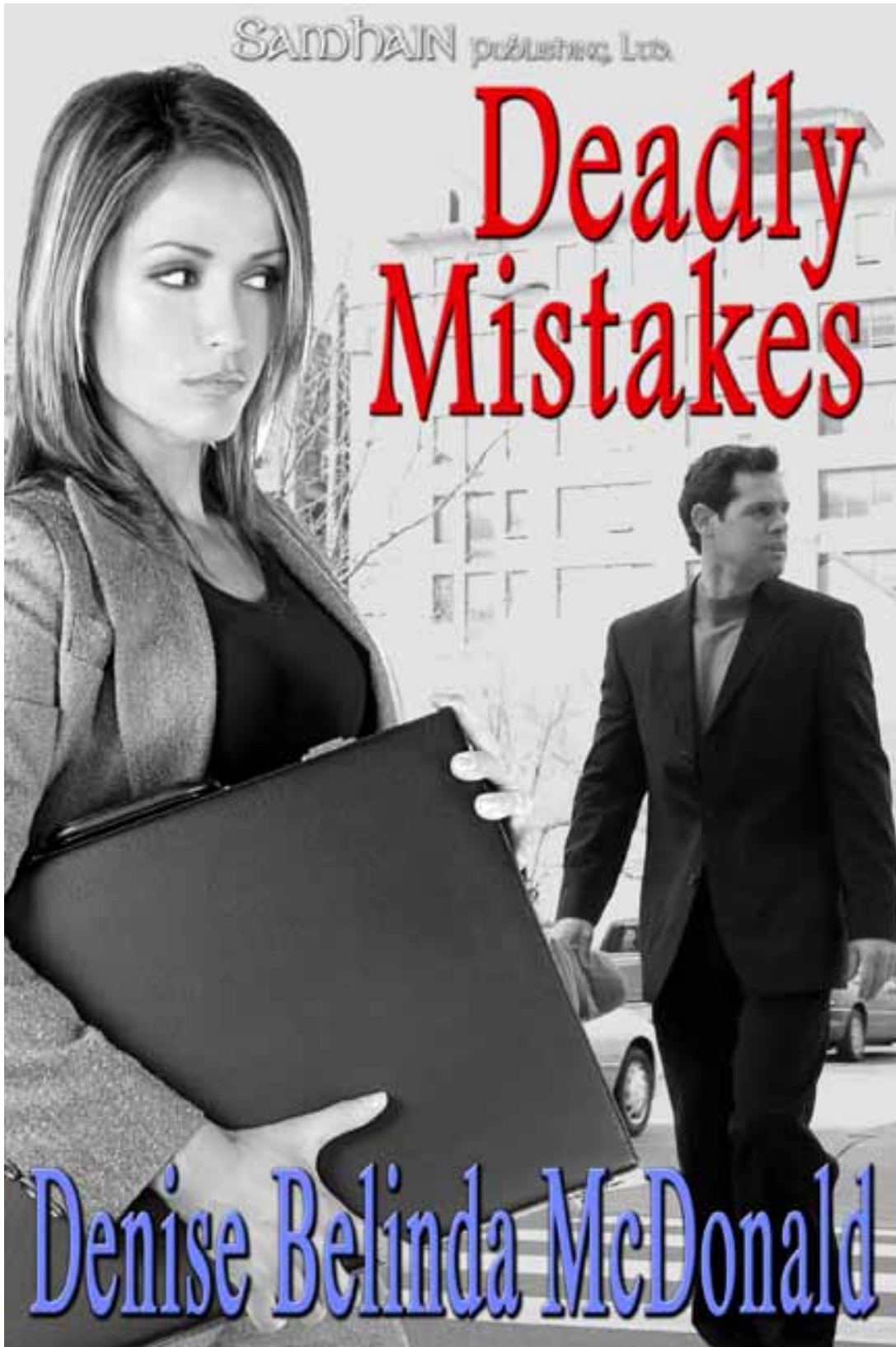


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Deadly Mistakes

Denise Belinda McDonald



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Denise Belinda McDonald

Dedication

To the gang at Trinity Writers' Workshop, thanks for all the encouragement. To my Rosebuds, love y'all bunches. Amie Stuart and Sandy Jones, you gals are the best!

Prologue

“What have I done?” Brian McMillen ran from the airport terminal to the taxi stand, hailing the first cab. He gave the cabbie the address as he settled his briefcase onto his lap. He chewed on his right thumbnail the entire ride from D/FW Airport into downtown Fort Worth. In the back of his mind, his mother’s chiding remarks about this nasty habit rang—but he couldn’t help himself.

At the apartment building, he checked his watch one final time before entering the lobby elevator. Two forty-five. He had to hurry before the building’s tenants arrived home after work. On the fourth floor, he used his key to enter the last door on the left. A light floral fragrance filled the room and sent him into a fit of sneezes before he could get out of the foyer. He pulled a handkerchief from his pocket, covering his mouth and nose as he proceeded.

Brian meticulously searched. Book after book was opened, flipped through, CDs checked and returned. As well as every cabinet, shelf, nook and cranny, but he had no luck in finding what he was searching for.

His nerves were frayed and he had sweated clear through his overcoat. He splashed water on his face in the bathroom. In the mirror, he saw his tired blue eyes staring back.

“What have I done?” he asked again.

Face dried, he went back into the bedroom for one last look, then finally gave up.

“Brian. We’ve been looking for you.”

His heart thudded against his ribs as he stepped from the bedroom. Two men lingered inside the front door of the apartment, guns trained on him. “W...what? Who the h...hell are you?”

“Oh, I think you know.”

Part I

Chapter One

“God, what a day.” Charlie leaned her head against the mirrored wall of the elevator. “At least it can’t get worse.”

The elevator rattled and squeaked the entire ride to the fourth floor. Charlie emerged into the dimly-lit hallway dragging her feet, exhausted from a full course load at school in the morning and a busy evening at work. At apartment 4B, she balanced heavy college books on one arm then inserted her key.

The deadbolt gave way easier than usual. “Did I leave the damn door unlocked?”

The door swung open into total darkness. The light from the hall did little to illuminate the interior of the apartment. Charlie set her books on the foyer table and tried the light switch. Nothing. She crossed the room to turn on the couch-side lamp, cursing the blown bulb with every step. An odd odor lingered in the air. Mixed with her floral potpourri, she couldn’t place the smell.

Walking through the apartment, she noticed something indistinguishable lying across the middle of the living room floor. While she tried to examine it, a hidden edge caught her off balance and she crashed heavily to the floor.

“What the hell?” caught in her throat as the corner of the end table cut into the flesh just inside her hairline. The lamp fell to the floor beside her.

Somewhat dazed and all fours, she fumbled around the floor in search of the fallen lamp. As the switch engaged, the pale, soft light cast

an eerie glow throughout the spacious apartment. Shadows hid the main portion of the rug and the strange object. Her ears rang, head throbbed. She looked around the room trying to absorb what had happened.

What had been lying in the middle of the floor to cause the fall?

She spotted a shoe off to the side of the rug.

"I don't remember Greg leaving his shit over here." She approached the shoe with the intention of kicking it across the room, but gasped at the discovery of a foot anchoring the shoe to the floor. As her disbelieving eyes adjusted, a man appeared drenched in a dark pool of blood, an unfamiliar man. She slapped her hands over her mouth to keep from screaming. Her heart beat a tattoo of fear.

She calmed her breathing and bent over the man, studying him. Because of the unnatural position, awkward and rigid, and the eerie, unblinking stare of his eyes, Charlie knew he was dead, but checked in vain for a pulse.

Frozen where she stood, she listened for sounds of the possible intruder, whoever murdered the man on the floor. Her raspy breathing penetrated the dead silence.



"...And in local news, earlier this evening Fort Worth shoe store owner Charlie Foster was taken in for questioning in the shooting death of an unidentified male. The man's body reportedly was found on the living room floor of the shoe store owner's downtown apartment. The police officer in charge of the investigation declined to comment until additional information has been obtained. Detective Collins will issue a statement in the morning pending further developments. This is Zaccary Alexander reporting to you live from downtown Fort Worth. Back to you Debra, Chip."



In a motel on a sleazy stretch of highway just on the southern outskirts of Fort Worth, Texas, the television was abruptly shut off. The occupants of room twelve were an incongruous pair, more of Laurel and Hardy than of hit men for hire. They were sent to do a job, a job only half-completed. A job their boss considered beneath him. He preferred to keep his hands clean but took credit when he deemed it in his best interest, which was never.

“Chris, make sure you get rid of the gun.” Randy stalked across the flattened carpet, stained with God knows what, mottling the color. The clientele that patronized such establishments, as they were, didn’t care about the decor—or cleanliness, for the maid service was scarce at best.

“But, Randy,” Chris rubbed his hands over his faded jeans, “they’ll never trace it. ‘Sides they hauled the shoe store owner in. They’ll just figure he did it.”

“I don’t give a fuck who they think did it. Get rid of the gun and don’t argue with me. You’re already in deep shit for leaving the briefcase behind.” Randy glared at Chris.

“Man, I told ya I was sorry.” He sat heavily on the greasy bedspread, cheap and thin, with a large faded paisley print running over it and colored in gaudy hues from the seventies. The kind of cover “no-tell” motels used for the hourly customers, when what you can’t see won’t hurt you.

“Never mind. But now we have to stay in this shit kicker town ‘til it dies down so we can go back and get it.”

“The guy’s dead. He ain’t gonna be talking to anyone now. The boss don’t need to worry.”

“Fine.” Randy picked up the phone receiver. “You wanna call up the boss and tell him? Tell him you forgot the case but don’t worry the guy is

dead. He can't talk to anyone anymore." He threw the phone at his partner.

"No, no thank you." Chris shrank into the mattress.

"Then just shut up."



"I don't know who he is or why he was in my apartment, Detective Collins. Like I already told you a hundred times, he was there when I got home from work. Already dead." Charlie stabbed out her umpteenth cigarette.

Both Detective Collins and his partner, Detective Aaron, stood across the table and continued to hurl accusations at her, almost before the other could finish.

"...Why did you shoot him?"

"...How did you know him?"

"...What exactly had he done to you?"

"...How did you clean yourself up?"

"...Where did you get rid of the weapon?"

Charlie stared at them, shifting her tired eyes from one detective to the other.

The police grilled her for over three hours. The good cop/bad cop routine seen often in television was lost on them. They seemed to be more in favor of a bad cop/bad cop routine, pushing a suspect to the point of maddening repetition, badgering to an inch of sanity.

She lit another cigarette, left it to burn in the ashtray. Her mind wandered briefly, thinking how Fort Worth had always been portrayed in movies and thought of as a place where cowboys live. Not the football-carrying kind. But the felt hat-decked, gun-toting, boots-and-spurs-wearing, horse-riding cowboys kind. They were in abundance, she

thought, looking at Detective Collins again in his western garb. But with a population of half a million plus, Fort Worth was a thriving area, as much as Dallas or Houston. The police, she had observed, prided themselves with a lower crime rate than most and hated untidy crimes.

As Detectives Collins and Aaron worked, thoughts of old cop shows and movies ran through her head. Their bullying questions and hostile insinuations coated with southern accents were almost laughable. Almost.

The bitter, cold coffee and hot-tempered detectives were the only reminders to Charlie she had not slipped into a dream or a bad scene from a bad movie—but reality. A stark reminder.

“Tell us again how you got the blood all over you.” Detective Aaron straightened his tie, looking above, not at, her.

“I told you already. The light in the foyer was out and I tripped over his body going for the lamp on the far side of the couch. Had I known there was blood everywhere I would have fallen in a different direction.” She tightened her hands into fists in her lap to suppress her ever-growing anger. “I also wouldn’t have cut my head on the table.”

“Let me venture out here, Charlie.” Collins cocked his head to one side. “Maybe you and our mystery man had an argument. Things got out of hand. He got rough with you, maybe even threatened you. He hit you, putting a gash in your head, and you shot him. Purely in self-defense of course.” He sneered as he rubbed his beefy hand over his paunch.

“And then I what, hung out in my apartment until he was good and dead, got rid of the gun somehow and then called you guys to find me covered in blood. Please.” She released a heavy sigh and stared up at the gray panel ceiling.

“Why so defensive?” Detective Aaron questioned.

“I’m not being defensive. I’m frustrated. My head hurts and you keep asking me the same damn questions over and over. And now he—” she shrugged her shoulder toward where Collins stood, “—makes up this ridiculous story. How many times do I have to say it? I don’t know him, never saw him before I fell over him *already* dead in my apartment.”

There was a reprieve in the heated exchange when a knock interrupted her boiling anger.

Detective Collins opened the door and a young officer peeked his head in. The two whispered to one another as the officer handed Detective Collins a manila envelope just before pulling away from the door. Collins had a foul look on his face as he stared down at his worn cowboy boots. He handed the unopened envelope to Aaron. As Aaron scanned the contents of the envelope, the subtle smirk slid off his face. His eyes narrowed and his mouth turned down as he cleared his throat.

“The gun powder residue test from your hands came back negative. And we verified you closed your store at eight from the mall surveillance camera,” he stated.

“Am I free to go?” Charlie rose out of the hard plastic chair.

“In just a minute. I have a couple more questions for you. Sit for one minute more... Please.”

She complied with Detective Aaron as his voice softened. He flipped through his palm-sized notebook.

“You told one of our officers your front door might have been unlocked when you came home.” He read straight from his notebook, “I didn’t think too much about it at the time, but it turned too easy to have been locked.’ Is that right?” Charlie nodded. “Who else has a key to your apartment?”

“What?”

“Who else has access to your apartment?” Detective Aaron asked again.

“Why?”

“We just need to know.” Detective Aaron walked around the table and propped one Bruno Magli-shoed foot up on the chair next to her.

“I... What exactly are you trying to suggest?”

“Nothing. I am just trying to establish who else could have possibly gotten into your apartment.” The edge had left his voice, but his words were still forceful. He leaned over his leg, getting too close—again—in the small interrogation room.

“I don’t see why it matters. They wouldn’t have done anything like this.” Charlie hardened her glare.

“Who?” Detective Collins shouted from across the room.

She startled at his barked command and blinked before answering. “The apartment manager, the super and my friend Greg, who was at work with me at the time of the shooting. He worked an all-day shift.”

“How convenient for you.” Collins lowered himself into a chair, which groaned under his weight.

“God, what is your deal?” Charlie couldn’t help herself. “You said you looked at the mall surveillance tapes, he will be there too. Dark-headed guy about yea tall.” She motioned with her hand above her head. “Probably helping customers with *shoes*. With me.” She thrust her chin out.

“Enough,” Detective Aaron ordered. “We’re not getting anywhere with your attitude,” he said briefly, shifting his gaze to his partner. “Now please, can you tell me, would the apartment manager have any reason to let someone into your apartment when you’re not home?”

“No. I have only lived there for five months. I don’t know him well enough to ask him for favors even if I thought someone was coming over.

Which was *not* the case today.” Charlie leaned over the table as she looked at Collins.

“All right, fine.” Aaron made a notation in the small notebook still poised in his hand. “You’re free to go. We’ll notify you when we release your apartment. You can leave the number to where you’ll be staying with the man at the desk by the door.” He motioned with his shoulder as she stood. “We may need to contact you again and would appreciate your cooperation.” A trace of suspicion tinted his voice.

“Do you have any idea how long it might take you?” She walked to the door.

“No. And, Miss Foster?”

She paused by the door, trying desperately to hide her irritation at his never-ending annoyance.

“If anything should come up,” he handed her his card, “or anything you feel you need to share, don’t hesitate to call.”

His smile creased just the corners of his mouth.

“Yeah, sure.”



A full week went by before anyone with the police department contacted her. She had been resolute in her decision not to call them, but to wait until they contacted her, despite picking up the phone on numerous occasions. Monday night at her store, Greg informed her Detective Collins was on the line.

“This is Charlie.”

“Miss Foster, we are done with your apartment. If you’ll be at your store for the next thirty minutes or so, I’ll have one of our officers run your keys by.”

She noted the time with a sigh. The store would be closed by then but she agreed to wait. She wanted her keys, and her life, back.

After hanging up with the detective, Charlie told Greg.

"I'll stay with you when the store closes," he offered.

"No, you go on. You've got a hot date tonight and I don't want to be responsible for you missing it," she said. "And as much as I love you, we'll both be happy once I move back into my own place. I've already cramped your style by staying with you for the week while the damn forensics team tore up my apartment. Fort Worth's finest." She rolled her eyes.

"If you're sure," he said.

"Positive. Tell Jonathan hello for me." Charlie walked Greg to the door to lock it behind him.

"Okay then. I'll swing by in the morning with your stuff when I head into work." With a flourished sashay, he made his exit and disappeared around the corner.

Alone in the store, she had time to go over the events of the past week, not that she hadn't done it many times before. She was puzzled by the lack of attention following the initial reports of "the incident". She had come to calling it that, because every time the words "murder", "shooting" or "death" came up, she kept picturing the poor man's face. The image would stay with her for the rest of her life.

It bothered her that the police, as far as she knew, still had no identification for the man. She did know that missing person's reports for adults were hard to file because, as an adult, you could pick up and leave at any time and there was no crime in that. It was hard to prove that any foul play had occurred.

She wondered if there was a family out there worried and questioning when their loved one might return, unaware he had died in such a brutal way, and alone. It tore at her in ways many would not understand.

Still brooding, Charlie straightened the display shoes for the tenth time when a knock on the glass doors jolted her nerves. She saw a young uniformed officer standing outside the store. A warm smile spread across his unlined face as he thrust his hand in the air with a quick wave.

They get younger every year, she thought.

She glanced at her watch and was surprised to see an hour and a half had passed. She hollered through the glass and asked if he had her keys. He nodded and produced them from his pocket. Charlie held up a finger signaling for him to wait as she ran to the stockroom, extinguishing the lights, grabbing her purse and school books.

She thanked him for bringing the keys to her. He nodded, tipped his hat and again produced a charming grin before he left, without having uttered so much as a single syllable. She laughed under her breath at his fleeting back as she headed for her own exit.

The few short blocks to her apartment made her edgier than usual. Her recent unease seemed to escalate with every step. The past week, a constant presence hung around her, lurking nearby but not near enough to distinguish itself as anything out of the ordinary. Now and then, if she found someone staring at her, she would recoil inside, then chide herself for such foolishness. She did remark about it to Greg the day before. He said he had felt the same way, but chalked it up to the weather or something equally as ridiculous. The idea had been dropped as fast as it had been brought up.

Charlie walked into the lobby of her apartment building. The hairs on her arm stood as her heart sped, beating a tattoo of panic. Her breath shortened. The urgent need to get out of the open dominated all senses.

Nothing identifiable, as the days before, but she didn't waste time analyzing her sudden irrational fear and all but ran between the elevator doors as they closed from its previous passengers. Alone in the car, her lips moved in a silent prayer, thanking God for letting her get into it safely and to please rid her of her ridiculous thoughts.

Her heart settled as the elevator slowed to her floor.

Down her hallway, yellow crime scene tape covered her door. "CAUTION—DO NOT CROSS POLICE LINE" tape lay every which way across the doorframe. She took perverse pleasure in ripping away the tape before she entered her apartment.

As she removed the last strip of warning, Bertie, her neighbor down the hall, stepped out her door.

"Charlie, I thought I heard you." She sauntered down the hallway, made even walking look too elegant for common folk. It always amazed Charlie how glamorous Bertie seemed. Her shocking wave of red hair and beautiful ivory skin had all the men in the building hanging out in the lobby just to get a glimpse of her. The worst part was, Bertie seemed oblivious. Charlie watched as she ran her long thin fingers through her hair as she continued. "I go out of town for a week and it looks like all hell breaks loose. What happened here?"

"You don't want to know." Charlie stuck her key in the lock and proceeded into her apartment, but was halted by Bertie's hand.

"Oh I almost forgot, I found your briefcase last week outside your door. I guess you must have been weighed down with all your books and left it. Hang on, I'll go get it."

Charlie stared curiously at Bertie's departing back. *I don't have a briefcase*, she wanted to say. Bertie was mistaken. But she returned from her apartment with the briefcase in one hand and her cell phone in the

other, chatting with few pauses. She thrust the leather case in Charlie's hand and waved before she retreated back down the hall.

Charlie stood, baffled. What was she supposed to do with it? She looked down at it, eyebrow raised, at the expensive exotic leather.

She shook her head and entered the apartment. "Oh my God." She gasped appalled at the sight. Everything sat pretty much where it had been, but not quite. Everything looked disheveled, almost violated.

The normally tidy apartment was left coated with fingerprint powder; every smooth surface had a light dusting. She winced at the grime, set the briefcase aside to get a rag, and wiped clean everything within reach. Then she dragged a kitchen chair around with her to wipe the rest of the surfaces.

The rug—gone for evidence, she assumed—left a sad spot even after she covered the area with a thin hooked rug her aunt had given her years before.

A headache formed behind her right eye.

An apparent, yet unsuccessful, attempt to put her apartment back in order had been made. Couch cushions were thrown on backward, books lay sideways in the bookcase. And most baffling to her, the pictures on the wall hung askew, presumably in search of a murder weapon, as if a gun would slide right behind the black and white photo of a church Charlie's grandfather had taken on a business trip to Canada.

It took her countless hours of painstaking manual labor to get her place back in shape. Tired from work and exhausted from cleaning, she dragged herself into her bathroom and started the shower. In the mirror, she was shocked to see her haggard face. Dark, bruise-like smudges circled her blue eyes. An actual bruise rimmed her hairline where it had taken ten stitches to close the cut she received from falling against the

end table. After she ran her index finger across the sutures, she reminded herself to schedule an appointment with the doctor.

Her pale and gaunt face showed the toll the weeklong twelve-hour class load and full-time employment took. The extra loss in sleep she had experienced since finding a dead man in her apartment was adding numerous stress lines, spoiling her young face.

Charlie checked the water's temperature, disrobed and washed away the bad day. Or week, she thought. Toweling off, she pulled on one of her father's old T-shirts and crawled under the covers of her bed. Sleep came fast.

Chapter Two

The A.M. rolled in with its usual luster. Early morning dew coated the newly-greened city. Commuters sat waylaid in gridlock, most oblivious to the person in the car next to them. As people woke, tuning to the local news, they heard of the previous day's happenings. Most broadcasts reported the typical overnight drivel. The highlight of all, though, was the updated story of the still-unidentified dead man.

"Zac, you're following the case. Do you have an update for us on the John Doe murder?"

"Yes, Jessica. The police have released little, if any, new information on the slain man's identity. But they have informed us this morning shoe store owner Charlie Foster has been ruled out as a suspect. They are continuing their investigation and will release new details as they become available."

"Thank you Zac..."



"Chris, wake up." Randy kicked the foot of the young man's bed.
"Wake up."

"Wha... What is it?" Chris ran a hand over his pillow-creased face and through his matted hair.

"The cops aren't looking at him."

"What? Who? What-er-ya talking about?" His eyes had yet to open.

"The shoe store owner, Charlie something or other. They aren't looking at him for the shooting. We can go get the briefcase now that they're done with him."

Chris lay back down, pulling the threadbare blanket up to his chin.

"Get up, you fuck! Get dressed!"

Chris sprang up from the bed.

"That gotcha moving," Randy said under his breath, a grin crossing his face.

Chris ran, frantic, around the room gathering his clothes. He grabbed his jeans lying on the back of the old wooden chair, stuffed his legs inside and pulled on a torn black T-shirt, covering his pale, hairless chest. Shoes in hand, Chris headed out the door before Randy could bark any more commands.

"Let's get over there and check the place out." They both settled into the car without another word.



A loud knock at the front door stirred Charlie from a fitful sleep. She dozed back off until the rattling of the doorknob jolted her eyes open. From in the bedroom, she heard the lock spring and the door open, evident by the squeal of the antiquated hinges. Within seconds, she was out of bed, wide awake, as she grabbed the baseball bat from behind the bedroom door. Charlie hid in its place and raised it in an aggressive pose, prepared to clobber the bearer of the shadow that crept through the door.

"Charlie?" A whispered, yet recognizable voice called her.

