

Haunted Memories

**By
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PROLOGUE

Darkness. Thick and surreal, spiked with the rich odors of hay and horses. The kind of darkness that swallows a child up and allows her imagination to run wild. But the stark terror in Olivia Bartlett's life was not in her imagination. It was real.

Bits of straw poked her lanky twelve-year-old legs as she picked her way through the inky blackness toward the heavy stall door. She pushed at it with all her might, but of course it wouldn't give. *He'd locked her in again.*

A shiver slid through her. An early October cool spell had made the temperatures fall, and her thin sweater was no match for the growing chill in the old barn. She rubbed her arms.

How long would he leave her in here this time? He'd beaten her, and cursed her like always. Like he'd done every day since Emily fell into the well.

Tears gathered in Olivia's eyes and she hugged her stuffed kitten. She hadn't meant for it to happen. But it had, and she couldn't bring her baby half-sister back. She'd tried to tell Walter that, but he'd only roared at her that she'd killed his only child. That had told Olivia she didn't count—in his eyes, anyway. Her stepfather had other plans for her.

At three, Emily was curious, and often followed Olivia to the well near the back door to watch her fill the bucket. But on her twelfth birthday, Olivia was so busy racing through her chores that she gave Emily the bucket and told her to get the water herself. Emily leaned over too far—and tumbled headfirst into the gaping hole.

Terrified, Olivia told Mama and Walter that Emily had wandered off. They looked everywhere, then checked the well.

Remembering the pain and anger etched on their faces when they found her sister, Olivia shuddered. Mama was never the same after that, spending her days crying and staring into space.

Walter, his eyes wild, whipped Olivia every day. The backs of her thighs were covered with big purple welts.

With a creak, the barn door slid open, letting in a feeble sliver of moon glow that didn't reach inside the stall. She recognized the fierce trudge of Walter's boots on the straw-covered floor. And she began to tremble.

Walter jerked open the stall door and towered over her, his foul breath cascading down her neck like dirty wash water. She shrank back into the shadows.

Muttering an oath, he reached for her.

CHAPTER ONE

Olivia screamed and bolted up in bed. Sweat poured down her neck. She fought off the covers and put her feet on the floor. The hotel room was dark, nearly as black as that smelly stall had been. She could still feel Walter's clammy touch, feel the incredible strength in his hand. Hear his vile curses. Shaking off the vivid images, she gasped for air.

Twenty-one years had passed since that awful autumn day, but the snapshots in her head now were just as crystal-clear as they had been back then. Maybe even more so, because today she was going home to Strong Springs.

Olivia rose and padded to the bathroom. Her short red hair stood up, and dark circles underscored her green eyes. She cursed her milky skin, which was so like her mother's. She didn't want any ties to her past. Not her looks, not the terrifying nightmares. And certainly not that damned house. Her skin crawled at the thought of the place.

Knowing she had no choice but to return there, however, she gritted her teeth and hurriedly got dressed. It was barely dawn, but she wanted to get on the road. She had a ten hour drive ahead of her.

As she headed south toward her old hometown, her mind skittered over the staggering events that had turned her life upside down. First had come a call from the county sheriff who had investigated Walter's suicide. Then she'd received a note from Walter himself, dated the day before he'd shot himself in the head, that promised her an inheritance. She shivered with revulsion. His message had been brought by a lawyer bearing the deed to the family home. He'd also sent a check, for an amount so astonishing she'd been afraid to cash it.

But no amount of money could erase the appalling memories that seared her soul. She'd never wanted to go back there. Not even now, with Mama and Walter both dead. The place scared her out of

her wits. But she had to go. Now that Walter was dead, she could safely enter the house and find the letter that belonged to her. The letter her mother had told her about so long ago.

As she drove into the tiny town, the late afternoon March sun sent long shadows spearing across the square. Strong Springs boasted of its aristocratic beginning, but in reality it had been founded by a trio of escaped prisoners—including Walter’s great-grandfather, a convicted murderer, who had built the old homestead. No wonder her stepfather had turned out to be such a bastard.

The shadows deepened as Olivia pulled onto County Road 275, which led to the old homestead. *Hell on Earth*, she called it. The big house loomed just ahead, its ghostly white shape rising like a vile mirage through the trees. The closer she drew, the faster her breathing became.

Hyperventilating and afraid, she pulled to the side of the road and rolled down her window, breathing slow and deep, forcing her lungs to pull in the cool, rain-scented air.

A chill slid over her skin. She rubbed her arms and tried not to look at the house, because every time she did she thought of being locked in the old barn, of the sickening smells of hay and manure. Of pain. Time had filtered these frightening images from her mind, but now they all came crashing back.

“Breathe deep, Liv,” she muttered to herself. “Old Walter’s dead and gone. He can’t hurt you any more.”

Casting her memories aside, she pulled back onto the road. Her Camry seemed to groan as she turned into the driveway of her childhood home. The drive curved around the side of the house, giving her an excellent view into her past. She longed to cover her eyes—but she couldn’t hide any longer.

The menacing, off-white wooden house crouched low amid a stand of gnarled oaks, claiming the verdant Mississippi hillside as its own. Fallow fields stretched out behind the homestead to the creek where she had been baptized.

A covered concrete porch, shrouded by knotted oaks, spanned the front of the house. The porch’s metal railing listed to one side. Overgrown pyracantha, crepe myrtles, and renegade pines filled the once-regal flower beds. Weathered oak rockers, their seats worn smooth, stood like zombies beside the door, near a creaky swing hanging on rusty chains.

Behind the house sat the dreaded well, its gaping mouth boarded up as if to keep it from spilling family secrets. In her mind's eye, Olivia saw Emily leaning over to attach the bucket to the hook—and watched her tumble headfirst into the hole, her screams echoing through the air. Then... silence.

A quiver of despair rolled through Olivia as she remembered. There were no bodies inside the well now. No ghosts. Only brackish water, spindly spider webs, and memories of death.

The dilapidated barn at the edge of the field had once been red, but was now a sickly brown. Olivia pictured its narrow stalls, and tears filled her eyes. She wanted to forget. Yet the smell of old hay brought back the cruel sting of Walter's slap and the hungry glint in his eyes as he reached for her.

Clambering from the car, she slammed the door and jumped when the sound echoed off the ancient house. The area was too quiet, too still. Even the birds had stopped chirping. A peculiar, itchy feeling washed over her and she spun around, half-expecting to see her stepfather standing in the shadow of the barn. All she saw were overgrown weeds and a rusty wheelbarrow, its lone wheel hopelessly bent.

Olivia eyed the towering storm clouds building on the horizon, tucked her hands in her pockets, and walked around to the front yard, which was knee-deep in wild onions. As she crushed their swaying stems underfoot, their pungent odor burned her nose, reminding her of the stench of Walter's sweat. Her stomach churned. Coming here alone had been a mistake.

She made a fist and turned toward her own private house of horrors. Its screens curled away from their frames, allowing insects to nest on the dirty panes.

She pulled a faded envelope from her pocket and drew out the note her mother had pinned to Olivia's gift the morning of her twelfth birthday, the day Emily had died.

My dear Olivia,

Keep this pink kitten close to your heart. Let it be your confidant and friend. I am proud of you, my girl. And I have another surprise! Your father, before he died, gave me a letter with a special message for you to open on this exciting day.

Tears filled Olivia's eyes as she read her mother's tight scrawl. She had never gotten her father's letter. Poor Emily had stolen her mother's attention that day—and every day until she died ten years later, after sinking into a catatonic state.

Olivia refolded the note and slid it back into her pocket. She had hours of work ahead of her if she was going to find that letter. But toil she would, because once she found it she would have the house leveled.

She edged toward the porch, and was startled to see a dark brown car bearing the Polk County Sheriff's Department logo parked beneath a spreading oak tree on the other side of the yard. She hadn't noticed it before, probably because she had been so focused on the house. Why was it here?

Thunder grumbled, and the air grew even more still. Not a blade of grass or leaf moved. A feeling of impending doom settled over Olivia, and she picked up her pace. Her hands shaking, she dug out the house key and mounted the three steps to the porch.

Just as she inserted key into the lock, the door swung open. She screamed and staggered backwards.

Taken by surprise, Tucker Hawkins drew his weapon.

"Who are you?" he asked gruffly, his heart thudding beneath his badge as he stared in shock at the petite redhead on his front porch. He'd been about to leave for work. And now—who the hell was she, and how did she get a key to his door?

The woman pinned him with wide, frightened-doe eyes, and recognition punched him in the gut. He lowered his pistol. "Olivia?"

She clapped a hand over her mouth. "T-tucker?"

Tucker blinked to make sure his eyes weren't playing tricks on him. They weren't. The woman was Olivia Bartlett, the girl he'd loved in seventh grade. Only now, she was a woman with curves in all

the right places and skin the color of alabaster. He felt as if his legs had been knocked from beneath him.

“What are you doing here?” she asked.

Tucker let his gaze settle on her pretty face. “I live here.”

“I don’t understand.” Olivia’s hands fluttered to her chest. “Walter left the house to me.”

“He couldn’t have. He didn’t own it.” Tucker frowned and holstered his Glock 9mm. “Uncle Harold won the house from my dad in a poker game years ago. When Anne and I divorced last year, Harold gave me the deed. Said he’d allowed Walter to live here rent free, but never sold him the place. After Walter died, I decided to move in.”

“That’s a great story. But your uncle was wrong,” Olivia said. “Walter owned this house. His lawyer brought me a copy of his will and the deed to the property just last week. He left it to me.”

“Let me see that deed.”

“Okay.” She edged toward the steps. “It’s in my car.”

Feeling shell-shocked, Tucker followed her around to the back of the house. The sky darkened and the wind kicked up, sending humid air skating over his skin. Wild onions snapped at his calves. Memories of their thirteenth summer scrolled through his head, and he bit back a curse. That was when Olivia had abruptly told him they couldn’t be friends any more. The same summer his mother had married Elliot McGraw, and his life had gone to hell.

He didn’t know what had happened with Olivia, but her withdrawal had hurt even more than his mother’s defection.

Immediately after graduation, she’d left for college and had never come back. He gazed at her trim waist and attractive backside as he negotiated the high weeds. A frown creased his brow. She looked like a sophisticated big-city girl now. A long way from Strong Springs, Mississippi.

He tightened his lips. He’d only been back here a few weeks himself, but he’d already made himself at home in the old house. What if she really did have a claim to the place? He’d planned to put down roots here, to block out the past. Now, he might have to move again.

He watched as she halted beside a white Toyota Camry, stuck her head inside, and emerged with a royal blue pocket folder. He noticed her hands shook as she thumbed through its contents.

“Find it?” He asked, coming up beside her. He drew in her fresh, flowery scent, and a strange yearning washed over him. It reminded him of their one and only kiss, which he’d stolen out behind the barn when they were twelve. If only—

No. He couldn’t go there. He swallowed, and locked his gaze on the fluttering leaves of the oak tree beside the barn.

She pulled out a thick legal document. “This is Walter’s last will and testament.”

“Let me see it.” Tucker reached for it, and their fingers brushed. A jolt of awareness shot through him. Dear God.

He jerked the paper away from her and met her startled gaze. Her cheeks flushed pink.

He tightened his jaw and focused on the document in his hand. It was signed by two witnesses, and appeared to be legitimate. Not good.

Finally he raised his head and met Olivia’s cool green eyes. Dark circles underscored them. She shoved a lock of hair from her face and pulled out another thick paper.

“This is the deed John Nash, Walter’s lawyer, gave me. I have no reason to believe it’s not real.”

With a frown, Tucker took it and examined it. It looked exactly like the one his Uncle Harold had given him six months before. He eyed Olivia. “It’s identical to mine. One of them must be a forgery.”

She grabbed the document from him and shoved it back into the folder. “This one is signed, sealed, and witnessed. It’s genuine.” She lifted her chin as if to say, *so what now, cowboy?*

Lightning streaked across the sky. Tucker looked up just as fat, cold raindrops began to pepper down, soon giving way to blowing sheets of rain.

“Come on!” he shouted, grabbing her arm. “We’d better get inside.”

Olivia tucked the folder under her shirt and dashed ahead of him toward the house.

By the time they reached the back door, both of them were soaked.

In the kitchen, Olivia tossed the folder on the counter and used her hands to wipe her face. “Damn it.” She peered out at the downpour, then looked at her watch. “How long is this rain going to last? I still have to find a place to stay tonight.”

Tucker tossed her a dishtowel, then fished out another one and mopped his arms. The cool air in the house raised goose bumps on his skin. He shrugged off the chill.

“You won’t get far in this storm.” He studied her. With her hair wet and plastered to her head, she looked like the girl he’d had a crush on all those years ago. She’d been his friend, before she’d pulled away and his life had degenerated into good days and bad days, the good ones being when Elliot hadn’t hit his mom. Casting off the bad memories, he made a fist.

“Look, I have to go to work.” He studied her. “Why don’t you stay here? It’s warm and dry, and I’ll be back by eleven.”

“Here?” Her head came up and she looked warily around the kitchen before her haunted gaze returned to his.

Tucker hated the glint of fear he saw in her eyes. What was she so afraid of? Him?

“Don’t worry. I’m sleeping upstairs.” He sent her a wry smile in an effort to lighten the mood, which had become as dark as the weather. “You can have the downstairs bedroom.”

“What about a motel? Is there one in Strong Springs now?”

“No.” He shook his head. “McComb’s the closest.”

She bit her lip. “Okay. As long as I’m here, I’d like to look through Walter’s things. That is, if they’re still in the house. My real father left me a letter—it’s a long story.”

Tucker resisted the urge to touch her. “That’s fine with me. Do whatever you need to do.”

She nodded and looked away, obviously disturbed by his nearness.

Thunder boomed, and rain slashed the windows. She jumped, glanced outside, then spun and headed for the hall.

Tucker’s chest constricted as he watched her go. Whatever had caused her to end their friendship all those years ago was still between them. She’d turned away from him then, and she was turning away

now. He wished like hell he knew why. She had grown into a beautiful woman, but deep inside, behind those cool green eyes, still hid that scared little girl.

He couldn't help his mother, but maybe—somehow—he could help Olivia. If only she would let him.

Sending a longing glance toward her bedroom as he passed by, he left the house and headed for his patrol car.

Olivia entered the musty hallway that echoed with the onslaught of rain on the roof. The place looked just as she remembered it. Worn, yet solid, with busy faded wallpaper, elaborate woodwork, and hand-hewn cabinetry. A thin patina of dust coated every surface. She wrapped her arms around herself. The place reminded her of Walter and of pain, both physical and emotional.

Tears gathered in her eyes, and she dashed them away. Staying in this house had been the last thing she'd ever thought she'd be doing. All she wanted to do was find the letter, then erase the memories once and for all. And she could have done that, if Tucker weren't here.

Tucker. She couldn't believe he'd invaded the house. They'd once been good friends, and his family home had become her refuge when Walter had first begun hurting her. Then her shame had become too great, and she couldn't tell anyone, not even Tucker, what was happening to her. Then his mother remarried, and he grew even more distant.

She hadn't seen him in over twenty years, but the pain of having to give up his friendship had flickered to life the moment she'd met his assessing gaze today, and it still burned inside her like an invisible brand.

Now, trying to overcome the loneliness that engulfed her, she pictured his rugged face in her mind's eye. He was even more handsome than she remembered, and several inches taller. He was more muscular too, his rock-hard chest and shoulders filling out his chocolate deputy's uniform. His stubborn

jaw had been thrust forward, and his familiar dark eyes had flicked over her like twin tongues of flame. He'd been a boy the last time she'd seen him. Now he was a man.

Her knees quivered. His mere presence had been enough to throw her off balance.

The lights flickered off, then snapped back on. Olivia caught her breath. She couldn't bear it if they went out. She hated the dark.

Remembering all the times Walter had locked her into tight, black spaces, she began to tremble. He'd favored the barn, turning the smelly stalls into prison cells. Or he'd lock her in the root cellar, a creepy room packed with moldy potatoes, old vegetables, and rats. She'd screamed until her throat blistered and tears scoured her face. Walter had laughed and put her in her most hated place, the crawl space under the house, where she would meet spiders the size of her fist.

She folded her arms. She needed a flashlight. She didn't want to be trapped in the dark again.

Entering the kitchen, she rummaged through drawer after drawer until she found a small penlight and one broken candle. A lot of help it would be. She tossed it aside and stuck the penlight in her pocket.

Despite a bone-deep weariness, she knew she couldn't rest. She needed to search for her father's letter. She might not get another chance before Tucker came back. Glancing out at the driving rain, she realized it would be a while before she could get her luggage from the car, so she put the folder in the downstairs bedroom and set about exploring the house.

Time passed quickly as she roamed through the upstairs rooms, skipping the one containing Tucker's things. At least he wasn't staying in Walter's bedroom.

Eager to finish her most-dreaded task, Olivia began sifting through her stepfather's belongings. Half of his dresser was empty, because he had disposed of her mother's things when she died, giving Olivia no chance to go through them. She had never forgiven Walter for that. Longing pierced her breast when she found one silken scarf, carelessly bunched in the corner of a drawer.

She brought it to her nose, hoping to recall her mother's powdery scent, but it was long gone. A lone tear rolled down her cheek, and her resolve grew firm. She had to find that letter, if only to prove

that the words her mother had whispered to her all those years ago, the words that had kept her going through the worst times, were true. Her real father had loved her. He'd thought she was the most precious thing in his life.

She reached into the top drawer and a large brown spider raced onto her hand. With a shriek, she flung him away. Her heart pounded.

She swallowed hard and kept on looking, but found nothing except Walter's socks, wide ties, and leather belts, which he kept coiled in the second drawer like snakes. She pulled open the next one and discovered his dingy underwear. Bile rose into her throat, and she slammed the drawer shut.

Battling the sudden onslaught of queasiness, Olivia brushed off her hands and focused on the contents of her stepfather's closet. Nothing else of her mother's remained. Only Walter's ugly clothes and shoes.

A sharp scrape echoed up the stairs.

Catching her breath, she rose and peeked into the hall. Nothing moved.

Her heart thudded and sweat gathered at the base of her spine. Filled with terror, she inched toward the door and peered down the stairs. The house was still as death. She drew in a quivering breath.

The scrape rasped again, and she jumped. What *was* that noise? Fear skimmed over her skin like a million tiny fingers. Gathering her courage, she slipped down the stairs and paused in the shadowed foyer. Rain blew against the side of the house. The wind rattled the windows.

The scratching was coming from behind the living room door, which loomed before her like a crypt, its detailed lines and faux crystal doorknob taunting her with their illusion of grandeur. She swallowed. Walter had died in there.

Thunder boomed and Olivia covered her ears. A waterfall of terror cascaded over her.

Determined not to let the house defeat her, she put her hand on the knob. Waves of dread washed over her, and she clenched her jaw to steady herself.

If she was ever going to be free of Walter's threatening presence, she had to face her fears in this awful house. Her hand shook as she opened the door. Cool mist filled the room, and the overpowering scent of bleach blasted her.

Her gaze landed on the open window next to the fireplace, where rain poured in. An oak limb shaped like a long finger scraped the windowsill.

Her heartbeat stuttered and she pressed a hand to her throat. That was the sound she had heard.

She marched across the room and slammed the window. The sounds of the storm faded. She turned, and her eyes fell on the outline of a stain splattered on the fieldstone fireplace. *Walter's blood.* Olivia's stomach clenched. Someone, probably Tucker, had tried to clean it up, but the mark of her stepfather's suicide was still evident.

Lightning flashed again, spotlighting the stain. She clapped a hand over her mouth and stumbled toward the door. The lights flickered out. Her heart jack-hammered in her chest, and she yanked out the penlight.

A sinister sound at the front door jarred her. Her nerves tingled. *Oh, God.* She stared down the hall. Tucker wouldn't be back already, would he? But who else could it be?

A picture of Walter's spiteful face sprang into her head, and she shut the living room door with a sharp click. The home's ornate front door, which should have been her route to freedom, stood in front of her like the entrance to the dark side. She took several deep breaths. Her body quivered.

"Who is it?" She rasped, struggling to regain her equilibrium as she peered through the etched glass oval. She could make out a shape, but not a face.

The shape moved.

She drew in a terrified breath. "What do you want?"

Silence. The doorknob turned slowly back and forth.

Her hair standing on end, Olivia edged away from the door.

Lightning suddenly forked down, its glare outlining the interloper in brilliant silhouette. *Was it Walter?* Thunder roared in Olivia's ears. She reeled backwards.

Her elbow rushed a coat on a rack behind her and she screamed, whirling away from it. Walter's coat. It seemed to float through the air, then lunge for her like he always had. Terror choked her.

The doorknob twisted again and the pane of glass in the door clattered.

Olivia spun and bolted for the kitchen, the flashlight clutched tightly in her fist. She needed a weapon. Anything.

She snatched a butcher knife from a block on the counter. Her breath shot out in fevered gasps.

The lights faltered, and abruptly flickered back on. Sweat mingled with the relief sliding down her spine.

Gathering her courage, she crept back into the hall. The foyer was awash in shadows. Rain drummed the roof, the sound vying with the hammering of her heart. The floorboards squeaked beneath her feet.

All at once, lightning flashed and she had a plain view of the door. The shape was gone.

CHAPTER TWO

Olivia checked the doors and windows and pulled down the kitchen shades, but left the overhead light glaring. Ditto for the hall. Her pulse thundered as she crept into the downstairs guestroom and turned on the lamp. No way was she trying to sleep now. Not in this house, with Tucker gone and a stranger twisting the doorknob.

Her skin prickled. Who could that have been? Walter's evil face flashed into her mind, but she shook off the startling vision. Her stepfather was dead.

Brandishing the knife, she glanced around the room. It was sparsely furnished, with an old-fashioned double bed, a hulking chest of drawers, and a scarred dresser. Memories of hiding here to escape her stepfather rushed through her mind. This room had once been her salvation, until *he* had discovered her lonely sanctuary. The price she had paid for hiding from him had been high. Too high.

Exhausted, she stretched out on top of the covers, laying the knife on the bed within easy reach.

A sickening crash beside the house brought her upright. Terrified, she fisted her hands in the quilt. And listened. She heard nothing but rain and thunder. Sweat beaded on her brow. Torn between the urge to remain hidden and the need to know what the noise had been, she picked up the knife and slid off the bed. Her palms grew damp. She scuttled to the window and peered cautiously through the curtain. Lightning flashed, revealing a fallen pine tree which had just missed her room. She closed her eyes and sent up a prayer of thanks. If that tree had hit the house—

She looked out again, and froze.

A dark shape hunkered in the yard, not thirty feet from the window. Her stomach clenched as she stared at the shadow, trying to make it a stump, a rock, anything but a living, breathing being.

Did it move, or was it just her trembling hand on the curtain? She dropped the gauzy fabric. No. She would *not* give in to her fear. Her imagination was getting the best of her. That was all. She needed to do something, anything to take the focus off the alarm pulsing inside her.

Too nervous to even consider lying down again, she stole into the hall and paused on the threshold of Walter's study. The place smelled sour, just like he had. She cringed, but forced herself to enter the tiny room. Maybe, since she had no hope of sleeping, she could find her father's letter. Walter may have destroyed it, but she hoped not.

Her hands trembled as she rifled through several drawers and cabinets. No luck. She found canceled checks, her mother's death certificate, and her mother and Walter's marriage license. Nothing that belonged solely to her mother.

The top drawer of Walter's desk wouldn't open. She hunted for a key, but couldn't find one. Her stomach roiled. She had to know what was in there.

She shoved the tip of the knife into the space and pried it open. A manila envelope lay inside.

Olivia picked it up. It was filled with photographs. Opening it, she gasped.

The images were of her.

Oh dear God! Her heart skipped a beat, and her stomach plummeted. She'd forgotten about the pictures. The sight of them seared her soul. Her skin tightened and her limbs began to tremble. She wrapped her arms around her middle, but that didn't help. Her hands were like ice. The photos slipped from her fingers and slid to the floor with a swish.

Her mind went back to the sickening smell of rotting potatoes, the ugly grimace on Walter's face as he'd taken those photos. The leer in his eyes. It had been her thirteenth birthday—the first anniversary of Emily's death.

Thunder rolled, low and deep. The walls of the house seemed to close in around her, like the walls of the horse stalls had all those years ago, and her nostrils filled with the smell of dung and moldy straw, suffocating her with its aura of evil. Olivia bent over to pick up the pictures, but the movement sent acid rising into her throat, choking her with nausea. Desperate for fresh air, she grabbed the knife

and raced from the study into the foyer. She had to get away from that smell, from Walter's overwhelming presence. He might be dead, but she still felt him grabbing her and making her—

The doorknob twisted.

With a frightened squeal, she lurched back against the wall. *The interloper was back!* Had that been the hulk she'd seen in the yard? Terror streaked through her.

She clenched the knife in both shaking hands. "W—who's there?"

A dark, dripping figure rose up to fill the glass oval.

She opened her mouth to scream, but had no breath for more than a tiny screech.

Backpedaling, she hit the stairs and sat down, hard. The knife clattered to the floor. She dove for it and snagged the blade, but it sliced her skin and she dropped it. The door opened, and the figure lunged at her.

Grabbing the banister, she abandoned the knife and scrambled backward up the stairs. She couldn't breathe. She whirled and crawled up the steps as fast as she could.

Walter! He was after her again! She had to get away from him, from his dirty hands and filthy mouth. His stench.

"Olivia, it's me."

Fear rocketed through her at the sound of the male voice, and she gasped. "No! Stay away from me!"

"Olivia!"

That wasn't Walter. Olivia stopped. Her knees hurt and her palms stung. Splinters filled her fingers.

"It's me—Tucker," the low, familiar voice said, shutting the door and stepping into the light. "Take it easy. I'm not going to hurt you."

It wasn't Walter, or an interloper. *It was Tucker.* Strong, dependable Tucker. Standing in front of her, his hand on the butt of his pistol, ready to protect her from shadowy memories. She blinked and

took a deep breath, her heart hammering. She pushed the hair from her eyes and stared at him. Moisture glistened on his tanned skin. His hair was wet.

His gaze dropped to her hands, and he rushed forward. “God, Olivia! What are you doing? You’re bleeding.”

“Tucker,” she murmured, afraid to take her eyes off him. Afraid that if she did he would turn into Walter, or some vengeful stranger. She tugged at her shirt and winced at the pain in her palm. Her face burned at the puzzled look on his face as he clambered up the steps and took her hand.

“Why did you run from me?”

“Y—you were just standing there, dark and wet—like a—a-ghost.” The reality of the situation hit her, and fury flowed through her. “Why didn’t you come inside?”

“I couldn’t find my key.”

“Wh—what time is it?”

“It’s one a.m. The bridge on the road into town is out. I had to wait for Emergency Services to block off the area.” He wiped the rain from his face with his free hand. “I’m surprised you’re still up.”

“Well—” She blanched at the blood on her palm. “I heard someone at the door—before. H—he twisted the doorknob. I thought he was coming in after me.”

“When was this?” Tucker’s eyes darkened. He released her hand and pulled out his pistol.

She edged away from him. “A while ago. I heard something later, but I think it was a tree falling. You don’t think he’s still out there, do you?”

“I’ll take a look around anyway, just in case.” He turned toward the door. “Wait there, and I’ll help you bandage your hand.”

She bit her lip and clenched her hand to stop the flow of blood. With Tucker here, she felt more calm than she had all evening. But if he ventured back outside— She took a deep breath. He had to go check. She would be all right. She forced a tiny smile. “Just be careful. Please.”

He nodded. “I’m going to find my key, then go. I won’t be long. You just relax.”

“Okay.” She would try. Watching him head for the kitchen, she drew in a shaky breath. She hadn’t been relaxed since she’d arrived.

He soon returned with the key and ducked back out into the night.

Olivia locked the door behind him and scooped the knife off the floor. Lightning flared, and the accompanying thunder shook the house. She began to pace. Surely he wouldn’t be gone long, not in this weather. Whoever had tried to break in—if in fact someone had—had no doubt disappeared by now.

The rhythm of rain on the roof became a downpour, and sheets of water battered the windows. A creak sounded in the kitchen, and Olivia whirled. Oh, God. Wielding the knife, she took a step toward the hall. The lights blinked twice, then went off. Stiffening, she pulled out the small flashlight.

All at once, the lock on the front door rattled. She stumbled backwards.

The door swung open, and Tucker burst inside.

The lights flickered back on.

“It’s me,” he said, his eyes locking on the blade in her hand. He shut the door and holstered his pistol. “You can put that down now.”

“Tucker, thank God,” she said, her breath whooshing out. She lowered the knife.

He wiped the moisture from his face and flipped the lock on the front door. “I didn’t see anything. No sign of someone trying to break in, no footprints, nothing. Although the rain could have washed them away.”

“I know I saw that doorknob turn,” Olivia said, her heart in her throat. “But maybe—”

“—it was the wind,” he said, finishing her thought.

“No.” She shook her head. Her cheeks grew warm. “I know what I saw.”

“Olivia—” Tucker began, his gaze dropping to her fist. His jaw tensed. “Never mind. We need bandage your hand.”

She glanced down at the blood trickled onto her wrist. She winced. “It stings.”

Her knees wobbled as he led her to the downstairs bathroom. He sat her on the toilet lid and pulled out a first aid kit. He reached for her hand. “Let me see it.”

She winced as he gently pried open her fist.

“Just relax. This will hurt a little, but only for a second.” He wrapped his callused fingers around hers.

A tingle slid up her spine, but not from the injury. Tucker’s tender ministrations touched a place deep inside her that hadn’t been stroked in a very long time.

She studied his rugged jaw, his warm mocha eyes, his broad shoulders. He was the same old Tucker, yet he was different. More mature, more caring. More compelling.

He dribbled hydrogen peroxide on the cut, and she gasped in surprise.

“Sorry.” He mopped blood and peroxide from the cut with a clean square of gauze. Then he dotted the gash with ointment.

She leaned close to him, trying to drink in his rain-fresh masculine smell, so different from the stench she usually associated with this house.

Tucker released her hand and opened a plastic bandage, which he gently pressed over her wound. “There you go.”

“Thank you,” she whispered, a curling warmth displacing the terror that had lodged in her chest. Tucker was her protector, her guardian. Her friend. If she had trusted him all those years ago like she did now, maybe— His intense gaze met hers, and he nodded. She blushed. What if he could read her thoughts?

Outside, the wind moaned. But in here with Tucker, Olivia felt safe and cherished—for the first time in her life.

Thunder boomed, jarring her back to reality. She would never be really safe, not in this house.

She rose on shaky legs and peered down at the bandage on her hand. It had been so long since someone had cared for her. She didn’t even know how to react, how to trust. So she retreated back into inane chatter. But she couldn’t suppress a trembling smile at his incredible gentleness.

“This has been a long night.”

“It sure has. Are you okay?” He touched her arm lightly.

A strange yearning twisted in her chest, and she blinked, determined not to allow another tear to fall.

“I’m fine. I’d better go to bed.”

“All right.” He dropped his hand.

“Goodnight.”

“Night, Liv. Sleep well.”

“I’ll try.” Olivia slipped into the hall, feeling bereft as she stepped into her lonely bedroom.

Tucker stared into the hall long after Olivia disappeared, his body growing taut with unspent passion. His chest felt tight and an odd tingling sensation filled his veins.

He’d never seen anyone so frightened—or so beautiful. Those wide green eyes touched a place inside him that hadn’t felt warmth since his mother’s defection. He longed to draw Olivia into his arms and soothe away her fears, but he’d seen the caution in her eyes. Someone had hurt her deeply. So deeply she was afraid to open up.

At times she was the same old Olivia, the treasured friend he’d known before she had cut him out of her life. Then the walls would rise up around her heart, and she was transformed back into that nervous, watchful stranger. One thing was clear, however, this house truly terrified her.

She claimed someone had tried to break in tonight, but Tucker had seen no footprints around the house. There were no marks on the door, and the lock hadn’t been jimmied. If a burglar had truly wanted to get inside, he could have.

Had Olivia only imagined the would-be intruder? Tucker rifled his hand through his hair. Surely not.

Thunder echoed through the house and the lights blinked. His body tensed as he waited for Olivia to call out to him, but he heard nothing except the steady drum of rain on the roof and the sound of her pacing in her room. A spike of despair penetrated his heart when he realized she wasn't sleeping. He'd heard the same sounds on the nights Elliot had beaten his mother. She hadn't slept either.

Tucker ground his teeth. He hadn't been able to save her, but he could be here for Olivia. Why was she so afraid?

Finally, her pacing ceased. Relieved, and yet almost disappointed that she evidently had calmed down enough to rest, he took off his holster and wearily unbuttoned his uniform. Maybe one day soon he could get her to trust him enough to tell him what had happened in this old house.

Until then, he would be here for her—like he had been so long ago, until she had pushed him away.

Her nerves sizzling with pent-up energy, Olivia sat down on the edge of the bed. Weariness refused to let her take another step. Knowing Tucker was in the house made her less apprehensive, but it didn't erase the longing radiating from every pore of her body.

Leaving the light on, she finally lay down, unable to stop thinking about him. A picture of his handsome face was etched onto her brain. Tonight, as soon as she'd realized he wasn't Walter or some terrifying stranger, her entire body had relaxed. Tension that had ridden her shoulders for years had evaporated. God, she'd missed Tucker. He'd always been there for her—until she could no longer face him. Until Walter's awful stench had leached into her skin and made her feel unfit to associate with anyone, especially Tucker.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She slept ten minutes, then lay awake for fifteen, trying to keep her mind off Tucker. After repeating that several times, she rolled over, punched her pillow, and wrapped the covers around her shoulders.

This time when her eyes drifted shut, they stayed closed. Her mind flew back over the years, delving into the past and dragging it into the present.

The walls of the barn closed in, and darkness quickly descended. Terrified, she huddled in the moldy hay until the stall door creaked open and moonlight painted Walter in startling silhouette. He smelled like sweat and beer and that peculiar stale odor that belonged only to him. The rank stench that made Olivia wretch into the sour straw.

“Come here, girlie,” he said, his stained teeth gleaming in the narrow arc of light. “Come to your sweet ole stepdaddy.”

“No,” she cried, pressing back against the wall, but his hand streaked out and grabbed her hair.

Olivia sat up in bed with a shriek. The lights were on, but she still saw Walter’s evil face, imagined him breaking through the door.

His dirty teeth, his callused hands. His stinking work clothes. His blood spattered across the ancient fireplace.

No! No! No! She shrieked and shrieked, until her throat closed up and tears ran down into her mouth.

Tucker rocketed from the bed. There was another shriek, and another. The house echoed with it.

Disoriented, he stumbled into the bedpost and let go a vile curse. Shadows skittered around him. *Olivia!*

Another ear-splitting scream rent the air. He grabbed the Glock and sprinted downstairs, surprised to find the area brightly lit.

He heard a low moan, more ominous than the shrieks. The hairs on his arms stood up. The sound was coming from Olivia’s bedroom.

His heart pounded. Raising his weapon, he halted just outside her door.

It was open. She sat up in the large four-poster bed with her arms wrapped around herself, moaning and rocking from side to side. A big T-shirt draped her shapely body, and her eyes were wide open, staring at nothing.

“Olivia?” He carefully scanned the room, searching the corners, checking the closet. No one was there. He lowered the Glock and crept closer to the bed. The air was chilly and still. Goose bumps covered her arms.

Outside, thunder growled.

“Olivia?” he asked softly. “Are you awake?”

She quit rocking and turned toward him, but seemed to look right through him. He put his hand on her shoulder.

She screamed and lashed out at him. “No, Walter! No!”

“Son of a bitch!” Tucker pressed his fingers against his stinging cheek. Lightning glimmered again, further brightening the room. “Olivia, for God’s sake, wake up. You’re having a nightmare!”

