



Dear Reader,

Full of the joys of spring? April is a month for new birth. Spring flowers and buds on trees all add to the feeling of joy and expectation and with it warmer weather. To add to the excitement of spring we have brought to you - the reader, three thrilling, not to be missed stories.

From popular favorite, Arianna Hart brings us **DARK HEAT** her first edition to our Amethyst Flame – steamy line. Immerse yourself, as you follow Talia Dane an empath, and Finn O'Brian a detective who does not believe in what he calls “mumbo jumbo” search for her missing friend. As the stakes rise, another girl goes missing and Talia is in danger. Time is ticking away; can Finn find her and his heart, before it is too late?

Next from Elaine Charton **PANDORA'S JUSTICE** is Elaine's first book published by Triskelion it's part of the Dangerous Curves line. Just when Pandora is finally free of the living hell she has been in for the last 10 years, a stalker who knows way too much about her, things that only her dead ex husband knew, brings Pandora a new kind of hell. Can Justin Andrews the man who is assigned to guard Pandora and her children save her from the horror haunting them or will his own personal horror come back to haunt him again.

Take a walk on the wild side with debut author Shelly Laurenston's **PACK CHALLENGE** our debut novel for our new line Amethyst Inferno – smoldering line. Like all Infernos this book is HOT – and comes with a warning. Asbestos gloves needed.

Sara Morrighan lives life on her own terms. Suffering from chronic pain from an old injury she refuses to let it get the best of her. Sara never one to run from trouble once it seeks her out, especially if its due to one to many Tequila's at the local bar, finds herself in trouble with a couple of dangerous strangers. That is not all, trouble also comes in the form of a tall, gorgeous hunk of a man named Zach a biker passing through town. But, Zach is not just a sexy piece of prime flesh. Zach holds the secrets to Sara's past. A past that is about to confront her and change her life forever.

Enjoy them all and come back for May's releases where you will find more extraordinary romances for extraordinary women.

Regards

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink that reads "GNorthman". The script is fluid and cursive, with the first letter 'G' being particularly large and ornate.

Gail Northman  
Editor

PANDORA'S JUSTICE  
by

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters places,  
and incidents are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to  
persons living or dead, business establishments, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

Writing is a solitary profession, still this book would not have come to fruition with out the help of so many people, to many to mention here but there are some I do have to single out.

To Michael, my hero and my biggest fan, who never stopped believing in me. Here's to another twenty years.

To Linda Wisdom, for her knowledge, her patience, support and friendship.

And last but not least to the ladies of the Traveling Circus. Gwen, Valerie, Rachel, Linda and especially Susan. For the friendship and the chocolate. For Sunday afternoons arguing, editing and just talking writing. Thank you for loving Justin and Pandora as much as I do.

## **PROLOGUE**

Her red scarf marked her as not one of them. She stood aloof and erect in the middle of the sea of black, alone among strangers she had once considered family. This was an experience she needed to endure. She counted the minutes until she could leave.

She clung to thoughts of her children, the only reasons she could bear to stand here. The only thing that made her life worthwhile.

As she watched them lower the ornate casket to the ground, one word reverberated through her mind. Freedom.

## Chapter One

Two Months Later

*The man outside the gallery ignored everyone and everything around him. People strolled down Newbury Street and enjoyed the early spring warmth. They hurried by him, sensing a danger they couldn't understand. He paid no attention to them. His attention remained riveted on the party in the gallery, searching until he found the object of his desire. A smile of pure wickedness crossed his face.*

*"Enjoy yourself, Pandora, for now."*

*"Then it's my turn."*

\* \* \*

"You certainly got yourself a good crowd here tonight." The tall man looked around the room. "I think it's safe to say you're an unqualified success."

Abigail glanced at the festivities around her and then back to the two men with her. "You know, I have to agree with you. Aren't you glad you were able to come after all?"

"Yes, I am." Justin Andrews looked at the man who stood next to him; EZ McAllister, his friend and the new man in Abigail's life, had already planned to be there. It was only because of a last minute change in plans that Justin had been able to attend Abigail's opening.

She held her hands out to both men. "Come with me, the two of you. I want to introduce Justin to my favorite artist."

\* \* \*

Pandora stood in a corner of the gallery watching the spectacle. If this was a dream, then she hoped to never wake up.

The chatter of small talk and the clink of glasses filled the gallery as people wandered about looking at her paintings.

Her paintings.

She still couldn't believe it. She used to draw things as a child, and later for her daughter. Never in her wildest dreams could she even begin to imagine tonight's gathering.

Pandora Riley, girl from the poor side of town, in a gallery on trendy Newbury Street being toasted by Boston society.

Across the room stood her friend, Abigail, who owned the gallery. Two men stood with her. The man on her right was her boyfriend, EZ McAllister. Although it seemed strange to call someone almost forty years old a boyfriend. Pandora somehow had found the nerve to introduce herself to him a short while ago.

It was the man on the left who intrigued her. Well over six feet tall, with dark hair and eyes, he seemed to be watching everyone and everything even while carrying on a conversation with the couple as they crossed the gallery. His bearing was almost military in manner, erect and at ease, but ready to spring to attention at a moment's notice.

The room was filled with some of the handsomest men in the city of Boston, so what drew her to this one? The old saying about a moth to a flame sprang to her mind, or maybe it was the spider and the fly? No matter how you looked at it, the man seemed to spell danger.

Pandora watched them cross the room, or tried to watch them without looking too obvious about the whole thing. She couldn't keep her eyes off his face. Craggy was the best way to describe it. Features worn down by experience and pain. She knew pain. But, there was something more there. An aura of integrity rarely seen anymore. She itched to sketch him.

Abigail stopped to talk to a group of students; the man looked across the room at her and smiled. Pandora's heart stopped. Nothing more than a simple movement. Thirteen muscles creating such a transformation. The man really should smile more often.

As he walked across the room with EZ, she couldn't take her eyes off him. King of all he surveyed. Every inch of him masculine and secure, and heading straight toward her!

Her heart raced. How could she talk with this man? What would she say? She still had problems talking with men. Especially men like this one. True, she'd introduced herself to EZ earlier in the evening, but it had taken almost every ounce of her courage for that minor accomplishment. But she'd done it. One more for the list of things she'd done lately that she would never have done in the past. It still amazed her; the courage freedom could bring.

Abigail waved to her. She smiled and waved back. The two men stopped, spoke briefly with Abigail and headed out the door.

Just as well, she mused. The dizzying attraction, the breathless anticipation. Feelings she'd only read about in books. She couldn't afford those types of feelings. Not now, not when she'd finally fought her way back from hell.

Abigail continued across the room to her friend. She raised a glass of champagne in salute. "You're a success!"

Pandora hugged her tightly, "No, we're a success. I couldn't have done it without you."

"And aren't you glad I talked you into it?"

She was. Abigail volunteered at the shelter, giving art therapy classes along with one of the psychologists. Pandora came to the shelter when she finally found the strength to leave Joey Riley. The two women met and became friends.

"We make a good team."

"That we do," Abigail agreed, pointing to a woman on the other side of the room. "There's Margaret Mary, the new shelter director. She wanted to talk to us about something."

"Tell me," Pandora said trying to sound nonchalant as she followed her friend across the room, "Who was that man talking to you and EZ?"

"That's Justin. I've told you about him. He and EZ work together."

So, that was the infamous Justin Andrews. Abigail had spoken of her old friend often. "He's very..." Pandora struggled for the right word, "intense."

Abigail stopped in the middle of the floor and laughed. "That's about the best description I've heard of Justin. It's also the most accurate." They continued across the room. "I had hoped to get a



chance to introduce you to him.”

“Really?”

“Yes, but it was strange. First, he wasn’t going to show up, then he did. Then suddenly he had to leave, said he’d forgotten about an appointment.”

“Well, that’s easy enough to do. Especially if you’re as busy as you tell me he is.”

“Not Justin, he’s the most organized man I know. I’d say something scared him off, except I can’t think of a single thing that would frighten him that much.”

Pandora agreed with her friend. She seriously doubted that anything on the face of this earth could scare Justin Andrews.

\* \* \*

Six Months Later

“Jenny Rebecca Riley, you get down here right now!” Pandora stood at the bottom of the stairs and waited impatiently for her daughter. In her hand were pieces of broken glass wrapped up in a towel. Once a red rose, the glass flower had been a gift when she sold her first portrait.

“Hi Mom!” Her oldest stood there all sweetness and light. However, Pandora reminded herself, Jenny was six years old and looks could be deceiving.

The broken pieces of red glass looked like drops of blood against the white towel in her hand. “Do you know anything about this young lady?”

Her daughter looked genuinely surprised. “Auntie Abby’s rose! Who broke it?”

“You weren’t in my studio?” Pandora asked, almost afraid to hear the answer.

“No, Mom.” Her daughter’s red-haired ponytails bounced as she shook her head. “You told me I can’t go in there. Not unless you say I can.”

It wasn’t the first time there’d been an incident involving her studio. She’d found several items moved or missing in the past few weeks.

Jenny was right; she did not allow the children in her studio, at least not alone. However, like most six-year-olds, that never stopped her daughter. She watched her carefully as a growing uneasiness crept over Pandora.

“OK baby, I just wanted to be sure. It must have slipped off the shelf.”

“I didn't do it, Mom.”

“I know.” She kissed the top of her daughter's head. “Go on back to your room and play. I'll call you when it's time for dinner.”

As her daughter ran up the stairs one thought stuck in Pandora's mind: the shelves lining the walls were sturdy, not much would shake something off them. Which only left one question: If Jenny hadn't been in her studio, then who had?

A tiny knot of anxiety formed in her stomach. She forced herself to stay calm as she walked back to her studio. The last tenants had used the room off the kitchen as a sort of storage area. When they left, the owners had insulated it and put in new windows and heat. EZ had installed some shelves for her. It was bright and airy, perfect for her needs.

Entering it now, she checked the windows and the door, looking for signs that would tell her someone else had been there. She couldn't find any.

The phone rang, breaking the heavy silence. She jumped back against some canvases, reaching behind her to steady them before grabbing the phone.

She hesitated, her hand hovered momentarily over the receiver; should she answer it?

What if someone had been here and was calling to see if she was home?

What if Jenny answered it? She silently picked the receiver up and waited to hear who would speak.

“Hello, Pandora.”

Her knees almost buckled in relief when she recognized the voice on the other end. “Abigail.” She pulled a stool over to the counter and sat down.

“Is everything all right?”

“Of course, why wouldn't it be?” Pandora didn't want to worry her friend, especially since she wasn't totally convinced there was anything worth worrying over.

“You didn't speak right away, as if you weren't sure who would be on the other end of the line. I thought you were over that.”

"I am," she answered, because she'd thought that sort of behavior was long behind her. Joey Riley was dead and buried and she had no reason to fear anyone or anything. "I'm in the middle of something and wasn't paying attention."

"Something I can show in the gallery, I hope?"

"Sorry," Pandora hesitated, "It's something for the kids at school."

"Oh well, I can hope. Since the show, I get people coming in all the time asking for more of your work. Everything I have has been shipped off to Texas for the opening of the new gallery."

"I am working on more things, but nothing I can show just yet."

"As long as you're working. Let people think you're a *'temperamental artiste'* and I can get more money for your paintings."

"You wouldn't, by any chance, be trying to make me feel guilty?"

"Would I do that?"

"Yes," Pandora answered, "but I'll forgive you."

"Thank you. Anyway that's not the reason I called. I wanted to see if you can meet me for lunch tomorrow, my treat."

"Tomorrow?" Pandora looked up at the calendar on her wall. "I can't, that's my day at the school. Can we make it another time? Jenny's birthday is in three days. You didn't forget, did you?"

"I'll be there with bells on. I'll also have Grandmother in tow, if she's feeling better. She loves your children, but has a cold and doesn't want to give it to them."

"She's not the only one who spoils them," Pandora teased her friend.

"Yes, and if you didn't have children who just happen to be absolute angels, we wouldn't want to spoil them."

"I'm glad they have someone fooled," Pandora said. "I know better."

"I'm not the only one. The last time I took them to visit Grandmother, Justin came by and he was very taken with how smart Jenny is and how well behaved they both were."

"Thank you," Pandora answered quietly. The mention of Justin Andrews disturbed her composure at a time she didn't want it disturbed.

“So, what are you giving my oldest for her birthday?” she asked, hoping to change the subject.

\* \* \*

Justin pushed himself back from the table and patted his full stomach. “Abigail, I forgot what a great cook you are, I should have married you myself instead of letting this no good Texas prairie dog snag you.”

“You had your chance. Uncle Patrick kept telling you what a catch I was.”

“Yeah, I know. Pat always did tell me I would be sorry I didn't listen to him.” Abigail's Uncle Pat had been Justin's first sergeant when he came out of the police academy.

“He was right. See what you missed?” EZ came over and wrapped his arms around his bride. “You're too late now. Get your own wife.”

Justin shook his head: “I don't think so. I like my life the way it is right now, thank you,” he said, feigning interest in his drink. His friends had obviously found their way to happiness. But wedded bliss was not in his cards.

“You're sure?”

Justin raised his eyes to meet those of his friend. “I'm sure.”

“Well now, seems I remember saying that same thing not so long ago.” He gave his wife a kiss before turning to his friend. “I'd watch it if I were you. Some long-legged blonde is going to come along and knock your socks off.”

It wasn't a long-legged blonde who flashed across Justin's mind, but a petite black-haired beauty. A fairy-child, that was just what Pandora Riley reminded him of. A tiny ethereal sprite ready to cast her spell on the nearest unsuspecting human.

“I spoke with Pandora last night,” Abigail cut in. “Grandmother and I will see her and the children the day after tomorrow. It's Jenny's birthday.”

He wondered if she'd read his mind. “How old is Miss Jenny Rebecca?”

Abigail and her husband exchanged knowing glances. “Six going on forty.”

“She certainly is inquisitive,” Justin said, thinking of the million and one questions she always asked when he saw her.

Abigail and EZ laughed in agreement.

He first saw Pandora the night of her show at Abigail's gallery. He'd been talking to Abigail and EZ when he sensed someone watching him. Turning, he noticed Pandora across the room. The attraction he felt was so instant and intense he left before Abigail could introduce them.

Since then, he'd done a little discreet investigating of his own into Pandora Riley. Shortly after that show, Pandora had called Abigail, hysterical because she thought someone had been in the house.

Then, of course, there was EZ and Abigail's wedding; his reaction to her that night had been all too human and anything but gentlemanly. He had stopped to say goodnight to Abigail's grandmother Celia and she insisted he dance with Pandora. He never could refuse the old woman anything.

He asked Abigail, "Has she had any more problems?"

"Not that I know of."

"I told you she was probably imagining things. Anyone who's gone through what she's had is allowed to get a bit nervous sometimes."

Abigail had told him something of her friend's story, the abuse, physical and emotional, inflicted on both Pandora and her daughter. As far as Justin was concerned, the man was just where he should be. Six feet under and hopefully burning in hell.

"I suppose you're right," Abigail agreed.

The rest of the evening progressed without further mention of Pandora Riley.

Later, EZ walked out to the car with him. Justin leaned against the door and asked; "OK, what's on your mind?"

EZ laughed. "I never could fool you."

"No, so don't try now. You walked me out here for a reason. What is it?" Justin asked a second time.

"We're leaving for Texas soon, and I know Abigail is going to worry about Pandora and the kids. I really would appreciate it if you kept an eye on them."

"Why? Are they in trouble?"

"No, but you know how Abigail is. And I really don't need her to be worrying right now."

Justin looked at his friend quizzically. "Is everything all right? She's not sick or anything is she?"

"No, not exactly."

"What do you mean not exactly?" He folded his arms across his chest. "Are you hiding something from me?"

A grin crossed EZ's face. "How would you like to be a godfather?"

It took a minute for the message to sink in but when it did, Justin shook his friend's hand and slapped him on the back. "That's great! When?"

"In about six months. The doctor said Abigail is healthy and I shouldn't worry. Hell, he even recommended a doctor in Texas if we ever need one, so we're covered all around."

"Then don't worry. I'm sure she'll be fine." He got into his car. "Tell her I'll keep an eye on Pandora and the kids."

"Good, that will be a relief for her. She's already told Pandora to call you if we're not here and she needs anything."

Justin just shook his head, "What if I had said no?"

"You wouldn't," EZ smiled

"What makes you so sure, my friend?"

"We both know you always were a sucker for a lady in trouble."

EZ was right, Justin reflected as he drove home. Just one problem: his armor happened to be tarnished. Any man who couldn't even save his own wife certainly didn't deserve another one.

## Chapter Two

“Miss Riley, Miss Riley!” Children surrounded Pandora the minute she entered the classroom, each of them wanting her immediate attention. Two afternoons a week she worked at the school: one day she helped out in the office, and one day she taught the first grade art class.

“They get so excited when they know you're coming.”

Pandora helped Sister Mary, the first grade teacher, unload the heavy tote bag. “I'm sure having Jenny in the class doesn't help any either. I know my daughter, and she's probably been talking about it all day.”

The two women shared a laugh. “Maybe just a little.”

“I think more than a little, Sister.” She took a box of paintbrushes out of the bag.

“I don't mind. She's such a smart child and you do so much for all the children.”

“That's debatable, Sister.” Pandora felt the truth was just the opposite. The children did so much for her. She loved the classes and the children. She loved watching them create things, the looks on their faces as they colored or painted, or just talked to her or each other.

If she had her way she'd have a house full of children. But it wasn't meant to be. Pandora had never been one to dwell on what she couldn't change and she was not about to start now.

She and Sister Mary passed out the art supplies. “OK kids, it's going to be time for winter vacation soon. Today, I want you to draw me a picture of what you would like to do during your vacation.”

The afternoon sped by as she helped the children. The bell rang just as she was hanging the last picture in their makeshift gallery at the back of the room. Pandora dismissed the class, watching the

children leave before turning to the clean up job.

She put Jenny and her friend Tina to work washing the paintbrushes as she packed the pencils and crayons back in the tote bag. The two girls were whispering and giggling the way little girls do when they're together. Once finished, they ran across the room to Pandora holding the brushes out for inspection.

"Look Mom, we did a good job, didn't we?" Jenny asked.

"We're good helpers, right Miss Riley?" Tina smiled up at her.

She took her time inspecting the brushes because she knew it was expected of her. The girls had more water on their plastic aprons than anywhere else. "Yes, darling, you and Tina are the best helpers ever."

"Then can Tina come back to our house and play, please?"

Tina's mom, Sandi, watched Pandora's son Zach on the afternoons that Pandora volunteered at the school. Next to Abigail, she was probably Pandora's closest friend.

"I don't know, Jenny."

"Please Mom, we promise to stay out of your studio, and we promise not to bother Zach."

"We'll have to see what Tina's mom says." She was glad to see Jenny making friends, wanting them to come over and play. It was even better to have a place she wasn't afraid to have people visit.

Pandora knew there was more than one type of abuse. While he had never laid a hand on his daughter, her ex still managed to do some damage. Luckily, by the time she found out she was pregnant with Zach, Joey was in jail awaiting trial and she had already started divorce proceedings. He'd never seen his son and that was fine with her.

During their stay in the shelter, Jenny had clung to her, reluctant to make friends. It was only after they were settled into a house and a routine that things began to change. As she watched the two friends dance around the room, Pandora wished she could keep them this happy always. However, one painful lesson she learned early in life was that there were no guarantees.

"All right girls, let's go," Pandora said, giving them each a box to carry back to the school office where she stored her supplies. She held the door open and they headed down the hall.



\* \* \*

Sandi, a part-time real estate agent, had a house to show that evening. So having Tina over to play turned into having Tina over for dinner. Pandora agreed to watch Tina until Sandi finished.

Standing in the doorway, between the living room and the kitchen, she indulged herself in watching her children. Zach sat between his sister and Tina as the three of them watched a video. He adored his big sister and seemed happiest when he was with her.

The phone rang calling Pandora back into the kitchen. She reached for it while absentmindedly pouring macaroni into the boiling water. "Hello?"

At first there was no sound on the other end. Then, just before she hung up she heard it: low at first, as if it was far away, but it soon grew louder.

That song, his song, the *Twelfth of Never!*

The spoon she'd just picked up clattered from her hand into the pot, splattering boiling water everywhere.

Pandora jumped back in shock, knocking a glass pan off the counter and on to the floor where it shattered into a million pieces.

A scream caught in her throat. This had to be someone's idea of a sick joke and she refused to listen. Slamming the phone down, she hoped it hurt the eardrums of whoever was on the other end. She tried to calm herself, taking deep controlled breaths, the way she'd been taught in her yoga class.

"Mom?"

Pandora whirled around to see Jenny standing in the doorway, wide-eyed with fear. "What's the matter, baby?" She stepped around the broken glass and scooped Jenny up into her arms. "Are you all right? What about Zach and Tina?"

"I came out to get some juice, I heard something crash and I got scared."

"Oh sweetie, it's OK, I knocked the pan onto the floor." Pandora stroked her daughter's hair. "It's OK."

"I thought Daddy was here. It sounded like the crash the night he broke my doll."

Pandora's heart stopped; she took another deep breath before speaking again. "Jenny, sweetie,

remember I explained about Daddy and how he was gone and could never hurt us again?" She silently cursed the man to hell for what he'd done to his family.

Jenny nodded her head solemnly. "You said he died."

"That's right." She smiled at her daughter's fractured pronunciation.

"Sister Mary said that people who do bad things don't get to go to heaven when they died."

Her big brown eyes looked sadly at her mother.

"Sister Mary is right," Pandora answered quietly.

"Does that mean Daddy's not in heaven?"

"Do you want your daddy to be in heaven?" She waited anxiously for the answer.

Jenny poked her lower lip out in a pout and shook her head. "No. He's bad. He hit you and made you cry, and he yelled at me and broke my doll."

Pandora hugged her daughter tighter. "Oh sweetie, it doesn't matter where daddy is. All that matters is he'll never hurt us again."

"I'm glad."

"So am I, Sweetheart." She gave her one last hug before putting her back down. "Now why don't you go in with Tina and your little brother. I'll bring in your juice."

"Okay." Jenny headed toward the other room, at the doorway she stopped and ran back to her mother and wrapped her arms around her mother's legs. "I love you lots, Mom."

"I love you lots, Jenny Rebecca," Pandora whispered as she stroked her daughter's hair. "Now, scoot. You're not supposed to leave company alone."

Jenny giggled, "Tina's not alone. She's with Zach!" She ran into the living room still giggling.

Sweeping the shattered glass off the floor she thought of what Jenny had said. Pandora remembered all too well the night her daughter spoke of. It was the night she had finally gotten the courage to leave her husband, because for the first time, it wasn't just her he had threatened. That night he'd threatened to beat Jenny as well. She rubbed the scar on her thigh where he'd sliced her as she tried to run away.

That night she vowed her daughter would never have to live through the hell that she had for

over ten years.

\* \* \*

Later, with Tina long gone and the children in bed, Pandora entered her studio. Removing the covering from the canvas she was working on, she studied it for a while but had trouble concentrating. The phone call earlier disturbed her more than she wanted to admit. Not a word had been spoken. All she'd heard was music. That's all she needed to hear. It was the song she had first danced to with her husband, Joey. It had to be a coincidence, or someone's idea of a sick joke.

She looked again at the canvas. It was a portrait of her friend Abigail with her husband, EZ. She had done the painting from a picture taken on their wedding day. Looking at the picture she could almost believe in true love and happily ever after. Unfortunately she'd given up on that kind of love a long time ago.

A picture flashed into her mind of Justin Andrews and the way he looked at the wedding, in his black tux. Every woman in the room had watched him as he came toward the table where she'd been sitting with Abigail's grandmother. Although she had spoken with him on the phone, it had been the first time she'd seen him since that night at the gallery. Once again she felt that pull, the same one that she'd felt that night.

She returned to reality with a shake of her head and glanced once again at the canvas. The picture would soon be finished. However, she realized she would not get any more work done tonight.

Covering the canvas, she checked all the windows and the one door in the room. Satisfied they were all locked, she left the studio and went upstairs to bed. Only sleep was a long time in coming.

\* \* \*

The phone rang and rang and rang. Maybe no one would be home. She could only hope. Then at least she could honestly tell Jenny she'd tried.

"Hello?" a worn female voice answered.

*Damn!* "Hello Mother Riley. It's Pandora."

"Why hello dear, it's good to hear from you. How are the children?"

"They're fine, actually that's the reason I'm calling."

"Isn't Jenny's birthday soon?"

"Yes, I'm having a party for her and some of her school friends. She wanted me to call and invite you and Joe. She'd really like you to join us."

"I don't know..."

Pandora cringed at the dismally defeated tone in her ex-mother-in-law's voice.

"You don't have to answer now, you can call me later."

A booming voice loud enough to shatter an eardrum interrupted the conversation. "I thought I told you not to call here!"

Pandora took a deep breath; this was for Jenny, she told herself, who happened to be this man's granddaughter, even if he didn't want the role.

"Good morning, Joe. I thought you might want to spend some time with your granddaughter. She'll be seven soon, and really wanted her grandparents to help her celebrate her birthday."

"Yeah. Well, she'll have to learn that you can't always get what you want. I want my oldest son alive and here with me, but I ain't going to get it – thanks to you, bitch."

"You know, Joe," she sighed, "I really thought we could lay aside our differences for one afternoon. Your only granddaughter wants her grandparents there to celebrate with her."

"You want me to forget the fact that in my old age, if I live that long, my oldest son won't be there to help take care of me? Maybe I'll explain to Jenny that the reason her daddy isn't around is because her mother killed him. If he ever really was her daddy."

She knew Joe would still be angry but she had hoped some of that anger would have dissipated by now. "Forget it, Joe, I shouldn't have called." The Riley men stayed angry. She should have known better than to think he, of all of them, might change.

"Damn right you shouldn't have called. And don't do it again. If I see you or your kids anywhere near my house or my wife, I'll make you sorry."

She winced when he slammed the phone in her ear. She shouldn't have even tried, but Jenny wanted them at her party, especially her grandmother.

\* \* \*

Pandora rushed through the mall, arms loaded down with bags. There was still much to do before Jenny's party tomorrow. The invitations had been passed out; she and Jenny made the list up together. Her friend Sandi would be there to help her set things up.

She'd taken the bus out to the Boston suburb, to this particular mall because it happened to be the only one where she could get the particular doll Jenny wanted.

Pushing the door open with her hip, she fought her way through the biting cold and wind toward the bus stop. A million and one thoughts crowded her mind as she mentally went over her list. Cake. Ordered it. Party favors. Got them. Napkins, plates and cups...

Lost in thought Pandora almost missed the flash of something speeding toward her. She scrambled back onto the sidewalk just in time.

A black sedan sped by so close she was buffeted by the rush of air left in its wake.

Clamping her eyes closed, she fought the wave of nausea threatening to overtake her. If she'd been one second slower. Dropping her bags, she began shaking uncontrollably.

A mall security guard pulled up in his car. "Lady, are you OK?" He got out and picked up the bags she'd dropped. A crowd of people began gathering. "I saw the car, but couldn't get the make or a plate number. What about anyone else?" he asked.

"I did. The idiot drove a black Buick but I couldn't catch the plates," a man said.

Pandora almost dropped her bags a second time when she heard that. *Joey's car*. It had to be a coincidence. Joey was dead. How many black Buicks were there in Boston alone, never mind the surrounding suburbs?

The security guard insisted she fill out a report. By the time she'd finished, darkness enveloped the parking lot as she crossed it once again toward the bus stop. Even though she was not alone, the guard had insisted on accompanying her, an uneasiness crept its way slowly up her back.

She recognized the feeling; as well she should, after all, she'd lived with it most of her married life.

Luckily, the bus approached as they crossed the almost empty lot. Thanking the guard, she gave one last look around before boarding the bus. As she settled herself and her packages in a seat she

reminded herself once again that her ex-husband was dead and could no longer hurt her or her children.

\* \* \*

Paper cups and plates, torn crepe paper and balloons spilled over the table and onto the floor. Six little girls, each of whom looked as if butter would melt in their mouths, had totally decimated her kitchen. Pandora could not be happier. All in all the party had been a total success, she told herself as she picked bits of broken balloon and torn streamers off the floor. Her shoes stuck to the floor, sticky from soda and ice cream, but she didn't care one bit. Jenny told her that this had been her best birthday ever and that's all that mattered. The floor she would wash later.

Sitting down with a cup of tea she decided to enjoy a few minutes of peace and quiet before she began cleaning up. Zach lay in bed sound asleep, exhausted from chasing the girls all afternoon. Abigail offered to help with the cleanup but Jenny wanted her Auntie Abigail to help her with her bath.

Auntie Abigail, soon to be mommy Abigail. She'd arrived alone; her grandmother had planned to accompany her but the older woman still hadn't recovered from a cold and didn't want to pass it onto the children. Abigail on the other hand had hardly taken her coat off when she began telling everything to Pandora. She was three months pregnant! Pandora remembered when she first discovered she'd been pregnant with Jenny. At least Abigail's marriage and pregnancy would be a lot happier than her own had been.

A knock on the front door interrupted her thoughts; who could it be? She wasn't expecting anyone. Apprehensive, she walked to the door, looked through the peephole and groaned. It was her mother-in-law, or should she say, ex-mother-in-law.

With a sigh, Pandora opened the door, "Hello, Mother Riley." She kept her voice as cold as the night air, standing in the doorway, refusing to move, not allowing the woman across the threshold. The Rileys had upset her daughter once already, she wouldn't let them do it again. "Nice of you to drop by."

"Pandora." The woman's voice trembled as she nervously looked past Pandora into the house. "Have the children gone to bed?"

"Yes, they have." She wondered what brought the older woman here at this hour. Joe must not know where she had gone; he definitely wouldn't have allowed it.

The older woman nervously fidgeted with the bag in her hands, her eyes darting left and right as if she thought someone would jump out of the bushes at her. Pandora wondered what was going on. Mother Riley never did a thing without her husband's permission.

"Is there something I can help you with?" she asked.

"I just wanted to leave this...for Jenny." She held out a bag with a gaily-wrapped package inside. "I wanted to come this afternoon but Joe..."

She didn't have to say more. Pandora didn't even have to imagine what Joe Riley had said, and did. She'd seen it often enough: after hanging up on Pandora, he'd probably taken all his anger out on his wife. Her ex had been exactly like his father.

Pandora looked over the older woman. She could see no obvious bruises, but they were there, she knew that from bitter experience. Joe was too good; he'd be sure no one could see the bruises, unless they knew where to look. Pandora knew where to look. However, she knew her mother-in-law would never leave her husband, no matter how much he beat her. Sighing deeply, she took the bag out of the other woman's hands. "I'll be sure she gets it. Thank you for coming by."

The woman hesitated. "I...didn't want Jenny to think I'd forgotten her birthday."

"I explained to her that her grandfather was not feeling well." She saw no need to tell her about the tears her daughter had shed, or how she'd struggled for an answer when Jenny asked if her grandparents still loved her.

"That's probably for the best." A flash of pain crossed the older woman's face, and she glanced around as if she expected to have her husband burst out from behind the bushes. "I'd better get home. Joe thinks I went to the supermarket."

"Yes," Pandora agreed with her. *We don't want to get him angry.*

Before she realized what was happening, the older woman leaned over and hugged Pandora tight. Just as suddenly, she turned and headed down the stairs. At the bottom, she stopped and looked back at Pandora. "You know dear, I really wish things had ended differently." Not waiting for a reply, she rushed to her car.

Pandora stood silently watching as the car drove away. It wasn't until the headlight disappeared

around the corner that she whispered, "So do I."



### Chapter Three

Justin sat in the living room of his apartment, allegedly poring over the crossword puzzle. Strains of a Puccini aria played softly in the background, a tumbler of single malt scotch within easy reach. As the lights of the city spread out below him; he did his best to relax. At least that was what he was telling himself. However, not more than two or three boxes had been filled in, and he'd been sitting there at least an hour.

Why was he still strung tighter than a violin? He'd been that way ever since he'd been to EZ and Abigail's house for dinner. The night he was asked to be godfather to their unborn child.

He would never forget the look on EZ's face, the elation, and the anticipation. Justin had that look once; he'd experienced the joy that came with it. When Joanne had first announced she was pregnant. The plans they had made, the dreams they had for their son. Dreams that would never be.

Born prematurely, his son Ben had been given lots of medicines to help him survive and grow, it was an unexpected reaction to one of these medications that killed him. His wife had never recovered and while her death had been officially ruled an accident, he knew better.

Thinking of Ben made him think of Jenny Riley and her brother Zach, which led to thoughts of their mother, Pandora. The last time he had seen her was at EZ and Abigail's wedding. He had gone to say good night to her grandmother but the older woman had other plans for him that night. She had decided he should dance with Pandora. He had known Abigail's grandmother long enough that he would not even try and argue with her.

Giving a crooked smile, he'd held his hand out to Pandora. "Shall we Ms. Riley?"

She'd refused. "No, I don't dance. Thank you anyway."

“Neither does Justin.” Grandmother Celia had said. “All the more reason for the two of you to dance together.”

He'd looked down at her, “I promise not to step on your feet too much.”

She had that deer in the headlights look, and for a minute he thought she would walk away. Instead, she took his hand and let him lead her onto the dance floor. He turned and put an arm around her waist. Slowly, he led her around the dance floor, which was not easy, as she was as stiff as a board.

He pulled her a little closer and bent down to whisper in her ear. “Relax. If you need a character reference EZ will vouch for me, as will Abigail.”

She looked up at him and much to his surprise, she smiled. “She already did.”

“Oh, have you two been talking about me?” Inexplicably, the idea of the two women discussing him made him feel enormously happy.

“Just enough to know that you can be a gentleman, most of the time.” She stepped closer and he could feel her relax a little. He moved his arm from her waist up to the center of her back. He was almost eight inches taller and when she laid her cheek against his chest he just wanted to gather her in his arms and hold her close. “Hardly gentlemanly thoughts.” He mumbled, not realizing he had spoken aloud until she looked up at him.

“What did you say?” she asked.

“Nothing,” he murmured. Luckily the music stopped and he escorted her back to the table.

The clanging of the phone jarred him back from the past. “Andrews!” he barked into the receiver.

“Justin, it's Abigail.”

He sat up straight at the tension in her voice. “What's wrong Sweetheart? Are you all right? Where's EZ?”

“I'm fine. EZ's on his way to pick you up. I'm at Pandora's. Someone's been in her studio. She wouldn't let me call the police. I convinced her to at least talk to you and EZ.”

“Has anything been touched?” he asked, already knowing the answer.

“Not that I know of. Whoever did this left a calling card. She's trying not to show it but

Pandora is really shaken up.”

His doorbell rang. “There’s EZ. We’ll be there shortly. Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. Pandora is upstairs with the children. I already checked the doors and windows down here. Nothing looks forced.”

“Good girl, just try and keep her calm. We’ll see you soon.” He hung up and strapped on his shoulder holster, taking his 9mm Glock out of the cabinet, making sure it was loaded before securing it in the holster. Grabbing his leather jacket out of the closet he rushed out the door.