"Greg?" She jumped from behind the wooden door, bat still raised.

"Oh shit," they shouted in unison. Greg grabbed his chest as he let out heavy sporadic breaths.

“Greg, what the hell are you doing here? You scared the shit out of me.”

“I told you I would come by this morning to bring you your stuff.” He held a grey duffel bag up for her to view. With his other hand, he fanned his face with long outstretched fingers and tried to catch his breath. “Why were you still asleep? It’s way after eight o’clock.”

“I had to clean my apartment when I got home last night. It was a mess.” She returned the bat back to its unassuming role as a sports implement until the next such emergency. “It took me forever to get all my damn stuff back in order.”

Greg gave her a sympathetic look. She dropped the bag into her room and took Greg by the arm, leading him through the living room.

Both averted their eyes from the area where a man’s life had drained freely from him. “What are you going to do with the room?” He motioned with his shoulder. “Change it?”

Charlie glared at him. “Probably. I’ll have to get a decorator over here to help. You know I can’t match for shit.” She shivered at the thought. “I have to check with the detectives to see if I get my rug back. But I don’t know if I even want it back.”

“Detectives. Why can’t I ever meet men the way you do?”

She looked at him incredulously, eyebrows raised. She wasn’t sure if he was kidding.

“Tell me again, what’d they all look like?” he asked.

He wasn’t kidding.

“You need to see someone about your morbidity problem.” He waited. “Next time I walk in and find a dead body, you’re welcome to take my place so you can deal with the police.” He still waited. “They all look the same. Like cops. Besides, I’m almost sure they were all straight.”

“Bummer.” He poked out his lower lip.

Charlie closed her eyes, vacating the air from her lungs. Inhaling, she willed herself not to hit him. They had been friends for so long she had learned to excuse most of his eccentricities.

Looking at her friend with his black curly hair and innocent green eyes, she hoped he would never see anything as horrifying as she had. Though, she remembered he had watched his mother die of cancer, but he was young enough to block some of it out. He was aware of death and darkness but preferred to see the lighter side of things, for his own sanity.

“You were on the news again this morning.” Greg broke into her thoughts.

“What did they say this time?”

Greg recounted the broadcast and the local paper’s take on events. “But they never mentioned the name of the store. No free advertisement, I guess,” he joked.

“Yeah right, ‘Come buy shoes for the whole family and at no extra charge see the owner accused, however briefly, of murder.’ That’ll go over real swell.” This time she did punch him in the arm.

“Hey. I still can’t get over the fact they thought you could be capable of such a thing. You don’t have a violent bone in your body.” He rubbed his sore arm. “My dad’s still on a tear he wasn’t there when they were interrogating you. You should’ve had your lawyer with you.”

“Did he call you again? He has already chewed my ass out—twice. It will never happen again.” She held up three fingers. “Scout’s honor.”

“You, a scout?” He snorted.

She raised a fist, then shook her head. “You want some coffee?” She switched gears.

He nodded and they walked into the kitchen. As she readied the coffee maker, she remembered the briefcase.

"I almost forgot. Bertie gave me a briefcase. Said she found it outside my apartment last week." Charlie looked around the apartment, trying to remember where she had set it when she came in the night before. The strong smell of the vanilla-flavored coffee made her empty stomach rumble.

She spotted the case under the foyer table.

Greg was sitting at the kitchen table already with his cup of coffee when she returned with the case.

"She didn't even know what happened in here. Just shoved the thing in my hand and took off before I could get a word in edgewise."

"Whose is it?"

"Beats me." She poured herself a cup while her friend examined the expensive leather case. "Let's open it and find out. Can you pop the lock without it looking like we got in?"

"Moi?" He flattened his hand on his chest trying to look insulted she would even ask as she sat across the table from him. "Of course I can."

In his younger days, not many past, he was known to pick a lock or two.

"Uncle Joseph taught me well." He smiled. "You know," Greg produced a small black bag from his back pocket that Charlie knew went everywhere with him, "Joe always says cracking safes and picking locks is a lost art form. Says 'the thieves of today have no patience'. They prefer the smash and grab method, they lack flair. To him that's blasphemy."

Ironically, both elder Tucker men had decided to make criminal pursuit their chosen career paths, Charlie mused. They just happened to be on opposite sides of the legal spectrum. Attorney Adam Tucker defended, rather than committed, the crime. And neither brother held the other's chosen profession against him.

“Even though Dad’s disappointed I didn’t follow him in the firm, I think he’s glad I went to work for you and didn’t follow Joe either. He would never admit it, though.”

Charlie knew he enjoyed selling shoes for her family store. He had once told her, “I’m rewarded with working with my best friend and I am a damn fine salesman if I do say so myself.”

“Piece of cake.” He passed the opened briefcase across the small table to Charlie.

“You are too good,” she said.

Pink tint covered his cheeks. “Oh you flatter me.”

Charlie snorted and pulled the case closer to her as Greg scooted around the table next to her. “Let’s see what we have here.”

She recognized the leather as an exotic reptile skin; a gold plate stamped with BDM adorned the top right corner. It had an intricate, yet obviously penetrable, locking system. She studied everything in its place; every item sat nestled in its own designated pocket.

First, she pulled out a wallet, an expensive two-fold made from the same leather as the case. At many of the handbag and accessory shows she had attended for the store, Charlie had enviously looked at the higher-end products. Her budget, however, didn’t include stocking four-hundred-dollar wallets. They both raised their eyebrows at such a lavish accessory.

She removed the driver’s license, staring at it for a long moment, horrified. “This belongs to the dead guy.” Her mind reeled. What the hell was going on?

“Are you sure?”

“It looks exactly like him, as far as I can remember. I don’t think I will ever forget his face.” She clinched her eyes shut tightly, willing his death

stare from her mind. Shaking herself, she opened her eyes and continued.

“Grab the note pad and pencil from the bar, will ya?”

“What for?”

“’Cause I said so dammit.”

Greg looked at her, concern crowding his face.

“I’m sorry. My nerves are shot, this is just too weird. I want to write down his name and address and stuff.

“His name is...was,” she paused, “Brian Donald McMillen. It matches the initials stamped on there.” She motioned with her pencil to the top right corner where the gold plate had nary a scratch.

“He lives...lived on North Clark in Chicago. His birthday was March fifth, nineteen seventy-one.” Tears caught in her throat as emotion ran through her. Composing herself, she continued, “That sucks. He died a week after his birthday.” She shook her head and Greg squeezed her hand.

“Look at all the credit cards.” Greg grabbed the wallet away from her. “There’s got to be fifteen of them. Do you think he would mind if I borrowed one?”

“Very funny.”

“But seriously, Charlie, this is a little creepy.” A frightened look darkened his face despite his teasing.

“I know, but I have to turn this over to the detectives and I won’t get any information out of them once I do. Don’t look at me like that, Greg. I mean, geez, the man died in my apartment. I deserve some information, don’t I?”

He shook his head. “I know you too well. You can’t just go looking into this. You don’t even know what you’re dealing with.”

“Wait a minute, all I am doing is writing down a little information. Can’t hurt a thing, right?” A terse smile creased the corners of her mouth.

Greg raised an eyebrow. Charlie ignored him. She knew she had gotten them into more trouble than *he* cared to remember. His having a lawyer for a father had come in handy on more than one occasion when someone needed convincing not to press charges.

She pulled out a black folder. It contained a single sheet of paper, printed on heavy bond paper with a company letterhead.

Charlie read it aloud.

Harrington Enterprises

1530 Michigan Avenue

Chicago, IL 60610

3-5-06

Mr. Brian D. McMillen

We regret to inform you, with the current downsizing your department has experienced, we are no longer able to maintain your current position. Your termination papers have been forwarded to the Human Resources Department where a generous severance package has been arranged.

Please remove all personal items you wish to keep in your possession and return your company ID card to the security desk forthwith.

Brenda Harper/Vice President

“How awful. Can you imagine getting fired by an impersonal letter? And on your birthday no less,” Greg stated.

“Wonder what would make him come all the way down here from Chicago? And to my apartment.”

“Well, he turned thirty-five and got fired all the same day. Maybe he wanted a change of scenery. I’m sure he wasn’t expecting to see the inside of a pine box six feet under.” Greg examined his cuticles.

She hesitated, staring bewilderedly at him.

He looked up to her eyes fixed on him and cleared his throat. “What else is in there?”

“Oh, a little traveling cash.” She pulled out a wad of bills the size of the upturned Coke can sitting on her kitchen counter. At first glance, the wad contained fifties and hundreds wrapped with a rubber band. At second glance, and four minutes to count it—twice—they discovered the wad roughly totaled thirteen-thousand dollars. Re-bound, Charlie held the cash up as if it were the Holy Grail. Both stared in awe at the bundle.

“I’ll just put this back so we won’t be tempted.” She then noticed two other interesting items. One she scooped up while the other was left to the briefcase.

The plane ticket in her hand had covered a gun that lay on the bottom. She leaned in closer, examining the gun. “Forty-five I think,” she said.

Greg’s eyes widened, but he made no comment.

Charlie wondered why Mr. McMillen hadn’t used the gun to protect himself. Shaking herself, she refocused on the ticket.

“The ticket’s from here to Brazil. Mr. McMillen was planning to leave the country.” She flipped through the ticket jacket and scanned the information. “He was due to leave from D/FW the day after he was killed. I’d say he was running from something—fast.”

“It found him,” Greg said.

“Maybe he was expecting that pine box after all.” Charlie tapped her fingers on her chin. “Not a damn thing in here explains why he was in my apartment. And why did Bertie find it in the hall? God, I wonder if

she could have been out there while he was being killed.” She put her hand to her throat, thinking of her neighbor being so close to the murderer. Fear trickled back into her consciousness. “It’s all just so strange.”

She returned everything back to the dead man’s briefcase, careful to replace the items where they had been found.

“What are you going to do with it?”

“I’ll call one of the detectives and tell him I have it. Hopefully, he will agree to come to the store to get it. I don’t want them back in my apartment nosing around again. I hope they don’t think I was holding information back on them.” She rose from the table. “Hang around while I take a quick shower and we can walk out together.” She stopped in the bedroom doorway.

“I’m opening the store, you don’t have to be there until one,” he called after her.

“I know, but I have to run up to school and drop something off. I don’t want to hang out here.”

“Whatever.” Greg flopped in front of the TV and scanned the channels.

Charlie walked into the bathroom and shut the door. It was the only room in the generous apartment to date it. The fixtures were from the sixties when the building had been an old clothing warehouse. The fourth floor, her floor, had been the executive offices. It was broken down and made into four large suites in the late eighties. Charlie’s was the smallest on the floor at sixteen-hundred square feet.

The spacious, one-bedroom floor plan suited her needs. It was within walking distance of her store and school. Parking spaces were provided in an adjacent garage for a tidy sum. Her seldom-used, four-year-old Toyota Camry sat collecting dust.

The old building supplied ample hot water if you didn't mind waiting for it to heat. With the shower started, warming slowly, she phoned Detective Aaron.

She listened to muzak and gnawed on her bottom lip while they transferred her three times.

"Detective Aaron, this is Charlie Foster."

"Yes, how may I help you?"

"You told me to call if anything came up. A neighbor of mine found a briefcase outside my door the day the man was murdered. She's been out of town, apparently, and didn't realize anything was going on." Charlie twirled a piece of hair around her finger. "She assumed it was mine and gave it back to me when I got back to my apartment last night. I figured you'd want to see it."

"Did you open it and look inside?"

"It was locked." She side-stepped his question.

"Okay, can you bring it down now?"

"Actually, I was calling to see if you wouldn't mind meeting me at my store."

"Now?" he asked, his voice hopeful.

"I have to run by school before work and it's in the opposite direction from the police station. Is an hour okay?"

"I would prefer to have it now."

"Please. One hour."

"Fine," he relented. "We'll be there in an hour."

After they hung up, she slipped into the shower. Her mind kept circling back to why the briefcase was outside her door. A terrible feeling sank heavily in the pit of her stomach.

Once dried and groomed to go, Charlie returned to the living room to collect her schoolbooks and the briefcase as a small purse hung

precariously from her tired shoulders. The hectic and unpredictable days were wearing on her.

"Here, let me take the briefcase for you," Greg offered. "I don't know why you won't just buy a *big* backpack."

"Usually it's not a problem." She handed it over to him. "Thanks."

"What do you want me to do with it?"

"Just stick it in the stockroom in case I run late. You can give it to the detectives if they get there first, and see for yourself what they look like."

"Be still my beating heart."

"Thank you, Greg."

"Notta problem."



Randy and Chris easily found their way back to the apartment building in the northern section of downtown. The outside of the building still looked like the warehouse from its former years. The downtown warehouse conversions were a growing trend. The forty apartment units converted from the offices and warehouse sat hidden between two larger office buildings on either side that were built some time later.

The two men left the confines of their dilapidated, nondescript car parked at the end of the block and made their way to the front of the building. In the lobby, they opted to use the stairwell so as not to run into anyone milling about the complex. After four flights of stairs, they hovered at the end of the hallway. An opening door forced them to scurry back into the stairwell.

A man and a woman emerged from the apartment and headed for the elevator. They spoke quietly to one another as they waited for its arrival. The woman lit a cigarette and blew smoke at the "No Smoking" sign at

the end of the hallway. The man rolled his eyes and waved away the smoke lingering around his face.

Chris nudged Randy with his elbow. "There's Charlie. There's the briefcase."

Randy swatted him away as the two they watched stepped into the elevator car. Running down the stairs two at a time, hoping to beat their prey to the ground floor, Chris spoke again. "We lucked out. I thought Charlie would never show up anywhere with the briefcase."

"Shut up, Chris! Someone might hear you."

"Sorry, Randy. But I just thought when the woman came home scaring us back into the apartment," he paused to catch his breath, "and me dropping the case by the door, we were through."

"I said shut up."

"I know, I know. Sorry." Pausing again, breathing heavier. "If she hadn't of found it out in the hall with all those people with her we coulda gotten it back. I told you, though."

Randy's fist balled at his right side as they descended.

"I knew when the police still didn't know who Brian was, she hadn't turned it over to them. I told you she'd give it to Charlie. Didn't I tell you, man?" Chris said.

As they stepped off the last step, Randy turned to face Chris, his face awash with anger and exertion, his chest heaving. Chris clamped his mouth shut and looked off over his shoulder.

Exiting a side door, they steadied their breathing. Randy kept a trained eye on the lobby doors. His patience was wearing thin. Chris never shut up. His mouth was constantly running and usually about nothing at all. And he kept saying "we" as if Randy had assisted him in leaving the case out in the hall. Randy knew, however, completion or lack thereof would be "we" as far as the boss was concerned.

They had been following the pair around for a week hoping to find the briefcase. As annoying as Chris had become, he'd had a point. The neighbor would probably give the case to Charlie. Luck finally did hold out.

Randy looked at Chris as he opened his mouth to speak. With hardened eyes and a raised finger Randy stopped any sound from escaping and instead said himself, "When they come out, we follow Charlie and the briefcase." Turning back to the door, he ended the conversation.



The elevator released its passengers, having picked up people from all three floors. The group proceeded across the lobby to the glass-fronted entrance. Charlie held open the heavy door for a harried mother lugging a thirty-pound toddler and a twenty-pound carryall bag.

"I appreciate you taking it to the store for me." She turned to Greg as they stepped out on the sidewalk. "I don't want to make them wait in case I'm late."

"Notta problem, boss." He saluted her.

Up on her tiptoes, she hugged him tight and whispered in his ear, "I love you, you know."

"Always," he returned in her ear. It had been their little catch phrase for more years than either could remember. They broke the embrace, leaving in opposite directions. Greg carried the hunted briefcase. Charlie carried suspicions of many.



Charlie crossed the street, away from the junior college. Paranoia engulfed her, walking the ten blocks back toward the store. The hairs on

the back of her neck stood again as if someone was watching her, following her. Occasionally, with a backward glance to keep an eye on fellow pedestrians, she would net a suspicious twinkle in the back of her weary brain cells. One face in particular, however, caught her eye. He had been in the hallway at the college as she dropped off the first draft of the report due.

Was it just a coincidence? Charlie grunted, remembering what a cop-show detective once said, “Some paranoid people are actually being followed.” Or something like that.

She decided to stop at the large bookstore chain on the corner to see if the same face popped up again. Walking through the Fiction-Mystery section, she perused different authors, trying to act as casual and as inconspicuous as possible. Picking up a John Sandford novel, she glanced around the bookstore for the stranger. Two aisles over and one back, he stood in the Women’s Health section. For a brief second, they locked gazes.

Charlie dropped the book to the floor and bolted for the door, weaving through the aisles. Sneakers slapping the pavement, she hit the sidewalk running, not looking back. Just as she reached the corner of the building, a large, heavy hand grabbed her shoulder.

“Hold on just a minute. I’d like to have a word with you.”



Whistling, Greg strolled up the four short blocks to the mall/office building, enjoying the morning sun. He walked into the first of two short office towers in downtown Fort Worth. A place where you could ice skate, eat lunch, and buy a sweater while you kill time before your teeth cleaning after which you see your lawyer. All conveniently under the

confines of one roof, with the central library only a connected hallway away.

On the second floor gallery, the Foster Family Shoe Store sat, third store on the right. The glass shone brightly, from the weekly window washing the day before, as he approached. Unlocking the glass doors, he let himself in, and then relocked until business. Setting the briefcase down behind the cash counter, he went to the stockroom to turn all the lights on. As he returned to the storefront to ready the register, he heard a gentle rapping on the glass.

He looked up and saw two men standing at the entrance. *Not too bad looking.* Giving a brief wave, he walked to the door, keys in hand.

“Are you guys here for the briefcase?”

The larger man nodded briefly.

Greg unlocked the door to let the men in and left his keys dangling from the deadbolt. He walked back to the cash counter, the men close behind. “You’re a little early.” Greg picked the case up from the floor.

“Thank you, Charlie. We’ll just take it off your hands now.”

Greg almost tripped over his own feet. “I’m not...” he trailed off. Ice-cold beads of fear trickled down his spine. He hardened his gaze. The polite smile slid off his face as his mind raced. *Surely, someone Charlie had already dealt with would come get the case. Why don’t they know I’m not Charlie?*

“Can I see some identification first, gentlemen?” He held the case tight to his body, protectively. “You can never be too careful.” He backed toward the stockroom.

The larger man nodded to the other who locked the door with Greg’s own keys. As he turned back, he held a gun and an evil smile.

“Enough talk.” The larger man also brandished a weapon pointing at Greg’s head. “Just give me the fucking briefcase, Charlie, and shut up.”

Chapter Three

“What?” Charlie said, half-scared and half-angry. Her empty hand clenched at her side, her books grew heavy in the other.

“I wanted to ask you a couple of questions about your friend, Charlie,” the stranger declared.

Charlie raised her eyebrows, stunned—speechless. The man grasping her shoulder could overpower her. Six-one, maybe six-two, and roughly guessing, she put him just under two hundred pounds, which in turn, put him at a great height and weight advantage over her slight frame.

“Who wants to know?” She slammed her free hand on her hip.

The tall stranger reached into his jacket. Charlie flinched and considered running again. But instead of a weapon, he produced a brown leather wallet. Inside, a Chicago Police Department badge and ID said Detective Robert M. Allen.

“You’re a cop?”

“Yes.” He nodded.

“Do you normally follow people around? Sneaking up on them?”

“Well, I...”

“Why *have* you been following me all morning?” she interrupted.

“I have been tailing Brian McMillen.”

Charlie wobbled, lightheaded at the name.

The detective deposited his wallet back in his wool sports coat.

As far as Charlie knew, the police had not yet determined the dead man's identity. The media had not ventured a guess on who he was with nothing to go on. The fact the man who stood before her knew his name frightened her.

"I followed him down here from Chicago last week. I lost track and haven't been able to find him. I read someone died in your friend Charlie's apartment. From the description they wrote up in the paper this morning, I put two and two together. I know it has to be him."

"You're investigating *him*? This Brian?" Charlie toyed with the edge of her psychology book. "Is he some kind of criminal?"

"No."

Staring up at him, she waited for him to continue.

"I'm not exactly investigating him, but I have been following him for some time."

"What does any of this have to do with me?" Charlie ran her hand through her hair and replaced it on her hip, shifting her weight to her other leg.

"I got Charlie's address from the police report, down at the station. I was watching the apartment when you and he left. I wanted to ask you if he had any kind of relationship with Brian." His dark brown eyes penetrated hers as he waited for an answer.

"But why follow *me*? Not *Charlie*?" She lowered her gaze to the books in her arm.

"I thought you might help me out first. I know the police have grilled him at length and he might not be willing to talk to me."

The detective was right about one thing, at least.

"Maybe you could give me a straight answer. Help me get a handle on the situation. Before I go talk to him."

“There is no relationship between Charlie and Brian. They didn’t know each other.”

“And you’re absolutely sure there is no relationship?”

“Positive.” She nodded.

“Why?” Detective Allen pushed on.

“Man, what the hell is wrong with everyone?” Charlie looked up at the cloudless sky. Turning all her attention back to the newest detective in her life, she continued, wagging her finger in the detective’s face. “Look, first you *follow* me around all morning, frankly scaring the shit out of me, then you tell me you want to get a better handle on ‘Charlie’s’ supposed relationship with this dead guy.

“When I do answer your damn question you don’t believe me and question my certainty. What the hell is wrong with you?” She didn’t wait for him to answer. “Don’t bother me if you aren’t going to listen. As a matter of fact, don’t bother me at all.” She turned and walked away.

Detective Allen grabbed Charlie’s elbow. “I am just trying to be sure about everything. I apologize for scaring you and apparently annoying you.” His voice dripped with sarcasm. “But as you can surely tell, this is a sensitive situation. Can you please tell me why you’re so sure?”

“Because *I* am Charlie.” She placed her hand on her chest. “And I have never met the guy, never seen him before in my life. I have no idea how he wound up on *my* floor,” she yelled at him, all her patience lost.

The detective from Chicago was stunned into silence.

“What’s wrong with you now?” Charlie stared bewildered at the gape-mouthed man. Detective Allen ran his hand through his hair.

“I’m sorry. I had no idea you were Charlie. I just assumed...”

“You assumed what? Charlie is only a man’s name?” They still stood on the street corner. She scrunched one eyebrow and frowned, eyeing

him. “You obviously didn’t read the police report very closely. I am pretty sure it said ‘Miss Charlie Foster’.

“I have already answered all the *local* detectives’ questions; if you have the police report then you know what I know. I cannot help you. I need to get to work.” Charlie turned and walked away.

She sped up and got a block away before Detective Allen caught up to her again. And again, he grabbed her by the elbow halting her progress, pressing his stiff fingers into her smooth skin. Charlie’s gaze hardened as it bore into the detective’s.

“Enough. I told you I am not answering any more of your questions. I am late for work.” Charlie jerked her arm free from his grip and drew the attention of the other people on the street. With Detective Allen aware of their curious gazes, she used that moment to escape and picked up her step to the mall.

Once on the escalator though, he managed to squeeze up next to Charlie. “I have been working on this for months now. He was my best lead.” His eyes pleaded for her to listen. “He catches a plane down here and winds up dead—on your floor. I need to find out why.”

“You’re the crack detective.” She fought back a smirk. “You can figure all this out without my help. And leave me the hell alone.”

“Come on, Miss Foster.” He finished speaking as the ride reached the top.

Charlie ignored his words and briskly walked to the store, staring down at the floor. As she came to the front of the store, she was surprised to find it locked.

“Weird.” Charlie dug in her small bag for her keys.

“Miss Foster.” Charlie turned to find Detectives Collins and Aaron approaching her. She quickly scanned the passing faces in search of the

other detective, wondering where he had gone. *Thank heavens for small favors*, she thought.

"I really appreciate you stopping here to pick up the briefcase. My neighbor thought it was mine, but I don't have one. I know you wanted me to tell you if anything came up." Charlie unlocked the glass front doors. A small ripple of fear laced with confusion swept through her stomach. In the four years Greg had worked for her, he had never been late opening the store. His punctuality was one of his most admirable traits.