“T-T-Tucker?” Tears gathered in the corners of her eyes. Blinking up at him, she yanked the covers up to her chest. “Oh, my God. I’m sorry.”

“You were screaming.” Tucker put the Glock on the nightstand and sat down on the bed.

She swallowed, hard, and banded her arms across her breasts. Her face turned bright pink. “I was dreaming. I—I think.” She shuddered. “It was so real—”

“Tell me about it.”

Her eyes widened and she turned pale. “No. I—don’t remember it. Not really.”

She glanced away and adjusted her T-shirt.

Tucker caught an enticing glimpse of rock-hard nipples nudging soft white cotton. In spite of the fear in her eyes, his body tightened.

She met his rapt gaze, and her cheeks darkened further. “I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“Come on, Olivia,” he whispered. Her haunted eyes were the clear, cool green of bottle glass. He gripped her wrist and felt her pulse flutter against his hand. “You used to talk to me. I’m still a good listener.”

“I can’t,” she whispered, clutching the covers with white-knuckled fingers. She couldn’t tell him. He’d been the one thing in her life that had stayed rock solid.

Now he was in her life again. Still rock solid. Still her friend. At least, she thought he was. If she told him the truth, he'd hate her. Walter had been his uncle. What did they say? Blood is thicker than—

Tucker frowned. "Why not?"

"It's not something I can talk about," she said softly. All those times Walter had made her feel dirty, all those pictures he'd taken. She'd wanted to stop him. Why hadn't she?

She squeezed her eyes shut. No one could ever know about her shame. Not ever. "Tucker, I'm really tired. I'm sure you are too. Just go back to bed."

He took her hands in both of his. His fingers were rough and warm, and he carefully avoided her bandage. His lips curved. "Okay. Just remember, I'm here if you want to talk."

"I appreciate that," she said, meeting his warm gaze. The concern in his eyes resonated deep inside her, filling a rip in her heart. She whispered, "You always were a good friend."

"Until you shut me out. Why did you do that?" Tucker asked, his thumbs stroking the backs of her hands.

She pulled away. She wanted to explain, but fumbled with the words in her head. Finally, she said, "After Emily died—things were never the same for me. My family—you know. We—" Her voice faded. Her words were true, as far as they went.

His eyes remained locked on her face, making her uncomfortable.

She lowered her head. "Tucker, please—"

"Okay, I'll let you go to sleep," he said finally, coming to his feet. "We'll talk later." With a sigh, he started toward the door.

"Hey—" she called softly.

He turned and searched her face.

A fierce longing swept through her. To counteract it, she bit her lip. "Thanks for coming to my rescue."

“Any time.” A tender smile curved his lips. He put his hand on the light switch. “Want me to turn this off?”

“No,” she said quickly. “Please don’t.”

“That’s right.” He sent her a teasing smile. “You always did hate the dark.”

She swallowed. *He was right.*

“Goodnight,” he said. “Sleep well.”

Like that was going to happen. She averted her eyes. “Goodnight.”

She hated to see him go, but she couldn’t let him stay. Not without revealing the secret she guarded with her life.

Because once Tucker learned the truth about her, he would run away from her—as fast and as far as he could.

Olivia woke to see golden sunlight streaming through the gauzy curtains. Her head ached and her skin was tight across her cheekbones because of the tears associated with her nightmare. But she’d be in worse shape if Tucker hadn’t come to her rescue.

Tucker.

A lump filled her throat as she pictured him, so concerned and wanting to help. Despite his empathy, though, there had also been a profound sadness about him. Tucker had been hurt deeply, too.

A muffled knock sounded at the front door. Startled, Olivia glanced at the clock. Seven-forty-five a.m. She frowned. Who could be here at this hour?

The pounding continued, and her heart thudded. Where was Tucker? Had he gone to work without waking her? Throwing off the covers, she got up and pulled on her jeans and blouse from the night before. Then she padded into the hall.

The scarred wooden floor was cold beneath her bare toes. A hulking shape blocked the etched oval, but in the daytime it wasn't nearly as frightening as it had been last night. She straightened her shirt.

"Who is it?" she called warily.

"Mayor Grady Sikes."

Olivia cringed. Sikes had been one of Walter's hunting buddies. Steeling herself, she opened the door. The mayor, who had once been slim, now had heavy jowls and a thick spare tire around his waist. A man she didn't recognize stood beside him. Behind them, a brown shaggy dog stuck his head out their truck window and began to bark. Mayor Sikes spun and shouted, "Barney, that's enough!"

The dog immediately stopped barking and began to whine.

Sikes turned back to Olivia with a sly smile. His slow perusal making her feel sullied. "Sorry about that. Old Barney gets excited over a pretty woman."

Irrked by his odd compliment, Olivia raised her eyebrows. "May I help you?"

"I thought Tucker Hawkins had moved into this house." His black eyes narrowed to slits, and he tried to peer around her into the foyer.

"There seems to be some confusion about the deed," she said obliquely, moving to block his view.

His face darkened. "What do you mean by that?"

"Just what I said. Is there something I can do for you?" she asked, allowing her impatience to show.

"Depends on what your stake is in this place." He laced his fingers around his thick paunch. "This is my nephew, Al Clay, who owns New Orleans Forensic Restoration."

The mayor indicated his lanky friend. The man had a mop of unruly red hair.

"Hello, Mr. Clay," Olivia said.

The mayor gestured toward the house. "We came to see Tucker about the house."

"What for?" Icy wariness slid through her.

He smiled slyly. “This place is of historical importance to our town. I understand that due to Walter’s suicide, it’s still a mess inside. Tucker told me he tried to clean it up, but even for a lawman that’s nauseating work.”

She pictured the dark stain on the fireplace, and nausea swirled within her. “What does that have to do with you?”

“The town council and I voted to preserve this house. Tucker’s all for it. Says he’s willing to work with Archives and History to give the place its proper place in history.”

“He has no right to do that.” She forced herself to stay calm although anger built within her like molten lava. “Walter left the house to me.”

“Excuse me?” The mayor cocked his head. His eyes took on a menacing hue.

“You heard me.” In self-defense, she folded her arms. He was making her nervous. “I own this house, and trust me, it will not be restored. Not ever.”

“But—I thought—” he sputtered, shifting from one foot to the other. Then abruptly he stilled and fixed her with a hard glare. “Well, hell. Will you consider selling?”

“No.”

“The town council voted—”

“Your vote means nothing to me.” She put her hand on the door. “Good day, Mr. Mayor. Mr. Clay.”

“Wait!” The mayor waved his hands in a frantic plea, and practically shouted, “Your stepfather died here. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?”

“It means the house stinks.”

“Al will clean it up for you. That’s why I brought him along. His company specializes in that sort of thing.”

She shut him up with a look.

Mr. Clay plucked a beige business card from his shirt pocket and held it out. “Take this in case you change your mind, ma’am. We’ll have the place like new in two hours, tops.”

“Thank you.” To get rid of them, she took the card. But she wouldn’t call. Why clean up the place just to tear it down?

The mayor edged forward until she could see the red veins on his nose. His black eyes sparked with animosity. “I hope you’ll change your mind, Olivia. I can be very persuasive when I want something. And I damned well want this house. Do you understand me?”

“I can be pretty stubborn too, Mr. Mayor. You’ll see.” Stunned by the force of his fervor for the place, she stepped back and slammed the door in his face. The gall of him.

He could wait until hell froze over, but she would never give Strong Springs this sickening monument to Walter, no matter how many votes they took.

She took a deep breath, and suddenly realized she was shaking. The mayor’s vehement demeanor had frightened her, and for good reason. He was a vindictive man. What she didn’t understand was why he had his sights set on this house.

She shook off a chill. The sooner she was out of this town, the better.

CHAPTER THREE

A flash of light caught Tucker's eye as he pulled on his jeans. He peered out the window. Low gray clouds billowed along the horizon, yet over the house, the sun was shining. It reflected off the mayor's pearl gray pickup as it trundled down the driveway, his beloved brown dog hanging its head out the side window.

Tucker frowned. Barney's barking woke him up. He'd hoped to rescue Olivia from Grady Sikes's obnoxious presence, but the mayor was already leaving.

Frustrated, he stripped off his T-shirt and headed for the bathroom. He'd take a quick shower, then question Olivia.

A knock at his door stopped him. He pulled it open.

Olivia's gaze fell on his bare chest, and her eyes widened.

"I'm sorry. I thought you'd been up for a while. I—"

"I have." He fisted his hands around his shirt. "What did Grady want?"

She bit her lip and looked away. "He said you and he made an agreement about the house."

"We did." Tucker drew in her delicious flowery scent, and that familiar yearning settled in the pit of his stomach. He let his eyes play over her. She looked tired, and he longed to reach for her.

"That's a moot point now, though—isn't it?"

"He doesn't seem to think so." She folded her arms. "He practically threatened me."

"What did he say?" Tucker asked, surprised by her words. Mayor Sykes was a pompous bastard who often had a hidden agenda, but he'd never seemed dangerous.

She bent her brow. "Just that he could be 'very persuasive', if need be. I didn't like his tone."

"He has his heart set on getting this house for the town."

She sent him a disapproving look. "I can't believe you'd go along with that."

He lifted a shoulder. "Can you think of a better way to renovate the place?"

“You know what I want to do with it.”

“Tear it down? That’s a moot point too—until we check the authenticity of our deeds.” He sent her a wry smile. “Agreed?”

“Agreed.” She met his gaze, and her eyes softened. “Want some breakfast?”

“Are you trying to bribe me?”

“Of course not.” Her cheeks turned a pretty shade of pink. “But you have to eat. I just thought—”

As he watched her, a coil of desire unfurled inside him and he felt his body react. Angling himself so that she wouldn’t notice, he reached out and touched her cheek. “Thank you. I’ll be down after my shower.”

Tucker’s gentle smile made Olivia grown warm inside. He shut the door, and she immediately pictured him naked with water sluicing over those hard muscles. Her face grew hot and her heart skipped a beat. She squeezed her hands so hard her fingernails bit into her palms. Why was he affecting her like this after all this time?

Hurrying downstairs, she brewed coffee and made cheese toast. Anything to keep her mind off Tucker.

The shower was still running. Trying to ignore it, she slipped into Walter’s study with the intention of searching for the letter. Even though it was morning, the place still gave her the creeps. She kept seeing her stepfather standing beside the desk, leering at her. Revulsion swept over her.

All at once, a thud rocked the floor beneath her feet.

She gasped.

Afraid to move, she stared at Walter’s wall clock. It ticked down one minute. Two.

The water in the shower above her cut off abruptly.

Silence.

Her heart pounding, she wondered if the thud had been conjured up by her imagination. If not—
Terror streaked through her, and she started for the door.

Another thump echoed beneath her. Her body quivering with terror, she halted and peered at the floor as if expecting a monster to slither up through the floorboards.

That strange, prickly feeling came over her and she spun toward the closet. No one was there.

Nerves on edge, she crept toward the kitchen. It was quiet as a tomb. Tucker's plate still sat on the counter.

The cheese toast was gone.

Wave after wave of fear rolled through Olivia. Dear God. Who else was in the house? Walter? No. He couldn't be.

He was dead.

Her hands trembling, she checked the stove. It was off. The cabinets contained only dishes and food—no one was hiding there. Brilliant sunshine, incongruous with the gloominess of the house, poured through the window over the sink. More terrified than she'd ever been in her life, Olivia turned in a slow circle and studied the room.

Her jacket was still draped over a chair at the table. Her plate and glass sat on the counter next to Tucker's, and the refrigerator emitted its normal off-key hum.

Nothing seemed out of place.

Another bump startled her. She brought a hand to her mouth. Her eyes zeroed in on the pantry, which contained the entrance to the root cellar. Ice filled her veins.

The root cellar. The nauseating smell of decaying vegetables filled her nostrils. She hated that place as much as she hated the horse stalls. It was dark. She struggled against the memory. Totally dark. Even now, standing in the kitchen in broad daylight, she felt the terrifying weight of that darkness pushing her down, choking her.

Another thud rattled the dishes on the table. She began to shake. She longed to face the house and its ghosts all by herself, but her fear was too strong. She needed Tucker.

"Olivia?"

She whirled and her breath sighed out. He stood in the kitchen doorway, his hair damp and spiky and his hands wrapped around his pistol's thick grip. He wore faded jeans and a blood-red Polo shirt.

His dark eyes locked with hers. "Did you hear that?"

She pressed her hands to her heart. "Yes."

"Where's it coming from?"

"The pantry," she said, realizing that if Tucker had heard the sounds too, she couldn't possibly have imagined them. But what about the disappearing cheese toast? Her stomach knotted. Could some creature, like maybe a rat, have eaten it? The thought of rodents in the house made her ill, but when she considered the alternative—

Tucker walked over to the pantry and put his hand on the doorknob.

Panic shot through Olivia.

"Don't go in there," she said, unable to halt the alarm boiling up inside her. "It's not safe."

Tucker turned, and his gaze sharpened on her face. "My God. You're scared to death."

"The cellar was where—" she broke off abruptly. She couldn't say it. Not to Tucker, not to anyone. Her cheeks burned with shame.

Tucker walked over to her and took her hand. "It's all right, Liv. You can tell me."

"You wouldn't understand."

"How do you know that?" he asked, his eyes locking with hers.

Unable to face him, she turned away.

"Fine," he said, obviously hurt. "Don't talk. But I'm going to investigate those noises."

He squeezed her fingers. His gentle touch started a fire deep within her. She had never had a protector before. She'd always had to fend for herself, whether dealing with Walter or the world beyond this frightening house. And yet—she had to keep her distance. She couldn't let Tucker learn the truth.

The pantry door loomed in front of her like the portal to hell. She knew they had no choice but to open the door, but the idea of going inside that dark space terrified her.

Tucker released her hand. "I'll be right back."

“No,” she said, grabbing a knife from a block on the counter. She clutched it in both trembling hands. “I’m going with you.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I know. But I need to go in there.” Until she did, fear would rule her every move. She held up the knife. “Don’t worry—I’m prepared, like always.”

“I don’t remember you being a Girl Scout,” he said. He winked at her. “Come on. I can always use backup.”

Despite his lighthearted quip, fear curled like a serpent in Olivia’s belly. Her palms grew damp and perspiration rimmed her brow. Her heart thudded.

Tucker opened the door. The pantry was empty.

Her eyes fell on the trap door leading to the root cellar, and goose bumps prickled her skin. She longed to wrap her arms around Tucker and bury her face in his solid warmth, but she took a deep breath and counted to ten instead.

He lifted the trap door, and the cellar’s entrance yawned like a giant mouth. Cool, damp air washed over her and she drew in the sickening, familiar odors of dirt, rat droppings, and mildew. Odors that reminded her of Walter. Terrifying memories of her hours alone in that dank space crashed over her as the light in the room suddenly dimmed.

Olivia’s terrified gaze shifted to the window, where pithy gray clouds now churned above the trees. The wind wailed and rain peppered down.

The hairs on her nape rose. She drew in another shaky breath. She had to overcome her fear, or Walter would win. She couldn’t let that happen.

Her hand shook as she pointed out the cellar’s light switch to Tucker.

He flipped it. Nothing happened.

A shiver crawled up Olivia’s back. She couldn’t go down there in the dark. It would be too much like the times Walter had locked her in.

“Tucker, wait,” she whispered, afraid to make too much noise. “We need light.”

She dug the small flashlight from her pocket and aimed it down the steps. A pair of wicked yellow eyes stared back at her.

“Aah!” Olivia screamed and jumped back, dropping the light. It flipped end-over-end down the steps.

Tucker dropped into a crouch and aimed the Glock into the hole. A curse slipped from his lips. “I’m going down there.”

“In the dark?” Her body quivered.

“I would get my big flashlight, but it’s in the car.” He glared out the window at the rain and spat another curse.

Olivia bit her lip. “I’ll go get it.”

“No.” Tucker stepped into the hole. “I’m going in.”

Olivia fisted her hands. Tears filled her eyes as she watched him disappear down the steps into the yawning darkness.

All at once, he yelped.

“Tucker?” Alarm shot through Olivia, and she put her foot on the top step. “I’m coming down there.”

“Don’t,” he said, his voice muffled. “I just saw a rat.”

“I have to,” she said, her heart beating a swift tattoo.

The dank coolness of the place was familiar, and smothering in its intensity. She searched the corners for Walter, but all she saw were gloomy shadows. Fear engulfed her. Her voice shook, “Tucker, where are you?”

“Over here. I found the flashlight.” A weak shaft of light sliced the darkness, illuminating rows of dusty glass jars. The place still reeked of rotten potatoes, although there were none. Tucker stepped out from behind the jars.

“This is so creepy,” Olivia said, a shiver rippling over her skin as she watched the light drift across shelves filled with solidified peaches, discolored beans, and curled okra. Those same jars had been there years ago.

“May I hold the light?”

He handed it to her.

She swung the beam along the wall. A pair of wide set yellow eyes stared back at her. She stumbled backwards and sat down hard on the stairs. “Oh, my God.”

Tucker chuckled.

“Don’t laugh. What is it?”

“Shine the light lower.”

She held her breath, and obeyed. The eyes belonged to a stuffed raccoon mounted on a fake tree stump. She sighed in disbelief. “It’s Bobilu.”

“Who?” Tucker raised his eyebrows.

She laughed nervously. “Bobilu. Walter killed him when Emily was a year old. She used to like to pet him. After she died, Walter put the raccoon down here.”

“You could have warned me. I almost shot him.”

“I’d forgotten he was down here.” Olivia rubbed her temples. Other than rats, spiders, and jars of old vegetables, the place was empty—except for her terrifying memories. And that was enough reason for her to stay away.

Tucker shrugged. “I don’t see anything that would explain those noises.”

“Good.” She swallowed. “I’ve got to get out of here.”

Darkness had fallen by the time Mayor Grady Sikes opened his front door and welcomed Ronald Aimes, the town druggist, into his cluttered living room. Barney barked once, then looked to Grady for reassurance.

“It’s a friend, Barney,” Grady said, petting the dog. “He won’t hurt us.”

He raised up. “Come on in, Ron. Sorry,” he said, shutting the door behind him. “Barney fancies himself a watch dog.”

“I’m scared.” Ron faked a shiver.

Grady laughed. “Then you’re a fool. The boys are in the boardroom.”

“What about Harold?” Ron shrugged out of his jacket. “Is he back in town?”

“Nope. Nobody’s heard from him.” Grady led the way through the kitchen to the bedroom he’d converted into the boardroom of the Strong Springs Town Fathers, a group born when the railroad had threatened to shut the line serving the town’s only industry, Green Pulpwood. Barney trailed behind them. Cigar smoke curled from an ashtray on the table, filling the room with a light gray haze.

Grady lowered himself into the leather chair at the head of the table, while Barney settled himself on the floor beside him. Ron took a seat to their left.

His hand on the dog’s head, Grady nodded at the two men already seated. “Charlie, Joe. With Ron here, we have more than a quorum.”

“Then let’s get started.” Joe Parker, the town’s only veterinarian, puffed on his cigar. “I have a basset hound about to deliver.”

Charlie laughed. “Wouldn’t want to keep the bitch waiting.”

“Usually we’re waiting on you, Charlie,” Grady snapped, yanking his hand away from Barney. Charlie was a deputy with a serious attitude problem. With him beating around the bush, they might all be hung out to dry. “We have to discuss our problem at the old Pane place.”

“Walter’s dead, so no more blackmail.” Joe frowned. “What’s the problem now?”

“The body’s still in the house,” Charlie said.

Joe looked confused. “I thought Tucker agreed to work with Archives and History to preserve the old place. While the work is being done, we go in and get the body.”

“That was the plan,” Grady said, fury building inside him as he remembered finding Olivia there this morning. “But it seems there are two deeds to the property. Tucker has one, and Walter’s stepdaughter has the other.”

“How in hell will we get the body out with her there?” Charlie asked, his face dour. “And Tucker—I was wrong about him. He’s a straight arrow. Wouldn’t fix a ticket for his own grandmother. We can’t depend on him to help us.”

“That’s too bad,” Ron said.

“Can’t be much of the body left after all this time.” Joe tapped his cigar in the ashtray. “We should’ve buried him in the first place.”

“It was Walter’s idea to hide him in the house,” Charlie said, flushing crimson. “Dumb bastard.”

“I remember Olivia. She was a pretty thing.” Ron parked his elbows on the table. “Did Walter really leave her the house?”

“I don’t know.” Grady shook his head. “She told me she wants to tear it down.”

“She can’t do that,” Charlie growled, snatching a cigar from the box on the table. He angrily bit off the end and spat it into the ashtray. “She’ll find Zack.”

“Slow down.” Joe frowned and turned to Grady. “Didn’t you already file our claim with the state?”

“Yeah.” Frustration ate at Grady and he rocked back in his chair. Beside him, Barney stirred. “But if Olivia’s deed proves to be legitimate, we could be in real trouble.”

“Maybe she’ll sell.”

“Asked her this morning.” Grady braced his hands on the tabletop. “She balked.”

Joe puffed out a trio of odd-shaped smoke rings. “Can’t ever trust a woman. If they find Zack—”

“After those threats we made, we could go down for his murder.” Ron’s matter-of-fact statement silenced the other men.

Grady shoved both hands through his scraggly gray hair. “I have an idea.”

“Of how to get Olivia to sell?” Joe tamped out what was left of his cigar. Smoke curled around his head.

Grady scowled. “No. How we can get the body out.”

“We could kidnap Olivia and Tucker and get it ourselves.” Charlie rubbed his hands together and grinned. “I volunteer to watch her.”

“No. Tucker’s way too savvy for that,” Ron said. He eyed Grady. “Go on.”

“I took my nephew, Al, who owns a forensic restoration business, up there to look around. If we send him back in to clean, he can distract them while I locate the corpse. Later, we’ll come back for it. It’ll be a breeze.”

“One problem,” Joe said, reaching for another cigar. “Walter died in the living room. Zack is supposed to be in the cellar. How will you get down there without raising suspicion?”

Unable to come up with a viable reply, Grady lifted a shoulder and put his hand back on Barney’s brown head. “I don’t know. But I’ll think of something.”

“You’d better,” Joe said, biting down on his cigar. He pulled a dull scalpel from his pocket and began to clean his nails. “Or you’ll pay a hefty price. Right boys?”

“Right,” Ron and Charlie said in unison.

“Only this time—” Joe held the scalpel up in the light. “—death will be much more slow and painful.”

Barney yelped.

The storm came up only minutes after Olivia and Tucker exited the root cellar. Sheets of rain ravaged the house and lightning popped in the windows like a million flash bulbs. Thunder rattled the

rafters. Olivia wrapped her arms around herself, but it did little to offset the coldness that settled deep in her bones.

Tucker's cell phone rang, and she jumped.

Glancing at the number on the display, he muttered a curse. "Damn it. They're calling me in."

"Now?" The chill in Olivia's body turned to ice.

With a curt nod, he put the phone to his ear. A dark scowl crossed his face. "Yeah, all right. I'll be there."

He ended the call and met Olivia's terrified gaze. "Sorry, but I have no choice. With this storm—"

"They're probably calling everyone in to deal with it." Unable to forget the odor of the root cellar or the fact that someone else might be in the house, she hugged herself even tighter. "Don't worry about me. I'll be fine."

Tucker didn't look convinced, and it was no wonder. Her statement had been a bold-faced lie. She was scared to death. Yet she wanted to hide that fact from him, because she didn't want to seem weak and needy.

She waited calmly as he changed into his uniform, and jumped when he came back into the kitchen holding a small handgun.

"This is my backup piece. It's a compact Glock 9mm, and it uses the same magazine as my duty weapon. Do you know how to shoot?"

"No." She stared at the pistol as if it were a snake about to bite her. "I've always been afraid of guns."

"It's pretty simple, really." He popped out the clip and slipped it into his pocket. "Come here."

She reluctantly obeyed, and he pressed the pistol into her palm, fitting the grip between her thumb and forefinger. It was warm from his touch.

“Hold it like this.” He slipped his arms around her from behind and covered her small hands with his larger ones. “Never put your finger on the trigger until you’re ready to fire—and make sure to keep your thumb out of the way of the slide. Wrap it around the grip like this.”

Heat engulfed Olivia from knees to shoulders as he showed her the correct way to hold the Glock. Her body tingled and her fingers trembled—but not from the weight of the pistol. She breathed in Tucker’s spicy scent.

“Relax,” he said, his warm breath curling into her ear.

Desire pooled low in her belly, and she closed her eyes. Her voice faltered, “I-I’m trying.”

“Layer your thumbs, just like this.”

“All right.” She drew in a quick breath. “I’ve got it.”

“Okay, good. When you’re ready to fire—” Tucker rested his cheek against hers and demonstrated pulling the trigger. Trying to pay attention, Olivia stifled a moan. Tucker smelled safe and sexy, and his beard rasped her skin.

Her pulse skittered out of control. Focus, she ordered herself, making herself aware of the deadly feel of the small pistol in her hands.

“Stare down the barrel.”

“Okay, I’m doing it.”

“Your sight is that white dot. See it?” His eyebrows raised, he looked at her.

She gulped. *What dot?* “Y-yes.”

“Center it, and pull the trigger. Like this.” His lips were only centimeters from hers. If she turned her head, even just a little bit—

Abruptly realizing Tucker was still talking to her, she felt her face grow hot. “—magazine holds eighteen rounds. You should be able to put at least one into your target.”

“If you say so,” she said with another hard swallow, not at all sure she’d comprehended a single word he’d said. He was too close, too solid, and too male.

He loosened his grip, but kept his hands beside hers. “Try dry firing it a couple of times.”

She did. And although she wasn't actually shooting, the gun jerked. It was her nerves.

He put his hands on her wrists. "Hold it steady."

"Tucker, I can't think like this."

He released her, and she stumbled.

He caught her arm. "Easy. Try again."

"No." Her cheeks burned, and her body ached for his touch. "That's enough practice for one day. I can do it if I have to."

"I hope so." Seemingly unaffected by her nearness, he took the pistol from her hands and popped the magazine back in. He set the weapon on the counter. "Keep it with you at all times, just in case. It'll make you feel better."

"Thank you." Tears stung her eyes, and she turned away from him. The only thing that would help would be for Tucker to stay with her all night.

Resisting the urge to grab her and pull her back into his arms, Tucker grimaced and readjusted his jeans, which had become uncomfortably tight. He hadn't expected her to have this effect on him, but desire pooled in his groin.

Frustrated, he rifled a hand through his hair. "I'll come by when I can."

"I would appreciate that." She turned, and tears glistened in her eyes.

He took her hand and rubbed his thumb across the back of it. "Are you sure you'll be all right?"

"Yes." She smiled tremulously. "You'd better hurry. The storm isn't letting up."

Unable to stop himself, he pressed a gentle kiss to her cheek. Her skin was soft and silky, like a baby's. He wanted more, so much more. But he didn't want to scare her. So he gradually broke contact. His heart in his throat, he spun and headed for the stairs. Her flowery scent clung to his shirt. He had to put some distance between them, or he'd never leave the house.

Showing her how to shoot had only been an excuse to hold her. Otherwise, she never would have let him that close. She was much too skittish.

He eyed himself in the bathroom mirror. *Sucker*. Put him within fifty feet of a beautiful woman and he couldn't look away. Problem was, Olivia wasn't just any woman.

She was his first love—and he had never gotten her out of his heart.

Once Tucker left the house, Olivia tucked the small Glock into her pocket. The weapon made her feel powerful, if not exactly safe. She put her fears aside and searched through the upstairs rooms looking for her father's letter, but she didn't find it. She wished desperately to find something that would take her mind off Tucker. She never should have allowed him to hold her, not even to demonstrate the pistol.

They were all wrong for each other. He was settled here in Strong Springs, and she couldn't wait to leave. A shiver charged up her spine. The sooner she was away from this terrifying old house, the sooner she could get back to her life in D.C. Her very *lonely* life.

She entered Walter's room again, preparing to continue her search for the letter. Thunder rumbled outside, and she started toward the closet. Halfway there, the toe of her shoe caught on a board and she went down, hard.

"Aah!" she shouted, her hands and knees slamming into the dull wood. The cut beneath her bandage split open.

Rolling into a sitting position, she grimaced and instinctively kicked at the offending floor board. It moved. Curious, she slid over to it and nudged it with her good hand. It popped free of the floor.

"Well, well, Walter," she said softly. "Looks like I've found your hidey-hole." Hope rocketed within her. Maybe, just maybe, her father's letter was secreted inside that tiny space. She would give anything to find that note from the only man who had ever been kind to her. Until Tucker.

Olivia shoved the board out of the way and peered into the hole. The opening was about four by twelve inches, and at least half that deep. She peered into it and spotted a leather-bound book, and nothing else. Her heart sank.

She pulled out the book. It was dusty and worn, with at least a hundred loose-leaf pages. She flipped through it. No letter. Disappointed, she turned to the first page. At the top of it, Walter had scrawled, “2003.”

January 2 SSTF trailed the railroad man again. C. said he ate at the diner, then high-tailed it out of town. Something’s up, and it’s not good.

January 7 H. and I talked to mill rep.

January 11 J. agreed to call the Illinois Central Railroad for info.

January 15 J. said ICC plans to close the line. We can’t let that happen!

Olivia frowned. None of it made sense. The single initials had to stand for names, but what were SSTF and ICC? She flipped through the book and saw nothing but more enigmatic scribbling. Why had Walter been so cryptic?

The rain slashed against the glass, and Olivia edged away from the window. The hairs on her nape rose and her skin prickled. She slapped the book shut and whirled, afraid she’d see Walter standing there, leering at her with those hard eyes. The room was empty. Yet she still felt the heat of his vile gaze, smelled his sweat. Reeled from his touch.

The lights went out.

Her breath caught and bile surged up her throat. The flashlight was in the kitchen. Fighting off a surge of panic, she clutched the journal to her chest and bolted for the door.

The lights blinked back on as she charged down the stairs. Just as she reached the bottom step, the front door flew open, and she staggered backwards. The pistol fell from her pocket and slid across the floor.

Tucker scooped it up.

“It’s not much good to you unless you actually shoot it,” he said, his mouth twisting in a wry grin. A cool mist surrounded him, chilling Olivia’s skin and filling the foyer with dampness.

“I forgot I had it,” she said, her teeth chattering. “You frightened me.”

“Sorry.” He shut the door and wiped his face on his sleeve. “I just came by to check on you. Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” she lied, a tremor sliding through her.

He peered down at the book in her hands. “What’s that?”

“Walter’s journal.” She tucked it beneath her arm. “I found it beneath the floorboards in his room.”

“That’s odd.”

“Not if you know Walter.” She gave Tucker a tremulous smile. “I haven’t had a chance to look at it yet.”

“I doubt it’ll be good for bedtime reading,” he said, his gaze settling on her mouth. “I’ve been worried about you.”

“You have?” Her senses went on red alert, she grew still.

He edged closer, his minty breath skating over her skin. “This storm isn’t letting up.”

“I know.” She swallowed. “It’s getting worse.”

She knew she should back away, but her body wouldn’t move. She was so glad to see him.

Tucker pocketed his keys. “I noticed the lights were out.”

“For a few seconds.” She shuddered. “The wiring in this old house isn’t the best.”

“It’s probably the wind.”

Her pulse pounding, she nodded. He smelled of rain, the outdoors, and mint. A heady combination.

She wet her lips. She could taste him on her tongue, feel those hard muscles rippling beneath her fingertips. Imagine the steely heat of his body. If only—

He reached out and ran his hand down her arm. She caught her breath.

A great clap of thunder rattled the house, and the lights flickered out again.

Olivia threw herself against Tucker. He wrapped his arms around her and held on tight.

Walter's journal was pressed between them.

"Relax," he said in her ear. "It's okay."

She wanted to believe him. But she was in way over her head. Garnering her courage, she pulled away and peered into the dark bowels of the house.

Walter stood just inside the kitchen door, watching her with dark, accusing eyes.

She screamed.

CHAPTER FOUR

Walter!

Olivia gasped and staggered backwards, the journal still pressed to her chest. Her stepfather was supposed to be dead.

She covered her mouth with her hand.

“Olivia?” Tucker followed her gaze. “What is it?”

“Walter,” she whispered, her stepfather’s name a wisp of smoke on her lips. Fear rose within her, choking her, gagging her with its ferocity. She gripped Tucker’s hard bicep and struggled for air, forcing herself to breathe. “He’s alive.”

“He can’t be.” Tucker slipped his arms around her and pulled her tight against him. “I was at his funeral.”

“I don’t care.” Her eyes riveted on Walter’s leering face, she pushed at Tucker. “I see him. Oh my God!”

“I don’t see a damned thing.” Tucker held her firmly.

She fought free of his arms. She had to know. Was she seeing a ghost, or was it really Walter, returned to torment her like he had when she was a child? She felt as though she stood in a wintry blast. Goosebumps prickled her skin.

Tucker let her go.

Olivia put the journal on a hall table and crept slowly toward the kitchen. She met Walter’s dark eyes and felt their greedy gaze lick over her skin. She felt dirty, like she had when she was young. His eyes mocked her.

A spasm of fear racked her frame, but she forced herself to keep moving forward. She felt Tucker behind her, watching her with concern. She knew he was questioning her sanity, but she also knew what she was seeing. Walter had come back to finish the job he'd started years before.

A buzzing sound filled her ears, and the lights blinked on. Went off. Came back on.

Walter was gone.

She couldn't have seen Walter. He was dead, his brains blown out by his own hand. The kitchen was brightly lit now, and every nook and cranny stood out in stark relief. No one was hiding here, and Tucker had checked the pantry and root cellar at Olivia's insistence. Both were empty. She now sat at the table, Walter's journal in front of her.

Tucker took another sip of coffee, then picked up the carafe and held it out. "Want another cup?"

"No, thanks." Olivia gripped her mug with shaky hands and stared down into it as if it held the answers to the questions streaming through her head.

Outside, rain spilled over the eaves of the house. Tucker set down the carafe and walked over to the table where Olivia sat with slumped shoulders.

He pulled out a chair and dropped into it. "I know you think you saw him."

"I did see him," she said. Her face was pinched and drawn. Tears shimmered on her tawny eyelashes. She met Tucker's frowning gaze. "Walter is in this house."

"Walter's dead."

"Tucker, I know what I saw. And the cheese toast—"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Tucker asked, perplexed by her change of subject.

Olivia took a deliberate sip of coffee and peered at him with haunted eyes. The desperation in her gaze pierced his heart. "This morning while you were in the shower, I made cheese toast—then went

into Walter's study to search for my father's letter. I heard the noises, and came to investigate. The toast was gone."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Angry that she had failed to pass on that significant detail, he fisted his hands.

She stiffened. "I didn't think you'd believe me."

"Maybe you imagined it."

Her expression clouded. "That's exactly why I didn't say anything this morning."

"Look, Olivia—Walter's blood was splattered all over the fireplace. I cleaned it up myself."

"Did you test for DNA?" Olivia swiped at a tear. "Order an autopsy?"

"I didn't get into town until time to bury him, so I didn't even get to view the crime scene."

Tucker scowled. "But if I had to guess, I'd say no to both."

"Figures, in this backwards place." She stared out the window at the rain. "Find out, will you?"

"I'll ask tonight." He put his elbows on the table. "Damn. I hate leaving you alone in this house."

Her hands quivered. "If Walter *is* alive—"

"You're under a lot of stress. You need to rest."

"I know." She picked up her mug and clutched it as if choking someone. "But I may never sleep again."

"I'll be back as soon as I can. I promise."

"Be sure to leave me your small pistol," she said, her back rigid.

Bewildered, he stared at her. The terror in her eyes was real, yet he knew she couldn't possibly have seen Walter lurking in the shadows.