\* \* \*

*You thought you were safe, but you’re not. You’ve never been safe. It would have been so easy to kill you that day at the mall. Too easy. I want you to suffer, just as I’ve suffered. It’s not your time yet, soon, but not now. I think I need to play a little cat and mouse first, you need to know just how easy it is for me to find you. To get you.*

\* \* \*

Pandora paced the living room floor.

“They’ll be here shortly.” Abigail patted the seat next to her on the sofa. “Sit down and try to relax.”

“How long could it take two men to drive across town?” she said, looking out the window again.

Abigail’s husband EZ and his friend Justin were partners in a security agency. When she discovered the break in Abigail wanted to call the police. Pandora was afraid it would disturb her kids, she had agreed to let her call the two men in and see what they had to say. Abigail hoped they would convince her friend to call the police.

“Mom?” Jenny’s tiny voice called up from the stairway.

This was the last thing she wanted, if Jenny knew her uncle EZ was on the way, she’d never go back to bed. “What’s wrong baby?”

“I can’t sleep.”

Abigail came out to the hallway. “Is everything all right?”

“Auntie Abigail, you’re still here!” Jenny ran down the stairs.

"You should be in bed, young lady."

"My tummy hurts."

"I'm not surprised with all the cake you had today."

"Will you read me another story, please?"

"Jenny, Abigail doesn't need to read you another story." Pandora stepped between the two.  
"You do need to be in bed."

"I don't mind." Abigail took Jenny's hand. "Come on sweetie. One story and then you'd better fall asleep."

Pandora watched them climb the stairs, briefly considering following them, but her doorbell was broken and she would not hear EZ and Justin when they arrived.

She went out to the kitchen and into the studio; just inside she had a cabinet full of her art supplies. Taking a plastic sleeve out she removed an Exacto knife. She knew the knife could just as easily be used against her as protect her. The scar on her leg attested to that. But she had to feel like she was doing something other than pacing.

*Why is this happening to me?* she thought, cutting another path around the room. All she'd ever wanted was a family of her own, a husband, two kids and the Great American Happily-ever-after. She thought she'd achieved it once, but she'd been wrong.

She looked up the stairs toward the bedrooms where at least one of her children slept soundly. She had the kids, but she'd given up on happily-ever-after a long time ago. At least for herself. However, she would move heaven and earth, and do everything in her power to be sure her babies got theirs.

\* \* \*

They split up – each walking around one side of the house looking for any signs of entry. It didn't matter what, any little thing that even remotely resembled a clue. Silently they passed each other at the back of the house, then doubling back over the others' work, they met on the front porch.

"Anything?" Justin asked EZ.

"Nope. What about you?"

“Zip. The dirt by the studio door looks disturbed but it’s hard to tell in the dark.”

“We can check once we’re inside. That door opens directly into her studio.”

EZ reached over and knocked on the door. They heard footsteps cross the floor and then, nothing.

He knocked a second time before speaking. “Pandora, darlin’ open the door, please.”

They heard the sound of the lock sliding and then the door opened. Dressed in leggings and a T-shirt, with her hair pulled back in a ponytail, Pandora looked even tinier and younger than he remembered. Right now she looked more like a teenager than the mother of two. A scared mother of two, but proud and defiant, as if she could deny what her rigid body and clenched fist told them. She stepped aside to let them in.

The two men entered and Justin shut the door behind them. EZ pried the knife from her white-knuckle grip and placed it down on the table. He gathered her into a quick hug and stepped back, keeping a hand on each shoulder, he looked down into her eyes. “Are you all right, darlin’?”

She nodded and stepped back. “Thank you for coming,” she glanced quickly at Justin and then to EZ. “Both of you.”

“It’s no problem,” Justin said, looking around the hallway and into the rooms, for what, he wasn’t entirely sure.

“I doubt you’ll find anything, but you’re welcome to take a look,” Pandora said to EZ.

“Let us be the judge of that one.” He looked around the entry hall. “Where’s my wife?”

“Right here.” Abigail came down the stairs and headed straight into her husband’s embrace. “Keep your voice down, cowboy.” She turned to Pandora. “She finally fell asleep half way through the story.”

“Thanks, I’m sorry you had to do that.”

“It’s not a problem. As long as these two don’t wake her up.”

“We’ll try not to,” EZ replied, leading his wife into the kitchen.

Pandora watched them walk toward the kitchen; EZ’s arm lay protectively around Abigail’s shoulders. How different her life would have been if she’d met someone like EZ, instead of Joey Riley.

Then she glanced over at Justin; her eyes widened in astonishment at the pain evident on his face as he watched his friends. She knew that look; she had seen it enough on her own face. The look of dreams lost, never to be found again. He had loved someone once, just as intently as EZ loved Abigail. Suddenly, Justin Andrews became a little less dangerous and maybe just a little more human.

He looked over at her as if he sensed her watching him. Just as suddenly as she'd seen it, the look disappeared.

"How about putting that knife away?" he asked.

"What?" she answered quizzically.

"The knife." He nodded toward the instrument on the table. "Why don't you put it away? Unless, you intend on using it tonight?"

"Oh!" Understanding cleared through the fog in her mind. "No, I'll put it back." She blushed and picked it up, quickly following EZ and Abigail into the kitchen. His deep gravelly voice shouldn't affect her but it did. After all it wasn't as if she hadn't spoken with him before.

The first time was months ago. She'd entered her studio one night shortly after her first showing, to find several things missing. She had called Abigail at a dinner party she'd been attending. She insisted on telling Justin and he'd called her as well.

At the time Justin and EZ had been working on a case involving art smuggling. The same case that had bought EZ and Abigail together.

Justin had been able to convince her that maybe she'd been over-reacting. Especially when she found the missing items a few days later in a cabinet in her studio. Now she wasn't so sure.

Pandora slipped the knife back into its sleeve and turned to find Justin watching her. "Left over from Jenny's birthday?" he teased, holding a bright red streamer in one hand and the remains of a balloon in the other.

She snatched them out of his hands and threw them in the trash. "I sort of let the kids get carried away."

"That's what birthdays are for," he answered.

"They certainly are." He had that strange look on his face again. Yes indeed, Justin was turning

into something of a puzzle. She pointed toward the half open door to the other room where Abigail and EZ could be heard talking. “My studio is in there, Mr. Andrews.”

“After you, Mrs. Riley.” He bowed and waved her ahead of him.

She stopped and turned on him. “My name is not Mrs. Riley!”

“Sorry.” He raised his hands in surrender. “If you don’t like the name, why didn’t you take your maiden name back? A lot of women do now.”

“I thought it would be too confusing for the children.”

He nodded, “I can understand that.”

“So, I answer to Miss Riley, Ms. Riley or Pandora.”

“I’ll try and remember that.” He motioned her toward the door. “After you, Pandora.”

He watched her cross the room and stopped at the entrance to her studio.

She took a deep breath, straightened her back.

He could see the battle going on in her head. Who, or what had done this to her? Had she simply exchanged one horror for another?

“You know,” he offered, stopping her just before she crossed the threshold, “you don’t have to go in there, just yet. I can have Abigail come out to stay with you while EZ and I take a look around.”

“No,” she said straightening up even more, as she turned to him. “I can do this. It’s my problem, and I have to face it.”

That was when Justin realized EZ had been right all those times he told him he was a sucker for a lady in trouble. Watching Pandora now, he knew someone had indeed broken into her home, he would do anything in his power to help find whoever it was. He reached around her pushed the door open. “Ladies, first.”

EZ stood by a bunch of canvases leaning against the wall. Next to them, the door leading to the yard stood open letting the cold winter air in.

Pandora placed the knife back in the cabinet. Grabbing the sweater she kept in her studio, she wrapped it around her.

“Come over here and look at this.” EZ stood in front of a door that had been locked almost since

the day she moved in here.

The lock had been broken and the door stood slightly open.

“Don’t worry about it,” Justin said, putting a hand on her arm. “Whoever did this had to be good, as well as clever to open it in such a way not to disturb things too much. We noticed the dirt outside had been disturbed or we might have missed this as well.”

Pandora doubted Justin missed much of anything. His hand felt hot against her skin and the look in his eyes were making her feel things she shouldn’t be feeling. Certainly not now.

Pulling away, she began moving things around, pacing the studio, pushing tables to one side and back again.

Abigail, EZ and Justin stood by silently waiting. Pandora took some canvases from one side of the room and moved them to the other. “When I first left Joey, I was scared. But I really had no choice, did I?”

Abigail stepped forward to help her but Justin held a hand out to stop her. Silently he shook his head. She stepped back.

Pandora continued, moving boxes away from the windows. “Jenny didn’t like the shelter, but I convinced her we’d be safe there. Still, she never left my side, and we slept with the lights on for months afterward.”

She began rearranging the paints on the shelf next to the easel. “Before we left the shelter, Abigail helped me find an apartment, then I discovered I was pregnant. After Zach was born, we moved here, and Jenny finally started feeling like she had a home. When I told her Joey had died, she stopped sleeping with the light on. I had promised she would be safe here.”

The jar of red paint she held in her hands dropped, splattering like blood over the floor. She began shaking and tears poured down her face. “What am I going to tell her now?” she said looking from Abigail to EZ to Justin. “Listen to me, I sound like a hysterical female.” She pleaded to her friend, “You know I never get hysterical.” Grabbing a rag off a table, she began wiping the spill off the floor.

“Give me that.” EZ knelt down next to her. “I’ll take care of it.” He helped her stand, looking



to his wife for help.

“Come on, sweetie.” Abigail put her arm around her friend. “Let’s leave the guys to their job.” She steered her toward the kitchen, nodding toward the box sitting on the table, making sure Justin saw it before she left the room.

He walked over and put on a pair of gloves before he lifted the cover. Inside lay a doll baby, all gowned up in a white dress.

A headless doll baby.

## Chapter Four

Justin had carefully lifted the doll out of its tissue paper bed with one hand before he noticed the head lying beneath the tissue paper. He picked it up and held it to the light. Then he did the same to the doll's body, looking for what, he really didn't know.

"Apparently, our visitor likes to leave presents," he said as he carefully placed the doll back in its box.

"As far as we know this is the first one," EZ answered.

"The first visit?" Justin removed the gloves and not seeing a trash can anywhere, he put them back in his pocket. "What about that incident a few months ago?"

EZ winced at the mention of that. Justin should have known better. He and EZ had been in the middle of an investigation then and using Abigail's apartment for their stake-out. She had not wanted to tell him about Pandora's phone call. That and several other factors almost tore their new love affair to shreds.

"I thought we'd decided to treat that one time as a coincidence?" EZ asked.

"Once is a coincidence, twice is something entirely different."

"Abigail tells me that she thinks Pandora is hiding something. There may have been more, and she's afraid to tell us."

"Afraid of what?" Justin shook his head. "We're only trying to help."

"I know that. But she has been through a lot and let's face it, she hasn't exactly had reason to trust people like us, has she?"

"What do you mean people like us? Police?"

“No. Men. It took her months before she would even be in a room alone with me.”

Justin knew enough of Pandora’s history to understand what his friend meant. When that first incident occurred, he’d done some investigating on his own into Ms. Pandora Riley.

He shook his head again, remembering the look on her face when they’d arrived tonight, and the knife in her hand. “Whoever did this had to have been watching her for awhile. They may have even been in the house before.”

“They sure enough knew where to break in,” EZ said.

“Not only that, they knew where to leave this.” He nodded at the box. “They wanted to be sure she would be the one to find it and not the children. It wasn’t left in a usual place like the kitchen or her bedroom, but a place that they knew she’d more than likely be alone.”

“I wonder if there is some significance to the doll,” EZ pondered.

“There’s only one person who can tell us that.” Justin picked the box up and headed toward the kitchen.

They found the two women at the table talking quietly. Pandora’s back was to them, but when Abigail looked up she stood and turned to face them. Tears still streaked her face.

“Did you find anything else?” she asked.

“Just this.” Justin sat down across from Pandora, taking the box from behind his back, he laid it on the table between them.

He felt lower than slime when the blood drained from her face and she slowly sat back down in the chair. But he had to know.

She turned away from the box and when she spoke her voice was cold and exact. “I want that out of my house, now!”

He had to admire her; the thing obviously bothered her but she held in there.

Justin handed the box to EZ.

The silence in the room could be cut with a knife; still, Justin waited for an explanation. Thankfully, neither EZ nor Abigail decided to challenge him. Then, finally, Pandora spoke.

“My daughter had one like it, once.” She had turned around again and sat staring at the spot on

the table where the box had been. "It broke and we threw it away." She stared at him, daring him to argue with her.

"Hey, I'm on your side, remember?" Justin said, holding up his hands in front of him.

"I'm sorry," she apologized, looking around the room at the three of them. "I know you're trying to help me but I have no idea who is doing this or why!"

"I know that." Justin toned his voice down, not wanting to upset her any further. "And we're going to find the answer for you, but we'll need your help."

"Of course."

"Why don't we start with the party this afternoon. Who were the guests? I need names and addresses."

Before answering, she looked over at Abigail who had been unsuccessfully trying to cover a yawn. "You don't have to stay. Why don't you go on home? You need your rest, especially now."

"Ah, she's told you then." EZ stood next to his wife.

"Yes she did and I intend to spoil this child as much as you two have spoiled mine. It's only fair."

"You'll get no argument from me." EZ turned to his wife. "She's right darlin'. Justin and I can handle things here."

Abigail looked like she would give them an argument but surprisingly, she changed her mind. "Fine, but first I need to talk to you and Justin."

"What for?" EZ and Justin said at the same time.

EZ put a hand on his wife's shoulders, "Can it wait until tomorrow?"

"No, it can't. I want to hire you."

"What?"

"You heard me, I want to officially hire you and Justin, or I should say your company, to guard Pandora and the children. And to find out what or who the idiot is doing this."

"Excuse me?" Pandora interrupted them. "Don't I have a say in this?"

"Not this time. I'll only worry about you the whole time I'm gone. Grandmother will worry

about you until we return. Unless you want to upset an old lady as well as a pregnant one, you'll agree."

Pandora let out a deep sigh, "You don't play fair, do you?"

"Not when it comes to those she loves, darlin'," EZ replied, "so you best agree."

"Fine, but I want to pay you back."

"We'll discuss that later." Abigail bent down and kissed her friend on the cheek before turning to her husband. "Come on, cowboy, walk me out to my car. If you play your cards right you might get a little necking in before I go home."

"Can't pass up an offer like that now, can I?" Taking the box, he followed his wife outside leaving Justin and Pandora alone.

\* \* \*

As they walked down the stairs, EZ took a flashlight out of his pocket. At the end of the walkway, he took the car keys from his wife. "Wait here, darlin'."

Slowly, he walked around the vehicle, checking every inch of it inside and out. Looking under every nook and cranny, even getting on his belly and checking under the car before he started it and turned the heater on. "OK," he motioned to his wife.

She walked over to him, put her arms around his neck and kissed him, long and deep, the kind of kiss that led her to her current state. "I love you, cowboy," she said when she finally broke away.

"Ma'am, would you be trying to seduce me?"

"Not here cowboy, too cold. But if you wake me up when you get home we may be able to negotiate something."

"I'll keep that in mind." Helping her into the car, he leaned into the window. "You know, you didn't have to hire us. We would have assigned someone to watch her anyway."

"But I don't want just anyone watching her, I want Justin."

"Are you trying to play matchmaker, woman?" he growled at her.

"No, I am not! You know me better than that. I just want my friend to be safe and Justin is the best man for the job. Next to you, of course."

"Thank you, ma'am." He gave her a quick kiss.

"Of course, if they should spend enough time together, maybe they will come to realize they really are the best match for each other." Giving a wave, she promised to call him when she got home and drove off, leaving EZ shaking his head.

\* \* \*

Pandora hated the way she felt, nervous to be alone with this man. She shouldn't be, she was just as safe with Justin as she would have been with EZ. Or was she?

EZ never made her feel things Justin did. EZ never gave her butterflies in her stomach or started that warm feeling in her belly when he sat next to her. She watched as Justin took a little notebook out from inside his jacket. When his jacket opened, she got a glance at the shoulder holster.

"Do you always wear that?" she asked with a shudder. Joey used to have a gun in the house, at least that was what he told her. She had never seen it, even though he threatened to use it on her more than once.

"I do when I'm working," he said with a shrug. "I don't like it but it's part of the job."

She wrapped her arms around her middle. Taking deep breaths, she forced herself to stop shaking. She had survived hell. She would survive this.

Squaring her shoulders, she looked at Justin. "I'm fine," she replied to his unasked question. "Let's look at the list."

"OK. First we have Sandi Nolan and her daughter, Tina..."

They spent time going over names and addresses. When they'd finished Justin asked her, "Did anyone show up after the party?"

She hesitated before answering. "There was one other person, but I'm not sure...I refused to let her in. I didn't want her to wake Jenny or Zach."

"Who was it?"

She didn't answer.

"Pandora, we need to talk to everyone. What may not seem important to you could be the piece on information we need to find out who is doing this."

She bit her lower lip.

Justin laid a hand on her arm, “Pandora, whoever it was could just as easily have gone upstairs to the children’s room. If someone had seen him, or her, we need to know.”

She hesitated just a second longer looking into Justin’s eyes. She’d bet he’d never raised his hand to hit a woman in his life. “She came to the door while Abigail was giving Jenny her bath.”

“Who came to the door?” EZ reentered the room.

“Did Abigail get out OK?” she asked.

“Yes, she’ll call me when she gets home.”

Pandora turned back to Justin. “To answer your question, my visitor was Mother Riley.”

“Mother Riley?” both men said incredulously.

“Yes, Mother Riley and before you ask, she is not a nun. She’s my ex-mother-in-law and she insists I call her that; her name is Bessie.”

“I would too if my name was Bessie,” Justin muttered.

Pandora ignored his comment. “She gave me a gift for Jenny. I left it in the closet in the studio. I’ll give it to her in the morning.”

“We’re going to need it, for prints,” Justin said to EZ.

“Why? It’s only a child’s toy.” Pandora answered.

“You don’t know that,” EZ said

“EZ McAllister, my ex-father-in-law may not like me but I seriously doubt he or his wife would do something to harm their only grandchildren.”

“How would they feel about their daughter-in-law?” Justin said.

“Former daughter-in-law,” she reminded him tersely. “I doubt Mother Riley would do anything, and Joe is probably too sick to do anything. Supposedly he has a bad heart.”

“That’s never stopped some people,” Justin said.

She opened her mouth to say something but EZ placed a hand on her shoulder. “Would they get angry about not seeing the grandchildren? I know they gave you a hard time about Joey getting killed and all.”

“No, Mother Riley loves the children and wouldn’t do anything to hurt them. Joe wants

absolutely nothing to do with them.”

“Well, I think we have enough for now,” Justin said. “Enough to give the police anyway.”

“We have to call them in?”

“Yes, we do, you know that. I have a feeling they’ll probably treat this as a simple break-in.”

“Isn’t it?”

“Could be, but I doubt it. They’ll probably want to go over everything with you again.”

She looked over at EZ who nodded in agreement. “I’m afraid so, darlin’. The sooner we call them, the sooner we can start looking for whoever it is that is doing this to you. They have access to things that we don’t.”

“You’re right, of course,” she relented, pointing over her shoulder to the phone on the other side of the room. “Go right ahead.”

“No.” Justin pulled his cell phone out of his jacket pocket. “We don’t know what, if anything, he has done to your phone.” He began dialing. “I’ll call on my phone, at least I know he hasn’t touched that.”

She’d thought her nightmare was over; she wasn’t supposed to have to deal with the questions anymore.

“If you want, we can bring the kids to our house, you can stay there while we’re gone.” EZ said to her.

“If I run, I’d be playing right into his hands, wouldn’t I?”

“Maybe, but you’d be safe.”

“Can you guarantee that? I mean, he was able to get in here, what is to stop him from doing the same at your house?”

“I can’t, you know that.”

“Exactly.”

When Justin finished his call he joined them. “What can’t you do?” he asked.

“Guarantee that my children and I would be 100% safe in another place.”

“Maybe not, but we could at least have some control there.” He held a hand up to her. “Now,



before you get on your high horse, I am not suggesting a thing. We'll stay here, for now."

"Thank you."

"I do need you to promise me one thing though."

"What's that?"

"When I decide it's too dangerous, you move, when and where I tell you to move. OK?"

"OK."

"Good." He could see she wasn't happy about it but Justin hoped she wasn't just agreeing to shut him up. That could be dangerous to both her and her children.

"Now, the police will be sending an officer out to take a statement. I told him we could find nothing. They're a little pissed off at not being called right away, but they'll get over it. They do want the doll, and they're going to go over the studio again but I doubt they'll find anything we haven't already found."

"They're welcome to it," Pandora said, her voice unusually harsh.

Justin rose from his chair. "Let's make sure everything is secure before they get here."

"Please try not to wake the children."

Before they got out of the room, a cell phone rang. EZ pulled his out and after talking for a few minutes he handed it to Pandora. "It's Abigail, she's home."

"Hello." Pandora watched the two men walk out of the room.

"Hi. Are they behaving themselves?"

"I guess so," she answered. "They've gone up to check the rest of the house, to make sure I'm safe. Are they always like this?"

"This is their protective mode," Abigail said. "When I was a teenager, I went to a dance. My date tried to get a little too friendly on the way home and ripped my dress. I tried to sneak in the house but Justin and Uncle Pat were waiting for me there. He found out what happened and stopped the boy as he left school the next day for a talk."

"How humiliating!" Pandora shook her head.

"Exactly. That's when I learned there is no arguing with him when he gets like that."

"Thanks for warning me."

"You know, you could stay with us. We'll be leaving for Texas the day after tomorrow and our place here is big enough for you and the kids. Or I could even stay and help you with the kids, for awhile."

"No, you will not," Pandora admonished her. "EZ already offered but I told him no. You go to Texas, see to the opening of your gallery. You know you won't be happy unless you're there to oversee every little detail personally. So go, and let that wonderful husband of yours spoil you."

"Yeah, he is kind of wonderful, isn't he." Abigail suddenly turned serious. "You're not angry with me, are you?"

"I should be, but I'm not."

"I'll feel better knowing he's taking care of you. We don't know who or what is behind all of this, until we do I feel better that you are not alone."

"Thank you, that means a lot to me. I keep hoping this is someone's idea of a bad joke, but I seriously doubt it."

"At least now you have someone who can help protect you and your children. Remember what I told you when you first left the shelter. You may not have any family left, but you do have friends."

"Yes I do, and I thank God every day for them."

"I'll call you tomorrow and see how you're holding up."

\* \* \*

They started at the top of the house, with the attic. He doubted anyone could get into the house from there, not unless they wanted to climb the old oak tree out front that didn't look too safe. However, if they were desperate enough they would, so he checked it out. Besides, he wouldn't feel like the job had been done unless he'd gone over every inch of the house.

"Why does Abigail insist on hiring us?" Justin asked.

"Actually, it's Abigail and her grandmother. They can afford our rates."

"I have no doubt they can but why not just ask us? We'd do it anyway, free of charge."

"I know, but she wants this all above board, she's afraid Pandora wouldn't agree to it any other

way.”

EZ reached over and flicked the switch on the wall, flooding the room with light, “I can understand why. Abigail told me once that when Pandora left Joey Riley she vowed to never be dependent on anyone again.”

“Especially a man?”

“Yea, but I think I’ve managed to convince her there are a few good ones left in the species.”

Justin didn’t answer; he wondered if he was included on that list. He didn’t ask but kept searching the room.

“So, what do you think?” EZ asked after they’d been there for a few minutes.

“I think she’s got to be the most stubborn woman I know, next to your wife.”

“She’s had to be to survive what she’s been through.” EZ pushed some boxes aside and checked the window; satisfied it was secure, he pushed them back. “Do you have any ideas about who might be doing this?”

“If the husband was alive, he’d be my prime suspect. Since he’s not, it’s a safe bet that this is probably someone who knew her when she was married to Joey. Or at the very least he or she knew Joey Riley. I’d question Pandora some more but I doubt it would do any good - at least not tonight.”

“What do you think about this Mother Riley? Do you think she may have had something to do with it?” EZ asked as Justin helped him push a trunk to one side.

“No, and neither do you.”

“You’re right, however, I do think she may be able to lead us to whoever is doing this.”

“What makes you say that?” Justin asked.

“Abigail told me that the parents blame Pandora for their son’s death. The father especially. He made it all to clear what would happen to the mother if she so much as visited.”

“Typical abusive family?” Justin asked.

“I’ve never met them, but it sounds like it. Pandora had been close to the old woman, until she started standing up to her husband.”

“Let me guess, the mother-in-law just took it as her lot in life.”

“Bingo.”

Justin checked a window on the other side of the room. It had been painted shut, and if he couldn't pry it open he doubted anyone else could. Not without making a hell of a lot of noise.

“What do you suggest we do?”

“Someone should go and talk to the grandmother.”

“We don't leave until the day after tomorrow, I can do it.”

“Don't even think about it. I'll send someone else out there. Even though you never met them, I don't want to take a chance someone may recognize you. If what we know is true, Mister Riley would probably take his anger out on the wife.”

“Do you need me to postpone the trip? I can.”

“No, can't see the need for it. We have enough staff here to help me.”

“Are you sure? You know my wife. If it wasn't for the gallery, she'd have canceled our reservations before you and I arrived tonight.”

“Oh so true,” Justin laughed. “But I'm sure we can handle things while you're gone. I'll send Nancy there, she's good at getting information out of people. I'll also call Mac and see what she can find out for us.”

“Has she officially resigned from Customs? Or is she still on leave? The last time I talked to her about it, she just about tore my head off.”

“I know.” Justin smiled thinking of the arguments the three of them could get into while working together. When he and EZ had started their own business, they had tried to convince her to join them. She had resigned from Customs at the same time they did but still hadn't joined them, preferring to help them on her own terms. “She's got a lead on something and you know how she can be once she gets like that.”

“Yeah, well, the last time she got this stubborn it landed her in a hospital.” They gave the room one last look before walking down the ladder that served as stairs for the attic and latching it shut.

Soundlessly, Justin slid open the door to the children's bedroom. Zach was wrapped up in his blanket, tufts of black hair sticking up, his thumb securely in his mouth. Jenny, on the other hand, was

sprawled on the bed, hair spread out over the pillow. She'd kicked her blankets off and they lay on the floor next to her bed. He stood watching them for a few minutes. Anger pierced the protective armor surrounding his heart, anger that these innocent children should have their lives disturbed. Anger at the fact that a woman should once again be harassed and abused.

He looked out the window to a full and unobstructed view of the street below. There could be no way anyone could enter through this window, not without being seen. He tried to open the window further but couldn't. Pandora or someone had banged a nail into the sill stopping the window from opening more than a few inches. The opening was barely large enough for either of the children to get through but just enough to let the cool air into the room. He decided to leave the window open. He'd have someone outside watching before he left here so they would be safe. With a tenderness he was not aware of, he lifted the blankets and covered Jenny against the cool night air.

When he turned back EZ stood at the doorway smiling at him. Furiously gesturing outside the bedroom Justin silently shut the door behind them.

"What's so damn funny, cowboy?" he demanded as they headed downstairs.

"Did you intend to leave the window open in that room?" EZ asked.

"Yes, we can put someone outside tonight. If anyone tries to get through that window, He'll be seen.

"Thank you."

"What on earth for?" Justin asked.

"For giving my wife peace of mind while she's away."

Shaking his head, Justin headed downstairs trying his best to ignore the chuckling behind him.

## Chapter Five

Pandora waited for them at the bottom of the stairs. "OK, cowboy, did you know what your wife was planning to do?"

Justin walked by them and headed toward the kitchen. EZ went into the front rooms to check the windows. Pandora followed him.

"No, she didn't tell me. I was just as surprised as you were, but I think it's a damn good idea and would have done it for free."

"Just so you know, I'm not too happy about it."

"Darlin' if you were happy about what was going on here, I would be worried." He came over and hugged her. "We'll be gone for a few weeks and Justin will keep you as safe as I would."

Physically, maybe but what about emotionally? She shook her head and left the room.

Justin was not in the kitchen but the door to the studio stood open and she could hear him moving things around in there. At least she hoped it was him. Slowly she opened the door further and peaked around the corner.

He'd just finished securing the door to the outside, nailing it shut and pushing the wooden chest that stood in front of it back into place.

"You think that's where he came in?" she asked him, pointing toward the door.

"You would think so, but no. I just don't want to take any chances if he comes back. We think he may have come in through that window." He pointed across the room. "It looks like it may have been jimmied open, then the lock broken to confuse us. I've fixed the window so it can only open it wide enough for a child Jenny's size to get through. Unless this person is a midget, or has one working

with him, or her, they won't get in through there."

Pandora walked over and looked out the window for a few minutes. Suddenly and viciously, she pulled the curtains closed and dragged some canvases over to put in front of the window. Who was out there? Who wanted to hurt her like this? She tried to drag some heavy boxes over to stand between the canvases and the window. Justin moved in and helped her put them where he thought she wanted them.

"It won't stop whoever is doing this, you do realize that?" he asked her.

"No, it won't. But I have to feel like I've at least tried and this way he'll hopefully make enough noise to wake me up." She met his gaze and something unwelcome tugged at Justin's heart.

"Ms. Riley," Justin began

"Oh, oh, this sounds dangerous."

"Hey, at least I didn't say Mrs."

"No, you didn't but I thought you agreed to call me Pandora."

"OK, Pandora, I hope you realize I meant what I said earlier."

"About what?"

"I will try and keep you and the children safe, but the minute I decide it is time to leave, we leave."

"I know and I agreed to that. You're the expert here, not me."

"But you're not happy about it."

"I don't know if happy is quite the word I had in mind. Part of me keeps hoping this is some nut who will disappear if we ignore him long enough."

"You don't really believe that, do you?"

"No, not really, but right now I'm just very angry." She looked up at him. "I do know my daughter feels happy and safe for the first time in years. She isn't sleeping with a light on in her room, and she doesn't wake up at night crying for her mother. If this bastard is trying to take that away from her, he or she will have to go through me first."

For once he pitied the perp. Pandora reminded him of a picture he had seen once of a mama lioness protecting her cubs. He would not want to be on the receiving end of that anger. Reaching into

his pocket, he gave her a card with his home phone, cell phone and beeper number. "After the police are finished, we have to leave but I'll be back tomorrow. There will be someone sitting outside before then, but if you see or hear anything even the least little bit suspicious call me at the number on that card. If there is no answer at my house, it automatically switches to my beeper, then the cell phone."

She looked down at it and then back at him. "OK, I will."

Justin turned and headed out the room, muttering to himself as he did. When he reached the door to the house she called to him. "Justin?"

He turned back and cocked an eyebrow at her. "Yes?"

She smiled at him. "Thank you."

"It's my job." He turned and walked away.

Pandora looked around the room one last time. She'd made it hers, her shelter, her safe place. All she wanted was to live with her children in peace and safety. "Is that so much to ask?" she questioned the empty room before flicking the light switch off and joining the two men to wait for the police.

\* \* \*

EZ crawled into bed next to his wife. His arms snaked around her belly, slightly swollen with his child. *His child*. Every time he thought of it he wanted to bust, and then pass out in fear. He hoped he'd be a good father.

Abigail turned over and pulled her husband closer. "Hey there, cowboy. Is everything all right?"

"Not really, but as good as they're going to be for now. We have Nick on duty outside the house and Justin is going back in the morning."

"I'm glad." She snuggled in closer. "He'll take good care of them."

"Do you know something I don't, woman?"

"You know that Justin hates to see any one hurting."

"This is true, and Pandora is definitely hurting. Do you think the grandfather could have done this?"



“I don’t know. The man is supposed to have a heart condition, but from what I hear he’s awfully active for someone so sick.”

“Hmm...” EZ would get Nancy working on that in the morning. Absently, he began stroking his wife’s back.

“What are you thinking about, cowboy?”

“Just thinking how lucky Pandora and the kids are to have you as their friend. And how lucky I am.”

“You better believe that cowboy.” She pressed a kiss to the bare skin on his chest. “Let me show you just how lucky.”

\* \* \*

Unable to sleep, Justin sat in his darkened living room, staring down into the city. His thoughts went back to Pandora. By the time the police had gone over the scene again and taken a statement it had been very late. He waited for Nick to show up so he could introduce him to Pandora. After dropping EZ off, he’d headed home with every intention of sleeping, but here he was, still awake.

The look on Pandora’s face when she saw that box kept flashing through his mind. There was more to the story than what she had told him, Justin would bet money on it. But until she was ready to talk about it he’d just have to bide his time. Too bad the husband wasn’t still alive; it would’ve made everything much easier. A simple case of soon to be ex-husband bothering his wife. But Joey Riley was dead. Killed in a prison knife fight; an appropriate fate for a wife beater. Justin hoped he was rotting in hell.

\* \* \*

*Damn, it’s cold out here.*

Justin pulled his jacket closer around his body and reminded himself, yet again, that he was getting too old to be pulling all-nighters.

He’d left Nick standing watch outside Pandora’s house. When he’d been unable to sleep, Justin decided to take over the rest of the shift. Which was fine with the young man. He had a young wife and a new baby so he was more than happy to go home, especially after he’d been assured he’d still get a full

night's pay. Now Nick was home curled up in his nice warm bed, next to his nice warm wife, while Justin sat outside at four a.m. on a cold winter morning trying desperately to stay warm. Reaching for the thermos, he took a gulp of the lukewarm liquid and grimaced.

Glancing over at the house, no one would have thought anything was wrong in there. It looked like every other house on the street. He wondered what time Pandora normally woke. With two kids he'd bet it would be fairly early. The minute a light came on in the house, he'd see if he could get a decent cup of hot coffee.

\* \* \*

Pandora turned to look at the alarm clock; there were a few minutes left before she had to get up. Laying there in the dark, she remembered the horror she felt when she first opened the box and saw that doll. All the pain of that night came rushing back, threatening to overtake her. But she'd come too far to let that happen.

If any of Joey's family had something to do with this, they would soon be sorry. It had to be someone in his family. She hadn't told anyone about that night although she was sure Joey had at least told his father. He told his dad everything.

If she hadn't seen the body herself she would have thought he was still alive and tormenting her. But she had seen the body. Disfigured as it was, she could still tell it was Joey. He had the tattoo on his arm, the one with the dragon on it. Glancing at the alarm clock again, she realized the children would soon be waking up. Stretching, she got out of bed and wrapped her robe around her, tying it tight as she slipped her feet into slippers.

Looking out the window, she saw a different car than Justin had pointed out to her before he left. Someone sat in it but she could not see whom. Heart pounding, she grabbed the card off her bedside table and ran downstairs to the phone.

A few minutes later, someone pounded on her front door.

"Pandora, are you all right? Let me in!" She looked through the peephole and could not believe what she saw. There stood Justin in the same clothes he wore when he'd left her house last night.

She pulled the door open, "Were you sitting out there in that car?"

He came in, gun drawn, “Of course, who else would it be?” He looked around the hallway before heading for the kitchen. “Are the children OK? Is anyone else in the house?”

“We’re all safe and as far as I know, no one else is in the house.” She followed him as he checked the room. “I called because when I woke up I saw a different car parked at the corner and I couldn’t see who sat in it. What happened to the man you introduced me to earlier? I think you said his name was Nick?”