"Well, if we can just get it from you, we will be on our way," Detective Aaron spoke up.

"I gave it to Greg, my assistant manager, in case you got here before me. I don't know why he hasn't opened the store yet." She glanced at her watch, noting it was thirty minutes past the scheduled opening time. "He was headed straight here."

She pushed through the doors, holding them open for the detectives. All the lights shone on the perfectly-arranged store. All seemed in order.

"Greg?" Charlie called as she rounded the cash register. The drawer hung open with the bank bag on top, upside down and empty.

Panicked, Charlie threw down her books and purse and ran into the darkened stockroom. She fumbled along the wall for the light switch. Illuminating the small room, she gasped.

Metal shelves lined with cardboard-boxed shoes sat neatly in rows awash in crimson speckles, which also covered the desk and walls. Charlie's eyes widened as she recognized Greg's motionless body in a heap on the floor.

Nausea punched through her body as a musty, wet scent filled her nose. She looked down into her friend's face. His eyes stared through half open slits, focused on nothing. Mouth deformed in a protest that died on

his lips as his life drained from him. A dark pool formed under his head, matting his black hair, where it lay on the cold cement floor. A dark shadow, just off center on his chest, stained the front of his white oxford.

Charlie dropped to her knees in front of him and choked on a scream, she couldn't look away. A heavy sob finally allowed the sound to escape her terror. She flung her shaking body onto his. His limp body shuddered with her force as she took him in her arms. She chanted the word "No" as she rocked back and forth, holding him to her.

The two officers transitioned into defensive mode. They removed their weapons from the shoulder holsters under their coats. One ran to the phone on the wall. The other walked down the six rows of shelving, checking the back of the small stockroom and the restroom.

Charlie remained on her knees holding Greg until Detective Aaron ordered her to let go. He led her to the customer chairs out in the front portion of the store where he asked her to stay seated.

She lost track of time. Her watch was covered in blood and she couldn't bear to look at it. Instead, she counted other officers as they arrived. A female officer arrived in mid-count and stood watch over Charlie from across the room. Several eyes, in fact, were trained on Charlie's every move.

A forensic team came armed with equipment.

Onlookers gawked as they passed the glass wall partition. Some made no attempt to hide their curiosity. They pointed and leered at Charlie, their voices muted, only understood by the expressions on their plain faces. Self-conscious of the stares, Charlie shifted her gaze to her lap where she was horrified to find she was covered in her friend's blood.

Her breathing became erratic and shallow as the realization sank in. Her head swam with visions of Greg's lifeless body lying in a crumpled mess on the stock room floor. He looked like a toy rag doll, discarded. His

face was devoid of any emotion. The spirit that had once flourished in his being had evaporated into the walls and the floor when he died. Her heart ached.

She also came to a shocking awareness. For the second time, she was met with such a find, the second time that she wore someone else's blood and literally stared death in the eyes. A whirl of thoughts and emotions ran through her head, from the video replay in her brain. Her ears rang loudly, drowning out the chatter filling the store. Her skin grew clammy. Then thoughts jumbled and clouded in her mind, running on top of one another. The lights danced around her face and set the room to spin. The people milling about the glass-enclosed store lost form.

Charlie's chin rested heavily on her chest as she sank in her chair. Her arms, paralyzed, fell to her sides. The lights dimmed, slowly at first, then plunged her into a murky darkness.



Her mind, slow to crawl out of the dark cavern, was alerted to noise around her. Chatter swelled in her ears. Her eyes labored to open. Through her widening awareness, crazy movement swarmed everywhere. A soft breeze feathered her face. The chatter fell silent as she blinked away her veil of confusion.

Charlie fought to remember where she was and what had happened. She focused on the hand fanning her face. The outline of a large body took form and the bewildered face of Detective Aaron hovered inches from hers. With the help of the female officer, Detective Aaron coaxed her to sit up. The remaining officers only gawked like the growing crowd outside.

After Charlie climbed back into her seat, she took several ragged breaths, aware of the eyes of more than one officer glued to her every

move. As her mind cleared, she remembered the stitches just in her hairline. Gingerly, she explored the sutures with her fingertips to check their sturdiness. They were intact despite her sudden collapse. She straightened her rumpled shirt and scanned the room for her purse.

She spotted it lying on the floor next to the cash counter where she had thrown it down. As she rose from the cushioned seat, more eyes joined in her surveillance, all the bodies around her stiffened on alert. Unsure of the change in atmosphere, Charlie walked to her bag and brought it back to her seat. Attempting to find her box of Marlboro Lights, she unzipped the main compartment. Every eye in the room drew down on her at once. As her hand slid into the brown leather bag, two different officers drew their weapons on her.

“Freeze!” they both yelled.

“I am getting a cigarette!” she yelled back, unmoving. “What’s going on?”

With her hand still frozen in her bag, Detective Collins came and snatched it from her lap.

“What are you looking for?”

Her questions were met with an icy silence. He dumped the contents of the bag out on the floor near the other set of chairs. Detective Collins rifled through her stuff with such a sour face Charlie was afraid he might puke right where he stood. He plucked the hard pack off the carpet and heaved it in her direction. She took the lighter from her pants pocket and, with shaky hands, lit the cigarette now resting between her dry lips.

Charlie took a long, nerve-rejuvenating drag before she spoke again. “Why did you do that?”

“Where were you earlier?” Detective Collins asked sharply.

Charlie considered the lack of response to her question. She closed her eyes, rubbed hand against her temple and said, "You need to call my lawyer."

"Excuse me?"

When she opened her eyes, she found Collins with his head cocked at an odd angle and a smirk as if she held a gun out to him taped to a signed confession.

"I said you need to call my lawyer." She caught the look in his eyes again. "He's Greg's father."

Collins stared at her for a moment.

"You know Greg? The v-victim." She motioned toward the stockroom with her empty hand, the words leaving a bad taste in her mouth. "What did you ask me?"

"Where were you earlier?"

"I was... You can't possibly... He's my best friend." Tears wet her cheeks.

"Don't you find it the least bit interesting, the pattern here? Two dead men in one week, both found by you, on your property."

"I don't believe you." The whispered words hurt almost as much as his accusation. Yet she had had the same thoughts, but with the knowledge she hadn't committed any crimes.

Anger propelled her to her feet, fists balled at her sides. The female officer advanced on her, remaining beside Charlie until she relented, sitting back down.

"Where? Just answer the question," he demanded.

"You saw me when I arrived."

"We saw you standing outside your store. That doesn't tell me what you were doing or where you were doing it before we got here."

Charlie did not attempt to speak. The two locked gazes. Both held their ground, neither willing to concede to the other.

"I am waiting, Miss Foster. Where were you?"

"She was with me." A voice came from the front of the store. Officers parted in deference to the voice.

Collins searched the room for the speaker. "Who said that?"

Walking toward Collins, badge in hand, he replied, "Detective Robert Allen, Chicago PD. I was with her."

Collins's eyes narrowed, looking at him, skeptical. "When was this?"

"From the time she and her friend separated at her apartment building until you met her in front of this store. I never had my eyes off her." Detective Allen gave her a quick glance.

Thank God he had been tailing me.

"You were with her? Why?"

"The John Doe she found." He nodded toward Charlie. "His name is Brian McMillen. I was questioning her about him. I called the station first thing this morning and got a copy of the report. It was approved and logged in." He left out his confusion with her identity.

The two men stepped away from her and continued to speak.

A moment later, Collins stood silent. He seemed to be sulking as he scanned the room. He lifted his hand to his chin and furrowed his brow, lost in his thoughts. He kept his back to the corner of the room. Only his eyes moved as he swept the storefront. His face contorted as he scrutinized every aspect of the fifteen by twenty foot room.

"Miss Foster, where is the briefcase?"

"Sorry?"

"You said your friend brought the briefcase here with him. Where is it?" He stepped closer to the cash counter, looking under the counter,

through the cabinets. "I already checked in the back. Would he leave it out here?"

"I don't know." Charlie rose and checked the displays throughout the storefront. "It's not out here either." She gestured with her hands, palms out.

"Would he have left it with someone or dropped it off somewhere?" Collins asked.

"No. And he was coming straight here. He knew you were on your way to pick it up."

"Wait a minute," Detective Aaron blurted out. Charlie had forgotten he was still in the store. "The door was locked when you got here. We saw you unlock it."

"Yeah." Charlie nodded. "Oh God," she whispered.

"Can you lock the door without the key?"

She shook her head. Fear tightened her chest making it difficult to breathe.

"Hold on." He stepped into the stockroom. He came out shaking his head. "They're not on the body," he confirmed. "Just to be sure, see if you can find your friend's keys," Aaron ordered.

"His name is Greg," she replied, curt.

"I'm sorry. See if you can find Greg's keys. Where'd he keep them when he was in the store?"

"He'd normally hang them on a peg over the desk. He would stick them up there when he opened the store." Charlie told him where to check.

He came out and said, "They're not there."

"What're you thinking, Nick?" Detective Collins asked.

"The doors being locked—someone had to lock them. Greg didn't shoot himself in..." An audible gasp escaped from Charlie and stopped

him in mid-sentence. He continued, "Whoever was here had to have taken the keys."

"This may sound crazy, but if his keys are here, there is a way to find them. He is..." tears caught in her throat, "...was always losing his keys. I bought him one of those clapping key chains. You know—you clap and they beep at you until you find them." Charlie clapped her hands.

All the officers stood aside and watched with incredulous smirks. Charlie took several steps, hunched over, and clapped two or three times. She repeated the process throughout the storefront. The outside on-lookers were once again gawking at the spectacle Charlie caused in the closed-off shoe store. A young officer took over the silly routine in the stockroom, walking down every aisle and from corner to corner. Not a sound reverberated other than the intermittent clapping of hands. He walked to the archway between the two rooms and shrugged his shoulders in defeat.

"They're gone. Whoever—they took his keys, too." Charlie's fear grew.

"Well, my guess is it was a robbery. They cleaned out the register and his wallet is gone. They probably saw him with the briefcase and followed him to the store, thinking he was the owner or someone bringing in the bank bags."

"They probably took the keys to lock the door so he wouldn't be discovered as fast," one of the detectives commented.

"Do you think I should be worried—about his keys? There is a key to my apartment, too," Charlie asked of anyone who would answer her.

After a minute of the officers talking amongst themselves, Detective Collins registered her question. "Nah. Change the store locks and you'll be fine. They have no way of knowing who you are or that your key is on there."

They went back to ignoring her again.

Chapter Four

Charlie watched the detectives and other officers take their time with the crime scene. Prints dusted for. Photos snapped. Items measured. She had heard Detective Collins tell two younger officers to check with the surrounding stores; she assumed to find out what they might have seen as if it was a clear-cut case of a botched robbery.

They wheeled Greg out on the coroner's stretcher.

With her eyes closed, she sat back into the chair, listened to the wheels squeak under the weight, and could feel the men close to her as they passed, leaving the store. A shudder ripped through her at the thought of her friend's body sealed up inside the plastic bag.

She could hear the large crowd outside the storefront. Their voices rose then dropped to a deafening silence except for a few escaped gasps.

When the crowd chattered away again, she opened her eyes to find the blare of lights. News crews had arrived. They positioned their cameras on the store and the coroner. Tapes rolled. Shutters snapped at a feverish pace. Charlie balled her fists in her lap and gritted her teeth to keep from yelling at the crowd rubbernecking in the corridor, angling for a better view of a life gone by.

Her throat closed as the barrage of questions echoed through the opened doorway. She was well-shielded by the police blocking the entrance, all but for the accusations flying by. Talk also filtered down from the four layers of floors above as word of the incident spread.

“...Is it true the clerk was gunned down?”

“...A robbery gone bad?”

“...Isn't the owner the same person who found a John Doe last week?”

How do they get their information so quickly?

The same young officer who searched the stockroom approached Charlie from the front door with a curious look. “There's an old woman out here. Says she's your aunt and insists on seeing you.” He motioned to the door with his shoulder.

“Aunt Grace?” Charlie stood and walked to the doorway to peer out into the crowd. Her pink-haired aunt, not grandmotherly pink but electric pink, stood among the gawkers. Clutching her purse to her chest, she craned her neck. She looked at Charlie and waved.

“Can you let her in?” Charlie waited as the man got clearance for Grace from the officer in charge.

To look at her aged aunt, despite the color of her hair, you would imagine a frail, doddering woman who might knit doilies in her spare time for the church bake sales. In fact, she was an extremely agile, energetic woman. Her slight limp was due to a recent sky-diving accident. She'd landed wrong on her ankle and sprained it. Charlie shook her head as she remembered trying to convince her aunt not to go.

Once cleared by the police officer, Grace hurried to Charlie and wrapped her in a hug. She then backed away, pushing her niece at arms' length, eyeing her with a protective but sympathetic eye.

Mouth turned down at the blood-covered clothing and stitches just in Charlie's hairline, she patted Charlie's cheek. “You look awful dear. What happened to your head? Is that how you got...”

“I bumped it last week on the end table.” Her mind wandered. Had it only been a week since the first dead body she'd found?

“Charlie, what’s going on?”

Grace’s words snapped her back. “Sorry?”

“I called here when I couldn’t get you at home. A strange man answered the phone and said the store was closed. Are you all right?” Grace again looked at the dried blood smeared on Charlie’s clothing, her face lined with concern and confusion.

Charlie looked down at the floor, at her shuffling feet, at the footstool. She couldn’t speak. Then her knees weakened and she sank rigid to the chair. Grace sat beside her.

“Honey, where is Greg? Isn’t he working today?”

Charlie burst into tears and sucked in pitiful breaths.

Grace left Charlie to speak with the detective watching them on the other side of the room. From where they stood, she saw her aunt’s face contort. The news was unceremoniously broken to her, but to her aunt’s great credit, she composed herself before returning to Charlie’s side.

She put a protective arm around her niece. “Oh honey. I know what you’re going through.” Grace had lost her younger brother, Charlie’s father, tragically, not to mention other family members over the years.

Charlie listened to her aunt coo and coddle while her mind numbed. She had lost her best friend of almost twenty years. Greg had always been like a brother to her.

Both having been the only child in their families, they had latched on to one another and became closer than siblings. It was cliché, but true. They had lived down the street from each other growing up. He was the regular boy next door. But despite such close proximity most of their young lives, they hadn’t truly become friends until she was nine and he eleven, when Greg’s mother died of cancer. The other children around shunned him as if he were contagious or damaged goods because he no longer had a mother.

On the playground one day, Charlie remembered approaching him, and without saying a word, she hugged him. She'd hurt for him and wanted to comfort him. From that moment, they'd bonded and a friendship grew into a mutual love and admiration for one another.

Charlie hadn't realized Grace had left until she returned with a wet cloth from the restroom. She washed the dried blood from Charlie's hands and face. She shed her over-shirt and placed it around her niece's shoulders. It helped to warm her from the shakes and hide the awful stains.

The police continued to buzz about the store like a swarm of flies. They talked amongst themselves, almost never making eye contact with the two women huddled together in the teal chairs.

Charlie caught sight of Detective Collins and Detective Allen talking very animatedly, across the room. Occasionally, one or the other would gesture in her direction. Finally, the two men parted and Detective Allen approached Charlie and Grace.

"I have to go to the station to put in a visual on Brian McMillen." Detective Allen tucked a piece of paper in his pocket. "They still haven't officially ID'ed him yet. They want to make sure it's him before they release any new information."

"It is," Charlie blurted out. She realized Grace and Detective Allen were staring at her. Feeling guilty, she continued, "This morning Greg and I went through his briefcase and found his wallet."

"Charlie," Aunt Grace said, in a lowered voice.

"What? I wasn't sure where it came from. My neighbor across the hall found it. Thinking it was mine, she kept it for me while I was out of my apartment. I didn't know who it belonged to. I did call the detectives to turn it over as soon as I realized it was his."

She frowned and crossed her arms over her chest. “The way they were questioning me last week, I wanted to see what was inside before I turned it over to them. They all but accused me of killing him.” She wiped tears from her face. “And actually they did ‘suggest’ I had, in self-defense of course,” she said, mocking Detective Collins’s words. “Like I said, I didn’t know it was his until we opened it.”

Allen moved closer. “What was inside?”

Charlie considered a moment, eyeing him with apprehension before she answered. She decided it couldn’t hurt to tell him. “His wallet, with his driver’s license. That’s how I know it is him.” She looked at her aunt. “There was a huge wad of cash—which we put back. A plane ticket for Brazil leaving the day after he died.”

“Really, huh?” Allen rubbed his chin.

“A termination letter...”

“He was fired?” Allen’s eyebrows raised. His gaze drifted off hers a moment.

“...and a gun.”

“Huh.” He seemed to only half-pay attention.

“Excuse me, when are you going to tell me what’s going on here?” Charlie asked. “I think I have the right to know.” But before Charlie could get an answer, Aaron walked over to the small group.

“We’re all done here. We do need you to change out of those clothes. We need to take them for evidence.”

Charlie knew the routine. She’d done it the week before.

Back in the restroom, she changed into shorts and a T-shirt left over from a summer promotion. Then she wadded up her shirt and pants and bagged them in a sack marked “evidence”. She returned and handed it over to Detective Aaron.

“Again, we may have to call you down to the station for some more questions.” He seemed to be breaking down the tough cop act he played on her. “I am sorry about your friend, Greg.”

After Aaron left them, Allen, still lost in his thoughts, paused at the door to leave. “Where can I get in touch with you? If I have a question.”

“I’ll be at my...”

“She’ll be at my house.” Grace dug through her purse and pulled out a scrap of paper then scribbled her name and home phone number. She handed it to him and he left without as much as a thank you. Charlie sat, too tired to protest.

The remaining officers loaded up all their equipment in the appropriate cases and filed out. Occasionally, one would make eye contact with Charlie, expressing their sympathies with raised eyebrows or a solemn glance. One, however, gave her a look more of pity for a pathetic soul than empathy. With that, her anger swelled again and she rose and set off to the stockroom. She gathered her belongings, then locked the doors behind her.



She scarcely remembered leaving the store with the media still milling about. Or the twenty-minute drive north to Grace’s house. Keller was a city that still had all the charm of a smaller town and older developed neighborhoods. Grace’s house had stood for over thirty years on the two-acre lot.

There were two local feed stores and a vintage Dairy Queen within several blocks. Something seldom found in the metroplex. The east side of town, however, was modernized with all the big city accoutrements and ever growing. Charlie knew Grace enjoyed the availability of both worlds.

The ranch-style house was seated on half an acre of well-landscaped greenery, the rest of the acreage gone to seed from a long-forgotten farm. Often she complained she rattled around in the generous two-bedroom home all by her lonesome, but it had been in the family for years and felt comfortable.

At the house, Grace drew a bath for Charlie, made a pot of tea and brought it into the bathroom before she laid out a big, fluffy, white terrycloth robe next to the tub. Once Charlie settled into the lilac scented water, Grace plugged in a small radio in the corner playing soft classical music—calm for the soul she had said.

Thoughts swirled through Charlie's head. Jumbled and distorted, she remembered the morning with Greg, remembered the words they said. They had joked. They had been solemn about Mr. McMillen. She had yelled at Greg and it was coming back to haunt her.

Did I tell him how much I loved him?

She sat up straight in the tub. Her hands shook as she ran them over her face.

She couldn't think clearly.

Did she tell him? The uneasy tattoo of her heartbeat pounded against her ribs. She couldn't bear to think she hadn't said it. She replayed, word for word, the conversation they had had.

Yes.

Thank God, she had told him. It had been the last thing she had said to him.

The very last thing, she realized.

Tears, again, wet her face. She hadn't known it would be their last conversation. The last time he would smile at her with his bright green eyes. The last time she would feel his strong, sturdy arms around her. Her best friend, brother in so many ways, lost to her forever.

I love you, Greg. I miss you already.

Shock settled in, mercifully numbing her. She let her mind empty of everything. Let herself drift away.

Charlie soaked in the tub, sipping her tea until the water of both cooled. Even then, she stayed submerged, trying to erase the last week, until the water grew too cold, unbearable. She pulled the plug out, letting the water drain from the tub as she still lay there, shaking in the cold air of the bathroom. Finally, she stood and outfitted herself in the robe left on the sink.

She dragged herself into the guest bedroom and climbed straight into the bed, pulling the homemade quilt up to her chin. It was the middle of the day, but she couldn't imagine facing her aunt. She wanted to be alone.



"Damn it, damn it, damn it!" Randy threw the briefcase to the floor.

"I thought for sure he already had the disc. He was in the apartment long enough to get it. What the hell was he doing?" Chris asked aloud, though not expecting an answer.

"We have to get back into the damn apartment," Randy said.

"But that will take a couple of days, 'cause won't the police be back in and out of there since we smoked the guy? I wish you'd let me keep his wallet, or at least go through it. I bet he had some good cards I coulda used. Did you see the watch he had on?" Chris got a deadly glare from his counterpart. He didn't dare mention the wad of cash from the briefcase Randy shoved into his bag.

"God, I want to get out of this town. This is driving me crazy." Randy kicked the briefcase across the floor then sank down onto the threadbare

chair next to the cheap imitation wood table. He balled his hand into a fist and quietly pounded the table.

Chris sat at the end of the bed in silence as Randy went through his mute tantrum. His gaze shifted to the dresser as the cell phone on top broke the silence. Randy rose from his perch and moved to the phone. Chris, in wide-eyed curiosity, listened to Randy's end of the conversation.

"...Yes, we got the briefcase."

"...No, no disc was inside." Red splotches covered his cheeks.

"...We followed the guy to his store from his apartment. No stops."

"...Dead. No witnesses."

"...I know." Randy's face blanched.

"...We'll get the disc."

"...It still has to be in the apartment."

"...We got his keys. We can get in there when the heat dies down."

"...I know."

"...Yeah."

Chris looked at Randy. He got the gist of the conversation, but wanted Randy to reassure him the boss wasn't furious even if he had to lie. Randy closed his eyes with a sigh and rubbed his face. "We have to get the disc." With that, he marched out of the hotel room, the door slamming behind him.



Scott Bernard's phone rang. "Yes, boss?"

"I need you to go to Texas and tie up some loose ends for me." The boss listed off his flight and hotel information.

"Gotcha."

"Find the damn disc."

"No problem."



Charlie awoke with a start. In the darkened room, she panicked and cried out. The sheets trapped her legs more as she thrashed and tried to free herself. Her confusion escalated as frantic footsteps neared. A scream stuck in her throat when she squinted under the bright lights as Grace pushed the switch, illuminating the room.

“Calm down, honey.” Grace’s voice penetrated Charlie’s fear and anxiety as she sat on the bed and laid an arm over her shoulder.

Charlie breathed easier. Her heart rate returned to normal and her eyes adjusted to the light. The guest bedroom of her aunt’s house materialized as she calmed down. Grace cooed calm and soothing words in her ear and stroked her hair as she had done when Charlie was eight and woke from a nightmare.

“I’m sorry,” Charlie repeated over and over and rocked herself, embarrassed by her reaction.

“Oh honey, what are you apologizing for?”

“I don’t know. For getting upset. For freaking out. For Greg.” Her words trailed off into tears.

“Charlie, there was nothing you could’ve done. It’s not your fault.”

Charlie cried a few minutes more before she pulled herself together. Sniffing, she rubbed her hands over her face to wipe away the remaining tears.

“I have dinner saved for you. Why don’t you come eat something?”

“What time is it?” Charlie, still disoriented, looked at the darkened window.

“A little after nine.” Grace slipped through the door.

Charlie dressed in a borrowed pair of jeans and T-shirt Grace had laid out on the dresser for her then ambled into the bright kitchen.

At the dinette, she picked at her food. She hadn't had anything since breakfast, which had only consisted of a cup of coffee. She pushed the meatloaf and mashed potatoes around her plate, could not bring herself to eat.

Her head a jumble, she felt like she was in a stupor from which she couldn't drag herself out of. Something felt terribly out of sync with Greg gone. In one brief moment, her entire world had turned upside down. She was barely holding on to the edge, as if any minute the rest would shatter and leave her torn into too many pieces to put back together.

Chapter Five

“Zac, what can you tell us about the current investigation?”