Tucker had watched them lower his uncle's mahogany casket into the ground.

After Tucker went back to work, Olivia listened to the old house creak in the gusty wind. The hall was brightly lit, but shadows danced around her in the bedroom. She clutched his pistol to her side and stared into the brilliant rectangle of light outside her door, hoping she had only imagined seeing Walter.

Her stepfather's journal sat untouched on the nightstand. She'd planned to read it, but she couldn't concentrate. If only Tucker were here. His raw strength gave her courage to face her fears and rise up against them.

Fitful sleep fell over her, and she smelled rancid sweat. Her body tensed. She spun around and searched the shadows, begging her racing heart to slow. The sickening odor choked her. Walter rose up in front of her with blood on his mouth. He raised his clawed hands, and reached for her.

She bolted upright, the small Glock clenched in both shaking hands. Her stomach swirled. Bile surged up her throat. She swung the pistol in a hard arc around her—and met solid flesh. The resounding *thwack* echoed off the walls.

“Ow!” Tucker's bellow jerked Olivia awake. His arm raised in self-defense, he leapt to his feet and backed away. “Damn it, I'm not Walter.”

“Tucker, oh my God! I'm so sorry.” Her body quaking, she flung down the gun and clutched the covers to her chin. She could still smell the sour odor of excessive perspiration.

Had Walter really been here? That odd feeling slid over her and she probed the shadows for her stepfather's evil face. No one stared back at her. She swallowed. Was she going mad?

Tucker turned on the lamp.

Still trembling, she looked up at him. “Did I hurt you?”

“Only a little,” he said his mouth twisting wryly. He lifted his hand to a red mark on his cheek. “I'm just glad you didn't shoot me.”

“Me, too.” She shivered. “I thought you were Walter.”

“I know.” Tucker sat down on the edge of the bed.

She pushed back against the headboard and drew her knees to her chest. The covers billowed. “I could have sworn—”

“No one was with you when I came in.”

“Are you sure?” Nausea churned in her stomach, and she gritted her teeth against it. “I smelled his sweat. He was bleeding. God, Tucker, I could *feel* him.”

“Why was he bleeding?” Tucker gripped her hand.

Olivia jerked free. He didn’t believe her, and that hurt. “I don’t know. All I know is that blood was on his face.”

“Why are you so spooked about Walter anyway? He’s dead.”

Struggling to think rationally, she shrugged. She had to be sure Tucker didn’t suspect the truth. He could never learn what had really happened in this place, unless she wanted him to run from her. “I guess it’s the house. That’s why I need to find that letter and get out of here.”

Tucker’s eyes darkened. “Why is the letter so important?”

“My mother was supposed to give it to me on my twelfth birthday, but Emily died—and I never got to read it.” Chills rippled down Olivia’s spine as she related the story.

Her voice dropped to a shaky whisper, “That was the worst day of my life. I lost my sister *and* my mother. She was never the same after that, just crying and rocking.”

Tucker didn’t say anything, he simply drew her into his hard arms. He felt warm and solid and safe, a secure haven in her whirlwind of fear. His lips touched her temple. “It’s all over now. Walter’s gone, and I’m here. You’re safe.”

The lights sputtered once, and went out.

Olivia gasped.

Tucker tightened his embrace. “You’re not alone any more.”

“Tucker, I can’t do this,” she said, pushing against him. She shouldn’t turn to him for comfort. He wanted the house, and she wanted to destroy it. But with darkness closing in she smelled the warm musk on his skin, so different from her stepfather’s sickening stench, and she longed for him.

She was so tired of being scared, tired of looking over her shoulder, watching for Walter. Tired of living a nightmare. She'd thought that if she found the letter and destroyed the house, she'd finally have closure.

But for now, what was wrong with letting Tucker hold her for just a little while?

With a tiny sigh, she finally closed her eyes and relaxed against him. His heart thudded a steady beat beneath her ear. He smelled like rain.

Fear slowly leached from her body as she reveled in his quiet strength. She hadn't felt this safe since Emily had died and Walter had become a monster.

Maybe now, even though the lights were out, she could finally sleep. With a satisfied smile, she rested more firmly against Tucker's steely chest.

Lightning flashed, filling the room with dazzling white light, and her eyes blinked open. In the doorway, she spotted a dark shadow, in the shape of a man.

Walter.

A scream lodged in her throat, and she shoved away from Tucker.

He reached for her. "What are you doing?"

"He's here," she whispered shakily, throwing off the covers and leaping to her feet. Thunder shook the windows, further rattling her. She raced to the door. Tripped, and caught herself on the door frame. The lights blinked on. No one was there.

She whirled on Tucker, who'd come up behind her. Tears welled in her eyes. "He had to be here. I saw his shadow."

"How do you know it was Walter?"

Tucker thought she was crazy. She swiped at a tear and tried to control her shaking. Only moments before, she'd been in his arms. Now there was a gulf between them. A sea of doubt and fear. She folded her arms in self-defense.

"The lightning—" Remembering the hulking shadow, she battled a shiver. "He was coming this way."

“I’ll check the house.” His cheeks taut, Tucker gave her arm a quick squeeze, picked up the small Glock, and slid by her into the hall, leaving the fresh aroma of rainwater in his wake.

“Stay here,” he ordered.

“No.” She couldn’t stay alone. “I’m coming with you.”

“Fine.” He took her hand. “Let’s go.”

Olivia’s heart pounded as they roamed from room to room, both downstairs and up. They checked the root cellar, the closets, the living room. No one lurked in the corners or hid in the shadows. The house was empty.

Her stomach sinking, Olivia clung to Tucker’s warm hand.

“Try to think of something else,” Tucker said as they returned to her bedroom. Letting go of her fingers, he reached toward her cheek but drew back at the last minute. His brow bent into a frown. “So you can relax.”

“I can’t do that in this house. Tucker, what if Walter faked his death?”

“Meaning someone else had their face destroyed by that shotgun blast?” He shook his head. “It’s possible, but not likely.”

“If it’s possible at all, how can I climb back into bed and go to sleep?” Her fear rose up to strangle her.

“I’ll stay with you.”

“No,” she said, stepping out of his reach. That would only lead her to become more attached to him, which she had to avoid at all costs. If he became too close, he might learn her shameful secrets.

He stalked her and gripped her arms. “Listen to me. You need sleep. And it’s obvious you’re not going to close your eyes in this house. Tomorrow we’ll get you a hotel room if you want, but tonight, I’ll bunk in here with you. You don’t have to face your fears alone.”

“No hotel room. The bridge is out, remember?” Still shivering, Olivia reluctantly agreed to let him bunk on her floor.

She dug a pile of blankets from the closet and tossed him a pillow. Knowing he was stretched out beside her bed was a comfort, but it didn't help her sleep. Every time she closed her eyes, she felt Walter's menacing presence. She couldn't wait to see this house turned into a pile of debris. But first, she had to get through the night.

Hell would be easier to endure.

Olivia awoke to find muted light streaming through the curtains. Soft rain pattered the glass. She looked at Tucker, sprawled beside the bed on his crude pallet, and guilt filtered through her. Last night, he had been her protector. So strong and sure, until she'd thought she'd seen Walter.

A shaft of cold fear speared her when she thought of her stepfather. Was it possible he really was alive?

She pulled the covers to her neck. She had to find that letter today, because her nerves couldn't take much more of this house.

On the floor, Tucker stirred but didn't awaken. Olivia found herself staring at his stubbled cheeks, the rock-solid curve of his jaw. The hairy knee she saw poking from beneath the covers. A lump rose in her throat. She could have let him sleep in bed with her so he didn't have to lie on the hard floor. But no. It was better this way.

Careful not to step on him, she got up and went into the bathroom. Her shower felt wonderful, but it didn't wash away the knot of anxiety in her belly. Only leaving Strong Springs for good would do that.

She came out of the bathroom twenty minutes later only to find that Tucker had disappeared. Pulling on a pair of jeans, a scoop-necked sweater, and her running shoes, she headed for the kitchen.

Tucker, Mayor Sikes, and his nephew, Al Clay, sat at the table sipping coffee. Startled, she halted on the threshold.

Al bobbed his head in greeting.

“Good morning, Olivia,” the mayor intoned, his lips curling in a bitter smile. “You’re looking nice today.”

Struggling to keep her cool, she bit her tongue and asked, “Why are you here?”

“Al’s gonna clean up what’s left of that mess in your living room.” The mayor sat back in his chair.

“I see.”

He nodded toward an empty chair beside him. “Sit down. I’ll get you some coffee.”

“I don’t want any coffee,” she said, her eyes falling on the mayor. “I hope this won’t take long. I have work to do.”

“I’ll help you look for your letter,” Tucker said.

“You don’t have to.”

“Thought you were in a hurry to find it.”

“I am.”

The mayor and Al rose and set their cups in the sink. The mayor peeked into the cupboard and the pantry.

Olivia frowned. “What are you doing?”

“Nothing. Don’t mind me.” His face turning red, the mayor followed his nephew into the hall.

Tucker stepped close to her and lowered his voice. “Better keep an eye on him.”

Olivia nodded. What was the mayor up to? Her stomach fluttered.

She found Al, dressed in what looked like a white chemical suit, working feverishly with a vacuum-like device in the living room. To her surprise, the air reaching the hall now carried a pleasant scent rather than the stark odor of bleach.

She found the mayor upstairs in Walter’s bedroom.

“What are you doing up here?” Alarm skidded through her as her gaze skimmed the room. It didn’t look like he had touched anything. Still, she raised a hand to her throat.

He pinned her with a hard stare. “Just looking around. This was Walter’s room. Thought I might go through his things.”

“There’s nothing here but clothes.” Remembering her stepfather’s cryptic journal, she crossed her arms. She could never tell Sikes about that sinister tome.

The mayor narrowed his eyes. “I had loaned some things to Walter. He would want me to have them back.”

“What things?” She asked. What was he after? She had seen nothing connected with him while searching for the letter. Only the journal could link him with Walter.

“Personal items,” the mayor snapped. He began to pace. “Did you find a diary or maybe a notebook, listing daily events?”

“No. Why?” She was intrigued. Had Walter told the mayor about his journal? She studied Sikes closely. His slitted gaze made her squirm.

His face twitching, he stuck his hands into his pockets. “Your stepfather was into some . . . questionable activities. Should that notebook fall into the wrong hands, his reputation could come under fire.”

“I don’t remember finding any diary,” she said.

The mayor’s face hardened. “Well, if you do, save it for me.” He turned on his heel and stalked from the room.

Tucker appeared in the doorway. “Was he bothering you?”

“Yes, but I can handle him,” she said, falling headlong into Tucker’s dark gaze.

“Want me to kick him out?”

“As soon as Mr. Clay finishes cleaning up Walter—or whoever.”

“That’s cold.” Tucker smiled grimly. “And a little sick.”

“So was Walter blowing his brains out in the living room.” Imagining it, Olivia pressed a hand to her throat. “I can’t comprehend him killing himself here. He loved this house.”

“Maybe it was convenient.”

She shook her head. “He wouldn’t do that.”

“He wanted privacy?”

“No.” She sent Tucker a hard look. “The Walter I know would have preferred to have an audience.”

The circumstances of her stepfather’s suicide had puzzled her from day one, but more so now that the mayor had asked for his journal.

If the dead man had been someone other than Walter, as Tucker had suggested, that would mean Walter really had been here last night—taunting her. But why? A frigid blast slid over her skin, raising goose bumps on her arms.

Tucker took her hand. “Are you all right?”

“No.” She met his worried gaze. “Walter was fascinated with the barn. If he was going to commit suicide, he would have done it there.”

“I see.” Tucker puckered his brow.

“What if he faked his death to lure me back to town? Have you considered that possibility?”

“No.” Tucker’s coffee-colored eyes narrowed. “Do you really believe he’s capable of concocting such an intricate scheme?”

“I haven’t thought about it before now, but—yes, I do. Even though he dresses like a country bumpkin, he has a high IQ.” Olivia’s nerves skittered wildly. If Walter had dreamed up such a plot, then he *was* after her. She grew dizzy, and stumbled toward Tucker.

He caught her and pulled her against his chest. Wrapping his hard arms around her, he pressed his cheek to her hair.

“I think you’re jumping to conclusions.”

“I’m not,” Olivia said, pushing against him. “If you only knew—”

“Knew what?” He peered down into her eyes. “Tell me.”

“No.” She pulled away. “I’m going downstairs to check on the mayor.”

Infuriated by Olivia's refusal to let him paw through Walter's effects, Grady paused in the living room doorway. "You almost done in here, Al?"

"Just about." Al's words were muffled by his mask. He picked up the vacuum hose. "Don't come inside."

"I wasn't planning to. I have more looking around to do." Grady peered toward the stairs. No sign of Tucker or Olivia. Good. Searching for the journal had only been a smokescreen. His real objective was finding that body. "Take your time. Just don't let Barney out of the truck."

"Sure, Uncle Grady." Al nodded.

With sweat rolling down his spine, Grady stalked into the kitchen and entered the pantry. After Harold had shot Zack Owens that night, they had rolled him in the living room rug and left him at Walter's disposal. Big mistake. Walter had blackmailed them all. He was dead now, but the body could still bring the Strong Spring Town Fathers to their knees. Grady clenched his jaw. If only Harold would return to town.

He entered the pantry and opened the trap door. Cool, musty air bathed his face. Fighting back a surge of apprehension, he pulled out a pocket flashlight and closed the pantry door. No need to draw attention to himself.

Holding up the light, he carefully navigated the narrow steps and pulled the trap door shut behind him. Something rustled in the darkness, and the hairs on his neck rose.

He swallowed and ran the beam of light along rows and rows of dusty jars, a stuffed raccoon with glassy eyes, and several boxes. No sign of Zack.

Grady crept over to the wall to his right and studied it, then examined the other three. Nothing seemed amiss. There were no seams, no holes. No secret hiding places. Nothing except a hidden escape route, of which he was aware. Frustrated, he looked at the steps. Behind them was a sealed metal barrel. Grady's heart did a crazy dance. Zack could be in there.

He reached down and pulled out his hunting knife. Testing the razor-sharp blade, he smiled with satisfaction.

He stepped close to the barrel and slid the heavy blade into the deep seam along the top. Grunting, he worked it around the barrel until he could lift off the lid. A strange acidic odor enveloped him, and he gagged. He pulled the collar of his coat up over his mouth and pointed his light into the barrel.

A skull, its mouth locked in a scream of denial, stared up at him. With a loud squeal, Grady jumped back and bashed his head on the stairs.

“Damn it,” he muttered, rubbing the crown of his head. The walls seemed to close in around him, and the air grew thick with the odor of death. The stuffed raccoon stared at him as if it were about to attack.

Dragging his gaze from it, he peered into the barrel. The skull was attached to a doubled-over skeleton. Clothes hung on its bony frame.

“Mayor Sikes?” Olivia’s muffled voice from above startled him.

He jerked upright.

“Mayor Sikes? Where are you?”

He heard the pantry door open and close. Olivia’s voice finally drifted away. Grady gulped in the musty air. He had to get out of the cellar without making them aware of the body. But how?

The tunnel. He’d go out that way, if it was still open.

Sweating profusely, he closed the barrel. His flashlight beam was growing dimmer by the minute, so he had to hurry.

His heart thudded as he felt his way along the rear wall, found the makeshift door, and wrenched it open. Cool, clammy air slapped his cheeks. The dirt walls, shored up by wooden pilings, were slimy with moisture. He hoped the tunnel still went through to the old storm shelter.

He stepped inside and shut the door behind him, although he knew from experience it locked on contact. The tunnel was about five feet high, and narrow. Grady had to duck his head. His light dimmed to a pinprick, and mud pulled at his shoes.

To his relief, the tunnel was short. He soon reached a door at the other end. He put his hand on it, and his light winked out.

“Not now,” he muttered, as darkness swallowed him. He scratched frantically along the door until his fingers found the latch. “Please open, please open. Oh God!”

He tugged at it, but it wouldn’t give. The darkness seemed to deepen. A shiver snaked down his spine.

If only Barney were here with him. He wouldn’t feel so alone.

Panic overtook Grady and, whining like a child, he fell to his knees. His fingers grew bloody as he clawed at the door.

He was trapped.

CHAPTER FIVE

Tucker halted at the entrance to the living room. The mayor's nephew was busy stowing away his supplies. The place smelled clean and fresh. Much better than the overwhelming scent of death that had once filled the room.

"Where's your uncle?" Tucker asked, pleased to see the blood stain gone from the fireplace.

Al shrugged. "Don't know. He was just in here."

Irritated, Tucker left him and found Olivia in the kitchen.

"I don't know what to think," she said, raising her hands in frustration. "The mayor's simply disappeared."

"Have you checked the cellar?" Tucker zeroed in on the pantry door, and an uneasy feeling filled his gut. He didn't know why the man might go down there, but maybe he had.

Olivia shook her head. "No. The place gives me the creeps."

"I'll check it," Tucker said, giving her hand a quick squeeze. She was a strong woman, but in this house she was vulnerable, much like his mother had been. Only she had never allowed him to help her.

Looking at Olivia now, his protective instincts went on high alert. He eyed her front pockets. "Where's my backup pistol?"

"In the bedroom."

He scowled. "I told you to keep it with you all the time."

"Sorry. I'm not used to being armed," she said, a sheepish look on her face. "I'll get it."

While she was gone, Tucker found the small flashlight they had used before.

Olivia returned and handed him the weapon.

He checked the magazine. It was good to go. Steeling himself against the cellar's moldy odor, he opened the pantry. The trap door was closed. Even so, an eerie feeling skidded over his skin. He tightened his jaw. "I bet he's in there."

"He told me he was looking for Walter's journal."

"Nosy parker." Tucker lifted the trap door and leaned over the dark opening. "Mayor? Are you down there?"

No answer.

Tucker looked at Olivia. "Stay here."

"Not a chance. I'm coming with you."

Tucker quirked his mouth. "You're a glutton for punishment, aren't you?"

"No. I hate going in there," she said, her voice dropping. "But I don't want anything to happen to you."

Bowled over by her honesty, Tucker let his eyes play over her face. Her silken skin begged for his touch, her soft green eyes pleaded for him to stay close. And those lips—

He jerked his gaze away and led her down the steps. The air in the cellar seemed cooler than before, and slightly acidic. Wrinkling his nose, he held up the flashlight. No sign of the mayor. Nothing looked out of place, until he aimed the beam at the floor. Fresh footprints marred the soft dirt.

"Olivia," he said. "Look at that."

She gripped his arm and peered around him. Her face paled. "Oh my God. Where could he be?"

"I don't know."

"Were those there before?"

"I don't think so. Maybe he came down here, then left the house by the back door." Tucker squatted and examined the prints more closely. "What kind of shoes did he have on?"

Looking thoughtful, she frowned. "Flat sole, I think. He had on a suit."

"Bingo. You and I have on sneakers."

Olivia sat down on the steps. “This is just too strange.

Tucker climbed up the steps until his face was even with hers. “Do you think he has his own agenda regarding this place?”

“I don’t know, but he seemed upset that Walter had left me a deed to the property. I think he’s up to something.”

“Makes sense. You seem to be pretty good at reading people.”

“I’m not so good at reading you,” she said softly.

“I only want to help you,” he said.

“I hope so, because I can be a wildcat when I’m riled.”

“I’ll take that as a warning.” He couldn’t suppress a grin. His gaze dropped to her lips, and his body tightened. She was beautiful and headstrong, just like his ex-wife, Anne had been. Yet they were nothing alike. Anne had always insisted she was right, no matter the circumstance, and took pleasure in besting Tucker. Olivia simply sought the truth.

Unable to stop himself, he reached out and cupped Olivia’s satiny cheek. She drew in a startled breath.

He couldn’t take his eyes off her mouth. An inexorable force pulled him closer, until he could make out the innumerable gold flecks in her gorgeous green eyes. Eyes that measured his soul. Lonely eyes.

He leaned toward her, half expecting her to back away. She didn’t. Instead, she reached up and feathered her fingers along his jaw. Her touch sent a spike of pleasure through Tucker. A tremor of desire made his knees weak.

“Tucker?” she whispered, staring at his mouth. The longing in her gaze called to his heart.

Without letting himself think, he kissed her. Tentatively at first, then more deeply. Her mouth was moist and sweet, her lips soft as flower petals.

She banded her arms about his neck and Tucker drew her closer. Her body was incredibly soft and supple. He reveled in her sweet, flowery scent. All he could hear was the hum of the old refrigerator above and the rapid thudding of his own pulse.

A door suddenly slammed in another part of the house, startling him. With a strangled curse, Tucker released her and found himself teetering backwards on the steps.

“What was that?” He asked, catching her hands to steady himself. His body ached with unfulfilled passion.

“The living room door?” She met his eyes, and her cheeks flushed crimson. “I’d better go check.”

She jumped up and dashed away, leaving Tucker standing on the steps shaking his head.

Olivia pressed her palms to her burning face. She couldn’t believe she’d let him kiss her. But she had, and his mouth had been like heated satin. His hands had been sure and just thinking about his solid muscles made her quiver with longing.

Yet she couldn’t allow herself to get involved. If Tucker discovered the truth about what had happened to her all those years ago, he would only push her away.

Reaching the living room, she halted. The door stood wide open, and Al Clay was gone. A single bucket sat in the middle of the spotless floor. Her nerves began to sing. She turned toward the foyer.

Tucker came up behind her. “Where did Al go?”

“I don’t know.” The area was empty. Olivia took a deep breath. She was glad Tucker was here and she didn’t have to face these odd happenings alone.

He squeezed her arm. “I’ll go check upstairs.”

She nodded. “I’ll look in the kitchen.

Before either of them could move, the front door blew open and Al stepped inside.

Olivia put a hand to her throat. “Where have you been?”

“Putting my supplies in the truck.”

“Did you see the mayor?” Tucker asked.

“No. I thought maybe he was walking Barney, but I didn’t see him.” Al frowned. “That dog was having a fit to get out of the truck, like he wanted to chase something.”

“Did you let him go?” Olivia folded her arms.

“No.” Al shook his head. “I was afraid he’d run away.”

“He probably would have.” Tucker picked up the bucket and handed it to him. “If you see the mayor, tell him to stop by tomorrow. We have some questions for him.”

“Sure thing,” Al said. “Goodnight.”

He disappeared out the front door.

Olivia was glad to have the bleach odor and the stain out of the house, but she was worried. The mayor had simply vanished. She turned to Tucker, who stood sentry beside her. “What do we do now?”

“We wait,” he said. “And see if he turns up.”

“Hope it’s not in the middle of the night,” she said, rubbing her arms. “My nightmares are bad enough without Grady playing hide-n-seek with Walter.”

“That does sound like a bad dream,” Tucker said, tenderly brushing a lock of hair from her eyes.

A quiver slid through her.

His gaze dropped to her mouth. “Let’s refocus here. Tell me more about Walter’s journal.”

Olivia struggled to get her bearings. “What do you want to know?”

“What could be inside that book that has Grady so stirred up?” He asked. He dropped his hand.

She lifted a shoulder. “I don’t know. It’s full of initials. Some probably stand for names, but others—”

“Maybe I can make sense of them.”

“You’re welcome to read it.” Eager to put some space between them, she edged toward the hall. “I’ll go get it.”

She made a beeline for her bedroom. Her stomach was tied in knots. Marching up to the nightstand, she looked for the journal. *It was gone.* In its place sat a turkey feather—just like the one

Walter had tickled her with when she was young. Remembering how he'd snickered as he'd swirled it over her secret places, she cringed. Shame poured over her, and she backed away.

"What's wrong, Olivia?"

Tucker's question startled her and she whirled, her hand slapping her racing heart. Her cheeks burned with humiliation. "Damn it, Tucker. Don't sneak up on me like that."

"I didn't mean to scare you," he said.

Hoping he wouldn't notice the feather, she swallowed. "The journal isn't here. I may have left it downstairs."

He just looked at her.

"This house makes me nervous," she said, and that was no lie. Cheese toast had vanished, Walter had appeared out of nowhere—and now that feather sat where his journal had been. She began to tremble.

Tucker walked over and took her arm. Her first instinct was to lean into him, but she couldn't let herself. If she got too close, he could learn her horrible secret.

"What's the matter?" He peered down into her eyes. The concern on his face was like a knife to the heart.

She put her fingers to her temples. "I can't do this."

"Can't do what?" Confusion flashed across his face. "I don't understand."

"I can't let myself get close to you. It—it's just not right."

"I'm only trying to comfort you."

"You kissed me in the cellar." Her face grew hot as she relived it. "That shouldn't have happened."

"Why not?"

"Because if you get the house, you'll pump enough blood into it to keep it alive." Olivia looked away. The house was only a smokescreen for the real reason she couldn't let herself get close. Pain twisted inside her as she relived her shame, and she whispered, "I want it dead and gone."

“That’s a depressing analogy.”

“It’s the truth.” She fended off his probing gaze. “We can’t let it happen again. Agreed?”

“We’ll see.” His face hardened, and he turned and walked from the room.

She almost ran after him, but forced her hands back to her sides instead. She had to get her mind off him and find out what Walter had done with that journal. Seeing that feather made her more sure than ever that he still lived. Only, she couldn’t share that with Tucker.

Olivia turned the bedroom upside down, but found only dust and old tablecloths. She started up the stairs.

“Olivia! I found it.” Tucker’s shout from the kitchen jolted her. Her stomach clenching, she turned and hurried toward him.

He met her in the doorway. “It was in the pantry.”

“I know I left it upstairs.”

“Maybe so, but here it is.” He flipped the cryptic pages. “Doesn’t look like anyone’s tampered with it.”

“Are you sure?” Olivia asked, her belly fluttering.

Tucker shrugged as he sat down at the table and began thumbing through the book. A deep frown creased his forehead.

Thunder grumbled in the distance, drawing Olivia’s gaze to the window. The sky had darkened to a deep slate gray and lightning flashed like a strobe over the barn. She wished it would strike that dilapidated building and set it ablaze. Then at least one setting for her nightmares would be history.

“These initials are puzzling,” Tucker said, looking up. He pushed out a chair with his foot. “Come help me. Maybe we can figure it out together.”

She shifted closer and hovered next to him, though it was hard to concentrate. He smelled familiar and inviting, his skin giving off that crisp, rain-like smell that soothed her senses. Yet she couldn’t get her mind off that feather.

Tucker flipped the book open to January, 2003, right where she’d left off:

January 27 Discovered RR man was one Zack Owens, and now he's back in town. We have no doubt he's bent on closing the line.

Tucker looked at her. "That sounds ominous."

The meaning of Walter's entry crashed into Olivia like a brick through plate glass. She swallowed. "If the railroad stopped coming to town, Green Pulpwood would close."

"And the town would be crippled," Tucker said with a concerned frown. "Holy cow. Let's keep reading."

He turned the page, and Olivia squinted at her stepfather's slanted script:

January 31 SSTF voted that Owens must go. H. will do the job, with my help.

February 2 Owens is a slippery bastard. H. made contact, but he had no luck with our plan. Neither did R., so I must intervene.

"They planned to kill him." Her chest grew tight.

Tucker ran his finger down the side of the page. "Keep reading. We need to know if they succeeded."

Olivia nodded, though her stomach was in a knot. Who was SSTF? A band of murderers? The ink on the page swam before her eyes, but she shook her head and forced herself to concentrate.

February 5 I knew H. wouldn't follow through. He's a lily-livered son of a bitch. So I did it. I-W-burned the papers. Hid the little creep where they'll never find him. They'll pay later.

"W. is Walter," she said quietly, the realization chilling her to the bone. Her stepfather wasn't just an abuser, he was a cold-blooded killer. She looked at Tucker. "He murdered Zack Owens."

"W. could stand for anyone. It could represent a nickname."

“Oh, come on. You and I both know it stands for Walter.” She wasn’t wrong about this. “I know him, probably better than anyone. He’s certainly capable of killing someone.”

“Do you really believe that?” Tucker stared at her in disbelief.

Uncomfortable with his keen perusal, she squirmed. “Yes.”

“Why are you so sure?”

“It doesn’t matter.” She sprang to her feet and walked over to the sink. No way would she go into detail about Walter. “I know what I’m talking about.”

“He was my uncle.” Tucker rose and came to stand beside her. “I’ll admit he was a little flaky, but—murder?”

She picked up a dishcloth and wet it under the faucet to have something to do with her hands. “You have no idea.”

“Come on, Olivia. You’re talking in riddles.”

“That’s all I’m going to say about it,” she said, bunching her hands around the dishcloth. Her cheeks burned with the shame she felt, but could never reveal. “Walter murdered Zack Owens. End of story.”

Tucker’s dark eyes locked on her face, and he tightened his jaw. “There’s something you’re not telling me, and I’m going to get to the bottom of it.”

She looked away. Her pulse thundered in her ears. “Just leave it alone, Tucker. Please.”

“I can’t do that.”

Lightning flashed outside, and thunder boomed, awakening Olivia to nature’s fury. But her disquiet came from within. Tucker’s words terrified her. He was an investigator, and he knew the right questions to ask. With him dogging her, how could she possibly hope to keep her secret?

Breathing hard, the mayor sat down with his back to the metal door. Tears dampened his cheeks. His shirt was soaked with sweat. He had to get out of the tunnel before he soiled himself.

His cell phone. He dug the instrument from his pocket and prayed it would work underground. To his relief, it had a signal. He punched in Charlie's cell phone number. No answer. Unusual, since he was supposed to be on the job.

"Gotta get out of here," the mayor muttered, his pulse pounding. He grew lightheaded. "Gotta have air, damn it."

With trembling fingers, he punched in Joe's number and brought the phone back to his ear.

Joe answered, "Strong Springs Animal Hospital."

The mayor heard dogs barking in the background, and his heart clenched. He hoped Al was taking good care of Barney. "Joe, thank God. You gotta help me."

"Who is this?" Joe's voice carried a frown.

Grady put his hand on the door. "Grady Sikes. I'm trapped in the tunnel beneath the old Pane place. You've gotta get me out of here. Now. Please."

"What are you doing in there?" Joe asked. "I thought Al was taking care of Zack."

"Shhh," the mayor hissed. "We're on cell phones, you idiot. Someone might pick up our conversation."

"Sorry." Another loud bark echoed over the line. "I'll be there soon. Want me to go to the house?"

"No," Grady growled, wishing he could have reached Charlie. Ron was busy filling prescriptions, and Harold still had not returned. Grady was beginning to worry about him. Joe would have to do. "I need you to come to the—"

"Can't hear you." Joe's voice grew garbled. "Hello?"

"Joe!" Grady yelled into the phone. Not now. "Joe, can you hear me?"

"H—" Joe cut out entirely.

"Joe!" Grady grew frantic. "Joe! Damn it, answer me!"

He smacked the cell phone against his damp palm. No luck. Joe was gone. The mayor released a long string of curses, shoved the phone in his pocket, and pounded and clawed at the door until sweat cascaded down his neck.

The dirt walls closed in around him. He was going to die.

Unable to get Olivia off his mind, Tucker sat alone in the Burger Barn on his dinner break. After he'd questioned her about Walter, she'd withdrawn completely and barricaded herself in her bedroom. In self defense, he'd donned his uniform and headed to work.

Frustrated, he picked up his glass of iced tea and drained it. Thoughts of the past niggled at his mind, keeping him unsettled. What was he not seeing? Olivia had pushed him away right after her little sister had died, when Mrs. Pane had gone into a catatonic state. The woman had spent the rest of her life sitting in the corner, rocking and staring into space.

Leaving twelve-year-old Olivia alone with Walter.

Tucker's head spun, and the greasy cheeseburger and fries he'd eaten threatened a return trip. He clutched the edge of the table for support as the truth sank in.

Walter—his uncle—had abused Olivia. That had to be what she was hiding. Walter had beaten her. Or maybe even— Bile burned Tucker's throat at the thought that his uncle might have touched Olivia inappropriately.

No wonder she wouldn't talk to him about it. Walter was his own flesh and blood. *That rat bastard.*

Rage boiled up like acid inside Tucker. He wanted to lash out at anyone and anything connected with Walter.

"Can I get ya anything else?" Ginger asked. The waitress, who may have been beautiful thirty years before when she'd dated his uncle, stood over him like a wrinkled cheerleader.

Tucker snapped, “No thanks.”

“Well, I guess you’re having a bad day.” She slapped his ticket on the table and walked away.

He rubbed both hands over his face, trying without success to banish a picture of Olivia and Walter from his head. No wonder she was so scared in that damned house. She was reliving her nightmare over and over, with Walter as the prime player. That was why she kept seeing him, even though he was dead. He was still alive in her memory.

Rain peppered the window beside the booth, and Tucker’s heart clutched. He’d gone to work and left Olivia all alone in that place with her ghosts. Digging into his pocket for his wallet, he didn’t bother to look up when the bell on the door jangled.

“Hiya, Tucker.” Ron Aimes, the town druggist, halted beside Tucker’s booth. His gray hair was wet.

Tucker nodded and dropped a ten beside the ticket on the table. “Hello, Ron. I was just leaving.”

“Grady told me you’ve moved into the old Pane place.”

“Yeah, about two weeks ago. So?” Impatience gnawed at Tucker as he slid from the booth.

Ron blocked his path. “Give me five minutes, please.”

“Not now,” Tucker said. “I have to get home.”

“I promise I’ll be brief,” Ron said, slipping onto the plump red seat. “This is important.”

Tucker reluctantly sat back down.

Ron mopped his face with a napkin. “We’re worried about Harold. No one’s heard from him in weeks.”

“I haven’t seen him since I’ve been here, but I did receive a letter from him just before I came to Strong Springs.”

“Can you put out some feelers, see if you can find him? Even Grady’s worried, and that’s not like him.”

“Sure,” Tucker said with a shrug. He was starting to worry about his uncle, too. “I can do that.”

“Thanks. Now about the town getting their hands on that house—”

“I’ve already given Grady the go ahead for that.” Tucker said, putting one foot on the floor.

“You don’t have to politick with me.”

“I know. But we’ve run into a snag with Walter’s stepdaughter,” Ron said, his tone deepening.

“You have to convince her, your deed is legitimate, so she won’t contest it. Strong Springs needs the money that house can generate.”

“I won’t do that,” Tucker said, his patience fraying further. Ron’s pasty white face mottled purple. Tucker tightened his jaw. “Olivia has a right to due process.”

“Even if you have to move out?” Ron growled. “Damn it, Tucker. The town council wants that house.”

“I know they do. But why? Strong Springs is only a pinprick on the map. Having an landmark here certainly won’t draw a crowd.”

“It might.”

“Get real, Ron. You’ll get a few carloads of history buffs, but tourism won’t become an industry. Not here.”

“That house is valuable for its architecture alone.” Ron’s steely eyes held Tucker’s irritated gaze. “We can have a festival each spring, build a museum.”

“Containing what?” Tucker raised his eyebrows. “Cow dung?”

Ron shot him a glare. “Don’t be crude. Anyway, that’s in the future. What’s important now is that you change Olivia’s mind. Either that, or we’ll be forced to—” Ron pursed his lips and looked away. “Never mind.”

“Forced to what?” Anger rose within Tucker. He glowered at Ron, who abruptly slid from the booth.

“You’ll see.”

“What are you trying to say?” Tucker rose beside him. “If you’re threatening her—”

“No, no. You’re getting the wrong idea.” Ron’s thin lips curved, and he patted Tucker on the back. “Just keep what I said in mind. That’s all.”

“Ron, damn it,” Tucker said, his body humming with unspent energy. “You can’t say something like that and just walk away.”

“Well, that’s what I’m doing.” Ron flashed Tucker a wicked smile and bolted for the door.