He stopped in the doorway to the kitchen and holstered the gun. “Damn, I’m sorry. I sent him home.”

“You did what?”

“I couldn’t sleep, so I sent him home. No sense in two of us losing sleep, is there?”

She didn’t know if she should be angry or pleased that he turned out to be so dedicated. The decision was postponed when Jenny came sleepily down the stairs.

“Mom?” She rubbed her eyes.

“I’m here, baby.” Pandora walked over and scooped Jenny up in her arms. “Did I wake you up?”

“No, but I heard a noise.” She struggled and Pandora put her back on the floor.

Justin came out of the kitchen. “I’m sorry, Miss Jenny. That was me.” He walked over and stooped down to Jenny’s level. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

Jenny rewarded him with a smile. “Mister Justin! Whatcha doing here?”

He looked up at Pandora, who barely shook her head. He had to think fast. “Your Auntie Abigail left something here last night, and she asked me to drop by and get it for her.”

Pandora stood there shocked at the easy way Jenny talked with Justin. She’d never reacted that way to any man. It had taken EZ at least a month to get her to even say hello to him.

“Mister Justin came to Grandma Celia’s house when she babysat us. He read a story to me,” Jenny explained to her mom.

“You did tell me about that. I’d forgotten.”

Justin smiled at Pandora. “More like she made the story up as I turned the pages,” he whispered

to her.

"That I can believe, knowing my daughter." Just then Zach's cry announced to the world that he, too, was awake and hungry. Pandora looked up the stairs, back to Justin and up the stairs again.

"It's all right, I'm leaving anyway." Justin stood up.

Jenny pulled on his pant leg to get his attention. "Wanna stay and have breakfast with me? We're having pancakes. My mom makes the bestest pancakes."

"Well, I don't know about that."

"Please," Jenny turned to her mother, "Mister Justin can stay for breakfast, can't he, Mom?"

Pandora looked at her daughter and then to Justin. "That's up to Mister Justin. Maybe he has to be somewhere."

"I think I can stay for homemade pancakes." He smiled back at her and she felt her resolve weaken.

"All right, but only if you make coffee while I get Zach."

"Yes, ma'am." He saluted her and held a hand out for Jenny. "Come on sunshine, show me where mom keeps her coffee."

Pandora headed upstairs. What on earth had she just done inviting this man in for breakfast?

\* \* \*

*The man stood on the corner, watching. He pulled the collar of his jacket up to protect himself from the wind, noting the man sitting in the car parked in front of the house. He smiled, a smile of such hatred and evil that it terrified the other people standing on the corner. A bus pulled up and they hurried past him onto it. He followed, paid his fare and pushed his way into the back of the bus. His seat afforded a good view of the house as they drove past it. They could put all the bodyguards they wanted out there, it made no difference. The bitch had a lesson to learn and he'd be the one to teach it to her...when the time was right.*

\* \* \*

Pandora could hear her son talking as she climbed the stairs. When she opened the bedroom door, he'd already gotten one leg over the railing. He smiled at her, confident that he'd just done the

greatest thing in the world.

“Mama!”

Pandora grabbed him before he could go further and swung him around.

“Good morning Sweetheart.”

Everyday she thanked God for this child. It never ceased to amaze her how something so beautiful could have come out of such a horrid act.

Nuzzling his hair, she placed him down on the changing table. “Phew! Stinky pants.” She wrinkled her nose and Zach laughed. “OK little man, let’s get some clothes on you, we have company for breakfast today.”

“Jen-Jen?” Zach asked, looking toward the door.

“Jen-Jen is downstairs with Mister Justin.” Pandora said, “Knowing your sister, she is talking his ear off.” As she changed and dressed him she mentally took stock of everything in her refrigerator. A man like Justin would want a big breakfast; luckily she had sausage to go with the pancakes. She hoped he didn’t like that paint remover that EZ called coffee. If he did, she had plenty of milk and sugar to help make it palatable.

## Chapter Six

Jenny pushed the step stool over to the counter and scrambled up on it. “The coffee’s in here, Mister Justin.”

“Whoa there, sunshine.” Justin reached over and grabbed her, placing her gently on the floor. “We don’t need you to fall down and break something now, do we?” He took his coat off and placed it on the back of a chair. When he turned around Jenny was staring up at him. He looked around to see if anyone else had entered the room. They were alone. “Jenny, sweetie, what’s wrong?”

She pointed toward his shoulder holster. “You have a gun.”

He bent down so they were on the same level. “Yes, I do, it’s part of my job.” He waited for her response.

She nodded, her face solemn, “Uncle EZ has a gun. He told me it was to help protect people. That’s his job.”

“He’s right.”

“He told me it was dangerous for kids to play with guns. He keeps it locked up when he’s not working.”

“It is dangerous, if you ever see one in a house you get an adult and let them know. You don’t touch it.” He had a lock that fit right over the weapon that would protect it from accidentally firing. He’d have to remember to bring it.

“I know,” she nodded solemnly. “Uncle EZ made me promise I would do that.”

“That’s because he’s a smart man. Remember, I told you before that I work with your uncle EZ, we’re partners. And I’m on my way to work. That’s why I wear my gun.”

Jenny appeared to think about that for a minute. “Like me and my best friend Tina? Mom says we’re partners in trouble.”

Justin laughed. “Something like that.” He lifted her up onto a chair as she continued talking.

“Cept, Uncle EZ, he’s not my real uncle. But he said I could call him that.”

“That’s nice of him. Uncles can be kind of a neat thing to have around.” He would have been lost as a child if it hadn’t been for his Uncle Nate.

Suddenly she looked very uncomfortable. Justin stopped short and waited for her to speak.

“I have a real uncle.”

“You do?”

“Yup,” she nodded, “His name’s Jimmy but he’s in jail. That’s where my daddy was when he got killed.”

“Do you ever see your Uncle Jimmy?” Justin would have to ask Pandora about the brother-in-law that no one talked about.

“Not since I was a little girl. Daddy and Mommy had a fight about him. But that was before me and Mommy left.” She glanced around the room before continuing in a stage whisper. “Daddy hit Mommy and cut her leg real bad with a knife, and broke my doll, so we went to live at the shelter and then Mommy had Zach.”

“You and Mommy did the right thing, Sweetheart.” Justin rose and grabbed the can of coffee off the counter, more to give himself something to do than anything else. At least now he had his answer as to what had gotten Pandora so upset last night. He’d bet any amount of money the doll in that box had been an exact replica of the one Jenny had talked about.

When Abigail first asked him to speak to Pandora, all those weeks ago, he’d gotten a copy of the police file on Joey Riley. He read the officers’ report of that night and didn’t want Jenny to see the rage he felt when he thought of the things that had happened.

Better to change the subject. “Your Mom told me yesterday was your birthday.”

“Yup! It was the bestest birthday ever. There was me and Tina and Jillie and Meg and Becca and Aimie.” Jenny climbed up on a chair. “Except my grandpa and grandma couldn’t come. Mommy

said Grandpa was sick. I think he just doesn't want to be with us."

Interesting, thought Justin tucking that little bit of information in a corner of his brain to check on later. He wondered how any one could deny their own grandchildren. "Who else was there?" he asked.

\* \* \*

Pandora stopped just inside the kitchen to take in the scene before her. Justin sat at the table across from Jenny, drinking coffee and listening to her daughter talk as if every word was pure gold. Jenny rambled on and on about her party.

Zach squiggled. "Down, Mama. See Jen-Jen."

She put him down and he ran to his sister trying his best to climb up on the chair with her. Pandora, well used to this routine, quickly grabbed him. "No, you don't, buster." She sat him in his seat that she had left fastened to the table last night. "You can sit right here, next to your sister." Turning, she almost jumped out of her skin when she found Justin standing directly behind her.

"Sorry," he smiled weakly and held out a cup of coffee, "I thought you might want this."

She took a sip and sighed. "Bless you," she whispered, looking into his eyes suddenly, she rushed to the refrigerator. "OK, who wants pancakes?"

What had he done? He'd only done what was normal for him. It wasn't like he'd come on to her or anything. The coffee was ready and so he poured some for her. He watched as she worked, mixing things, getting the kids set up, doing ten things at once. He watched, amazed at how organized she was, gaining even more respect for her. Had his own mother been this organized? He never had paid much attention when he was growing up, however, looking back, she seemed to be. But then it was probably easier now that it was just her and his dad. He had to admit, it was always her and his dad. He'd always seemed to be an outsider, even when she tried to make it otherwise.

"Justin?" Pandora's voice bought him out of his reverie. "Do you want more coffee?"

"What?" he looked at her in surprise. Then he realized a plate of food had been set in front of him.

She waved the coffee pot in front of him. "Do you want more?"



“Sure,” he held his cup out to her, “thanks.”

“I hafta go to school today,” Jenny announced. “I wish I could stay home. Aimee’s mom let her stay home the day after her birthday.”

Justin smiled at this bit of obvious manipulation.

“I bet Aimee isn’t as smart as you are, Miss Jenny.” He looked over at Pandora who was trying to get Zach to drink his milk, and winked. She smiled back and he felt a none too familiar tug at his heart.

“Did Aimee get a hundred on her last spelling test?” Pandora asked.

“No, but I did.” Jenny jumped down and took a paper off the refrigerator door and handed it to Justin. “See, I got two gold stars!”

“Wow, I never got a hundred on my spelling test. That’s because you go to school and study hard, don’t you, Miss Jenny.”

She nodded her head in agreement. “Yup, but someday I’m going to be as smart as my mommy!”

Pandora shook her head, “I’m not too sure how smart your mommy really is.”

“I don’t know Jenny, I think your mom is a really smart lady, don’t you?” He was rewarded with a blush and a warning glance from Pandora.

“If you don’t get upstairs and get dressed young lady, you’ll be late. Tina and her mom will be here soon.” Taking Zach out of the chair, she held a hand out to her daughter. “Let’s go and let Justin finish his breakfast in peace and quiet.”

When they left the room, his appetite seemed to have gone with them. Gathering up the dishes, he put them in the sink and began to wash them.

This is how Pandora found him when she returned. “I’ll do those,” she said. “You’re a guest.”

“I think after freezing my butt off outside your house all night I qualify as a little more than a guest.” He continued washing. “I don’t do that for everyone, you know.”

Pandora picked up a towel and started drying. “I didn’t ask you to spend the night freezing in your car.” He stopped for a minute and looked over at her. “No, you didn’t ask. You didn’t have to

ask. It's part of my job." She didn't have to know that it was a part he usually assigned to someone else.

"I meant to ask you, just what will happen? I mean, I've never had a bodyguard before. I thought you only worked with big businesses?"

"Well, this is the first time we've handled a domestic case. So we have no hard-set rules. I'll be the one you deal with for the most part. I think it would be easier on the kids to have someone they know. If I have to leave, for any reason, then I'll have someone else here. More than likely, it will be Nick. I like to be consistent and I think the children would appreciate the sameness of it. Makes them less scared. If you have to go anywhere, I'll go with you and check the house thoroughly before I let you back in."

She groaned.

"I know," he smiled, "But it really is necessary. We are going to try and disrupt your life as little as we can. All things considering."

"I'd appreciate that."

"You know, Ms. Riley, for a little woman you certainly have a lot of sass," he countered, folding his arms across his chest.

"How did you think I've survived all these years?"

The shrill ringing of the telephone interrupted their repartee. "Men!" Pandora snorted as she walked across the room and took the receiver off the wall. "Hello!" she said.

Justin turned back to washing dishes, after a few moments he realized Pandora had not said another word. He looked over his shoulder at her. "Damn!" Grabbing a towel, he dried his hands as he crossed the room.

Pandora stood staring at the receiver, her mouth open but silent, her face as white as the dishtowel in his hands. Grabbing the receiver out of her hand, he listened. At the other end he heard music. Cursing, he slammed the phone down. Wrapping an arm around Pandora he walked her over to the table. Throwing the towel on the counter, he grabbed a cup and poured the last of the coffee from the pot. He added lots of sugar and milk to it before handing it to her.

“Come on, Sweetheart.” He sat across from her, talking as gently as he had to Jenny earlier. “Drink this.”

Pandora’s hands shook as she tried to raise the cup to her lips. Leaning forward, Justin wrapped his hands around hers and helped her drink the warm liquid. “That’s right. Drink up.” He gently coaxed her until the cup was empty. Placing it on the table, he turned back to her. The color had returned to her face and she’d stopped shaking. “Want to talk about it?” he asked.

“Do I have a choice?” Pandora’s voice quivered slightly.

“Yes, you do,” he said, relieved that she was arguing with him. He hated to think she’d suddenly turned into the helpless female. “We can talk now or we can talk later.” *When I come back after taking care of a few things, like a secured phone line.*

He looked into her eyes, his gaze intense and searching. “This was not the first time you’ve gotten that phone call, is it?”

She hesitated briefly and he could see the battle going on in her mind. Should she lie or not? Luckily, his side won.

She shook her head. “No, it’s not. I received a similar one a few days ago.”

“What happened?”

“The same thing. I had been making dinner and the phone rang. I picked it up and there was no one on the other end.” She wrapped her arms around her middle, hugging tight. “Then, I heard it.”

“The same song?”

Pandora nodded. “*The Twelfth of Never*. The very first song I ever danced to with my ex-husband. Joey is – was a big fan of that particular singer. It was his favorite song.”

“So, whoever did this obviously knew both you and Joey.”

She nodded her head. “I thought it must be someone in the family but I can’t think of who.”

“What about his brother?”

“Jimmy?” Pandora looked at him in surprise. “How did you find out about him?”

“Jenny told me she had an uncle who’s in jail.”

Pandora sighed, “Jimmy is Joey’s younger brother. They did everything together. At least they

used to. Jimmy got involved in a robbery and someone got killed. He didn't pull the trigger, but he was part of the robbery so they got him as an accessory."

"Joey wasn't there?" he asked, but he bet he knew the answer.

"He was drunk that night, already passed out."

Just what he thought. "Is Jimmy still there?" Justin asked wanting to verify what Jenny had already told him.

"The last I knew he was. But he may be out by now He and Joey were in the same prison."

"Is there anything else you've forgotten to tell me? Any more of these phone calls you've forgotten about?"

"Only the two."

He just stared at her not answering.

She held her head a little higher. "Honestly!"

"And before that?"

"One or two hang-ups. I just assumed they were wrong numbers."

"Could have been, but I doubt it. Have there been any other break-ins? Other than the one a few months ago?"

"I think that was all."

"Think again. We have to be positive."

"There was one time, I found something broken in my studio. A glass rose Abigail had given me. At first I thought Jenny had been playing in there. She swore she hadn't. I just assumed something had knocked it over and I never realized it."

"So, why hasn't Abigail said anything about this?"

"Because I didn't tell her. I didn't think it was worth worrying about at the time."

He shook his head and pulled his phone out of his jacket pocket. "I have to leave for a while. I'm going to call Nick back in. There are some things I need to do and I don't want to leave you alone."

"Will he have to be in the house?"

"I'd prefer it that way."

“Do you always get your own way?”

He crossed back over to her . “Damn it, woman, why the hell not!”

She held her head up a bit higher and looked him straight in the eye. “I haven’t had a chance to explain this to Jenny.”

He shook his head, then decided to see just how much more she would tell him. “Speaking of Jenny, do you want to tell me the story behind the doll we found last night?”

Pandora said nothing, got up, put the mug in the dishwasher and sat back down. Justin thought he would have to ask her a second time when she finally spoke.

“Jenny used to have a doll, just like that one. Her grandmother gave it to her and it was her favorite. Joey was drunk as usual, not that he needed that as an excuse to begin beating me. In fact it usually made it worse.”

Pandora took a deep breath before continuing. “Jenny came out crying, telling him to stop. He grabbed the doll out of her arms and tore her head off. He threatened to do the same to Jenny if she didn’t stop crying.”

“Bastard.” Justin swore but doubted she heard him. She continued talking.

“I stayed with Jenny until she fell back asleep, praying that Joey would be passed out when I returned to our room. He usually was, but not that night.”

“That was the night you left?”

She nodded, but didn’t look at him. It was so hard to talk about, to tell this man what he needed to know. But if he were to help her he had to know.

“I saw the police report from that night.” He laid a hand over hers, she welcomed the touch, a link to humanity keeping her grounded as she relived the nightmare.

“Then you know,” she whispered

He took both her hands in his, “I know he raped you and sliced your leg.”

She pulled her hands away afraid of soiling him with her memories. “Earlier in the day he caught me talking with Sandi’s brother. Dan had been out running and stopped to talk! I was sitting outside with Jenny. Joey didn’t like it when I talked to other men.” She continued to look away,

haunted by memories. "He didn't say anything right away, but I should have realized he would not forget. Joey never forgot."

He waited until she finally looked up at him, then he spoke.

"I can never know how you felt that night, but I do know two things. Joey Riley deserved everything that happened to him in prison. You, however, did not deserve what he did to you, no woman deserves that. No person deserves that. The fact is what you did that night was very courageous."

"Courage had nothing to do with it." Unconsciously, she rubbed the place on her leg where the scar was, remembering the searing pain and the blood that never seemed to end. "I had no choice, I refuse to let my daughter grow up in that atmosphere. Refused to let her feel unloved."

How could someone not love such a child, Justin thought.

Pandora continued, "One time he broke my arm, and a neighbor took me to the emergency room. The nurse there gave me a card with the address and phone number of the shelter. I knew it would be the only place Jenny and I could go. All my friends, what few I had, I couldn't subject them to Joey's anger. Everyone else I could go to was either family or a friend of Joey's."

She couldn't look at him as she relived that night. "When I finally got the bleeding to stop, Joey had passed out. I didn't even think, didn't even stop to dress Jenny, just wrapped her up in a blanket and ran."

"For your life."

"No, for my daughter's life." She finally looked up at him, tears in her defiant eyes, head held proud and high. "If Joey had killed me, at least I would be out of that hell. But there was no way I would subject my daughter to that. At the shelter I promised myself that no one would ever hurt us again."

"And you'll keep that promise," Justin said, rising to his feet. "As I said, I have some things to take care of, including getting Nick over here." He stopped her protest with a finger on her lips. "I'll keep them outside, for now. You get Jenny off to school, do what you have to do and I'll meet you back here around noon." He reached for his phone and dialed.

Pandora watched him. Knowing he was right didn't make it any easier. But she wanted to break this to Jenny, in her own way. She didn't want her daughter reverting to her old ways.

When he hung up she said, "I'm sorry for the way I acted. But you have to understand, Jenny has only come out of her shell in the past six months and I'm afraid of what this will do to her."

"You're just doing what you think is best for your kids. However, I happen to think Miss Jenny Rebecca will be just fine. If you'd like we can talk to her together."

She followed him to the front door. "No, I'll speak to her this morning."

"Are you going to work, Mister Justin?" Jenny asked as she came down the stairs and plopped herself down in front of the television.

"I certainly am, but I'll be here when you get home from school. I have to take care of some things first."

"Pway, msr Jusin?" Zach pulled on the man's pant leg.

"Not now buddy, maybe when I come back, OK?" Justin reached down, lifted him up over his shoulders and Zach giggled in delight.

"Kay." He toddled after his sister back into the living room.

"I'll be out in my car, waiting for Nick to show up. Do you have a neighbor you're friendly with?" Justin asked.

Pandora nodded. "Sandi. Her daughter and Jenny are in the same class."

"That's the same one with the brother?"

"Yes it is."

"You gave me her name and address last night. Her daughter is Tina and they live one block over."

She nodded. "You have a good memory. Sandi is supposed to drive the girls to school today." She looked at the clock on the wall. "She should be here soon."

"Good. If you receive another phone call, or if anything even remotely different or strange happens, get out of here. Don't wait, grab the kids and get out of here. Go to Sandi's house as fast as you can. Do you have a cell phone?"

She shook her head. "No, I never saw the need for one."

He made a mental note to get her one from the office. "OK, if you have to go to Sandi's or another neighbor then do so and call 911 *after* you get there." He scribbled a name down on one of his business cards and handed it to her. "Ask for this man. EZ talked to him last night when he called the break in to the police. Also, Nick will be outside and he can help."

"Are things really that dangerous?" Pandora asked, glancing at the card before dropping it into her pocket.

"I sure hope not," Justin replied, before heading out the door. "I'd rather not take any chances though."



## Chapter Seven

“I’m glad Justin is coming back Mom. I like him.”

Pandora put the hairbrush down and began to braid her daughter’s hair. She had to tell her and now was as good a time as any.

“Remember the day I asked if you’d been in the studio?” she asked, referring to the incident she had told Justin about. “The day Auntie Abby’s rose broke?”

“Yes, and I told you I wasn’t in there. I didn’t lie.” Jenny stuck her lip out, obviously indignant at her mother.

Pandora hugged her daughter. “It’s OK sweetie, I know you didn’t.” She took a deep breath, letting it out before continuing. “But someone else was in there.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know. That’s what Mister Justin is going to find out.”

“He’s smart like Uncle EZ. He’ll do it.”

The doorbell rang, ending their conversation. As Pandora went to open the door, opened the door she wished she could feel as confident as her daughter.

“Hi there.” It was her friend Sandi and her daughter Tina. “Did you know you have a gorgeous man sitting in a car outside your home?”

“That’s Mister Justin,” announced Jenny as she grabbed her school bag. “He’s going to find out who got into Mom’s studio and broke Auntie Abigail’s rose.”

Sandi looked at her friend. “Oh, is there anything else you want to tell me?”

Pandora looked at the girls. “Jenny, why don’t you and Tina go out to the van. Tina’s mom will

be there shortly.” She bent down and kissed her daughter. “You have a good day in school. Don’t go telling everyone about Mister Justin.”

“Why not Mommy? They’ll think it’s way cool.”

“Because it’s supposed to be a secret.” She knew how much her daughter liked secrets.

“OK, but Tina knows.”

“Yes, but Tina can keep a secret, can’t you?”

“I can keep a secret.”

“I hope so. Now, go on out to the van and wait. Tina’s mom will be right there.” She hugged her daughter. “Love you lots.”

“Love you lots, Mom. Come on Tina, let’s go see Mister Justin.” The two girls went out, the door slamming behind them before Pandora could tell them to leave Justin alone.

She didn’t want the girls bothering Justin. But it was too late to stop them. She figured he could handle those two. Right now Sandi stood waiting for some answers.

“All right girlfriend, give. What happened?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I suppose you have one of the sexiest men in Boston sitting outside your house every day?”

“You’re right there.” Pandora filled her in briefly on the phone calls and the break in.

“Damn, I bet it was the grandfather. Old man Riley is just mean enough to do it.”

“Yes, but he’s too weak to be climbing around like that, or to do it quietly.”

“I wonder if Jimmy may have anything to do with it. He’s just crazy enough to do it.” Sandi had gone to school with Jimmy Riley and knew the family. She avoided them if at all possible.

“Is he out of jail yet?”

“He may be. I seem to remember Danny saying something about it. Let me call him and see what I can find out.”

“OK.” Sandi’s brother Danny still lived in the old neighborhood. “If anyone would know, he would.”

“Justin Andrews? Isn’t he the one that has the security business with Abigail’s husband?”

“The one and only.”

“But didn’t you tell me they only worked with high profile business clients?”

“They did, until Abigail hired them to find out who is doing this to me..”

“Well, if he’s the owner then he can afford to have someone do the scut work, and sitting outside in a car in Boston in the middle of winter is definitely scut work. Unless he wants to be here.”

“What do you mean?”

“Think about it.” A beeping horn stopped any further conversation. “Oops. Guess they stopped bothering the man. I’d better go before those two decide to drive themselves to school. I wouldn’t put it past either of them to try.”

Pandora laughed, “Neither would I.” She held the door open for her friend. “See you this afternoon.”

\* \* \*

It was well past noon, closer to three in fact, when Justin finally pulled up in front of Pandora’s house. It had taken longer than expected to get what he needed. He could see Nick parked down the street, looking like any guy sitting in the car reading a paper, but Justin knew better. Nick was one of their best: nothing would get by him. Locking his car, he walked up the porch stairs leading to Pandora’s house and knocked on the front door.

Nothing.

He knocked again.

Not a sound.

He pressed the doorbell.

Silence. Damn thing was broken!

Peering into the living room window he saw no movement. Pulling his phone out of his pocket, he called Nick.

“Everything OK, boss?”

“Not sure. Have you seen anything today?”

“No, Ms. Riley came out once to get her mail and that was it.”

“OK, she’s not answering when I knock and the doorbell is broken. I’m going to check the back door. If I’m not out in twenty minutes call 9-1-1.”

“Do you need me to back you up?”

“No, just remember twenty minutes.”

He turned the knob on the front door. It was locked. Going around to the back door he found that one unlocked. Swearing softly to himself, he drew his weapon out of the shoulder holster and cautiously entered the house.

“Pandora?”

He glanced around the empty kitchen.

“Pandora, it’s Justin.” Not a sound could be heard, no TV, no Zach, nothing. He didn’t like it, not one bit.

Kicking open the door between the kitchen and the living room, he checked that room, also empty, as was the room across from it. He headed for the stairs.

Fear crept up his spine, his instincts making him doubly cautious and quiet as he climbed the stairs. Those same instincts never failed him before but what if they’d been wrong this time? What if someone had somehow slipped past Nick and got in the back way?

He stopped halfway up the stairs to the second floor. The familiar tinkle of a bell and a tune that he could not quite make out penetrated through the adrenaline. It also niggled something in the back of his memory, something he could not quite put his finger on, yet.

Silently, tentatively, he started back up the stairs, following the sound straight to the children’s bedrooms. The pounding of his heart threatened to drown out the sound of the music. Drawing a deep breath he prayed he would not be too late, yet again, and slowly, carefully, he opened the door.

He went almost weak with relief at the sight that greeted him.

Pandora sat in the wooden rocker next to Zach’s crib. Her son was snuggled in her arms and the two of them were sound asleep. The tinkling he’d heard was the sound of music coming from a tape player.

Giving a sigh of relief, Justin leaned against the wall and allowed himself to enjoy the scene for a

few minutes. The music had been a lullaby that Joanne used to sing to Benjamin, he would watch her rock him in the neonatal nursery. The melody had transported him back to a time he could not, and would not, ever forget.

A time when he'd found out the truth of something his Uncle Nate had told him, "Good cops should never marry, never have kids, and never, ever fall in love." Cursing the fates that had taught him that lesson, all too well, he pushed off from the wall and headed back downstairs, carefully closing the door so as not to wake up mother or son. He had to call Nick and let him know all was well, then he had some work to do.

\* \* \*

Justin had just finished putting locks on the windows in the kitchen when a bright red mini-van pulled up.

A tall woman with long red hair got out and opened the back door. A much younger version jumped out, followed by Jenny, chattering away a mile a minute. Justin figured the only time that child was quiet happened to be when she slept and he wouldn't really count on that. He got to the back door, just in time to stop Jenny from banging it open.

"Justin! You're here!"

"And just where else would I be, Miss Jenny? I promised you I'd be back by the time you got home from school, didn't I?"

Jenny threw her coat on a chair and pushed open the door, calling to her mother. He pulled her back into the kitchen. "I need you to be quiet for a little bit, OK? Your mother and Zach are sleeping."

"Oh, OK. Tina and her mom are here." She pointed to the woman and child who followed her into the room. "Tina's mom wanted to meet you."

I just bet she did, he thought, welcoming Tina before turning to look into the deep blue eyes of Sandi Norton. She didn't trust him and he couldn't really blame her for that. Extending his hand Justin put on his most charming smile, "Justin Andrews."

"I know." The woman's voice wary, her eyes narrowed suspiciously, she grasped his hand firmly and shook it. "Sandra Norton."

Sandra, not Sandi, he didn't miss that, or the tone in her voice. She was reserving judgment. However, his instincts told him, she was someone Pandora could trust. Even if Ms. Sandra Norton wasn't sure she trusted him, yet.

Jenny interrupted them. "Can Tina and me watch TV?"

He looked across to Sandi who answered, "Sure, hon, but hang your coats up first, and be quiet, we don't have to wake your mother up, just yet."

"Thanks." The girls ran into the other room, chattering the whole time.

"I thought little girls were supposed to be quiet?"

Sandi smiled. "What fairy tale have you been reading, Mister Andrews?"

"I gave up on fairy tales a long time ago, Ms. Norton."

She opened the door, looked into the next room and came back to stand in front of Justin. "Pandora told me you hoped to help find out who it was who broke into her studio last night."

"Among other things," Justin answered, not willing to give any more information than needed.

"And what other things might that be?" she challenged him, hands on her hips.

"Things that don't concern you, Ms. Norton."

"Anything about Pandora concerns me. She's my friend."

"Well, then, as a friend, is there anything you think we should know?"

"I went to school with Jimmy Riley. The whole family is sick, and I don't mean physically."

"I had gathered as much."

"Well, my brother still lives in the neighborhood and I've been trying to reach him to see if he can tell me anything new. I think Jimmy may be out on parole, or getting ready to come out."

Justin took a business card out of his pocket and handed it to her. "If you or your brother hear anything, if you see anything even remotely suspicious, I want you to call the number you see there. Ask for either me or EZ."

She glanced at it before sticking it in her purse. "This is about more than a break-in, isn't it?"

"I can't tell you."

"I guess I'll have to trust you then, won't I?"

“Afraid so, Ms. Norton.”

“Just remember one thing, Mister Andrews. If anything happens to Pandora or any of the children, you will have to deal with me.”

“I promise you, I’ll do my best to be sure that doesn’t happen.” He prayed he could keep good on that promise. The prospect of Sandi Norton coming after him was not an appealing one.

“See that you do.”

“See that you do what, Sandi?” Pandora stood in the doorway, watching.

“See that I take you out to dinner tonight,” Justin said, wondering just how much, if any of the conversation she’d heard. “You deserve a treat.”

She looked from one to the other. “Why do I have the feeling you’re lying to me, both of you?”

“We’re not lying,” Sandi grabbed her coat from the chair “I have to get home. I’ll call you later.” She called out to her daughter and the two were gone, before Pandora could question her further.

## Chapter Eight

"Why didn't you wake me?" Pandora asked Justin when the door closed behind Sandi.

"Most women with a job and two kids would appreciate a man who let her sleep," Justin said.

"I'm not most women."

"Don't I know it," he muttered, throwing the tool he'd been working with into his open toolbox.

"Most women don't leave their back doors unlocked."

"I didn't intend to fall asleep! Besides, you're the one who told me I'd be safe with someone watching the house."

"That was before I realized you made a habit of leaving the back door unlocked."

"I knew Jenny would be home soon and Sandi usually comes in with her for a few minutes. Nothing could have happened."

"You don't know that. There was at least thirty minutes between the time I found you sleeping and when Sandi and the girls got here. A lot could happen in that thirty minutes."

"So sue me. You're always right. Don't you get tired of being so damn perfect?"

"Trust me, I am far from perfect."

She really didn't feel like arguing. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize how tired I'd become. Luckily, Zach woke up when he heard his sister."

"Did you ever hear of a doorbell?" he asked.

She looked chagrined. "It's broken."

"I know. I found that out." He headed out the door, toolbox in hand.

"Where are you going?" Pandora asked suddenly, panicking.



“Don’t worry, I’m not leaving yet.” He stopped, turned and headed back toward her. “I’m going to fix your doorbell. I don’t want a repeat of this afternoon.”

He walked over to where she stood and leaned in close, placing one hand on the counter beside her. Fear showed in her eyes but she held her head high, letting him see once more the strength that had gotten her through so much. He reached around the other side of her and grabbed the screwdriver off the counter where he’d left it earlier.

“The next time it might not be me coming in the house.” He turned and walked out, leaving Pandora staring at the closed door, speechless. But not for long.

“How dare he.” she pushed herself away from the counter and stormed across the room. “We are going to get a few things straight right now.”

For a brief moment, when Justin had come towards her, she’d flashed back to the nights when Joey would come after her. She would not live with that again. “It’s time you and I had a little talk, Mister Andrews.”

She found him in the hallway with Jenny and Zach. Her daughter sat on the stairs with Zach on her lap. They listened intently as he explained what the tools were and what he planned to do with them.

The same scene had been played out once before, the day they’d moved into this house. Abigail and EZ helped them and Jenny had subjected EZ to the same interrogation she now gave Justin.

“Mommy! Mister Justin said he can fix the doorbell. Maybe he can fix my toy box, too; but not today, he said.”

“That’s right sweetie. Right now I need you to take Zach into the living room. I’ll be in shortly.”

Oh boy, thought Justin as he watched the two kids desert him, he was in for it now. He knew he’d pushed Pandora’s button just a bit too far during that scene in the kitchen. But he’d wanted to provoke a reaction from her, to make her think about her situation. He had succeeded, perhaps too well, if the look on Pandora’s face was any indication.

With a deep sigh, he picked up the toolbox. “Guess I’ll get to work.” He opened the door and went outside. Pandora followed. “You want me to teach you how to fix the door bell?” He asked.

Pandora stood in front of him. "What were you hoping to accomplish in there?"

"I was just looking for my screwdriver."

"You know, Abigail was right – you can be impossible!"

"Oh? You ladies seem to spend a great deal of time discussing me." For some reason the thought pleased him.

"That is not the subject of conversation here."

"Well, you're the one who mentioned her."

"Oh!" She stomped her foot. "Listen to me, because I'm only going to say this once. I agreed to this for one reason and one reason only. I don't want Abigail unduly worried right now. And if I hadn't agreed, she would have found a way to do it behind my back."

Justin nodded in agreement.

She pointed her finger at him, poking him in the chest, as if to accent every word she said. "However, that does not give you license to boss me around or attempt to intimidate me in any way, shape or form. Do I make myself clear, Mister Andrews?"

"As a bell, Ms. Riley." He didn't point, but he put the same tone in his voice as she had in hers.

"Good." Turning on her heels, she stormed back into the house, slamming the door behind her.

Justin stared at the wooden door, suddenly a huge grin crossed his face and he rubbed his chest where she poked him. "Damn, for a little person, she sure packs a mean punch."

\* \* \*

Pandora sat on the sofa supposedly watching TV with her kids, but her mind was outside, on her front porch. She could hear Justin working there. It seemed like an awfully long time just to fix a doorbell.

Once she sat down and thought about it she realized she probably shouldn't have yelled at him like that. He'd only been trying to help her. But he'd gotten her so damn angry. The night she had left Joey Riley she swore to never let any man intimidate her again. She could not forget that vow, even for a man as handsome as Justin Andrews.

As if on cue, he walked into the room and leaned lazily against the wall. "I'm finished."

She looked over at him. "Thank you."

"I had to replace a couple of wires, they looked like they'd been cut. How long has the bell been broken?"

"About 6 months. I kept meaning to call the landlord to come fix it but never got around to it."

"I think I need to have a talk with your landlord."

"Surely you don't think he had anything to do with it, do you?"

"You never know." Justin looked at the kids and back to her. "Can I talk to you, alone?"

"Of course." She got up and headed for the kitchen. "I'll be right back, kids." But they were too engrossed in the movie to notice. Justin followed her.

She purposely stood in the exact same spot as earlier. The significance wasn't lost on Justin. She crossed her arms over her chest. "What is it?"