“Well, Debbie, police are still being quiet about the most recent shooting, but they inform us Charlie Foster is, again, not a suspect. She is seen here, leaving her store as the police questioned other mall employees.”



“What the fuck?” Chris heard over the water spraying from the shower. He quickly shut it off and wrapped himself in a cheap, worn towel as he ran from the small bathroom. The steam followed him out, dispersing through the room.

Randy stood in front of the TV with his gun drawn. He was aiming at the blonde female anchor with the large, straight, white teeth smiling through the screen.

“Hey, man. What are you doing? Stop it. What’s the matter with you?”

Randy turned to face him. He breathed hard through clenched teeth. Chris stood wide-eyed and dripping on the worn, flat carpet.

“It’s the woman.”

“What woman? What are you talking about?” Chris scanned the room. With the curtains shut, he couldn’t see the street out front. “The reporter?”

“No, asshole. The woman, this morning. Outside *Charlie’s* apartment, *She* is Charlie.” He still clenched the gun, and his teeth, tightly as he spoke.

“What? I don’t understand. What the hell are you talking about?”

“Charlie...is...a...woman.” Randy waved the gun at the TV. “It was the woman we saw this morning. The guy in the store’s name was Greg something or other, a friend of hers. Charlie—the female—is the owner of the shoe store and the apartment we need to get into.” Spit shot from his mouth and landed on his shirt.

Chris sat hard on the end of the bed. He ran his hands through his wet hair. “What kind of stupid fucking name is Charlie for a woman?”



The phone rang as Charlie cleared her untouched dish from the table. “I’ll get it, Grace,” she hollered down the empty hallway, dumped the food in the trash, before she loaded her plate in the dishwasher. She picked up the receiver.

“Hello?”

“Charlie Foster, please.”

A tingle ran up her spine when she recognized the voice. “This is she.”

“Miss Foster, this is Bobby, er ah, Detective Allen,” he paused, “from the store, this morning. I was wondering if I could talk to you about the shootings.”

“I don’t know what I could tell you that would help.” She stopped and ran through his words again. “Did you say shootings, as in plural? Why would you want to talk about Greg’s shooting? It can’t possibly be related.” She leaned her hip against the table. “The other detectives said it was a robbery.”

“That’s what I want to talk to you about. Can I come see you tonight? Is it too late?”

“Detective Allen, I don’t mean to be difficult but aren’t you from Chicago?” He did little more than grunt. “How can you be investigating stuff that happened here?”

He didn’t respond. His silence only confused and annoyed her.

“I’ll tell you what, let me call Detective Aaron or Collins and see what they say. Okay? Give me a number where I can reach you?” She wrote down the cell phone number he rattled off and hung up.

“Grace? Have you seen my purse?”

“On the coffee table, hon.”

Finding it, Charlie dug inside for her wallet and extracted Detective Aaron’s card. With it in hand, she lit a cigarette, refreshed her tea and settled on the couch with the cordless phone in her lap.

“Man, oh man. This day sucks.” A tear slid down her cheek. After a quick swipe, she inhaled a thick drag on her cigarette while she dialed the number embossed on the card. As she released the smoke from her lungs, it rang.

“Miss Foster, we have been trying to reach you all evening.” Detective Aaron’s bark made her sit upright.

“Sorry. I’m staying at my aunt’s. I didn’t think to leave her number. Actually, I didn’t think I would be staying here. What did you need?”

“We have something we need to go over with you.” Paper shuffled in the background. “We found a key in one of Mr. McMillen’s pockets. On a hunch, we had an officer check it with your apartment lock. It’s a match.”

“How could he have my key?” She stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray her aunt had set out for her and lit another.

“Don’t know. That’s what we’re trying to figure out. It’s an old key. It stuck badly at first.”

“My key sticks, too. When I moved in the super said the previous tenant had always complained to him to have it fixed.”

“Wait a minute.”

At Aaron’s outburst, she dropped an ash on her jeans. She swiped at it, then looked around to make sure her aunt hadn’t seen.

“Are you saying he didn’t change the locks before you moved in? That’s not normal practice.”

“Well, usually no, but the woman who lived there before me died. She was old. And died all alone. He told me no one ever came to claim the body and he thought the state ended up paying for her burial.” Charlie took a long drag and exhaled. “He offered to change the locks when I signed the lease, but I didn’t think it mattered. Figured it wasn’t worth the trouble.” She rubbed the cigarette butt on her lip. “It wasn’t his fault.”

“Do you by any chance remember her name?”

“I know he told me,” she took a drag. “Let me think.” She stood and paced the living room while she blew smoke rings.

Charlie took one last drag then stubbed out her cigarette. Was that her second, third or fourth? She wasn’t sure. She needed to stop, but...

“Miss Foster?”

“Thinking.” She massaged her temple. “Smith. Um—Mary Anne Smith, I’m pretty sure. You’ll have to check with Mr. Wilkenson. He seemed to know her and still has some of her things.”

“You have a pretty good memory, Miss Foster.”

“I inherited it from my dad. Things like that just stick in my head.”

“Huh.” No other comment.

Charlie had a tendency to ramble. She bit her lip and waited for him to continue.

Finally, he said, "On the case today," he paused, "we got the videotapes from the mall security. We are examining them now and may need you to come in and see if you can recognize anyone."

"Okay. I'll check with you tomorrow. Oh, before you go I wanted to ask you about Detective Allen. He called me earlier and wants me to meet with him to go over some *details* of the case." Unsure, she didn't specify which one. "Should I...do I need to?"

"He checks out okay. He's a pretty straight arrow from what I learned. A good cop. But, he's not on the case down here. As far as I can tell, he wasn't working on anything up in Chicago either."

"Yeah, but..."

"I can't tell you not to talk to him, but there is no reason you need to." Aaron asked for her aunt's phone number and they exchanged their good-byes.

Grace came into the living room as Charlie set the phone down on the coffee table. She relayed both her conversations with the officers, asking her what she thought of either.

"Detective Aaron seems to have been up front. I'm clueless how to handle the Chicago officer. What's his name?"

"Detective Robert Allen," Charlie said. "I don't know why he would need any of the information he asked about. He's shown a lot of interest in the first shooting, granted he had been following the man down here. But, his interest in Greg's," her throat tightened and she shrugged, "just seems weird."

Grace nodded. "Freaky."

Charlie couldn't help but laugh.

A sharp knock at the door made both women jump.



He stood sans his sports coat, despite the slight chill in the air, on the front porch. Wearing a long-sleeved denim shirt, he shoved his hands in his khakis' pockets. Sweat beaded his forehead as he waited under the weak porch light, glancing to his car and back.

Finally, he saw Charlie peek through the curtained window beside the door.

"Detective Allen?" A frown pulled down her mouth before she disappeared from view.

The front door made little noise as it opened. Charlie peered out over the top of her aunt's protective shoulder. He thought he noticed a flash of interest dance across their faces.

"I looked you up in the phone book," he offered, as his only apology. "Can I talk to Charlie? In private."

"It's okay, Aunt Grace." Charlie nudged her aunt and they switched places. "You want to come in?" Charlie moved to the side.

"Actually, I saw a bar a few miles up the road. We could go there if it's all right."

"Not very private." Her tawny eyebrow arched to her bangs.

"Just go." Her aunt pushed her toward the door.

"Grace." Charlie struggled with her aunt for a moment. "I need shoes."

Bobby glanced down at her plain white socks. "Probably."

When she left him waiting on the porch, her aunt stepped closer and lowered her voice. "I expect you to take care of her. She's had a rough week."

“Yes ma’am.” He eyed the bubblegum-haired aunt. Though he outweighed her by at least a hundred pounds, he was pretty sure she could take him down without breaking a sweat. “Not a problem.”

“Sad, sad day, our Greg. Charlie loved him.” She tsked and shook her head. “I expect you to...”

“Ready.” Charlie had her sneakers under her arm and purse on her shoulder as she shoved a cell phone in her pocket. She smiled weakly at him as they stepped off the porch. “I won’t be too long, Aunt Grace.”

“Whatever. I’m gonna go paint my toe nails.”

Bobby tried to hide his smile when Charlie rolled her eyes, but she caught him. “Eccentric doesn’t begin to explain it,” she whispered.

She inhaled the cool night air, paused and looked up to the darkened sky before she ducked her head and hurried to the car. He waited, as his mother always taught him to, beside her door until she got in. Then he walked around the car to the driver’s side. Aware of the older woman’s gaze through the front window, he waved.

Complete silence settled in the car during the five-minute drive as she put on her sneakers and fiddled with the laces until he pulled into the lot. Inside the club, the sawdust on the floor crunched under their feet. Heavy smoke filled the air and burned Bobby’s eyes. Western-clad men crowded the bar. “Let’s sit there.” He pointed to an empty table tucked away in the back.

Despite the hazy ambience, the bar met his prerequisite. It served cold beer and louder music. Honky-tonk music blared from the jukebox on the other side of the room—loud enough to be heard over the growing mass of people.

Even with the small, intimate table, Bobby scooted closer to Charlie. He didn’t want to yell to be heard over the regular din of the room. “What do you want?”

“Beer.”

His brow furrowed as he looked sideways at Charlie. “You are twenty-one, aren’t you? I didn’t think to ask.”

She looked at him incredulously. “You’re kidding, right?”

He didn’t respond, only continued his questioning stare.

“I’m twenty-eight,” she answered.

He stared a moment longer in disbelief as the waitress appeared in time to spare him any further comment.

“What’ll it be?”

“Beer. Two.” He held up two fingers.

“I need to see your ID.” The woman wiped the table down as Charlie pulled her driver’s license from her wallet.

“All right, be right back.” She winked at Bobby and left.

“Flirt.” Charlie stuffed her ID back and pulled out a twenty.

“I got this. It’s on me.”

She shrugged and leaned back in her chair. As she opened her mouth to speak, the waitress plopped two bottles down on the table. Bobby handed her a bill, didn’t even look at it and said, “Keep the change.”

“Thanks, doll face.” She kissed her fingertips and tapped his cheek before she left.

“I bet if you check, her number’s scribbled inside the napkin.”

“No.”

Charlie motioned to it with her head. “Check.”

Sure enough. Ten colorful digits lined the inside crease.

She smiled. Two dimples curved a small moon on either side of her mouth. “Cheers to me.” She winked and took a sip of the beer.

A sudden, unexpected rush rumbled through his chest. He groaned and took a sip of his own beer. *Stay on track.* “I know you’re wondering why I wanted to talk to you.”

She nodded and the smile fell from her mouth. Instantly, he hated he’d been the one to do it. But he had a job to do. Whether he was on the case or not.

“I need to find out why Brian was in your apartment.”

“On the phone,” she leaned forward, “you said you wanted to know about the shootings, plural. What does this have to do with Greg’s shooting? Or was there another one I’m not aware of?”

“First things first.” Bobby held up his hands. “Right now I am more concerned with why Brian wound up dead in your apartment.” He looked at his beer, avoiding her questions and the malicious look she gave him.

“I don’t have any idea. I already told you. I don’t know what else I can add that might help you.” She paused when he looked up. “Can I ask *you* a question?” He gestured with his beer for her to continue. “I spoke with Detective Aaron. He said you weren’t working on any cases tied to this here or in Chicago. Why are you so interested and why all the questions?”

He stared down at his beer bottle again. His jaw tightened as he pulled the label from the bottle. “You’re right. I’m not on a case. I was looking into this on my own time.”

“Is that normal police procedure?” She leaned away from him.

“Not exactly. It’s personal.” He did not elaborate.

“Look, Detective Allen...”

“Bobby, please.”

“Fine, *Bobby*. I think this is pointless. I can’t help you. I’m sorry to waste your time and that you’re wasting mine.” Charlie drained off the last of her beer.

He watched her set the empty bottle in the middle of the table and rise.

"If you wouldn't mind taking me back to my aunt's house... Better yet, I'll call a cab."

"It was the same person," he said.

"Excuse me? Same person for what?" She shouldered her bag. "You need to be a little more specific. I don't see..."

"Who shot Brian *and* Greg." His eyes never left his beer bottle as he continued to shred the silver label onto the table. "The same gun used on your friend Greg in the store was used on Brian in your apartment."

He looked up in time to see the color drain from her cheeks.

"I don't understand. How do you..." She slumped into her chair and dropped her bag back to the floor. "How do you know all this?"

"I got chummy with one of the technicians at the scene." He changed his tone and wording when he saw her cringe at the sound of her friend's death as so technical. "I'm sorry, at the store. Turns out, we have a mutual friend at my precinct, and we started gabbing. We went out to eat after his shift and he updated me on the case."

"They were surprised when the weapons check came back with a match on the bullets since you alibied out. Same caliber of gun. They put a rush on the ballistics test. It was a match. Same gun, same killer."

Charlie signaled the waitress for another round. She had money in hand, surprising Bobby, and paid as the waitress deposited two more beers on the quieted table. Charlie fondled the bottle in silence. She took a long draw on her drink and looked at Bobby.

"Why didn't Detective Aaron tell me when I spoke to him earlier? He never even hinted it was anything different than a robbery. 'Plain and simple', they said at the store."

“They wouldn’t tell you. They’re still trying to connect you somehow. They think you’re involved, and they’re trying to figure out the how and why. If I hadn’t been following you, you’d probably be sitting in lock-up right now.”

“They couldn’t think I had anything to do with it.” She slammed her fist on the table. “He was my best friend, for God’s sake. I wouldn’t... I couldn’t. That’s fucking crazy. They said my store was robbed. You’re wrong...or confused.” Lines pulled her mouth down. Her eyes grew somber and dull as they shifted from her beer to his face, waiting for answers.

“Think about it for a second,” he said. “A robbery, which takes place in the morning when cash registers are usually empty. And in broad daylight. Someone *made* it look like a robbery. Someone was after the briefcase—for whatever reason.” He looked away from her again. Anywhere but at her.

“But I told you what was in there. Yes, there was quite a bit of cash, the only thing of any value. They could’ve just killed him for the money—right?”

He shook his head. “It had nothing to do with the money.”

“How can you say that? You don’t know for sure.” Her voice cracked under the strain. Her face scrunched.

“If it was a robbery why didn’t they take his watch? One of those titanium jobs, right?” He paused to study her face as she considered the idea. “It was a very expensive watch. And he had on a gold ring. Which I bet cost a few hundred dollars by itself. Not your typical steal. Especially when you tie it into the shooting in your apartment.” He managed the statements with little emotion, a trait he had learned on the job, though inside he wanted to scream and yell as much as he could tell she did.

Frustration didn't begin to describe him and, for whatever reason, the fact he'd turned Charlie's world upside down, too, ate at him.

She fidgeted, drank her beer, then pulled a crumpled pack of cigarettes from her bag. "His dad gave him the ring for his high school graduation." Her hand shook as the flame of her lighter connected, burning the tip of the stick. The crimson glow lit her face with an eerie cast as she sucked in a long drag. "The watch was something his uncle 'picked up' somewhere. He's sort of a retired cat burglar."

"Um..."

"He's retired."

Bobby did a mental head shake. *Pink-haired aunts. Dead men popping up everywhere. Now a retired cat burglar for an uncle.*

She took drag after drag on the shortening cigarette, not paying him any mind. Her pale blue eyes looked distant with flashes of anger and fear mixed throughout. Her shoulder length, light honey brown hair hung in a ponytail. The stitches in her hairline were barely visible, but he knew they were there, overhearing most of her conversation with her aunt in the store that morning.

Charlie could have easily been mistaken for an eighteen-year-old college freshman in her Texas Christian University T-shirt and faded blue jeans. He had, just a moment before.

He scrutinized her as she stubbed out her cigarette and lit another. She met his eyes and watched his gaze slip to the cigarette. She, too, looked at the burning stick in her hand.

"I have been trying to quit." She shrugged. "I only do it when I get stressed out. Considering what you're laying on me, I should have one in each hand." A wan smile tilted her mouth.

She intermittently drank and took drags off her cigarette as her gaze moved to the end of the bar but seemed to stare at nothing.

The topic at hand faded from his mind. He was surprised to find himself smiling inwardly, amused as he thought how contradictory she was. She spoke with a hard edge to her voice—almost tough. The first time he stopped her outside the bookstore she had stood her ground. She might have been afraid, but he couldn't tell. Most women would have overreacted when grabbed by a strange man. Charlie had merely stared him down and asked what he wanted. He admired that.

Despite her bravado and harsh tone, though, there was a softness to her. Her features were strikingly gentle and feminine. His mind had wandered to thoughts of what she may look like when not under a great deal of stress and sadness. As he had followed her in the morning his mind had been on netting Charlie, or rather the one he thought was Charlie. *She* had merely been a means to an end with which to solve Brian's murder. Someone to answer questions. He hadn't really noticed *her*.

But now... Now he couldn't tear his gaze away. Soft, pink lips and ivory skin made his fingers itch to do more than take his next sip of beer. What was with him? He'd never been drawn in with one look, but as he studied her, she captivated him. Her blue eyes dazzled. He wondered how much her eyes might sparkle, or how rosy her cheeks would glow when she was truly happy.

An odd ache rose from his gut tightening his chest, and he longed to see Charlie's hair float around her shoulders. If he could simply pull the band that held it back...

He vaguely remembered it had hung free when he'd accosted her outside the bookstore. But he had been caught up in the drama as it unfolded at the store; he neglected to register her appearance. Hell, he hadn't even thought of her as a woman.

In the smoky bar, he took in everything in minute detail, recording it to memory.

Damn. He shouldn't be looking at her and thinking things in terms of how hot she was. *Get a grip, man.*

Charlie, unaware of his close audit, closed her eyes and shook her head. A single tear popped from her eye and slid down her cheek, dropping into the filling ashtray. A hazy cloud of ash rose from the dish and settled back down.

Bobby shifted in his chair, uncomfortable. He switched his gaze to a spot on the wall not far behind her as she reopened her eyes.

"You have no way of knowing why this happened, do you?" she asked straightforward, with no preamble.

"I think I have an idea, but..."

She held up her hand to silence him. "Am I in danger? Do you think someone will come after me now, for whatever reason?"

"I doubt very seriously that would happen." He shook his head. But he didn't know. "I think Greg was an unfortunate accident. He had something someone wanted. Brian's briefcase is gone now. Hopefully, that satisfied their search."

Charlie's eyes grew larger, more tears floated on swollen rims. "It's my fault Greg's dead, because I asked him to carry the briefcase to the store."

Bobby didn't know how to respond.

"Of course I'm in danger." She cleared her throat. "I know what was in the briefcase. I'll be a target, too."

"But we don't know for sure why he was killed, either of them. There's no way to tell." He tried to assure her, but he worried about the same thing. "I'd still lay low for a while. Stay with your aunt though, there's no way anyone could find you there."

“You did.” She pointed her cigarette at him.

“Yes, but I had her name and phone number to start off with. She isn’t in the police report. You should be fine. Will your boss let you off work for the next few days? Especially under the circumstances.”

“I think she might.” Charlie smiled for the first time since they’d started speaking.

He caught humor on her face and raised his eyebrows and shoulders wondering what he just missed.

“Did you actually *read* the article or the police report you used to find me or ‘Charlie?’” She smirked at him.

Still confused, he repeated the gesture.

“I own the store.”

He nearly choked on his beer as he swallowed.

“You do?” he asked, once he cleared his throat.

“It’s been all over the news. In all the reports. ‘Charlie Foster—shoe store owner’, like it’s part of my name. You don’t pay much attention to detail for a detective.” She still smiled.

“Actually, the paper I read this morning failed to mention it.”

“That’s a change.”

“Aren’t you awfully young to own your own store?” He sipped his beer. “I don’t mean any disrespect.”

The playful smile slid from her face.

“It’s a family-owned store, or at least it was.” Her voice lowered, lost the southern twang. “My family owned the store, from the time I was five or six.”

She lit another cigarette. “When I turned eighteen, actually the week before my birthday, they were in a car accident—my mom and dad. They were both killed instantly.” Her eyelids lowered.

She signaled the waitress again for another round as he sat silently. She again had money in hand and a polite smile on her face when the chunky brunette deposited two fresh bottles and removed the empties. As the waitress walked off, he watched Charlie's smile disappear again.

"I was having a huge birthday party at a restaurant across town. Their idea. They wanted to celebrate, they'd said." She took several sips. "My parents closed the store early. They were headed to the party together when they got a flat, ran over a nail or something, and pulled off to the side of the road. According to a witness from the accident report, they were both standing beside the car as my dad tried to change the tire.

"The car was brand new. The lug nuts were on pretty tight apparently. Dad was having trouble getting them off—his back, you know." Charlie took a deep breath, her eyes glassed over. "Well, out of nowhere, someone crashed right into them. Hit and run. There weren't even any skid marks. They didn't try to stop." Her words slurred at the edges. "No one ever found..."

She slammed her bottle down hard on the table. Her eyes widened at the singular sound. She continued on, in an almost hypnotized state, talking in such a monotone, weak voice, that he had to strain to hear her. "They had a will leaving me everything. The store. Money to take care of myself. I've been running it since the day after I graduated high school."

Charlie started spurring out short, brief sentences. "Grace moved down here. To be with me. My parents set the trust up pretty well. I haven't had too much trouble. It was hard, though. The store always reminds me of them. Thought of selling." Her eyes welled up, but no tears fell over her weary face. "But I can't. It's a part of me."

He debated taking her hand, wanted to touch her face, but decided against it. "I'm sorry to hear about your parents. I didn't know. It must have been difficult." Bobby tried to console her, mumbling soft comforting words as his stomach clenched. He wanted to kick himself for being such an ass.

They looked from one another to their beers and back.

"You're taking classes at the junior college." He leaned back in his chair. "What are you majoring in?"

The question must have caught her off guard. Her forehead scrunched and she frowned.

"Remember, I followed you this morning. You dropped off some papers or something."

"Oh yeah, my alibi," she said. "Right now, I am just taking the basics. I haven't decided what I wanna be when I grow up."

She downed the last drop in her bottle and raised her arm to signal the waitress.

Bobby grabbed her hand and pushed it back to the table. He shook his head at her—she had had enough. Heat rushed through him as he let his hand linger. A little too long. A little too comfortable, he realized, then released it with far too much regret.

As she opened her mouth to speak, a small burp escaped her lips. She released a nervous laugh, which in turn, developed into a batch of hiccups. After of couple of minutes of the non-ending barrage, he suggested it was time to leave.

She stood. "I'll call Grace to come—" hiccup, "—get me. You—" hiccup, "—go on."

"I'll take you home."

"She won't—" hiccup, "—mind." Charlie tugged her cell phone from her tight jeans pocket.

Bobby saw it slip from her fingers and before he could grab it, it hit the floor and shattered into several pieces.

“Man, oh man.” Hiccup. “This has not been my—” hiccup, “—freakin’ month. One thing after another. I swear. My karma is pulling out butt hairs now.”

“What?”

“Something Greg says.” Tears welled in her eyes and she hiccupped several times. “Used to say.” She rubbed her forehead. “Bobby, I don’t feel so good.”

Bobby scooped up the damaged cell from the bar floor, then retrieved her bag and led her, by the elbow, through the growing crowd and exited the bar.

Outside the building, Bobby removed his grip from her arm and smoothly shifted it to the small of her back, guiding her to his car. There, she leaned against the rear fender and waited while he unlocked and opened the door.

Charlie all but melted into the front seat of the rental car. He didn’t think she’d had that much to drink. Though with her size and the shitty day she’d had...

Hiccups sang into the night as he leaned across her to hook the seat belt, not waiting for her clumsy fingers to work. Her hot breath feathered his neck. It charged something in him, stunning him.

“You smell good,” she whispered.

He froze, thought for a moment she might try to kiss him, but instead she settled back into the seat and closed her eyes.

After shutting the door, he slowly walked to the other side of the car and stood for a moment peering over the top of the car. He had to let his mind clear and his libido settle in the cool night breeze. He looked, unseeing, out across the parking lot. With half a laugh and half a sigh,

he chided himself for the thoughts dancing through his mind. Damned if he wasn't attracted to her.