Too stunned to go after him, Tucker stared out the window and watched the druggist negotiate the wet sidewalk. The railroad man had been murdered, the mayor had vanished inside the house, and now Ron was threatening Olivia. What the hell was going on in this town?

CHAPTER SIX

For the first time since Olivia had arrived back in Strong Springs, Tucker hadn't come home for dinner. Olivia listened for him, but all she heard was rain slapping the windows and the damp wind whistling beneath the rafters. The eerie sounds gnawed at her concentration.

Her nerves on edge, she sat at the kitchen table with the small Glock at her side, trying without success to focus on Walter's journal.

Every now and then she thought she heard a muted scream, but she chalked it up to the howling wind and her overactive imagination. Yet she couldn't help thinking—what if it was Walter, trying to scare her?

Thunder grumbled again, making the hairs on the back of her neck rise, and the lights flickered. She held her breath as terrifying memories of being locked in the pitch-black root cellar assaulted her. She remembered screaming, but getting no response except Walter's sick laughter. A chill rolled down her spine. In response, she slid the tiny flashlight into her pocket. Better to be safe than sorry.

Giving up, she shut the journal and rubbed her eyes. She had searched high and low for the letter, but she still hadn't found it. Maybe if she couldn't sleep, she'd comb the living room for it again tonight.

Today she'd called a demolition company, hoping to get a jump on destroying the house should her deed be considered legitimate. The man had agreed to inspect the place in a day or two, and present her with an estimate. Knowing Tucker would be upset if he knew what she'd done, she decided not to tell him just yet. He'd find out soon enough.

The wind's low moan intensified. Determined to overcome her crushing fear, Olivia marched into the bedroom and turned down the covers. The turkey feather taunted her from where it sat beside the lamp. Not willing to touch it, she put the pistol on the nightstand between it and the bed.

The lights blinked again. Pulling out the flashlight, she forced herself to remain calm. It wasn't easy. Her knees wobbled as she changed into her nightclothes and climbed into bed to read.

Lightning momentarily brightened the room, and the accompanying toll of thunder shook the house. Olivia tried again to focus on the journal:

February 15 ICC officials are investigating, but H. has done a great job covering our tracks. He is to be commended.

Olivia frowned at Walter's cramped handwriting. "H." had to stand for Harold Pane, the county sheriff, Tucker's uncle, and Walter's brother. She hadn't seen him since she'd been back in town, and that puzzled her. Surely he would have been involved in investigating Walter's suicide. She shook her head. Tucker must have been upset to learn that both his uncles could have been involved in the murder of the railroad man.

She tightened her grip on the book. Tucker had been so kind, yet she couldn't open up to him for fear he'd learn the truth. Not even after he had kissed her.

Reliving that charged moment, she absently touched her fingertips to her lips and recalled the soft firmness of his mouth. His tongue's tentative exploration, the steely feel of his hard arms. She quivered. No man had ever been so gentle with her.

Thunder crashed again, and inky blackness engulfed her.

"No!" Olivia cried, her heart jumping into her throat.

She grabbed the flashlight and flipped it on, keeping her eyes trained on its tiny pool of light. Her hands trembled as she swept the beam slowly around the room, locating the hulking chest of drawers, the empty dresser, the ancient valet.

Outside the storm raged, but inside the dark house, she heard nothing. Not a creak, not a groan. Only the sound of her own ragged breathing.

She swung the beam of light toward the door—and there was Walter, leering at her from the shadows.

“Did you find the feather, girlie?” He snarled, his lips curling back over stained teeth.

She screamed and lurched back against the headboard.

He snickered.

Terror washed over her. She had to get away. Flipping off the flashlight, she grabbed the pistol and scrambled beneath the bed. A mixture of perspiration and tears slid down her cheeks as she fisted both hands around the pistol’s thick grip.

If Walter grabbed her, he would kill her—to keep her from telling what had happened in the barn all those years ago. But he wouldn’t succeed. Tightening her hold on the gun, she gritted her teeth and vowed to fight for her life.

“Where are you, damn it?” Her stepfather growled, the tread of his boots eating at the wooden floor. “You can’t hide from me forever.”

He was off to her right. Oh, God. If only she could see him. The weapon wavered in her hands as she lay still, afraid to move. Her heart thudded, and moisture trickled down her face.

Rain hammered the window and lightning glimmered, too briefly for her to find Walter. She cursed inwardly. The turbulent weather mirrored her fear.

Her stepfather’s heavy steps grew closer. He halted, and she braced herself. Any second now he would look under the bed, and she would have to shoot him.

The lights abruptly blinked on, and she gasped.

He was gone.

Lightning and thunder crashed around Walter, and rain soaked his skin. He paid no attention. Not even when the runoff became ankle deep. He was too angry. He'd had to slip out without grabbing Olivia—again. She would pay dearly for today's fiasco. He would see to it.

First, however, he had to save his old friend. Grady Sikes was trapped in the tunnel beneath the house. Walter clenched his fists. He would set Grady free, but he couldn't allow himself to be seen. Grady thought he was dead.

With a muted snarl, Walter approached the storm shelter's rusted metal door. Lightning glared, stunning him, and his hair stood on end. He wiped the rain from his face and squinted through the storm. The entrance to the shelter was hidden by a wild huckleberry. He paused beside it and tied a dark handkerchief around his face, bandit-style. Then he slipped past the bush and opened the door. It squawked loudly.

"Grady?" Walter called, distorting his voice. The small room was dark and clammy. He pulled out a flashlight. The shelter was empty. "Grady? You in there?"

Pounding rang out in the corner. He heard a muffled shout.

"Grady, is that you?" Walter heard two deep thuds, more pounding. Another muted cry.

He crept over to the corner. There, hidden in the shadows, was the tunnel door. Walter yanked it open and dashed out into the storm before Grady could spot him.

Grady called after him, but Walter didn't answer. He had to hurry back to the house, and Olivia. He had to shut her up before she gave him away.

Thunder crashed and the electricity went out again, plunging the bedroom into eerie darkness. Olivia's heart hammered so loudly she heard it above the keening of the wind. Tucker was home from work, but he'd disappeared into the bathroom. Afraid Walter would return before he did, she counted to ten, then twenty. Her pulse skittered like a mouse on a hot rock. Cotton filled her throat.

Lightning glared, and the darkness following it was so complete Olivia lost her breath. Panic streaming through her, and she bolted up and banged her head against the underside of the bed.

“Olivia?” The voice blended into her nightmare. *Walter was back.* Lightning flared again, revealing a male feet only a yard away.

She screamed and scrambled from beneath the bed. As she rose, her feet went out from under her and she tumbled onto the rug.

Her stepfather leapt after her.

She raised her head, and everything faded to black.

Tucker knelt beside Olivia and frantically felt for her pulse. It was there, steady and strong. And she was breathing. Thank God. He felt as though a weight had fallen from his chest. Yet he knew that once she awakened, she’d be angry because he had frightened her.

He lifted her in his arms and settled her on the bed. She didn’t awaken.

“Olivia?” He said, gently shaking her. “Olivia, it’s Tucker. I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Thunder shook the house. He cursed the darkness and sat down beside her. The bedsprings creaked beneath him. Feeling his way, he pulled the covers up to her neck. His hand hit something cold and hard near her shoulder. *The flashlight.*

He clicked it on and, careful to avoid her eyes, searched her face for injuries. She had a huge knot on the back of her head.

He hurried to the kitchen and filled a towel with ice. Returning to her bedside, he pressed it to the growing knot.

She moaned. “Go away,” she muttered. “No!”

“It’s me, Liv,” Tucker said softly. “It’s Tucker. You bumped your head, I’m trying to help you.”

She pushed at the towel. “No!”

“Settle down.” Tucker caught her wrists in his free hand.

The electricity blinked on. Olivia twisted away from him. Tucker leaned close to hold her still.

“It’s okay,” he soothed. “The lights are on, you’re with me, and you’re safe. Walter’s gone.”

As if on cue, she opened her eyes.

“Thank God, you’re all right.” A smile arced Tucker’s lips, as he held the ice firmly against the knot on her head. “You hit your head somehow.”

“Tucker?” She whispered, her eyes wide with uncertainty. “Where’s Walter?”

“Shhh.” He ran his thumb along her cheek. “I scared you. I’m sorry.”

“That was you?” She batted the towel away and sat up.

“Yes.” He kissed her palm. “You should lie down.”

“I don’t want to.” Dismay puckered her brow. “You don’t believe I saw him.”

“We’ll talk about it after you get some rest.”

“No. We have to talk about it now.” With a wince, she grabbed something off the nightstand and held it up. It was a feather. “Look at this.”

Tucker scowled. “Where’d that come from?”

“Walter left it here. He used to—never mind.” Her face turned bright pink, and she threw down the feather as if it had burned her. “Let’s just say it’s a message for me.”

Anger flared in Tucker’s chest as he reached down and picked it up. “What did he use it for?”

“Don’t go there, Tucker.” She gingerly touched the bump on her head. “I need to sleep.”

Recalling the horrifying conclusion he’d drawn about her and Walter in the diner, Tucker watched her stretch out beneath the covers. His body grew taut with anger. “If Walter hurt you—”

“Not now,” she pleaded, her green eyes filled with disquiet. “Please.”

“Olivia—” Tucker reluctantly silenced himself. If he let on that he’d discovered her sordid secret, her walls would fly up and he’d never get close to her again. “Okay. I’ll let it go—this time.”

“Thank you.” Her lower lip quivered, and lightning added a fringe of gold to her face.

Tucker knew he should move away from her, yet he could do nothing to fight the pull he felt. He took her hand, and this time she didn’t fight him.

She touched his cheek. “Will you stay with me again tonight? Please?”

“Of course I will.” He said, knowing full well he should turn and run. “On a pallet, like last night.”

“No.” She bit her lip. “I want you in bed with me.”

“Olivia—” A fierce longing surged through him, and his body leapt to attention. “That’s not a good idea.”

Her eyes glinted with pain. “I hate being alone in the dark.”

An unnamed emotion swelled within him. She looked so beautiful lying there, her hair fluffed out around her face. A rivulet of moisture rolled from beneath the towel and headed for her eye. He caught it with the pad of his thumb. “I’m not sure I should sleep with you.”

“Why not?” She pushed the towel off her face and sat up. The covers dropped to her lap and Tucker received an enticing view of cotton-covered nipples.

His mouth opened in reaction. Then he realized what he was doing and looked away. He was surprised he hadn’t drooled on the sheets. He pressed the chilly towel to his lap. Maybe that would cool him off.

“Please, Tucker.” Her pleading eyes tugged at his heart. She put her hand on his arm. “I’m scared.”

He caved. Who could resist sleeping with a gorgeous, vulnerable woman—even if all they did was sleep? His breathing quickened, and he didn’t even try to control it.

“Okay,” he said, determined to somehow keep his hands off her. He held up the towel. “Just let me get rid of this.”

“Hurry back,” she said, her eyes following him as he rose and rounded the bed. “In case Walter is nearby.”

“I’m telling you I didn’t let you out of that tunnel.” Joe watched the mayor mop his face for what had to be the hundredth time. He’d met Grady on the sidewalk and helped him clean up, and now the man stood in his office glaring at him.

“Well, if you didn’t do it, who did?” Grady asked, frowning. “Charlie didn’t answer his phone, and Ron’s line was busy. Who else knew I was trapped in there?”

“I have no idea.” Joe folded his arms. “All I know is, I didn’t let you out.”

“That’s just odd.”

“Yeah, well—” Joe shrugged. Odd things had been happening around the old Pane place ever since Walter died. “Ron said he asked Tucker to find Harold. What do we do in the mean time?”

“We take Ron and Charlie up to that house and show them the tunnel entrance. The storm should provide us good cover.”

“We can’t get inside.”

“I know that, dummy.” Grady scowled. “But we don’t have time to waste. I’ll show them now and by the time we’re ready to go back in, I’ll find a way to unlock both doors.”

“If you say so.” Joe remained skeptical, but he knew he had to go along. No one in their right mind crossed Grady Sikes. He was as evil as Walter had been. “Maybe you’ll find out who let you out of that tunnel.”

“Maybe so.” Grady seemed to shiver. “Let’s go. Charlie and Ron will meet us near the house.”

Joe nodded.

The two of them grabbed flashlights and headed for the door. Barney woofed once, and Grady halted.

“Stay, Barney.” He walked over and patted the dog’s scruffy brown head. “I’ll be back soon, then we’ll go home.”

Barney seemed to understand. His eyes bright, he walked over to his bed in the corner and lay down.

Grady and Joe plunged back into the night, this time using black rain ponchos to shield themselves from the intensifying gale. Thunder echoed off the ancient storefronts. They slipped down a side street and angled up the hill through a copse of thrashing sweetgums.

“Stay under the trees,” Grady ordered, keeping close to Joe. Rain pelted his face. “I doubt anyone will be out, but we don’t wanna be seen.”

“Right.”

“This Harold thing has me concerned. Where could he be?”

“I don’t know.” Joe’s voice was hard to hear over the thunder and wind. “He’s certainly not answering his cell phone. I’ve been trying him all day.”

“He left town before Walter died.”

“Yeah, and that mean’s something’s fishy. Harold never takes that much vacation at once.”

“If he doesn’t show up soon—“

“I’m sure Tucker’ll find him.”

Grady’s gut twisted. He hated relying on Harold and Walter’s nephew. The man was too decent for his own good. “Hope it’s sooner rather than later. I don’t like having an AWOL Chief of Police. Makes the town look bad.”

“Tucker said he’d help find Harold, but he sure won’t do anything to hurt Olivia. I’d be willing to bet he’s banging her.” Joe smirked. “If so, that could prove convenient.”

“Sure it could.” Grady grew thoughtful. Maybe Tucker had a weak spot after all. He grinned at Joe. “You know, two heads sometimes *are* better than one.”

Joe’s hearty cackle rose above the wind.

Heat suffused Grady’s body as he pictured Tucker and Olivia together. Walter had told him juicy stories about that sweet little girl. Of course, she was a woman now—and that was a plus. He didn’t like to rob cradles like Walter had.

He clamped down on his raging libido and eyed the house up ahead. The entire first floor was brightly lit now that the electricity was back on. Poor Miss Olivia must be afraid of the dark. He'd give his right nut to be the one soothing her during this violent storm.

Joe slapped his arm, and he jumped. "There's Charlie. Looks like he's got the tarp. Hope he brought the other stuff."

"Where is he?" Grady pushed Olivia from his mind and squinted through the blowing rain. He finally spotted Charlie huddled against the trunk of a large oak near the storm shelter. No one else was around.

Charlie shook the rain from his poncho, pushed away from the tree, and held up a rolled canvas as lightning flared, illuminating the three of them.

Grady cursed the storm. "Where's Ron?"

"Filling an emergency prescription."

"Man never gets a break." Joe shook his head in derision. "Nights, weekends, holidays. Always in that drug store."

"Cops never get a break either," Charlie muttered.

"No more chatter." Grady cut him off. "We need a plan."

"So lead us to the body." Charlie toyed with the pistol on his hip. That made Grady nervous.

"We're not getting him tonight," Joe snapped, falling in step behind Grady. "It's too dangerous."

"Not for me," Charlie said, trotting after them.

Lightning crackled again, turning the trees into dripping, long-armed ghouls. Grady dreaded going back into that damned storm shelter. They crested the hill, and all of the sudden—there it was.

He glanced around, and saw no one. Whoever had let him out of the tunnel was long gone by now. He counted to ten and opened the creaky door. The place reeked of mildew. Memories of being trapped alone in the tunnel assaulted him, but he batted them aside and plunged into the yawning black hole. Sweat broke out on his body.

Joe and Charlie ducked in behind him. Grady pushed off his hood and flipped on the flashlight. The cement walls oozed moisture. He pointed his light beam off to the left. A small door marked the end of the wall.

“There’s the tunnel. It’s low, but I survived in there.” *Barely*. He turned to Charlie. “Hope you don’t suffer from claustrophobia.”

“No problem.” Charlie said. “Joe served on a submarine.”

Joe nodded. “Three years.”

“Good.” Grady jerked his thumb at Charlie. “Put the tarp in the corner.”

Charlie obeyed.

Grady fought off a wave of nausea. He needed fresh air and open spaces. Rain be damned. He turned on his heel and left the shelter. Charlie and Joe followed him.

Once they were safely outside, he eyeballed the two of them. “Now comes the fun part.”

“We scare Olivia.” With a grin, Joe asked Charlie, “Did you hide the lumber in the crawl space?”

“Sure did. Last night.” Charlie wiped the rain from his cheeks. “Let’s go. I can’t wait to hear her scream.”

Tucker lingered outside Olivia’s bedroom door. He had no business going back inside and climbing into bed with her. He should sleep on the floor like the night before. Women weren’t to be trusted; his ex-wife had proven that. Problem was, he wanted to sleep with Olivia—even if he didn’t touch her—more than he wanted her to give up her claim to the drafty old house. Life was too short.

He took a deep breath and stepped inside.

“Any sign of Walter?” Olivia’s voice quivered. She pulled the covers to her chin and stared at him with wide, haunted eyes. Fearful eyes.

“No.” Tucker put his hand on the lamp.

“Don’t,” Olivia said, bolting up. “I can’t sleep in the dark.”

“I’ll leave the hall light on,” he said, his eyes settling on her mouth. She was all femininity, feist, and fear. None of which had described his ex. He flipped off the lamp. “Don’t worry. You won’t be alone.”

He rounded the bed and slid beneath the covers. Warmth spread through him, even though he hadn’t laid a finger on her. He drew in the combined odors of soap, body powder, and flowers.

She turned to face him. “I’m afraid I’ll dream about Walter.”

“Not with me here. I’m immune to nightmares.”

She laughed. “Tell me something I can believe.”

“I’m serious.” He put an elbow beneath his head. “I’ve been certified nightmare free.”

She laughed nervously.

“It’s true. I haven’t had a nightmare since I was ten.” He peered into her shadowed eyes and saw himself reflected there. She was lonely, hungry. Wanting. That enticed him, but he couldn’t let himself dwell on it. He touched her arm. “Relax, Liv. You’re safe with me.”

She caught her bottom lip with her teeth, and a shaft of desire spiraled through him.

He bit his tongue to control his growing hunger. No way would he touch her tonight. She was too frightened. He ordered his body to behave, fixed his gaze on the far wall, and counted slowly to twenty-five.

The wind moaned through the rafters and lightning glared. Without warning, the house was plunged into darkness.

Olivia sprang off the bed like a jack-in-the-box. “Oh, no! I’ll never sleep now.”

“Sure you will,” Tucker said, grabbing her and guiding her back to bed. Lightning flickered again, revealing the stark terror on her face. Her fears would be hard to overcome, but he had to try. He pulled her into his arms.

Burrowing close to him, she trembled.

He drew in her fresh, flowery scent. His body grew taut with desire. He whispered, "That's it. Lean on me."

"I am." Her teeth chattered. "I just hate the darkness."

"Walter can't hurt you any more."

"He can if he's alive."

"Not with me here." Tucker set his mouth. If that bastard was alive and tried to hurt her, he would kill him.

"You don't know Walter."

She shivered violently, and Tucker kissed her forehead.

She put her hand on his cheek. "Tucker, I'm c-cold."

"Then let's get warm," he said, the words catching in his throat. He urged her beneath the covers and pressed closer to her. They were a perfect fit. Afraid to breathe, he settled her against his pounding heart. "How's that?"

"Warm." Olivia's answer was muffled by the covers, which she'd scrunched beneath her chin. She looped an arm over his ribcage and cuddled close. "Your body's like a furnace."

He grinned into the night. She didn't know the half of it. If she moved her hand to his crotch, she'd find a blazing inferno. He pressed his lips to the top of her head. Her hair smelled like fresh lavender.

"You smell sweet," he said, to keep from saying something stupid. He hadn't been with many women since his divorce, and none in the past six months. That made him really out of practice in the pillow talk department. He gave Olivia a comforting squeeze. "Try to go to sleep. I'll keep watch."

"Thank you," she whispered.

He rolled over and she spooned herself around him, making him want to purr like a big, satisfied cat. Except he wasn't satisfied. He wanted more of her, so much more that he knew she'd refuse him. So he just lay there in the dark doing his best not to stir, when what he wanted most was to roll over and sample the passion he knew bubbled beneath her frightened exterior.

Lightning flashed, briefly illuminating the large feather Olivia had tossed on the floor—and anger rocketed through him. If his Uncle Walter was indeed alive, he had a hell of a lot to answer for. Tucker clenched his fists. Walter was his own flesh and blood, but he wasn't above the law.

If he had hurt Olivia, Tucker would make him pay—in spades.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A loud thud shook the floor, and Olivia's eyes flew open. The room was dark. She heard Tucker's even breathing and the wind's low howl. Nothing else. Lying motionless against his solid chest, she swallowed. Her heart hammered. Something had awakened her. But what?

She listened intently, but heard only the wind. She sighed. She was letting her imagination get the best of her again. Tucker was here, and he would keep her safe.

She snuggled closer to him and let her eyes drift shut. He'd been a true gentleman tonight. He hadn't tried to get too close, fondle her, or even kiss her. Although deep inside, she wished he had.

Another thunk echoed in the inky blackness. Panic swept over Olivia, and she bolted up. The sound had come from the kitchen. Grabbing the flashlight and the small Glock from the nightstand, she threw off the covers.

She had to face her fears, not run from them. So she set her jaw and flipped on the tiny light. Lightning flickered at the same time, filling the window with its brilliance. She caught her breath and rose.

"Liv?" Tucker's voice cut through the gloom, which seemed even darker now. "What are you doing?"

"I heard a noise," she said, her teeth chattering. The pistol felt bulky in her hand.

"Wait for me." The bed creaked as he slid from beneath the covers.

Relieved, she halted. Lightning flashed again, and Tucker's white briefs stood out like a neon sign. Unable to take her eyes off his obvious arousal, she just stood there, transfixed, the pistol dangling from her fingers.

"What are you gawking at?" He asked, his deep voice a caress.

“Nothing,” she said, swinging the gun toward the window. For once she was glad the room was dark, because her cheeks burned. She kept her gaze off Tucker.

He chuckled. “I don’t like the way you’re slinging that pistol around. Give it to me.”

She handed it over.

He tugged on his jeans, then stuck it in his waistband.

Thunder rumbled again. Another storm was brewing. Holding the flashlight in front of her like a weapon, Olivia crept into the hall. The oppressive darkness weighed her down. She felt that odd, itchy feeling, smelled the sickening stench of sweat. Her heart thumped as she swept the light in a large arc. She saw nothing. Still, fear roared through her.

“Tucker?” Needing reassurance, she reached for his hand.

He interlaced their fingers. “I’m right here.”

“Don’t leave me. Please.” Perspiration rimmed her brow. The feel of his rough palm calmed her, yet Walter’s disgusting odor hung in the air. He had to be nearby. She gulped. “Wish the lights would come back on.”

“Might be a while.”

“Thanks for the encoura—”

A loud thud came from behind the kitchen door. Olivia pressed herself to Tucker. He smelled of mint and spice, but the odor of stale sweat hovered around her, choking her. Filling her head with visions of Walter. Her throat closed up. She couldn’t breathe.

Tucker put his lips to her ear. “Is that what you heard?”

“Yes,” she whispered, squeezing his fingers so tightly she was surprised he didn’t pull away. “Someone’s in there.”

“I’ll take a look.” He released her hand and gripped his pistol with both of his. “You wait here.”

“No,” Olivia said, a shiver skittering up her spine. If anything happened to him, she’d be all alone. She raised her own gun. “You might need my help.”

He nodded, and they entered the kitchen together. The refrigerator purred off key. Thunder grumbled, and a dazzling lightning display filled the window with eerie white light.

Olivia halted in the center of the room. The pantry door was open. She pointed in that direction.

Tucker squeezed her shoulder. She held her breath as he disappeared into the pantry—and immediately gave a muffled shout.

Before she could investigate, lightning blinded her and earsplitting thunder brought her to her knees. She screamed. Her terrified gaze flew to the window. There stood Walter, staring at her with a leering, dripping grin.

Grady turned to Charlie, who lay just inside the oblong crawl space. “Can you see Joe?”

“Yeah.” Charlie grinned. “He’s laughing his ass off.”

“Then our plan must be working,” Grady said tightly, wielding the ragged two-by-four he’d used to pound the underside of the kitchen floor. “Where are they now?”

Charlie stuck his head out in the rain and motioned to Joe. He turned back. “In the kitchen.”

“Time for us to take a break.” Grady tossed down the board. “We can’t let them find us.”

“Agreed.” Charlie gestured to Joe again.

Moments later the veterinarian, soaked to the bone, shimmied beneath the house. Dirt stuck to his clothing, caking him with mud. A wide grin split his wet face. “Between you and that lightning, Olivia’s screaming bloody murder. Good job, boys.”

“Our plan is working.” Digging his fingers into the soft dirt, Grady scrambled over to his pals. “We’ll come back tomorrow night and try something else.”

“Count me in.” Charlie turned to Joe. “How about you? Can you make it?”

“You know I’ll be here.” Joe’s lips curled in a feral smile. “This is actually kinda fun.”

Tucker tumbled down the stairs into the root cellar and landed on his face in the dirt. He spat out a mouthful of it and cursed. Above him, he heard Olivia scream. He didn't know why she'd left the trap door open, but it didn't matter. He had to get to her. He discovered his limbs still worked and dragged himself to his feet. His right leg cramped; he ignored it and kept moving.

Lightning flashed above, illuminating the top step. He gripped the Glock and felt his way up the stairs, halting at the entrance to the kitchen. His eyes had finally adjusted to the darkness, making it easier for him to see.

Olivia knelt in the middle of the floor, her hands covering her ears. Her low keening matched that of the wind.

"Liv," he said, stumbling to her side. "Liv, it's me. Tucker." He dropped down beside her. "My God. Are you all right?"

Her eyes blinked open, and her frightened gaze locked with his. "No. I saw Walter. Outside, watching me. I couldn't do anything—"

"You mean, he was at the window?"

"Yes." She glanced around wildly. "I don't think he came inside the house. I-I blacked out. I don't know where he went. I just—"

Tucker took her hand. "It's okay. He's not here now."

"What happened? You went into the pantry and disappeared."

"I fell into the root cellar."

"Oh, no." Leaning forward, she touched his cheek. "Are you hurt?"

"Just bruised." He wiped his forehead, and his fingers came away covered with dirt. He sat back on his haunches and wiped them on his thighs. "The noises have stopped."

"I know." She caught his hand. "Did you see anything strange in the cellar?"

"I didn't stop to look around." His mouth curved. "I heard you screaming."

He rose and pulled her up with him. The knot on her forehead was now turning a deep purple. He kissed it gently. Then he crossed to the sink and washed his hands. Outside, the rain poured down in buckets. He peered into the soggy darkness, but saw nothing strange.

Olivia drew close. "I'll never go to sleep now."

"Sure you will." He turned off the water and dried his hands on a towel. "Where's the flashlight?"

"Right here." She held it out.

Lightning flared again, giving her face a soft golden glow. Mesmerized by the yearning light in her eyes, he brushed his mouth over hers. Her lips were cool and sweet. She didn't pull away, like he'd feared she would. Instead, she put down the flashlight and gripped his shirt. Her breathing quickened.

He deepened the kiss.

"Tucker," she whispered, her fingers flying lightly over his cheek. "I'm so glad you're here."

"Me, too," he murmured, tugging her close. Her supple body fit his like a matching puzzle piece. He bit back a low moan.

She looped her arms around his neck. "This is crazy. If Walter's out there—"

"Don't think about him."

"I'll try not to," she said, her breath warming him. "I just hope you aren't too attached to this house."

"Right now, I don't give a damn about the place."

Laughing softly, she kissed him.

The window beside them shattered.

Olivia shrieked. Tucker shoved her to the floor and threw himself on top of her. He was heavy and solid, and she was so glad he was there pressing her into the hard floor. Slivers of glass and cool rain pelted the worn linoleum around them.

"What the hell?" He growled, his body taut as trip wire.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she wrapped her arms around him. Although she was frightened, the feeling of his body on hers was erotic. Probably because of her heightened senses.

His lips touched her ear. “Hang on, Liv. It’ll be okay.”

Finally, glass stopped falling. Rain splashed into the sink above them, and thunder boomed loudly. Olivia trembled beneath the weight of Tucker’s body.

If she wasn’t mistaken, he was aroused.

Tucker pressed a kiss to the top of her head.

Despite his comforting presence, fear swirled within her. “Wh-what happened?”

“I don’t know.” His warm breath teased her ear. He levered himself up and rolled off her.

She suddenly felt cold, all the way to her bones. Her body ached with a yearning she had never before experienced.

Tucker took her hand and said, “I’m going to help you up, then I want you to stay put while I look outside.”

“Promise me you’ll be careful.”

“I will.” He pulled her to her feet. Giving her hand a hard squeeze, he took a step away from her, and yelped.

“What’s the matter?” She asked, her heart tripping.

With a sharp curse, he lifted his foot. “Glass.”

“Don’t move,” she said, adrenaline pumping through her. She tossed him a dish towel. “Use this to stop the bleeding.”

“*You* don’t move.” Tucker thinned his lips and indicated her bare feet. “We don’t need any more blood spilled in this house.”

“Unless it’s Walter’s.” All they needed was for either of them to become incapacitated. Her stepfather would just love that. She crossed her arms. “You need to get the sliver out of your foot.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He hobbled over to the table.

She winced when he popped the tiny piece of glass from his heel. Blood dripped onto the floor.

He mopped it up, grabbed a roll of paper towels, and fashioned a makeshift bandage.

“I’ll get a real one later,” he said when she opened her mouth to protest.

Rain blew inside. Olivia moved away from the sink, but not before the moisture drenched her nightshirt and flattened it to her body.

Tucker’s hot gaze locked on her soaked chest, and his lips curved. “You must be cold.”

Her face growing hot, she banded an arm across her pebbled nipples. How like a man to notice that at a time like this.

He spread the towel over the glass on the floor.

“Thank you,” she said, respect for him etching itself onto her heart despite that remark about her nipples. She caught his hand and scurried across the towel.

He pecked her cheek, released her and pulled out his pistol. “Stay here. I’m going outside through the front door.”

“Watch for Walter,” she said, cautiously sniffing the air. She expected to draw in her stepfather’s rancid body odor, but she smelled only the crisp, clean scent of rain and the heady spice of Tucker’s aftershave.

He disappeared into the hall. Her pulse sped up, but she forced herself to remain calm. He’d be back soon.

“Howdy, girlie.” Walter’s gravelly rumble crawled across Olivia’s nerves. “I thought he’d never leave.”

She spun, but she didn’t see him. Her throat closed up. She searched the shadows, saw a shape and shrank back.

“You know what that means.” Walter appeared in front of her like a sickening mirage, all filth and sweat and sour smells. “You’re mine now.”

He reached for her.

She stumbled backwards against the sink. The edge of the counter bit into her hip.

Walter advanced, his hand streaking out to tangle in her hair. She jerked away and tried to scream, but emitted only a tiny squeak.

Walter laughed and edged closer, his nauseating odor enveloping her, dragging her back into the straw-filled barn, the dank-smelling root cellar. The sickening crawl space. His hands on her, his body touching hers.

Finding her voice, she screamed and shoved him as hard as she could. He reeled toward the table and caught himself.

“Olivia?” Tucker’s worried shout carried into the kitchen. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s Walter!” She bunched her hands into fists. “Help me! We can’t let him get away.”

Ignoring the shards of glass tearing at her feet, she rushed her stepfather and pummeled him, clawing at his skin like an angry wildcat. He dodged and bolted for the door, throwing it open and dashing outside into the blowing rain.

Breathing hard, Olivia sprinted after him until she lost him in the dripping darkness. She leaned over at the waist, breathing hard. Her feet stung. Rain rolled down her body to mingle with the blood on her toes.

Her skin tingled. Her worst nightmare had come true. *Walter was real.* He had touched her. A wave of revulsion slid through her.

“Olivia!” Tucker’s panicked voice ripped through the darkness. “Where are you?”

“Over here,” she said, the words a harsh croak. Fear had her by the throat, and it wouldn’t let her go. She straightened and waved her arms over her head. “Beside the well.” *Where Emily had died.*

His Glock aimed into the darkness, Tucker rushed up beside her. “Where is he?”

“He ran that way,” she said, her voice quavering as she pointed past the barn. “He’s long gone now.”

“Did he hurt you?” Tucker asked, his worried gaze raking her from head to ankles.

Her body quaking, she shook her head. “I stepped in the glass, but—”

“Let’s go inside so I can check your feet.”

“First, I want to hear you say it.” Tears mixed with the rain on her cheeks. “I want you to believe me.”

“Not now.” He stuffed the pistol into his waistband and wrapped his arms around her. “We’ll talk later. I’m just glad you’re okay.”

Her knees turned to jelly at the feel of his solid body. He felt so warm and strong. So safe. She buried her face against his solid chest, drawing in his clean, spicy scent. The odor of security.

She began to cry.

Tucker settled Olivia into a chair when they returned to the kitchen from putting bandages on her feet, and handed her a glass of water. “Drink it all. It’ll help your throat.”

She nodded blankly. Her hands trembled on the glass as she took a sip. Tears pooled in her soft green eyes, and she whispered, “Walter touched me. I can still smell him on my skin, in my hair.”

Tucker dropped to his haunches beside her. “Relax.”

“That’s easy for you to say.” She hiccupped and wiped her mouth. Her hands tightened on the glass.

He tensed. She was reliving the nightmare of Walter’s abuse. Tucker longed to pull her onto his lap and soothe her, but instinctively he knew that she needed to be empowered, not coddled. That was the only way she would ever gain control of her fear. Not for a minute did he believe Walter was still alive. Olivia did, however, and Tucker had to find a way to help her defeat him. Even if the monster only lived within her own mind.

Lighting flashed again, and rain peppered the sink. Olivia set down her glass and looked at him. “There should be some plywood in the crawl space under the house. The entrance is beside the well.”

He nodded. She believed the images conjured up by her brain, but she had more strength than any woman he'd ever met. Having suffered abuse, she knew how to survive. If only he could tell her he had discovered her secret.

He took her hand. "Coming with me?"

"Yes."

He rose and helped her up. "Let's go."

She hesitated before accompanying him out into the night. Rain drummed down steadily, its soft patter incompatible with the aura of fear surrounding them. Tucker examined the window and saw that a broken limb from a nearby pecan tree had shattered the glass. The branch lay sideways beside the back stoop, its leaves fluttering like feathers in the growing breeze.

Olivia tugged the branch into the yard and led Tucker past the well to the entrance to the crawl space. She stood sentry next to it, her features rigid and her hands curled tightly at her sides. "I'm not going in there."

He nodded. It was no wonder.

A musty odor rose from the opening. Tucker pulled out the flashlight and ducked inside. Spider webs filled the corners, and the dirt beneath him was loose, like sand.

"Tucker?" Olivia's voice rolled over him like a soothing tide. "Are you all right?"

"Yeah, give me a minute." He grabbed an eight-foot piece of plywood and slid from the narrow space. Emerging into the cool, rain-filled air, he smiled at her. "This should do it."

Olivia helped him carry it to the porch.

"You'll need tools." She wrapped her arms around herself and hurried across the kitchen to the pantry. Tucker watched her dig out a hammer and nails. She handed them to him.

"Here." She brushed a lock of hair from her eyes. "You hold the board; I'll hammer."

"Teamwork," he said, unable to stop the grin that spread across his face. Lightning slashed across the dark sky, casting Olivia's face in an eerie golden glow. He led her back onto the porch.

"Let's get to it."

CHAPTER EIGHT

The next morning dawned to reveal a world blanketed in milky white fog. The grass was wet and numerous broken limbs dotted the yard. Remembering the horrors of the night before, Olivia clenched her hands.