Nervously, he combed his fingers through his hair, then cleared his throat. "I want to apologize for my behavior earlier. It was uncalled for."

"Well, we can agree on that, at least." She smiled inwardly at the sight of Justin so nervous.

He started pacing the room. "It's just that when I found that door unlocked and you didn't answer my call, I imagined all sorts of things. When I went upstairs and found you sleeping, my first instinct was to wake you up. You looked so peaceful and I knew you'd gotten little sleep the night before, so I came back down here and waited."

She blushed at the thought of him watching her sleep.

"You were only doing your job," she said, more to remind herself than for any other reason.

"Yes, I know, then you came down and the first thing you did was complain because I didn't wake you up."

She nodded in understanding. "Ah! I started acting like an ungrateful bitch."

"I wouldn't quite put it that way, but..."

"Yes." They laughed in unison. Pandora extended her hand. "Friends?"

Justin took her hand and held it, perhaps a second longer than was necessary. "Friends."

Just then, the doorbell rang. "Who could that be?" Pandora wondered as she went to answer it.

"I'll get it." Justin stopped her before she got out the kitchen. "It's probably the man I called to install the alarm system."

"I can't afford an alarm system."

"No one is asking you to pay for it. This is part of the package. It will help when you're home alone. Speaking of which," he pulled a cell phone out of his pocket and handed it to her. "Here, I'll explain it to you later." He held up a hand to stop her protests. "I don't want to hear a word. This is a loaner from the office. I'll feel better if you had it."

"OK, then, thank you," she said as he walked past her and out the room. Somehow she would find a way to pay Abigail back for all this.

\* \* \*

It had taken a little persuading on his side, but he'd finally convinced her that he really did want to take her and the children out to dinner. Jenny wanted to go to her favorite fast food place, which meant Zach did as well. However this was as much for their mother as for them, so Justin took them to a family-style restaurant he'd heard about from Nick. The man had a little boy about Jenny's age so Justin figured it would be a safe recommendation. However, he made sure they got a table away from the windows and toward the back of the restaurant. If someone had followed them here, he wanted to know it.

They placed their orders and the children were busy coloring their place mats with the crayons left on the table. Pandora sat there with an enigmatic smile on her face. "What are you thinking about?" he asked.

"I was just thinking this is hardly the kind of place you would normally be seen in."

"Oh? And how do you know that?"

"The infamous Justin Andrews? Somehow I doubt your usual date would spend time in a restaurant like this."

He looked around. "True, but how would you know?"

"Abigail always talks about you. She takes great pleasure, for some reason in telling me about your latest blonde, brunette, or redhead."

“You and Abigail seem to spend a lot of time talking about me. I’m flattered.”

“Abigail’s not the only one who talks about you. You’ve made another conquest as well.” She looked across the table at her daughter sitting next to him. “When we were getting ready tonight all she did was talk about you. She likes being called Miss.”

“Well, she’s made quite an impression on me. Your daughter is very intelligent and cute as a button. Right, Miss Jenny?” He leaned over and pulled on Jenny’s ponytail.

Jenny looked up from her coloring, “This place is really cool, Mister Justin.”

“You know, I think we can drop the Mister, why don’t you just call me Justin.” He looked over at Pandora. “If that’s OK with your mom, that is.”

“It doesn’t bother me.” She bent down and picked up a crayon that Zach dropped.

The waitress came over with their food. All conversation ceased as they made sure the kids were set up and eating before the adults tackled their food. Later, as they enjoyed their coffee and the kids their dessert, Pandora looked up to see Justin staring at her.

“OK, now it’s my turn to ask. What are you thinking about?”

“You may not want to know.”

“Why not? You can’t embarrass me. I’ve been through to much to be embarrassed easily.”

“OK, but don’t say I didn’t warn you. He glanced at the children to make sure they were both occupied with their ice cream. “I was wondering how you would be acting if this happened to be a real date. Just you and me and no kids.”

She blushed, redder than he’d seen any woman turn in long time. He found it enchanting, for some reason. A grown mother of two blushing over a simple statement. Had she been thinking the same thing? He wondered how long it had been since she went out somewhere without the kids along. How long it had been since she went out anywhere that hadn’t involved fast food?

\* \* \*

EZ strolled into his friend’s office without knocking. “So, I can tell Abigail that Pandora will be safe while we’re gone?”

“Yes, she can relax. I have Nick over there now. He’ll cover until I can get back,” Justin

explained. "I have several things needing my attention here. Then I'm going home to catch some sleep."

"And why would you need to catch up on sleep?" EZ teased. "Job getting to much for you, old man?"

"Don't you need to be home packing or something?" Justin snapped back.

"All packed. We leave in the morning. Abigail wanted to spend time with her grandmother and parents before we left. I love my wife and her grandmother, but I can do without a night of my mother-in-law's sniping so I begged off. I'll pick her up at Grandmother Celia's later." EZ sat on the edge of the desk and peered at the computer screen. "I took care of that already." He pointed to the memo on Justin's screen.

EZ moved to the chair across from Justin. "Abigail was right, you did spend the night at Pandora's house."

"No, I couldn't sleep so I sent Nick home and I spent the night *outside* Pandora's house, in my car, doing my job."

"I bet you never thought your job would include breakfast with a seven-year-old?"

"Could you say no to that seven-year-old?"

"Nope. She knows it, too, that's the problem."

"Is there something you particularly wanted to talk about?" Justin asked.

EZ shook his head. "Just have a few things to go over with you before I leave. Want to be sure everything is set up."

"As much as she'll let me," Justin muttered.

EZ leaned back in the chair and smiled. "Run into a little snag, have you?"

A picture of Pandora sleeping with Zach in her arms flashed in Justin's mind bringing with it all the feelings he wanted to forget. "You could say that."

"We can put someone else on the case if you like," EZ offered, "But, Abigail would feel better if you were there."

"Tell her not to worry. I can handle things." He could guard them without out making it

personal. At least until EZ and Abigail returned from Texas.

EZ reached across the desk. “While you were busy romancing a seven-year-old, I picked up a couple new accounts today.” He cleared Justin’s screen and keyed in a new file. “Let me brief you on them.”

\* \* \*

*You think you can hide from me? You think that man can protect you? Bitch, I’ll prove you wrong. You can hide behind your bodyguards, and your fancy security system, go right ahead. I’ll get you sooner or later, you’re mine and no one else will have you!*

\* \* \*

The office staff was long gone by the time the two men had finished. They secured the offices and set the alarm before heading their separate ways. EZ to pick up his wife, and Justin for home to grab a few hours of much needed sleep.

At least that was his intention. Somehow he found himself parking in front of Pandora’s house. He looked around, noticing Nick’s car. The man had parked just out of the way of the house, but still within sight of it.

Telling himself he just wanted to check on things, he climbed the stairs and turned the knob on the front door; good, it was locked. He rang the bell, and listened, soon he could hear someone walk down the hall, then the footsteps stopped. He hoped she’d remembered what he told her and was checking to see who was there, before deactivating the alarm and opening the door.

“Justin!” Pandora wore the same black jeans and red turtleneck she had on earlier. She pulled her long hair back with clips and a smudge of red paint sat on the tip of her nose. He thought she looked adorable.

“What brings you here?” She looked around him and out to the street. “Is everything all right?”

“Fine. I was heading home and decided to stop and see how you were holding up.” It sounded like a lame excuse even to him. “I didn’t mean to bother you, I’ll leave.”

Pandora placed her hand on his, “No, please come in. I’m just finishing for the night and nowhere near ready to go to sleep. I’m going to have some tea, unless you’d rather have coffee?”

"Nothing for me." He did his best to stifle a yawn. "Well, maybe some coffee." He followed her down the hall and into the kitchen.

"Let me just wash my brushes, I'll be right back." She called over her shoulder as she went into her studio. "Make yourself at home."

She finished rinsing the brushes she'd been using and placed them in a can on the shelf over her table. What on earth was Justin doing here, at this hour? What on earth did she say to him? It was easy enough to talk to him with the children around. Lord knows Jenny alone could carry on three conversations at once.

But what did you say when you are alone with a man like that? A man that gave you goosebumps, shivers and X-rated dreams that would never be more than dreams? Lifting the canvas she'd been working on, she turned and found Justin directly behind her. "Where did you come from?" She shrieked.

He grabbed the canvas before she dropped it, covering her hands with his. For a few seconds they stood there, staring at each other before he pulled away. "Sorry, I thought you heard me come in." He took the canvas from her. "Where would you like this?"

She pointed across the room next to another painting. "Over there."

He gently stood the frame up against the wall and stepped back to look at the painting. It was EZ and Abigail on their wedding day. Pandora somehow had captured the immense love these two special people shared. A love that he'd once hoped to find, a love he would never deserve.

"I just finished it, you're the first to see it. What do you think?" Pandora waiting anxiously for his answer.

"It's beautiful." Justin said, "Probably one of the best things you've ever done."

Pandora let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding, waiting for his reaction. "Oh? How much of my work have you seen?"

"Enough to buy two of them. I own both of your Storm Island pieces."

"Really." They were the two highest selling pieces she had ever done and now she knew who had purchased them.



“Yes, I used to love that place as a child.”

“I’m glad you like them. It’s one of my favorite places as well. I haven’t done to many landscapes since then.”

“I don’t know why, you do them so well.”

“I like doing portraits much better. I like trying to capture people’s character. It’s a challenge.”

“One you’ve obviously met, and done well by.” He pointed toward the portrait. “You’ve captured them perfectly.”

“I did it as a present for them. No one knows about it but Grandmother Celia. She got me the picture. I was going to give it to them when they returned from Texas.”

“I promise not to say a word.”

“Thanks.” She looked at the canvas one last time before heading out the room.

Justin followed, trying unsuccessfully to stifle another yawn. “Excuse me, my lack of sleep is catching up with me.”

“I can understand that. Why don’t you go into the living room? I’ll be right there.”

“That’s OK. I’ll keep you company.”

They were in the kitchen now, and she stopped at the stove long enough to light the burner under the teakettle.

“Look at it this way. You’ve spent the day running around, you installed an alarm system, somehow got the phone company to start my Caller ID within a matter of hours and fixed my doorbell. On top of all that you listened to the ramblings of a two-year-old and a seven-year-old.”

“That’s all part of my job.”

“Justin,” She turned to him, hands on her hips, “you can’t follow me everywhere. I’ll be fine. Now, go and sit.”

He had to grin; it was the same tone of voice he had heard her use earlier with the kids. “Yes, ma’am.” He saluted smartly before leaving the room.

A short time later, she came into the room and found him leaning back in the easy chair, eyes closed sound asleep. Smiling, she placed the tray quietly on the end table and went to get a blanket from

the closet. Placing it over him, she headed back to the kitchen.

She shut the coffeepot off and placed the cups away before checking the back door and windows to be sure they were locked. Although being February in Boston she would have known if one was open, she felt better checking. Taking her cup of tea with her she went to the front of the house.

Once again, she checked all the locks on the doors and made sure the windows were secure. Then she turned to set the alarm. Someone had already done it.

She glanced over at the sleeping man in her living room. "You didn't think I'd remember, did you?"

The only reply she got was a snore.

## Chapter Nine

“Be quiet Zach, you’ll wake him up.”

Justin slowly regained consciousness; the last thing he remembered was sitting down in the chair. Damn, he must have been more tired than he thought to fall asleep like that.

He opened one eye, then the other, the children stood staring at him as if they expected him to rise from the dead. “Good morning.”

“Hi, Mister Justin!” Jenny smiled at him. Zach just stood there silently, with his thumb in his mouth. “Did you take too much medicine?”

“What?” he asked, stretching his arms over his head wincing as his muscles creaked before he stood up.

“Every time my daddy slept in the chair like that he told me he had too much medicine. I knew it really was ‘cause he drunk too much though.”

“And how did you learn so much, Miss Jenny Rebecca?” Justin sat back down in the chair, patting the arm for Jenny to climb up. She did as he pulled Zach onto his lap. Phew! He wrinkled his nose. The boy needed a diaper change and fast. He hoped Pandora would wake up soon. He wasn’t sure he could tell one end of a diaper from another.

“I use to hear him and Mommy fighting when he came home. They used to wake me up.” She said it as if it were the most natural thing in the world. Which it was, for her, at the time.

“I didn’t hear you and Mommy fight last night though. At least I didn’t wake up.”

“You didn’t wake up because your Mommy and I did not fight last night.” Seven-year-olds should be worried about ball games, Barbie dolls and cartoons, not drunks and fights between their

parents. "I came by to be sure you all were safe. Mommy invited me in for a cup of coffee. But I fell asleep."

"Good," Jenny nodded, "I'm glad you weren't drunk. I'm never going to drink, not whiskey anyway, or beer. I'll just have Kool-Aid, and maybe soda."

Justin laughed and hugged her tight. "I think as you get older you may want something a little stronger than that, Sweetheart."

"Koowaid, Jen-Jen?" Zach looked to his sister and then up at Justin, "pweeze?"

Justin stood up, still holding the little boy. "Not this early, champ. I don't think your mother would like that. What if we see about some juice, though, and maybe some breakfast? After we get you changed." He turned to Jenny. "I need you to help me with this one, Miss Jenny. I've never changed a diaper before."

"Sure, I help Mommy all the time." Jenny ran ahead of him into the kitchen.

\* \* \*

Pandora awoke with a start; what time was it? Looking at her clock, she jumped out of bed. Sandi would be here soon to pick Jenny up for dancing school. She could hear the TV on downstairs. Halfway down the staircase she stopped, fascinated by the sight that greeted her. There in the living room, on the floor with her children, sat Justin. His back against the coffee table and Zach in his lap, Jenny sat on the floor beside them. They were watching cartoons as Zach fed Justin cereal from his bowl.

Zach spotted her first, "Mommy!" He dropped his spoon right on Justin's lap and toddled over.

"Hello baby." She picked him up and opened the front door. The sound of the alarm reverberated throughout out the house.

"Mama!" Zach started crying.

Pandora grabbed the paper and slammed the door shut. "Justin! I thought you would at least turn it off in the morning." She bounced her son up and down trying to comfort him.

But Justin was too busy. He punched a code into the alarm and pulled his cell phone out. After talking to someone on the other end the house was blissfully silent. "I just did."

“That’s really loud, Mommy,” Jenny came over to the adults, “Why?”

Justin answered, “Alarms are supposed to be loud, Miss Jenny. That way they can scare the bad guys off.”

“See Mommy? I told you he’s smart, smarter than you even.”

Pandora shook her head. “Let’s hope I’m smart enough to check that thing the next time before I open the door.”

With the alarm silenced, Zach wanted to get back to his cartoons. He wiggled until his mother put him down.

“Did you change your brother, Jenny?”

“No, Mommy. Justin changed Zach. He stank!”

“Yeah, he was kind of ripe.” Justin grinned. “I didn’t think it should wait until you woke up.”

“You’re just a man of many talents, aren’t you, Mister Andrews?”

He grinned sheepishly. “I had help,” He looked over at Jenny, “didn’t I, Sweetheart?”

“I showed him where to find everything, Mommy. I helped him, just like I help you,” Jenny explained with a giggle, “But, he needed a little more help. He never changed a diaper before.”

She smiled at her daughter, “Thank you Jenny, but right now, I need you to go up and get dressed. Tina and her mom will be here soon to take you to dance class.”

“OK, Mom.” She started up the stairs, but came running back down, stopping in front of Justin.

“Promise you won’t leave until I come back, Mister Justin!”

“I won’t.”

“As I told you last night, you’ve made another conquest. My daughter.”

“And as I told you, she’s a good kid. You’ve done a great job with her especially considering everything that’s happened.”

She nodded and looked away; he knew when not to push.

“Besides, we have a lot in common.”

“Oh? Such as?”

“We both like Frosted Flakes and the Road Runner.”

That bought a smile to her face. "Myself, I'm partial to Marvin the Martin."

"Ah, a true esoteric," he grinned back at her.

"Not really, I kept hoping he'd come and take me to Mars."

"Ah ha, a traveler, even at an early age."

Pandora shook her head, "No, I just thought life had to be better anywhere else."

"Were things that bad?" Abigail had told him she'd had a rough childhood, but she never went into detail and he never asked. At least he had Uncle Nate around all those times his parents were away.

"Not all the time, and there was someone who made it a bit more bearable." For a few minutes she looked away, lost in her own memory of another long ago time.

"I'm glad you had someone." He took a step closer and reached out gently stroking her face, then tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "If I'd been around, I'd have taken you anywhere you wanted, as far as you wanted."

Pandora bit her lip. He could see tears glistening in her eyes. He took another step, and a third, reaching to gather her in his arms and...

*Crash!*

They both jumped back and turned toward the living room. Zach stood in a milky sea of chocolate puffed cereal. A bowl lay shattered all around him. "Mama!" he cried raising his hands to her.

The moment between them was broken. Quickly Pandora crossed the room and grabbed Zach before he stepped on any of the shards.

"Oh, baby!" She sat down and placed him in her lap, holding him until he stopped crying.

"Zach want puffs!" the two-year-old insisted, looking at the mess he'd made on the floor. "All gone, mama?"

"No darling, not all gone." She placed him on the sofa. "Stay here and be good while mama cleans up and we'll get you some more puffs."

"Jusin stay with Zach?"

"I don't think so." She smiled at the fracturing of his name. "I'm sure Mister Justin has work to

do.”

“Actually, I’m doing it.” He sat on the sofa and pulled Zach on his lap. “I cleared a lot of things up in the office last night so as of this moment you and the children are my top priority. OK, champ?” He tickled the child who giggled in obvious delight.

When Justin announced they were his priority, Pandora didn’t think he’d meant that literally.

She soon learned the truth. He’d been hired to guard them and guard them he would.

He kept Zach occupied while she did housework. When Jenny returned from dance class, he went shopping with them. In the grocery store he bundled Zach into the cart and wheeled him around like a pro. Somehow he managed to keep the children occupied as they followed her around the market. If she closed her eyes she could fantasize they were the perfect little family she’d always dreamed about.

Except for one thing: the perfect little family did not wait in the car while a bodyguard checked their home. He’d placed a man outside at all times, even when they weren’t home. However, Justin still insisted on checking the house before he’d let her and the children enter.

“Why are we still sitting here, Mommy?” Jenny asked from the back seat of Justin’s car. “Did Justin catch the bad man?”

“No, sweetie, I don’t think so.” If he had, she thought, police would be swarming all over the house by now. “Justin wants to be sure the house is safe before we go in there.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s his job.”

“But you told me Daddy is dead and no one can hurt us anymore.”

“And I meant it, baby.” She would do what ever needed to be done to keep her family safe. “But remember what we talked about earlier?”

She could see Jenny in the rearview mirror nodding in agreement. “Justin is going to protect us and try to catch the man who broke into our house.” She repeated it exactly as Pandora had explained to her earlier.

“That’s right.”

“Justin will catch them!”

“He’s going to try.”

“He will. He’s smart like Uncle EZ.”

“Unca EZ?” Zach interrupted looking around for his other favorite person.

“Yeah, Justin and Uncle EZ are partners, they work together. They’ll find the bad person.” The pronouncement was given with all the hero worship and finality a seven-year-old could muster.

Just then he came out of the house and walked toward them. Pandora may have been finding it easier to talk to him but her heart still took a little leap every time she saw him. Dressed in what she had come to think of as his standard work uniform: jeans, T-shirt and leather jacket all in black, any normal female with an ounce of hormones in her body couldn’t help but react to him.

No matter how he dressed, he managed to carry an air of superiority – almost arrogance – that seemed to add to his attraction rather than diminish it. The fact that underneath all that hard muscle and testosterone lay a gentle soul made him even harder to resist. He tried very hard to hide it, but she saw evidence of that gentleness in the way he treated her children.

He held the car door open for her, then helped Jenny out of the back seat. “It’s safe to go in now.”

She got Zach out of his seat and carried him up the front stairs. “Stay with your sister. I have to get the bags.”

“Hurry you guys!” Jenny jumped up and down on the porch. “I need to watch cartoons!”

“toons, Mama.” Zach echoed his sister.

Pandora chuckled as she went back down the sidewalk and out the street beside the car. Opening the trunk, she took one bag out and laid it on the sidewalk.

The screech of tires filled the quiet afternoon. She looked up and froze as a black sedan bore down on her. She was caught in the headlights, unable to move.

“No! Mama!”

Justin felt as if the world was moving in slow motion, “Stay there!” He yelled to the kids on the steps. Turning he ran as if demons were after him. They were, the demons of his past. He had to reach her in time. “NO!” He screamed, knocking Pandora down in a flying tackle. He vaguely registered the



screeching of tires as the car drove off, chased by Nick.

He had landed them in the gutter, but they were alive, and that was all that mattered. “Are you OK?” He asked Pandora, needing to hear her voice.

“I think so.” Her voice sounded weak and tearful. “Come on, Sweetheart.” Justin extended one hand and pulled her up. Zach and Jenny were running toward her.

“Mommy!” They both cried and wrapped their arms around her legs.

“Shh baby, it’s OK. Mommy’s here.” She pried them both from her legs and lifted Zach into her arms. She took a step, wincing at the pain shooting up her leg.

“Are you OK?” Justin asked. “I wasn’t exactly gentle, I just wanted to get you out of danger.”

“I’m fine, really.” Jenny stood beside her, watching her mother, her lower lip stuck out. A sure sign her daughter was upset. She tried walking again; it still hurt but not as much. Justin put his arm around her for support and she didn’t argue. She tried to put Zach down but he would not let go. She held him in one arm. Jenny walked beside her as slowly they made their way up the sidewalk.

Once in the house she sat on the sofa and elevated her leg. Both children sat beside her.

Justin got some ice and applied it to her swollen ankle. He didn’t think it was broken, she probably sprained it when he knocked her down. “I’m going to get the groceries. I’ll be right back.” He stopped at the door, “If your mama gets off that sofa, Miss Jenny, you be sure to tell me.”

Pandora threw an exasperated look at him. “Don’t worry, I’m not going anywhere.”

He grinned. “Just making sure.”

It took him more than a few minutes. He’d probably been talking to Nick, Pandora thought when he returned carrying her groceries. After putting the bags in the kitchen, he came back.

“Miss Jenny, why don’t you and Zach go into the kitchen? I put out some cookies and juice.”

Jenny looked over to her mother, “It’s OK, baby. Justin and I have to talk about some things. I need you to watch Zach for me.”

“OK. Mommy.” She jumped off the sofa and helped her brother down. “Come on Zach.”

Justin waited until they left the room before he spoke. “Were you able to see what kind of car it was, or get a glimpse at the driver?”

“No. I heard this noise, and when I looked up all I saw was headlights coming at me, and then woosh, just like...” she stopped, realizing what she was about to say.

“Like what?” He hunkered down next to her. “Like what, Pandora?”

Pandora glanced at the kitchen door before speaking. “The day before Jenny’s birthday I took the bus to the mall. Jenny wanted a specific doll for her birthday and the toy store there was the only place I found that carried it. So off I went. As I crossed the parking lot to the bus stop a black car almost ran me down.”

“And you didn’t think anything of it?” He began pacing the room. “Is there anything else you haven’t told me about? Or do I have to wait until someone shoots you to discover that wasn’t the first time either?”

She sat up taller. “Excuse me for not remembering! At the time I happened to be more concerned about how someone managed to break into my house then what I thought about some turkey not watching where he drove.”

“Fine, but I’d appreciate it if you told me any other little details you may have forgotten.”

“Leave my Mommy alone!”

Jenny and Zach stood in the doorway holding hands. Zach had his thumb in his mouth. “Don’t yell at my Mommy,” Jenny scolded him.

Both adults were stunned into silence.

“Oh baby.” Pandora held her arms out and both her children ran to her. “We were having a disagreement, that’s all. Justin didn’t hit me.”

Justin joined them. “That’s right, Jenny. Adults can have arguments without hitting anyone. It’s called a discussion.”

He smiled at the disbelieving look Pandora flashed at him. “I’d never hit your mother, or you or Zach. I don’t hit anyone.”

“Not even bad people?”

“Well, sometimes, but that’s my job, that’s different, and they have to hit me first.”

She looked at them both and nodded, “That’s OK.” She took her brother’s hand and turned back,

stopping suddenly. "I forgot, there's a man on the back porch, he said his name was Nick and he needed to talk to Justin.

"Good." He stood up and headed for the door.

"Do you think he got whoever it was who drove the car?"

"Probably not, he wouldn't be back this soon. He may have gotten the license number but I have a feeling we'll find out it's stolen."

"Alright. Go talk to him."

"Remember what I told you."

"I will," she sighed.

\* \* \*

*So, you think you can fool me, do you? This man thinks he can protect you? He thinks he can get into your bed, slut? He can think again, bitch, you're mine!*

\* \* \*

Standing back from the easel, Pandora surveyed her work with a critical eye, pleased with the results. It was Justin; not the way most people perceived him, but Justin, the way she and her children knew him. Black jeans, T-shirt and leather jacket, the way he looked the night he and EZ came to her rescue, the way he looked that morning he came banging on her door. This was Justin, her defender, and her children's.

Two weeks had passed since their argument the day the car almost hit her. Things seemed much better. He had been right, even though Nick managed to get the license plate number, when they checked it out the plates belonged to a Honda reported stolen three days earlier. She didn't know much about cars, but she knew the car that almost hit her was not a Honda.

Meanwhile, Justin worked his way into the pattern of their lives. He spent his nights on her sofa and Pandora could already see problems with the children when this nightmare finally ended.

She couldn't deny she felt much safer with him around. However she knew it could not go on like this forever. There had not been a phone call in over a week, and nothing had gone missing or even appeared to have been moved, since he moved in.

There was also the problem of how she was going to pay for all of this. She didn't feel right, letting Abigail and her grandmother pay even if they could afford it. When she mentioned it once to Justin he tersely told her, "Don't worry about it." Then he very quickly changed the subject.

The phone rang. She took her time crossing the room, just as Justin had instructed her, to allow him time to get to a phone

"Hello," she said hesitantly.

"Pandora! You have to come out here. The kids would love it!"

She breathed a sigh of relief, "Abigail! How did the opening go?"

"Fantastic. I sold some of your paintings. Could have sold more, if I had any with me."

They discussed business for a while before Abigail surprised her by saying, "Justin, I am sure you're totally bored with all this talk. Why don't you hang up and leave us to gossip in peace?"

"Good night, Abigail." A deep chuckle resounded from the other end of the line, followed by a click.

"How did you know he was there?" Pandora asked. Even she couldn't tell if he was listening or not.

"Between my husband, various family members and Justin, I think I know what standard operating procedure is by now." Abigail's uncle had been a cop. Before joining U.S. Customs, and working for Justin, EZ had also been a cop.

"What's this I hear about a car trying to run you down? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Who told you? Was it Justin or EZ?"

"Who do you think?"

She could shoot Justin for telling her. "I had forgotten about it, honestly. At least until that night. I just figured it was some kook."

"Yes, a kook who almost killed you."

"But he didn't."

"Thanks to Justin."

"Yes, but up until that night nothing had been happening. I hadn't had so much as a phone call.

I was beginning to feel guilty for having him around.”

“Don’t feel guilty. Until they find out who your stalker is, he’ll stay there. And you’re not to worry about the money either.”

“Abigail, this must be costing a mint.”

“That’s all right, between grandmother and I we can afford it. Besides, when this baby is born, you can pay me back in babysitting hours.”

“You just tell me when,” Pandora replied. “I’ll be happy to do it.”

“So,” Abigail changed the subject. “How are things really going between you and Justin?”

“I told you, fine.”

“OK, so he’s doing his job. What I want to know is how are things *really* going between you two, personally that is.”

“Abigail!” Pandora blushed when she thought of the scene in her living room last weekend. She had been sure Justin wanted to kiss her when Zach dropped the cereal bowl. That had probably been a good thing, because she would have let Justin kiss her and that could have been a big mistake. She glanced around the room as if expecting to see her friend there. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“If you say so. Every time you two are together the sparks fly. Can I help it if both of you just choose to ignore them?”

“Are you trying to play match maker? Is that why you set this up?”

“No, I just want you safe, that’s my primary concern right now.”

“I’m glad to hear that.”

“But of course if you and he should finally decide to acknowledge what everyone already knows...”

“Abigail!” Pandora sighed deeply. “There is nothing going on between Justin and me, other than a business relationship, and there won’t be anything other than that, ever.”

“So you say,” Abigail conceded, “We’ll see.”

They spent a few more minutes talking, making plans to meet for lunch when Pandora returned

to Boston the following week. After promising to take the children to see Abigail's grandmother, she hung up.

No sooner had she hung up then the door opened and Justin entered, a mug in each hand.

"I thought you might want a break." He held a mug out to her. "It's some of that herbal stuff you like. I hope I made it right."

"Thanks. I'm sure it's fine." She took a sip and smiled back at him. Damn. He'd spotted the picture. She hadn't had time to put it away, and she didn't want him to see it yet.

He stood in front of it, staring, his silence almost deafening.

"Do you like it?" Pandora asked, not really sure she wanted an answer.

"Yes. But it's too good to be me."

"No, it's not." She joined him at the easel. "I painted you the way Jenny describes you. She told me you're her white knight, even if you do wear black."

He smiled, "We both know that Miss Jenny has an overactive imagination."

"She thinks you're brave and smart, like her uncle EZ and that like him, you can save us from almost anything."

He put the cup down and turned away, staring out the window. Rubbing the back of his neck he wished somehow he could ease the pain in his chest. It came every time he thought of the one person he'd failed, the only person who ever trusted him almost as much as Jenny.

"Justin?" Pandora placed her hand on his arm. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." He looked down at her, petite and fragile, but looks were certainly deceiving. He knew she was much stronger than any of the men he'd ever worked with over the years, even EZ.

Covering her hand with his, he turned back to the painting. "I'm no white knight, or even a black one. I'm just a man, trying to make a living."

She placed her free hand over his, "I think it's a little more than that."

He shook his head. "I'm not necessarily brave, but I am good at what I do and I will do my best to protect you and your children." He turned to her, "You do believe that, don't you?"

"If I didn't, you wouldn't be here," she replied, reaching up to gently stroke his face, wishing she

could somehow wipe away whatever it was that caused all the pain she saw mirrored there.

“I happen to think that you are an extremely smart and very brave man, Justin Andrews, and don’t you forget it.” She surprised the both of them with what she did next. Standing on her toes she pulled his head down to meet hers. Then, she brushed a kiss across his lips, as soft as the touch of butterflies’ wings; and just as quickly it ended. They stared at each other, not sure what to do.

“Oh my,” she whispered before walking out the room.

Justin stared after her speechless.

## Chapter Ten

He poured himself some water and sat down at the kitchen table, wishing for something stronger. He'd get very little sleep this night. Pandora had caught him unaware and he didn't like that.

Justin had spent years hiding his heart, not daring to give it again, afraid of failing. Ever since Joanne had died in the accident. He'd failed her by not being there when she needed him, ignoring her cries for help. He threw himself into his work, refusing to care about anything else. Then along came this tiny sprite of a woman and her two children, bringing out every protective instinct he possessed. He would not fail this time, could not, he'd never be able to live with himself if he did.

"Justin?" Pandora stood in the doorway wearing a long Boston Red Sox T-shirt and white athletic socks but nothing else. There was enough moonlight for him to see that. He also saw the angry scar on her thigh, still there even two years after that final brutal attack. He found himself wanted to touch it, wishing he could smooth it away.

"Can't sleep either?" she asked, interrupting his thoughts.

"No, I decided a glass of water might help." He got up and placed the glass in the sink. "Think I'll go back to bed now." She stood to one side so he could pass her, however he stopped and studied her intently.

"Yes, Justin?" she asked.

He wondered if she realized the effect she had on him. "Would you answer one question for me?" he asked.

"Of course."

"Why did you do it?"



“The painting?” she asked, not looking up at him.

“Actually, I was thinking of the kiss, but now that you mention it, yes, the painting as well as the kiss.”

“The painting is easy. I wanted to thank you.”

“For what? I’m only doing my job.”

She gave him a look of disbelief. “If that’s what you want to think.”

“That answers half my question,” he said, ignoring her last comment, suddenly reluctant to move away from her. “What about the kiss?”

“The kiss? I honestly don’t know.” She looked up at him and nervously licked her lips. “I’ve never been so forward with a man in my entire life.”

“Not even your ex?”

She shook her head. “Joey didn’t like it if I was pushy, like that. He had to be the one to initiate things.”

He’d bet Joey didn’t like a lot of things.

“I’m sorry if it bothered you,” she said. “It just seemed like the thing to do.”

“Don’t be sorry, I’m not.”

“You’re not?” Her eyes widened in surprise.

“No.” He just wished he could have taken it further. Then he looked at her and felt a kick in the pit of his stomach.

She honestly didn’t think she *was* attractive. Once again his mouth ignored what his brain tried to tell him not to do. “I found myself wishing you hadn’t run out when you did.”

“You did?” She squeaked and winced at the sound of her own voice. Why couldn’t she sound cool and sophisticated, not like some young girl alone with a man she had a crush on. “What would you have done?”

“This.” He stepped closer and placed his hands on either side of her face. “May I?” he asked.

No one had ever asked permission to kiss her. She nodded, not trusting herself to speak even if she had wanted to. As he came even closer, she stiffened, not sure what to expect. It certainly wasn’t

this.

She felt his lips on her skin, light as a feather caressing first her forehead, then her eyes and finally her lips. He gathered her into his arms and held her close, her head against his chest. She could feel his heart beating as fast as hers and she took comfort from the knowledge he was as affected as she by whatever this thing was between them.

“That wasn’t so bad, was it?” He asked, still holding her close.

“No,” she answered, liking the way it felt to have his arms around her.

“Want to try it again?”

Parting her lips, she raised herself to meet his kiss. “Yes, please.”

His lips tasted warm and sweet on hers, like nothing she’d ever experienced before. Joey had never been able to start this shiver of whatever it was Justin had ignited in her. When he finally stepped away she wrapped her arms around herself in an attempt to hold the warmth in.

Justin placed a final kiss on the top of her head. “I think you should go to sleep, now.”

She nodded in agreement and left the room, not sure what to think. Just before she started up the stairs she thought she heard Justin say, “You were a damn fool, Joey Riley.”

## Chapter Eleven

Keeping her word to Abigail. Pandora took the children to visit their adopted grandmother the next day. Justin insisted on accompanying them.

“Thank you for the portrait dear, it’s lovely. I know Abigail will be surprised.”

“I just hope she likes it.”

“What’s not to like?” Justin asked from where he sat on the other side of the table. The children sat in chairs on either side of him, enjoying their lunch. “It’s one of your best portraits. I’ve told you that before.”

“I know, but don’t you get nervous when you’re doing a case, afraid they won’t like what you’re doing?”

“Not really. Most companies hire us to do a job, the best way we know how. If they don’t like how we do it, then they can feel free to hire another firm. Of course, they won’t get as good protection as they would from us, but you get what you pay for.”

“Speaking of which...”

“Yes, ma’am.” He turned to Grandmother Celia. “I assumed you’d want a report.”

“I know you are good at what you do, I just want to know what you have done. Outside of making Pandora’s home safer.”