It had been a long time since he'd had an instant connection. The rush of finding someone attractive from the moment you look into their eyes. And the need to be near them. It was not, however, the time to think of Charlie that way. Or in any way that didn't concern the two damned cases. Opening the door, Bobby shook all the images from his head and slid in behind the wheel.



"We're here." Bobby pulled his car up to the curb in front of the ranch-style house. The porch light, casting little light, shone in the late evening and caused deep shadows across the front yard. He eased out of the driver's side, his keys jangling from his hand as he walked to the passenger door. With one hand under Charlie's elbow, he wrapped his arm around her waist and hoisted the still-hiccupping woman from the plush seating of the rented silver Ford Taurus.

"Come on, Charlie. Help me out a little here." Bobby strained to situate her unwilling body to a standing position.

He half-dragged and half-carried Charlie to the front door. He wondered briefly why he didn't just pick her up in his arms, then her breath tickled his neck, sent his heart racing. The scent of her, fruity and floral, filled his head. His stomach tightened, as did his groin. He wanted nothing more than to pull her to him, on him, and settle his mouth on hers.

Talk to her instead, he thought. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Mmm-hmm." She didn't open her eyes, her head lolled on his shoulder.

"How'd you know that waitress left me the phone number?"

“Cause that’s what I would have done.”

An all too warm feeling crept through him. He ached to touch his lips to hers. A breath touch, though he didn’t think that would be enough. The fact it *was* so appealing prevented him from doing it. Forget the fact her aunt waited inside the house and Charlie was snookered.

Could he be a bigger ass?

He shook his head and pushed the bell. It echoed through the house as Charlie leaned into him.

Grace answered the door. “Y’all are home quick.”

“We, uh, ran into a little problem.” Bobby proceeded through the door even before being asked.

Charlie’s feet shuffled. She tripped on the doorframe and sank hard to her knees as a barrage of hiccups rang out. Finally, Bobby scooped her up in his arms with little effort, despite her soft protests.

“Where shall I put her?”

He followed Grace down the hall to a small bedroom and laid Charlie on top of the quilted bed. “She apparently can’t hold her alcohol very well.” His hand ached to tuck in the loose hair that had fallen from her rubber band. Instead, he backed to the doorway.

“Man, oh man.” Grace pulled Charlie out of her sneakers.

Bobby watched her struggle to get her niece under the covers without a lick of help from Charlie.

Then Charlie giggled between hiccups. Even from across the room, he could see Grace smile at her niece. The silly sound the giggles made mixed with the hiccups was hard to resist as a smile crept across his face, too.

Charlie whispered something unintelligible to him as Grace pulled the quilt up to Charlie’s chin. “What’s that, hon?”

“Isn’t he cute?” she said rather loudly.

Another rash of hiccups and giggles intermixed as Charlie snuggled into the pillow. Bobby's face flushed as Grace turned back to him. "Very cute." Her coy smile made the heat in his face increase.

"We'll let her sleep it off." Grace gave him a quick wink and turned out the light. "Let's go into the living room." In the cozy room, Grace pointed to the sofa. "Why don't you take a seat, Detective Allen?"

"Bobby please, ma'am."

"I'll call you Bobby as long as you cut the ma'am crap."

He chuckled. "Sure."

"Good deal. I'll be back in just a moment." She returned with a tray of coffee.

"You shouldn't go to all this trouble," he said.

"No trouble. It was already made and waiting for Charlie when she got home." She poured him a cup and offered the sugar and cream, which he refused. "I must apologize for her. She's never been much of a drinker. And I don't think she's eaten a single bite of food today. It's been a rather trying day, as I imagine you can understand."

"Oh, it's okay. We had an interesting talk, despite the circumstances," he said.

"Were you able to find out any other information to help you?" Grace settled back into her chair and sipped her coffee.

Bobby shook his head. "The biggest mystery is still why Brian was in her apartment. Without that, I don't know what I'm looking for. But now with the new twist..." Grace looked at him, confused. He gave her much of the same details as he had already shared with Charlie.

"That's a doozie." She clucked her tongue. "Sorry. Jessica Fletcher, I'm not."

"Who?"

“*Murder She Wrote*. TV show. Well, never mind.” She shook her head. “Have you ever been to Texas before?”

“No. My first time.”

“Hmm. And on such a crappy occasion. Shame.” She sipped her coffee then smiled. “The last time I was in Chicago a man proposed.”

“Really?”

“Yep. Knew him for three-and-a-half hours. I thought about it. But decided I couldn’t take the cold winters.”

Bobby tried not to laugh. “A good enough reason as any.”

“That’s what I thought.” She shrugged.

Bobby glanced at the hall and lowered his voice to almost a whisper. “Can you tell me what Charlie is short for?”

Grace snorted. “Oh, I don’t think I could. She is pretty touchy about her name. Even had it legally changed to ‘Charlie’ on her license and birth certificate.” She paused. “I’m afraid my brother and his wife were, let’s say, a bit eccentric, especially when Charlie was born.”

“Aw, come on. I won’t tell.”

Grace looked about the room, eyes squinting, as if she were about to reveal trade secrets of a great conspiracy. She leaned forward with a wild smile, as did he. “First, you have to realize, my brother and I grew up in South Carolina...”

Before she could finish, he leaned back wide-eyed with raised eyebrows and started laughing. He nearly dropped his coffee cup from shaking so hard. “It isn’t short for Charleston, is it?”

He laughed even harder as Grace nodded, smiling. “Like I said, my brother and his wife were eccentric.”

“I will say that is a first for me.”

“If you ever want to make her mad—and I mean hair pulling and spitting mad—that would be the way to do it.” She laughed along with him.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” He stood. “Thank you for the coffee, Miss Foster, and the company. I really should be going. If she thinks of anything else that might be helpful, please ask her to call me. She has my cell number, but this is the hotel information. I’ll be here at least until the end of the week.” He handed her a slip of the hotel’s stationery. He had scribbled his room number in the middle of the sheet.

Grace walked him to the door. He frowned when she said, “Oh, I’ll be sure she calls you.”

“Oh, that reminds me.” Bobby pulled the broken cell pieces from his pocket and handed them to Grace. “She dropped it.”

“That’s the fourth one this year.”

Chapter Six

“Let’s go now. I want to get it over with as soon as possible,” Randy hollered at Chris as he pulled on his shoes. “We have to get the disc.”

“What if she’s home?” Chris asked.

“What if she is? One less problem,” he said. “We might as well get it over with. Come on.”

The two men left the hotel in silence. In the car, Chris played with the key chain he took off the man in the store. “Hey, maybe he has a key to her apartment on here.”

Randy raised his eyebrows and shoved his own key into the ignition. “Huh. Maybe.”

Chris wished Randy would let him drive. It wasn’t like those two wrecks were his fault. People just need to learn how to drive. But he knew better than to ask again. He touched the welt under his eye as Randy pulled into the lot across from the apartment.

They slipped back into the stairwell, anonymous, as they had the morning they watched Charlie and *the man* leave the building. At 4B, they tried the key ring. On the second to last key, they hit. Randy and Chris let themselves into the apartment and snuck through the varying rooms in search of any occupant, not to get caught off-guard.

The place was deserted.

“That damn disc ain’t here,” Chris said after an hour.

“She found it.” Randy thrust his knife into the sofa. “She must have found it and put it somewhere. We have to get her and find out what she did with it.”

They waited in the apartment for hours. Waited to grab her the minute she returned. Randy paced the floor. “We’ll beat the information out of her if necessary. She’s a small woman. It won’t take much to persuade her.”

Chris shivered. He’d been on the other end of Randy’s fist too many times to count. He wouldn’t wish it on anyone, even the stupid bitch who took the disc.

After several more hours, Randy decided to leave. “We need to go so no one sees us coming out of her apartment.”

They snuck back out through the stairwell and across to their car. When Randy did nothing more than sit, Chris glanced back and forth to his watch and the building. “What’re we going to do, sit outside her building ‘til she shows up?” He yawned for the third time.

“Shut up.”



“Damn. My head.” Charlie tried to run her fingers through her hair, but they snagged on the lopsided ponytail still bound by the rubber-band. She winced as she ripped out a few hairs along with the tangled band.

Her stomach growled. She smacked her dry lips, but the fuzzy taste wouldn’t go away. “Just shoot me now.” She cringed when she realized what she’d said.

She swung her legs off the edge of the bed and let her head hang down on her chest as her feet hovered just above the wooden floorboards. With a heavy sigh, she leaned forward and slid off the bed.

“Man, where is my robe?” She spotted it in a pile on the floor by the closet door and bent to pick it up. She regretted the move when her head throbbed, feeling as if it had been slipped into a vise and the screws were being tightened.

The aroma of her aunt’s sausage omelet assaulted her in the hallway. In one whiff, she went from starving to nauseated and back again. Every step down the rug-covered hall bounced her brain, sloshing it around in her skull. Charlie squinted at the disgusting brightness and cheeriness as she entered the sun-filled kitchen.

Her aunt turned toward her at the squeak of the hardwood floors, face full of sympathy. “Poor baby,” Grace teased.

“Why did I drink so much?” she asked. “My tongue feels like a dozen caterpillars have settled on it.”

“That’ll teach you, I guess. Sit down. You need to eat. Don’t look at me that way,” she said as Charlie rolled her eyes. “You’ve barely had a bite in the last couple of days. Eat.” She set a steaming-hot plate of eggs on the table. Then poured a generous glass of orange juice and set the pitcher near by. “You also need to drink all of that. You look dehydrated.”

Charlie didn’t contradict her aunt. She didn’t have the strength.

After most of the food offered to her was gone and she drank the pitcher of juice, the throbbing had lessened but hadn’t quite dissipated.

“Here.” Grace handed her a coffee mug. “Let’s go into the living room.”

Charlie cozied up next to her aunt on the plump sofa and laid her weary head on Grace’s shoulder.

“Well, you’ve had a hell of a time, girl.” Grace patted her on the knee. “Your new officer friend is quite charming, though. Interesting, too. You should have seen his face when you said he was cute.”

Charlie groaned. “I did not.”

“Fraid so.”

Heat crawled up her neck and onto her cheeks. How could she have said something so embarrassing? And why did she care so much that she had?

“Is he seeing anyone?”

“Aunt Grace, how should I know if... Now don’t you go getting ideas. He’s a cop working on a case, not someone you can fix me up with.” Charlie didn’t want her aunt to interfere or get any of her wild notions. But as she thought about it, the prospect of her and Bobby didn’t seem unappealing.

“He *was* hot.” A flutter stirred in her belly. She’d watched him in the bar. His chocolate brown eyes perfectly matched his tousled hair. His big, strong hands had shaken some as he spoke to her. She had wondered why. He didn’t know Greg, no emotional tie there. And although he didn’t say how he knew Brian, he didn’t seem emotionally tied to him.

She sat back up, scrunched her aching forehead—every line pinched as it moved. She remembered her conversation about the bullets. “Did the detective tell you about Greg’s case? How he is sure it’s related to the dead guy from my apartment?”

“Yes, but he didn’t tell me how, other than that the bullets matched.”

“That’s all he seems to know for sure. He seemed surprised by it, too. It’s just so odd.” Charlie thought for a moment. “I need to call Detective Aaron, figure out what’s going on.” She rose from the sofa. “But first I need to take a shower. Can I borrow some more clothes?”

“I already set a clean outfit on the end of the bed for you.”

“Thank you.” She kissed her aunt’s forehead. “Detective Allen, er, ah, Bobby,” she couldn’t get used to saying his name, “suggested I stay over here for a while if that is okay with you.”

“You know you are always welcome here, whenever you want. What can I help you do?” Grace asked.

“I have to get to my apartment to pick up a few things. Will you drive me over there in a little while?”

“Sure. Did you leave your car at the mall? Do we need to go there and pick it up?” Grace picked up a book on rock climbing and flipped to a bookmarked page.

“No, I walked to work yesterday. It’s still at my apartment, in the parking garage. I’ll drive it back over here, so you won’t have to keep driving me around.”

Grace shook her head. “I don’t know why you bought that car in the first place. All you ever do is leave it in that silly parking garage at your apartment. What does it cost you to park it each month? A hundred dollars?” she asked.

“Two.” Charlie dashed down the hall out of earshot.

After a quick shower, Charlie wrapped her hair in a pink towel and piled it on top of her ever-healing head. Dressed again in the white terrycloth robe, she popped two aspirin before putting in a call to Detective Aaron. Both he and Detective Collins weren’t due in until after lunch. “I’ll just call back later. Thanks.”

Oh well.

She blow-dried her hair. Putting the hairdryer up, she stared at her slim figure in the mirror. She was built just like her aunt and the rest of the women on her father’s side of the family. She and her aunt stood at five foot five and had a smallish waist. The years had added a few pounds to Grace, but she maintained her weight well and they both weighed in under one hundred and thirty pounds. But that was where the resemblance stopped, she mused. Charlie had her mother’s ocean blue eyes and honey brown hair. Her lightly-tanned skin paled in comparison

to her aunt and father's darker Cherokee heritage. They were both one-quarter Cherokee and it contributed to their striking features.

She thought of her great-grandmother Rose and remembered her wonderfully bronzed skin and jet-black hair. Her eyes were so dark they were almost black. Her grandmother Lillian had been a fairer version of Great-grandma Rose, due to her fair-skinned Anglo father. Charlie's dad and aunt inherited the tanned skin with dark brown eyes and dark brown hair. Grace's natural hair color, however, had transitioned to an odd shade of blue-gray. Why she liked to dye it pink, Charlie would never understand.

As she looked in the mirror, she realized she was an odd, yet striking mixture of both of her parents. Little pieces of each of them shone through. She needed only to look at herself to keep them in mind.

She shook the thoughts from her head and dressed again in the borrowed clothes left out for her. Grace had laid out a pair of jeans and a Walt Disney World T-shirt from their trip last year. Charlie recalled surprising Grace with the trip for her sixtieth birthday.

She pulled her hair back up in a ponytail, to keep it out of her face. As she looked for her shoes, she came across the piece of paper with Detective Allen...Bobby's number sitting on the dresser. She shoved it into her jeans pocket and grabbed her shoes, then headed for the living room. "I'm ready, Aunt Grace."



Chris sat on his bed with his back pressed to the old headboard. Randy paced the floor, back and forth, going on three hours, since the crack of dawn.

"I can't believe that ass called the cops."

"I told you we shouldn't sit in the parking lot."

Randy growled and cursed both Charlie and the garbage man that had seen the two of them in the car.

Finally, he flopped into the chair and breathed heavily. He looked around the worn room and his eyes settled on Chris.

“We need to stay away from there for today. Let the cops forget about us. Then first thing tomorrow morning, we will wait outside her apartment, on foot, and grab her. We will make her tell us where the disc is. If she doesn’t cooperate, then...” He motioned across his throat with his hand. His eyes closed and smile crossed his face.

Chris knew he’d never get to sleep no matter how damn tired he was.

Chapter Seven

Out in front of her apartment building, Charlie hopped out of Grace's car. "I'll be fine, Grace. I promise. Now go. You don't want to keep your Rosebud friends, or whatever you call them, waiting." She waved until Grace turned the corner at the end of the block.

In the lobby, she stopped and checked her mail. She flipped through the ads and junk as the elevator crawled to her floor.

Standing in front of her apartment, her nerves gnawing at her, she checked the door. Locked. She relaxed with a foolish sigh of relief. Then the skin prickled on the back of her neck.

Her gaze darted from one end of the hall to the other, searching for someone who might be watching her. Her floor held four apartments. One was empty. It sat on the same side of the hall as hers. Bertie's apartment sat across from it.

Her closest neighbors, across the hall from her, had been a friendly couple when she met them at a building party. Both were young professionals at competing firms and were seldom home. Workaholics.

"Overactive imagination." She huffed and stuck her key into the lock. As usual, it stuck as she tried to turn it. It gave way with a wiggle and a hard twist. She made a mental note to have Mr. Wilkenson change it out for a brand new, never-been-used lock as soon as he could find one. Dropping the keys back into her bag, she pushed through the door.

Her gasp echoed down the hallway as she entered the foyer.

The innards of her sofa covered the entire floor of her once-tidy apartment. Wall hangings sat in broken heaps surrounded by glass. Every inch of her home had been violated and vandalized—again.

“Motherfuc...” She balled her fist and punched her thigh. “How much? How much am I supposed to take?” She surveyed the damage and considered the brief idea someone might still be in her apartment, lurking behind a door or in a closet. She checked every hidden inch of her apartment until she was sure she was alone, then she tried to clear her head. “What now?”

Phone. She needed to call the police. She patted her pocket for her cell. “Damn, I forgot it’s broke.”

She waded across the mangled living room and rifled through the area the phone *had* been—then inspiration struck. Charlie went to the wall and trailed the cord from the outlet. It led under a shredded sofa cushion and her autographed books from the emptied bookcase, but it was only the base, upside down and blinking. The handset for the cordless was not in the immediate area. She flipped over the base and pressed the page button to locate the handset with the programmed pinging for the lost phone.

When no sounds came, she retreated to her bedroom in search of the other phone. It lay half-under her bed, off the hook and beneath a pile of her panties.

Another violation.

A chill ran through her. The phone was dead silent, no buzzing sound warning that the phone had missed the disconnect button. She gave a silent prayer and held her breath as she put the phone to her ear and depressed the disconnect button. When she released the button, she had been hoping so hard for the dial-tone that she nearly dropped the phone

when it buzzed in her ear. She refrained from jumping for joy as she tried to retrieve Detective Aaron's number from her cluttered memory.

A flash of her conversation earlier to the police station reminded her that the detectives weren't due in until later in the afternoon. She looked at her watch, still too early. She contemplated leaving him a message instead of just dialing nine-one-one as the dial tone sang in her ear. The thought of another batch of officers tromping through her world and asking more questions, making more accusations, made her shudder. "I'll wait until they get back in. Yeah." She nodded to herself and set the phone on her bed.

As she thrust her hands into her jeans pockets, she found Detective Allen's phone number from the dresser at Grace's. The phone rang three times before a groggy voice came over the line. "Bobby. This is Charlie. I need you at my apartment. Like right now."



Bobby stood in the hallway in front of B. Charlie answered in mid-knock.

"Hey." He wondered if she had been waiting at the door for him to arrive. Through the small opening, he could read the look on her weary face as she greeted him. Fear and anger tainted her light-blue eyes. Her mouth, drawn down and tight, didn't budge. The haggard expression left—albeit briefly—when their eyes met.

She had again pulled her hair up into a ponytail, but the hard edge to her face gave no impression of playful youth. She leaned past him out into the hall and checked the hallway. Bobby tensed from an exhilarated rush when her breast brushed his arm. Before he could form a thought, though, she ushered him through the door, locking the deadbolt and chain.

“Thanks for coming so quickly, Detective Allen.”

“Bobby, please.” He reminded her.

“Bobby, I appreciate it.” He heard her sigh. “I just came to get some clothes to take back to my aunt’s house. I found this.” She motioned with her hand.

Looking into her apartment, Bobby discovered a disaster area. Someone had left behind bare walls, all but for the nails that once held pictures. From where he stood in the short, narrow foyer, he could see into the small L-shaped kitchen. All the cabinets hung open to empty shelves—contents a mess on the floor.

“Did you call the police?”

“You’re here, aren’t you?”

“I meant...”

“I know what you meant. Yes, I called them first but Detective Aaron won’t get in until later. I didn’t want a new batch of cops going through my things.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence.” He scrunched his nose. A sour smell hung in the air. “What the hell is that?”

“Someone dumped a carton of milk all over the floor by the fridge.” She shrugged. “Don’t ask me why.”

“Is anything missing?” Bobby asked.

“How the hell should I know?” She scrubbed her hands over her face. “Sorry. This isn’t your fault. I didn’t mean to snap at you.” Charlie pointed to a black box with shattered glass lying on its side. “My TV is still here. Other than that, I don’t know yet. I can’t really tell.”

He shifted his gaze to watch Charlie as she picked through the piles of ripped and tattered furniture. She didn’t deserve this. An odd twinge of frustration ran through him, heating his face and neck. He followed her until she stopped and stared at an object by her foot for a moment. As he

got within the barest of inches of her, she bent and picked up a wooden frame with shattered glass, holding it gingerly. He peeked over her shoulder at the scratched photo from years past.

A happy couple posed in a field of bluebonnets. A blonde child of three or four perched on the man's knee. The woman held one of the child's hands. Both females shared the same honey brown hair and the same light blue eyes, penetrating your thoughts as they hypnotize you. All three people had wide, frozen smiles. Charlie's fingers hovered just above the broken glass, not quite touching the faces.

She flinched when he squeezed her shoulder,. She shrugged off his hand and moved to the other side of the room before she spoke. "The door was locked when I got here. I made a point to check it before I put my key in and unlocked it. Thought I was being paranoid." She released a low snort and shook her head.

"I have to ask, could your boyfriend or ex-boyfriend have done this?"

"I haven't dated anyone in over two years."

Relief shouldn't have washed through him, but it did.

Bobby debated what to say next as he watched her shoulders rise and fall with even, steady breaths. He waded through the sofa cushions and books to stand in front of her, to face her. "So someone used a key to get in and out." Not a question. A statement he'd hoped would have been incorrect somehow. But he knew from casing her apartment before, other than the front door, there was no outside access or fire escape to get in, just short of Spiderman. Brian and her friend's shooter got into her apartment for some reason.

Her eyes hardened, as did her face as she looked into his eyes. "This was *not* some random thing. Nobody would go up to a fourth floor apartment just to tear it up. It has to be the same person...or people from the store," she said, as if reading his mind.

Bobby schooled his face to show no emotion and made no attempt to speak.

“Come on, detective. God damn it, this is my life that is being destroyed here,” Charlie yelled. “You have to tell me what the hell’s going on here. I feel like I am just biding my time until someone *I don’t know* walks up behind me and *bam* I’m gone. Just like Greg, just like your friend Brian.” Red splotches colored her ivory cheeks.

He broke her gaze and moved past her into the open area of the kitchen, then righted the small, upturned breakfast table and two chairs beside it. “Come and sit, please.” He motioned for her.

She still held on to the family photo as she sat. He slid into the chair across from her and stared at his hands as he wrung them over and over.

“I have an older brother, or rather *had* an older brother,” he said without raising his eyes. “About fourteen years ago, he and a friend started up a company.”

He looked up as he heard Charlie fumbling around on the counter beside them. She had found a pack of cigarettes and pulled one out. Bobby eyes drew to her mouth as she raised the stick to her lips. His chest tightened a bit.

He was so intent on her mouth he didn’t see the match until it came together with the cigarette. As the smoke rose, he followed it away from her mouth to her eyes. She lifted her gaze and met his.

“Uh,” he cleared his throat, “Jamie, my brother, and his friend Will had gone to college together and worked separately for a few years before they decided to go into business together. Jamie was a computer whiz. He could write code in his sleep.” Bobby paused, remembering his brother, the nostalgia hurting as much as helping. “They opened up a

software company. Jamie did the programs and Will basically did the books and management.”

“What kind of codes did he write?” Charlie dropped her half-finished cigarette in an empty soda can.

“Mostly financial planning and setting up companies’ payroll systems. You have to keep in mind this was just before the Internet hit and everyone got wired.

“The company did well right from the start. Jamie was so happy,” he said. “Right around the first anniversary his mood...changed. I don’t know.”

The stench from her cigarette and the soured milk turned Bobby’s stomach. He didn’t know how she could stand it. He stood up and paced the floor beside the table, hoping movement would lessen the smell. Charlie rose and retrieved two sodas from the fridge. She offered Bobby one as she sat back down. He continued to speak.

“He became withdrawn. I didn’t see him much. I graduated from college, then the police academy and had just joined the force.” He fiddled with the soda, played with the tab before he popped it.

“Labor Day weekend my fiancée...” his voice caught in his throat, “...and I went to Jamie’s house for a cook-out. He seemed preoccupied, nervous almost. Every time we asked about work, he changed the subject. I didn’t want to push it with a bunch of his friends around so I just dropped it. The next weekend, he was dead.”

Charlie lit another cigarette and joined him in the living room.