Walter had touched her. She felt like she needed to bathe. Last night she'd been too frightened to get into the shower. But now, with muted light filtering through the curtains and Tucker beside her, she felt a surge of strength.

She peered at him across the bed. He lay sprawled beneath the covers like a giant tom cat, all brawn, vigor, and testosterone. A fierce longing swept over her.

He hadn't kissed her after the window had exploded, and she was dying for another taste of that delicious mouth. She wanted to touch him and have him touch her—all over. Like he had when he had covered her for her protection. Only this time, he would be on top of her for another reason all together.

She felt her face heat.

After the way Walter had made her feel, the longing she felt for Tucker surprised her. But no matter how much she wanted him, she couldn't let him close enough to learn her secret. Better to find that letter and leave town before anything else happened between them.

She reluctantly left him beneath the covers and jumped in the shower, languishing beneath the warm flow long enough to wash Walter's imagined stench from her body. Then she dressed and hurried into the kitchen.

Subdued light leaked around the plywood she and Tucker had nailed over the broken window, giving the place a surreal aura. Olivia cast a fearful glance toward the pantry door, which was tightly closed. Why didn't that reassure her? She took a seat at the table farthest from it and gulped down a quick breakfast, then headed upstairs.

Tucker caught her on the steps.

“Morning, beautiful,” he said, his voice rough with sleep. His dark hair was mussed, and he had on nothing but a pair of faded blue jeans, unbuttoned at the waist to reveal a swirl of dark hair. His furred chest gleamed in the muted light.

Olivia gripped the banister. “Good morning.”

“Didn’t expect to find you up so early.”

“I have to find that letter.”

“Want some help?”

“No, thanks.” She shook her head. What she needed was some distance from him. Working side by side could only lead to disaster, although it would make her feel safer after last night.

Tucker nodded and stuck his hands in his pockets, drawing her gaze to the impressive bulge at his fly.

Her face heating, she looked away.

“I had planned to take you to McComb today to check out your deed,” he said. “I know you’re eager to get out of here.”

“I am.” She raised her chin. She *was* ready to get out of this house. Leaving Tucker, however, was another matter. She met his eyes. “Is there a problem?”

“The roads are closed.”

“What roads?” Dread speared through her. “I know the bridge is out, but surely there’s another way out of town.”

Tucker raked a hand through his hair. “I just got off my cell phone with one of my co-workers, who said the storm knocked down trees all over the place. I’m afraid we’re stuck here for the duration—but I’ll still have to go to work.”

That meant she’d have to spend even more time alone in this old house. Olivia cringed as cruel memories of Walter—both past and present—tumbled through her mind. To her bewilderment, tears sprang to her eyes.

She dashed them away. “Sorry. I was just hoping—”

“We’ll go to the courthouse together as soon as the roads are clear,” he said, stepping closer to her. His deep voice caressed her stinging heart. “I promise.”

She nodded. He was being incredibly kind, although he had to want her out of the house. It was his home.

She, on the other hand, found herself wanting Tucker. He shouldn’t have this effect on her. Not here, in this house of horrors. How could she have become so captivated by him in such a short time? Was she simply reliving their childhood friendship, or was she falling in love?

Unwilling to answer that question, she slowly backed up the stairs. “I-I need to get to work.”

“Me, too. I’m going to replace that window.” His face grew solemn. “I left the little Glock I’d given you on the dresser in my room. Get it and keep it with you.”

She nodded. She would feel better armed, especially with Tucker outside. “Let me know if you need any help.”

“Sure thing.” With a sexy wink, he turned and walked away.

Olivia’s heart fluttered. She tried not to think about him as she retrieved the pistol.

Once she’d stowed it safely in her pocket, she crossed the hall and began methodically digging through another ancient dresser in hopes she’d find her father’s letter.

Work gloves, playing cards, old maps. She shook her head and opened another drawer. Her gaze fell on a black rubber snake, and her heart skipped a beat. She remembered the slick feel of that snake as Walter had draped it around her neck, taunting her, rubbing it over her bare skin just to watch her writhe. Nausea bubbled up her throat and she gulped it back. Gritting her teeth, she covered the snake with a hand towel and slammed the drawer shut.

Anger rolled through her, and she swore she could detect the sour odor of her stepfather’s sweat drifting through the air. A shiver slithered up her spine, and she shook it off. She had to stay in control.

Steeling herself, she opened another drawer and pulled out two sets of sheets, pillowcases, and a trio of worn handkerchiefs complete with Walter's initials. But no papers. Disappointed, she tossed the linens back into the dresser, not caring how they landed.

A branch tapped the window behind her, and her pulse rate tripled. She rose and crossed the room. The oak near the house swayed in the stiff breeze. The sky had turned dark, and thunder rumbled along the horizon. Her stomach clenched. Another storm was bearing down on them. If Tucker was going to replace that window, he had to hurry.

She folded her arms. She couldn't get him out of her head, no matter how afraid she became. His arms had felt so solid around her last night, and his soft reassurances had enabled her to sleep. But what she'd really wanted was to roll over and lose herself in what was sure to be the best lovemaking this side of the Mississippi River.

Tears banked against her lashes, and she brushed them away. Instead of feeling sorry for herself, she should fix her eyes on her goal and keep working. No more pity breaks, no more dwelling on Tucker. She had to rely on herself to find that letter and authenticate her deed. Once the house was history, her awful nightmares would finally cease—and she could get on with her life.

She opened the last drawer and that odd, itchy feeling stole over her. The hairs on her nape came to attention. Goose bumps puckered her skin. She whirled. No one was there.

A door slammed downstairs, and she gasped. Was that Tucker? Or was it Walter? She crept into the hall and peered down the steps. Silence greeted her.

Her blood turned to ice.

Thunder rumbled overhead. Walter stood beneath the trees and watched the strapping man measure the window, then drive off down the hill toward the hardware store. That meant Olivia was alone in the house, at least for a while.

His mind set on retribution, he drew a freshly-honed filet knife from the pocket of his overalls. Anticipation rose within him as he tested its razor-sharp blade and watched blood well up on his thumb. That pain was nothing compared to what Olivia was about to endure. He'd played with her long enough.

It was time to go in for the kill.

Tucker set his jaw as he pulled up in front of Kent Hardware. He would only be away from the house a short while, but worry prickled his skin. He shouldn't have left Olivia alone in that house.

Picturing her strong chin and those vulnerable bottle green eyes, his heart hitched. He felt like he was back in seventh grade, afraid to ask her to the class dance. The fact that she was in danger only amplified his fear.

Not only was he worried about Olivia, but he was also growing concerned about his Uncle Harold. Ron's questions had awakened him to the fact that his uncle's long absence was unusual, and Tucker was determined to track him down. He'd tried over and over to call Harold, but without success. No one seemed to know his uncle's destination, or when he was scheduled to return. So Tucker decided to make a quick stop by his office after he got the window and get the wheels turning by filing a missing person's report.

Shoving the gearshift into park, he climbed from his cruiser and hurried into the hardware store. He had to finish his errands and return to the house before Olivia realized he was gone.

Determined to keep her mind off Walter, Olivia ransacked the room's tiny closet. No letter. Walter must have thrown it away. Sadness filled her, and she marched into the bathroom to wash her hands.

A sharp thud sounded beneath her feet. Olivia froze with a towel in her hand. That had sounded like the trap door slamming shut. She swallowed hard, and perspiration trickled down between her shoulder blades.

She could either barricade herself inside the tiny bathroom and feed her fear, or she could go downstairs and investigate that noise. She pulled Tucker's gun from her pocket.

Her heart pounded as she left the relative safety of the bathroom. The hall was empty. Thunder boomed, and electricity crackled in the air. Rain drummed the roof, its cadence off-key and steadily deepening.

Olivia held her breath as she stole down the shadowy stairs. Lightning flickered in the front door's glass oval. Her body quivering, she tiptoed past it and eyed the kitchen's ominous threshold.

What would she find on the other side? Panic skated through her. Her palms grew damp, and she feared she might drop the pistol. The floorboards creaked beneath her feet.

Holding the gun in both sweaty hands, she peeked inside. The rancid odor of sweat hung in the air. The kitchen was gloomy, except for an occasional glitter of lightning around the plywood on the window.

Where was Tucker? Terror streaked through her. Had Walter hurt him?

She set her mouth and forced herself to examine the room carefully. The pantry door was closed, just as she'd left it. Her heart thumped against her ribs. What if Walter stood behind it? Or, worse yet, what if he had secreted himself in the root cellar, and was waiting for her to come back into the kitchen?

That sick feeling washed over her, and she struggled for air. The clouds outside thickened, blocking out the light. A limb scraped the roof. She nearly leapt out of her skin.

This was ridiculous. She was afraid of her own shadow. Gulping back her fear, she crossed the room and paused beside the pantry door. The flashlight was in her bedroom. She would take a quick look down the steps into the cellar, and that was all. She wasn't going inside.

She gripped the doorknob just as thunder crashed. Her heart skipped a beat.

Relax, she told herself, wiping her hands one at a time on her thigh. That's what Tucker would say. She had to find a way to gain control of her fear. Chanting the word over and over, she took a deep breath.

Fingers trembling, she opened the door. Cool, sour air rolled over her skin. She put a hand over her mouth and stared wide-eyed at the gaping trap door. Why was it open?

A chill slid through her as her eyes struggled to adjust to the frightening dimness. Once they did, she gasped in horror.

Walter crept toward her up the stairs, a thin silver blade glinting in his gnarled hand. "Lookin' for me, girlie?" His sick laughter bounced off her soul.

She screamed and raised the pistol. "Get away from me!"

"You won't dare shoot me," he said, taunting her with his wicked leer. "I'm your stepdaddy. Put the gun down, Olivia."

"No!" She snapped, the anger she'd buried deep inside for so many years bursting to the surface. Her hands shaking, she centered the white dot as best she could and squeezed the trigger. The resultant blast stunned her, and she stumbled backwards.

Walter grunted and grabbed his shoulder.

Olivia turned and bolted for the door. It flew open just as she reached it, and she slammed into Tucker's hard chest.

"Whoa," he said, wrapping her in his hard arms. His brow furrowed. "What the hell happened? I heard a shot."

"It's Walter!" She cried, the pistol in her hand eerily illuminated by a flash of lightning. "I hit him."

The door hung open, but there was no sign of her stepfather or his knife.

“Relax.” Tucker’s deep rumble calmed her. “Give me the gun.” He peeled it from her trembling hands and stuck it in his waistband.

Olivia drew in a quick breath and smelled Walter. Her knees gave way, and Tucker dragged her upright. She clawed at his arms. “He’s in there. He has a knife.”

“Stay here,” Tucker said, releasing her. He checked the pistol and seemed satisfied with it. “I’ll take care of him.”

Relieved, she nodded. Her breath hung in her throat as she watched him enter the pantry and disappear down the cellar steps. She imagined him confronting Walter, yet she heard no shots or any sign of a struggle.

Nerves on edge, she crept into the tiny pantry. Beside the trap door, where Walter had stopped, she spotted three drops of dark red blood on the worn linoleum.

Olivia shrank back into the kitchen. Tucker returned moments later, a tight frown wrinkling his brow.

She swallowed. “D-did you see him?”

“No.”

“You’ll have to believe me,” she said confidently. “Look down.”

He glanced around the pantry. “I don’t see anything.”

“His blood is right there—on the floor.”

Tucker examined the area around him closely, then met her flashing eyes. “There’s nothing here.”

“Yes, there is,” she said, growing exasperated. She marched over to where she’d seen Walter’s blood.

The spots were gone.

She lost her breath, and panic roiled within her. She pointed at the floor with trembling fingers. “I saw three drops of Walter’s blood right here, just a minute ago.” Bile surged up her throat. “I promise!”

Tucker reached for her hand. “Olivia, I don’t think—”

She jerked away. “Don’t say it.”

“I want to believe you. I really do.”

“Damn you,” she whispered, fearing for her own sanity. Tucker hadn’t seen Walter, or his blood. She was losing her mind. Her eyes filled with tears and, furious with herself, she flailed at Tucker. “Get away from me.”

“Stop it.” He caught her wrists and pulled her close. Cupping one hand behind her neck, he forced her head onto his rock hard shoulder. Her body taut against him, and he gently smoothed his hands down her back. She was shaking like a leaf.

“Walter’s not here now,” he soothed.

“He can’t have gone far. I put a bullet in him.” She pulled away and wrapped her arms around herself.

“Olivia—” He longed to drag her back into his arms, but he knew she wouldn’t let him.

She raised both hands. “Just go away and leave me alone. Please.”

“Do you want me to go look for him?” Tucker asked. He knew he should just walk away from her, but he couldn’t. This troubled green-eyed pixie had latched on to his heart and wouldn’t let go. “I will if you want me to.”

“No.” She swiped at a tear. The combination of pain and fear in her eyes twisted his gut. She put her hand on his arm. “It’s too late now.”

The touch of her fingertips electrified him. Unable to stop himself, he kissed her gently. Her cool, mint-flavored lips belied the turmoil on her face. Drawing in her flowery scent, he felt the heady stirrings of desire. “Don’t worry, Liv. We’ll fight this thing together. I promise.”

“I’m sorry for wrecking your world, Tucker,” she said, her words muffled against his chest.

“This place—”

“Tell me why it frightens you so much.”

“I can’t,” she said, her voice dropping to a whisper.

The terror he saw in her eyes ate at his heart. “You used to trust me.”

“That was a long time ago.”

“What happened that summer when we were twelve?” He slipped his fingers beneath her chin and urged her to meet his gaze. He knew, but he wanted to hear it from her. “We were best friends. Why did you shut me out?”

Tears flooded her eyes, and she tried to pull away. “Don’t do this, Tucker. Please. Not now.”

“What happened in this house after Emily died?”

Olivia’s eyes opened, and panic etched itself on her face.

“Trust me. I’m a good listener,” he said gently, brushing the hair from her eyes.

An anguished sound escaped her. “You don’t know what you’re asking me to do.”

His mother had refused to talk about the beatings she had endured, too. A fierce protectiveness flashed through him, and he relented. He didn’t want to cause her more pain. “Okay, you win.” He dropped a kiss on her brow and pulled back.

Her troubled gaze locked with his. “What do we do now?”

“We wait.” He shrugged. “That’s all we can do. The roads are closed, and more storms are moving in.”

She frowned. “Then I’ll keep searching for the letter.”

“You do that.” Her quest should keep her mind off the terror, at least for a little while. And it would put some space between them. He gave her hand a squeeze. “I picked up a new window. I’m working eleven-seven tonight, so I’ll have plenty of time to put it in.”

She nodded, then turned and walked away.

His heart ached as he watched her slip into the shadowy hallway. He had an idea of what his uncle might have done to her here in this old house, but until he learned the whole truth he would have to simply be here for her—and work to build her trust. Until the day she would finally relent, and tell him everything.

Olivia hauled two boxes from the study into her bedroom and shut the door. She needed time—and space to breathe, away from Tucker. He was close to discovering her secret, and that terrified her. For once that happened, he would never look at her the same again. She'd already lost him once because of Walter. Losing him again would be like taking a knife to the heart.

She looked down and spotted the turkey feather on the floor. Hot tears sprang to her eyes. Feeling sick, she rose and kicked it toward the door. Walter would *not* defeat her. Not now, not ever.

Olivia dashed her tears away and sat down on the bed. Her best defense right now was to stay busy and keep her mind off both Tucker and Walter. She dug into the first box. It contained credit card receipts, old bills, and what looked like tax documents. Seeing Walter's name printed in stark black and white made her break out in a cold sweat.

Lightning flickered at the window, heightening her sense of unease. She rolled her shoulders to ease the tension she felt and put down the receipts. Thunder growled, its sonorous echo bouncing off her soul.

She kept picturing Tucker, outside in this weather repairing the window. It wasn't yet dusk, but the gloomy clouds gave the perception that it was late. What if he needed help? She paused. No. It was better this way.

Her hands shook as she picked up a large stack of correspondence. Several of the letters were from the legal firm that had contacted her about Walter's will. None were the treasured missive from

her father. One envelope, however, its edges curled under, was from Harold. A tingle slid over Olivia's skin as she opened it and pulled out a single piece of folded paper slashed with blood red ink:

Fun time is over, my friend. Move out of the house and get the money we talked about in unmarked, laundered bills, or I'll tell them everything. And I mean EVERYTHING. H.

That curious, tickly feeling spread over Olivia and the hairs stood up on her arms. She looked around for Tucker's backup pistol, then remembered he'd taken it from her and stuck it in his waistband. A feeling of apprehension washed over her, but she shook it off and reread the note. It sounded like blackmail. She leapt to her feet. Tucker should see it.

A brilliant flash of lightning stunned her. She shoved the note into her pocket.

A crash shook the house and the lights wavered—then went out, draping the room in creepy dark shadows. Fear filled her. She gasped and lunged for the door.

“Go ahead and try it, girly,” Walter growled, his voice welling up to surround her. “It won't open.”

She spun around just in time to see lightning illuminate her stepfather's evil face. Just like in the barn. She had no gun, no knife, no weapon of any kind. Her hands trembled as she pressed her spine to the door and reached behind her for the knob. *He was right.* It wouldn't turn.

Walter moved forward, his silver knife gleaming in the meager light. His putrid odor flowed over her. She grew nauseous.

A feral grin slithered across his face. “You killed Emily. Now you're gonna pay. In cold blood.”

“No!” She shouted.

Frantic, she whirled and yanked hard on the doorknob. It wouldn't give. She pounded on the panels and screamed for Tucker, her terrified shrieks ricocheting off the walls like ping pong balls tossed in a box.

Her pulse raced. Dread lodged in her belly.

Walter came so close she could feel him. His foul odor clogged her nostrils. She put a hand over her mouth and ducked away from him. She had nothing with which to defend herself. There was no way out.

He raised his arm as lightning blazed, spotlighting the curved blade in his hand. In desperation, she dropped to the floor and swept her legs against his bony ankles. He grunted in surprise and toppled to the floor in a heap. The turkey feather floated upwards and came to rest on his belly.

“Olivia!” Tucker’s deep rumble rattled the door. The knob twisted, but wouldn’t give. “What’s wrong?”

“Tucker, help!” She shouted, leaping to her feet. “It’s Walter! The door’s locked.”

“Move back,” he ordered.

She obeyed, and the door crashed inward. Tucker pulled her into his sturdy embrace. She whirled in his arms.

Walter was gone—but the turkey feather remained.

Annoyed that Olivia was still with Tucker, Grady called an emergency meeting of the Strong Springs Town Fathers. Ron was busy, but Charlie and Joe met him at his house.

Charlie wore Strong Springs Police Department blue. Barney sniffed at his shoes. Charlie rubbed his scruffy ears. “Ron’s on his way.”

Grady thinned his lips. “That’s good, because we have a big problem.”

“What happened? Did they find Zack?” Joe, worry etched on his face, edged forward in his chair.

“No, but Olivia’s not going to leave that damned house. She and Tucker have formed some sort of alliance.”

“With this weather, who can blame her?” Charlie asked.

“Tucker’s the problem,” Grady snapped.

“Maybe we need to up our scare tactics so we can get that body out of that house.” Joe narrowed his eyes. “Fast.”

“My point exactly,” Grady said. “Any ideas?”

Joe grinned. “I put on a sheet and act like a ghost. Howl, pretend to float. With the lights out, I should be able to put on a pretty good act.”

“You can be *Walter’s ghost*.” Grady’s pulse sped up. “That should scare the pants off Olivia. It’s perfect.”

A knock rattled the door, and Barney barked.

“That’s Ron.” Charlie rose. “I’ll get it.”

“Hush up, Barney,” Grady said to the dog. “Lie down.”

Barney whined and settled onto his bed.

Grady smiled. At least he had one friend he could count on during this mess. “Good dog.”

Ron sat down, and Joe planted his fist on the table. “We’ve revised our plan. Listen up.” He went on to describe their idea in detail.

Feeling a strange reptilian pleasure listening to his friends plot their next move, Grady chewed on his lower lip. Olivia Bartlett would soon be out of the house and they would find the body. Things were looking up.

CHAPTER NINE

Olivia's stomach roiled. She could still see Walter's wicked face. She could feel his body heat, smell his slick sweat. The acrid taste of bile bubbled up her throat. She choked it back. Tears brimmed in her eyes, but she wiped them away and sat down at the table next to Tucker.

"Want something to eat?" He asked.

"No." Food was the last thing on her mind. Darkness had fallen, making the kitchen light seem like a beacon in the storm. She hugged herself. She couldn't stop trembling.

"Are you all right?" Tucker asked.

She shook her head.

"Tell me what happened. Don't leave anything out."

"He had a knife," she whispered, her fear growing. How would she ever sleep now, knowing Walter could slip in and out of her room at will? "He would have killed me if I hadn't fought back."

Tucker took her hand. "How did he get inside?"

"The window."

"It was closed." Tucker puckered his brow.

"The sill was wet." Olivia rubbed her arms. That moisture was the only sign Walter had been in her room. She had a vivid imagination, but she knew she hadn't projected his presence there. Pain had flared in her legs when she'd swept his feet from beneath him, and she'd heard him hit the floor with a thud. Reliving that moment of satisfaction, she fisted her hands tightly. "I'll prove it to you. I'll stay in that room by myself tonight."

"That's not necessary." Tucker halted in front of her.

"Why should it matter to you where I sleep? You have to go to work anyway." She brushed past him. She would overcome her fear and brave that room alone. She had no other choice.

With a curse, Tucker followed her. She was the most stubborn woman he'd ever known. He'd seen that turkey feather she claimed Walter had once used to taunt her, and that made him want to believe every word she said. Yet her stepfather couldn't possibly have disappeared from her room in the time it had taken Tucker to burst inside—especially if Olivia had knocked him to the floor, as she'd claimed.

She halted at the door to her bedroom. "Go away, Tucker. I meant it when I said I'm staying by myself tonight."

Thunder clapped loudly, and she jumped.

He reached for her, but she dodged his hands. A feeling of loss shot through him. He met her snapping eyes. "At least let me check the window and the closet before I leave. That'll make me feel better."

"Fine." She crossed her arms. "Just make it fast."

Slipping past her, he drew in her pleasant flowery scent, and a shaft of longing slid through him. He wanted her—but she had made it clear she didn't want him. Setting his jaw against the raw ache that settled deep in his chest, he jiggled the window. It didn't budge. He glanced at her, but she averted her eyes.

The closet was empty, as was the area beneath the bed.

"All clear," he said, halting beside her.

She finally looked at him, and he saw anxiety and fatigue engraved on her features. Her jade eyes were wary.

"You should be fine while I'm gone," he said softly, the urge to soothe her overwhelming him.

She nodded gravely.

He gently cupped her cheek. She stiffened, but he could have sworn she leaned into his hand.

He bent to kiss her, and she shifted away. Her fingertips rested briefly on his arm.

"Goodnight, Tucker. Be careful out there."

"I will." He pulled the small Glock from his waistband and handed it to her. "You'll need this."

She took it, and he turned and walked away. Time to dress for work. His heart ached with the need to be with her, to protect her the way he had wanted to help his mother—but he knew she would never let him stay, even with more storms rolling in. And that hurt.

Hearing him close the front door fifteen minutes later, Olivia felt more alone than she had since she'd first arrived at the house. Tucker was the strong one, the one not seeing ghosts.

She bit her lip to keep from calling out to him. All at once, he was gone and she was all by herself. She blinked back tears and rechecked the window. It was locked.

She put her hand on the curtain just as lightning flashed, giving her a fleeting glimpse of a dark figure hunkered beneath a tree outside near the house.

Walter! A scream lodged in her throat and she yanked the curtain shut. Her heart pounded. She thought of Tucker, who had just driven away. The urge to call him back was overwhelming.

Her knees knocked together so hard she nearly lost her balance as she gripped the curtain and chanced another look outside. Lightning glared again, giving her an unobstructed view of the tree. The figure had vanished.

Rain began to fall, its pounding drops beating against the side of the house in waves. Olivia shrank back and tried to regulate her breathing. Walter could be anywhere, inside or out, watching her. He'd gotten in the house earlier. What was to stop him from doing it again?

She would not sleep tonight. Her body tingling with fear, she sank down on the edge of the mattress and set Tucker's pistol on the nightstand.

The old house creaked. Thunder gave an ominous drum roll. That itchy feeling washed over her, and she jerked her gaze back to the window. *No one was there.*

The room was bright, thanks to the electricity. Yet she was a nervous wreck.

With shaking hands, she picked up Walter's journal. Maybe if she read more of it, she could get into his head. Why was he so intent on killing her after all this time?

The pages crackled as she opened the book. Rain pattered the glass. Trying not to dwell on the fact she was alone, she slid up against the headboard and began to read.

Ten minutes later, she was still on the same paragraph. The wind howled beneath the eaves like a woman in mourning. Olivia put down the journal and rubbed her arms vigorously. The lights blinked a couple of times, but to her great relief, they stayed on.

She finally gathered her courage and stretched out fully dressed on the bed. Lightning flickered through the curtains, the rapid-fire flashes providing a spectacular light show.

She shoved another pillow behind her and tried to pretend it was Tucker, spooning himself around her to keep her safe. But she knew better. She would never feel his hard arms around her again.

A sharp thud sounded in another part of the house, and she bolted upright, her heart pounding. Footsteps echoed through the clammy air. Had Walter returned?

She threw off the covers and grabbed the small Glock. The floor was icy beneath her bare feet. Her pulse thudded as she crept slowly toward the hall. Several muffled thumps resounded through the house, sending shivers up her spine. She wasn't imagining this. Someone was roaming around inside.

She eased across the threshold and took a step into the brightly lit hallway. The pistol felt awkward in her hands.

A low howl rolled toward her from the kitchen, making her hair stand on end. She whirled and spotted a lone white figure lingering at the other end of the hall. It turned to face her.

She tried to scream, but her throat closed up.

Adrenaline coursed through her and she dashed back into the bedroom, slamming the door behind her. It popped back open. She gasped. She'd forgotten Tucker had broken the lock.

Knowing she had to keep it shut, she shoved the heavy dresser against it. Her body trembled with the exertion.

She had no idea what she'd just seen. It hadn't looked like Walter, more like a child dressed up as a ghost for Halloween.

Perspiration bubbled across her skin. She sat down on the bed, the pistol cradled in both damp hands, and listened intently. She heard nothing else. Finally, her head lolled on her shoulders and she could no longer keep her eyes open.

She fell into a fitful sleep with her back against the tall headboard, the light burning holes in her eyelids. All at once, Walter was there, a bright light arcing like a misshapen halo around his head. He drew her into the barn and came at her with bloody claws.

Unable to breathe, she woke up slapping the sheets. Fear poured over her and she scrambled for the pistol. To her surprise, the pink light of dawn leaked through the gauzy curtains.

Her back and shoulders ached. Realizing she had survived the long night without Tucker, she put down the pistol. Weariness burned behind her eyelids. She rose and dressed, pleased she had made it on her own. Yet someone had been in the house with her.

She drew her brows together. Had it been a real ghost? Goose bumps pebbled her skin. She halted and listened. The house was silent, which probably meant Tucker wasn't home yet. What if whoever had come inside was still here?

She picked up the pistol and cautiously approached the door. Shoving the heavy dresser aside, she held her breath and stepped out into the shadowed hall.

All at once, someone grabbed her from behind and threw a pillowcase over her head. She screamed and tried to whirl around, but her captor held her fast. The pistol fell to the floor with a clatter.

"We shouldn't have started our project so late last night," Grady growled. "It was nearly dawn before we threw Olivia in the crawl space."

"Meaning what, exactly? Joe peered at Grady over his cup of morning coffee.

"Meaning we didn't have time to move the body."

"I thought we'd decided Tucker's too unpredictable to risk it," Joe said. "He drops by the house at all hours. Hell, if he found us there—"

"You're right." Grady shook his head. "Still, I feel like we wasted the night."

“No, we didn’t. We succeeded in scaring Olivia. Do you think we should have left her tied up in there?” Joe’s eyes gleamed with gleeful lights.

Grady swallowed a mouthful of his own brew, and grinned. “Sure. She hates enclosed spaces. Leaving her in the crawl space was a great idea.”

“I aim to please.” Joe sat back against the booth and paused as Ginger set their heaping breakfast plates on the laminated tabletop. He rubbed his weary eyes. “Thanks, hon. Can you bring us some more maple syrup?”

She nodded and walked away with a swish of her thick hips.

Grady watched her go. “What was Olivia wearing when you grabbed her?”

“A baggy T-shirt and blue jeans.” Joe dug into his eggs. “Nothing sexy. Get your mind out of the gutter.”

“Can’t help it. That woman does something to me.”

“Forget about it.” Joe bit into his bacon. “We’re running out of time.”

“I’ll stop by the house this morning and see if she managed to get loose.”

“You’re only gonna piss her off.”

“That’s my plan.” Grady spread butter on his dark toast. “The more angry and frightened she gets, the more likely she’ll head for the hills. Or in her case, Washington D.C.”

“I hate to see her go.” Joe smirked. “I haven’t had this much fun in a long time.”

“Once the place is designated a landmark and the tourists start coming, we can take turns scaring them. Every old house needs a ghost.”

Joe snickered. “You may be on to something.”

“I know I am. Eat your breakfast. We have work to do.”

Grady stuffed the toast into his mouth and began to chew. Last night’s project had worked much better than he had expected. Now he had to go at Olivia from a different angle. Anything to get under her skin. Because sooner or later, she was gonna fold and the old house—complete with Zack’s dead

body—would belong to Tucker, who would give the town full access for the historical restoration. Then the SSTF's problems would be solved.

Tucker rubbed his eyes and headed for his office. Dawn was just breaking, but he was eager to learn if anything new had come in regarding Uncle Harold's whereabouts.

"Howdy, Tucker," the mayor called, beckoning to him from across the street as he exited his cruiser. "Wait up. I need to talk to you."

Irrked at having to stop, Tucker halted and waited for Grady, who was walking Barney on a thick leather leash.

Grady tugged on the lead. "Heel, Barney."

Panting, the dog sat down next to him.

"Good dog." Turning his attention to Tucker, Grady curled the leash around his hand. "I've been wanting to have a word with you."

"I've been busy." Tucker put his hand on the butt of his Glock 9mm.

A sly smile curved Grady's fat lips. "With Miss Olivia?"

"Working." Tucker clenched the weapon's grip to keep from decking Grady. "I spent all night putting up road blocks to keep your constituents from plowing into downed trees and power lines."

"Thank you for all your hard work."

"It's my job," Tucker snapped, unable to keep the tension from his voice. He'd planned to get info on Harold and rush home to check on Olivia. "What can I do for you?"

"I just wanna make sure her presence in that house with you won't hamper our agreement."

"It won't, unless her deed is found to be legitimate."

"Is that a real possibility?"

"You'd have to ask Harold. He gave me the place."

“I haven’t been able to find him.” Grady drew his mouth into a taut line. “That’s one reason I wanted to see you. Have you heard from him lately?”

“No. Not a word.” Weariness settled over Tucker, and he dragged a hand through his hair. “I filed a missing person’s report on him yesterday, just in case, and I want to check its status.”

“If you hear word, let me know immediately.”

“Sure thing.” Tucker bobbed his head.

The mayor tugged on the dog’s leash. “Come on, Barney.” He and the panting dog disappeared around the corner.

Tucker set his jaw and pushed open the door to the tiny Strong Spring’s sheriff’s substation. The place consisted of a long gray counter, behind which sat several straight-backed chairs, a battered barstool, and six ancient desks topped with sleek black computer monitors. Bleary-eyed Charlie Barnes stood near the coffee pot at the back of the room, pouring himself a cup of hours-old brew.

“Thought you were off tonight,” Tucker said, bumping through the swinging door at the end of the counter and making his way between the two rows of desks.

Charlie set down the glass carafe with a sharp click. “I came in late. Had business to attend to.”

“All night?” Tucker raised his brows. Charlie had once had an exemplary record, but lately he’d been missing shifts and showing up late for roll call.

Charlie downed a swallow of coffee. “What’s it to you?”

“You’re on my shift. I like to know I have backup.”

“I’m here now, aren’t I?”

Tucker bit back a sharp retort. “Have you checked this morning’s E-mail?”

“No.” Charlie’s mouth twisted. “Have you talked to your girlfriend?”

“Not since last night. Why are you asking?” Tucker stalked toward him. “And anyway, she’s not my girlfriend.”

“Whatever you say.” Charlie met Tucker’s scowl with one of his own. “I don’t know why you’re letting her stay in the house with you, unless you and she are—well, you know. Possession is nine-tenths of the law.”

“I was there first.”

“So? She can still use it against you.”

“She won’t,” Tucker snapped. “Why should you care, anyway?”

Charlie shrugged. “I’m backing the mayor and the town. They want that house.”

“I’m losing patience with all of you.” Tucker shook his head and backed down. He needed to hurry home. As he flipped on the nearest computer, worry knotted in his gut. He hoped Olivia was all right. His duties hadn’t allowed him any breaks on his shift.

His stomach rumbled as he sat down and roamed through the department’s E-mail. To his chagrin, he found nothing at all pertaining to Harold.

Tucker leaned back in his chair. He hadn’t heard from his uncle since the week before he had moved to Strong Springs. Harold had mailed him the deed to the house, then followed it up days later with a telephone call inviting him to come to work for the Polk County Sheriff’s Department. Eager to put Jackson and his belligerent ex-wife in his rearview mirror, Tucker had jumped at the chance to start a new life.

Tucker rubbed his eyes and ran over his last conversation with Harold in his head.

“How soon can you get here?” Harold had asked.

“Give me a week,” Tucker said. He’d given his notice at Jackson Police Department the week before, and had one more week to go.

Harold had given his okay. Tucker had arrived in Strong Springs right on schedule, but his uncle hadn’t been here.

Tucker slammed his fist against the desk, drawing a startled glare from Charlie, who still lounged beside the coffee pot. Bolting from his chair, Tucker made a beeline for the door. He wouldn’t

solve the mystery of Harold's disappearance this morning. It was past time for him to go check on Olivia.

He arrived at the house, but couldn't find her. She wasn't in the bedroom or the bathroom. He snatched up Walter's journal, thinking that it might give him a clue. He carried it into the kitchen. No sign of her there, either. Fear crawled over him like ants as he opened the diary.

Before he could read a word, he heard a muffled thud. It sounded as if it had come from beneath the floorboards.

Tightening his jaw, he tossed the journal on the table. Then he drew his weapon and headed for the cellar.

Olivia heard Tucker calling her name, but the dirty gag in her mouth prevented her from answering him. The ropes binding her wrists behind her back cut into her tender skin. Lightning split the darkness momentarily, giving her a snapshot view of the narrow crawl space.

Memories of her hours here long ago spilled through her mind, chilling her soul. But this time, Walter hadn't been the one to tie her up. Two men had grabbed her, one of whom smelled like Old Spice. She'd detected no odor of sweat, and their hands had been smooth as baby cheeks. They had remained silent. She had no idea who they were, or why they had done this. But at least they hadn't hurt her.

She worked her feet back and forth, desperately trying to slip free of the bonds tying her ankles. That rope wasn't nearly as tight as the one binding her wrists.

Something crawled over her hand, and she squealed. The gag made the sound reverberate inside her head. Revulsion slid through her, and she clumsily sat up. Her head was only inches from the spider web draped ceiling. She eyed the webs with distaste.

She twisted her feet again, and miraculously, her right foot came free. Hope filled her. She kicked off the rope and began crawling awkwardly toward the opening, which was blocked with only a thick piece of plywood.

If they'd truly wanted her locked up, why had they put her in here? Other questions skated through her head as she struggled across the sandy floor on her knees.