“Well, we sent someone to speak with the grandmother. If someone in the family is involved, she knows nothing about it, yet. We’re still checking on the rest of the family.”

“Excuse me?” Pandora stood. “When were you going to tell me about this? You do realize that you could have placed Mother Riley in danger. If Joe gets an inkling of her talking to anyone he could

hurt her.”

“Don’t worry. I sent someone who was not associated with you, and they talked to her away from the home. I’m not totally heartless.”

“Thank you. I’d hate to think I caused her more harm.”

The children had stopped eating and were busy listening to every word the adults said. Grandmother Celia stood up, “Come on children, there is something in the other room I want to show you.”

Jenny looked over at her mother. “Go ahead.” Pandora said, “I’ll be right there.”

Jenny rolled her eyes. “Come on Zach, the grownups want to talk about something they don’t think we should hear.”

Laughing, Justin lifted Zach out of his seat. Taking her brother by the hand, they followed the older woman out of the room.

“Is she right?” Pandora asked. “What else do you have to tell me? Anything the children shouldn’t hear?”

“Well, maybe.”

“What? Do you know who is doing this?” She walked around the table and sat down next to him. “Who is it?”

“Calm down.” He reached for her hands.

She thought her heart was going to burst out of her chest. She grasped his hands, needing the anchor, not sure of the news he had. “What is it?”

“Did you know Jimmy’s back in the neighborhood?”

She let out a sigh. “Sandi thought he might be. Did she call you?”

“No, but her brother did. He called the office yesterday and left a message. I called him back while you were giving the kids their baths.”

“And you didn’t tell me last night?” She pulled her hands away. “Why not?”

One eyebrow rose in question. “I had my mind on other things, in case you’ve forgotten.”

No, she hadn’t forgotten. She stood up and walked to the window, not wanting him to see the

flush on her face. Jimmy was the only one who would have the knowledge to do the things that had been happening. Although a year apart in age, he and Joey had been more like twins. She almost jumped when she felt Justin's hands on her shoulders.

"Shh, Princess, we've notified the police and we're looking for him. He was released on parole and has to show up sooner or later. He can't hide forever." He pulled her closer and wrapped his arms around her. "We'll get to the bottom of this, I promise."

She leaned into his embrace. Closing her eyes she prayed that he could keep that promise.

\* \* \*

A short time later, she watched Justin on the floor, assembling a train track for her son and daughter, patiently answering Jenny's questions.

"He's good with the children, isn't he?" Grandmother Celia came into the room and sat next to Pandora.

"Yes, he is." Pandora agreed with her. "Jenny really likes him, maybe too much."

"Why do you say that, dear?"

"I realize he's probably the closest thing she'll have to a stable male in her life, next to EZ. But, I'm afraid of what will happen when this is over. He'll leave then, there'll be no reason for him to stay around. How do I explain that to her?"

"Who says he's going to leave?" the older woman asked. "He looks pretty settled to me."

Pandora looked at the woman in disbelief. "You can't be serious. Justin's taste in women hardly runs to short dark haired divorcees with two children."

Before the conversation could go further, Zach and Jenny insisted she come see what they had built. She never saw the enigmatic smile on the older woman's face as she watched her with Justin and her children.

\* \* \*

Pandora and the children now sat waiting in the car for Justin to check the house before they could enter it.

"Mommy, go in the house?" Zach asked yet again.

"Soon, baby," she reassured her son.

"How soon?" Jenny whined. "I'm tired of waiting."

The incessant wailing of a police siren prevented her from answering. The sound grew louder and louder and she watched in horror as a patrol car parked in front of her house. A policeman got out and ran up the stairs to her house.

Pandora got out, taking the children with her. That's when she realized Nick wasn't in his car. "Stay with me Jenny Rebecca," she warned as they headed up the stairs. She reached for the door, only to have it swing away from her.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" Justin took Zach out of her arms and tried to steer them back down the front stairs. "I called Celia. I want you to go back there and wait for me."

"Why?" She pulled away and marched past him into the house. "I want to know what happened. I thought you had secured the house. What happened to Nick? I thought he was on watch?"

"We found him out cold in the kitchen. Someone broke in, bypassing the security system." Justin spoke softly, hoping to soften the blow, but knowing it wouldn't.

Pandora stopped in the hallway, her coat half off, not really sure she'd heard him correctly. The look on his face told her all she needed to know.

"Pandora, wait!" He called out as she ran to her studio, but she paid him no mind. He followed her, wishing he could have stopped her from seeing what it looked like in there.

She stopped just inside the door, horrified by the carnage that greeted her. Canvasses torn, paint spilled everywhere, and in the middle of the chaos lay Justin's portrait. Blood red letters screamed across the canvas, *NO!*

The policeman who answered Justin's call searched through the rubble with gloved hands but she barely noticed him. Grabbing onto a table for support, she closed her eyes and took several deep-gulping breaths. Who would do this to her? Why? What had she done to deserve this?

"Mommy?" Jenny came up behind her and looked into the room. With a cry she ran over to the canvas before she could be stopped.

Still holding Zach in one arm, Justin wrapped the other around Pandora, offering what little

comfort he could. Jenny ran back to them in tears, carrying what had once been her stuffed zebra but now bore little resemblance to that creature.

“Mommy?” she cried out before throwing herself into Pandora’s arms.

“Jen-Jen cry?” Zach asked Justin.

“Yea, buddy, Jen-Jen cry.” He reached over and stroked her hair. “We’ll find whoever did this Sweetheart, I promise.”

She looked up at him through her tears. “Call Uncle EZ! He’ll help you.”

“I’m sorry to interrupt you, sir.” The officer crossed the room to join them, he opened the plastic evidence bag. “Excuse me sweetie, I need to take this.” Carefully, he took what was left of the zebra from Jenny and placed it in the bag. “I called headquarters, they’re sending a crime scene team.”

“Good.” Justin shepherded them all into the kitchen, leaving the patrolman to his work. “I need to call EZ and a few other people, but first, I’m going to need you to do something for me.” He looked over at Pandora, “Please.”

Thankfully she didn’t argue with him, but simply nodded.

“Go upstairs and pack enough clothes for a few days. If we need more, we’ll get them there.”

“Where’s there?” asked Pandora.

He handed Zach over to her. “I’ll let you know later. Right now I want to get you out of here.” He herded them out the room.

That’s when she saw Nick, sitting at the kitchen table. Holding an ice pack to his eye, dried blood caked around his mouth. “Oh my God! Are you OK?”

“Yup.” He tried to smile and then winced. “I’m going to have a hell of a headache though.”

“I feel so bad. I didn’t even see you there.”

“Don’t worry about it.” He looked over at Justin. “I’m sorry, boss.”

“Don’t be.” He patted the man on the shoulder. “Ambulance is coming, I want you to get checked out. I’ll call Nancy and have her go see your wife so she’s not scared. Take the rest of the week off.”

"Thanks, boss. You taking them away?"

"Yes, we'll leave as soon as she gets packed."

"Don't worry, Ma'am." Nick said to Pandora, "We'll find who did this."

"Uncle EZ and Justin will, they can do anything!" Jenny said.

"Yea!" Zach agreed.

"They're real smart." Nick agreed. "That's why I work for them."

"OK, enough of this," Justin interrupted them. "We have to get going."

As they headed up the stairs, the sound of sirens stopped them. "Wait a minute," Justin said. "I want to talk to them."

"We can go up and start packing," Pandora said.

"No!" He stopped her. "I don't want you out of my sight. We'll go up together."

She sat on the stairs, Zach on her lap and Jenny next to her. Zach had his thumb in his mouth and Jenny chewed her lower lip. Putting her free arm around her daughter, she pulled her close. "Come on Jenny Rebecca, everything will be all right."

"Justin needs to call Uncle EZ – they need to find the bad guy." Tears filled her eyes.

"Oh, baby." Pandora's heart tore apart at the sight of her daughter's tears.

"Hey there, is that tears I see?" Justin knelt down on the floor in front of them. "Come now. We're going to take a trip."

Jenny perked up. "Where we going? Will we catch the bad guy?"

"Where we're going is a surprise," he said. Mostly because he wasn't sure yet. "As for catching the bad guy, leave that to me and your uncle EZ." Standing, he held his hand out to the child. "Come on, you need to help Mom pack some clothes. I'll call Uncle EZ while you do that."

Pandora stood up, still holding Zach. "Does that sound OK to you Jenny?"

"Yup!" She took Justin's hand and they followed Pandora and Zach up the stairs.



## Chapter Twelve

“Are you OK?” Justin glanced anxiously at Pandora sitting next to him in the car. She’d barely spoken two words to him since they’d left Boston and he’d just crossed the border into New York State. He checked in the rear view mirror. Both Jenny and Zach had finally fallen asleep in the back seat.

“I’m fine,” she answered tersely, but he didn’t believe her. Her arms remained wrapped tightly around her waist. The same way they’d been when she talked to the police before they left. The way they’d been since they threw the bags in the car and took off.

“Are you going to tell me where we’re going?” she asked.

Satisfied that Nick would be going to the hospital, he’d made a few phone calls while she had packed clothes for her and the kids. He’d not told her of the plans he’d made. His primary concern had been to get them all out of there. “I know a safe place where we can stay for a night or two and get some rest. Then we’ll head for Florida.”

“Why Florida?” she questioned him again. “It’s so far. I didn’t even bring warm weather clothes, what about Jenny’s school? How long will we be gone?” She threw her questions at him.

“EZ said he’d have Abigail go to the school tomorrow and explain to Sister Mary, as well as Sandi and Tina. I wouldn’t worry about clothes, we can get some down there. My primary concern was to get you and the children as far away as possible. Florida seemed like the best place.” He reached across the gearshift and placed his hand on top of hers. “I promise, I’ll do my best to keep you all safe.”

She unwrapped her arms and held on to his hand. “I know you will.” Leaning back in the seat, she soon fell asleep.

Justin kept his eye on the road and his hand in hers as she slept, praying that he would not let

them down.

\* \* \*

She woke up as they turned down a gravel, tree-lined roadway. Ahead, she could see an old farmhouse and barn surrounded by pine and oak trees. It was absolutely beautiful and peaceful. An older couple stepped off the porch as Justin pulled to a stop.

He opened the door for Jenny to get out as Pandora removed Zach from the car seat.

“Good morning, folks.” The older man came forward, hand extended. “I’m Bob Stanley, this is my wife Meggie. You must be Mr. Andrews. Matilda told us to expect you.”

Justin shook hands with the man. “Thank you for letting us impose, sir.”

“It’s not a problem.”

The woman looked around at Jenny, hiding behind her mother’s back. “Hello. I bet you’re hungry.”

Jenny nodded.

“Good, I was just about to make some breakfast. But, I need to get some eggs first. Would you like to come with me to the chicken coop and help pick them?”

“You don’t pick eggs, you get them from the supermarket. Everyone knows that.” Jenny looked to her mother for confirmation.

“The supermarket has to get them from somewhere,” Pandora said, squeezing her daughter’s hand. “It’s alright, you can go with Mrs. Stanley. I have to change Zach.”

“Your mother’s right.” The older woman held her hand out to Jenny. “Come on, I’ll show you where they find them before they get to the market.”

Jenny looked to her mother, then Justin and back to Mrs. Stanley. Curiosity finally got the better of her. “OK.” She took the other woman’s hand and walked away with her.

Mr. Stanley helped Justin with the bags and led them inside. By the time Pandora washed and changed Zach, Jenny sat in the kitchen happily breaking eggs into a bowl.

“Mom, it was so cool. I saw where the hens lay their eggs and I got to reach in and take one!”

“Sounds like fun.” Zach climbed up next to his sister and immediately reached for the bowl.

Pandora pushed it away. “No you don’t, buddy.”

\* \* \*

She couldn’t remember the last time she’d been anywhere so peaceful, or so lovely. After breakfast she sat down in the recliner in the living room and promptly fell asleep. Someone had covered her with a blanket and when she woke up she couldn’t believe it was past lunchtime. She found Mrs. Stanley in the kitchen.

“Did you sleep well, dear?”

“Yes, thank you. I guess I was more tired than I thought.”

“The children wanted to wake you for lunch but Justin said to let you sleep. We let the children eat on the porch and now they’re down in the barn with my husband.”

“Maybe I’ll join them.”

“I left some sandwiches in the refrigerator, if you’re hungry.”

Pandora stared out the window. The calendar still said winter but here in Virginia, bits of spring had started to show. “I think I’ll wait until dinner. Can I help you with anything?”

“Not a thing, you’re here to rest and that is what you’ll do.”

“Yes ma’am.” Pandora grabbed an apple off the bowl on the counter. “I’ll be outside, on the porch if you change your mind.”

Sitting on the stairs she could imagine this place must really be a beautiful sight when everything was in bloom.

The porch door opened and Justin joined her on the stairs.

“I thought you were with the children.”

“Bob is handling them just fine.”

“Do you think it’s safe to leave them? You don’t really know these people, do you?”

“No, I don’t, but the person who owns this place vouched for them and that’s enough for me. The kids will be fine. Right now Bob is Zach’s hero for letting him ride a horse. He’s even managed to answer all Jenny’s questions.”

“That takes a lot of patience.”

"I think he has it."

She had one more question. "Who's Matilda?" Afraid it might not be any of her business she quickly added, "You don't have to answer if you don't want to. When we arrived Mr. Stanley said Matilda had called to tell him we were coming."

"I'm sorry, I thought you knew. Remember Mac, who used to work with me and EZ?"

"Yes, I met her at the wedding. This is her place?"

He nodded. "Matilda is her given name, but I think the Stanleys are one of the few people she lets call her that."

Pandora had spoken briefly with her at EZ and Abigail's wedding. She remembered an Amazon of a woman in a killer dress. "She doesn't seem like the farm type."

"That's for sure. We knew she owned a house in Virginia, but were never sure just where. She never told us."

"You mean she never invited either you or EZ here?"

"Nope, this is where she comes when doesn't want to be found. At least that's what she told me."

Pandora looked around at the acres of farmland. In the background she could hear her daughter and son screaming in delight. "I certainly can understand that."

"Somehow I knew you would like it here, Princess."

"You know there is only one other person who has ever called me that. It's been years."

Justin watched her stare out across the land, lost in her past. "Joey didn't call you that?"

"Good God, no. He called me a lot of things, but Princess was never one of them."

Justin smiled at that. "So who was it that called you Princess?"

"I have a stepbrother, Zach, I named my son after him. When my mom first married Jack Castorva we saw each other as competition, as most kids do. He called me Princess and I called him Stinky." She giggled at the long forgotten memory.

"You miss him." It was a statement of fact, not a question.

"Yes, I do. For years it was just me and Mom, until the summer I turned eight. She met Jack

that summer. He did his best but I don't think he ever really knew what to do with me. He adopted me, because he felt it was the thing to do. But then Mom died and Jack buried himself in his work. Zach and I looked out for each other. He was the only one I would listen to, funny thing is he told me not to marry Joey. I should have listened to him."

"You were in love."

"I thought so."

"When was the last time you saw him?" Justin asked. His investigations had shown the presence of a stepbrother but no mention of him in years.

"He came to see me just after I had Jenny. His father had died and while cleaning out the house he'd found some things of my mother's he thought I might want. Joey didn't appreciate him coming by."

I bet he didn't, thought Justin. "So you haven't heard from him since?"

"No, last I knew he had accepted a job in Alaska. I would like him to know about Zach. I hope he's found some measure of happiness in his life. God knows we couldn't please his dad, either of us."

"Ah, Princess." He drew her close to him. "Have you found happiness yet?"

"I thought I did. I'm beginning to wonder if it's not in my stars."

"It's there." He brushed a kiss across the top of her head and pulled her even closer, pleased when she didn't fight him. "It's just taken a detour that's all."

She laid her head against his chest, taking comfort from the steady beat of his heart. "Sounds like you know all about detours."

"Detours and stop signs, I know them all."

When she raised her head, his mouth was inches from hers. She licked her lips, this man made her dare to do things she'd never done before. He lowered his head and covered her mouth with his.

In the back of her mind she could hear the children's voices, the sounds of Meggie in the kitchen preparing supper. But all of that faded into the velvet reality of his kiss, the strength of the comfort he gave her. The energy she needed so badly. All of it found in that one kiss. His hands roved up and down her back effectively turning her spine into mush. She wrapped her arms around his waist, wanting

him closer, and her hands closed around the hard steel of his gun. Bringing back the enormity of their situation. She stiffened and pulled away.

"I'm sorry," she apologized. What had she been thinking.

"Don't be." His hands framed her face forcing her to look at him. "The gun is always there, will always be there. It's part of who I am, it's part of why we're here."

"Let me go help Meggie." She rose and opened the screen door to the house. Justin spoke before she could step inside.

"Princess?"

"Yes?"

"For the record, I'm not sorry."

She didn't answer, simply closed the door behind her. Stopping in the downstairs bathroom to wash her hands, she looked at her reflection in the mirror. She didn't recognize the woman with the flushed face and swollen lips still warm from his touch. She traced those well-kissed lips with her fingers. "God help me," she whispered to her reflection. "I'm not sorry, either."

\* \* \*

After supper the children went to bed immediately, tired from all their exploring. She had grabbed a book from the den downstairs and settled in to enjoy it. However, she could not concentrate. A knock on the door gave her the excuse she needed to put the book down.

Justin stood in the dark hallway. "I saw the light on and thought I should check on you."

"Thanks, I'm reading a book I found downstairs. I was just about to close it and try and sleep."

"Good idea, I think we'll be safe enough to stay another day. The kids seem to be enjoying themselves." He reached up and gently pushed her hair behind her ear. "Sleep tight, Princess." He closed the door before she could say anything else. It wasn't until she crawled into bed did she realize she'd totally forgotten to ask just where in Florida their final destination would be.

\* \* \*

"Come on, we're going for a walk." Justin took Pandora's hand and pulled her off the porch.

"What about the kids?"

“They’re happy where they are, helping Bob in the barn. I think Miss Jenny has added farmer to her list of occupations when she grows up.

She had to laugh. “Yes, she told me this morning she wanted a farm.”

“See, they’ll be fine. Bob won’t let anything happen to them.” He pulled her again. “Let’s go.”

“OK, OK, don’t rush.” She allowed him to lead her down the path, around the barn and into the woods. “Where are you taking me?”

“You’ll see soon enough.” He led her into a clearing where he had set up a group of cans on a fence.

“Why do I get the feeling this is not archery practice?”

He reached behind a tree and pulled a holster out there was a gun in it.

“You don’t expect me to carry that, do you?”

“Calm down, Princess. I don’t expect you to carry a gun. This is my backup gun and I’d feel better if you knew how to use it, just in case.”

“In case what?” Her heart dropped to her feet. “You’re not expecting anything to happen, are you?”

“No, I’m not. Now calm down and listen. I just don’t want you to find yourself in a situation where something happened to me and I couldn’t protect you. This could be the deciding factor in your survival.”

Pandora was nothing if not realistic and she knew Justin was right. She just hated the idea of a gun. “I don’t have to wear that thing, do I?”

“No, you don’t. It’s small enough to fit in your purse, if I think you need to take it. Before you say anything, I also have a lock for it. So there is no chance of the kids accidentally firing it.”

“You think of everything, don’t you?”

“I try.” He handed her the gun. “Listen up. This is a Smith and Wesson .38 revolver, small enough and easy enough for you to handle.”

Reluctantly, she listened as he explained gun safety and how the mechanism worked. “OK,” He took the weapon back from her. “Now watch me.” Raising the gun, he aimed at the fence and let off a

shot. The ping as the bullet hit a can reverberated throughout the clearing. He turned and handed the gun to her. "Your turn."

She took it, surprised that it didn't feel as heavy as she thought it would. "What now?" She faced the targets on the fence, sure she wouldn't hit any of them.

"Hold it with both hands, raise them to about chest level, aim and shoot. Just as I showed you."

She did and managed to nick one of the cans on the fence.

"OK, that's good, but you can do better. Let's try again."

"I hit it, didn't I?"

"No, you nicked it. There's a difference."

"And what would that be? I managed to make contact with it, didn't I?"

"Yes, you did, but if that had been our stalker, he still could have gotten a shot off at you. Now try again."

She muttered something under her breath that he was sure her kids would have been in trouble if they'd said it. He just smiled and stepped behind her, covering her hands with his. "Your aim needs to be a bit steadier, that's all."

He helped her shoot the remaining rounds, each time his hands held her arms straight as she aimed and shot. Each time he became more aware of the warmth of her body, the nearness and the intoxicating scent of whatever soap Meggie had left in her bathroom. Some sort of flowery stuff. Whatever it was it filled his senses, making him forget target practice, forget everything but the fact that he was alone in a clearing with an attractive woman.

"Justin?" She looked up at him. "How'd I do?"

"What? Oh, good." He shook his head and got back to the subject at hand. Pulling away he grabbed the ammunition off the ground next to the holster. He couldn't forget the real reason he was here.

Handing her the ammunition he had her reload the gun the way he had instructed her. Then she had to shoot another five rounds on her own before he was satisfied.

"Now that wasn't so bad, was it?" he asked as they headed back to the farm house.



"I suppose not," she said, not willing to admit the sense of accomplishment she felt when she hit the last two shots right in the center of the can. "You were right, I should know how to use one, just in case." She smiled up at him. "Thank you."

They walked around the barn and were heading for the farmhouse. She heard a rumbling and turned to see her children coming across the field sitting with Bob on an old tractor. Each of the children had a baseball hat on with the name of the tractor embroidered on the front.

"Look at us, Mommy! We're farmers."

"Look, Mommy!" Zach repeated.

"Where did you get those?" Pandora laughed, pointing at the hats.

"I took them down to the hardware store with me. Had to pick up some lumber and a new piece for my saw," Bob answered. "Didn't think they'd be any harm in it." The last sentence was aimed at Justin. "I told everyone they were Matilda's niece and nephew. And we saw no one new or different while we were there."

"Good. If anything happens after we leave, you know who to call." He reached up and pulled Jenny off the seat. "Come on Miss Jenny, I'll give you a ride back to the house." He settled her on his shoulders.

"Cool! Mommy, put Zach on your shoulders and we can race."

Pandora picked her son off the seat. "I don't think so Jenny. Zach smells like he needs changing."

"OK. But Justin and me can still run back. Right Justin?"

"Sure can, Sweetheart. Hold on." He started galloping like a horse toward the farmhouse.

"Thanks for taking care of the children for me." Pandora turned to Bob.

"It's been my pleasure. We don't get to have children around here very often. Our only son is overseas in the army so we don't get to see much of him or the grandchildren. It's been nice having those two here for a few days."

"Well it's been a wonderful respite from everything else."

"Maybe you'll come back and visit someday, when you aren't running from something."

Pandora looked at him. "Who says we're running from something?"

"Matilda said you needed a place to hide for a few days."

"And I'm glad this was it. And I would love to come back and visit one day." She shifted Zach in her arms. "Let me go get this one changed before dinner."

### Chapter Thirteen

“Are we there yet, Mommy?” Jenny asked for what had to be the hundredth time.

“There, Mama?” Zach echoed his sister.

“I’m not sure,” Pandora answered them, “You’ll have to ask Justin.”

“Almost,” he replied, pulling into what seemed to be a well-to-do housing development. He pulled up in front of a Spanish style house that reminded Pandora of a picture she’d seen once of a hacienda. However, the three older people waiting outside the house were most definitely not Spanish. Even from a distance, the resemblance to Justin was visible.

She turned to him. “Why didn’t you tell me we’d be staying with your family?”

“Because we won’t, for long. They leave the day after tomorrow for Greece. The house will be all ours.”

“Mommy, can we get out now, *pullezze!*” Jenny unbuckled her seatbelt and proceeded to crawl into the front seat with her mother. “Who’s that?” She pointed to the people now approaching the car.

“That’s my Mommy and Daddy,” Justin explained, “and my Uncle Nate, you’ll like him, Miss Jenny, he knows some cool stories.” He reached over and unlocked Pandora’s door. “Let’s go, so I can introduce you to them.”

Before getting out of the car, Pandora gave Justin a scathing look. “We will talk about this later, Mister Andrews.” He had no right to drag his parents into this.

“I’m sure we will,” Justin muttered before exiting the car.

\* \* \*

The children had finally gone to sleep, Justin put them in the same room adjoining hers. They

shared a bathroom and she left the door open between the two rooms. It had taken Jenny some time to finally fall asleep. Zach, thankfully did not have that problem. As she unpacked, someone knocked on the bedroom door. Mary Andrews, Justin's mother, walked in.

"Am I disturbing you?" she asked.

"No, please come in." Pandora crossed the room. "The children have finally fallen asleep and I was just unpacking."

The older woman held out a mug of steaming liquid. "Justin told me you liked herbal tea, so I brewed some. Thought it might help you relax after the last few days."

Pandora took the mug and inhaled the familiar aroma. "Thank you, this is lovely." She placed it on the nightstand and went back to emptying her suitcases. "Thank you also for letting us stay here, especially on such short notice."

"Nonsense, my dear, we're only happy to help. It isn't often that Justin asks anything of us."

"I can imagine that. He does like to be in control. He wouldn't even tell me where we were staying. When he pulled up in front and I realized where he had taken us, I wanted to throttle him. I wouldn't dream of putting you through all this trouble. It's not safe."

"Someone is after you? That's what Justin told his dad and uncle."

Pandora nodded and took a deep breath, swallowing hard before she began talking. "Someone seems to be stalking me." She continued unpacking as she spoke. "A few days ago, I had taken the children to visit a friend and while we were out whoever is doing this broke into my house. Somehow he managed to get through the security system and totally trashed my studio. He also slashed some stuffed animals Justin had given the children." The hairbrush in her hands clattered to the floor and she began shaking. Mary put an arm around her and helped her sit on the edge of the bed.

"I just got so scared!" Pandora cried, staring into space at something seen only by her. "What if we'd been home? What if he'd hurt the children? I can handle myself but if anything happened to my babies..." All the tension that had been building up over the past weeks finally proved to be too much. Pandora buried her head in Mary's shoulder and cried, sobbing uncontrollably. The older woman just held her until she finished.

"I'm sorry," Pandora said, wiping her eyes with the back of her hands. "You must think I'm terrible, falling apart like that."

"Of course I don't. You've had a bad time of it, that's all. The surprise would be if you hadn't fallen apart. You're a very brave woman with two darling children, who are very lucky to have you as their mom." She stood and pulled the blankets back off the bed. "I'll leave you to finish your tea and get some sleep."

Pandora smiled weakly at her, "Thank you, Mrs. Andrews. For everything."

"Please, call me Mary," she insisted. "And thank you, my dear, for bringing my son back to me."

Deciding she had heard wrong, Pandora went about her nightly rituals before crawling into bed. The minute her head hit the pillow, Mary's cryptic message was forgotten.

\* \* \*

Justin accepted the drink from his uncle. He raised his glass in salute to both the men in his life. His biological father and the man who raised him.

"So, son, if what you said is true, this girl is in serious danger."

"Yes, Dad, she is. I think someone is out to kill her. I wouldn't have bought her here, but I knew you and mom would be leaving soon. I seriously doubt anything will happen in the next few days, so I wouldn't be putting either of you in danger. I'm hoping we left fast enough to throw him off his track, maybe force him to make a mistake."

"And if you haven't? What if this lunatic shows up before we leave? Will you be enough to protect us all?"

"Benjamin!" Mary entered the room, "Sit down." She pointed to Justin, who had risen to leave the room rather than argue with his father. Reluctantly he did as he was told. "I will not have you arguing, not now. The only thing that matters is the safety of that girl and her children."

"It's alright, Mother. We all know what Dad thinks of my chosen career. I'm not an academic, therefore in his eyes I'm a failure."

"He never said that."

"He doesn't have to." Justin looked to his uncle for support but Nate had the same look as his father. Mary Andrews was upset and brave men did not interfere.

"If he thinks you're a failure then why is he the one with the file drawer full of your medals and citations you received while on the force. Or the scrap book of news clippings we get from friends in Boston?"

Justin was dumbfounded. He turned to his dad, who was studying the floor. "Well, your mother doesn't have time to take care of them. Women like these things."

As apologies go, it wasn't much, but it was the best he would get from his father, so Justin took it. "Thank you."

He heard Nate mutter, "About damn time." Before he could say anything more a child's scream split the air.

\* \* \*

"No! Mommy!"

Pandora awoke immediately to her daughter's screams. Dear Lord, no. Please, not again. She ran into the next room to find Jenny cowering in the bed, crying. Gathering her up, she sat on the bed with her daughter in her lap. "Shh, baby, its OK. Mommy's here."

The door flung open and Justin rushed in, gun in hand, followed closely by his parents. Zach had crawled out of his bed and toddled over to his sister. "No cry, Jen-Jen."

Pandora looked at the other three adults in the room, "I'm sorry, it must be a delayed reaction to the stress of the past few days. She used to have nightmares, when we lived in the shelter after..." She couldn't continue.

Justin secured his gun, tucking it into his waistband. "I think we'll be all right," he reassured the others, walking them to the door.

"Want me to check outside?" Nate asked.

"Sure, but I don't think you'll find anything."

"I'll go with you." His father followed Nate out the door.

Mary sat on the bed with Pandora, "Do you need me to stay?"

Pandora shook her head, “Thank you, but we’ll be all right.”

“I’ll stay with her until the kids fall asleep.” Justin reassured his mother.

Saying good night, she left and Justin took his mother’s place on the bed. Reaching across the bed, he lifted Zach onto his lap. “Hey there, Miss Jenny,” he pulled at her hair playfully. “Want to talk about it?”

Jenny shook her head no.

“Was someone in the room with you?”

She didn’t answer, keeping her face buried in her mother’s shoulder.

“Was it a dream?”

She nodded.

“Did you dream about the bad man?”

Again she nodded, continuing to hold tight to her mother.

“Did he try and hurt you?”

She shook her head once again up and down.

“You know I’d never let anyone hurt you, don’t you?”

“But you weren’t there!” Jenny cried out, her tear-streaked face tore him apart. “Mommy wasn’t there, and you weren’t there, just me and Zach. We kept calling you and Mommy and you didn’t come.”

Justin held Zach tight. Anyone who tried to hurt this family would have to go through him first. “We’re here now, and I’m not going to let anything happen to you, or to Zach. Right buddy?” He ruffled the child’s hair and was rewarded with a hug.

“Wight, Jusin.”

“But what if you’re not there?”

Pandora interrupted, “I’ll always be here, sweetie.”

“But what if you can’t?” Jenny pleaded.

Pandora gathered her daughter closer and looked up at Justin. Once again he found himself wishing for just five minutes alone with the man who had terrorized this family.

"Tell you what, Miss Jenny. If someone bad comes for you, and I'm not here, you grab Zach and you hide until Mommy or I come and get you."

"I have a good idea," Pandora stood with Jenny in her arms. "How about you and me and Zach all climb into my bed and go to sleep?"

"Can Justin come, too?" Jenny asked eagerly.

He and Pandora exchanged a look. He could just imagine the four of them cuddled in bed on a Saturday morning watching cartoons. Or he and Pandora in bed on a Saturday morning, before the kids woke up, watching each other, among other things. Either image he'd do his best to forget. But try explaining that to a seven-year-old.

Luckily, Pandora rescued him. "I don't think the bed is big enough for all of us. It might break."

"Yea," Justin agreed, "then we'd have to take it out of your allowance."

"That's silly," Jenny giggled. "I don't get a 'lowance."

Justin looked at Zach. "I guess my daddy will have to take it out of my allowance then."

The children giggled.

"You're a grownup, you don't get a 'lowance."

He smacked his hand on the side of his head. "Silly me. You know what, Miss Jenny? I guess we better be sure that bed doesn't break." He lifted Zach up onto his shoulders. "Come on, partner, let's get you settled onto Mommy's bed."

It took a while but the children finally fell asleep. Jenny tried to convince him to sleep in a sleeping bag on the floor but once Justin showed her his room was right across the hall she relented. Of course, the fact he had read them two stories helped. Never mind that before he finished the second one Jenny was fast asleep curled up with her brother.

Pandora walked him to the door.

"Thank you."

"I was just doing my job."

"Thank you anyway."

"Will she be OK?" he asked.



"I think so. When we first left the shelter, she used to crawl into my bed almost every night. When she stopped, I still had to leave a light on in her room for a while."

"So why didn't she have a nightmare at the farm?"

Pandora shrugged. "Maybe because it was such a different experience, it kept her mind off it? She did insist on sleeping with the door open between both rooms and the bathroom light on."

"You're probably right." He bent down and kissed the top of her head. "Sleep tight, Princess, if you need me just call out. I'll leave my door open."

\* \* \*

Pandora stood at the back door watching Jenny and Zach chase Justin around the yard.

"You have such beautiful children." Justin's mother came up and stood behind her.

"Mrs. Andrews." She smiled back. "Thank you, I think so."

"Please, I told you last night to call me Mary."

"OK, Mary."

"Did Jenny go back to sleep alright?"

"Yes, I let them both sleep in my bed with me."

"The children really like Justin." They stood watching the children and Justin play. "It's good to see him laughing again. He hasn't done enough of it since..."

She stopped suddenly, as if realizing she had said too much.

"Since when?" Pandora turned, wondering what the other woman was talking about.

Mary winced, looked out to the yard and her son and back again. "Let's just say he had a rough time a while back and leave it at that."

Nate joined Justin in the yard. "Mr. McCoy doesn't live with you?"

"Lord, no. My brother lives on the next block. He joined us here when he retired from the police force."

Pandora had only spoken with him briefly last night. "Is Nate your only brother?"

"Yes, there's just the two of us. Benjamin, Justin's dad is an only child."

"Justin seems close to his uncle."

"My, yes, he followed Nate around all the time, stayed there whenever we had to go away. It was no wonder Justin went into law enforcement. Much to his father's dismay." She looked over at her son. "But what did he expect? We were both so busy with our careers... maybe if I had spent more time at home."

Pandora impulsively hugged her. "You did your best, that's all any mother can do."

"Thank you, dear." She hugged her back, then held her at arms length studying her. "I have a feeling you'll be very good for my son."

She wanted to stop Mary from getting any ideas. "There's nothing going on between us. Justin is doing this as a favor to Abigail and her grandmother."

Mary shook her head. "If you say so." She left the room before Pandora could say any more.

\* \* \*

"Thanks for agreeing to see me, Detective Henderson."

Justin shook the hand of the big burly man standing behind the desk. He'd come down to update the local authorities on the situation, just in case.

"Not a problem, Mister Andrews. Nate's told me a bit of what the situation is with Ms. Riley. Perhaps you could tell me more?" He indicated the empty chair next to his desk.

Justin sat down and began talking. He found himself liking the detective. The man didn't ask a lot of questions, but he knew which ones to ask and then sat back to listen and take notes.

"So this woman, Ms. Riley, is being stalked, she was almost killed twice and her studio destroyed. Man, someone must really hate her."

"Yes, we're pretty sure it's someone connected to her ex-husband, but we haven't found the connection yet."

"I don't know what I can do to help you. There has been no crime committed yet, at least not in my territory. What about the brother? Could he be your stalker?"