“I was new on the force, so I didn’t get to get all the details even though he was my brother. They said it was a mugging that had gotten out of hand.”

She blew out a smoke ring. “Sounds familiar.”

He nodded. "Two days later, I get a letter in the mail from him. He told me if anything happened to him to find a lock box in his closet and it would explain everything."

"I take it there was no lock box," Charlie broke in after another long drag.

"Correct, his place looked just like this. At the time, I figured of all the dumb luck, his apartment gets wiped out after he dies. Some crooks will read the obits to find places to hit, you know, before their estate and whatnot gets settled. Other things were missing too, so I passed it off."

"I'm sorry. I still don't see the connection here. What does any of this have to do with me or Greg? Or Brian for that matter?"

"I'm getting to that," he said, keeping his voice patient. "Jamie's partner decided to keep the company going after he died. He was very methodical about it." He couldn't hide the hard, angry tone in his voice. "He even bought out Jamie's share from me. Jamie had left everything to me. Will changed the name of the company so it only holds his name now—Harrington Enterprises."

He saw her stiffen.

"About eight months ago, I was approached by a CPA with the company—Brian McMillen."

"The now *dead* Brian."

"Yeah. He called me because he found some information on Jamie one day when he was balancing some books or something. I'm not sure. Brian said he found some discrepancies in my brother's paperwork on one of the companies they had originally built a system for. All the original paper work was archived in their building."

"Wait, wait, wait, wait. Why'd he contact you?" Charlie dropped another cigarette into the empty soda can. "I'm confused. I don't understand what you're talking about."

He started to answer but she stopped him holding up her hand.

“Hold that thought. I need to run to the bathroom, then you can start over and tell me exactly what the hell you’re talking about. And what it has to do with me.”

Charlie left Bobby standing alone in the living room. With a heavy sigh, he ran a hand through his hair. “I wish I knew.”



“This is driving me crazy.” Randy punched at the wall. He pulled back just as his knuckles brushed the surface. He had worn a path in the carpet pacing the floor for the many hours since they returned from a late breakfast.

“I’m bored,” Chris said under his breath.

“Get your butt up. Let’s get going.” Randy snagged his keys off the dresser.

“Ah man, I was just saying...” Chris straightened up.

“Move it.” Randy thrust his thumb at the door.

Randy marched out the door and said, “I’m tired of this Cow Town. The boss sent us on a major dud here. One fuck up after another. This failure doesn’t bode well for our future with the boss or for a future in breathing.”



At the car-rental counter, Scott Bernard did a quick, mental inventory of his day’s itinerary. He first had to locate Charlie Foster. The evening before, he purchased a Fort Worth paper from the bookstore around the corner from his Chicago apartment. He remembered how hard he laughed when he discovered “he” was a “she”. The two buffoons

the boss had sent to retrieve the disc had been lax—even stupid—as they scoped things out.

Once he located Charlie, Scott had to find Chris and Randy to see if they had recovered the disc yet, which he doubted. If they had, it would be easy, just pop them both and be on his way. If not, however, he would have to watch them and Charlie for a while. That would make him very angry, and in turn, they would *all* suffer.

He had not been south of Illinois in quite some time. His muscles grew tense as he pulled out of the D/FW Airport parking lot. Map by his side, he pointed his car toward downtown Fort Worth. He was surprised to see the amount of traffic coming to and from a city he didn't even consider important. His cell phone chirped in his pocket. Answering, he spoke to his boss, William Harrington, and confirmed his arrival and the beginning of his pursuit.



Charlie returned and waited with raised eyebrows for Bobby to continue. He was not accustomed to sharing his personal story. It was difficult for him to open up. Her eyes on him were too much to bear. He went into the living room to restore it to some semblance of normalcy.

“You asked why he came to me.” He shoved books back into the shelves. Charlie sat beside him and handed him one at a time from the mishmash pile of books. A few had major binding damage. Most had ripped covers. He watched her pause over a couple of older-looking books. Tears welled, but didn't fall.

He shook his head.

“That's the interesting part.” He sighed. “He works...worked as a CPA, but he was a closet computer freak. He said he was going over some of Jamie's original code and the ones Jamie wrote were different from what

had been designed for the companies that had contracted them. That's why he was digging around in the archives to compare notes. He had gotten on the Internet to try and locate Jamie—see if he could clear up the discrepancies.”

His jaw tightened and he faded back into his reflective silence. As Bobby shelved the last book, Charlie replaced sofa cushions. Three out of the four cushions, he noted, were slit on both sides. She put the less-tattered sides up and took a shuddered breath. His throat tightened, making it hard for him to swallow. He wanted to take her in his arms and tell her he could fix everything, make it all right. But he didn't know if he could and that scared the shit out of him almost as much as the desire to repair the mess her life had gone to since Brian dropped in.

Bobby moved around behind the sofa and collected the strewn CDs from the floor. Mostly he had to reunite each disc with its proper casing.

“He didn't know...about Jamie?”

Bobby shook his head. “Brian only started work there two years ago and had no idea Jamie was dead. He found an online newspaper article detailing the mugging.”

“How did he find you?” Charlie asked.

“Same way. He saw my name in the article and looked me up.”

“But why call you about a several-year-old computer program?” she asked. “I don't mean to get pissy with you, but you're not making this any clearer.”

“The discrepancies he found were a back way to get into a company's business. It gave someone complete access to all the financial resources and records.”

Her hands paused over a picture frame. “Are you talking about embezzlement?”

“Yep.”

“Your brother, did he...” She didn’t finish.

“No.”

Charlie stopped replacing the glassless photos on the wall, her eyes widened at his sharp tone.

“Jamie’s program had been altered. Brian had found the original copies, like I said, in the company archives. Jamie didn’t, and wouldn’t, have written one that way. Besides three of them were changed after he died. Brian told me he was going to go to Will Harrington with it all. Something spooked him after their meeting.”

Bobby went on to tell Charlie how over the last few months he and Brian had corresponded with one another. Brian had grown more suspicious of Will. Bobby had had his suspicions when Jamie died, but he’d thought he was being unfair to Harrington. That he had imagined things out of grief.

“Then a little over two weeks ago, Brian went squirrely. Started acting real strange,” Bobby said. He had brought all the new information to his commander, the details never before uncovered of his brother’s involvement with the company. He asked if he could discreetly look into it. As would be expected, however, he was turned down quicker than the question could dissipate from the air. He decided to take a leave of absence disguised as a long, overdue vacation.

“And then...” She rolled her hand at him.

“I tried to touch base with Brian. But got nothing. So I tailed him and that was how I followed Brian here to Fort Worth.” He replaced the last CD on the rack and maneuvered himself to stand beside her. “I got sloppy because it’s so personal, too personal. You have to maintain your objectivity—which I didn’t.”

He had gotten so preoccupied with the “why” Brian came down here, he had lost sight of him at his hotel for a few brief seconds. Seconds that

cost Brian his life and were now wreaking havoc in Charlie's. He decided to keep the observation to himself.

"So that's where I came in. But why my apartment?"

"That's the million-dollar question. There's got to be a connection I'm missing. Obviously, he had something someone wants."

Charlie shifted her gaze from Bobby to a crooked picture on the wall. Her hand shook as she reached out to straighten it but stopped just short of the black wooden frame. She cupped her face in her trembling hands as her entire body shook. Tears leaked through rigid fingers onto the front of her clothing.

Bobby stood back watching her break down, helpless to do anything for her. He reached out with a strong hand, connected with her hunched shoulder, and squeezed as a reassuring sign of comfort and understanding. He let his hand linger, wanting to touch her.

Charlie's shoulders heaved. Her soft sobs grew into mournful wails. Light brown wisps of her hair fell loose from the rubber band and dropped around her hand-covered face. The rest bobbed along in the ponytail, dancing to the rhythm of her cries.

She turned her body to his, hands still firmly covering her face, and placed her head on his chest. Bobby moved his arms around her, holding her to him. The feel of her in his arms excited him. He fought the urge to touch her hair as he breathed in her sweet smell. For a brief moment, he imagined her as a young child, frightened by the boogie-man. Only he knew her boogie-man was a hundred times scarier and a hundred times more real.

Her breathing evened and her shoulders rested as she calmed. He continued to hold her to him, not wanting to let go. A wild thought that puzzled him as it ran through his head.

She edged back, breaking the embrace, wiping her face with the backs of her hands.

Charlie's face looked haunted to Bobby. Her fear and sadness turned her beautiful face young, childlike. Her eyes clouded with death and destruction. He could only imagine what she must be going through. She was so young to have lost so many people close to her. To have her world turned upside down in such a way that she must be hanging on by the barest of threads. But she was holding together better than most victims he had encountered in his career.

Before he could help himself, he leaned forward and pressed his lips to hers. The soft touch nearly brought him to his knees, especially when her lips parted on a sigh and his tongue entered her mouth. His hands slipped to her waist and snuggled her tight to him, against him. He couldn't get enough.

Then Charlie pulled away, looked up at him, searching his eyes for a moment, like she was trying to read his thoughts. He sensed she wanted him to say he would protect her and tell her he would make everything better. Bobby vowed to do his damndest to help her, but he couldn't bring himself to say it aloud.

"I...ah, I'm so embarrassed." She rushed off to the bathroom. Apologies filled the air in her wake.

Several minutes later, the telephone broke the silence in the tense apartment, startling Bobby. Following the sound into the bedroom, he found the noisy phone lying on the colorful quilted bed. He recognized the wedding ring pattern. His mother had a similar one on her bed.

"Phone." He looked to the bathroom door to see if Charlie would emerge to answer the call.

Hearing no stirring from the bathroom, he reluctantly snatched up the receiver. "Hello." His deep voice rasped, having gone dry.

“Ah yes, I am trying to reach Charlie Foster.”

“May I ask who is calling?”

“Detective Aaron, Fort Worth police department.”

“This is Bobby, Detective Robert Allen, I mean. Charlie called me over here when she couldn’t get you or your partner.” He paused, again looking around the bedroom. “She found her apartment torn all to hell. Someone did a number on it. I don’t think there’s one thing that didn’t get wrecked.”

“Any sign of forced entry?” Aaron asked.

“No. She said the door was locked when she got here. She made a point to check. Seems they got in with a key.” Bobby let that hang in the air while Detective Aaron sat silent on the other end.

“Hmm,” Detective Aaron said. “Okay, I’ll send someone out there. I actually called because Charlie needs to come down to the station to view the security tapes from the mall. We want her to see if she can ID anyone.”

Bobby agreed to make sure Charlie would be there within the hour and hung up.

He sat on the end of her bed while he awaited her return from the bathroom. The damage to this room turned his stomach. He knew he had somehow brought all of it, literally, to her door. At the same time, his arms ached for her, from the lasting feel of holding her, even trembling and scared but warm, her body to his. He wanted so much to protect her. An urge welled up inside him, shortening his breath and causing his heart to race.

And he could still taste her. He had to get himself in check.

A stuffed bear, decapitated, lay on the floor at his feet. Anger rolled through his gut.

“I know where I went wrong.” He shook his head and picked up the bear body. “I got too involved.” His emotions were exposed.

Bobby knew he needed to back off, to have the detachment the job required. But he couldn’t. He rushed into things with his heart, not his head.

Plus, he realized, Charlie had wedged her way into his heart.

His emotions whirled for a woman that he had known for less than two days. And half of that was tailing her, thinking she might be a murder suspect in a case he was not working on, but following with far too much interest. Not a favorable way to start a relationship.

His stomach lurched when the door squeaked open. Charlie stepped out, face dry, her hair all pulled back up in her ponytail. Her eyes never quite hooking with his, she again apologized. She seemed embarrassed as she picked at her short manicured nails, so he sputtered supportive noises hoping to soothe her, if not with his arms then with his words.

She seemed uncomfortable with his assurances so he changed the subject. “Detective Aaron needs you to come down to the station to view a security tape. I’ll take you down there when you’re ready.” He didn’t give her a chance to argue.

With a quick nod, she closed the curtains, plunging the room back into darkness. He tossed the ruined bear onto the bed and followed her into the living room where he watched her switch out a large purse for a smaller, across-the-shoulder bag. Leaving out her pack of Marlboros, she lit a cigarette. “For the wait for the elevator.”

Bobby looked at her then shook his head. “Your lungs.”

“Uh-huh. I’ll come back for the clothes later. I kinda lost interest in staying there any longer than I have to.”

When they stepped out into the hall, she stared at her key ring before inserting the key into the lock.

“This seems like a waste of time.” She turned the lock and pulled out her key. “If they want back in they obviously won’t have a problem and can’t be stopped.” She sighed.

It was eerie how her words mirrored his thoughts.



Scott Bernard sat in his car across from the apartment complex. As he spotted the face from the newspaper that sat next to him on the front seat, he was shocked to see the companion who ushered her to a car parked at the curb. He started his engine and pulled on to the road three cars behind them then lifted his cell phone and pressed the pre-programmed number.

“Bobby is here.”

His statement was met with initial silence on the other end.

“Interesting. Get him too.” The line went dead.

A small smile creased his face as he followed the car’s slow progress through afternoon traffic across downtown. Bobby and the woman pulled into the parking garage at the police station. Scott watched as the two entered the building, their darkened forms disappearing through the glass-front doors. He proceeded on his next quest.

“Excellent.”

Chapter Eight

“I can’t really see their faces.” Charlie glanced at Detective Aaron then back to the black and white video tape. Two men stood hunched over with their backs to the camera, although they probably didn’t even know it was there. They wore baseball caps pulled down low to shield their eyes. With a casual gait, they strolled up to the glass-front of Charlie’s store and knocked.

She clasped her hand to her mouth as she watched Greg cross through the front quarter of the store, all that was visible from the camera’s vantage point.

Only one minute, sixty brief seconds, passed before the same two men strolled back out the front door. They stopped long enough for one to lock the door and pocket the keys. The other stood watching around him, carrying the briefcase.

The detective stopped the tape and looked at Charlie. Her vision blurred, eyes full of tears that distorted Detective Aaron. She sniffled, sucking in as much air as she could get into her lungs. On a hearty exhale, she closed her eyes and rubbed her temples, willing the scene from her mind. A full day had passed, but the vivid image of Greg still flashed before her eyes, as if it had burned itself on her retinas.

Detective Aaron informed her that, from checking further on the tape, she, he and his partner arrived only half an hour later. She opened her eyes as she heard Detective Aaron cross the room. His Bruno Maglis

tapped on the cement floor. He stood for a moment with his hand poised on the doorknob then excused himself, leaving Charlie to sit alone in the small, windowless room.

She fondled her cigarette, cursing the no smoking in public buildings policy. She rolled the stick in her fingers, lifting it once to her nose to smell the tobacco.

Detective Aaron returned to the room with a steaming cup of coffee in a weak Styrofoam cup.

"Thanks." She blew across the top, trying to cool the black liquid.

"So, did you recognize either of them by any chance? Maybe hanging around that morning or even the day before?" he asked.

She shook her head and stared at her cup. With a deep breath, the coffee scent wafted up to her nose, as she readied her nerves for her question. "When were you going to tell me that you think it's the same shooter in both cases?"

His brows knitted together in an angry frown. "Who told you that?"

Her eyes hardened. "Does it matter who told me? I *am* right. And you had no intention of telling me, did you? Don't you think I deserve to know that?" She glared at him.

"No. It's not something we would've shared with you." He looked away from her.

"But they, whoever they are, are still out there. They have trashed my apartment and could still be coming for me. I'm not..."

"You can't know that it's the same ones who trashed your apartment," he interrupted her. "We have no evidence yet that supports that statement."

"Please. Do I look like an idiot to you? Whoever got into my apartment had a *key*. You saw that guy on the video tape stuff Greg's keys in his pocket. *My* key was on there too. Tell me," she asked, "what

are the chances that my vandalized apartment, where the locks were still engaged when I got home, was a random thing? One in ten billion, maybe? Huh?” She crossed her arms over her chest and turned her twenty-eight-year-old body into a full-blown four-year-old’s pout.

“Might I remind you,” he crossed his own arms over his chest, “one other person had your key, too. What’s to say there aren’t more copies floating around?”

Charlie rolled her eyes and continued to sulk. Then Detective Collins and Bobby entered the room. Catching Charlie’s eye, Bobby gave her an odd look as he stood in the corner. She was too much into her self-pout to decipher, or care, what the look meant.

Charlie sat stone-faced and silent as the detectives grilled her on what she knew.

They had lied to her. She didn’t know much about police procedure and she didn’t give a damn. They’d endangered her life by withholding the bullet information. She could have walked in on the men destroying her apartment. All the information the police kept from her was essential, and without it she could be in serious danger.

With no help from Charlie, their questioning ceased.

“I want all of your men out of my apartment.” To her, they acted like it wasn’t and couldn’t be related to the shootings, so in her mind they didn’t need to be involved. And as far as she could tell, nothing had been taken.

“You know we can’t do that, Miss Foster,” Aaron said.

“Fine.” She promised she would call if anything new occurred to her or if she had any other problems.

As they left, Charlie held her tongue until she and Bobby were in his car and on the road. “Can you take me to my aunt’s house?”

“Sure. Hey, I want to thank you for not telling them about my brother and everything. I appreciate it.”

“Yeah, whatever.” She sighed and turned in her seat to face Bobby. “They weren’t exactly being overly forthcoming with me, so why should I? They seemed willing to let me hang out there and get hit, so screw ‘em.” She returned to her pout posture. She was angry, not with him, but she couldn’t help herself.

At Grace’s house, Charlie asked Bobby to come in for a moment. Grace had set the table for lunch, then quickly added another place once she’d convinced Bobby to stay to eat. They had a light lunch, chatting about the city.

Neither told Grace of the condition of Charlie’s apartment. In fact, Charlie steered the conversation away from any topic revolving around the police station altogether. For Grace’s sake, Charlie concocted a story that she’d called Bobby to apologize for her behavior the evening before and, in return, offered to show him around the city. Charlie was surprised when her aunt not only didn’t question the lame excuse, but also stated how wonderful a tour guide Charlie was.

After lunch, Bobby excused himself to use the bathroom. Grace winked at Charlie with a mischievous grin that chilled Charlie to the bone. Her aunt was forever playing matchmaker to her only niece. Charlie shrugged it off, hoping Grace would keep her comments to a minimum. Then an idea came to her.

Clearing the table, she dumped the dishes in the sink and snuck into the hall and stopped Bobby before he returned to the living room. “I’m going to try something in there,” she motioned toward the living room. “Just go along with what I say, okay?” she asked, eyes wide in a child’s beg.

“Aunt Grace, I have an idea.” Charlie said when she returned to the living room with Bobby on her heels. “Why don’t we get out of here for a while? I have to close the store down for the time being. You and I can take a trip.”

Charlie sat next to Grace on the sofa and continued, “We can go down to Florida to see Cousin Elizabeth. She wanted us to come this summer. We’ll just go early. And you’ve been driving me nuts talking about diving again.”

“That would be wonderful. Lord knows you need to relax. Okay, we could do that,” Grace answered with a sweet smile spread across her face.

“Oh, but shoot.” Charlie mustered up all her high school drama training. “Detective, didn’t you say you’d like me to show you around the rest of the week while you’re here?” She raised her eyebrow, turning toward him so her aunt couldn’t see her face.

“Uh, yes. I thought it would be nice to have a tour guide the rest of the week,” he said with a little too much enthusiasm.

Charlie feigned disappointment and punched at her knee. Then to reel in her aunt, her smile grew wider and eyes brighter. “I know,” Charlie said, “Why don’t you go on down and I will meet you at the end of the week, after he leaves?”

Grace’s face lit up. Her smile beamed from ear to ear. Charlie suspected Grace was happier about her niece’s plans for the week than her own. Charlie had suckered her good. Grace seemed even more elated when Bobby offered to drive her to the airport with Charlie.

Charlie was on the phone with Grace’s regular travel agent, making arrangements. She found a seat on an early evening flight out of D/FW into Miami. Next, she was on the phone with Elizabeth, giving her

Grace's arrival information. The two women then flew into a fit of packing Grace's suitcases for a two-week, spur-of-the-moment trip.



"You didn't have to take us to the airport." Charlie watched the planes come and go as they left the airport.

"I didn't mind."

"Thanks, I just really wanted to get her out of town and safe," she said. "I don't know what I'm up against. And it would kill me if anything happened to her." He looked at her sideways. "Sorry, poor choice of words." She paused a second. "Maybe I should have gone, too."

"I can take you back if you want. You can get on the plane, too."

"And spend a week with her and her cousin and all the young men that work at the retirement village. No, thank you." She laughed. "You know, she was pushing us together so hard. It was way too easy to 'trick' her into going alone." She turned to face the window so he couldn't see the heat in her cheeks.

Her hand tapped against the door armrest of the Taurus. Her fidgety energy filled the car as she craved the cigarettes she'd left at Grace's house. After a prolonged silence, she said, "Um, you can just drop me back at my apartment. I have my car there. I will probably just grab some clothes and stay at Grace's until... I don't know when," her voice dropped off. "I appreciate what you've done," she added somewhat dismissively.

"You can't get rid of me that easily. I'm not going anywhere."

"Thanks, but I'll be okay. I outgrew babysitters a long time ago."

"These people mean business, Charlie." His knuckles whitened on the steering wheel. "You're in real danger until we figure out what's going on. I'm not about to leave you alone out there unprotected," he said and then

his voice softened some, became weak. "I'm responsible for all this. I led them to you, even sicced them on you."

"There's no reason for you to think that way." She moved closer to him in the bucket seat, then set her hand on his arm with a gentle, reassuring squeeze as he drove. "It's not your fault at all. I hope you don't think I blame you."

He took his eyes off the road to look at her face and down at her lingering hand. Self-conscious, she pulled back to her side of the car, almost hugging the door. Then she dug in her purse, found a forgotten pack of cigarettes, and pulled one out. She rolled the stick around in her fingers, staring at the white paper. Her thoughts rolled over in her mind along with the stick.

"Why didn't you tell them about your brother?"

"I don't have any evidence. Just my word against a millionaire. At this point, I don't have anyone to corroborate a thing. And truthfully there's nothing they can do even *if* they believed me." He faced the road. "You gotta realize, Harrington will have distanced himself from the crimes. So there's no way to prove anything is connected."

"What do we do now?" She bit her lip as she stared at him. "I'm getting more and more scared."

"I'm sorry." He reached across the car, touched her hand. A jolt of electricity shot through her before he pulled back. Then his face turned harder. "We have to figure out what they're after. Obviously, they think you have whatever it is. After Brian died, did you notice anything from your apartment out of place? Anything he might have gone through."

"No. I was so shaken up I really don't know if I would have noticed anything anyway. Everything seemed normal at the time, but I was only back in it a morning before it got trashed. Now, with it all torn to hell, I just can't be sure."

“Why were you there, Brian?” Bobby asked.



Scott spotted the two leaving the restaurant. They spoke quietly to each other despite their animated gestures. The sounds were whisked away by the heavy street traffic alongside the diner. He advanced on them, stealth in the shadows of tall overgrown shrubs.

The two exchanged something, then one walked to the driver's side. When the other bent to pick up something dropped on the sidewalk, Scott rested the cold metal shaft of his gun on the temple of his prey. Both hunter and prey were well hidden from any possible witnesses to the crime in progress. Scott's angry hands probed pockets, plunging the depths for the elusive disc.

“Where is the disc?” he asked.

“Disc? What disc?”

“Where is the goddamned disc?” He spit, sprayed his words as he spoke.

“I d-d-don't have it. I never found it. Please...” The bullet shattered through the victim before the sounds of final pleadings evaporated in the air.

A crowd exiting the restaurant muted the popping noise of his silencer. Scott grabbed the prey's lost treasure, a key ring, from where it landed across his boot. As he crossed the parking lot, he saw the driver of the car jump behind the wheel and tear out of the lot, never looking behind him as he drove. Screams filled the windless air, as people rushed from the diner, having discovered the dead body. From his vantage point, already around the corner of the next building, Scott could see the crowd gather around the lifeless body crumpled on the

sidewalk in a growing pool of crimson. He left the scene before any eyes fell upon him, determined to find the driver at a later time.