Reaching the board, she hit it with her shoulder. The plywood dropped against her, and cool, moist air rushed into the dank space. Rain peppered Olivia's clammy skin, and she welcomed it. If only she could reach the back door, she could alert Tucker.

Olivia wasn't in the cellar. With a sharp curse, Tucker bounded back up the stairs. He'd looked everywhere for her. Everywhere except the barn. Thinking about her being locked up along in that terrifying space made his skin crawl. He had to find her.

Lightning glittered across the brightening sky as he opened the back door and jogged down the steps. Rain slashed his face, plastering his hair to his head and making him shiver. He clutched the Glock so tightly his knuckles ached. He hadn't been able to help his mother, but he could help Olivia. If Walter was indeed alive, and he had her—

A muffled cry from beside the house startled Tucker. He spun in the wet grass, but saw nothing. Thunder boomed overhead. His heart hammered with apprehension.

He heard another cry, then saw a blur of movement at the entrance to the crawl space. It was Olivia, bedraggled and on her knees, struggling to rise.

A huge lump rose in his throat. He lowered his pistol and rushed toward her. "Olivia! My God."

She gave a muffled shout as he skidded to a stop next to her and shoved the Glock into his waistband. She was dressed in a baggy T-shirt and yesterday's jeans. A dirty rag covered her mouth, and her hands were bound tightly behind her.

Tearing at her gag, he growled a curse. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," she murmured through the cloth. Rain streamed down her face. The gag popped free, and she spat another wad of material from her mouth. Turning her face to the sky, she drank in the falling moisture. Then she looked up at him with grateful eyes. "Thank God you found me. I've been so scared."

"I heard you trying to shout." He helped her to her feet, then fought the rope binding her wrists. He gripped her arms. "What happened?"

"I don't know." She pressed herself to him, and he wrapped her in his arms. Her body quaked. She rubbed her abraded wrists. "I realized it was dawn and got up to check the house. You weren't home. I had your pistol—"

He eased her back so he could see her face. "Go on."

"Someone threw a cloth over my head. There were two of them. I don't know how they got inside." She swallowed. "Anyway, I think they used a pillowcase. They shoved me against the wall and tied me up. I-I dropped the gun."

"Did they hurt you?"

"No, they just threw me in here." She pointed at the crawl space. Another shiver wracked her, and she clumsily wiped her face with her hands. "It was so dark. I was afraid you wouldn't find me."

"Was Walter involved?" Anger boiled inside Tucker.

She shook her head. "No. The men were too well kempt. I smelled Old Spice, not sweat."

"Let's go inside." Tucker took her arm and led her toward the back steps. "We need dry clothes."

She finished telling her tale, then slipped out of her jeans and into a soft cotton nightshirt while he changed upstairs. Once he returned, she climbed into bed to get warm. He stretched out beside her and cuddled her close.

His body radiated the heat she craved. The crawl space had been so dark, and so frightening. Despite her vow to keep her distance from him, she put her hands over his and reveled in his quiet strength.

“Thank you for finding me,” she whispered, emotion swelling in her chest. The panicked look in his eyes after he had loosened the rope on her wrists was burned into her brain.

He stroked his fingers down her arm, making her tingle all over. “At first I couldn’t find you. That scared the hell out of me.”

“I tried to call out to you, but the gag—”

“You’re safe now,” he said, pressing a gentle kiss to her temple. “Go to sleep.”

She longed to turn over and kiss him full on the mouth, to give herself to him, but she was so tired. Tucker represented the safety net she had always wanted but had lost the day she had pushed him away. For the first time in her life, she actually felt safe and cherished. Loved.

Her eyelids slowly drifted shut, and she fell into a peaceful sleep. Feeling her relax against him, Tucker drew in a troubled breath. She had given him no real clues as to who might have grabbed her, or why. They’d found the dropped pistol in the hall, right where she’d left it.

Olivia’s presence here had destroyed the sense of calm he had experienced since he’d moved into the house. But peering down at her sleeping form, he decided he didn’t care.

Her silky auburn hair fanned out around her head, and her mouth formed a sexy bow. His body tightened with desire. He curled his hands to keep from reaching for her.

For the first time since his divorce, he was in danger of losing his heart—yet Olivia kept pushing him away, and for good reason. He wouldn’t upset her by forcing their union. When and if she came to him, it would have to be by her choice. Only then would he allow himself to explore the full depth of his feelings for her, feelings carried over from their youth.

Time had changed both of them, but it had done nothing to diffuse the fierce yearnings rising inside him. First, however, he had to help her conquer her fears. Then maybe she would open up to him. Some awful fear held her paralyzed. Something she would not or could not tell him. Things that could be bad enough to keep her from confiding in him were too awful to contemplate.

Exhaustion gradually overtook him and he closed his eyes. His last thought was of Olivia.

Olivia stared down at Tucker, who was still asleep, and barely resisted the urge to slide her hand through his hair. She owed him so much. And she was attracted to him. Her throat closed up. If only she could tell him the truth about Walter, then maybe they could have a chance at a real relationship. Problem was, she didn't know how to go about it.

It was now afternoon. She needed to roust him, so they would have time to talk before he had to go to work.

"Tucker?" She whispered, leaning close.

Stubble as dark as midnight covered his chin and he had one arm cocked over his head. She swallowed. "Are you awake?"

"No," he murmured, shifting beneath the covers.

She touched his broad shoulder and was amazed by the heat of his satiny skin. Blood pooled low in her body. She smiled and flattened her palm against his bicep.

Tucker's eyes popped open.

She jerked her hand away.

"Hi, Liv." He yawned. His mouth curved in a weary smile. "You look like you feel much better."

"I do. I finally got some rest." Thanks to you, she wanted to say. Her face grew hot, and she paused. "With all that happened this morning, I forgot to tell you what else went on last night."

“What do you mean?” He sat up and stared at her.

“I saw Walter again—outside, before the men grabbed me. Then I saw a gho—” She snapped her mouth shut. If she said ‘ghost’, Tucker would want to have her committed.

He caught her hand. “Tell me.”

She reeled from the fire of his touch, and a shaft of uneasiness slid through her. His dark eyes were filled with understanding now, but if she told him about the apparition they would cloud up and he would shut her out like she had him so many years ago. The thought of not being able to turn to him for help made her heart ache.

He tugged her closer to him. “It’s okay.”

“It was a phantom,” she said softly. Maybe if she didn’t use the word ghost, he wouldn’t pull away. She hurried on, “In the hall, just before they grabbed me. I heard a thud, then—”

“You saw a ghost.” His words were a statement of fact, not a question. He released her hand and the covers bunched in his lap. “Did you get any sleep at all?”

“Not much,” she said, remembering how good she’d slept the night before in Tucker’s arms.

“It’s no wonder you’re seeing things,” he said, his worried gaze playing over her face. “And after they threw you in the crawl space—”

“That certainly wasn’t my imagination.”

“I believe you.” Tucker flung off the covers and rose. He wore briefs, but they left absolutely nothing to the imagination.

Her eyes widened. “Oh, my.”

“What you’re seeing now is real,” his mouth quirking into another half-smile, this one attempting to hide the passion coursing through him. He started toward her, and was relieved when she didn’t flinch. “I’m no ghost.”

“I can see that.”

He halted only inches away. She was beautiful, all soft edges and silken hair and full lips. He touched her cheek gently and she released a shaky breath.

He kissed her forehead. “There aren’t any ghosts, or phantoms, or whatever you want to call them, in this house or anywhere else. They don’t exist. Bad men exist, men who want to hurt you. But no ghosts.”

“Then what did I see? Please tell me, because I’m beginning to question my own sanity.”

“Those men were probably just trying to scare you.” He took her hand. He longed to draw her to the bed and love her fears away, but that was not what she needed right now. She needed understanding and friendship. Strength. Not sex. “This house—”

“Terrifies me,” she said, finishing his thought. A single tear escaped her eye and she dashed it away. “It always has.”

“Because of Walter.”

“Yes.”

His heart hitched. Unable to stop himself from touching her, he slipped his arms around her. She trembled like a trapped bird. Drawing her against his straining body, he lowered his head and gently captured her mouth.

She tasted like honey and cream. When she didn’t resist, he angled his head and deepened the kiss. She groaned softly, wrapped her arms around his neck, and kissed him back.

Their tongues tangled, and his body pulsed with need. The bed was so close. He longed to lay her down and push inside her, to feel the welcoming heat of her legs wrapping around him. To make love to her. Maybe then she could concentrate on something besides her fear. He pulled her against his searing arousal, gritting his teeth against the surge of need that filled him.

She gasped. “Tucker?”

“I’m trying to take your mind off the house,” he said, nibbling at her lips. “Is it working?”

“You’d better believe it,” she said breathlessly, laughter bubbling up her throat. Her fears disappeared beneath Tucker’s gentle touch. He kissed her again, and a shiver of desire rippled down her spine. She whispered, “Please, don’t stop. You taste good.”

He laughed softly.

Three distinct thuds jarred the house.

Olivia jerked away and pressed a hand to her throat. It took her a moment to realize someone was pounding on the door.

Muttering a curse, Tucker ran a hand through his hair and backed away from her. “I’d better answer that.”

“You’d better let me,” she said, casting a knowing glance at his bulging briefs. “Unless you’re expecting someone.”

He mouthed an expletive.

With a nervous laugh, she touched his arm. “I’ll get it.”

He shot her a look filled with banked desire, then nodded and reached for his jeans.

A warm blush tingled over her skin. Without acknowledging the electricity arcing between them, she bolted from the room.

Another knock sounded before she opened the door. Warm, muggy air enveloped her. Thunder rumbled, and rain pattered down in the yard.

A strapping young blond man in a ragged T-shirt stood on the porch. He stood bow-legged, and had a chaw of tobacco in his cheek. “Good afternoon, ma’am. I’m Matt Jones with AAA Demolition. You wanted an estimate on tearing down a house?”

“Oh yes, I did,” she said, as his words registered.

He handed her a business card. “Is this the place?”

“Yes.” Low gray clouds boiled above them. Olivia read the card twice, and suddenly felt as unsettled as the weather. She wanted the place gone, but it was now Tucker’s home. She looked up at Matt. “How long will it take you to tear it down?”

He solemnly studied the home’s weather-beaten façade, its sloping roof, the cracked brickwork. “Probably a week at least, if it’s a conventional foundation. Depends on the weather and the availability of my crew.”

“I see.” She swallowed back the urge to hand him back his card and shut the door. “Well, my circumstances have changed. I’ll have to call you once I know I actually own the house.”

Matt frowned. “You don’t live here?”

“No, she doesn’t.” Tucker’s deep voice resonated behind her. Fully dressed, he walked up behind her and put his hand on her back. “*I* own it, and I want it to remain as is.”

Matt glanced at Olivia in surprise.

She entwined her hands. “We don’t know who owns it. We have duplicate deeds.”

“That does pose a problem.” Matt folded his arms. “I can’t schedule the demolition until ownership is resolved. I’m sure you understand.”

“I do.”

“She’ll call you.” Tucker felt Olivia’s spine grow rigid.

She skewered him with those fierce green eyes. Cat eyes.

Why was she so angry? Tucker let his mouth curve into a tight smile and nodded at the demo man. “Thanks for coming by.”

“No problem.” Matt nodded. “I’ll be waiting for your call.” He spun on his heel and left.

“Why are you upset?” Tucker asked, his gaze locking with Olivia’s.

Her cheeks gleamed with bright pink highlights. “You’re patronizing me, and I don’t like it.”

“I was only trying to help.”

“I can take care of my own business.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He smiled wryly, and fastened his gaze on her lips. “Forget about it. Give me a kiss.”

“No!” Her startled gaze settled on his mouth.

He could tell she wanted to, but she was mad at him.

He cupped her cheek. “Come on, Olivia. Don’t push me away.”

“Damn you, Tucker,” she whispered, her eyes softening at his touch. “You keep me so mixed up, like when we were kids.”

“We got along fine then, until you decided we couldn’t be friends any more.”

“I know. When I was twelve, I was too afraid to do this.” She put her hands on his chest and gave him a smoldering kiss.

She tasted like the rain drizzling down on the grass. He drew it out as long as possible.

Finally, she pulled away. Her breath slid out slowly, and she swallowed as if trying to get her bearings.

A beat later, she said quietly, “I’m sorry I got so angry with you.”

“You’re beautiful when you’re angry,” he said, tickling his fingertips along her jaw. “We could go upstairs, and—”

“Whoa.” She backed away. “You’re trying to take this too far. You want to make me forget about my deed.”

“I wouldn’t do that,” he said, dogging her steps as she neared the wall. The door was still open, and cool, damp air funneled inside. He trapped her beside the stairs, bracing an arm on either side of her. “I made you a promise, and I’m going to keep it.”

“I appreciate that,” she whispered. “But it’s too soon. We shouldn’t—”

“Relax. I’m not going to force you,” he said softly. “I just want you to forget about the deeds and the house for a while, so we can concentrate on us.”

“There is no ‘us.’” She swallowed, and the pulse at the base of her neck fluttered. “I’m only here temporarily, remember?”

Her words were like a splash of cold water in his face. As much as he hated to admit it, he knew she was right. He tamped down his surging desire. He surely didn’t want to cause her more pain. So he nodded.

“Okay. I’ll back off.” He dropped his hands. His body tightened in protest. “For now.”

Her lips curved in a sad smile. “I’m sorry, Tucker. But it’s better this way.”

Maybe for you. His heart in his throat, he reached out and squeezed her hand. Then he turned and walked away.

Longing swirled inside him. He was in way too deep with her. But he couldn't seem to stop himself, no matter how hard he tried.

CHAPTER TEN

Torn about sending Tucker away, Olivia slinked into the study to renew her search for her father's letter. Anything to keep herself occupied, when what she really wanted to do was throw herself at Tucker's feet and beg him to make mad, passionate love to her. But getting physically involved would only make things worse. Right now she had to keep her wits about her, to protect herself and her heart.

She sighed and looked around the small room. She still had two more drawers and a cabinet to go through.

Opening the first drawer, she found what appeared to be legal correspondence concerning a patch of land in the next county, a stack of old Christmas cards, and a bottle of dried-up glue. No letter.

She tugged open the second drawer. It was filled with a jumble of small receipts, a pile of rubber bands, and stamps. Several unopened envelopes were stacked to one side.

"Any luck?" Tucker asked from the door.

Startled, she looked up. His intense gaze sent a tingle over her skin.

"Did you find it?"

She picked up the envelopes with trembling hands and shook her head. "Not yet. Walter was a pack rat, but it doesn't look like he kept anything of my mother's."

Tucker crossed the room. "I'm sorry. I know how much that means to you."

"I never had it, so I don't really know what I'm missing. But I would like to read it."

"Do you remember your father?"

"In little flashes, like sound bytes." Thinking back, she bit her lip. "I remember one special day, when he took me to the beach in Pensacola. I remember how foamy the water was, how white the sand

seemed, the way the sea gulls circled overhead. We played with a beach ball and gathered shells. It was a perfect day, even though I got a sunburn.”

“I’m glad you have that memory of him.”

“Me, too,” she said, meeting Tucker’s eyes. They seemed to see into her soul. “That was a day I’ll always remember.”

He touched her arm and electricity jolted between them, stunning her with its mind-blowing intensity. She nearly dropped the envelopes.

He took them from her. “What are these?” He’d felt the jolt too, but was trying to cover up.

Her face burned with uncertainty.

“I-I don’t know.” Her eyes fixed on his rugged face and square jaw, and she drew in a shaky breath. She knew it was wrong, but she’d never been this drawn to any man. Ever. She inhaled his spicy scent, and moisture pooled in all her secret places. If she didn’t get close to him this very minute—

He frowned down at the envelopes in his hand. “They look like unopened bills from last year.”

“Making them Walter’s problem, not yours.”

“They’re my problem if they come with the house.”

“You’d know it by now if they did.” She plucked them from him and tossed them back in the drawer. “Like you’re always telling me—relax.”

“Don’t be a smart ass.”

Suddenly feeling empowered, she smiled. “My ass is no smarter than yours.”

“Maybe not, but it’s a heck of a lot cuter.” He put his hand on it and squeezed.

She gasped in surprise. A sexual charge slid through her

He grinned. “Kiss me like you did in the foyer, beautiful.”

“Is that an order, deputy?” With a nervous laugh, she rose on her toes and pressed her mouth to his. He responded by kissing her back, his lips smooth and hungry.

Warmth spiraled through her along with a side of fear. Terrified she was doing the wrong thing, she pulled away.

Tucker wouldn't let her go. Instead, he wrapped his arms around her and kissed her again, this time sliding his tongue into her mouth, penetrating, stroking, caressing. The kiss went on and on.

She drew away, breathing hard. She couldn't speak.

He touched a finger to the corner of her mouth. "Where did you learn to kiss like that?"

"I-I don't know." Overwhelmed by a growing feeling of inadequacy, she tried to shrug it off, but Tucker bent his head and took her mouth again, sending sensuous shockwaves through to her womb.

Tremors racked her as she slid her hands up his hard chest, reveling in the feel of his steely muscles beneath his warm, satiny skin. He pressed his pulsing arousal against her belly, and her knees nearly buckled.

Ignoring the protests in her brain, her entire body became fluid and wanting. Her nipples ached for his touch.

"You're perfect," he whispered, gently cupping her breasts in both strong hands. He must have been reading her mind.

He rasped his thumbs over her taut nipples, and it was too much. She'd thought she was ready but—

She gasped and tried to fight free of his hold.

"Liv, relax. I won't hurt you," he murmured, kissing her neck, her cheek, her mouth.

She stiffened.

He dropped his arms and took her hands. "Come with me. Let me make you feel good."

"Tucker, I'm scared." She blinked back tears.

He tugged her toward the door. "I'll make your fears go away. I promise."

Wanting but afraid, she went along. He led her to her bedroom and drew her to the bed.

"Sit down," he said, urging her onto the edge of the mattress.

She sat down and fisted her hands in the quilt. She had been with men a few times, but it had always terrified her. After Walter, she didn't know if she'd ever be able to have a normal relationship with a man. And she certainly didn't want to disappoint Tucker. He would become disgusted with her, and that would break her heart.

“Lie down.”

“Tucker, we shouldn't do this,” she whispered, feeling as though someone might hear them. Hear *her*.

“Shhh.”

“But I'm not sure—I don't know how to—”

“I'll show you. Kiss me,” he said, leaning close.

She drew in his warm, spicy scent, and her insides quivered with desire. Then all at once his mouth was on hers, tasting, suckling, teasing. Lost in the moment, she kissed him back with all the passion she had stored up inside.

Tucker gently lowered her to the bed and stretched out on top of her, his sturdy weight pressing her into the mattress. His steely arousal nudged her thighs. It felt wonderful—*he* felt wonderful. But this was all wrong.

She couldn't do it. Not now. Not until Tucker knew the truth. And once he did—

Twisting her mouth free, she pressed her palms against his broad shoulders. “Stop, Tucker. Please!”

“What's the matter?” He asked, a dazed look on his face. His breath shot out in fevered gasps. “Did I hurt you? I didn't mean to. I only wanted to make you—”

“No.” Embarrassed, she looked away. “It's just that—I-I can't do this. Not now, maybe not ever. I'm sorry.”

“You started it.”

“I-I know I did.” Tears pooled in her eyes. She felt like an inexperienced teenager. That was Walter’s legacy for her. “I didn’t mean to encourage you like that. I just—couldn’t help it. I mean, I want you. But I just can’t—”

Unable to say any more, she turned her face away.

Still breathing hard, Tucker lowered his head. Seconds ticked by. Then he rolled off her and stared up at the cracked ceiling in silence.

She could feel the sexual tension radiating off him in waves. She wanted to reach out to him, to somehow apologize, but she didn’t know how without making things worse between them. Not without sharing a part of herself she wasn’t ready to impart.

His cell phone bleated, and they both jumped.

He muttered a curse.

“You’d better answer it,” she said, her body throbbing with unfulfilled passion. Looking at the hurt in his eyes tore her apart, but it was better this way. She didn’t know how to make love to a man, not even Tucker, who had been so kind to her. Now, she’d let him down.

Not meeting her eyes, he scowled. “All right.”

He yanked the phone from his pocket. “Hawkins.”

“Tucker, thank God I got you.” Charlie Barnes’s strident voice rang in his ear. “We need you downtown.”

“What’s the matter?” Tucker figured he had to be calling about another downed tree. “You can’t direct traffic?”

“Don’t make jokes. Your uncle’s house is on fire.”

“Harold’s place?”

“Yeah. Get down here as fast as you can.”

Muttering another strident oath, Tucker snapped the phone shut and looked at Olivia. “We’ll talk later. Harold’s house is on fire.”

“Oh, my God.” She put a hand over her mouth. “I’m coming with you.” She started to get up.

“No.” He caught her arm. “Stay here. I don’t know what I’m going to find downtown.”

Looking into his eyes, she nodded.

Tucker gave her a quick kiss, then he was gone.

Olivia felt a jolt of incredible sadness as she watched him trudge through the rain to his patrol car. She was nothing but a tease. Leading him on, making him think they were going to make love, then pulling away.

Regret tore through her, but despite it, she knew she had done the right thing. For herself, anyway.

An eerie orange glow bounced off the clouds over the center of town, and lightning crackled overhead. How strange that Harold’s house would burn during this downpour. Maybe lightning was the culprit.

She wrapped her arms around herself to ward off a sudden chill. Her gaze stayed on Tucker’s car until it disappeared around the bend. Resisting the urge to blow him a kiss goodbye, she started for the kitchen.

A loud thunk sounded in the direction of her bedroom.

She halted, and the hairs stood up on her arms. Her breathing quickened. Tucker’s backup pistol was on her nightstand. She had no weapon with her, no way to defend herself.

She swallowed hard, and slipped into the shadows beside the stairs. Relax, she told herself. That’s what Tucker would say. *Just relax.*

Another sharp thud rattled her nerves. Was it Walter?

The sour odor of sweat rolled over her, and bile surged up her throat. Choking it back, she gathered her nerve and tiptoed down the hallway, hoping to reach the kitchen and grab a butcher knife before he spotted her.

“Where’re you going, girlie?” Walter growled, his hulking form rising up to block her path. The blade of a knife glittered in his hand.

With a loud shriek, she turned and dashed back toward the foyer. Her pulse pounded in her ears. She lunged for the stairs, taking them two at a time as she plowed upwards, determined to escape his filthy grasp. Walter's footsteps echoed off the faded walls. He was breathing heavily, and his foul curses iced her blood.

She'd heard those words many times before, during the years when he had abused her. Funny how they didn't have the same effect on her now. It was as if Tucker had poured a protective covering over her, allowing Walter's ugliness to slide off without leaving a mark.

Her throat closed up when she thought of Tucker. How she wished he was here now, protecting her. Saving her from her own worst nightmare. Olivia reached the landing and sprinted for his room. Walter pounded up the steps behind her as thunder boomed outside.

She ran into Tucker's room and shut the door, slamming the lock home just as Walter grabbed the doorknob. He twisted it hard, but it held. He spewed a litany of gutter words, cursing her and everyone else in town.

Olivia's hands flew to her mouth. She ignored what he was saying and kept her eyes riveted to the door.

Walter kicked it, and she jumped. Oh God! Was he going to break it down?

She held her breath. She couldn't let him win.

He kicked the door again and again, until the ancient hinges creaked and the lock squealed like a rat in a trap.

Desperation crawled through her as she searched the sparsely-decorated room for a weapon. Anything. All she saw was Tucker's neatly-made bed, a beat up dresser, a matching chest-of-drawers, and a ragged striped chair. Throwing up a silent apology, she ransacked Tucker's dresser. She found socks and briefs, blue jeans and T-shirts. No gun.

She moved to the chest-of-drawers, where she discovered winter clothing and two sets of white sheets. There, buried beneath a stack of pillowcases, she found a small leather holster, but it was empty.

Walter cursed again. Another thud shook the door, and the wood splintered. Olivia's heart leapt into her throat. The putrid odor of sweat seeped in to clog her nostrils. She threw down the holster.

Another kick bowed the door inward. Hoping to buy time, Olivia scrambled for the tiny closet. She ducked inside and pulled the door shut behind her. The foul odor of Walter's sweat faded away and Tucker's enticing scent engulfed her. She drank it in.

Trying to even out her breathing, she edged back through his hanging uniform shirts and pressed her spine to the closet's rear wall. It gave beneath the pressure.

All at once she was falling, tumbling backwards into a yawning abyss filled with sticky cobwebs and hard wooden steps. The wall slid shut above her and a scream lodged in her throat. Her ear grazed a stair as she flipped head over heels into terrifying darkness. Stars burst behind her eyes, and everything went black.

I can't do this right now. Olivia's whispered words rang in Tucker's head as he rolled down the hill toward town. Yes, she'd made the first move, but he'd responded like a man starved for affection—which he was—and he had pushed her too far too fast. He wanted to kick himself.

She was terrified of intimacy, no doubt because of what Walter had done to her. Anger filled Tucker every time he thought about his uncle. The man was a pedophile, and if he was alive he needed to be treated as such.

His hands fisted tightly around the steering wheel, Tucker abruptly realized he'd already turned onto Main Street. He arrived in front of Harold's place just as a second fire truck raced up, its siren blaring. It was a volunteer unit from Bailey, a small town nearby.

His thoughts of sex faded as he stared in stunned silence at what had been Harold's rambling home. Only its charred brick walls and chimney still stood, their soot-covered façades testament to the

fact that only one fire truck could reach it in a hurry. Short tongues of flame lapped at remnants of the fallen roof.

The odor of smoke hung thick in the air despite the heavy rain. Tucker paused and eyed the churning clouds above the smoking ruin. Lightning glimmered beneath them like fiery lace, chilling his blood and adding to the morning's creepy feel.

Charlie stalked over to him. "About time you got here."

"What happened?"

"I don't know," Charlie said. "Could have been lightning. We still can't reach Harold."

"You haven't heard anything from the bulletin I posted?"

"Not a word."

Frustration ate at Tucker, and he dragged a hand through his hair. "When was the last time you talked to him?"

"The day Walter died."

"Before, or after he shot himself?" Tucker asked, suddenly curious. Charlie's body language showed he wanted to be anywhere else but here.

"That morning," Charlie snapped. "Why?"

"I need to talk with everyone who had contact with him in the days before he disappeared."

"I saw him at the post office. There's nothing more to tell, I can assure you."

"When was the last time you saw Walter?"

"About an hour later that same day," Charlie said, his expression growing thoughtful. "And if I remember correctly, he said Harold was coming by to see him that afternoon. I don't know why."

"I have reason to believe Harold may have been blackmailing Walter," Tucker said, watching the blood drain from Charlie's face. A spark of interest fired within him. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing."

"If there's something you're not telling me—"

Charlie shook his head and marched off toward the second fire truck. “We’ll talk later. I have to go.”

Tucker ground his teeth. Charlie was hiding something. He would bet his badge on it.

A loud pop rent the air, and the front wall of the house collapsed. Tucker raised his arm to shield his eyes as a surge of heat blasted over him. His uncle had built that house with his bare hands, back when he and Walter had practically run this town. What had gone wrong?

“Deputy!” a gravelly voice shouted. “Oh, deputy!”

Tucker turned and spotted Grady Sikes loping toward him, a bulbous red gas can clutched in his hand.

Grady waved it over his head. “I found this container outside my office next door. I didn’t put it there.”

“Why’d you pick it up?” Tucker asked, irked that the mayor might have destroyed evidence.

The mayor shrugged. “I wanted you to see it.”

“Put it down.”

Eyeing Tucker with distrust, the mayor obeyed. “You don’t think *I* started this fire, do you?” He stuck out his chin.

“I don’t think anything yet.” Tucker pulled out his cell phone. “I’ll contact ATF and let them make the call.”

“Wasn’t me,” Grady growled, nudging the can with his foot. “Someone was trying to frame me by leaving this at my door.”

“Could be,” Tucker said, hurriedly dialing county dispatch. The first name that jumped into his head regarding the fire was Walter. If his uncle had killed Harold—his own brother—maybe he had torched the house to destroy evidence. But if so, why now?

Worry creased Tucker’s brow as he waited for dispatch to connect him with the ATF Field Office in Jackson.

All at once, it hit him. Walter had set Harold’s house on fire to get Tucker out of the house.

Dust clogged Olivia's throat, choking her. She blinked, but saw only darkness. Her forehead throbbed. She tried to sit up, but dizziness swept over her and she clutched at her spinning head.

Fear speared her heart. She was trapped alone in another small dark space. Only now, thank God, she smelled only stale air and mold, not Walter's nauseating stench.

If only Tucker were with her. The thought became a mantra inside her head. She pictured his tender smile, the intriguing crinkles at the corners of his eyes, felt his gentle touch. A knot formed in her belly. He was her savior, her protector. The first man who'd ever come close to learning her horrible secret—and still, he wanted her.

Resolve grew within her. She wouldn't die here all alone, like some helpless child. She would fight to the death in order to defeat Walter.

She cautiously put out her hands and explored the uneven surface beneath her, discovering she was lying cattycornered on a flight of stairs. Gingerly she sat up and rubbed her aching forehead. She'd hit the same place she'd injured the night Tucker had frightened her.

Shaking off another bout of dizziness, she put her hand on the wall and rose on trembling legs. She had no idea where she was on the staircase, if she was nearer the bottom or the top. But she knew she had to go down, away from Walter.

She stood still and listened, but heard nothing except distant thunder. The space was so dark. Terror washed over her. She had to get out.

Using the wall for balance, she felt her way down the steps slowly, tripping once but catching herself before she tumbled ass over teakettle again. Her breathing grew strained as she drew in more dust. She coughed as quietly as possible.

The stairs seemed to go on and on and the air gradually grew cooler, making her wonder if she was going below ground. Abruptly, the steps ended and Olivia found herself on a solid dirt floor.

The passage narrowed and her head brushed the low ceiling. She reached up and felt smooth wooden beams. Something crawled over her hand. Her heart thumping, she flung it away. A shiver rolled down her spine. Who knew what kinds of creatures might live in this dark place?

Her stomach roiled. Light. She desperately needed light. The darkness pressed down on her, reminding her of all the times Walter had locked her away. Her pulse skittered.

All of a sudden, she hit a wall. Literally. Her elbow stung from the impact, but she welcomed the pain. Her hands flew over the jagged concrete until she found an indentation containing a tiny lever. Sending up a swift prayer that it would work, she gulped in a fortifying breath and pushed it down. A narrow door popped open in front of her.

She started to step through it, but found her way blocked by rows and rows of glass jars filled with old vegetables. Her breath caught. She had found a secret passage to the root cellar.

Sliding along the wall, she was able to squeeze behind the jars and stumble for the steps. Light leaked around the edges of the trap door, giving her enough illumination to climb out.

She shoved the door open and burst through the opening. After the overwhelming darkness, the tiny pantry seemed airy and light. She sat down on the floor and drew in a long, shaky breath.

Several minutes passed, and she heard nothing. Where had Walter gone? She rose on shaky legs and peeked into the kitchen. It was empty.

She grabbed a butcher knife from the block on the counter and tiptoed down the hall. Once she reached the bedroom, she shut the door and grabbed Tucker's pistol. The lock was broken, so she shoved the dresser in front of the door. Lightning flickered at the window, briefly stunning her eyes. She suddenly smelled the rank odor of sweat and molded hay. Not again, not here. The hairs on her nape rose. Squeezing the pistol's black grip, she grew nauseous.

"Surely you didn't think you could escape from me that easily," Walter said, his vicious rasp curdling the blood in her veins. "Nice touch with the dresser."

Olivia raised her weapon. Her eyes scanned the darkness until she spotted her stepfather standing spraddle-legged in front of the closet, a ravenous gleam in his bloodshot eyes. There was a dark stain on his white sleeve. His sick laughter chilled her to the bone.

“I knew that if I waited long enough, you’d be back.” Walter raised his knife and advanced toward her. A floorboard creaked beneath his booted foot. “Come to daddy.”

“No!” She said, backing away. He had to have hidden in the closet. She should have checked. Should have done something to keep him away. But what?

Fear curdled in her stomach. Her palms grew sweaty, and the pistol nearly slipped from her grasp. She tried to focus on her stepfather’s gleaming weapon.

Her body quivered. “Why are you trying to kill me? What did I ever do to you?”

“You know what you did, girlie” he growled, the gravelly sound grating on her nerves. Venom hardened his gaze. “You killed my sweet little Emily.”

“That was an accident,” Olivia said, searching frantically for an escape route. She had to keep him talking. As long as she could keep his attention on Emily, she would be safe. She swallowed. “We were just kids.”

“She fell into that damned well because of you.”

“She was trying to help me.” Olivia’s heart thudded. “You remember how much she liked to water the horses. She’d rub their noses and give them apples and—”

“Shut up!” Walter shouted. He closed his eyes and put his hands over his ears. “Stop talking about her! She was my baby. She was my little girl, and you killed her.”

“It was unfortunate, but no one’s to blame.” Her legs shaking, Olivia moved stealthily backward toward the door. “She lost her balance.”

“You pushed her.”

“I did not.” Fury rose inside her. Guilt had weighed her down ever since that horrible day, but after years of therapy she’d come to realize she wasn’t responsible for her sister’s death. “I didn’t touch her. I was in the barn combing Rocky. Emily lost her balance and fell. It was an accident.”

“It was all your fault!” Walter shouted, stalking toward her. His eyes glinted with wild lights, and his knife gleamed like polished coins. “You were twelve. She was just a baby. You knew better.”

“She wanted to help me.” Olivia eased backward another step and tightened her grip on pistol. Her hip met the dresser. She gulped back the urge to move quickly.

“No matter what you do to me, you can’t bring her back,” she said. “But then, you know that. Don’t you?”

“All I know is that you murdered my little girl.” Leading with his knife, he lunged at her.

Olivia emitted a strangled cry, raised her weapon, and squeezed the trigger. The resultant pop echoed off the plaster walls. Walter grunted. His knees hit the dresser and his knife bit into the back of the door. She spun away from him and fired again, the bullet barely missing his ear.

Walter shouted a profanity and stumbled backwards, leaving his knife quivering in the door.

Olivia whirled and yanked it free. Her heart pounding, she scrambled to the end of the dresser and shoved it away from the door. It squawked against the floor.

“Go ahead and run again, girlie,” Walter roared, staggering to his feet. “You won’t get far.”

“Just wait and see how far I get,” she said, firing wildly at his legs.

He gave a muffled shout and grabbed his knee.

Terror propelled Olivia forward as she ripped open the door and bolted for the kitchen. Lightning flared, its stark white light illuminating her path. If she could only get back to the root cellar, she could latch the trap door.

Thunder crashed, jarring the house. Rain lashed the board over the window. Olivia sprinted toward the pantry.

A creak sounded in the hall just as she reached the door, and she whirled. *Walter*. She’d thought she’d hit him with that last shot, but maybe not.

She had to get to safety.

Her muscles protesting, she lifted the trap door. Cool, moist air flowed over her, along with a heady dose of relief. How ironic. She was counting on one of the places she feared most to keep her safe.

Once inside, she knelt on the steps just beneath the locked trap door, listening intently. The storm continued to rage outside, and the old house groaned. But she heard nothing else.

Olivia's breathing gradually slowed. She sank down on the steps and swept her feeble flashlight beam over the rows of rancid vegetables, dirt, and Bobilu. With any luck, Walter didn't know about the secret passageway into the cellar.

She wiped her face on her sleeve. Despite being relatively safe, she still saw Walter in her mind's eye, taunting her from the trap door. A shudder rolled through her.

Thunder boomed again, this time so loud the noise penetrated below ground. A sharp thud resonated above, and fear rose within Olivia. Feeling as though she might hyperventilate, she forced herself to breathe slowly and evenly. Stay calm, she told herself. Relax, like Tucker said.