"Could be, nobody has seen him. We don't think he's that smart, so he may be working with someone. I know there isn't much you could do right now. We don't even have any proof."

"You're right there."

“I just wanted to fill you in on the case, as a professional courtesy. In case something should happen.”

“Do you think he may come down here?”

“I'm not sure. No one knows we're here, except for my partner.”

“And you can trust him?”

Justin's eyes met his and recognized something there. The hint of mistrust born of betrayal. “With my life.” He rose and extended his hand.

“Then I'd say you were a lucky man.” He shook Justin's hand and watched him walk out of the room.

## Chapter Fourteen

Later that night, the children played in the yard with Pandora. After his appointment with the Lieutenant, Justin took them to the mall to get some more clothes and had surprised Pandora with a sketchbook and pencils. She had thought to sketch them as they played but Jenny had other plans. So she played with her children, the three of them unaware they were being scrutinized.

Justin grilled burgers and hot dogs as he continued his tale from last night.

"That poor child!" said his mother.

"Have you come up with any more leads?" asked his uncle.

"Of course he has!" his father interrupted, "You're not talking to one of your rookie beat cops here."

Justin exchanged a smile with his uncle before answering. "Thanks, Dad." To have him defend Justin this way was a new and novel experience.

"EZ and the rest of our staff are checking out all the leads. He and his wife are the only ones who know where I took Pandora and the kids."

"Good," Nate nodded his approval. "What about Jenny's school? How are you handling that and her friend?"

"She told you about Tina, did she?"

"Yup, her bestest friend, I believe she called her. She told me about her mother as well."

"Sandi is a very smart lady. She went to school with Jimmy Riley, Pandora's brother-in-law, and will let us know if she hears anything. Abigail and EZ are going to visit her and explain what happened. EZ is going to speak to the principal of Jenny's school. They're off next week so she won't

miss too much school. Hopefully, we'll have this wrapped up by then."

"Justin, come play!" Jenny called from the yard.

"Pway Jusin!" Zach echoed his sister.

"Maybe later," he called, "These hot dogs look done. Do you guys want one or am I going to have to eat them all myself?"

"No!" Zach and Jenny ran onto the porch, followed by a laughing Pandora.

"I warned you, mister, never get between my kids and food. It could be dangerous."

\* \* \*

The night breeze cooled things off as Justin sat outside nursing a beer, enjoying the quiet with his Uncle Nate. Pandora and the kids had gone to bed and his parents were packing for their flight tomorrow morning.

"Like old times, right son?" Nate raised his beer can in salute.

"Almost," he agreed, "back then, if I showed up with a six pack, you'd have poured it over my head."

"Someone had to watch out for your best interests."

"I suppose so." He took a sip of beer. "I thought Dad would bite your head off tonight when you asked if I had any suspects."

"Me, too, believe it or not, he is proud of you, in spite of your disagreements."

"Yea, I know." He doubted he'd ever get over the shock though.

"Has the girl got any other family?"

"She has one stepbrother but she hasn't seen him in years. I doubt Jenny even knows about him. Last time he came to visit was just after Jenny's birth and I get the impression Joey was not happy about it.

"So, he used it as an excuse for a beating?"

"She didn't come right out and say so, but I got the impression that's exactly what happened."

"And now?"

"The last time she heard from him, he was heading for work in Alaska. We're still looking for

him.” He took a deep swallow of beer. “We think the mother-in-law is hiding something, but we’re not sure what. We put a few feelers out in the neighborhood and Mac is keeping her eyes and ears open for us. She has a lot of connections on the streets.”

Nate nodded in agreement. “That’d be Matilda, right? The beauty I met when I visited last year.”

“Yes, but she’d shoot you if she heard you. She hates her name.”

“Is she still with Customs?”

“Yes, for now. We’re still trying to talk her into joining us without much success.”

“When she gets tired of the paperwork, she will.” Nate drained his can and handed it to Justin.

“Well, son, time for me to be getting these old bones around the corner and into my bed.”

“You going to be alright?”

“Baloney! I’m getting old, not senile. Besides, there’s a new widow moved in the other day. Maybe, if I’m lucky, she’ll be out walking her dog.” He patted Justin on the shoulder. “I’m glad you’re here son, no matter what the circumstances. I’ll call you tomorrow.”

Halfway down the walkway he turned and gave Justin a strange look. “I suppose, the girl makes enough from her paintings to pay your fees?”

“Actually, she’s not paying.”

“That’s what I thought,” Nate said and continued on his way, leaving Justin to ponder his words.

\* \* \*

*A knife slashed across the canvas, the edges curled back. Energized by anger, he slashed again and again until the canvas lay in shreds on the floor. Paper soon turned into confetti and joined it on the floor. Paint, ink, pens, frames, all shattering to the floor, crushed beneath the tread of heavy boots.*

*“Think you can get away from me? You and your fancy boyfriend with his high-tech alarm system. I’ve beaten him once and I’ll do it again. You can run but you can’t hide. I’ll find you and your boyfriend. Then, I’ll take you right out from under his nose.” A match hissed to life in the dark, an arc of flame, flew across the air. “Where I’m taking you, you won’t need these.” Flames shot up as the match hit the pile in the middle of the floor.*

\* \* \*

Pandora awoke early. When she fell asleep the night before, the Andrews had still been packing. She'd wanted to get up and make breakfast for them. It wasn't much, but it was the least she could do after they'd been so generous to her and the children. Sliding out of bed, she slipped her robe on and checked on the children before she headed downstairs. The smell of bacon cooking greeted her as she entered the kitchen.

"Good morning, dear." Mary stood at the cooking island in the middle of the gourmet kitchen.

"Good morning. I'd hoped to be the first one up today. I wanted to make breakfast for you."

"I appreciate the thought, but I beat you to it. When Justin was a child, we used to have a big breakfast the morning of any trip Benjamin and I took. It was our time together with Justin."

She pointed over her shoulder to the counter on the other side of the sink. "You can make the coffee, though. Everything you need is in the cabinet over there."

Pandora set about doing that. Once brewed, she poured two cups, handed one to Mary and pulled a stool over to the other end of the island and began making toast. The women worked in silence for a few minutes.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Of course," Mary answered. "Anything."

"What did you mean yesterday when you said I'd be good for Justin?"

Mary put the eggs on a warming plate and came to sit beside Pandora. "I'm sorry if I upset you. I didn't mean to imply anything."

"You didn't upset me. I just wanted to know what you meant."

"It's just that I haven't seen Justin this at peace with himself in a long time. This is the first time he's been home that he's actually stayed here. Usually he stays at Nate's. His father and he haven't always gotten along."

"Why is that?"

"Most men want sons to carry on the family business. The Andrews family business is academia. When Justin announced he wanted to go into law enforcement, well, to say Benjamin did not

take it well is an understatement.”

“That explains a lot,” she said to Mary. At least she didn’t have to worry about that with Zach. His father was dead and his grandfather wanted nothing to do with him.

“I thought it might. Although, to be honest, we really shouldn’t have been surprised. We were so busy with our own careers, teaching, running off to archeological digs, and doing research. More and more Justin would end up with Nate. For a long time he and his father didn’t even talk. And then—” The sound of footsteps on the stairs stopped the conversation. “Let’s just say that something happened and we thought we lost him forever.” She got up and took some plates out of the cabinet. “Anything else, Justin will have to tell you.”

“Tell you what?” The topic of conversation entered the room. “Are you exposing all my deep dark secrets, mother?” He kissed her on the cheek.

“No, I’ll let you do that.” She slid the eggs off the warming plate and onto a platter. “I assume your father is finally awake.”

“Yes, he is.” Justin stole a piece of bacon off the plate. “So are the kids. I heard Zach and Jenny talking.”

“I’d better go up and see to them.” Pandora hurried out of the room.

Justin waited until he heard her feet on the stairs before turning to his mother. “Now, woman, don’t go getting any ideas in that head of yours.”

His mother turned back to the stove. “And what ideas would that be?”

“You know damn well what I’m talking about, marriage and grandchildren, and all that stuff.”

“And what’s wrong with all that stuff? Is it a crime to want my son to be happy?”

“No it isn’t, however, I told you after Joanne and Ben died, I would never get married again.”

“But that was over five years ago. Justin, you have to go on with your life.”

“And I am, just don’t expect me to get married again.” He held up his hand to stop her. “End of discussion, Mother.”

“You’re as stubborn as your father, you know that!”

“Yes I am, and you love me anyway.”



She shook her head. "Yes I do, now go tell everyone breakfast is ready."

\* \* \*

Pandora and the children stood outside the house, saying good-bye to the Andrews. Justin and his father had loaded the suitcases into the car. Nate would be driving them to the airport.

Mary hugged Pandora. "I hope to see you again, someday when this mess is over."

"I'd like that," Pandora answered, surprising herself by finding that she really meant it. In two short days she had come to really like Justin's mother. She shook hands with Benjamin Andrews. "Thank you, sir, for letting us stay here."

"Nonsense, child. Only too happy." He nodded toward the car where Nate and Justin stood talking. "Don't you worry none, that boy of mine will find out who's doing this to you."

"I'm sure he will," Pandora agreed, but she wondered just how.

Justin hugged his mother and shook hand with his father. "Have a safe trip." He joined Pandora and the kids outside the house and they waved as the car pulled away.

Mary looked back just before they turned the corner. Justin stood beside Pandora; he'd lifted Zach so he sat on his shoulders. Jenny stood beside her mother waving to the car. Mary sat back contentedly and patted her husband on the knee. "I think my wish for grandchildren may soon be answered."

Justin watched his parents drive away. Pandora stood beside him, arms crossed over her chest. The children waved and called out until the car could no longer be seen. Then they were alone.

Now, what? he wondered. When he'd walked into the house in Boston and realized what had happened, his one thought had been to get everyone as far away as possible. He hadn't thought beyond bringing them somewhere they could be safe.

Back in Boston, EZ handled the investigation. His job was to protect them. He really didn't want to confine them to the house, but it was spring break and there would be crowds at most of the places he could take the kids. He didn't think they'd been followed but he couldn't risk that chance. He had to take them somewhere where he could at least have some control.

Then, he remembered. Nearby was a small private beach, used by locals only. He was pretty

sure his parents had passes. His mother loved the beach and it would not be mobbed by vacationers. Since it was gated, they would be restricted to one area only. He should have no problems, it would be a nice safe afternoon.

\* \* \*

Pandora turned when Justin came running to her daughter's call. Her heart stopped at the sight of him in swim trunks. Joey had managed to keep himself in shape but he'd looked scrawny compared to Justin. She watched as he ran into the water, splashing the kids as he did. He came back, sneaking behind Jenny and lifting her up on his shoulders. Then, he let her jump into the water. He got down on his hands and knees in the water and let Zach climb on his back and ride him like a horse as they chased his sister.

Pandora loved the water. As a child some of her happiest times had been spent with her mother, stepfather and stepbrother at the beach. Of course that had been when things were still good, before...

"Hey!" she jumped back from the water that had been splashed on her.

"Gotcha Mommy!" Jenny and Zach giggled as Justin tried to look sweet and innocent. He failed.

"OK, who's going to pay first?" Pandora chased the children out of the water and back to the blanket.

"We beat you Mommy!" The children screamed in delight when she joined them on the blanket.

"Yes, you did," She pulled the cooler closer to her. "But I have the food, so I win! Who wants to eat?"

After stuffing themselves on sandwiches and cookies, the children played some more in the sand. Soon Zach toddled over and lay down next to his mother. After he'd fallen asleep, Justin gently moved him under the umbrella's protective cover. Jenny called him over to help her build a sandcastle not far from the blanket.

Pandora took her sketchbook out and began to draw her daughter at play. When she finished, she put the book back in her bag and lay down on the blanket and closed her eyes.

Justin stood watching her. What on earth made him think this would be safe. He may be able to protect them from any one trying to hurt them. But who was going to protect him? Pandora in a one-

piece bathing suit was sexier than any blonde in a thong. He sat down beside her on the other side of the blanket, trying not to wake her up.

He needn't have worried.

"Did Jenny tire you out already?" She asked, keeping her eyes shut.

"Yes, your daughter is a very demanding architect. Knows just how she wants things done."

Pandora opened her eyes and sat up, she looked over at her daughter and then back at him skeptically. "Kicked you off the site, did she?"

"Yup." They both laughed.

Pandora hesitated momentarily before speaking. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure." He wondered what she needed to know. "Ask away."

"Where did you put your gun?"

"What?" Her question threw him off guard.

"Your gun, where is it. It's obvious you don't have it on you."

"How can you be so sure?" he teased.

"Well, that bathing suit doesn't exactly hide anything."

"So, you were watching me in my bathing suit?" He asked innocently. "Do I pass inspection?"

She turned pink and started stammering, "Yes... no... that is..."

"Don't sweat it, Princess." He laughed. "My gun is within easy reach, trust me." He looked over at the gym bag he had used to bring the towels in and now sat just behind him. Far away from the children, but still within easy reach.

Understanding dawned on Pandora. "Oh."

"Yes, but remember this is a private beach, we needed my parents membership card to get in here. That is one of the reasons I chose it. If you notice I also placed us close to the water and as far from the entrance gate and fence as possible. If anyone wants to get you here, they would have to work at it."

"Thank you, I should have known you wouldn't leave it at the house."

He looked at her solemnly. "We probably have a few days leeway but sooner or later this person

will be back.”

“What then?” She asked.

“Then we’ll capture him and put an end to it.”

“You’re pretty sure it’s a him.”

“Yup. A woman would not have caused all the property damage.”

“I certainly hope you’re right.”

They watched Jenny play for a while. “Thank you, Justin, for bringing us here, even with your gun. I haven’t been to the beach in ages.”

“Why not? You and Joey didn’t live far from one.”

She looked ashamed – glanced over at Jenny, then Zach, back to Justin and then at an imaginary spot somewhere on the horizon. “Joey didn’t like the beach.”

“Didn’t like the beach? Or didn’t like the men staring at his wife?” He knew men like Joey Riley, had dealt with quite a few of them in his years on the force.

“I’m hardly the type men stare at,” she protested. Feeling the flush creep up her face. Joey had called her a few choice names after the first few beach trips they’d taken. He didn’t like her bathing suit, didn’t like whatever she picked to wear to the beach. Accused her of flirting with the other guys there.

Justin leaned over and cradled her chin in his hand. She inhaled and held her breath when he turned her face toward him. “Listen to me, Princess,” he said softly. “Joey Riley was a damn fool.”

She stared into eyes that reminded her of chocolate, the dark expensive kind that she loved. Time seemed to stop and slowly, silently she nodded yes. Pandora leaned toward him, drawn by what, she couldn’t tell. She thought, no hoped, that Justin would kiss her. She felt something hit her legs and the spell was broken. Justin pulled away.

“Pway Mommy!” Zach was awake and throwing sand over her leg. She grabbed him and pulled him to her lap, tickling him as she did. Jenny spotted them and decided they were having more fun, so she ran up to them. Justin grabbed her and joined in the fun. Soon they were all rolling in the sand and laughing.

## Chapter Fifteen

Justin stood on the deck and watched the stars light up the night. Through the open windows he could hear the children splashing in the tub as Pandora helped them get ready for bed. Thank God, Zach had once again intervened or who knew what might have happened. Whatever had made him think the beach would be safe? When she'd removed her T-shirt, he knew he was in trouble.

He'd admitted to himself a long time ago that he was attracted to her. He found it harder and harder to stay away from her. Both she and her kids were coming to mean a lot to him. He just wasn't sure what he could or should do about it and that bothered him. Picking up the portable phone, he punched in some numbers.

"McAllister." The deep rumble of a Texas drawl came over the phone.

"It's me. Anything new?"

"There certainly is and it's not good."

Justin felt every muscle tense up. "Give it to me straight. What happened?"

"Pandora's studio's been torched."

"Damn." Justin glanced up at the window, this was not what he'd wanted to hear. The bathroom was dark but he could hear noises in the bedroom. "Let me call you later."

"Is she there?"

"No, she's putting the kids to bed. I don't want to chance her walking in on the conversation. Does Abigail know?"

"No, I got the call in the office. Luckily, one of the neighbors heard something and called 9-1-1. They were able to contain the fire to that one part of the house.

"I'm glad to hear it." He turned at the sound of footsteps. "I'll call you later."

"Call who later?" asked Pandora as she stepped out onto the deck. "I didn't hear the phone ring."

"EZ. I called him, he and Abigail were on their way out so I'll call back later."

"About me?" she asked, "Has he found anything out?"

"No." He hated himself for lying but he had no choice. He'd tell her later, when he got more information.

She sat on the bottom step and stared out into the dark. Justin sat down beside her.

"Did he talk to Sandi yet?"

"He didn't say. I knew he was planning to. Why? Is there something you want to tell her?"

"Not really. I wanted to know if he'd talked to her brother yet. She was going to see if he knew anything more about Jimmy. Maybe he's been spotted around the neighborhood."

"She told me that, the day we met. I'll be sure to remind EZ the next time I talk to him."

"Her brother may not know anything more than we do, but it couldn't hurt."

He needed to change the subject and fast. "Speaking of brothers, why didn't you contact your stepbrother after you left Joey?"

"I tried to, but the letter I sent was returned with no forwarding address. I had no idea where he'd moved to, and no money for expensive detectives."

"Like me?" he teased.

"Yes, like you." She smiled back at him. "I would like to see him again, to let him meet Jenny and Zach."

Justin made a mental note to himself to talk to EZ about the stepbrother. "Maybe he'll show up someday."

"I hope so." Her eyes filled with tears, she wiped them away with her hands. "I'm sorry, I'm so weepy lately. I don't know why."

He reached for her and drew her close, "Shh, Princess. The stress has to come out some way. I'd be worried if you weren't a little weepy, after all you've been through." He held her, offering what

little comfort he could as he felt silent tears rack her body.

Pandora knew she should pull away, she should go upstairs to her children. However, it felt so damn good to lean on someone else for a change. To let someone else worry about things. When the tears finally stopped, she pulled away from him with a snuffle. "I didn't mean to do that." She wiped her eyes with the backs of her hands. "You must think I'm a big baby."

He framed her face with his hands. "No, I don't. I think you're a very courageous, beautiful woman who's done what she's had to in order to survive."

She sniffed and smiled up at him through her tears. "You know your mother said the same thing to me the other night."

"Yeah, well, that only proves it because my mother is a very smart lady."

"Must be something about the Andrews family. Usually I'm so controlled, not weepy at all."

"I'm glad to hear you can relax so much around us." He leaned down and brushed a kiss across her lips, then another. His eyes searched her face, looking for denial. Finding none, he captured her lips, claiming her as no man ever had before.

She gave herself up to the sensations he aroused in her. Surprisingly gentle, yet firm, he didn't try to force himself on her, though he surrounded her with his being. She clasped her arms around his neck, wanting to be closer. He obliged by pulling her into his lap and making her forget about everything: the house, the kids, and the sound of a throat clearing.

"Excuse me?" Nate walked up to the steps. "If I'm interrupting something, I can come back later."

"Oh, no!" Pandora jumped out of Justin's lap and ran into the house muttering something about the children.

"Your timing, as usual Nate, is impeccable." He indicated the spot next to him. "Sit down and tell me what brings you here."

"I decided to take a walk along the beach and thought I'd amble over and see how you were doing on your own. From the looks of it I'd say pretty well."

Justin chose to ignore his comment.

“Have you talked to EZ yet?”

“Yes, earlier tonight.” He glanced back at the house. “Come with me into Dad’s office, I have to call him back anyway. Then I can fill you in on everything.”

\* \* \*

“How could you be so dumb?” Pandora chastised herself as she lay in the tub. After leaving the two men, she hurried upstairs and out of sight. Satisfied that the children were safe, she decided to draw herself a long, hot bath. Maybe she could soak her cares away, even for a little while.

What must Nate think of her? She had been practically plastered across Justin. She blushed just thinking about it. Maybe she was a tramp just like Joey used to tell her. But then, she remembered the look in Justin’s eyes just before he kissed her. Joey’d never looked at her like that. No man ever looked at her that way. It scared her and thrilled her at the same time. Something was going on between them, something she had no experience with whatsoever. The question was should she pursue this feeling and where would it take her?

She’d worry about that later. Right now, she intended to enjoy a few minutes to herself. She lay in the warm frothy water until it turned cold. After drying off, she wrapped her robe tightly around her and went for one last peek at her children. Zach snuggled up in his blanket, sound asleep, the ever-present thumb in his mouth.

Her heart stopped. Jenny’s bed stood empty.

Telling herself everything would be fine, she checked on both sides of the bed and even underneath but no signs of her daughter. Quietly closing the door so she didn’t wake Zach, she flew down the stairs all the while praying all would be well.

She looked around the living room and the kitchen, no signs of anyone having been there. Panic spread throughout her body. She needed to find Justin. Then, she heard a familiar giggle. Following the sound, she found her daughter in the study regaling Justin and Nate with a story. Pandora wasn’t sure if she should hug or strangle her daughter.

“Jenny Rebecca Riley. What are you doing out of bed, young lady?”

“Mommy!” She didn’t move from her perch on Nate’s lap. “I woke up and you weren’t in your



bed. I came down here with Justin and Uncle Nate.”

“Uncle Nate?” She raised an eyebrow at both men and they just shrugged. She shook her head.

“Well, say good night to Uncle Nate and Justin. Then, come with me, it’s time you were in bed.”

Luckily Jenny happened to be in a compliant mood. Saying good night, she jumped down and followed her mother out of the room.

Zach didn’t even move as she helped Jenny into bed. At least one of her children slept well.

“Good night sweetie, love you lots.”

“Love you lots, Mommy.” Jenny snuggled down in the bed. “Mommy?”

Pandora stopped with her hand on the door. “Yes?” She waited hesitantly, never sure just what would pop out of her daughter’s mouth.

“Am I ever gonna have another daddy?”

That was the last question she’d expected. “Someday, maybe, I’ll get married and you’ll have a daddy.”

“Like Justin?” she asked hesitantly.

Pandora’s heart dropped, taking a deep breath she turned to face her daughter. “Why Justin?”

“Cause if you and Justin got married, Nate would be my real uncle, not pretend and we could come here whenever we wanted.”

Pandora just shook her head. “We’ll talk about that another time.”

\* \* \*

*An eerie light glowed from the center of the room. A low menacing grumbling punctuated the click-click-click of fingers as they raced across the keyboard. Soon, bitch, soon. You can't hide forever. Soon, I'll find you. You belong to me and no one else. Where we'll go, your boyfriend won't be able to help you. You will pay for your sins, soon.*

\* \* \*

Justin hung up the phone after talking to EZ. Combing his hair back with his hand, he puffed out his cheeks and turned to his uncle.

“How bad is it?” asked Nate.

"Bad enough. The house is still standing but the studio's ruined. There's smoke damage to the first floor but the landlord said his insurance should cover the damage."

"At least no one was hurt."

"True." He nodded, once again thankful he'd gotten Pandora and the kids out of there when he did. "The bastard who did this may have thought he was smart, but not smart enough."

"How's that?"

"One of the neighbors, the one who called 911, reported a man looking around the neighborhood earlier that afternoon. They sat her down with a police artist earlier today. EZ will let me know if they can come up with anything."

"When do you intend to tell Pandora?"

Justin looked to the door, then back to Nate. "Not yet, I'd like to spare her for a day or two."

"Do you think that's such a good idea? She might not appreciate it."

"Since when did you become such an expert on women, Nate?"

"I'm not. But, remember she's not Joanne."

Justin leaned back in his father's chair and crossed his arms over his chest. "Don't go there, Nate. Remember you're the one who told me being a cop and being married didn't mix."

"At the time I believed it."

"What happened to change your mind?"

"You're not a cop any more. And as much as I hate to admit it, I could have been wrong."

"The great Nate McCoy, wrong? What would the men in District Six think?"

"Don't get smart with me. I may be old but I can still beat your butt."

Of that Justin had not doubt.

His uncle continued, "And don't make the mistake of thinking Pandora's a delicate little thing. That woman is a lot stronger than you give her credit for."

"I know that, and I'll tell her when I think the time is right, not before. I'd like to give her and the kids a few days to relax and remember what it's like not to live in fear."

Nate muttered something and left the room.

“It’s my decision to make,” Justin said aloud to the empty room. Why didn’t he feel convinced?

\* \* \*

They had been there for a week now and Pandora just wanted to go home. Justin tried to help them adjust, even helping her set a corner of her bedroom as a make-shift studio. But it just wasn’t the same. She missed her house; she wanted her things around her. She knew it would be a while yet before she saw her studio again, and she was not happy about it.

She wondered if she would ever paint again in that room, after the carnage she’d witnessed there. Who could be so angry with her that they would want to do something like that? Why?

The children seemed to be fine; they probably thought this was all a big game. Of course Zach was still too young to understand anything. Last night though, Jenny asked Justin when they would be going home. All he’d say was soon.

She did enjoy the weather. In Boston it would still be cold, maybe even snowing and the children would be in the house. Here they were out in the sun, playing in the yard below her. She had her pad and pencil in her lap, sketching. It had become the only way she could relax and free some of the tensions that had been building up in her. A discreet cough interrupted her.

Uncle Nate stood in the doorway. How long had he been there? she wondered. She’d not seen him since the night he’d caught her plastered all over his nephew. Her face burned in embarrassment.

“I’m sorry,” he apologized. “You seemed to be so involved in what you were doing I hated to disturb you.” Sliding open the screen door, he stepped onto the deck. “May I?” He nodded to the sketchbook in Pandora’s lap.

“Of course,” She handed the book to him, “It’s nothing, really.”

He flipped through the pages. “You’re very good.” He held up the page with a pencil sketch of Justin.

Pandora’s heart sank. “I was going to give that to Justin, when this whole mess is over. I had started a painting from a similar one I’d done in Boston. Unfortunately, I never got to finish it when...” her voice drifted off as she looked out to her children.

Nate returned the sketchpad to Pandora, then bent and kissed the top of her head. “You’re a very

brave lady, Pandora,”

“Everyone keeps telling me that. Why can't I believe it.”

“Believe it. I'm glad Justin brought you here.” He turned and walked back into the house without saying a word.

She followed him into the house, after admonishing the children to stay in the yard. “Do you know something, you're not telling me, Nate?”

“Not me.” He leaned against the counter and looked up the hallway.

“Justin? Is Justin hiding something from me?” She asked, as panic began to well up inside her. Had there been another break-in? Had someone been hurt? “Nate, what do you know? Tell me please.”

Justin came into the room holding the portable phone in his hand. He slammed it down on the counter. “Yes, tell her, Nate.”

Nate looked at his nephew, he was a smart boy, but like his father he sometimes needed a push in the right direction. “That's all right, I think I'll leave that to you.” He headed out the back door. “See you tomorrow.”

Pandora turned her attention to Justin. “Just what are you not telling me, Mister Andrews?”

“Now, Princess, calm down. I didn't want to get you upset.”

“You picked the wrong way to do it.” She reached over and picked up the phone. “Maybe I'll just call Abigail. At least she'll be honest with me.”

Justin grabbed the phone from her. “I had every intention of telling you, I wanted to wait until I got all the facts and now I do. So, sit down and I'll explain.”

“Thank you.” Pandora pulled a stool out and sat at the end of the island in the middle of the kitchen. “I'm waiting.”

He took a deep breath before continuing. “The night after we left Massachusetts, someone broke into your studio and set fire to it.”

“Oh my God! No!”

## Chapter Sixteen

She put her head in her hands and took several deep breaths to calm herself. All her work ruined. When would it all end? “How bad was it?” she asked when she finally lifted her head.

“Not as bad as it could have been. They have to totally redo the studio, and there’s smoke damage to the house, but that’s it. One of your neighbors heard a noise and called the police. The same neighbor saw a man watching your house the afternoon of the fire. She described him to a police artist and we now have a sketch, and some idea of what this man looks like.”

“And?”

“I haven’t seen the sketch yet. EZ is going to fax me a copy when he receives it.”

“I want to see it when you do.”

“You will.”

“Good.” She nodded, pleased he chose not to argue with her. “No one was hurt, were they?”

“No, EZ spoke with your landlord and his insurance should cover the repairs on the house. It will be a while before you could move back in, though.”

“Who else knows about this?” Pandora asked, her brain a maelstrom of thoughts. “Does Abigail know?” Although she doubted her friend would have kept it a secret from her.

“She knew nothing before today. I just got off the phone with her and EZ. They said to tell you that you’re staying with them when this is all over.”

“I hope she tore you both to shreds.”

“Don’t worry, she did. EZ will be paying for this one for a while.”

“Good.”

"Mommy!" Jenny called from the deck. "We want to come in."

Justin walked over and opened the door for them. "Come on, kids, who wants a story before bed?" He looked over at Pandora. "I'll get them settled in for the night. Why don't you call Abigail?" And maybe cool down a little before we talk further.

"I can handle my own children, thank you." Pandora kept her voice cold. If he thought he could get to her through her children, he'd better think again. She picked Zach up and took Jenny's hand. "Let's go kids. Say good night to Justin." As they climbed the stairs she tossed a warning over her shoulder. "You and I are not through yet."

\* \* \*

"Mommy, are you mad at Justin?" Jenny asked as she was climbing into bed.

"No, baby, why?"

"I heard you yelling and you never yell. Not anymore."

"Oh, Jenny." Pandora smothered her daughter in a hug, "Justin forgot to tell me something very important, that's all."

"Were you doing a discussion again?"

She had to laugh, "Yes, we were."

"Maybe he wanted to pr'tect you, Mommy? Like you tried to pr'tect me from Daddy when he was bad?"

Out of the mouths of babes, thought Pandora. "Maybe sweetie, but, I'm not a child. I'm a grown up and he should have told me."

"Being a grown up is hard. I think I'm going to be a little girl all my life."

"It doesn't work that way," she laughed at her daughter's logic. "However, no matter how old you get you're always going to be my little girl."

"Even if you have another baby girl?"

"I don't think that will happen, but even if I do, you'll still be my baby."

"I baby Mommy!" Zach protested from the other side of the room.

"Yes, you are, you're both my babies. Now, go to sleep." She tucked the blanket around her

daughter.

“OK, goodnight mommy, love you lots.”

“Wov wots, Mommy.” Zach laid a sloppy kiss on her cheek.

“Love you lots, both of you.” She shut the door and went downstairs to find Justin.

\* \* \*

Justin waited for Pandora in the living room. He'd gotten himself a beer and poured some iced tea for her. “Have a seat,” he said pointing to a spot on the sofa beside him.

Pandora took the tea and sat on the chair directly across from him.

“Ouch,” he winced. “I'm in that much trouble.”

“I haven't decided yet.” She took a sip of tea. “How long have you known about this?”

“I found out the night my parents left.”

That was almost a week ago. She glared at him remembering the phone call he'd abruptly ended when she came out on the porch that night. “You lied to me! The night you called EZ,”

“I did not lie. I told you we had business to discuss and we did.”

“OK, so you didn't tell the whole truth. That's just as bad.”

“I was only trying to do my job. I told you, I wanted to get all the details first.”

“And it took you this long?”

“Yes, it did. I didn't want to get you upset.”

“Excuse me? I'm the one being stalked by some stranger who seems to know the intimate details of my life.” She stood up and glared at him. “I'm the one who had to uproot my life and my children to come down here and stay with complete strangers without being told where I was heading. And you want me to stay calm?” She threw the tea in his face. “Don't do me any favors!” Slamming the empty glass down on the table, she stormed out of the room.

“Brilliant, simply brilliant.” Justin admonished himself, wiping tea off his face with his hand. He took off the wet shirt and headed for the laundry room. He'd take his time cleaning up, and then he'd go talk to her. Hopefully she'd have calmed down by then.

\* \* \*

"McAllister," a deep rumbling baritone answered the phone.

Pandora kept her voice cool. "Is your wife there?"

"Ouch, that icicle just pierced my heart, darlin'. Does this mean you don't love me anymore?"

"Let's just say you're not exactly my favorite person at the moment, Mr. McAllister."

"Then let me put my wife on. Maybe she can convince you of my charms."

"In your dreams, cowboy." Pandora waited for EZ to bring the phone to his wife.

"Hi Pandora! I'm sorry about this. I only found out today, or I would have called you."

"I know. What can you tell me now?"

"Probably no more than you already know. The only reason I found out was because I heard EZ talking to the police. Is Justin still alive?"

"He's a little wet, but I think he'll survive."

Abigail laughed, "What did you do to him?"

"We were arguing and things needed cooling down, I didn't have a water hose available, so I threw some iced tea at him. I left him downstairs drying off, of course I haven't finished with him yet."

"Good for you."

"The thing is, Abigail, I know he meant well. At least in his own way."

"He probably did. The problem is, and I include my husband in this, they were born about a hundred years too late. They still think all women should be treated like hothouse flowers. Of course there are times we love it. However, we don't like being made to feel useless, or dumb either."

"Exactly! I've lived with that all my life. I am not going to do it anymore."

"Has he apologized?"

"Yes, I stormed out on him.."

"Where are you now?" Abigail asked.

"In the guest room. The children are asleep in the next room."

"You mean he hasn't followed you up there?"

"No, I think he's afraid to."

She chuckled. "I doubt it.



“I wouldn’t be so sure about that.”

“He’ll be there, trust me.”

Just then she heard a knock on her bedroom door. “You’re right. That’s him now. How did you know?” Obviously, she still had a lot to learn about men.

“These two are so much alike, they could be twins. Let him sweat, but not too long.”

“OK, have you talked to Sandi yet?”

“EZ did. Apparently Jimmy is out but no one has seen him lately. I’m going by there tomorrow.”

“Tell her I miss her and Tina.”

“Will do. Give the kids a hug from me.”

They exchanged good byes and she hung up. A second anxious knock at the door before Justin opened it and walked in.

“Come in, Justin.” She went over to the bench in front of the window and stood with her back to him. “Make yourself at home.”

“All right, I should have waited before coming in, I’m sorry. I got worried when you didn’t answer.”

“I was talking to the one of the few people I can trust not to lie to me.”

“Have you and Abigail decided to forgive us?”

“Eventually.” She sat down, still with her back to him.

He walked across the room and sat next to her combing his fingers through his hair. “I seem to be screwing up royally these days. I should have told you. I only wanted to do what I thought was right. Can you forgive me?”

She smiled at him. “So, the great Justin Andrews is not perfect after all.”

“No, I’m not. As much as I hate to admit it.” He held out his hand to her, “Friends?”

She shook it. “Friends.” She turned to look out the window to the clear night. The sky illuminated by thousands of bright twinkling stars. “As much as I want to go home, I’ll miss this view when I do. It’s so peaceful.”

“Yes, it is. I've forgotten just how peaceful it can be.”

“You know, I keep picturing the room in flames, everything I've been working on destroyed. It just hurts to think someone could hate me that much...”

Justin put an arm drew her close; “We will find him, Princess. I promise you.”

Pandora nodded silently, continuing to look out into the night. Suddenly she pointed. “Look Justin, a shooting star! Quick – make a wish.” She closed her eyes and wished; when she opened them his face was inches away from hers. Then, his lips were on hers, softly seducing her in a way she wasn't sure she wanted to stop and that scared her. Pulling away, she opened her eyes to look straight into Justin's. There she saw something, she wasn't sure what, but she knew she had to be there. Her arms went around his neck and she pulled him back down to her. His lips brushed kisses on her eyelids, her cheeks, her lips. A soft moan rose from somewhere deep inside her. He tasted rich and decadent and she didn't think she'd ever get enough of him.