Unfinished business.



Bobby drove alone back through the now-familiar streets to Grace's house. He parked in front of her curb and turned the engine off. He bent his head into his hands and cursed the world for his troubles. He fought back the tears that stung the backs of his eyelids. It had been years since he last shed tears.

After his brother's funeral, he swore never to become close enough to another human to get hurt, never to allow such feelings inside him. But somehow, he fell for Charlie. And he was torn up inside, every emotion welling at once. His heart pounded and ached all in the same breath.

A knock on his windshield jolted him back to reality. His face relaxed as he sucked back a heavy breath. He willed his heart to steady as he removed the keys from the ignition. Getting out of the car in the bright afternoon sun, he squinted as he locked up his car then turned and stared into the soft blue eyes smiling up at him.

"Did I startle you? I'm sorry. I put my car in Aunt Grace's garage around back." Charlie waved. "Come on." She led him into the vacated home.

"Let me just put these in the guest bedroom." She raised the bags retrieved from her apartment. She returned to the living room and sank on the sofa, curling her legs under her. Bobby sat in the chair across from her.

"So." She clasped her hands in her lap.

He laughed. "So."

They stared at one another. Polite smiles sat glued to wary, worn out faces. She grabbed at her pack of cigarettes lying on the coffee table and lit up. Bobby frowned at her when she looked up.

"I started when I was sixteen as an experiment in 'adulthood' or rebellion, I suppose." She waved away her smoke. "Whatever got the most rise out of my parents. Unfortunately, the joke's on me since I got hooked on 'em." She took a long drag and released the smoke as she continued to speak. "Greg started when I did but he actually managed to quit four years ago."

She stopped speaking for a minute and looked down at her hands. She looked so sad. Every time she brought up Greg's name her eyes clouded, he noticed. He watched her compose herself, a remarkable trait that he admired in her.

"Where are my manners? You want one?" She offered Bobby the pack.

"No. No, thanks, I never took up the habit."

"Wish I hadn't. Every couple of years I decide to stop, but one tragedy after another brings me back to the stick." She took a long drag and blew it out. "Grace's stopped nagging me about it though. She lets me smoke in the house as long as I mow the yard every other week. Exercise in exchange for a cancer stick—it's a fair trade I suppose." She shrugged.

"Besides, now is not the best time to quit considering my stress level." When she stubbed out the butt in a pink ceramic ashtray, she reached for another. "Hey wait a minute now, you know all about me, police reports and all," she winked, "and I hardly know anything about you. Except that you don't smoke."

"What do you wanna know?"

"How old are you? Thirty-six? Thirty-seven?"

He clutched his hands to his chest. "I'm wounded."

She grimaced. "How far off am I? Forty?"

"I am *thirty-five*." He rolled his eyes at her.

"Who knew men could be so touchy." Her smile broadened. "You said you had a fiancée, when... what happened with that? Is your wife waiting at home for you?"

He didn't know why the question stung. "No. We never got married." He stopped to clear his throat. "We amicably split after Jamie died. I was just so consumed with his death, I couldn't see anything else for a real long time. I think she understood." He paused. "I've never been married, as a matter of fact. How about you? You ever been married?"

"Oh God, no." She put her hands on her chest as he had. "The closest I came was my high school boyfriend. We dated from our junior year until I was twenty. But he was off at the University of Texas and I was still here running my store. I couldn't keep the long-distance relationship going. Or rather, I didn't think he should sleep with other women while he dated me. He didn't agree so I quit him."

"Sounds like a real winner of a guy."

"Yeah, well, hindsight," she said. "It was kind of hard dating while I was running through shoe orders and payroll and he was running through cases of condoms. Different lifestyles." She shrugged her shoulders.

She then shifted and stretched.

The flutter in his stomach whipped faster. Despite the baggy T-shirt and blue jeans she wore, Bobby could tell she had a remarkable figure. He had caught a glance of her firm ass earlier as she helped get her aunt's luggage from the trunk of his car. As she moved on the couch, the curve of her rounded breasts rose and fell with her steady breaths. He realized how much he wanted to touch her, to hold her in his arms. He

licked his lips and at the same time mentally scolded himself for the images that ran through his head.

Charlie didn't seem aware of his close scrutiny. He knew he should stop, but he couldn't help himself. He watched as she removed the cloth stretch-band from her hair, letting the locks fall to her shoulders. His mouth dried and palms sweated when she ran her fingers through the sandy tresses. It was an effort for him to make the air flow in and out of his lungs.

Without a word, she got up from the sofa and went into the kitchen. Bobby blinked several times at the door she had exited through, then sank back in his seat. He could still smell her scent, sweet and fruity. Strawberries, he decided. It wasn't a seductive aroma, but somehow it seemed to work for her. He closed his eyes, breathed her in, let it fill him, swirl around his head.

What in the hell am I doing? He shook the thoughts from his head as he opened his eyes.

Charlie returned with two cans of soda and another lit cigarette dangling from her mouth.

"So," he accepted the can and raised an eyebrow, "your aunt tells me your parents moved here from South Carolina."

Charlie stopped in mid-sit and dropped her unopened can. She stared wide-eyed at Bobby. His grin grew into a rolling laugh.

"Oh jeez, my aunt has a big mouth."

He laughed even harder.

She sat and smiled along. "Yes, yes. Imagine, if you will, growing up and every first day of school during roll call hearing 'Charleston Foster'. I got to be pretty good at beating up the boys. So you had better watch it." She waved her fist at him.

They both laughed and drank their sodas once hers settled down from hitting the floor.

“My dad got the weird kid names thing from his mother.” Charlie said. “She named him after Woodrow Wilson because he was president when she was born in 1918. She was only six when Wilson died but for some reason he stuck with her. They called my dad Woody for short. I guess he didn’t much care for his name either.

“And Grace’s comes from the hymn ‘Amazing Grace’. It was Grandma’s favorite song as a child. My grandma would hum it all day as she worked around the house. Sometimes, I can almost still hear it.” She closed her eyes and hummed.

She had such a sweet voice. Chills flowed through Bobby and he shifted in the chair. The straight, stiff back was uncomfortable and unyielding so he got up and moved to the other end of the sofa from Charlie. A mere sofa square separated them.

She opened her eyes and looked at him. Hunger stirred in his loins, but he resisted. He decided to keep her talking, keep his brain engaged, not his glands. “Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“Nope, I was an only child. Greg was always like an older brother though. Both our families are really close. We used to have big backyard parties together throughout the summers. It seems like we always saw Greg’s family.”

“I know just what you mean. My brother and I grew up in the same house our dad did. The same neighbors all our lives, like a big extended family.” He rested his arm along the back of the sofa. His fingers almost touched her soft hair. “Um. It was great. The guys on our block and the next would have water balloon wars. But every so often, a fistfight would break out. That’s how I got this scar.” He pointed to the faded line in his eyebrow. “I was eleven.”

Charlie leaned across the couch and grabbed his chin in her hand. She turned his head back and forth studying his face. Her touch sent a jolt through his system.

"I didn't even notice it until now. Musta hurt like hell. I got this one when I was eight." She raised the hem of her shirt to flash the milky white skin beneath. Bobby saw two faint jagged lines, each about a half an inch long, just above the top of her jeans. "I got tangled up in a barbed wire fence when we were camping." She leaned back, picked up her soda and finished it. "Did you know cows like the caramel patties that you use to cover apples?"

"I didn't know that."

"Yep. And they will pull the hell out of your arm to get it. Barbed wire fence or no."

"I will keep that in mind." He chuckled. "Jamie and I would go camping in Wisconsin with our dad when we were in junior high and high school. We fished for our dinner and bird watched."

"Bird watching. Really?"

"A hobby we inherited from our grandmother. One of my mom and dad's favorite things to do."

"Do your parents still live in Chicago, too?"

"My dad passed away from a heart attack when I was twenty-two. About three months after Jamie." His chest tightened. He wondered if it would ever stop. He dropped his eyes from hers.

"I'm sorry to hear that." Charlie laid her hand on his arm. "What about your mom?"

"She packed up the family house 'bout five years later and moved down to Arizona to live near her two sisters," he said. "I still have a few cousins running around the Chicago area, and I don't live too far from

where I grew up. It still has a hometown feel in the old neighborhood. I know the neighbors and they know me, good deeds and bad.”

“Hmm.”

The conversation trailed off to insignificant small talk for another hour or so. A comfortable hush fell over them after all topics had been exhausted. Charlie’s eyelids drooped. Yawns came closer together.

Her words slurred with fatigue as she spoke again, “I hate to ask this but...”

“What? Ask away.”

“I’m exhausted. I haven’t been sleeping well. I could really use a nap,” she said. “Would you mind terribly if I...” She motioned toward the hallway.

“No. Go ahead.”

It would give him time to regroup after watching her as she tired. She’d stretched and moaned, settling herself into new positions. Every sound had set his blood on fire and made it difficult to keep his hands to himself, knowing she only sat three feet away. He didn’t know how much more he could take. “I’ll be fine here,” Bobby said.

“You sure?”

He nodded.

“Thanks. I’ll sleep a lot better knowing you’re out here. The TV guide has all the channels if you want to watch TV. Help yourself to the kitchen. Aunt Grace keeps every snack known to man stocked in there. Eat whatever you like.” Charlie yawned again and started for the hall. “Oh and she hides the ding-dongs over the fridge in a box that looks like fridge filters. She thinks that I don’t know they’re there.” Charlie shrugged her shoulders. “Don’t ask me.”



Charlie rubbed her temples with the heels of her palms and yawned again as she sat on the end of the bed. She had stripped out of her sneakers, socks and blue jeans, leaving them where they fell on the hardwood floor.

She groaned and lay in the bed. Her body ached she was so tired.

But she could hear Bobby moving around the living room. Even the soft rumbling of noises comforted her. She wrapped herself in the borrowed terrycloth robe and went to the door, wanting to go back out and talk to him despite her body's ache from fatigue.

"I can't sleep in the middle of the day with him alone in the living room," she said aloud. "This is so damn weird."

She stood with her forehead pressed to the door and her hand on the knob. "What am I going to do? First I'm gonna stop talking to myself or I'm gonna think I lost my mind." She laughed.

But Bobby's out there all alone. God if he isn't cute. And those shoulders, she thought. She lifted her head, then tried to shake her wanton thoughts away.

"Different time and place I bet he would be fantastic."

"Whew." Charlie fanned herself with her hand. "I could just go out there and try to seduce him." Charlie laughed hard and released the doorknob. Pressing a hand to her mouth, she muffled the noise.

Now I know I've lost my mind. But... She opened the door and stepped into the hall. Two feet from the door, Charlie chickened out. She dashed back in the bedroom and shut the door without a sound. "I am such an idiot. And sleep deprived. Yeah, that's it, I need sleep." She shook her head again. "And still talking to myself. I'll go to bed, alone. Sounds like a plan."

Charlie took her robe back off before getting in her bed. She slid under the warm covers and closed her eyes. Thoughts of Bobby whirled in her head. A smile creased her lips as she slid off into sleep.



A motel room on the other side of the city erupted with anger. The less-than-sturdy chair crashed to the carpet and splintered into hundreds of sharp pieces. The table lay upturned in the corner of the room. A gaping hole was left in the rickety old television, as the electricity flickered from the breach in the power flow.

Chris collapsed, finally, on the end of the bed as anger-induced fatigue ached from every pore. He had not shed a single tear in his many years of crime and hatred, but now hot, heavy tears fell down his face as he recalled Randy's limp body lying on the ground outside the diner. He hadn't realized how much it would rip at him. Randy was the closest thing to a friend he had ever had, especially in his line of work.

The tears that flooded his eyes were as much for himself as Randy. The one thing his mind could grasp in that state was that his life hung on a damn disc he had yet to find. The only thing that kept him alive. He was not surprised the boss sent someone after the two of them. He'd just thought he had an extra day or two to find the disc.

After a brief rest, he packed his clothes in an army-green duffel bag, frantic to get out of the small hotel room. He tore open the cheap wooden dresser and stuffed all his clothes in the bag. Randy's he left behind. He dragged a ratty towel from the bathroom and wiped down any and every surface he could that might hold a fingerprint. He left the motel in such a hurry he didn't even worry about turning in the key. He didn't care. What could they do to him?

Chapter Nine

After several hours of television, Bobby turned it off and snooped around the small living room. Grace had many family mementos scattered everywhere. He had doused all the lights but the hall light and the one over the fireplace. He didn't want to disturb Charlie while she slept.

The mantle, about the only thing he could clearly see, contained a treasure-trove of family history. Bobby lit from photo to photo. Black and white pictures that looked very old crowded the left end of the fireplace mantle. He supposed they were of Charlie's father and aunt as children. He could see Grace's face in both the children in the way they held their smiles and the straight line of their jaws.

Next along the fireplace, Charlie's age progression followed. A small baby with rosy cheeks sat in a yellow cotton dress ensconced in a pink and blue knitted blanket. A few wisps of curly, golden hair sat atop her head in a matching yellow bow. Her crisp blue eyes sparkled even as a small child of a few months old.

"She was an adorable baby. I wonder what our children would look like if we had any." His hand paused over the frame. "Whoa. Where'd that come from?" He looked around the empty room, afraid to find her watching him. But he was still alone. He focused back on the picture. "Control yourself, man. You're getting *way* ahead of yourself."

He picked up the next photo of a bright-eyed four or five-year-old Charlie, laughing on the back of a paint horse. She held a straw cowboy hat in her pudgy little hand, with a huge smile. The silver frame to the right held a beautifully-arranged portrait studio photo. Her radiant smile brightened the gray backdrop. Her early teen years, he guessed thirteen, showed none of the awkward stage most adolescents go through.

“She was always beautiful.”

He wondered if that made her the envy of her fellow classmates. Her golden brown hair hung in tight curls around sharpened cheekbones. Her pink lips parted just enough to give the hint of a smile.

At the next frame, he touched the ornate wood with the intricate roses carved in it. Then he traced his fingertip around the edge of her sculpted chin as an eighteen-year-old Charlie posed in cap and gown at her high school graduation. Her haunted eyes couldn’t hide the deep pain from the death of her parents, only months before.

His hand jerked away as a shrill scream rang from the end of the hall. He took off in a flash and removed his gun from his waistband as he edged down the hall. His breathing came in hurried spurts, adrenaline rose.



A dream had awakened her. She sat bolt upright in the bed surrounded by darkness. She heard a thundering sound. The door opened with a bare relief of light. A silhouetted figure stood, arms raised out in front. In the pale glow, she saw a flash of metal. *A gun*, her brain registered.

She screamed again and covered her head with her arms.

“Charlie?”

She heard her name.

“It’s Bobby. Are you okay?”

It took her a minute for her mind to clear. She remembered being in Grace’s house, sleeping in the guest bedroom.

“Bobby, oh God, oh God, I’m sorry. I just, I...” Lowering her arms, she pulled her knees free of the sheets and up to her chest. She rocked back and forth on the bed and cried, helpless.

She looked up as Bobby hurried to her. He put his gun on the nightstand and sat next to her on the bed. He wrapped his arms around her trembling shoulders, holding her to him. She turned her drowning face and shaking body into his chest, sinking further into his gentle embrace. The smooth denim rubbed her face, soaked up her tears.

“I... I had a bad dream.” She cried as she spoke, her voice muffled by his shirt. “And...when I woke up it was so dark in here I couldn’t remember where I was. I’m sorry,” she sobbed. “I didn’t mean to scare you. I kinda freaked out.” Violent spasms shook her, her breathing erratic.

“It’s okay.” Bobby’s voice, smooth and calm, soothed her. “I’m here.” He stroked her hair, his hand on top of her head sliding to the ends that curled around her shoulders.

He laid a cheek on top of her crown of tangled mane. He rocked with her, stroking her, until she calmed. He eased her to a stop. His hand, still gentle, caressed her neck. She sniffed in the last few shudders as tears dried up, then turned to drop her huddled, bare legs off the edge of the bed. Her thigh brushed against his sending jolts of electricity through her.

Bobby lifted his head off hers. Charlie looked up into his eyes and noticed his, too, shined from tears. An odd sensation flooded her.

She tried to smile, but a loose tear ran down her cheek. Bobby released his hold around her shoulder and wiped the tear from her face, then trailed his fingers down her cheek to her quivering chin.

Her body shook again, aroused by his touch. With a gentle but firm grasp, he held her face in his hand as he lowered his mouth to hers.

Charlie sat motionless for a moment in his grip, paralyzed with panic and want. Then desire surged and she moved into him. Her lips parted beneath his, accepting him. Her hand slid to his jean-covered thigh, rock hard and warm. Her other hand rose up to his face where she caressed his cheek. The day's stubble tickled her palm as his mouth devoured hers.

She moaned when Bobby scooped up her bare legs and draped them across him.

"Bobby." She mumbled into his mouth, then wrapped her arms around him. "Closer." She pulled him tight to her, kissed him harder until his hands slid under her cotton T-shirt to her waist. "Yes."

She moved her hands to his shirt-front. Her fingers worked the buttons down the denim shirt.

Bobby pulled his mouth from hers, left her mind dazed and fuzzy. "Are you sure?" His breath rasped and feathered her face.

Desire darkened his eyes and excited her. With a brisk nod, she shifted her legs on his lap and straddled him. She pulled off her T-shirt then recaptured his mouth. She nipped his lower lip with her teeth. "Positive."

Bobby shuddered when her fingers grazed his flat, tight stomach. She unfastened the last shirt button and jerked the shirt down and trapped his arms to his side.

“Hold still.” Mouth at the hollow of his throat, she trailed a line of kisses down until she lapped at his flat copper nipple. His body jerked beneath her and she fought back a smile.

“Not fair.” He all but moaned the words as she repeated the process on his other nipple then back up to his neck and earlobe, her body pressed to his.

Bobby’s erection pushed against her. All the fear she’d relived in her dream vanished, replaced by desire and power she hadn’t experienced in a long time. *She* had done that to him. *She* held the power over him. And she was totally out of her league.

“I can’t believe I’m doing this.”

She hadn’t realized she’d said it aloud until Bobby said, “Do you want to stop?” His fingers dug into her hips and breath heaved from his lungs.

Charlie shook her head and yanked his shirt the rest of the way off, then captured his mouth.

“Hang on.” Bobby pulled away from her, and for a moment, she thought he’d changed his mind, but he stood, kicked off his shoes and shucked his jeans and boxers. Then he crouched in front of her, and with a deft, one-handed move, he released the clasp of her bra, then guided the straps down.

When he tossed the bra to the pile of clothes on the floor, he just stared at her and finally said, “You’re so beautiful.”

Heat crossed her cheeks and down to her nether regions. No man had ever said those words to her, not the way Bobby had with all the want and desire plain on his face.

She wanted to speak, say something in return, but he kissed her, lifted her up and deposited her in the center of the queen-size bed, then removed her panties. He kissed a trail behind the thin cotton fabric until

they slid over her feet and onto the floor. He hovered over her, his weight rested on his arms. Bobby stared at her, seemed to memorize her, all of her. When his eyes returned to hers, she smiled.

“I am definitely sure.” Her voice rasped huskier than she thought possible.

He gently lowered himself next to her, pulled her close. The heat from his body charged her system. Her skin vibrated from his touch.

He explored her body with his hands, worked her into a flurry of anticipation and stole her breath. She dug her nails into his shoulders, trying to ground her mind to stay aware of his every touch. He dipped in one finger then another and the climax ripped through her body, shook her until she cried out. She panted, tried to regain her breath as Bobby shifted, moved over her then plunged deep into her.

Charlie met his hips thrust for thrust, unsure where the energy came from after such a powerful orgasm. Another built in its wake. The moan that slipped from her lips spurred Bobby on and he drove harder until Charlie didn't think she could take anymore. She cried out once more.

Bobby stiffened in her arms, then lay heavily atop her.



Scott settled into the front seat of his rented car. His view of the apartment front obscured occasionally, but only by a passing truck. Fondling the key ring from the recently-deceased hit man, he wondered about the device that hung from its own ring. It resembled a keyless-entry remote for an auto, but was unlike any he'd ever seen.

“Who cares.” He tossed the key ring to the passenger floorboard.

He shifted in his seat, contorted and twisted until his back popped. He hated surveillance. Something that wouldn't bode well for whomever

he found first. He hoped it was Bobby. He owed that man. And intended to pay. In full. Maybe a little extra.

A grin spread across his face.

He could imagine his hands sliding around Bobby's throat, choking until the life nearly faded, then releasing him long enough to have a few last breaths. He would tell him how he'd killed Jamie, then finish the job while the other man's eyes locked onto his, knowing the face of death at his final moment. Bobby would rue the day he had sicced IA on him.



Chris drove around the city until he knew for certain he hadn't been followed. Out in far north Fort Worth, on a farm to market road that led to an industrial section, hid away from the suburbs, he cut his engine and lights. Sheltered by unused tractor-trailer hulls waiting for resurgence in the company's product, he formulated a plan for one final strike to retrieve the hidden software and preserve his life.

Chris sank down in his seat, pulled his jacket collar up close to his neck, and wrapped his arms around himself for what little warmth they would provide. Despite the early spring weather, he was chilled through and through. His eyes closed into tight knots as his mind drifted into oblivion.



The evening's darkness plunged the room into deep shadows, thrown from the hallway light. Bobby gazed at the woman lying beside him.

"I am in deep trouble."

Charlie's head rested in the center of Bobby's bare chest. Her even, sleep breaths blew light waves over his stomach as he stroked her silky, honey locks. A faint smile painted his face.

“Deep trouble and I don’t even care.”

A chill set in the room. The day’s heat vanished as the sun went down. The thin sheet did not provide enough warmth for their naked bodies. Even in sleep, Charlie’s skin prickled from the brisk drop in temperature. Bobby rubbed his hands up and down her arms to warm her. She slept soundly, didn’t stir under his soft touch.

“I won’t be here much longer. And maybe I won’t want her again.”

Yeah, sure, he thought. And maybe he could stop breathing.

“It’ll wear off. And until then...” He cupped her breast in his hand and closed his eyes.

A blaring sound jolted him. Charlie awoke with a start. The bedside phone clanged again. Charlie raised her head and met Bobby’s eyes.

Her cheeks reddened and she smiled, then rolled to the other side of the bed and leaned her back up against the pillows to pick up the receiver.

“Hi, Aunt Grace.” She pulled the sheet up to her chin.

Bobby turned on his side and propped up on his elbow to listen.

“...I’m glad you had a good flight.”

“...Good, good.”

“...Yes, I, ah, spent the whole afternoon with Bobby.” Her blush deepened.

“...I will be down in a few days.”

“...Yes...yes...I will call you as soon as I get my flight number.”

“...Okay...okay...I will. I love you, too... Bye-bye.”

Charlie returned the handset to the cradle, then hugged the sheet up under her chin tighter before she met his gaze. They both smiled wild, goofy smiles at one another.

“Aunt Grace made me promise to make you dinner tonight. For taking her to the airport.”

If Grace only knew, Bobby thought.

Charlie rolled and snuggled next to Bobby, arm around his waist. He rested his chin on top of her head and wrapped her up in his arms.

Charlie's touch aroused his senses again, making him hungry for her. He debated another kiss or two and to have his way with her over and over until he didn't want her any more. He couldn't imagine his body not craving her.

But his stomach had other ideas.

Charlie looked up at him. "You are hungry. How about I fix you something to eat? I'm starving, too."

"Sure, I'm up for that." *Oh poor choice of words.*

Charlie laughed.

"I can see that. But you do need your strength." She patted his chest and rolled off the bed in all her naked glory.

What a beautiful body.

Bobby decided it would be wise to get dressed before he grabbed her and refused to let her out of the bedroom.

Oh, I am in deep, deep trouble.

In the dark, the two scrambled around the room in search of adequate dinner attire. Both clad in jeans and shirts, they proceeded to the kitchen where Charlie instructed Bobby to sit at the small dinette table as she moved into a dinner ritual. He watched her with amusement as she dug through her aunt's cabinets, plucked ingredients from shelves and the pantry, then set them on the counter.