"Olivia!"

At first, she thought she had imagined it. But her ears perked up, and she held her breath.

"Olivia!" Tucker's voice carried a frightened edge. "Where are you?"

Energized, she clambered up the steps to the trap door. Her fingers fumbled with the lock.

"Here I am!" She shouted, hoping he could hear her. "Tucker! In here."

All at once the door was yanked wide, and his hands were reaching for her. He hauled her up the steps into the pantry and wrapped her in his strong arms.

"Are you okay?" He asked, his hands running down her body. She seemed all right. The terror that had fueled his mad dash to the house began to abate. "Olivia? Talk to me, please."

"I-I'm fine," she said, clutching at his waist like he was her lifeline. "Now that you're here. Walter had me. I-I shot him again. At least, I think I did."

"He's worse than a cat with all those lives." Relief spread through Tucker and he kissed her soundly. "I'm just glad you weren't hurt."

“Not this time.” She shivered.

Tucker frowned. “What do you mean?”

“He’ll be back,” she said, her voice so soft he could barely hear her. “He wants to kill me.”

“I won’t let him,” Tucker vowed. He caught her hands and led her into the kitchen. “Sit down. Let me get you some water.”

Her face paper white, Olivia obeyed.

Tucker hated seeing her like this. Somehow, someday—he would protect her. No matter what it took.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A shiver cascading over her skin, Olivia took the glass of water from Tucker and took a comforting sip. The cool liquid soothed her parched throat.

He sat down beside her.

She put the glass on the table. “What about the fire?”

“Harold’s house is a total loss.”

“I’m sorry.”

“If I had to guess, I’d say Walter started that blaze to get me out of the house.”

Olivia’s eyes widened. “Oh my God. That means—”

“He wanted you left alone so he could kill you.”

“He almost succeeded.” All at once, it dawned on her that Tucker finally believed her. Warmth flooded through her. “Thank you.”

“I have no choice but to believe you. The timing of the fire can’t possibly be a coincidence.”

“I wonder—” he began, picking up Walter’s journal from the table.

She watched him skim through the cryptic book. “Walter may have had his hands that—the other day, when I found the turkey feather in its place.”

“The entries don’t seem to be altered, and there are no pages torn out.”

“I didn’t say he changed anything. Only that he had the opportunity.”

“Well, if he did delete some entries, he missed this one,” Tucker said, holding up the book and tapping a page near the back. He met her eyes. “And it’s one he would have definitely wanted gone.”

“What do you mean by that?” She rose and peered over his shoulder.

Tucker underlined Walter’s words with his finger as he read them aloud, “The body’s in the root cellar. Nobody, not C., J., H., or R. knows that. Just me. It’s my little insurance policy. One word from me to my friends at the Highway Patrol, and they’ll all go down for the crime.”

“Oh, my God,” Olivia said, grabbing the book from him. Sure enough, Tucker had quoted it correctly. She gaped at him. “There’s a body in the root cellar? Where?”

“Good question.” Tucker put down the book and folded his hands behind his head. “That’s probably what the mayor was looking for the day he disappeared.”

“Well, I guess so.” Someone else had died in this cursed house, besides the man everyone thought was Walter. And her stepfather had killed both of them. Nausea swirled in Olivia’s stomach.

“I hate this place,” she mumbled, swallowing hard against the bile rising up into her mouth.

Tucker leapt up and caught her arm. “You don’t look so good. Are you okay?”

“I’m f-fine,” she said, the words catching in her throat. Probably because she was definitely *not* fine. Her legs wobbled, and she plopped back down into her chair. He handed her glass of water.

She wrapped both hands around it.

He stared down at her with concern. “Maybe I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“No. You did the right thing,” she said, suddenly remembering the odd message she’d found in Walter’s papers just before he’d appeared in her room. She sat up very straight. “I think Harold might have been blackmailing Walter.”

Tucker frowned. “Why do you say that?”

“I found a note in Walter’s study.” Happy she had on the same jeans, she pulled the scrap of paper from her pocket. Her worried gaze took in the lines scrawled in blood red ink:

Fun time is over, my friend. Move out of the house and get the money we talked about in unmarked, laundered bills, or I’ll tell them everything. And I mean EVERYTHING. H.

That curious, tickly feeling spread over her as she handed it to Tucker. Unnerved, she rubbed her arms.

Tucker cursed. “This does sound like blackmail. What was Harold thinking?”

“We have to find that body,” Olivia said, although the prospect renewed her nausea. She gnawed her lip. “The man deserves a decent burial.”

“We can’t bury anyone until we’ve contacted state law enforcement.”

“Why do we have to do that?” she asked. “You’re a deputy sheriff.”

“Harold is my boss—and my uncle. I can’t risk any improprieties.” Tucker began to pace. “I’ll call the Mississippi Bureau of Investigation. They’ll help us.”

“Have you talked to Harold?”

“No.” Tucker said. “I couldn’t get him on the phone, so I filled out a missing person’s report. My next step is to interview his friends and try to track his movements.”

“You don’t think—”

“I’m not making any speculations until I check his house.” Tucker retrieved the flashlight and turned those warm chocolate eyes on her. “But first, we should look for the body.”

She released a pent up breath. “Do you think it’s the railroad man from the journal?”

“Probably.” Tucker turned on the flashlight. It still worked, but its beam was growing weak.

Worried it would go out, Olivia spotted a lantern on a pantry shelf and grabbed it. She showed it to Tucker. “Should we take this?”

“Good idea.” He dug some matches from a drawer and lit the contraption’s frail wick. It burned so brightly it hurt Olivia’s eyes.

She grabbed a screwdriver from the drawer just in case, and opened the trap door.

Tucker pulled out his pistol, took the lantern, and started down the steps.

Following him, Olivia felt the blood drain from her face. Would they find the body in this terrifying space? Or did Walter’s cryptic journal simply chronicle the musings of a very troubled mind?

Tucker halted at the bottom of the stairs and held the lantern high as he scanned the dirt floor, the walls, and the cellar’s meager contents.

Clammy air funneled over Olivia’s skin. The only bodies she saw were wrapped in frilly spider webs, their unfortunate carcasses drained of vital fluids.

Tucker shoved the pistol in his waistband and turned to her. “Got a shovel?”

“In the barn,” she said, gulping as she pictured those narrow stalls. Walter had locked her in there, making her do unspeakable things. “I’ll go get it if you want me to.”

“No.” Tucker touched her arm. “If I need it, I’ll go.”

“Thank you,” she said, grateful he understood.

He put down the lantern and walked over to the wall to their right. Careful to dodge Bobilu, he ran his hand along the cinderblocks as high as he could reach, at chest level, and just below his knee. He frowned.

“What are you looking for?”

“A way out of this place.”

“When Walter was after me today, I found a secret passage.” How could she have forgotten? She crossed to the rows of glass jars and carefully slipped behind them. “Back here.”

“I’ll be damned.” Tucker said, watching her tug open the narrow door. “Where does it go?”

“A flight of stairs leads to the closet in your room.”

“I had no idea.”

“Neither did I.” If she had she would have made use of it years ago. Regret filtered through her. She’d been so young then, and so frightened. No wonder she hadn’t discovered the door. Or perhaps it had been installed after she had left home.

“There might be another passage leading to the outside.” Tucker moved to the rear wall. His body cast an eerie shadow as he ran his hands along the cinderblocks at chest level. All at once he halted and muttered something under his breath.

“What is it?” She asked, intrigued by his intensity.

“I’m not sure.” He put his fingers on one of the vertical ridge’s between the blocks. A look of awe spread over his face. “I think this is another one.”

The seam arched toward the ceiling and intersected with another seam. She frowned as Tucker traced that one to a third. Her heart rate quickened. He was right. It was another door.

Tucker moved the lantern closer and put his hands back on the wall.

“Could the body be back there?” Olivia asked, a shaft of fear stabbing through her. “It wasn’t in the other passage.”

“Maybe.” He slid his fingers into a chink in the concrete and pulled a small lever. The door swung open, revealing a dank, narrow tunnel smelling of dirt.

Olivia gasped. “How long has this one been here?”

“Probably since the house was built.” Tucker lifted the lantern and illuminated the tunnel’s narrow entrance. “Walter’s grandfather was an escaped convict. Neither passage surprises me.”

“Maybe they were his route to freedom, in case the law caught up to him.” Olivia leaned into the narrow opening, and imagined hurrying along the passage in an effort to escape. A shiver rolled over her and she wrapped her arms around herself. “I wouldn’t want to be trapped in either one of them. I don’t like enclosed spaces. Especially dark ones.”

Someone banged on the front door above them, and fear streaked through Olivia. She snapped her mouth shut and looked at Tucker, who pressed a finger to his lips.

“Who could that be?” She whispered. Eyeing the open trap door, she fought to gather her courage.

He put down the lantern. “I’ll go see.”

“No!” Fear skittered through her. She wasn’t staying in the cellar alone. “Let me.”

“We should both go,” he said, putting his hand on her arm.

She shook her head. “I can handle it. You check the tunnel.”

His gaze flicked to its dark entrance. “All right. Shout if you need me.”

Relieved, Olivia put the screwdriver on the steps and hurried through the kitchen to the foyer. An imposing shape blocked the front door’s glass oval. Her pulse raced. She pulled it open, and was surprised to see Mayor Grady Sikes standing on the mat. Thunder rumbled overhead.

“Hello, Mayor,” Olivia said. “May I help you?”

“I’m looking for Tucker,” he said. “And don’t tell me he’s not here, because I just saw him downtown a little while ago, and his cruiser is parked right out front.”

“Now is not a good time.” She couldn’t let the mayor inside while she and Tucker were looking for that body. She edged forward so she blocked the door. “Tucker’s busy.”

“Busy, my ass,” he snarled. “You’re just being difficult because you want this damned house. Walter told me you were a hardheaded little witch.”

“Don’t you dare bring my stepfather into this,” she snapped, her blood running cold at hearing Walter’s name. She put her hand on the door. “May I give Tucker a message?”

“Tell him I remembered something else about Harold I thought he should know. Might help in his investigation. Now with the fire and all—”

“What is it?” Suddenly interested, Olivia tilted her head toward the offensive man.

The mayor hooked his thumbs in his belt loops. “Harold visited Walter the day he died.”

“Why is that unusual? They were brothers.”

“Because they had a falling out. I don’t know the details.” Grady lurched off the porch. “Don’t worry. I’ll track down Tucker on the job tonight to talk to him about the fire. It’s origin was suspicious, you know.”

She nodded.

The mayor halted. “You tell Tucker he should watch his back. You never know when the tide might turn.”

“What do you mean by that?” She asked, her stomach lurching. That had sounded very much like a threat. Sweat beaded on Olivia’s brow.

The mayor didn’t answer. Instead, he merely lifted his hands and marched off toward his truck.

Anxiety grew inside Olivia as she watched him climb inside the cab of his truck next to his dog, Barney, and drive away. The mutt stuck his head out the window.

Eager to tell Tucker about the mayor’s mysterious message, Olivia dashed back to the root cellar. Tucker had disappeared. Apprehension prickled her spine.

She edged into the tunnel. “Tucker?”

“In here.” His voice echoed as he loped toward her, the lantern held high. His eyes glittered with excitement. “It leads to a storm shelter built into the hill.”

His words sent her staggering away from the opening. She’d forgotten about the storm shelter. It had been one of Walter’s favorite cells. She began to shake. “That place—I hate it.”

His face darkening, Tucker lowered the lantern. “I didn’t mean to upset you.”

“You didn’t. It’s just that—Walter wasn’t a nice man.” She flinched from the memory of the first time he’d locked her in there. “I had no idea either of these passageways existed. If I had only known—” her voice cracked. Unable to face Tucker with the truth, she abruptly turned away.

He caught her shoulder and forced her to face him. “What would have happened had you known?”

“Nothing.” She looked at the floor. She couldn’t let him learn the whole truth. Walter was his uncle. He might not believe her. Even if he did, would he blame her? Or worse, be disgusted by her? One thing she knew for sure, once he knew, he would no longer be her friend. “Just forget about it, okay? Let’s keep looking for the body.”

“Let me guess.” Those intense mocha eyes searched her soul. “You could have used them to escape. Walter used to lock you up in here, didn’t he? And in the storm shelter, too.”

“No.” She lied, jerking away. How could he know that?

He stepped close to her. “He used the crawl space too, didn’t he? That’s why you’re so afraid of this house.”

Recalling the hours of agony she’d spent locked alone inside those clammy cells, she clenched her teeth. Tears gathered in her eyes. Suddenly furious, she dashed them away.

“Olivia, you can talk to me.” The lantern light gave Tucker’s rugged face an eerie glow. He touched her arm.

She forced a tight smile. “Maybe later. For now, tell me more about the house. Please, Tucker. I need a distraction, not more questions.”

He studied her for a long moment, as if trying to decide whether or not to push her. He must have decided against it, because he finally said, “Moonshiners owned this place before Walter. They might have dug the tunnel and put in that hidden stairwell.”

“That makes sense.” Imagining midnight clandestine meetings, killings, and sales of illegal booze, she shook off a fresh chill. “The tunnel is also the perfect spot to hide a body.”

“So is the cellar.” He motioned toward the stairs. “Who was at the door?”

“Grady Sikes, looking for you.” She folded her arms. Tucker’s questions had made her forget the mayor’s visit. “He said Harold visited Walter the day Walter died—and that they had apparently had a falling out.”

“I’m not surprised. They never were that close.” Tucker’s face drew into a taut frown. “What else did he say?”

“That you should watch your back.”

“A threat. I should have known.” Lifting the lantern, Tucker peered around him. “He’s angry because I’m letting you stay here.”

Olivia tightened her fists as shadows darted around her like the rats and bugs she had endured when Walter locked her up. She kept her eyes on Tucker’s face as his sharp gaze settled on something behind her.

“I’ll be damned.” He grasped her upper arm and pulled her to his side.

“What is it?” Her heart hammered as he guided her across the dingy room. A rusted metal drum filled the dead space behind the steps.

“I can’t believe I missed this,” he muttered. “It’s the perfect hiding place.”

He lowered the lantern toward their feet. “Mud.”

She stepped back. The ground around the barrel was slick with it.

Footprints marred the area. Olivia went cold. She pointed. “Tucker, those aren’t my footprints, and I don’t think they’re yours”

He looked at her. “Bet it was the mayor.”

“They know,” Olivia said.

He nodded. “The barrel’s rusted at the bottom. If there’s a body in there—”

Feeling his revulsion, she quaked at the realization that Walter, the man who had abused her for seven long years, might have murdered two people. He could just as easily have killed her and stuffed her into that container.

“Watch out,” she said, her gaze glued to the barrel’s rusty lid. She’d never noticed the drum before, probably because it had been hidden so deeply in the shadows.

Tucker set down the lantern and tugged on the lid, but it wouldn’t budge. Sweat popped out on his neck.

As he stared down at the container, anger filled him. How could Walter and Harold, along with their accomplices, have committed murder? Even if ICC had recommended closing the line, there were legal channels they could have followed. Documenting the track’s usefulness, requesting state intervention. Challenging the study in court. Tucker gritted his teeth. They hadn’t needed to kill.

His body taut, he turned to Olivia. “Got the screwdriver?”

She picked it up off the steps and handed it to him without a word. Her face had been pale. Now it was flushed with—what? Curiosity? Dread? An awareness of the inevitable?

“Thanks.” He kissed her cheek. Her skin was frigid.

She gestured toward the container. “Open it.”

“Okay. Here goes.” He slipped the screwdriver beneath the lid’s rusted edge and carefully pried up the top. Then he tossed down the tool and gripped the lid with both hands.

“Stand back,” he said.

Olivia did, and he felt tension radiating from her. She was on fight or flight status. He didn’t blame her.

He sucked in a deep breath and lifted the lid. A strong acidic odor enveloped him, and a pair of vacant eye sockets stared up at him, the mouth beneath them frozen in a permanent scream. The doubled-up skeleton looked like it was trying to climb from the barrel.

“Sweet heaven,” Tucker whispered, a chill settling over him. He dropped the lid, and it clattered to the ground.

“There’s a hole in his skull.” Olivia’s voice quivered. “Walter shot him.”

“A year ago, at least, if the journal is correct.”

“He murdered two people.”

“We don’t know that.” Tucker pinned her with a hard stare. She truly believed the bastard still breathed, and that he’d killed whoever was in his grave. “He’s probably rotting in hell right now.”

“No.” She backed away. “He’s alive.”

Tucker clamped his teeth to keep from arguing with her. It wouldn’t do any good.

“You have to understand. He’s capable of anything,” Olivia said, her face stricken. “Even faking his own death.”

“If we take that journal at face value, he definitely killed this poor sucker.” Tucker picked up the lid and set it on the barrel, but he didn’t fasten it down.

Olivia fought back a surge of despair. “This place is such a nightmare.”

“Relax,” he said softly, dropping his gaze to her mouth. He longed to take away her fear and replace it with hope. If only she would let him. “You’re not alone any more.”

She put her hand on his arm, and a look of trust filled her eyes. “Thank you.”

His body tightened in response. Now was not the time for sex, but he could hold her and lend her his strength, if only momentarily.

He reached for her, and she slipped readily into his embrace. She smelled of spring flowers and rain. So different from the musty dampness of the cellar.

She was in danger here in this house, and he had to find a way to keep her safe.

He ran over the scenario in his brain. Harold, Walter, and Grady Sikes were in league with one another, which wasn’t surprising, considering they had once been hunting buddies. Only now, their prey had changed. If they had murdered the fellow in the barrel and the unfortunate soul lying dead in

Walter's grave—provided Walter was indeed alive—then they had to pay. And before anything happened to Olivia.

Tucker tightened his hold on her. He would protect her with his life.

CHAPTER TWELVE

“We have to move the body.” Olivia’s words echoed off the kitchen walls to give Tucker a chill. “Before the mayor and his pals come back looking for it. And you know they will, since they know it exists.”

“We can’t do that,” he said. “It’s evidence in a murder case.”

“We either move it, or the mayor gets his hands on it.” She rubbed her arms. “Do you want that to happen?”

“Of course not.” Tucker had always prided himself on going the extra mile to preserve crime scenes. If they moved the skeleton, important evidence could be destroyed. But in this case— “The container is rusted. With all that dampness down there, it’s not in very good shape.”

“I was thinking the same thing.” Olivia pressed her fingertips to her temples. “Please, Tucker— let’s move it. I’d sleep much better if that body was out of the house.”

Thunder boomed, and she jumped.

Tucker felt her fear like a fist to the gut. Edging closer, he studied her taut face. Terror rounded her irises, tiny worry lines fanned out from the corners of her eyes, and dark circles underscored them. Anxiety was her constant companion, and knowing there was a skeleton in the house would only make that worse.

“All right,” Tucker said, giving in when every cop instinct he possessed screamed that he shouldn’t. “I’ll do it for you.”

He turned away. Damn. He was in even deeper than he thought if he’d compromise an investigation for her. He set his jaw and looked at her. “We’re the only ones beside the mayor and his pals who know the body exists, so if the barrel will stay together long enough—”

“I can’t ask you to do something you believe is wrong.”

“I said I’d do it. Besides, it’ll keep Grady from stealing it right away. He’ll have to launch another search if he wants to get it.”

“Thank you,” Olivia whispered, lightning revealing a sparkle of gratitude in her eyes.

A knot rose in Tucker’s throat, and he drew his knuckles along her jaw. She was so beautiful.

Olivia trembled at his touch. No one had ever loved her unconditionally, or seen her in a heroic light. Her years of mistreatment and abuse at the hand of her stepfather had left her feeling inadequate and insecure. It occurred to her that she’d never really believed in her own strength. Until she’d met Tucker. He seemed to know her, inside and out—although she’d never shared her innermost pain. A yearning to unburden herself to him filled her heart. She longed to tell him everything, but now wasn’t the time.

She raised her fingers to his beard-shadowed cheek. “You remind me of the way we used to be, when we were kids.”

“I wish you’d trust me that much now,” he said, slipping his arms around her. “Maybe one day—”

“I don’t know if I can.” Filled with a surge of longing, she met his eyes. “But I’ll try.”

“That’s all I ask.” His lips quirking up, Tucker lowered his head and captured her lips in a kiss that was at once feather-light and soul deep.

Her senses overwhelmed, Olivia pushed against his rock hard chest. She wanted to stay safe, to remain sealed in his warm cocoon of isolation. Only, he wouldn’t let her. His arms pulled her tight against him, until she couldn’t breathe. Couldn’t think. All she knew was the incredible heat of his hard body.

She’d never felt so treasured and so loved. They’d only been back together a few days, but it seemed a lifetime ago that she’d been alone and terrified. With Tucker around, the frightening pictures of Walter in her head faded away and she was left with blank photo paper waiting to be filled with snapshots of the future. A future with Tucker?

He smiled down at her, his dark eyes gleaming with banked passion.

Shaking off the seductive image of the two of them growing old together, she gulped in a steadying breath. “Well, I guess we’d better do this.”

He smiled and stroked his finger down her cheek. “One more kiss?”

“I’d like that.” Dazed from his touch, she would have agreed to anything.

He kissed her softly, then backed away. “I want to know why they did it.”

“You mean why they killed him?” Olivia struggled to get her thoughts in order. What was he talking about? Her mind was a jumble of erotic images, all involving Tucker.

A fresh chill washed over her, and she hugged herself tightly. “Me, too. If Walter’s behind it, it’s got to be for selfish reasons.”

“Maybe he wanted to help preserve town.”

“Only if he had something personal to gain from it.” Missing Tucker’s warmth, she hugged herself. “No matter the reason, I’m sure he enjoyed the killing.”

Tucker stared at her for a long, disconcerting moment before turning away and heading for the pantry.

Olivia followed reluctantly. She hated going back into that dank cellar. “Where will we put the body so they won’t find it?”

“In the barn.”

“Whoa.” Terror streaked through her, and she halted. “I can’t go in there. The sight of that place, the smells—”

“You don’t have to worry,” he said, pulling open the trap door. “I’ll be with you.”

“No offense, Tucker, but I’m not sure even you can banish the odors and the memories locked in there.” Olivia took several slow, even breaths, and tried not to hyperventilate.

“What did Walter do to you?” Tucker looked at her oddly, his brow furrowed.

She shook her head. “Not now, Tucker. Please. Let’s just move the body.”

A dark shadow crossed his face, the shadow of anger. She knew it wasn’t really directed at her, but it frightened her anyway. It occurred to her that Tucker was a force to be reckoned with. With him

at her side, maybe she would be all right. Yet the thought of entering that hated space made her heart gallop.

She hadn't been inside the barn since the last time Walter had grabbed her all those years ago—on her graduation day. She'd been seventeen and had threatened him with a pitchfork—the first time she'd had the nerve to fight back. That pitchfork had saved her life.

That was also the last time he'd ever touched her, because the next day she'd run as far and as fast as she could, putting Strong Springs so far behind her that she even made up another hometown to share with her newfound college friends. Friends who had no idea of the pain she had endured.

Her heart in her throat, she followed Tucker and helped him wrestle the bulky barrel up the steps and into the kitchen. The container left a dark rust stain on the worn linoleum. Lightning flickered and thunder rumbled, signaling the approach of yet another storm.

The barrel sat in front of the sink like a bomb ready to go off.

A shaft of panic slid through Olivia.

"Ready?" Tucker walked over and put his hands on her shoulders. "Help me get it off the stoop, then I'll roll it to the barn. You don't have to go inside."

"No. I want to help." She kissed his cheek gently, and wiped her palms on her jeans.

"You are one brave woman," he said, his mouth quirking up.

Her face grew warm. "Only because you're with me."

Fresh determination rippled through her. She could do this, with Tucker's help.

Ignoring the rain, they slid the metal barrel out the door and off the stoop. The weight inside rattled when Tucker eased it onto its side, and Olivia almost lost her grip. A grisly picture rose before her vision.

"Oh, God! What if the barrel comes apart?" Her blood chilled as she imagined white, shiny bones clattering onto the wet grass.

Tucker sent her a wry look. "We'll just stuff him back inside."

“Piece by piece? B-bone—by bone?” With a shudder, she wiped the moisture from her face.

“No, thanks.”

“Come on, Liv,” Tucker said, putting his hands on the barrel. Lightning accentuated his grim face. “Stop thinking about it—and let’s roll.”

Olivia positioned herself beside him. The drum made a rumbling noise as it jolted over the uneven ground. Thunder crashed overhead a fitting accompaniment for rolling a barrel of bones to the barn. How macabre.

As they moved closer, she drew in the fetid odors of rotting hay and old cow manure. Smells she associated with Walter’s hellish dungeon. The barn rose up in front of her as if daring her to step inside.

“Wait.” She struggled to catch her breath.

Tucker touched her arm. “I won’t make you go in there.”

“I have to,” she said. She needed to face her demons, to put the past to rest and get on with her life. Tucker, or no Tucker. She squared her shoulders. “Open the door.”

He did, and the ominous darkness repelled her. She couldn’t banish Walter’s image. But she forced herself to keep her eyes wide open and to focus.

Tucker squeezed her arm reassuringly.

She gave him a smile she didn’t feel. Then she bent and put her hands on the barrel. “Help me.”

She and Tucker rolled the barrel into the barn’s dank coolness and halted just inside the door.

Olivia took in the dilapidated walls, the hard-packed dirt floor. The dreaded stalls. Their yawning doors mocked her.

Refusing to let Walter win, she walked into the first one. The stall Walter had favored most. There on top of a knot of faded straw, its lime green eyes faded to a pale yellow, sat the stuffed pink kitten her mother had given her on her twelfth birthday. That kitten had been the security blanket she’d carried with her everywhere, including into hell with Walter.

She picked it up, and the fragile wrapping around her heart ripped open. A flood of frightening memories, crushing in their intensity, poured through her. She recalled Walter's dirty, callused hands, the stinging bite of his leather strap, the sickening odor of moldy straw.

Hugging the kitten to her chest, she turned to Tucker, who stood tall and straight in the muted light. He made her feel strong. Like she could overcome any obstacle and vanquish any foe—even Walter, and her sordid past.

Sensing her distress, he stepped inside the stall and drew her into his arms. His lips claimed hers in a fiery kiss. Olivia dropped the kitten and wrapped her arms around him. Her vile past dimmed to a pinprick of pain.

Desire, hot and untamed, rushed in to fill the void in her soul. Dampness gathered at the base of her spine and pooled in her most secret places. Her nerve endings tingled. She let herself sink into an insulated shell filled with warmth and hunger, passion and raw need. Tucker's hands slid slowly down her body, molding and caressing. Generating blazing heat. She moaned.

Her thoughts slid over her sad, lonely life, and she realized this was the first time she'd ever kissed a man with such abandon. The first time she'd ever been mesmerized by a touch, had craved sex like a drug. It was too much for her battered emotions.

She pushed away from him. She couldn't do this. She didn't know how. She gasped, "Tucker, I can't—"

"Did I hurt you?" He peered down at her, a dazed look on his flushed face. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean—"

"No." She stumbled backwards, and he caught her arms. Her cheeks burned. How could she tell him she would be nothing but a disappointment as a lover—thanks to Walter? That she had no idea how to please a man? Sure, she'd had sex in college, but it had been unsatisfying and had meant nothing. She'd simply wanted to fit in—to prove to herself that she was normal, if there was such a thing. She trembled. "I don't have much experience with men."

“It’s okay. It’s me, remember? It’s Tucker.” Murmuring more soothing words, he wrapped her in his strong arms and pulled her close. “I won’t hurt you.”

“You don’t understand. I don’t know what to do. And this place—” Thunder boomed outside, stressing her dismay. She drew in his musky, masculine scent and fought to cage her painful memories. “My worst nightmares happened here.”

Tucker’s body went rigid. “Tell me.”

“No.” Tears shimmered in her eyes. “You’ll hate me.”

“I could never hate you.”

“You might when you learn what Walter did to me.” Her voice cracked, and she looked away. The idea of sharing her secret with Tucker terrified her. Yet she knew she had to do it before anything more happened between them. He deserved to know the truth. “He used to hit me.”

“That son of a bitch,” Tucker muttered, anger firing in his eyes. He clenched his hands.

Waving for him to be quiet, she swallowed hard and met his tortured gaze. “That’s not all. H-he touched me. It went on for years, until I finally was old enough to fight back and left town.”

“Did he—rape you?”

“No,” she whispered. “But he might as well have.”

Fury rose to choke Tucker. He’d suspected. He’d imagined the worst. Hearing his suspicions verified by Olivia was like taking a knife to the heart. But in the midst of his anguish, he felt a flutter of relief. Thank God his despicable uncle hadn’t committed the ultimate sin against her innocence. Thank God he hadn’t raped her.

Tucker gripped her hand. “If we find out he’s alive, I’ll kill him with my bare hands.”

He looked around him. This house, this barn, was the living memory of all her pain, all her nightmares. No wonder she wanted them destroyed.

She squeezed his fingers. Now that he’d tapped her well of pain, her story came tumbling out, “I was so scared, and so ashamed, Tucker. That’s why I pushed you away. I couldn’t bear for you to find out what was happening to me. I still—” Her voice broke off, and tears rolled down her cheeks.

“I’m so sorry,” Tucker said, the shame on her face touching a place deep inside him. He wanted to use his touch to wipe away her humiliation, to rid her of her awful memories. If only she would let him.

She dropped her face into her hands and turned away. He could feel her withdrawal, and it tore at his soul.

“Please don’t shut me out,” he said softly, pulling her hands away from her face. He kissed her cheeks, her eyelids, and her mouth, trying to be as gentle as possible.

She tried to jerk away, but he slipped his arms around her and whispered, “Let me love your pain away.”

“Oh, Tucker,” she said, her breath catching in her throat. He was so kind, so understanding. Nothing like Walter. If anyone could defeat her past, Tucker could.

Looking into his warm mocha eyes, her humiliation began to fade. He knew the truth, and he hadn’t run from her.

He dragged his thumb across her bottom lip. Raw heat collected in her belly and the intensity of his gaze nearly knocked her to her knees.

“Trust me?”

“Yes,” she whispered, enthralled by his incredible tenderness. She could trust him not to hurt her. To take his time, and teach her what to do. Her fears dissipated, at least temporarily.

Tucker took her hands and drew her toward the back of the stall. His muscled thighs bumped hers.

Electricity sparked between them, making her pulse pound. She wanted him to touch her. And that scared her.

“I’m here with you, Liv. It’s just you and me,” Tucker said. He sat down on a pile of matted straw and tugged her onto his lap. His arms cradled her, and he drew her close for a searing kiss.

She clung to him. The odor of old hay wafted up to tickle her nostrils, bringing with it horrifying images of Walter. She leaned close to Tucker and drew in the smell of his spicy aftershave. Anything to send her awful memories away.

The heat of his body warmed her.

“Whatever happened in the past is gone,” Tucker whispered, nuzzling her neck. “All that matters is here and now. You and me, together. Think about us.”

“I can do that,” she whispered, hot tears banking in her eyes. Her heart swelled with joy. With trembling fingers, she touched his stubbled cheek. “As long as you’re with me.”

“That’s my girl.” He grinned. His hands glided over her body as though she were made of fine china. Stroking, measuring, loving.

He kissed her again, and Olivia drank him in. His mouth was like molten silk. His tongue touched hers, and a shiver rippled down her spine. She’d never done much kissing, only hurried pecks in the dark, trying to prove she could fit in. She never had, until now.

Tucker slid his tongue deeper into her mouth and palmed her breast. She gasped at the intimate contact.

“Just relax and let me touch you,” he said, gently kneading her sensitive flesh. “I won’t hurt you.”

“Oh, Tucker,” she whispered, as heat flared through her. Desperate for more, she reached for the hem of his T-shirt.

Catching her hand, he pulled the Glock from his waistband and set it atop a bail of old hay. Then he plucked the gun from her pocket, set it beside his, and reached for the top button of her blouse. Once it was free, he kissed her softly.

“Let’s take it slow,” he said, his words sending a quiver through her. “One button at a time.”

Then, with sure hands, he carefully undid the second button. Then he followed it up with another long, deep kiss. One that rocked her to her toes.

Olivia’s heart fluttered. “What about your clothes?”

Tucker released her and stripped off his shirt. His muscled chest gleamed.

He grinned. "Is that better?"

"Oh, yes," Olivia whispered, elated by the masculine sight of him. He looked so strong, so powerful. So incredibly sexy. Her face grew hot, and she stammered, "May I touch you?"

"Yes," he said, catching her hands again and pressing them over his thudding heart.

The blistering heat of his skin startled her. She stroked her fingers over his furred chest, reveling in the latent strength beneath her hands.

Tucker reached for her blouse and, with shaking hands, undid the third button.

Olivia reveled in the fact that he was so aroused.

He kissed her, and she let her mouth linger on his as long as she dared. Tucker groaned.

"Sorry, but I have to speed this up," he said, kissing her hard. Then he quickly unfastened the rest of her buttons. Olivia held her breath as he gently pushed the garment from her shoulders and watched it fall to the hay-covered floor.

His eyes fell on the tiny swath of silk covering her breasts, and she went still.

No one had ever looked at her with such reverence.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered, his voice raspy with emotion.

Tears filled her eyes, and she kissed him. All the love she'd stored up inside came out in that kiss.

Breathing hard, he popped the snap on her jeans. She reached for his and in seconds, they were both naked.

His steely body fascinated her.

"Stand up for a moment," he said, gently urging her to her feet.

Her nerves thrumming, she obeyed, even though her knees had turned to jelly.

He carefully spread their clothing out on the hay. His mouth curved, and he took her arm. "That should do it. Lie down."

“Please take it slow,” she said shyly, settling down beside him as warm, moist air cascaded over her skin. She rubbed her face against his sturdy chest. The dark hair tickled her nose. Suddenly feeling brazen, she flicked his nipple with the tip of her tongue.

He drew in a sharp breath.

She laughed nervously. He tasted both salty and sweet. It was a flavor she’d never forget.

With a wide smile, he tumbled her over and sprawled on top of her, his scorching arousal nudging the tops of her thighs. Her hands flew to his broad shoulders and she reveled in the rough, masculine feel of him. The growing hardness of his body. This was Tucker, the only man who had ever understood her fear.

He kissed her again and again, his questing tongue sending liquid silver flashing through her veins. She moaned with pent-up desire. The fact that they were inside the dreaded barn empowered her. She’d never felt so wanton, yet so free.

Thunder rumbled, rattling the roof. She quivered beneath Tucker’s gentle touch; arched her back against his hands. His greedy mouth feasted on her neck, her breasts, her belly button. Then he slid lower and urged her legs apart. His most intimate kiss stunned her. She grabbed his hair.

“Tucker, oh my God.” Electricity sparked within her as she writhed against his ravenous mouth. She’d never been touched like this before, had never imagined such rampant need.

A shiver rolled through her, and flames flared behind her eyes. She trembled uncontrollably, crying out his name as wave after wave of sensation poured through her, sending her thoughts tumbling into oblivion. All she knew was Tucker and his roving tongue.

Finally, he raised his head and his hot gaze burned clear through to her core. Her heart pounded.

Rain lashed the battered walls, giving the barn a sinister feel. Lightning flickered, and a new layer of energy zinged through the air. Olivia reached for Tucker.

He moved up her body and kissed her gently, then lifted her hips and slowly thrust inside her. Olivia gasped at the hot, immense feel of him.

“Touch me,” he rasped, locking his gaze with hers as he pressed relentlessly forward. Her restless hands gripped his shoulders. She writhed beneath him. All at once he was fully inside. He filled not only her body, but also her heart. She gasped. She’d never felt so alive. So safe. Whole, for once in her life.