This time he pulled away, ever so slightly, yet still holding her in his embrace. “Tell me to stop.”

She shook her head, “Why?”

“Aren't you scared? I am.”

“Yes, but it's the good kind of scared. You're the first man who ever made me feel this way, and part of me wants to see where it will lead. But part of me still wants to run.”

“If you want to stop, tell me now and I will.” He meant every word. He was afraid of rushing her, afraid of hurting her, he knew he'd never be good enough for her. However, he also knew if she asked him to stay, he would not leave for love nor money. By the same token if she asked him to leave, he would, even though it would kill him. He prayed she wouldn't. But he had to be honest with her. She deserved that.

“I can't offer anything beyond what we have now, you know that.” Standing, he held his hand out to her, “It's your decision, Princess.”

Without a word, she took his hand and let him lead her over to the bed. Pulling the quilt back he sat down, letting her stand between his legs. He caressed her face, letting fingers trace across her

shoulders and down to where the buttons on her blouse met. He looked up at her and waited. Her eyes met his, as if trying to read into his soul, she chewed on her lower lip and he fought the urge to kiss it.

“I don't know if this is right or wrong,” she finally said.

He started to speak and she put her hand lightly over his mouth. “Hush. All my life I've listened to empty promises. I'm tired of them, I'm tired of being strong and I'm tired of being alone.”

He gently pulled her into his lap. “As long as I'm here,” he whispered in her ear, “you'll never be alone.”

“Then that's enough.” She wrapped her arms around him and engulfed herself in his comfort. When he covered his mouth with hers, she knew she'd come home.

Side by side they lay on the bed, kissing, caressing, exploring slowly inch by delicious inch. He opened the buttons on her blouse and swiftly undid the clasp on the front of her bra. His hands cupped her breasts, his thumbs caressing the nipples into hard pearls. Her breath caught in her throat and she closed her eyes. His touch wasn't the rough kind of loving Joey Riley had given her. This was loving, as she had hoped it could be “Oh, my,” she finally managed to breathe softly.

He helped her out of her blouse, then her bra, lavishing kisses and caresses on every bare inch of her. Slowly he undid her shorts, pulling them and her panties down in one motion. They still lay side by side on the bed. His hands explored the soft curves of her body, her waist, her hips, her thighs and finally to the dewy moistness between her legs. She gasped in surprise when he slipped a finger inside her.

“Shh, let me do this for you, the first time.”

He kissed her on the mouth, the neck and then her breast, taking first one taut nipple into his mouth and loving it with his tongue. When she thought she could stand no more, he started on the other. The whole time his fingers worked magic, sending shivers of ecstasy throughout her body. She kept her eyes closed, afraid to open them, afraid of shattering her dream. Her hips rose to meet the demand of his fingers, higher and higher until she was the one shattering into a million pieces, all of which had Justin's name on them.

When she could breath again, she opened her eyes. “Hello.” Justin watched her, desire

continued to sparkle in his eyes.

She blushed a deep red. "I never knew."

"I guess not." He smiled back at her.

"But you," she looked at him, "you're still dressed."

"I can fix that." He rolled off the bed and quickly shed his clothes. He laid his wallet on the bedside table and then placed his gun beside it.

He slid into the bed beside her, but continued to hold her at arms length. "Last chance, do you want me to leave? I will, I'll do what ever you want. Even if it is to just hold you all night. Just say the word."

Pandora swallowed hard. Joey had never asked anything, especially not once they were married. He just took and took until there was no more to take. Now, here was a man who asked what she wanted, and would abide by her decision, what ever it should be.

Slowly, she spread her hands across the hardness of his chest. "The only man I've ever slept with was Joey. I have no idea what to say or do. I only know one thing."

"What's that?" he asked, barely able to breathe, unsure of what she was going to say.

Kneeling on the bed she reached up to link her hands behind his neck, pulling him down to meet her. Just before their lips met, she whispered the one word he longed to hear. "Stay."

He took his time lingering, tasting, and creating sensations within her that she had only dreamed about. His hands brushed her body with feather-light strokes, each serving to flame the fire in her even higher.

Suddenly she was underneath him, covered with his body. Suddenly she couldn't breathe, she tensed up and tried to fight the growing panic within her.

Justin sat back on his knees. "Pandora, Sweetheart, it's fine. I'm not going to do anything you're not comfortable doing."

"I'm sorry." She sat up and pulled the sheet up over her, "It's just that..." Before she could finish, he pulled her to him.

"Shh, Princess, we don't have to kill all your demons in one night."

She should have known he'd understand. Why hadn't she met him long ago, before Joey? Her life would have been so different. But, she hadn't, so she'd take what she could for now and save the memories for later. He kissed her again softly, gently, as if she were a cherished piece of crystal that would shatter if held wrong. They lay there for a while, kissing, touching, holding each other as she felt the panic ease away. Somehow the sheet that had covered her body had been pulled away. She didn't care.

"Justin?"

"Yes, Princess?" He asked. "You want me to stop?"

"Don't even think about it." She scooted closer to him. "I think I'd like to try again, if you don't mind...if you think it's alright...I mean, can you?"

"Are you sure?" A smile crossed his face and he kissed her, leaving no doubt as to his ability to do anything.

"Yes." He'd lit a sparkler in her stomach and it was threatening to turn into a fire cracker.

"I'm going to move, Princess, you let me know if you're uncomfortable in any way."

She nodded, gasping when he turned on his back, pulling her over on top of him. She felt every inch of him, all of it hard and hot. Some parts more than others. She sat back on her knees, looking down at him. The look he gave her as hot and hard as the rest of him and just as thrilling. "Help me, Justin," she begged, not sure what to do. He smiled and showed her. Hands on her hips he helped her up and then slowly to lower herself into him, one agonizing inch at a time.

She had died and gone to heaven. This was what she'd been searching for.

"Justin!" she gasped as he flexed his hips. She rose and fell, up and down, riding him as if she had all the time in the world.

He reached up to kiss her, his lips softly touching hers, then covering her mouth to taste the sweetness. This would not be a rushed loving, not this time. Though she'd been married for ten years, Pandora was in many ways still a virgin, and he would treat her as such.

"Justin?" she asked as her hands explored his body. "Is this always..." She didn't finish her question.

He looked at her, astride him. The moonlight from the window highlighted her body in silver, her dark hair hung in waves around her face. He laced his fingers in it's softness, pushing it away from her face. "No, Princess, it's not always this good," his hands stroked her, caressing her body down to where they joined together.

She looked down at him and smiled the same wicked wonderful smile that every woman gave to the man she loved. Even if she wasn't sure she loved him.

A tension built higher and higher inside her, and she wasn't sure what to do about it. Pandora rose up and down, not really sure what she was doing but knowing it felt so good. From the look on Justin's face, he must feel the same way. Suddenly it wasn't enough. "Justin?"

"Shh," he whispered, brushing curls from her eyes. "I'm going to roll over with you. Don't be afraid, I won't hurt you."

She nodded and waited. Suddenly she found herself on her back looking up at him. The concern in his face almost did her in, it felt so right. He didn't cover her with his body, or smother her. He was just there, in her, and around her, and with her, and she wasn't afraid. She wondered if she'd ever be afraid again.

He wrapped her legs further around his waist and continued in that age-old dance of couples everywhere.

"Justin!" she cried out her need to yield to the aching fire inside her. He answered her the only way possible, as together they reached that place that would change them both forever.

## Chapter Seventeen

The bright sunlight shined through the window, waking Pandora from a sound sleep. She turned over and hugged the pillow where Justin had lain. He'd left her about four a.m. As much as she'd hated for him to go, it was the right thing to do. She wasn't ready to explain this change to her children, especially since she wasn't sure herself just where it would lead. She hadn't expected things to go this way, especially not last night, but then according to Abigail love followed its own schedule. Not that she thought herself in love with Justin yet.

The sound of footsteps on the stairs interrupted her thoughts.

"Mommy, Justin's gonna make breakfast, come on Mommy, get up!" Jenny bounced into the room, pulling the blanket away from her mother.

"Good morning, Jenny Rebecca." Pandora grabbed her daughter and dragged her into bed with her for a hug. "Did you want something?"

"Mommy!" Jenny pulled away from her mother. "Justin and Zach are downstairs. Justin's gonna make breakfast, but he said we were to wait for you to wake up. You're awake, aren't you?"

"Yes, sweetie, I'm awake." She sat up and reached for her robe. Justin had a lot to learn about seven-year-old females. "Where's Zach?" she asked as she searched for her slippers.

"I told you, Mommy," Jenny all but stamped her foot, "He's downstairs with Justin, hurry!"

"Oh, you did. I'm sorry." She found her slippers and put them on her feet. "Come on then, I guess I'd better get downstairs."

Jenny ran ahead of her mother calling out as she did. "She's awake Justin. Can we have breakfast now?"

Pandora took her time coming downstairs, not sure what she would find. She was not ashamed of what happened last night; she just didn't know how Justin would react to her this morning. It was one thing to be alone with a man at night in bed. However things tended to look differently in the morning light. Or so she'd been told.

"Good morning!" she said as she entered the kitchen.

"Mommy!" Zach waved his hands at her.

"Good morning, sweetie!" She bent down to kiss him and received a sticky wet kiss and hug in return. "I think someone couldn't wait for breakfast," she said, laughing when she stood up.

"You're right." Justin approached her with a wet paper towel. "Here. Let me." He wiped her cheek in what appeared to be a friendly gesture.

However, the touch of his hand, combined with the softness in his eyes did things to her heart that were more than any friend could ever do. She was in major trouble here. Thing was, she wasn't sure she really cared.

"There," Justin said, winking conspiratorially at her. He threw the towel in the sink. "He wanted something to eat so I gave him a little cereal." Reaching over, he plucked Zach off the chair and set him on the floor.

"Hey there, Miss Jenny. Why don't you take Zach in to watch TV? I'll yell when the waffles are ready, OK?"

She watched, amazed, as her daughter quietly came over and took her brother's hand.

"Come on, Zach. I found what channel Nickelodeon is down here. Let's go watch it."

Pandora poured herself a cup of coffee. "How did you do that? Usually I have to bribe her out of the kitchen. She always wants to help me cook."

"Easy. I bribed her as well."

"Oh?" asked Pandora, "how did you manage that?"

"I told her she could be my helper when I do some work later today." He took the cup from her hand and placed it on the counter. "I don't think she cares as long as she is helping."

He was close, so close, his eyes riveted her to the spot, her heart pounded. "That's my



daughter.” She squeaked, her mouth suddenly dry.

In one forward motion, she was in his arms. The kiss was slow and thoughtful, caressing her mouth, cherishing her.

“That’s the other reason I bribed her,” he said when they finally broke the kiss. “I wanted to give you a proper good morning kiss.”

She planted a kiss on the base of his neck. “I’m glad you did.”

“Mommy!” Jenny’s voice from the other room came between them like a chaperone.

“Your children seem to have this knack,” Justin said, still holding her in his arms.

Pandora laughed. “I think it’s a kid thing.”

“At least they didn’t wake up last night.”

She could feel herself turn red. What if they had woken up? She didn’t even want to think about that. She tried to step back.

Justin held on to her. “Hey, you’re not sorry about last night are you? Because I’m sure not.”

“No, I meant what I said last night. I don’t expect forever, but I’ll take whatever we have for as long as we have it. But I won’t have the children hurt. Jenny already thinks you’re even smarter than her Uncle EZ and Zach agrees with her.” She pulled away from him. “Speaking of which, I’d better go see what she wants.”

Everything she said made sense. They would have to tread carefully with the children. Since Joanne he’d given up on forever, so her attitude was perfect. Why then did he feel so cheated?

That afternoon after putting Zach down for a nap, Pandora took her sketchbook and pencils out to the deck. Through the open window she could hear Justin and Jenny hard at work. He was putting some shelves in for his mother and Jenny was helping along with asking a million and one questions. All of which she could hear Justin answer patiently.

Several boats were out racing in the water and soon she was lost in sketching them. She didn’t realize it until Jenny came out onto the deck. “Mommy I helped Justin. He said I did real well, want to see?”

“Sure sweetie.” Pandora glanced at the clock on the kitchen wall when she entered the house.

She'd been out there three hours. "Jenny, honey, did Zach wake up from his nap and you didn't call me?"

"No, Mommy." She took her mother's hand. "Come see what I did. I helped Justin put up shelves. He even let me hammer nails!"

"I'm sure they're beautiful, sweetie." Pandora hugged her daughter. "But, let me check on Zach first, then I'll come see your shelves, OK?" She ran up the stairs not even waiting for an answer.

She could hear him whimpering down the hall. She ran to his room and picked him up. The bed was soaked with sweat and he was burning up. "It's OK, sweetie. Mommy's here."

"What's wrong?" Concern etched Justin's face as he joined her. He reached over to touch Zach. "Hey, buddy, you don't feel good."

Zach whimpered some more and dug his head into his mother's shoulder.

"I think he may have an ear infection. He's had them before." She looked behind Justin. "Where's Jenny?"

"I told her to stay in the living room. I didn't want her to come up, in case." He didn't finish the sentence. They both were thinking the same thing. In case, the stalker had somehow gotten into the house and harmed Zach.

"I need to get him to an emergency room," Pandora said. "Unless you know a pediatrician."

"Not me, but Nate might, I remember him saying something about one of his neighbors being a retired doctor. Let me call him."

"Fine, I'm going to change Zach and I'll be right down. You better tell Jenny what's going on. She tends to imagine the worst."

A smile broke across Justin's face. "Miss Jenny does have quite an imagination."

"That is an understatement," she replied but Justin had already left the room.

Jenny stood at the bottom of the stairs, waiting. Her thumb was in her mouth and tears in her eyes. Pandora sat down on the bottom step with Zach in her arms. She patted the space next to her.

"Sit here with me, baby." She put her free arm around her daughter. "Are you all right?"

"Uh huh," she nodded. "I heard Justin call Uncle Nate. He said Zach was really sick."

“He is, sweetie. Uncle Nate knows a doctor we can take him to see. The doctor will make him feel better. I think he has an ear infection. Remember that night he got sick and we were awake all night?”

“Uh, huh. I remember. But Justin wasn't with us then, Justin will make him better.”

“I don't know about that, Miss Jenny.” Justin joined them in the hallway. He lifted her into his arms. “But I know a really good doctor who can make him feel better. Mommy and I are going to take Zach to the hospital. He's meeting us there. Uncle Nate is coming to stay with you. He said he has a new computer game for you to try.”

Jenny loved playing on the computer. She used them in school, but Pandora hadn't gotten one at home yet. She would have to see about a computer once they were back in Boston. If they had a home to go back to, that is. For now the Andrews owned a state-of-the-art system and Nate had been spoiling her with computer games while they were here. Anything to make the time easier for the child to handle.

The door opened and Nate walked in. “How's my favorite girl doing?” His normally booming voice was uncharacteristically quiet and low. He took Jenny from Justin, hugged her and set her down on the floor.

“Hi, Uncle Nate. Zach's sick.”

“I can see that, sweet thing.” He put a hand out and felt the baby's forehead. “Did you take his temperature?”

“Yes, it was 103. I gave him something to bring it down. I think it's an ear infection.”

He nodded, handing Justin a slip of paper. “Here's the name of the doctor. She'll meet you in the emergency room. I told my friend you were both here visiting. Nothing else.”

“Thanks Nate.” Justin took the piece of paper, glanced at it and stuck it in his pocket. He held a hand out to Pandora. “Come on Princess, let's get him down there.”

Justin stayed with Pandora the whole time they were in the emergency room. He took care of the paperwork while she walked the waiting room with Zach. Cranky and pulling at his ears, he just wanted his mother to hold him.

The doctor had been waiting for them. Justin didn't think she looked old enough to be out of high school, never mind medical school. However, she seemed to know her stuff, and Zach liked her.

She examined Zach and confirmed what Pandora had guessed. Her son had a whopping ear infection. After handing Pandora several prescriptions, the doctor released Zach. She closed her eyes briefly on the ride home, just to rest a bit and the next thing she knew they were pulling up in front of the house.

"I'm sorry Justin." She undid her seatbelt and got out. Justin had already retrieved a sleeping Zach from his car seat. "I didn't mean to fall asleep." She took the child from him.

"Don't worry about it." It was getting dark; he could see lights coming on in the neighborhood. "Let's get you inside."

Nate had cooked dinner for them all. He fed Jenny and took her with him to get the prescriptions filled. Justin set the meal out for Pandora and himself. When she came down from settling Zach in, he held a chair out for her. "You're dinner awaits, madam."

She smiled weakly and sat down. "Thank you. I'm not sure I can eat though."

"Not eat? Trust me, Nate's special pasta sauce will tempt the weakest appetite."

It certainly smelled heavenly. Pandora surprised herself by eating a big bowl and two slices of garlic bread. "You're right. That was wonderful. Tell me, can you cook as well as that?"

"Not me, my talents lie elsewhere."

He wiggled his eyebrows at her and she blushed. Remembering last night, she knew just where some of his talents lay.

"Thank you Justin, for helping out this afternoon. I know it's part of your job but I really did appreciate it."

He leaned across the table and brushed a kiss across her lips. "I would have done it even if it wasn't part of the job. You know that."

She nodded, bringing her face closer to his. "Yes, but its much better not to have to face a problem alone."

"Aw, Princess." He pulled her from her chair into his lap, holding her as if she were a fragile

piece of glass. Drawing her close, her head on his shoulder, he held her, combing his fingers through her long hair, his touch healing and heavenly.

Pandora pressed a kiss into the base of his neck, another on his cheek, then another on his lips. She stopped when she heard a car door slam announcing the arrival of her daughter and Nate with the prescriptions.

\* \* \*

Later, when Pandora had taken her daughter up to give her a bath, Justin and Nate sat at the kitchen table, each of them nursing a beer and talking.

“The little one will be fine?” Nate asked.

“Yes, the doctor said he had bilateral otitis. Which is just a fancy way of saying both ears are infected. Guess if you put it in Latin the insurance companies are more likely to pay.”

“You’re probably right. Charlie tells me this doctor is a real looker.”

Justin thought about it. He hadn't really noticed, he'd been too worried about Zach, and Pandora. “I guess so.”

Nate looked at his nephew and shook his head. “Boy, you got it bad!”

“What are you talking about, old man?”

“You. You're in love with her, aren't you?”

“Who?”

“Who do you think? The only female around these days, unless you count Jenny, and she's too young for hormones, thank God.”

Justin wondered if he would be around when Jenny wasn't too young for hormones. Surprisingly, he found he wanted to be around then.

“You didn't answer my question, son. Are you in love with Pandora?”

“I-” he hesitated, not sure what to say. Not really wanting to put a label on his feelings, yet.

“You're sleeping with her, aren't you?” Luckily Nate didn't even wait for a reply. “You better decide what you want, before this is all over. Because one day it *will* be and she'll go back to her life. Just as you'll go back to yours.”

Justin shook his head. Nate was crazy; he wasn't in love with Pandora. At least that's what he told himself as he shut the lights off and locked up for the night.

Both children were sound asleep. He felt Zach's head, the fever seemed to be going down. He smiled when he saw Jenny had kicked her covers off again. He gently placed them back over her. The night-light spread a small glow in the hall, just enough so the kids could see if they woke up. He peeked into Pandora's room.

She was sprawled across the bed, the covers thrown back and she hugged one pillow and her head lay on the other. He covered her up with a blanket. Her eyes opened into little slits. "Hey there, Princess." He bent down and lightly kissed her.

"Hey there yourself," she answered sleepily. "Did Nate leave?"

He nodded, "I was just checking on everyone before I went to bed. The children seem fine. Zach's sound asleep."

She reached out and touched his hand. "Stay with me."

"You need to sleep. In case you forgot, we hardly got any sleep last night."

She smiled. "I didn't forget. Don't worry, Andrews, I'm too tired to seduce you. I just need you to stay with me for while." Her eyes sought his. "Please."

"I'll stay." He removed his shoes, then his shirt; keeping his pants on he crawled into bed with her. She snuggled up to him, one arm across his chest. He rubbed her back in a circular motion, until the easy pattern of her breathing told him she'd fallen asleep. For several hours after, he lay there, holding her, not wanting to leave, just yet. Had Nate been right? It was so long since he'd been in love he didn't remember what it felt like. All he knew was that it felt right to be here, in this bed with his arms wrapped around this woman, so he stayed.

## Chapter Eighteen

*The clanging of the phone broke the still of the night. A hand reached out from beneath the blanket and lifted the receiver of its hook. He said not a word, listening to the person on the other end. He hung up and got out of bed. His mission was drawing to a close; the phone call had given him all the information he needed. Grabbing his keys he headed out the door. "Soon, Pandora, soon," he said as he drove into the night.*

When Pandora woke up, she was alone. The dent on the pillow next to her proved that had not been the case all night. After fighting with Zach to take his medicine, and then fighting with Jenny to get into bed, she laid across her own bed for just a few minutes. She woke briefly when Justin pulled the covers over her. She wanted him in the bed with her and told him so.

For once she'd decided to take care of her own needs. It had been nice to be the one being cuddled and held for a change. If she wasn't careful, she could get used to it.

Stretching, she went in to check on Zach. He must be feeling better. He wasn't in his bed and she could hear him downstairs with Jenny, arguing over something on TV.

She followed the sound of voices to her children. "What is the problem here, Jenny Rebecca?"

"Uncle Nate got me a video last night and I want to watch it. But Zach wants to watch some stupid show."

She'd have to talk with Nate, he'd spoil her daughter rotten if she let him. "Let Zach watch his show." She cut off her daughter's protest with a raised hand. "It's not on for very long. When it's over then you can watch your video."

"Mom...!" Jenny's voice made the word come out in an extended syllable.

Pandora let out an exasperated sigh. "No more arguments, Jenny. I'm going to make breakfast."

"Pancakes?" her daughter asked hopefully.

"Maybe," Pandora replied. "If you can be quiet for a while."

"Puffs, no pancakes!" Zach piped up.

"You can have puffs," Pandora said and turned to her daughter. "You might get pancakes." She headed toward the kitchen with a smile on her face. She could hear Justin talking on the phone.

"When she wakes up I'll ask her and call you back." He hung up as she entered the kitchen.

"Ask me what?" She headed for the coffee. As she walked past him, he pulled her into his arms for a good morning kiss.

"I hope that smile on your face was for me," he said when they finally separated.

"I hate to disappoint you, but no." She pulled away and walked over to pour herself a cup, sitting down at the table. "It was for my daughter."

"Jenny? What did she do?"

Pandora explained to him about their little argument.

"You're smiling because she argued with you?" He shook his head.

"No, silly. But she is acting like a seven-year-old. Which means she is comfortable here. She feels safe."

"Why don't you think of moving down here permanently? Mom could help you find a place to live. I know she would love to have the kids near and Nate adores Jenny." He walked over to pour himself a cup of coffee. "Plus, I'd be down here often to visit."

Pandora's heart dropped. Of course she had been silly to think that Justin would want any kind of long-term commitment. If she were here, he wouldn't feel obligated to come see her. Except for the few times a year he came down to see his parents and Nate. Then she would be just another neighbor. Who wanted to tie themselves down with another man's kids? "It's too soon to think about moving anywhere," she said, grateful that Justin's back remained turned. "Who were you talking to just now?"

"EZ," he said as he hunkered down next to her seat. "Sweetheart, we need to talk."

The expression in his eyes sent a shiver of fear throughout her body. "Is everything all right? Is



there any news?"

Justin pulled a chair over in front of her. Turning it backwards, he straddled the seat and took her hands in his. "Were you the one who received Joey's belongings after his death?"

She looked confused at his question. "No, I assume they all went to his family. Since we'd divorced I was no longer listed as next of kin. Why?"

"What about Jimmy – did they let him out for the funeral?"

"No, he was still in prison. I told you that before."

"I know, Sweetheart. This is very important. Did you have any contact with him while he was in prison?"

"He wrote me a letter once after Joey was convicted, telling me it was my fault, saying all kinds of horrid things about me. Said he was going to blame me if anything happened to Joey."

He took a deep breath, let it out in a whoosh before continuing. "Do you have that letter?"

"No, I threw it out and never received another one. What's this about Justin?"

He wished he'd never promised not to lie to her. But, he had to tell her the truth, for her own safety. "Sandi finally heard from her brother. It seems Jimmy Riley still hasn't been seen around the neighborhood. And there's one other thing."

"What's that?" she asked, afraid to hear the answer.

"Apparently someone had been able to get into the prison computer system and change some records."

"What records?" She asked, afraid to hear the answer.

"Jimmy hadn't been released when we thought he'd been."

"No?" Her world was tumbling yet again, how much more could she stand?

"No, he was released a few weeks before your first break-in."

If she hadn't been sitting down, she'd probably have fainted. "What do you mean? How?"

Turning the chair around he sat back down and pulled her to him. "We're searching for him right now, sweetheart. EZ is calling in every favor that is owed us from the police department."

"Boston Police aren't going to help us down here."

"I've already spoken with Detective Henderson and EZ is faxing him a copy of the composite sketch the artist drew. He also showed it to Sandi and apparently it looks just like Jimmy. Reaching past her, he pulled a paper off the counter top. "Here." He laid it on the table.

She looked into a face she knew all too well and pushed it off the table and onto the floor. "That's him. I forgot how much he looks like Joey. They could be twins, if they weren't born a year apart. They even have the same tattoo, on the same arm."

Justin wasn't quite sure what to say to that.

Luckily he didn't have to answer. "But Joey is dead and buried while his brother stalks and harasses me."

If he had Jimmy Riley in front of him He'd make sure that the man would be rotting in hell with his brother. He wished he could take that painful look off her face. "Don't worry, Sweetheart, if he shows up, we'll get him."

"But what if you don't? What if he finds me first?" Her hands wrapped around his waist as if it were a life preserver. In a way it was.

"We'll just have to make sure he doesn't," he said, hoping he could keep that promise. He had failed someone once before, he would not do it again.

\* \* \*

Justin had gone to speak with Detective Henderson, leaving Pandora and the children with Nate. They sat on the back deck watching the kids play in the yard. Jenny had wanted to go to the beach but she had to tell her no. Not until the doctor said it was all right for Zach to go into the water.

"Did you ever think of moving down here?" Nate asked her suddenly.

"Why are the Andrews men suddenly so interested in keeping me in Florida?" Strange that she should be asked the same question twice in one day.

"Our motives are purely personal. My nephew is in love with you and I am in love with your children."

"Justin? In love with me? I think you need to get your eyes checked, Nate."

"I'm not so old that I can't recognize the signs."

"I think you're confusing love and lust, Nate. Justin may want me, but he doesn't love me." Nor will he ever, she thought. But that was something she'd learn to live with somehow.

"Damn fool boy! Doesn't even see what's right under his eyes," Nate muttered. The ball Jenny had been playing with rolled to a stop at his feet. He picked it up and threw it back to her. "He asked you to move here?"

"Yes, this morning. Said you and his parents would like it, and of course he'd get to see us when he came down to visit." She wanted to scream when her eyes started to fill up. She would get through this.

"Aw, hell!" Nate swore at the look in her eyes. He put an arm around her shoulder and drew her close. "You love him, don't you?"

She nodded yes, afraid to speak.

"Good, the boy needs a little love in his life. That's been missing since Joanne died."

"Joanne?" This must be what Mary was trying to tell her that morning.

"Yes, Joanne, his wife." He nodded in understanding, "Ah, he hasn't told you, has he?"

"No, but I think you will."

"He won't be happy about it but you need to know. It might help you understand him a little better." He glanced over at the children before continuing. "Joanne was nothing like you. She was an only child and very spoiled, a trait Justin only encouraged. Oh, he loved her, but she was not the right type of woman for him. She needed someone who would be home at five o'clock every day and give her everything she needed. And she needed a lot. Not just material things, but emotional as well. She got pregnant and had a lot of problems with the pregnancy. She delivered early and Ben was in ICU for what little time he was alive."

"Oh my God!" Tears filled her eyes. What that must have been like!

But Nate wasn't finished with his story. "The poor child had a reaction to some medicine they gave him and died. That sent Joanne over the edge. She blamed Justin because he wasn't there at the time. He was working and couldn't be reached, something Joanne never let him forget. He tried to help her, went to therapy with her, arranged to work less and even managed to be home early most nights.

But she didn't care. One night they argued and she left him, said she was going back to her parents. She never made it. They found her car wrapped around a tree. She wasn't wearing her seatbelt and went right through the window. Died immediately."

"Poor Justin." She couldn't imagine losing either of her children.

"I realize you are first and foremost a client to him. But I do have to say I've never seen the boy happier than I have the past few weeks."

"That may be, Nate, but that doesn't mean he loves me."

"I think he does. And you love him."

She could only nod.

Nate walked over and kissed the top of her head. "Then the rest will take care of itself."

She didn't have the heart to tell him she'd stopped believing in miracles a long time ago.

\* \* \*

Justin followed the sound of laughter to the deck in back. He found Nate cooking burgers and the kids sitting enraptured as he made up a story for them. He had always loved Nate's stories as a child. He'd even envisioned that one day he'd be telling them to his children. However, that was not to be.

What about EZ and Abigail? A nagging voice rang in his mind. All right, so there were exceptions, but not for him. He'd made that mistake once, but never again.

"Justin!" Zach ran over to him and wrapped his arms around Justin's legs.

"Hold on there, buddy." He lifted the child high in the air, enjoying the sound of his giggles.

"Justin!" Jenny called to him. "Uncle Nate is telling us the dragon story again."

"Again?" He put Zach down on the bench next to his sister. "You've heard that story so many times I bet you could tell it yourself by now."

Nate flipped burgers onto a plate and placed it on the table. "OK kids, lunch!" He looked up at Justin. "What did the detective have to say?"

"Not much he could do," Justin replied, stealing a chip from the bag. He glanced over at the kids; they were busy eating. "Come in the kitchen for a minute." Once inside he pulled a sheet of paper

out of his pocket and handed it to Nate.

“This is him?”

Justin nodded. “Jimmy Riley, Pandora’s former brother-in-law and the children’s uncle.”

“Unsavory looking character. Hard to imagine he’s the same gene pool as those two adorable children, isn’t it?” Nate handed the picture back. “Henderson has a copy of this?”

“Yup. He’s distributing it to all the watches.”

“Can’t ask for much more than that, can you?”

“Not really. Just keep an eye out, and you might want to tell a few of your poker buddies too, just in case.” There were a half dozen retired cops that got together weekly for a game.

“OK, I’ll do that.”

“Where’s Pandora?” Justin asked

“Upstairs. She’s painting. She wasn’t hungry, said she’d eat later.”

“Save us a couple of burgers,” Justin called over his shoulder as he headed up the stairs.

\* \* \*

Pandora stepped back and looked at the painting. She hoped Justin’s parents liked it. She had wanted to do something for them, to thank them for letting her and the children invade their home. Looking around her room she wondered once again. What was left of her studio at home?

There was a knock on the door, and Justin poked his head around the corner. “Am I disturbing you?”

“No, please come in.” She placed the brush in a can of water and wiped her hands on a rag. Her hair was tied back with a ribbon and she brushed a few stray strands out of her face. “How did it go?”

“Pretty much as I expected. Unless Jimmy shows up and tries something, his hands are tied. He will distribute the picture though, to keep everyone aware.

The frustration he felt reflected itself on Pandora’s face. He crossed the room and put his arms around her. “I wish I had better news, Princess.”

“I know, it’s just so damn....” She buried her face in his chest.

“Disappointing?” he finished her sentence for her, “Frustrating?”

She nodded. "I just want it over."

His hands rubbed circles on her back. She was so tense he could feel every muscle and tendon there. Lifting her in his arms, he headed toward the bed.

"Justin!" she cried in surprise, wrapping her arms around his neck. "What about the children?"

"Nate is with them. He'll keep them safe." He sat on the bed with her and swung around so they lay side by side. "If you want me to stop, say so now, Pandora."

She knew it would stop all too soon, but please God, not yet. For now she intended to take everything she could, to help her get through those long nights when he would be gone. She straddled him, and began unbuttoning his shirt. "I'll tell you when to stop." She leaned down, her long hair enveloping both their faces. "It won't be soon," she managed to whisper before her lips touched his.

Then there were no more words, only caresses, only touches, only silk and heat. The universe had shrunk to just the two of them, their need, their passion and their love.

Later, she lay in his arms, making lazy circles on his chest with her fingers. "I love you," she whispered, feeling his body stiffen, as she knew it would. She rose on one arm and looked down at him, laying a finger across his lips. "Hush, I'm not asking for promises, just telling you how I feel."

He swung his feet over the side of the bed and reached for his jeans. "I wish you hadn't said that."

"Why? I do."

"No you don't, you love what you think I am. I'm not some knight in shining armor. Hell, I can't even promise I'll keep you safe."

"You've been doing all right so far."

He pulled his shirt on and began pacing the floor. "That's because we've been lucky, but what if our luck runs out? Then what?"

She climbed out of bed, wrapping a robe around her. "This is about Joanne and Ben, isn't it?"

He stood silent at the window, looking out onto the beach. "I should have realized Nate couldn't keep his mouth shut."

"He loves you, Justin. He just wants what's best for you."

“Did he tell you that it was my fault? At least my wife’s death was.”

“None of that was your fault.”

“How do you know? You weren’t there.”

“I’ve watched you over these weeks, the way you treat your parents and Nate. The way you act with my children. The way you act with me. I’m sure you did everything you could. You wouldn’t do otherwise.”

“You know nothing.” He turned to walk out.

“Don’t you dare leave me!”

He turned, shocked at the tone of her voice. He had never seen Pandora this angry.

“You know when I left Joey I used to think it was my fault. If only I had done something else. If only I had been a better wife, become like my mother-in-law. Maybe I would have had a good marriage. But you know what? It takes two and Joey had as much to do with it as Joanne did with that you went through.”

“Are you finished?” he asked.

“Not yet. I said I love you and I meant it. God knows, I didn’t want to love you. But I do. You’ve given me more than any man ever has. And it’s not just the sex or the fact that you agreed to help us. It’s the friendship, the way we can talk about almost anything. The way you treat Jenny and Zach like human beings. I am not asking you to love me. I’m not asking you for anything. I am offering my love to you for however long you are around. I’ll manage to survive when you leave, manage to get on with my life, with or without you. But what ever happens, my life will be richer because I do love you. No matter how you feel about me. So just deal with it.” Grabbing her clothes, she stormed across the room and into the bathroom, slamming the door behind her.

“That’s where you’re wrong, Princess,” he whispered at the closed door. “I do love you, I’m just not sure I deserve you.”

\* \* \*

Nate took one look at Justin and decided he’d better leave. Whatever had happened upstairs in the past hour had not ended as well as it should have. He only had to see the thunderous look on his

nephew's face to know that.

"OK kids, time for me to take off. I'll see you both tomorrow." He passed his nephew standing just outside the door. He patted him on the shoulder. "Burgers are on the counter." And he was gone.

