two small, pale ones. "What're you doing out here? I woke up alone, and I missed you."

He studied her face, assuring himself she was real, this time, and not just the illusion he'd chased for so many years. "I wanted to watch the sun come up. It's different, here, somehow. Peaceful. The sunrise here seems to promise so much."

Tina smiled softly, the way she always did when he dared to show her a piece of his soul. "You're an incurable romantic, Sam Callaghan. Have I told you lately just how much I love you?"

"No," he teased playfully. "Not in years. I thought you might have grown tired of me."

Tina moved into the circle of his arms, draping her hands over his shoulders in a comfortable, familiar way. "Sam Callaghan, you're a dreadful liar. I'll grow tired of you when the Sun grows tired of circling the Earth. I remember saying something just a few days ago about love and honor and cherish. You can't have forgotten already."

The breeze blew her hair across his face, so that he saw her through a curtain of shimmering strands, as if she might not really be there—as if she might still be a part of his dreams. He held her close, afraid she might shimmer and disappear when he awoke. "That was two weeks ago tomorrow, my love. I know it seems like a lifetime."

Tina kissed his forehead gently. "It was a lifetime. We're supposed to be packing to go home this afternoon. Unless you've come to your senses, and decided to stay another week."

She touched her lips to his eyelids, feather soft kisses, in an odd gesture that always seemed to send shivers of anticipation through him. Sam brushed his lips across her cheeks, finding his hunger for her rising again. It was so difficult to be logical with her this close. Especially with her skin tasting like salty sea spray. "I could stay here forever

with you. This place is as wonderful as I dreamed it would be. You, Mrs. Callaghan, are the perfect seductress. But, as much as I hate to admit it, we have responsibilities."

Tina's fingers raked through his hair, needing to touch, to reassure, as if she, too, felt the dream was about to end. "It's gets easier to accept the idea of sharing responsibility when you trust the people around you."

Sam kissed his way slowly down to the nape of her neck, enjoying the way she trembled beneath his lips. "Your father may have a heart attack if Kara brings home another puppy."

Tina let her head fell back, giving him access to the length of her throat. "It's Al I'm worried about there. Those puppies are going to grow up some day. Apparently Mrs. Jameson can handle Daddy. She can manage Kara, too. But nobody manages a cat."

Sam let his kisses drift lower as he breathed in the smell of her, enjoying the feel of her skin, warm through the soft fabric, chasing away the winter's chill. "You shouldn't be out here without a jacket. You'll catch cold."

Tina's hands slid under his coat, pulling him even closer. "I won't get cold. I have you to warm me."

Sam rose, his pace still unhurried, his arms still wrapped around her soft, warm body. "Let's go back to the cottage. I'll cook breakfast," he promised.

"Umm. I just bet you will."

"I will," he promised. "Later."

"Make it lunch," Tina suggested.

* * * * *

"Happy St. Patrick's Day." Ward Donovan poured two fingers of Jameson's into each of three cut crystal tumblers.

"Ireland is so beautiful," Tina reminisced. "I think finally understand why my mother felt she had to do something, anything to help."

Sam nodded in agreement. "I wanted to bring home all of the children. But so many generations have left already. There has to be something we can do. Some way to help give them a reason to stay."

Ward glanced at the clock. "I was hoping you'd feel that way. There's a meeting tonight. I'd like you both to come with me."

"The INC? But they met just last week," Tina reminded him, glancing at the calendar to make sure she hadn't confused the dates.

"No." A smile danced around Ward's eyes. "This is another organization. One that's not widely known, and less publicized. Membership is by invitation only, but you've both inherited your right to be there. I think it's time you accepted your heritage."

Adrenaline pumped through Sam's veins the way it always did when he worked deep cover. "*Clan Na Gaul*."

Ward's lips tipped up on one side of his mouth. "I'm going to tell you this one last time, Son. As far as I know, *Clan Na Gaul* does not exist."

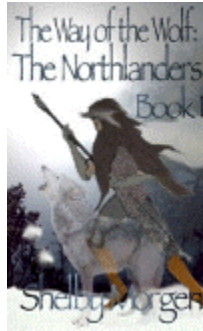
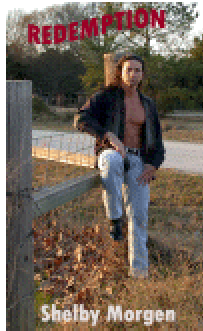
He wasn't a cop any more. He was a man with a family, and a heritage. As Tina had told him months ago, with wealth and power came responsibilities you just couldn't outrun. Sam slowly nodded his head. "I understand." He raised his glass. "*Erin Go Bragh*."

Three glasses clinked together. "*Erin Go Bragh*."

If he closed his eyes, he could taste the salt air blowing in off the coast.

Erin Go Bragh. Ireland forever.

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