Tears pooled in her eyes.

He kissed them away, and whispered, “Are you all right? Am I hurting you?”

“No,” she said, overcome with an emotion she was afraid to name. She gripped his hips and urged him deeper, then deeper still.

Tucker strained toward her, his gaze warming her. Olivia felt the pain of her past drain away, only to be replaced by images of his smiling face. Kissing her, taking care not to hurt her. *Loving her*. Walter’s wicked image vanished as she and Tucker moved together, sealing their union with murmured words of love.

She groaned his name. Her hands flew up his back to his shoulders, finally tangling in his hair as stars exploded behind her eyes. Crying out his name, she arched beneath him, the feeling like something out of time.

Tucker’s climax shook both of them. Shudders racked his strong frame. Never before had Olivia felt so wanted or so treasured. So loved. This was what lovemaking was meant to be. Total sharing between a woman and a man.

“Come here, beautiful,” he said moments later, tugging her close and spooning himself around her.

“I had no idea it could be like that,” she whispered, feeling overwhelmed. She basked in the glowing warmth of his hard body.

He leaned over her and pressed a tender kiss to her lips. “I want it to be like that every time.”

Every time. Like it would happen again and again. Olivia felt a startling rush of hope. She cupped his cheek and whispered, “I love you, Tucker.”

He peered down into her eyes. “I love you too, Liv. More than anything.”

Tears stung her eyes, and she shivered, partly with joy and partly because she was growing chilled.

Tucker rose and found an old horse blanket. He tucked it around her, then lay down and curled his arm around her.

“Get some rest,” he said, his warm breath tickling her ear. “I’ll be right here.”

Sleep beckoned as she cuddled against him. She hadn’t felt this relaxed, this safe, ever. She fell asleep wrapped in his hard arms. As he had promised, no nightmares invaded her dreams. He knew the truth, and he loved her anyway.

Finally, she was at peace.

Tucker woke with a jolt. The barn was dark, and thunder grumbled in the distance. He recognized the soft patter of rain on the roof, heard Olivia’s soft breathing, and smelled the earthy odors of hay and cattle. Something had awakened him, but he wasn’t sure what.

He slowly eased himself away from her and pulled on his briefs and jeans. Straw crunched beneath his feet as he crept slowly toward the stall door. The barn was filled with inky blackness. Lightning lit the place briefly, but not long enough for him to see much.

He felt his way to the outside door. The air was warm and muggy despite the steady rain, and the darkness was complete. He drew in a deep breath as the cool moisture splashed against his face. A deep healing had begun within him when Olivia gave him her trust, and he didn’t want to lose that feeling.

The steady patter of rain grew into a deluge, and he ducked beneath the eaves. A board creaked to his left. He turned.

Pain abruptly exploded in his head. Lightning blinded him. He fell face down in the mud.

A hand caressed Olivia's shoulder. She smiled. Tucker. So gentle, and yet such a thorough lover. She'd waited all her life for a man who could live with what had happened to her. Who didn't run when she cried out at night.

She reached for him, and grabbed a handful of dirty straw. A high-pitched wicked laugh burned her ears. Her eyes flew open. *Walter!*

She felt his choking presence, smelled his rancid sweat. Adrenaline jolted through her, and she shot upright. Not now, after all Tucker had done for her. And dear God, she was naked beneath the blanket. A fog of disbelief and sheer terror rolled over her, and her stomach turned inside-out. Where was Tucker? She opened her mouth to scream his name, but no sound came out.

Walter clapped a hand over her lips. "Don't make a sound, girlie, or I'll slit your pretty little throat."

He waved a knife in front of her eyes. "Understand?"

Nausea roiled her stomach, and she nodded. Walter had hurt Tucker. Tucker would never have left her alone. Not after what they had shared. Her frantic gaze searched the shadows for his crumpled form, but she didn't see him. Tears flooded her eyes. If Tucker was dead—

With a harsh grunt, Walter jerked her to her feet. Thunder grumbled like an angry giant. She tried to squirm away, and he pressed the knife beneath her chin.

"Get dressed. We're going for a walk."

Fear paralyzed her.

"Move!" He shouted.

With jerky movements, she obeyed. He grabbed her arm before she picked up her shoes.

"I oughta kill you right now, you little slut." He sneered at her. His breath smelled like day-old manure. "But I won't, as long as you behave. So mind me. You hear?"

He prodded her toward the barn's rear door. Fear skittered over her skin like a thousand tiny insects. The night was black and wet, and a web of lightning laced the sky. Picturing Tucker lying in a pool of blood, Olivia began to shake. "Where's Tucker?"

"Shut up and move."

"What have you done with him? If you've—"

"Shut up. Your boyfriend ain't gonna bother me again."

Olivia's heart froze. "Oh, God! Please—" She cringed, waiting for the words that would shatter her life. How could she only now understand just how much she loved Tucker? Now, when it was too late?

"My nephew met with an unfortunate accident, girlie. He's dead."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

“Keep your damned mouth shut, girly,” Walter growled, his filthy hand slick on Olivia’s mouth. “Be still or I’ll have to hurt you.”

Blinking against the rain pelting her face, she fought against her stepfather’s steely hold. She couldn’t break free. He smelled of horses and old sweat, odors that had haunted her since childhood. Her stomach twisted.

Walter dragged her into a grove of swaying oaks. Rain poured down, soaking them both. Leafy branches thrashed above them like warring devils. Olivia squirmed in her stepfather’s grasp and managed to wrench one arm free. She punched him hard in the side.

An expletive flew from his lips and he slapped her, making her ears ring. She tasted blood. He tangled his blunt fingers in her hair and jerked her head back.

“You stupid little wench,” he snarled, his disgusting breath washing over her face. “After all I did for you—”

“After you taught me everything no little girl should know?” Olivia shouted angrily, the words slipping past her lips before she could stop them. Fury bubbled up inside her like hot lava. “You sick bastard.”

He tightened his hold on her hair and raised his knife. Lightning illuminated his evil black eyes. He shoved the blade against the tender skin beneath her chin. “Keep talking like that, missy, and I’ll carve you a second smile. You know I’m capable of it.”

“Go ahead. I’m not afraid of you any more,” she snapped, realizing it was true. He was a pathetic shell of a man who got off on hurting women. If only she had Tucker’s backup pistol.

Walter spat phlegm in her face. She gagged, and before she could recover he shoved her into the trunk of a small oak. Its rough bark scraped her skin; blood swelled on her forearm.

She cried out.

“Shut up,” he snarled. Walter grabbed her hair and yanked her forward.

Olivia struggled to keep her footing in the pouring rain. Her bare feet slipped in the sticky, slimy mud. She wrapped her hands around his fist and tried to loosen his grip. He jerked her head. Her scalp felt torn and raw, but still she tried to angle her head enough to bite his arm. As her feet gained traction on short, nubby grass, lightning flared, briefly outlining the wooded hillside. He was taking her to *the storm shelter*.

“No!” Olivia shouted, the wind snatching the word from her lips. Fear flooded her veins, sweeping the edge off her anger and propelling her into action.

She slammed her heel down on his instep. He yelped and loosened his grip. She slugged him in the face, and he let go.

Panting, she shoved him down into the muck and sprinted off through the blinding rain. Mud squished up between her toes. Lightning filled her vision, and thunder crashed like a big bass drum.

He caught her and dragged her backwards. His hand was a vise grip on her arm.

“Don’t you run again,” he snapped. “I’ll catch you, and I’ll kill you.”

She opened her mouth to argue, but he twisted her arm and she screeched in pain.

“That’ll teach you to keep your damned mouth shut.”

She slid down the hill beside him. Lightning streaked down as he forced her behind a pair of huckleberry bushes and opened the door to the storm shelter.

Inside, the darkness was complete. Wind and rain lashed the heavy door. A tremor rolled through Olivia.

Walter shoved her into a corner. “Sit down.”

She obeyed, and huddled there with her arms wrapped around her knees. Her clothes were soaked and she was so very cold. Her heart sank when he pulled out a key and locked the door, then slipped the key back into his pocket. She was trapped. Her heart pounded.

Walter disappeared into the tunnel, reappearing moments later with some sort of bag and the lantern she and Tucker had used. Her stepfather must have found the matches.

The lamp's bright light lent him a devilish aura. He pulled out a knife, and it glittered in his hand. A ripple of fear cascaded down her spine.

"We're under a tornado warning." He bared yellow teeth. "But you'll be safe with me."

His sick laughter curled around her like a snake.

She met his crazed eyes, and her stomach churned.

He set down the lantern. "You're mine now."

"What did you do to Tucker?"

"Do you really want to know?"

Her heart ripped. "Yes."

"Too bad." He turned away.

Anger filled her. "You can't hurt me any more, no matter what you do to me."

"Apparently I can, by hurting people you love."

People she loved. Yes, she loved Tucker with all her heart. She had to escape and find out what had happened to him. Filled with new resolve, she pushed herself to her feet. Her legs ached from sitting on the hard ground.

Walter fingered the knife. Its glinting blade promised agonizing pain. His hard eyes locked with hers.

"Try to fight me, girlie, and you'll regret it." Walter took a step toward her. His gaze swept the wall behind her. "Turn around and see what I have in store for you."

Unwilling to take her eyes off him, she glanced sideways at the sweating concrete. Four gleaming metal rings, two near the ceiling and two near the floor, surrounded her. Terror tingled through her.

He pulled a roll of heavy Nylon rope from a bag at his feet. "Guess what I'm gonna do with this."

Olivia didn't have to guess. She knew. Despite the dank air in the tiny space, perspiration pooled in the small of her back. An ominous sensation swept over her, and her palms grew slick. She had to escape before he tied her up and stripped off her clothes.

"Don't think you can get away," Walter growled. He tossed down the rope. "I've been planning this for years."

"I should have known your suicide was a lie." Olivia put her hands on the rough wall behind her and braced herself to strike. She would battle him to the death before she let him touch her.

Walter glowered at her. "You took the money I sent you, didn't you? And you accepted that fake deed. You must have believed me."

Olivia's mouth dropped open.

Her stepfather grinned. "You didn't know it was a fake? Damn, I'm good." He cackled.

Olivia longed to counter him, but he was right. She'd bought his story hook, line, and sinker.

He waved the knife. His snicker mocked her. "Gonna draw it out. And I'm gonna enjoy every minute of it."

"What are you waiting for?"

Walter's wicked eyes flashed. "The greater the anticipation, the greater the thrill."

Olivia shrank back and pretended she could make herself invisible, like she had so many years ago. Back then, it hadn't worked. But this time would be different. She would find a way to escape Walter and his vile plans for her.

His lips curled. "I'll be back. Count on it."

He spun, dragged out his flashlight, and reentered the tunnel, leaving the lantern glaring in the middle of the floor.

Olivia gulped in a steady breath. Her legs quaking, she hurried over to the outside door and tugged on it. It wouldn't budge. A wave of frustration slid through her.

She could hear rain, wind, and what sounded like hail battering the other side. How she wished she could slip through the door, no matter the weather. Her pulse raced. The only other way out was through the tunnel—the same way Walter had gone.

Tucker awoke with the odor of mud in his nose. His head throbbed. He put out his hand, and his fingers dug into the wet ground. He opened his eyes. The house was a murky silhouette in the distance. Rain flowed down into his face, and thunder boomed. Blinking, he sat up. Where the hell was he?

Mud covered his clothes, but was quickly dispersed by the driving shower. He gingerly pressed his fingers to his hair and found a knot just above his right ear.

He'd pulled on his jeans, and stepped outside to check on an odd sound. He'd been standing under the eaves, his eyes searching the darkness, when someone had hit him. Hard. His stomach dropped. *Where was Olivia?*

He staggered to his feet. Dizziness overtook him, and he grabbed the barn wall for support. She had to be all right. Sleeping in the stall. If she'd awakened, she probably thought he'd abandoned her to her memories. He had to get to her.

He reached for his pistol. It wasn't there. Damn it. He remembered taking it out of his waistband and putting it on the hay. Why hadn't he picked it up when he came outside?

His legs wobbly, he muttered another foul curse and entered the musty blackness, angling toward the narrow stall where he'd left her.

An eerie, low-pitched howl stopped him in his tracks. His blood curdled and the hairs rose on his arms. He blinked again to dispel another bout of vertigo. What had made that awful sound? He stood there a full minute, but heard nothing else except the steady drum of rain and the wind's ghostly whistle.

His neck prickled. Taking a deep breath, he hurried toward the stall. He slipped inside and waited to let his eyes adjust to the darkness.

When they did, his gaze fell on the two Glocks sitting untouched on the hay. His heart clutched. Olivia was gone.

Olivia stepped back and examined the concrete walls. They were seamless, except for an area in the corner to the right of the door. She walked over to it and ran her hands over a square-shaped ridge about waist high. She'd never noticed it, because she'd never had light in the shelter before. A tiny latch concealed in the rough concrete façade caught her eye. She lifted it, and excitement rose within her. Maybe the tiny vault contained a key, or a hint at another way out.

She held her breath and pulled it open. A decorated cigar box sat inside. Disappointment filled her, until something clicked in her mind—and her mouth dropped open. She'd glued the bright paper and fake jewels to that box in school the year her father had died. She remembered the day she'd presented it to him as a gift—and how he'd laughed with delight.

Her heart in her throat, she reached for it. A faux blue stone fell off and hit the floor. She didn't try to pick it up. Her hands shook as she opened the lid. Three small starfish, a delicately-curved conch shell, and a long white envelope filled the box. Tears welled in Olivia's eyes as she remembered walking with her father on the beach. She'd given him the shell and starfish as gifts as well. He must have treasured them.

She pulled out the envelope. This was the letter for which she'd been searching. She could feel it.

Thunder boomed, rattling the door. Her skin tingled, and that odd, prickly feeling slid over her. Walter was coming.

She shoved the box back into the vault and closed the door, then folded the envelope and slipped it into her pocket.

The tunnel door swung wide.

“Get over to the wall, girlie,” Walter snapped. He held up a small toolbox. “It’s playtime.”

Fear streaked through Olivia. She swallowed hard, but didn’t move. She couldn’t let him tie her up.

Walter put down the box. His voice grew hard, like it had when she was twelve. “Do it now, Olivia.”

“I won’t play your game.” She swallowed. “Not any more.”

“You don’t have a choice.”

“Yes, I do. I have free will.”

He barked a laugh. “Your ‘free will’ ended the second I walked through this door. You’re mine, body and soul.”

“Come here.” He fisted his knife and limped toward her.

Her terrified gaze zeroed in on the sharp blade.

“You *will* obey me,” he growled, his voice ringing off the cement walls. The rancid odor of sweat hung in the air, making Olivia gag. He sneered. “Understand me, girlie?”

“I understand perfectly,” she snapped, her resolve growing. *He would not win.*

Walter raised the knife and surged toward her.

She kicked over the lantern.

Tucker slipped his backup pistol into his pocket and checked the magazine in his duty weapon. The sight of Olivia’s clothes spread out on the hay sent a sharp pang of longing through him.

His mind whirled over the events leading up to their lovemaking. He'd seen no sign of Walter as they'd moved the body, no sign of anything out of the ordinary. But he had to have kidnapped her. There was no other explanation for her disappearance.

Letting his gaze rake the empty stall one last time, Tucker turned and headed for the door. He had to find her.

Thunder rolled, the wind blew, and rain splashed into the mud outside. A wave of cool air filtered over Tucker's skin. Without warning, the rain grew harder and tiny white spheres bounced over the ground. Hail.

Tucker tensed. Damn. The storm was intensifying. He stuck his head out the door and peered up at the gray-green clouds. His stomach churned. Tornado clouds.

A feeling of urgency wrapped itself around him as he braved the weather and sprinted for the house. If only he could call for backup. He cursed inwardly. With his Uncle Harold—and possibly more of his friends—involved with Walter, Tucker knew he couldn't risk it.

His weapon clutched in a death grip, he pressed his back to the wall beside the door and counted to three. Then he burst into the house and began a systematic room-by-room search. The kitchen, the living room, Olivia's bedroom. All were empty.

A low roar reached Tucker's ears. The wind picked up, and the lights flickered out. He mouthed another expletive. He had to find her soon, before the weather worsened.

His heart thudded. Sweat rimmed his brow. Taking a deep breath, he crept silently up the stairs. The entire second floor was empty.

He gritted his teeth. That meant Olivia's worst nightmare had come true, and he'd let it happen—just like he'd let those men hit his mother. He'd tried to stop them, but he'd been so little, and they were so angry. Pain rippled through him at the memory. He couldn't help her.

But he could help Olivia.

The cellar. That had to be where Walter had taken her.

His hands fisted around the Glock, he hurried back downstairs and reentered the kitchen. The hail's din on the roof was deafening, and the trees outside bent double in the wicked gale. The old house creaked and groaned.

Tucker prayed it would hold together long enough for him to find Olivia.

He found the flashlight, flipped it on, and paused beside the trap door, listening. He heard nothing but the weather. His hand grew slick on the Glock.

He ripped open the trap door and pointed the weapon down the stairs. Cool, dank air flowed over him. His pulse thrummed as he raised the flashlight and started down the steps.

The roar above him grew louder. He ignored it and kept going.

The cellar was empty.

With a curse, Tucker halted. The tunnel door loomed before him. If he met Walter in there—

A loud crash in the house made Tucker whirl and tear back up the steps. The outside wall of the kitchen flew inward, and with a startled shout, he was swept off his feet.

Darkness filled his vision.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The cellar was plunged into darkness. Olivia dodged to the right and felt Walter's bulk sail by her. He hit the door with a pronounced grunt. She dropped to her knees and scrambled frantically for the rope. Her fingers found it and she leapt to her feet.

His heavy breathing rasped through the air.

"Where are you?" he growled, spouting a flurry of vile curses. "Say something! Anything!"

Olivia felt for the wall, searching until she found the metal rings. Her hands trembled. Using only her sense of touch, she threaded the rope through one of the bottom rings and quickly tied it off.

Walter limped closer, his sour odor washing over her. She held her breath to keep from coughing.

"When I find you, I'm gonna slice and dice you."

Terror streaked through Olivia. If her plan failed. Her heart in her throat, she tugged the rope tight and silently stretched it across the room. Her foot bumped the lantern, and she nudged it aside as silently as possible. Then she wrapped the rope around her hands—and waited.

Walter shuffled closer. "Where are you, damn it?" He shouted. His question rang off the concrete walls. "You'd better tell me before I find you. Remember how I used to punish you when you were young?"

Memories of pain and humiliation streaked through her, weakening her limbs. She almost lost her grip on the rope. *No*. Not this time. Fear wouldn't take hold of her this time. She concentrated on the sound of his footsteps drawing ever closer.

Her body went taut. He was almost close enough for her to go into action.

A great roaring filled the air, and she dropped into a crouch. Her skin tingled. What was that?

Walter halted, so close she could smell his foul breath.

The roaring grew thunderous, like an overloaded freight train. Olivia's blood turned icy. *It was a tornado.*

Suddenly her senses were razor sharp. Walter was distracted by the sound of the storm. It was her only chance. Gathering her legs under her, she sprang up and swung around him and wrapped the rope around his legs.

Screaming a curse, he lunged for her.

She pulled the rope tight. With a cry of surprise, he tumbled to the ground, landing hard on his knee. He shouted in agony and his knife clattered to the hard-packed floor.

Still holding the rope, she dove after it.

Walter grabbed her ankle. "Gotcha, bitch."

"Let go of me!" She shouted, flailing her legs. She broke free and scrambled after the knife on her hands and knees.

Growling a string of expletives, he leapt after her. His reeking weight crushed her to the ground. Her chin cracked the floor and pain spiraled through her. She cried out.

"Quit fighting," he ordered nastily, his stinking breath streaming over her. He jammed his knee into her kidneys.

With a pained shriek, she jolted him off her back and onto the floor. He spewed a litany of curses.

Her hand bumped the knife, and she grabbed it. The handle was warm. She leapt to her feet. If only she could see him.

The roaring outside diminished. Walter spat another expletive and staggered toward her. She flattened herself to the wall.

"Where did you go?" He asked. His breath slid out in rapid, angry gasps. "I know you're in here."

His voice helped her locate him. His back was to her. She hesitated a moment, then surged forward and jabbed the knife into his neck. Warm blood spurted over her hands and face.

He screamed and tried to shake her off.

She yanked the blade free, and her elbow slammed into the wall. Pain shot through her arm. Her hand went numb, and she dropped the dripping blade. Nausea swirled in her stomach. Walter sprang at her again, his face twisted in pain, and she frantically felt for the tunnel door. She had to get out before he caught her.

He made a strangled sound.

The noise crawled across her skin.

“Help me,” he cried. She heard him fall.

Her foot caught in the rope and she tumbled down beside him. He grabbed her blouse.

“No!” She jerked away. The fabric ripped. She gritted her teeth and leapt for the door. Her blood-covered fingers hit the knob, and she yanked it open. Thank God he hadn’t locked it. Cool air blasted over her as she threw herself into the tunnel and slammed the door behind her. The silence in the narrow space was disconcerting.

Her feet tangled with each other, and she went down again. She tasted blood. *Walter’s blood.* Bile rushed up her throat, and she clapped a hand to her mouth. Had she killed him?

After a tense moment, she gulped back her nausea and rose on shaky legs. The dirt walls were damp. She wiped her face on her blouse and drew in a dose of cool, clammy air.

Inch by inch, step by step, she felt her way through the inky blackness. Memories of being locked into tight, dark spaces slid through her. She could feel Walter’s vile touch, sense his imprint on her skin. Her stomach bucked.

Minutes later, her hand met the door. She’d made it through. Relief skated over her nerves. She was almost free.

The door was locked.

“God, no,” she whispered, a fresh jolt of adrenaline sliding through her. She was trapped. She didn’t want to die like this, trapped with the man who had made her childhood a living hell.

Tucker groaned. His back was wet, and his head throbbed. He couldn't see a damned thing. He raised his hands to his face and met wet cloth. What the hell? Terror streaked through him.

He clawed at the smelly material and with effort, ripped it from his face. He blinked, looked up, and saw clouds. Moved his legs and felt mud. How had he gotten outside?

Several broken boards lay across his chest. He pushed them away and gingerly sat up. He was in a field about a hundred yards from the house.

The house. His eyes widened. The barn and other outbuildings were still standing, but his home was gone. Dear God! The tornado had made a direct hit. Where was Olivia?

Tucker staggered to his feet and took in his chaotic surroundings. Clothing and linens hung in the trees like flying ghouls. A washing machine sat on its side fifty yards away, wrapped in a maze of barbed wire. A two-by-four had been driven through a pine tree.

His breathing quickened. The oaks surrounding the house had been snapped off at ground level and scattered like matchsticks.

He checked his body. Other than a few cuts and bruises, he was okay. He'd lost the Glock, but his backup piece was still tucked securely in his pocket.

Drawing in a consoling breath, he began to jog slowly toward the house. Pain exploded in his head, but he ignored it. He had to find Olivia.

He dodged the torn living room couch, which lay in a puddle of water in the middle of the field. Rubble was strewn across a wide area. He spotted kitchen chairs, jars from the pantry, and Walter's chest of drawers. He drew closer to the house, and became disoriented.

Where had the pantry—and the trap door—been? Frantic, he spotted the well and the back stoop, both littered with debris. Using them as guides, he picked his way through the rubble.

The trap door gaped wide.

"Olivia!" He shouted, peering into the dark hole. "Olivia, where are you?"

Fear cascaded over him like rain. The image of a future without her fisted itself around his heart. Tears welled in his eyes. He couldn't live like that.

"Olivia!" He started down the dark steps, and was surprised to find the cellar's contents completely untouched.

The jars of old vegetables and Bobilu the stuffed raccoon stood as silent monuments to Olivia's painful past. Tucker's frenzied gaze swept the room. Where could she be?

He heard a muffled cry.

She was in the tunnel. Muted light filtered down the wet steps behind Tucker as he rushed over to the door sitting deep in shadow. The distant crash of thunder rattled the boards scattered overhead.

"Olivia!" His heart thudding, he yanked the door open. "Are you in here? Olivia—"

"Tucker!" Tears streaming down her cheeks, she threw herself at him. He caught a whiff of old sweat and fresh blood combined with her flowery perfume as she buried her face in his shirt and gripped him tightly.

A tremor slid through him as he wrapped his arms around her and pressed his lips to her hair.

"You're okay," he murmured, elated to have finally found her. Had she died— He buried that possibility in the back of his mind and stroked his hands up and down her back. "God. I love you, Liv. So much. I've wanted to tell you, but—"

"I love you, too." She sobbed into his chest. "Thank God you're here!"

"The tornado—I was afraid you—" He'd imagined finding her crushed in the debris, never to touch or kiss him again. He squeezed her so hard she began to squirm.

He relaxed his grip and stepped back.

She looked up at him and gasped. "My God. You're hurt."

"The storm," he said. He gingerly touched the back of his neck. "And Walter. The bastard lured me out of the stall, then cold-cocked me."

"I knew you wouldn't just leave me." Her eyes misted, and she whispered, "He told me you were dead."

“He was wrong.” Tucker curved his lips in what he hoped was a reassuring smile, then let his gaze roam down her body.

A dark stain marred the front of her blouse. He touched the spot and his fingers came away wet with a dark, coppery liquid. *Blood*. Dread settled into the pit of his stomach.

“Did he cut you?”

“No.” She fingered a darkening contusion on her cheek. “He hit me. That’s all. The blood’s his.”

“My God. Is he—?”

“I don’t know.” A tremble slid through her. “I stabbed him. He—he fell. In the storm shelter. Blood was everywhere.”

“Show me.”

“Okay. Stay close to me,” she said, gripping his arm.

He squeezed her hand. “I promise.”

Olivia reluctantly opened the tunnel door. Cool air blasted over her, but she felt warm inside. Tucker was all right. She stepped back.

“You go first. I’ll prop the door,” she said, grabbing two jars of old vegetables from the shelf.

Once she set them on the floor, Tucker took her hand and led her into the dark passageway.

“I can’t see anything,” she said after a few steps. That peculiar feeling slid over her, and she fought for air. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“This won’t take long,” he said. “Relax.”

Like that was possible. Olivia swallowed. If Walter wasn’t dead—

Rounding the bend in the tunnel, Tucker let go of her hand and pulled out his pistol.

An eerie sensation of déjà vu tripped up Olivia’s spine. Breathless, she pressed herself to the wall. Her stomach did a series of crazy flips.

“Where did you last see him?” Tucker asked grimly, his disembodied voice echoing off the damp walls.

“In the storm shelter.” Olivia reeled from a fresh chill. “I can’t go back in there.”

“That’s okay.”

The whine of the door opening startled her.

“Tucker?” She whispered, clutching at him. He wasn’t there. Damn this darkness, she thought, her heart tripping. If only she could see. Silence filled the clammy passageway. She could hear water dripping, could feel her pulse sending blood through her veins. Nothing else.

She pressed a hand to her throat. “Where are you?”

“Right here.” He visualized in front of her like a ghost.

There was a sharp click behind him, and a flashlight blinked on.

Olivia screamed, “Tucker, look out!”

He whirled and dropped into a crouch, his pistol ready.

Walter charged toward them, a knife gleaming in his bloody hand. His strangled roar filled Olivia’s ears.

Tucker cursed, and three loud pops rent the air.

Walter fell forward into Tucker, and a thick, sour odor filled the tunnel.

“Tucker?” Olivia cried, shoving at Walter’s bloody bulk. “Are you all right? Oh God!”

“I’m fine.” Tucker slid free and struggled to his feet. “What about you?”

“Good.” A shudder racked her. “He’s dead, isn’t he?”

“Yeah, he is. Come here.” Tucker wrapped her in his hard arms.

Elation spilled through her. Her nightmare was finally over. She clung to him. “It’s so hard to believe. After all these years—”

Tucker kissed her softly. “Let’s get out of here.”

A smile arched her lips as she allowed him to lead her up the stairs into the light. As she emerged from the cellar, her mouth dropped open. The house was gone.

Tucker pulled out his cell phone and turned away from her.

Her body numb, Olivia vaguely heard him ask the 911 dispatcher for help, but everything else was a blur. Bewilderment tore through her. She had thought seeing the house obliterated would make her happy, but all she felt was inner confusion.

“The house—” she stammered. “My God. Your things—”

“Things don’t matter.” Tucker snapped the phone shut. “You do.”

She fisted her hand in the fabric of his shirt. The tornado had done in seconds what the demolition crew had said would take a week or more. Yet the barn and outbuildings still stood.

Amazed, she said, “The barn’s okay.”

“Once we turn the body over to the MBI, I’ll have it torn down.” He stroked her back.

“No. Don’t.” Olivia raised her chin.

Tucker frowned. “Why not?”

“I won’t hang my head in shame any longer.” She smiled. Love flowed through her as she peered up into his warm mocha eyes. “You helped me banish my demons.”

He pulled her close and kissed her cheek.

Paper rustled between them. *Her father’s letter.* How had she forgotten? Anticipation filled her as she plucked it from her pocket and turned it over.

“What’s that?” Tucker asked, his eyes riveted to hers.

She clutched the missive to her chest. “The letter I told you about. From my real father.”

“You found it.” Tucker grinned.

“Yes,” she said, her heart thudding. She’d been waiting for this moment since she was twelve years old. With trembling fingers, she pried open the flap. This was the note her father had written her two days before he died, to be given to her on her birthday. She pulled out a folded piece of discolored paper. It was heavier than normal.

She frowned up at Tucker. “I found it hidden in the storm shelter while I was trying to escape. Irony, isn’t it?”

“How’s that?”

“The man who perverted my idea of fatherhood is responsible for my finding the last letter my real father ever wrote to me.” A lump rose in her throat and she carefully unfolded the note. A tiny gold key was taped to the bottom of the page. Her heart skipped a beat. What was that for?

Tucker edged closer. “What does it say?”

Swallowing hard, she stared down at the dog-eared page. Tears filled her vision, and her father’s tight scrawl blurred. She wiped her eyes and began reading aloud:

My dearest Olivia,

I love you more than life itself, and I hate leaving you. Yet I am being called home. Before I go, I want you to know how proud I am that you’re my daughter. I can’t be with you, but I want you to know that I’ll always be your daddy.

The key taped below is for a safety deposit box at Mid-State Bank in McComb. Inside you’ll find papers guaranteeing you a steady income for the rest of your life. This will pay for the best schools and will allow you to fulfill your dreams.

Love, Daddy

Olivia brushed away a tear. Her bad memories of Walter faded as she slowly reread her father’s loving words. He hadn’t wanted to leave her; it had been beyond his control. And although she hadn’t known it, he’d always been there for her—in spirit. Even during the darkest times.

Now she had Tucker. He was her rock, and her protector. The man she wanted to share the rest of her life with. She knew that now, with a certainty that took her breath away.

He took her hand and entwined their fingers. “Your father wanted you to have a good life.”

“Yes, he did,” she said, joy filling her heart. “My mother was supposed to give me this letter the day Emily died. If only she could’ve done it before—”

“Would your life have been any different?”

“Not with Walter around,” she said. “He tried to ruin every good thing that ever happened to me—even when I thought he was dead. That deed he sent me was fake.”

“That’s what I figured.”

“You can say it, you know.” She peered up at him. “I told you so.”

“I won’t.”

“Well, I deserve it. I bought every word of his story without question. How could I have been so gullible?”

“Uncle Walter was a con artist and a murderer. He obviously didn’t know about your father’s letter, or he would have stolen that, too.”

She laughed sharply. “Yes. And taken whatever’s in that safety deposit box.”

“We’ll go to the bank soon.” Tucker entwined their fingers. “You’ve waited long enough for your legacy.”

“Twenty-three years,” she said, having trouble believing this was really happening.

A siren echoed through the trees, breaking the silence over the field of debris. Olivia watched an ambulance slowly wind its way up the littered road. There was no need for it to hurry, since her stepfather was already dead. She had to keep reminding herself of that fact. That she was finally free.

“I wonder what happened to Walter’s journal,” Tucker said, his words startling her. “We need it to prove Grady and his pals killed Zack Owens. Without it, our claims are worthless.”

“I had it last night,” Olivia said, her eyes searching the scattered rubble. A frisson of worry skittered over her. “It was in my bedroom.”

“It’s probably two counties away by now.” His brow furrowed, Tucker released her and wandered out onto what had been the front porch.

Olivia shivered as the ambulance pulled to a stop beside the walk and two strapping EMT’s climbed out. Tucker explained what had happened to Walter, and showed them the trap door. Grabbing flashlights, they disappeared inside dragging a portable stretcher.

Olivia trotted down the steps and meandered through the scattered debris, looking for the missing book. To her surprise, she spotted the turkey feather, its sharp point driven into a board. It fluttered in the breeze. A feeling of euphoria engulfed her when she realized she felt nothing upon seeing it.

A soft rain began to patter down, and dirty cotton ball clouds loomed on the horizon. His eyes on the darkening sky, Tucker halted next to her. “We’re never going to find it.”

“We might,” she said, her eyes falling on the lamp that had been on her nightstand. It lay on its side in a puddle of mud. “There’s the lamp.”

“Olivia—” Tucker reached for her, but she avoided him. “Don’t get your hopes up.”

“I won’t, but I have to look.” She squared her shoulders and dug into a pile of rubble. All she found was broken dishes, soaked papers, and pieces of a chair.

Tucker followed her, his eyes scanning the littered field.

She moved on to the next heap, then the next. To her utter shock, at the bottom of that one, beneath one of Walter’s work boots, lay the journal. Its pages were wet and some of the ink had smudged, but it was intact.

Triumphant, she picked it up and waved it. “You said unlikely? I just found it.”

“My God.” His gaze incredulous, Tucker strode over to her and examined it. “It’s in one piece, too. That’s unbelievable.”

“My guardian angel must be looking out for us.”

“Evidently.” Tucker smiled.

“It’s all over,” she whispered. “We can make our case.”

“Come here, beautiful.” Tucker pulled her into his arms.

She buried her face against his steely chest. “I love you, Tucker.”

His heart clutched. “I love you too.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Olivia's hands trembled as she opened the narrow safety deposit box at Mid-State Bank. A trio of rolled papers was tucked inside. She unfurled them, and awe flooded through her. "Oh, my God. Tucker, you won't believe this."

"What is it?" He leaned over her shoulder.

She held up the papers so he could see. "One is a deed, and one is an oil and gas lease—for my father's family property just north of town. Both are in my name. I never knew he had property there."

"Your mother didn't tell you about it?"

"No, I was too young. And after Emily died—well, let's just say Mama was in no shape to think about family property."

"Your father must have loved you very much."

"I loved him, too." She bit her lip and thought of the few short years she'd had with him. She'd been only six when he'd died. All she remembered was his dark hair, his quick smile, and that wonderful day they'd spent together on the beach.

Tucker sat down and cocked up a corner of his mouth. "Now you can head back to D.C. in style."

"Who said I'm going back?" She turned to face him.

He shrugged. "Just figured you would. I mean, your job and your home are there."

"You're here."

"Yeah, I am." He touched her cheek. "Does this mean—?"

"Yes," she said, giving him a lingering kiss. He tasted like cool mint. Desire flowed through her, and she quivered. "I'm staying here with you, if you'll have me."

Tucker kissed her again. Her mouth was cool and sweet, like freshly churned cream. He pulled away and stared deep into her sparkling green eyes, which pierced through to his core. She was all he'd ever wanted, and more.

Before he could stop himself, he slid from the chair onto one knee and gripped her hands.

"Marry me," he whispered, his heart bursting from his chest.

"What did you say?" Her mouth fell open.

He met her startled gaze. "Marry me. I guarantee you no more nightmares. Ever."

"Oh Tucker—yes," she said, kissing him hard. "I have nothing to fear when I'm with you."