Justin grabbed the bag of chips on the table and sat down on the stairs. Jenny and Zach joined him on either side.

"You were gone a long time," Jenny said. "Did you have to help Mommy paint?"

"Something like that," Justin muttered, not wanting to think about the conversation – or lack of one – that had occurred in the bedroom.

"I help Mommy!" Zach said just before he grabbed the bag of chips.

"I bet you do, buddy." Justin grabbed the bag away from him. "Nope, no more chips for you. If you get a tummy ache then your mother will shoot both me and Uncle Nate."

Suddenly, a gunshot pierced the peaceful afternoon. Glass shattered and Justin heard Pandora scream his name.

The children climbed up onto Justin, screaming.

"Mommy!" Zach cried out.

"Mommy!" Jenny's eyes widened in fear. "Help Mommy, it's the bad man!"

Holding on to them tightly, Justin jumped down the few remaining stairs and ran to the fence separating his parents' property from their nearest neighbor. He knew he had to get the children safe, or Pandora would never forgive him.

If she was still alive.

No! He refused to even think about that.

Crouching down in the grass, he set each of the children on their feet. "Jenny darling, I need you to be very brave and help me, OK? Can you do that for me?"

She nodded solemnly. "Are you going to save Mommy?"

He glanced back to the house, wondering what was going on in there. He hoped he would not be too late. "Yes I am, Sweetheart." He turned back to the children. "What about you Zach? Can you be brave, like a cowboy?"



“Like Unca EZ?”

“You got it, buddy.”

Zach looked to his sister and then back to Justin. “OK.”

“Good boy,” He turned to Jenny. “OK Miss Jenny, I’m going to make you my partner here. You’re in charge, so listen up.”

Jenny grabbed Zach’s hand and nodded.

“I’m going to lift you up and over the fence into Mrs. Hurley’s yard then I’ll lift Zach over. I want you both to run to her back door and bang on it until she answers. Tell her I sent you there to be safe. Tell her you need to call Uncle Nate. Then, it’s very important that you stay there until me or Uncle Nate come to get you. Don’t leave with anyone else, except your mother. Can you do that?”

“Yes.” Her lower lip stuck out and he could see she was trying not to cry. Lifting her up, he hugged her tight. “That’s my girl.” He set her down on the other side of the fence then turned to Zach. “OK buddy. I need you to go with Jen-Jen, OK? You do just what she tells you.”

“Mommy?” Zach looked back to the house.

“I’ll make sure Mommy is OK, I promise.” He hugged Zach before setting him down on the other side of the fence. “Run!” Once he saw them on the neighbor’s deck he pulled his weapon out and went back to the house praying he’d be able to keep that promise he made minutes before.

## Chapter Nineteen

The small man leaned against the doorway, hands in his pockets, undressing her with his eyes.

“Hello, Pandora”

She took a step back. What was he doing here? How much had he heard? She wanted to close her eyes, wish him away, but she knew it wouldn't happen. She held her head high, looked him straight in the eye, refusing to be cowed by him. “Hello, Joey.”

“Surprised? You shouldn't be, you were the one that used to tell me I could pass for Jimmy.”

“I never thought even you would stoop low enough to kill your own brother.”

“Hey, if I didn't do it, someone else would have. You know Jimmy was missing a few screws.”

“What about your parents?”

“Pop understood and he'll make my Mom understand.”

She just bet he would. Her mind was running at full speed. Where's Justin? What did he do with the kids?

“Your bodyguard should be here soon, after he takes care of the brats and then we can have ourselves a party. He took a step closer. “I never knew you could be so loud. You've changed since you left me. No longer a bump on a log, are you?”

“Not that you would know. You were usually too drunk to care.” She turned her back on him and picked a scarf out of the pile on her dresser. More to give her hands something to do. She would not let Joey see how scared she was, not for herself, but for her kids and for Justin.

A shot reverberated throughout the room, shattering the mirror in front of her into a million pieces.

“Justin!” She screamed and jumped away from the mirror.

And right into Joey. He grabbed her wrists and pulled the scarf out of her hands, wrapping it tightly around her wrists. “Do not ever turn your back on me!” He pulled her toward the door and out the room. “Now, let’s go see if we can’t bring your bodyguard out of hiding.”

\* \* \*

Checking his weapon, Justin moved toward the house. Slowly he slid the glass doors open and entered the kitchen, weapon ready. If anyone had been in this room he would have seen them from outside. Still, he took no chances. He stood in the hall and listened: nothing.

He walked down the hall toward the front of the house, waiting, expecting, what he didn’t know, or refused to think about. He was working on instinct now, the age-old instincts of the protector.

The door to his father’s office was open, and he could see her sitting in a chair in front of the desk. She hadn’t even had time to change; at least she had a bathrobe on. He must have gotten her when she came out of the bathroom. Her arms were bound behind her back; her mouth gagged with a scarf. The same scarf he’d gotten for her earlier in the week when they’d gone to the mall. It suddenly dawned on him, the bastard must have heard them making love!

He approached the room slowly, nudging the door open the rest of the way. There, on the sofa, gun pointed straight at Pandora sat a small wiry man with thinning red hair and maniacal blue eyes.

“Jimmy Riley, I presume?” Justin asked, cooler than he felt. He had to keep control of this situation if he wanted to get them both out of here alive.

“What took you so long, bodyguard?” The last word came out more as a sneer. “Hiding the brats, I assume.”

“You could say that.” Justin stepped cautiously inside the room.

“That’s all right. I’ll deal with them later. After I take care of business here. Right now, I have to ask you to drop your gun.”

Justin took a second to glance at Pandora, he tried to answer her pleading gaze with a smile. “What makes you think there will be a later?” he asked, trying to keep the man talking, anything to waste time until Nate and help arrived.

"Oh, there will be. I'm afraid my mother will insist on it. She misses the little brats."

Walking over to Pandora, Joey grabbed her hair and pulled her head back. Tears filled her eyes at the force of it. "It's just too bad my loving wife won't be around to share it with me."

Justin's mind was trying to digest what he'd just been told. "Joey?"

"Jeez bodyguard, you are slow. I would have thought you had it all figured out by now."

"She's your ex-wife, Joey." Justin knew he was on a tight rope here. They had underestimated the man and if they weren't careful he could snap at any moment and kill them both. If only he could keep him talking long enough for help to arrive.

"Ex, like hell. The vows said till death do us part." He pointed the gun at her head. "I won't tell you again. Drop your weapon and kick it over here."

Slowly, Justin laid his gun on the floor and kicked it across the room. He had to keep the man occupied, keep him talking until Nate could show up with the police.

"So, the bodyguard does have some brains after all." Not taking his eyes off Justin, Joey kicked the gun to the other side of the room. "Your taste in men has changed while I was away, Pandora," he sneered.

"It's improved, Riley."

"Shut up!" The howl of his anger reverberated throughout the empty house. "I've had enough."

"Arms up and walk over here slowly, while I decide which of you I should kill first. You, or my cheating slut of a wife. She sounded like she'd learned a trick or two since I've been gone."

Justin stopped halfway across the room. Damned if he would let that bastard know how much he affected him. "Just tell me one thing, if you would."

"How did I do it?" He lowered the weapon away from Pandora, pleased to brag about his feat. "Sure I'll tell you, why shouldn't I? You won't be alive to tell anyone." He walked around Pandora, which proved to be a mistake.

Her feet may have been tied together, but she could still move her legs and she did. Fueled by anger, she was able to knock Joey off balance. He fell to the floor and his weapon went flying across the room.

Justin dove for the gun and aimed it at Joey. “Don’t move Riley. Not if you want to live.” He kept an eye on him, as he walked over to Pandora and pulled the scarf away from her mouth. “Are you all right?” he asked as he pulled a second scarf out of her mouth.

“Yes,” she said eyeing her ex-husband nervously. “Where are the children?”

“Next door with Mrs. Hurley. I told Jenny to stay there until Nate or I came over.” He wanted to grab her, hold her, never let her go, but they didn’t have time for that.

“Where the hell is Nate?” He looked around the room quickly. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Joey Riley try to rise up. A quick kick and a hard right to the jaw effectively silenced him, for the moment anyway.

Joey had tied her limbs with scarves. Justin made short work of the ones on her arms.

She unbound her feet and was in his arms. He didn’t take his eyes off Joey but he desperately needed to feel her in his arms again, what had ever made him think he could live without her?

“Will he stay like that?” Pandora asked.

He looked over at Joey, out cold on the floor. The man was obviously unbalanced. He’d much rather have emptied his weapon into him, but they had laws against that.

“I want to be sure he’s bound good and tight, tighter than these scarves will do. I need you to get some rope so we can tie him up. Check the laundry room. My parents tend to store things there. I’ll keep an eye on Mister Riley here.”

“I don’t like leaving you. I don’t trust him.”

“Hey, I’m the bodyguard remember, not you.” He nodded toward his gun. “Pick that up for me.” She did and handed it to him. “No, you keep it. Just in case.”

Pandora looked over at her ex and back to Justin. “Be careful. He’s sneaky.”

“Don’t worry. The only place Joey Riley is going is back to prison.” He watched her leave before turning back to his prisoner. He glanced around the room, looking for something, anything, which he could use to secure this man until the police arrived. Just in case there was no rope in the laundry room. “Nate, where are you?” He wondered aloud once again.

A noise from outside got his attention. “What the....” He hadn’t even thought of a partner.

What if Joey had help? He needed to warn Pandora. What if they'd already found her? He turned to glance out the window and all hell broke loose.

Pandora found the rope on the shelf over the washer. Grabbing it, she hurried back to Justin, afraid to leave him alone for too long. "I got it..." She stopped short at the office doorway and dropped the rope. Joey was on his knees and had just thrown something at Justin. Before she knew what she was doing, she'd raised the hand with the gun in it and fired. Somewhere, she heard a scream, just before she fainted she realized that scream had been hers.

Justin turned and barely missed being sliced by the knife that now stuck in the wall next to where he'd been standing. Joey lay on the floor screaming, clutching his shoulder. Policemen came rushing into the house followed by Nate and Detective Henderson but Justin only saw one thing...

Pandora lifeless on the wooden floor.

"You bastard!" In three quick strides he was on top of Joey Riley. Led by blind rage Justin beat his fists into Joey, barely hearing Nate as he did. Finally two policemen pulled him off and he ran over to Pandora.

"Assault!" screamed Joey. "I'll have your license, asshole. You'll be in prison right next to me. Then we'll see who's so tough."

Detective Henderson walked up to him and stuck a finger in his face. "I doubt it, buddy. Think about it. You arranged to have your brother killed. Stalked this poor woman and her children. And let's not forget that knife sticking in the wall there. I wouldn't be surprised if we found your fingerprints on it, would you?" He looked to Nate.

"No, I wouldn't." Nate answered but his eyes were on his nephew. Justin stood next to the EMT's working on Pandora. He helped them lift her onto the stretcher holding her hand and whispering to her.

\* \* \*

When Pandora came to, she was being lifted up onto a stretcher. "Justin?" Relief filled her when he stood beside her.

Relief that was mirrored in his eyes. "I'm here, Princess." He took her hand in his and

squeezed, he brushed some hair out of her eyes and laid a kiss on her forehead. “They’re going to take you to the hospital just as a precaution. You hit your head when you fainted.”

“I never faint!”

The EMT standing over the stretcher chuckled. “Sure looked like a faint to me.”

Pandora ignored him and looked up at Justin. “What about Joey? Is he? Did I?”

“All that target practice at the farm did some good. No, he’s not dead, unfortunately. You hit his shoulder and he’ll be going back to jail for a long time.”

“He didn’t hurt you did he?”

“No Sweetheart, he didn’t. Thanks to you.” At least not where you could see, he thought, remembering the tightening around his chest when he saw Pandora lying there. If Nate hadn’t shown up then he would have killed Joey Riley, and not given it a second thought.

She squeezed his hand tight. “Good.”

Nate’s face peeked over Justin’s shoulder. “Glad to see you with us.”

“Nate.” She smiled weakly. “Where are the children?”

“Don’t worry about the children, I’ll keep them with me.”

“Thank you. Tell them I’m alright and I love them.”

“We have to go now,” the EMT interrupted them.

“OK,” Justin leaned down and kissed her. “I’m going next door with Nate, Miss Jenny is probably having a fit right about now.”

“Tell her I’ll see her tomorrow.”

“Will do.”

They started to wheel her away and Pandora stopped them. “Justin.” She called out.

“I’m right here, Princess.” He kissed her again. “Let them take you in and get checked over please.”

She nodded. “I love you,” she said as they wheeled her out the door.

“I know,” Justin whispered as he watched her go.

\* \* \*

The next morning she sat up in bed watching the news of Joey's arrest on TV, wondering when the doctor would come and discharge her. There was a knock on her door and before she could say anything a very pregnant Abigail waddled in, followed by Jenny and Zach. The kids stood there wide-eyed staring at their mother, not sure what to do.

She shut the TV off and put the remote on the bedside table. Then, Pandora opened her arms; "Don't I get a hug?" The kids ran to her and she hugged them tight. The nightmare was over at last!

"Justin said you shot daddy. I'm glad you did because he wanted to hurt you and Justin. Now he's going back to prison for a long time!" Jenny said when she finally let them go. "I thought he died?"

"So did we all, baby. But don't worry he won't hurt us ever again."

"That's what Justin said. He said he would make sure he never hurt us again. And Uncle Nate said we could come visit him any time we want. Can Justin be my new daddy? He's better than my real daddy. I don't like my real daddy."

The two women exchanged worried glances. Pandora would have to explain things to her daughter but not yet. "I think Justin would have something to say about that."

"But I asked him and he said I had to ask you!"

"We'll talk about it later, after we get back to Boston."

"I a policeman, like Unca Nate and Unca EZ." Zach proudly proclaimed, showing off a shiny badge pinned to his shirt. "See!"

"One of the policemen gave that to him," Abigail explained.

"I got one, too," Jenny said, not to be outdone by a two year old.

"I brave!"

"That's right darling." Pandora hugged them both again. "You both are very brave and I'm so proud of you both."

Abigail leaned over and kissed her friend before lowering herself into a chair. "How are you doing?"

"I'll survive. Should you be traveling?"

"I'm fine. Did you think I would really let EZ leave without me?" she asked



“Where is your cowboy?” Pandora asked.

“Out taking care of the paperwork. We want to get you back to Boston ASAP.”

“I’m all for that.” It was time to get on with her life.

“Isn’t there someone else you want to ask about?” Abigail teased her.

Before Pandora could reply, Jenny spoke. “I forgot to tell you, Mom. Justin left this morning. He went back on the plane with Daddy. He said he wanted to see him in prison. He said he would come see us when we were home. Justin, not Daddy.”

Pandora looked over at her friend and the look Pandora gave her spoke volumes. Somehow she doubted Justin would be visiting any time soon. She couldn’t tell her daughter that. Not yet anyway.

The door opened and EZ entered. His eyes rested on his wife and as always the look they gave each other tore Pandora’s heart in two. What ever made her think she and Justin could have the same thing? He dropped the bag he’d been carrying on the bed and enveloped Pandora in a bear hug.

“How are you, darlin’?”

“I’m all right,” she nodded. “Just anxious to get home.”

He held her at arm length looking her over carefully, and then he nodded as if satisfied she was telling the truth. “As soon as the doctor shows up, we can get you out of here. There’s clothes and make up in that bag and we’ll have time to go back for the rest of your things before our flight out.” He looked over at the kids who were now investigating the contents of the bedside table. “Hey partners, I hear they have the best ice cream in the cafeteria. Who wants to check it out?”

“Yea!” They dropped everything and ran after him. Jenny stopped at the door and turned back to her mom.

“I’ll be here when you get back sweetie, I promise.”

“Don’t worry, Jenny Rebecca.” Abigail reassured her. “I’ll watch over your mom.”

“OK. She ran over and quickly hugged her mother before turning to run after EZ and her brother.

Abigail came over and sat beside her on the bed. Tears filled her eyes. “You don’t know how happy I am to see you.”

Pandora hugged her. "About as happy as I am to see you." Grabbing the bag she headed for the bathroom. "Stay there and talk to me while I get dressed."

"Want to know just how Joey did this?"

"Yes, I sort of figured some of it from his ramblings."

"Seems he was the one who killed Jimmy. In the turmoil after the fight it was easy to pretend he was Jimmy. He also had become a computer freak while in prison. He managed to break into the prison system and change the records. The night his mother came to the house he followed her and that was when he put the doll in the house."

"So the parents knew?"

"No, at least not his mother. His father did. Which is how we found out. He bragged to the wrong person."

"That man never did know when to shut up."

"Yes, well, he managed to get a suspended sentence in return for telling all. His lawyer pleaded advanced age and illness."

"Last I knew all he suffered from was arthritis, and an alleged bad heart."

"He was diagnosed not too long ago with lung cancer."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that."

"Are you really?"

"Yes because he'll make his wife's life even more hellacious than it already is."

"Are the repairs done on the house?"

"No, it's not ready yet. EZ called the landlord and he said it would be a while longer. Apparently Joey did more damage than we first thought."

Pandora stuck her head out the door. "He did more damage than anyone thought," she said, speaking of more than her house. "I'm not sure I even want to go back there."

"I can understand that, but don't worry, we already found a place for you to stay."

"Where is that?" she asked, hoping it would not be too expensive.

"My apartment, and don't even think about arguing with me."

Pandora came out brushing her hair. “And where would you two live?”

“We bought a bigger place, near grandmother, with the baby coming we needed more room. If you decide you want to stay there we can work out a rent-to-sale agreement. We haven’t put it on the market yet.”

“Thank you,” Pandora said. “I don’t know what I would have done without you in all this.”

“What about Justin?”

“Of course I’m grateful to him and EZ, and I fully intend to pay them back.”

“Pandora.” Abigail’s voice tinged with frustration. “What happened between you two?”

She finished packing her makeup away and put her jewelry on before finally answering. “Just what you knew would happen.” She walked over to the window and stared down into the street below.

Abigail joined her. “You love him.”

She could only nod.

“It will work out then, trust me.”

Pandora wrapped her arms around her middle, willing herself not to cry. Somehow she was not as optimistic as her friend.

## Chapter Twenty

Closing the suitcase, she took a final look around the room. So many things had happened here, good and bad. She ran her hand over the back of the window seat, remembering the night she and Justin first made love. She knew she would not be able to hold him but she never thought it would hurt this much. She would survive. She'd survived hell; she could manage a little heartache. She turned to see Nate standing in the doorway watching her. Wordlessly she ran to the comfort of his open arms.

"Ah Sweetheart, don't worry. He'll be back for you, I know my nephew."

She pulled away. "I wouldn't be so optimistic, Nate. Weren't you the one who told him being a cop and being married was a lethal combination?"

"Yes, but that was before I saw him with you and the children. He belongs with you."

"I'm afraid he doesn't see it that way." She pulled her sketchpad out and tore a piece from it. "Give this to him please. Tell him I wanted him to have it."

"Damn fool nephew of mine. He's too stubborn for his own good," Nate grumbled.

"And I wonder where he gets that from?" She smiled and reached up to brush a kiss across the man's cheek. "You better come see us the next time you're in Boston. Or Jenny will never forgive you."

"Try and keep me away."

Her eyes started to fill with tears, she had to get out of there. "I'm going to miss you, Nate." Taking one last hug, she ran out before she totally fell apart.

It was late when they landed in Boston. Too late to do more than get the children to bed. As a result, it would be the next day before Abigail and Pandora could go back to Pandora's house. As they

opened the door a flood of memories assaulted Pandora. She hoped she could do this.

“Do you want to wait outside while I get everything we came for?” Abigail asked.

“No, I have to do this.” Drawing on the strength that had gotten her through so much, she walked in.

It was harder than she thought it would be. The damage was bad enough, while there had been some cleanup, water stains could still be seen along with remnants of smoke damage. She could deal with that, but every where she turned, every place she looked held some memory of Justin.

The doorbell he had fixed for her, the stairs where Jenny sat while he patiently explained things to her.

She looked into the kitchen but refused to step into the studio, not sure she could handle what she might see in there. She had a picture in her mind of the room as her safe haven, her little piece of sanity. She didn’t want that ruined so Abigail went in and took out anything left that could be saved.

When they finished she gave one last look before locking the door behind her. She just might have to think about Abigail’s offer of the apartment. This place held too many memories.

\* \* \*

It was hot, unusually so, even for Florida in March. Pandora was glad she had pulled her hair back. Even then it still stuck to the back of her neck. Thank God for air conditioning, she thought as the car pulled up to the courthouse.

“Are you sure you’re ready for this?” EZ asked.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be ready for this, but I have to do it. Thank you for staying with me.”

It was the final day of Joey’s trial in Florida. EZ had flown down with Pandora. Today she would give her side of the story and then fly home. She had left the children with Abigail and right now all she wanted was to be home with them.

“I’ll be here with you. The whole time. Don’t let that lawyer intimidate you.”

Pandora nodded. “You ought to know by now cowboy, it takes a lot to intimidate me. That’s something the Rileys and their lawyer will soon find out.” They went through the metal detectors and straight to the courtroom.

When they called her she walked up to the witness seat, neither looking left or right. She swore to tell the truth and nothing but the truth and sat down.

The prosecuting lawyer had already briefed her on what to expect, so she was ready when the defense attacked her.

“Mrs. Riley, isn’t it true that you cheated on your husband, and that your youngest son Zach and possibly your daughter are not really his?”

“I am no longer Mrs. Riley. You can call me Ms. Riley or Pandora.” She kept her voice smooth and firm, but with the right amount of frost to let it be known what she thought of his question. Her hands gripped the railing of the witness box. “As for my children, I was married to Joey Riley for ten years and never once in that ten years did I have sex with another man. Those children are his and no one else’s and any DNA test in the world will prove it. Although I doubt either one of them wants to see him ever again.”

Justin snuck in and sat down next to EZ. “How’s she holding up?”

“Better than any of us thought she would. Are you going to see her?”

“Not yet.”

“For God’s sake man, why not? You’re both miserable. When are you going to realize she’s the best thing for you?”

“I do realize that, but there’s something I have to do first.” He looked over at the witness stand. “She’s finishing up. I’d better go.”

“Do you want me to tell her you were here?”

“No, I’ll see her soon enough. I’ll make it up to her and the children, I promise.”

EZ shook his head. “You’d better, or I’ll let Abigail loose on you.”

Justin just laughed, “When I’m finished, even Abigail will approve of what I’ve done.” With a final glance at the woman he loved, he left the courtroom.

When she finished, she stepped down and walked away, straight past her ex, his parents and EZ, out of the courtroom. Outside, she was surprised to find Justin standing there talking to one or two other men. He couldn’t have been in the courtroom, she would have seen him. For a second or two they

stood there staring at each other, then he smiled at her and walked away with the group of men.

He looked as if he'd not gotten a lick of sleep in days. Her heart sank, but what did she expect? That he'd come running to her with open arms? He was the one that didn't want the relationship, not her.

EZ joined her. "Those guys are from the District Attorney's office. He probably needed to talk to them about something."

"Probably." Pandora answered but somehow she thought differently. "What time is our flight back?" She wanted to get back to Boston. No matter what she thought, she never had imagined it would hurt this much.

\* \* \*

She glanced over at the clock on the wall. Zach was with Abigail and she had another three hours before Jenny got back from school. She should take advantage of this time to paint. She pulled her sketchpad out and placed it off to the side of the canvas. It was a pencil sketch of some children in the Public Garden on the Swan boats. Getting things together she began to put just the barest elements onto the easel. Then, the doorbell rang. Silently cursing, she wiped her hands on a rag and went to answer it. It was Abigail.

"Hello, I've come to take you for a ride."

"I can't go, I'm in the middle of something." She looked over her friend's shoulder. "Where's Zach?"

"With Grandmother. She says she needs the practice for when this one makes his appearance." "She patted her expanding belly. "Now placate a pregnant woman and take a ride with me."

Pandora laughed, "OK, I could use the break anyway." Once settled in the car she asked, "So, where are you taking me?"

"You'll see." Abigail was silent until they pulled up in front of Pandora's house. Former house, she should say, as she still hadn't decided if she wanted to move back or not.

"Come on." Abigail shut the car off and undid her seat belt. "Your landlord called me this morning. He'd been trying to get a hold of you, but you're not answering the phone."

"I told you I've been working." Pandora sat, not sure she wanted to go back in there, not sure she could handle the memories.

Abigail walked around and opened Pandora's door. "Look, you're the one who always tells me you have to face your demons. Better to do it in the light of day with a friend than alone. Besides, they need to know if you'll be moving back or not so they can proceed."

"I guess so," Pandora agreed, though the closer she got to the door the more it felt as if her heart would come through her chest.

It had been a month or more since she'd been there and the change inside was unbelievable. No more stench of smoke and destruction, the walls had been painted, new windows put in and the floors shined and polished. New rugs were scattered over the floor but no furniture. Everything looked different, newer. The kitchen had been redone from top to bottom, with the island in the middle, just like the Andrews kitchen in Florida.

Taking a deep breath she opened the door to what had been her studio. No more, it looked more like a family room, sturdy carpeting on the floor, plenty of shelves and room for kids to play in. It was the house of her dreams, the house she'd only told Justin about. Her heart began beating faster.

Abigail had disappeared, at least from the first floor. For a pregnant lady she sure could move fast, Pandora thought as climbed the stairs to the bedrooms. Giving the work done downstairs, she had no idea what she would find. The children's room looked the same, but then she went into what had been her bedroom. The wall had been knocked down between it and the guestroom next to it. Floor to ceiling windows had been added to bring in the light, an easel, canvases and art supplies filled the shelves around the room. But it was the man standing in the middle of the room who took her breath away. She had to fight the urge to run and throw her arms around him.

"Hello, Justin."

He looked like he'd not slept a wink in days.

"You look wonderful, Princess."

What was that flash she saw in his eyes? "Thank you."

"How are the children?"



“Fine. They miss you.”

“I miss them. Especially Miss Jenny and her hundred and one questions.”

It was then she realized he was standing next to an easel that held a pencil sketch. Not just any sketch but the one she had left behind for him in Florida. Beside that was a second easel which held an empty canvas.

She looked at Justin quizzically.

He cleared his throat.

She waited.

Something had changed, his mannerism, his tone, it was more like the old Justin, the one she'd fallen in love with, the one she thought loved her. But that had proven to be a lie, hadn't it? She looked around, “You did all this, didn't you?”

“Not all, the owner started it, when I bought it, I made some changes.”

“When you bought it?” She squeaked. Now she could never move back, with Justin as her landlord.

“Yes, I bought it, right after I got back from Florida.” He raked his fingers through his hair and for some inexplicable reason she smiled.

“Let's see if I can get this out with out making myself seem more of an idiot than I already have.”

“That remains to be seen.” She sat on the edge of the window seat. She had always thought one would be fantastic in this very window, and she'd been right. “I'm listening.”

“Good.” He paced the floor stopped before the sketch and stared for a minute then began pacing again. “You know when Nate gave me this, he also gave me a talking to like I hadn't gotten in years.”

“Really?” She bet he did, but she would not let Justin see her reaction. She simply crossed her arms over her chest and waited.

“Yes,” he replied. “My parents did, too, when they returned from their trip. I deserved it.”

“What did you do this time?”

He stopped right in front of her, his eyes, every bit of him, showing something she was not sure

she could believe.

“I let the most important thing in my life get away.”

“And what would that be?” For the first time in weeks she felt free. However, she would not let him off so easy.

“You and Jenny and Zach.”

“It took you this long to figure it out?”

“No, I knew it that last night in Florida.” He pulled her close to him and buried his face in her hair. “God Pandora, when I saw you lying there on the floor that night, I think if you hadn’t already shot Joey I would have.” He pulled away but continued to hold her hands. “I did manage to get a few blows in though, before Nate pulled me away.”

She smiled at the image in her mind. She had never been a particularly violent person but God forgive her, if anyone deserved it, Joey did.

“I just had to take care of some business first. I wanted to be sure Joey would never ever bother you again. So, I was helping the police with their investigation. Then I had to get this house finished. I know how much this house means to you.” He pulled her over to stand in front of the sketch. “I know I can never make things one hundred percent safe for you and the children but I at least had to know I did something to make things a little better.”

She didn’t know what to say, suddenly afraid that she was misinterpreting his words. “Safer for who, Justin? What are you trying to tell me?”

“I’m not doing a very good job here, am I?”

“I don’t know. What are you trying to do?”

He glanced at the sketch. “The man you have there is cold, so very cold and so very lonely, he has been for the longest time. Except for a brief period when a fairy sprite and her two inquisitive children came into his life.” Still holding her hands, he continued speaking. “I need you to paint me another picture, Princess. One that will take a lifetime to create. More than a lifetime. One that includes you and me and Jenny and Zach and as many other children as you want.”

He got down on one knee in front of her. “I love you, Pandora Riley, I love you and your

children and I don't intend to ever let any of you get away. I want to grow old and gray with you, watch our children and their children grow. If they'll let me I'd like to adopt both Jenny and Zach." He stopped when he realized Pandora was crying. Scooping her into his arms he sat back down in the window seat with her on his lap.

"What's wrong, Sweetheart?" he brushed stray strands of hair out of her face. "You do still love me, don't you?"

She hit him on the chest. "Of course I still love you, you fool." She framed his face in her hands and pulled him closer "And, I'll marry you, under one condition."

"What's that?" he asked.

"This." She covered his lips with hers, pouring all her love into the kiss, letting him know just what she wanted.

Neither of them saw Abigail quietly close the door and let herself out.

## Chapter Twenty One

“Mommy you look beautiful!”

“Thank you, sweetie.” Pandora gave herself one final look in the mirror. The vintage silver flapper dress had been a gift from Grandmother Celia. She wore her hair down, the curls framing her face. Somehow Grandmother Celia found someone to create a miniature of Pandora's dress. Mother and daughter looked quite beautiful.

A knock on the door and a very pregnant Abigail entered the room. “Are you two ready? It's time.”

Grabbing the flowers off the bed, Pandora straightened her daughter's hair ribbon and handed her a basket. “You ready to get married Jenny Rebecca?”

“You bet!”

The wedding was being held in Abigail's new house. It was a small wedding but everyone who was important to them was there. EZ would give her away, Abigail was her matron of honor. Even the children were going to stand up with them when they took their vows. Justin had insisted on it.

Grandmother Celia was there, as were Justin's parents and his Uncle Nate. Sandi and Tina were there with Sister Mary. Soon after they were pronounced husband and wife, everyone surrounded them to offer congratulations before moving on to dinner.

Pandora was talking to Sister Mary when she heard the doorbell ring. EZ left the room and returned a few minutes later to whisper something to Justin. Her husband, she did like the sound of that word, came over to her.

“Excuse us please, Sister? There is something I have to show my wife.”

“Certainly.”

“Come with me, Mrs. Andrews.” He took her hand and led her out the room and down the hall to the study.

“Justin, what’s going on? We can’t be leaving? I have to say good-bye to the children.” They were going to Paris for their honeymoon, and the children would be staying with EZ and Abigail. Justin had promised to take her to the Louvre so she could see all the great works of art there.

He pulled her into his arms and kissed her long and deep. When he finally let go of her she sighed. “You’re awful pushy there, buddy.”

“Yes, I know, but you love me anyway.” He opened the door to the study and motioned for her to enter. “I have a surprise for you.”

She turned to him. “Justin! We said no presents!”

“Hush, woman!” He smiled at her. “I didn’t think I’d get this here in time for the wedding.”

“She always was a pushy female, even as a little girl.” A deep male voice, one she’d not heard in years, spoke to them from inside the study.

Pandora could not believe what she was hearing. She looked at Justin who just smiled. “Go on. We’ll hold dinner for you both.” Pushing her inside he closed the door behind her and Pandora turned to look at a face she thought she’d never see again.

“Hello, Princess.” The man opened his arms.

“Zach!” she cried and ran to him. They held each other close, tears streaming down their faces, neither of them able to say a word.

When they finally sat down Pandora asked, “How on earth did you find me?”

“I didn’t, it was that husband of yours who found me. He told me everything. Pan, I should have stayed around, maybe I could have prevented it.”

“I doubt it!” She brushed a lock of hair out of his eyes, still amazed to see him after all this time. “You know he would have killed you the next time you showed up.”

“But he almost killed you.”

“True, but thanks to Justin he didn’t.”

"That's a good man you have there. And he tells me I now have a nephew, as well as a niece, who is even more precocious than I remember you being."

"Yes, she is and wait until you meet her and Zach. I named him after you. Will you be here long? Where are you living? Oh we have so much to get caught up on, but I'm going on my honeymoon!"

"Hush!" Zach laughed at her. I live in Washington State and at the moment I'm unemployed. I'm thinking of moving back east and thought I'd take some time to check things out. Especially now that I have a niece and nephew to get acquainted with, so I'll be here when you and your husband return."

"Oh, good. I am glad."

"Me, too, Princess."

She stood up and took her brother's hand. She had never really thought of him as her stepbrother. "Let's go eat. I have lots of other people I want you to meet as well."

When they opened the door, Justin was leaning against the opposite wall, looking quite pleased with himself. She threw her arms around him and kissed him. "Thank you so much!"

"I told you I would help you build your happily-ever-after and I thought this would be a good start."

"That it is." She linked an arm with each of the men and headed down the hall toward the dining room. "It certainly is."

\* \* \*

"Thank you for coming with me," Pandora said to Abigail as they entered the court building.

"Like I would let you do this alone." They nodded to the security guard who let them through the metal detector. Pandora watched everything around her as they waited for the elevator. The last time she'd been in this building had been for the same reason, except this time she knew would be the last. If what EZ had told her was correct, then her ex would not be leaving jail anytime soon.

When they entered the courtroom the first people they saw were Joey's parents. His mother turned away, guilt clearly written on her face. His father also turned away with a look that clearly said

he thought this was all her fault, but she could live with that. Then they bought Joey in, she felt a moment of pity when he shuffled into the courtroom, handcuffed and shackled. Then he looked up at her, his face a glowering mask of rage and she grabbed Abigail's hand, drawing on her for the strength needed to sit there. Her friend squeezed her hand.

"It'll be over soon."

"I know, I just have to hear the words, so I know he can never hurt me again."

The charges being read assault with intent to do bodily harm, attempted murder and murder. Joey's lawyer read the plea, not guilty by reason of insanity. Pandora gasped, but she should have guessed they would try something like that. Joey Riley was remanded to prison to serve the remainder of his term on the original charges and a court date was set for the murder charges. Whatever the outcome of that he would still have to serve time in a Florida jail. If he lived that long.

His parents walked by them on their way out and Joey's father, pulling a portable oxygen tank beside him, started cursing her. "Bitch! You won't be happy until both my sons are taken away from me will you!"

Pandora ignored him, knowing it would do no good. She and Abigail walked away. Once outside she pulled the red scarf over her hair to protect it from the wind that was whipping across the square. Abigail touched her shoulder and pointed to the other side of the square. Standing against the wall next to a coffee shop stood Justin.

Pandora smiled, everything would be all right. She pushed her way through the busy square and straight into the arms of the man who helped her find her happily-ever-after.