"This spaghetti is from an old family recipe from my mother's side." She set a pot on the back burner, dug in a drawer, then tied up her hair. Bobby gaped at her luscious neck. Desire stirred in him as he followed her every movement, she all but floated around the kitchen.

"We need something to drink."

He snapped out of his trance.

"Aunt Grace has some wine. Would you mind getting it? It's in that big hutch in the dining room," she said.

"Sure thing." Bobby also grabbed two glasses, returned and poured them both a drink. As she transferred the cooked pasta to the colander, he slipped back out of the kitchen.

In the living room, he pawed through Grace's CDs until he came across Toby Keith. Music poured through the house as he came back into the kitchen. A shy smile spread across his face as she turned to look at him.

"I didn't know you northern boys like country music." She shook her head.

"What, you think there is some imaginary Yankee line that prohibits the music from getting past the state?" Bobby set his wineglass down as she turned back to the sink where she was rinsing the noodles.

Charlie yelped when he came up behind her and whirled her around the kitchen. He two-stepped her across the tile while Toby Keith crooned "How do you like me now" and Bobby sang along. They laughed and danced as the song played through.

"I haven't laughed that much in days. Thank you." She gave him a quick peck on the lips. "You better let me go now, though, or the sauce will burn."

After he captured her mouth with a deeper kiss, he released her despite the ache in his arms to hold her.

As he refilled the wineglasses, Charlie brought the plates to the table, heaping full of spaghetti. The oven timer dinged, signaling the loaf of French bread was ready.

"Perfect timing." She brought the bread to the table.

They ate with few words between them, the CD player the only sound penetrating the walls. A smile or a nod would follow their eyes catching. On occasion one bare foot would rub against another under the table.

After dinner, they stood side by side at the sink. "Grace has a strict rule of washing off dishes before they're put in the dishwasher. My grandmother was the same way. So it's always stuck with me to do it that way. A waste, probably, but a tribute to Foster women gone by." She raised her hand to her chest and a handful of bubbles stuck to the front of her shirt.

"Um, you got... Let me get that for you." He swiped at the dish cleaner.

"You trying to cop a feel, Detective?"

Heat crawled over Bobby's face.

A blush?

He couldn't remember the last time he'd blushed. "I uh..."

Charlie leaned up on tiptoes and kissed his cheek. "Thanks for helping with the dishes."

When they drained the first bottle of wine, Bobby proceeded to uncork another. "This is pretty good wine. Made right here, huh." He read the label. "Maybe I'll take a tour sometime."

Was he already planning more time in Texas? He shook the thoughts of the future from his head.

"Why don't we sit out on the back porch on the swing?" Charlie loaded the last plate into the dishwasher. "Fort Worth yields more stars than most city skies do."

Glasses in hand and bottle toted, they relaxed on the porch swing in Grace's picturesque backyard.

The quarter moon had all but diminished in the dark sky and cast very little glow over the yard. A slight fragrant wind blew around them.

“It’s amazing how bright the stars are out here. In Chicago, the sky is more or less brown,” he said.

“What a shame.” She sighed. “I used to play back here when I was little. I had a playhouse with pink shutters right over there in the corner.” She pointed to the east corner of the yard. “I had a dog, too. His name was Mr. Scruffy. But he died when I was twelve. Everyone dies on me,” she said in a whisper.

Bobby rubbed his hand over hers. It ripped at his heart to hear the defeat in her voice. And the reality of what she said, she’d had so much death in her young life. Something she said, though, made him pause. “I thought you said Grace didn’t move here until,” he had to be delicate about her parents’ death, “the end of high school.”

“God, I can’t believe you remember that. This was my grandmother’s house back then. My parents moved to Texas when I was two, from South Carolina.” She nudged his ribs. “My grandpa died two years later and Grandma Lillian decided to move here with Grandma Rose—her mother—to be near us. I think someone said that Grace was living in Las Vegas at the time. I don’t really remember. I was only four.”

Bobby laid his arm across the back of the swing and played with the end of her ponytail. He had to touch her, some part of her, needed to connect to her.

“Anyway, both my grandmothers lived here together. Grandma Rose passed away when I was six. I still have such fond memories of her, though. She was the most interesting person I knew, especially at six years old. Grandma Lillian lived here until she passed away three years ago.” She shook her head. “Afterwards, Grace decided to sell her house on the other side of town and move in here. It had been the family focal point for so many years she hated to let it go.”

He listened to her life. And despite the tragedy, Charlie had a strong and resilient attitude. She could survive anything.

"She's all the family I have left, you know," she said with a heavy sigh. "Except for her two cousins. Elizabeth lives in Florida now. But you know that. And her brother Frank lives in West Texas near Abilene. Now there's a place to see stars."

Bobby watched her silhouette talk as she stared out into the sky. A few stray hairs fell from her clip, danced around her face as a strong breeze blew. When she shivered in its wake, Bobby scooted closer to her and placed his arm around her shoulders,

"It's pitch black out there at night. It's amazing to lie on the ground and just... I can't explain it...take it all in. It always reminded me of a book I had as a kid, *Snow White and the Diamond Mine*.

"The stars sparkled so bright I would pretend I was Snow White, and the Dwarfs mined the sky for me," she said. "Frank's kids are seven and ten years older than me, so I didn't ever have anyone to play with, so I would play make-believe. Can you imagine me as Snow White?"

No. You're much more beautiful, he thought.

"Sorry. Sometimes my mouth just goes on and on," she said.

Bobby smiled at her. "It's okay. I like listening to you."

His hand grazed the back of her neck. Charlie closed her eyes and breathed in heavily. Before he could help himself, Bobby leaned across her and placed his mouth on hers. He pulled back and looked into her eyes. Despite the darkness, he could see the desire in them. He took the wineglass from her and placed it on the wicker table beside the swing.

His mouth returned to hers, heavier and more needful. Her lips parted beneath his, and he tasted her. Arms tangled in a fevered pace. A warm rush ran through him as the swing swayed on the porch. Bobby only pulled her closer, dragging her on top of him. His hands snuck

under her clothing, pawing at her willing body then covered her breasts. She hummed against his lips as he caressed her.

Bobby shifted their bodies again to sit her beside him. He stood, scooped her up off the swing and carried her through the house into the bedroom; all the while his mouth ravaged her with his warm, hungry kisses. In the room, they collapsed together onto the bed, clothes thrown to the floor at a frenzied pace.

Chapter Ten

Charlie woke to a cold, empty bed. The gray morning provided little relief to the dark room. She rolled over and switched on the bedside lamp. Squinting, her eyes adjusted to the bright yellow light. She sat up and smiled at the memory of the night before, running her fingers over her lips. She could still feel his mouth on hers, his touch on her body.

She left the bed and opened the small closet, then dug through her bag for jeans and a shirt of her own. She slipped on the clothes and a thick pair of socks. Silently, she crept down the hall in search of Bobby. As she approached the kitchen, the smell of bacon and Grace's French vanilla coffee wafted through the door.

"Good morning." Bobby smiled as Charlie came up to him.

"Gloomy day, huh?"

"I hadn't noticed." He grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her to him. He laid his hand on the back of her neck, his mouth landing heavily on hers in a sensual kiss.

Warmth rushed through her, igniting the passion from before. She had wondered if it had been a fluke, a coupling of convenience. But the desire that swelled in her was a longing much, much deeper. Unused emotions pushed forward, demanded exploration, and demanded revelation.

He's here to solve a case not fall in love with me. Love? Whoa, where'd that come from?

Charlie pulled away and cleared her throat. "What's all this?" She motioned to the stove.

"You made dinner for me last night," he said. "So it's my turn to cook for you. Sit, I'll pour you a cup of coffee."

"I haven't ever had a man fix food for me before. Especially not breakfast. Which says a lot about my love life," she mumbled.

"You poor deprived girl." Bobby said the words, but if she wasn't mistaken there was an instant flash of—she wasn't sure—relief, on his face.

Emotions too tangled to digest, she opted for humor and stuck her tongue out at him then asked, "How long have you been up?"

"Bout an hour. I'm still on Chicago time." He stood at the stove with his back to her.

"I hate to point this out to you, *Detective*, but Chicago and Fort Worth are in the same time zone."

He chuckled and turned to look at her. "I know that. I meant I'm programmed to get up for work at the same time every day. I can't ever seem to sleep late even when I *am* in a different time zone." He placed a plate in front of her, bacon, eggs-sunny side up, and toast, then refilled her coffee cup and kissed her forehead before he sat down.

"This is great," Charlie said between bites. Her skewed eating habits had caught up with her. Starved, she ate every bite, making satisfied noises as she chewed.

"I guess I'm going to miss school again today," she said, looking at the clock as she pushed her empty plate away. "This is the second day in a row, not to mention the two days last week. Not such a good record going, huh?"

"You'll get back on track soon." He squeezed her hand, rose and set the dishes in the sink. "I've had some time to reconsider why Brian came

down here.” Bobby sat back at the table with Charlie. “I was thinking back through all our conversations, and I remember him mentioning that his mother lived down here somewhere.”

“Did you try looking her up in the phone book? I’m pretty sure there are quite a few McMillens, but we could just go down the list,” Charlie suggested, refilling their cups with the coffee pot on the corner of the table.

“No, her last name wasn’t McMillen, it was Smith. Besides, she died several months ago. That’s why I haven’t given her much thought. There has to be thousands of Smiths in the area.”

Charlie almost dropped her coffee cup. The hot liquid sloshed over the side onto the table as she set it down hard. “Shit.” She wiped up the spill.

Bobby stared at her. “What?” was all he said before she jumped up and started to pace the kitchen.

“What was her name, Brian’s mother? Her whole name,” she asked.

“Smith. Marilyn Smith. She was married again when Brian was in high school and changed her name, but her husband died a few years ago. Why?”

“That’s it, Marilyn, not Mary Anne.”

Bobby stood and grabbed her arms. “What are you ranting about?”

“She’s the woman who had the apartment before me. I told you... No, I told Detective Aaron.” She tugged on her lip.

“I’m not following you.”

“I couldn’t connect the two because of the name. But it’s so obvious now.”

He stared blank-faced at her.

“They found a key to my apartment in Brian’s pocket. Didn’t they tell you?” She looked at him as he shook his head.

His face cleared with understanding. "So Brian's mother rented the apartment before you. That's why he was there. To find something he had left with his mother."

"Yes!" she shouted, excited.

He frowned. "But why weren't the locks on your door different? Wouldn't they have been changed?" Bobby asked. "They should have changed them before you moved in."

"Because I'm an idiot."

"Charlie."

"When she died, she had no apparent family. Or at least that is what I thought. The super hadn't gotten to it yet and I didn't see the point in changing them at the time so I told him not to mess with it. I thought it was just a waste of money."

"That was incredibly stupid." His grip tightened on her arms.

"Hey, that hurts."

Bobby loosened his grip, then let his hands fall to his sides but did not speak.

"I realize, now. Like I said, I'm an idiot." Nausea rolled her stomach. "Oh God, this *is* all my fault. I could have prevented all of this." She sank to the dinette chair and held her head in her hands. "If I hadn't been so stupid, none of this would have happened. Greg would still be alive." Tears welled up and threatened to fall.

Bobby rubbed her shoulder. "You couldn't have prevented anything. Brian would have found a way into your apartment somehow. We would still be right here right now." He squatted in front of her and brought his face level to hers. "We just have to figure out what, and where, the thing is they're after."

The phone rang. Charlie composed herself as Bobby excused himself before she answered.

“Good morning, Charlie.” Aunt Grace’s chipper voice flowed though the phone wires.

“Hi, Aunt Grace.” Charlie fought to disguise her soured attitude.

“Did you sleep well?” she asked.

Charlie could feel the blush creep across her face. “Yes, fine, thanks. How are you enjoying the weather down there?”

“It’s beautiful. Did you have dinner with our detective last night?”

Our detective?

“Yes, ma’am, I did. I made him my mother’s spaghetti recipe.” Charlie scraped at a stain on the counter with her thumbnail.

“Wonderful, wonderful.” Grace all but laughed out loud. “But that’s not actually why I called.”

“Yeah, right,” Charlie teased.

“No, really, the other day you asked me to remind you about your paper, for English.”

Charlie laughed to herself. Even on a vacation twelve-hundred miles away, and with all that had happened within the last couple of weeks, Grace was concerned with Charlie’s scholastic needs. She may not have borne any children but she was a wonderful mother. Charlie would have to remember to do something special for Grace come Mother’s Day.

“Thank you. I have it all done on my computer. I just have to print it.” Charlie stopped short. A thought hung in the back of her head, but she couldn’t pull it forward. “Aunt Grace, I gotta run. Call you soon.”

As she hung up, Bobby returned to the kitchen, shirt tucked in and socks on. He squeezed her shoulder in passing and sat back at the table.

Charlie sat down, toyed with the phone antenna and tried to pull out what was odd from her conversation with Grace. She stayed at the table with her head bent and eyes closed, tapping her forehead, her subconscious unyielding.

"You know, Mr. Wilkenson, the super, kept a lot of Marilyn Smith's things. It's all down in one of the empty storage bins in the basement. He even gave me a book of hers." Bobby eyed her. "He was fixing my sink and saw my collection of mystery writers. It was a really old copy of an Agatha Christie book. I haven't had a chance to read it yet."

The telephone rang again.

"Grand Central Station, this morning." Charlie laughed, then answered the phone. "Hello."

"Miss Foster, this is Detective Aaron. Yesterday a man was found shot to death outside a diner on the other side of town," he said with no preamble. "The man had out-of-state identification, from Illinois. He also had a gun on him, the same caliber as the one used on Greg and Mr. McMillen. We ran a ballistics test and it confirmed it was the same gun." Charlie's heart pounded as her smile fell.

"He was shot from behind at point blank range, as he and a dining companion left during the lunch crowd... Charlie, are you still there?"

"Yes, hold on, hold on. Detective Allen is here. Can you repeat all that to him? Um...thanks." Charlie didn't let him answer; she just held the phone at arm's length and offered it to Bobby. "It's Detective Aaron. Will you please talk to him?"

Bobby took the phone, face concerned.

Charlie left in search of her cigarettes. She hunted down her pack in another room. When she returned to the kitchen with her lit cigarette, she heard Bobby assure Detective Aaron he wouldn't let her out of his sight. He hung up the phone and ran his hands through his dark brown hair, shook his head in disbelief. His gaze stayed on Charlie as she wrestled with the news.

"So they have one of the guys. Of course, now there is at least one more, unless the two from the mall got in a fight and one decided to cut

his losses. I'm sure that is as likely as me winning the lottery," Charlie said, as she walked over to where Bobby stood. She stubbed out her cigarette and laid her head on his chest. She shook all over. He slid his arms around her and kissed the top of her head. "I am so scared, Bobby. What now?"

"Um, there is one other thing he didn't tell you, your keys weren't found on the body, so someone still has them." Bobby rubbed her back. "We have to get over to your apartment and have your super change the locks *today*."

She pushed away and wiped the tears from her face. "Give me about ten minutes, okay?" She stood on tiptoes and kissed him on the cheek, then left him in the kitchen. As she walked down the hall, a thought flew into her mind.

She snuck into Grace's room. Next to Grace's bed, Charlie dropped onto all fours and reached under the bed. She groped and pawed at the floor until her hand finally lit on the cold metal shaft of Grace's gun. Her "protector". Charlie had often reprimanded her aunt for leaving it so easily accessible. But Grace argued no children ever came to her house. And at her age, she needed to be able to grab it as quickly as possible.

Charlie checked to make sure it was loaded, then stuffed the small handgun into the back waistband of her jeans, under her shirt. She padded silently, sock-footed, back to the guest bedroom and put on her sneakers and grabbed a light raincoat of Grace's to disguise the bulge.



Chris parked his car a block away from Charlie's building. He grabbed the ball cap from the back seat and pulled the brim down low on his forehead to shield his face from rain and recognition. He knew whoever hit Randy already knew what he was looking for and could be

hanging around the building. When he stepped from the car, he pulled the collar of his jacket up in vain around his ears. The cold spring rain pelted relentlessly at his unprotected skin.



Scott scanned the people that milled about the street. Multicolored and various-sized umbrellas danced around as people dashed from one place to another. Work traffic thinned and foot traffic spread out. Spotting one of his targets would be harder with all that shit in his way but he was self-assured by his own egotistical past.

His phone chirped in his pocket.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Scott, any news?” the boss asked.

“No, Will. But they’ll be here. I know it.”

“You better take care of it soon.” And the phone went dead.

He played with the key chain he took from the fresh corpse the day before. He turned the small box over again and again in his hand. He could not figure out what it was.

“Leave it alone.” He shook his head and tossed it back to the floor, then checked his watch. “Any time now.”

Chapter Eleven

In the car, Charlie fidgeted as the cold metal of the gun pushed into the small of her back. Nervous, she chewed on her bottom lip and tried to retrieve the memory from Grace's conversation. Something gnawed at her thoughts, but didn't want to connect.

Bobby hadn't spoken more than two words to her since they left Grace's house. Charlie reached across and lightly stroked his arm. He took his eyes off the road long enough to give her a worried glance and a weak smile.

"There's something nagging me, but I can't put my finger on it. Something Grace said." She drummed her fingers on the armrest.

"What did your aunt tell you? Maybe if you go back over it, it will pop out."

"She asked me about you." Charlie smiled at Bobby. "I told her what a remarkable lover you are."

Bobby jerked the wheel. The car swerved a little until he righted it.

"Kidding. Sorry." Charlie fought back the laughter that built in her chest. "And she reminded me about my paper due at school. That's all she said."

"Does, uh," he cleared his throat, "your aunt often call you to remind you about your school work?"

"No, but I'd been having trouble with my computer and...that's it." Charlie slapped her hands together.

“What? What’s it?”

“My computer. I think it might have been gone, yesterday. Remember, I didn’t think anything was missing. I keep my laptop on the table and when you picked it up off the floor something seemed off, but I couldn’t figure out what it was. They took my computer. But why?”

“Discs. Brian must have copied Jamie and Will’s programs. I’ll bet he came down here before his mother died and hid them somewhere in the apartment. It was right around the time she died that he started acting weird. I thought at first maybe he was just really shaken up by her death, but now...

“He must not have been able to get back down here to get ‘em then. That’s why he was in your apartment. They killed him before he got them,” Bobby said.

“What make’s you say that?” she asked.

“If they had gotten ‘em, they’d have no reason to still be after you. They tore up your apartment after...the incident in your store. They must figure you have it somewhere.”

Charlie turned in her seat toward him. “But I don’t. I have no idea where it is.”

“Didn’t you say the super... What was his name?”

“Mr. Wilkenson.”

“Right, Mr. Wilkenson. Didn’t you say he kept some of Brian’s mother’s stuff?”

“Yeah, down in the basement. There’s no furniture or anything big, he sold it or gave it to Goodwill. He did keep several boxes full of her stuff like knickknacks, books, you know, the kind of stuff you might pass around or save forever in a box somewhere. But I’m almost positive she didn’t have any computer stuff. I think he might have mentioned something about it.”

Bobby looked at her.

“He is a computer nut. He’s actually the one who fixed my laptop,” she explained.

Charlie sat quietly for the next few blocks. She tugged at her lip and breathed heavily. “Um, why do you suppose...um, what’s going on with this latest shooting?”

“Who knows? Could have been like you said, the guy with him, cutting his losses. Could have been totally random. I just don’t know.”



Chris scanned the lobby as he pretended to shake the water from his coat and hat. He prepared himself mentally for any encounter that might thwart his plan to get to the girl. With no one watching him, he slowly sidestepped to the stairwell. The last few steps, walking backward, keeping his eyes on the lobby floor. Careful, he let the heavy metal door close itself on silent casters behind him and he listened for anyone around. Eyes and ears on hyper alert.

In the stairwell, he pulled out his gun and checked it, then took the four flights of stairs two at a time, stopping every few steps to listen for the echo of another on the stairs. Barely winded, too much adrenaline. At the top, he stuffed his gun back in his waistband.

He glanced at the “No Smoking” sign before he flicked a burnt-out match at it. He took a long, hard drag on the cigarette then carefully cracked the door and peered through, into Charlie’s hallway. Not a soul stirred. He left the door open a hair and settled his shoulder into the jamb.

The rain had soaked through his jacket and some into his shirt. The cold gray cement stairwell did nothing to warm him. Only his growing

anger and resentment helped keep him warm. He pulled back behind the door as the elevator dinged someone's arrival.



Scott Bernard rushed out of the car after he saw Charlie and Bobby enter the apartment building. The rain had let up enough that no umbrellas marred his view of their entrance. Bobby led her by the elbow and scanned the street around them.

Slow and casual, Scott entered the lobby, looked at his watch and the elevator expectantly as if he was there to meet someone. The back of Bobby's head appeared over the top of the few people around. Scott's gaze trailed them as they strolled across the lobby. He watched as they boarded the elevator and were then enclosed inside.

"Four." He'd watched the floors mark off above the elevator doors until the number stopped, lit on the top floor. He did a quick scan for Chris, thinking he would be haunting the lobby in hopes of recovering the disc first. As far as he could tell, though, Chris had taken off.

"If he was smart," he mumbled to himself.

Scott formulated a plan as he waited for the elevator's descent. He sat for a moment in one of the lobby's plush chairs with his attention trained on the elevator, switching between the doors and numbers above. The elevator came back down, stopped momentarily on the third floor.

As the doors finally opened into the lobby, a small child bounded out followed by a haggard mother carrying a large canvas bag on her slumped shoulder. The door closed and the elevator seemed to wait there for its next summoning.



Out of habit, Charlie tried the knob before inserting her key. Locked. *Thank God*, she thought.

They stepped into the unlit apartment. Charlie flipped the switch by the door. "Damn it. I keep forgetting to fix that bulb. Hold on, let me go open the curtains." Charlie made her way through the path they'd made the day before to the window, then she turned on the lamp by the sofa.

"I was right. My computer's gone." She held up the broken line still connected to the wall jack. "They cut the wire and walked off with it. Damn, I saved my research paper in there. It took me a month to get some of that information. Well, shit." She ran her hand through her hair.

She saw Bobby's mildly annoyed gaze. There was a killer or two literally gunning for her, and she was worried about homework. She realized how petty she sounded but couldn't help herself.

"What?" she asked in defense. "This professor does not like women. He doesn't. He's a hard ass when it comes to our work. He won't be swayed in the least by 'why' it's missing." Bobby only looked on, speechless. "Listen, he gave me a 'C' on my last paper—I *know* it was better than that."

Bobby shook his head and laughed at her.

"You think this is funny. Well, Professor Ewing won't. The man has no sense of humor whatsoever."

Bobby continued staring. It made her feel the need to explain further. "One time he gave us a writing assignment. It had an open topic—meaning we could write about whatever we wanted. I decided to write it on the 'theory of fuck'." She held up her finger as Bobby started to speak.

"Wait—hear me out. Anyway, I wrote a paper talking about the many ways you can use the word fuck. It can be a verb." She winked at him. "No need to explain there. It can be a noun like in 'hey, fuck face'. It can be..."

Bobby stopped her, holding his hands up palms forward. "I give up. I get your point." He shook his head.

"He failed me. An 'F'. I have never gotten an 'F' before."

"Poor baby."

She scrunched up her face, then stuck her tongue out at him and made him laugh.

Bobby composed himself. "We have to assume that we are not searching in vain here." He stood in the living room and scanned the area. "So you said the super kept some of Mrs. Smith's things down in the basement."

"Yeah, in one of the empty storage bins."

"Which apartment does he live in?" Bobby asked.

"Two C. Second floor. Let me call him." Charlie crossed the living room like an obstacle course, jumping over furniture, dodged piles of stuff, heading for the bedroom with the only working phone. She tsked. Most items in her apartment would have to be replaced.

She thanked God that Grace made her purchase renter's insurance.

In her bedroom, she stepped on clothes and knickknacks from the top of her dresser, then found the phone and dialed Mr. Wilkenson's number. When he answered, she explained to him what she needed, giving him as little detail as possible. He agreed to show them the boxes that he had stored.

She returned to the living room to find Bobby squatting, sifting through what had been her coffee table. All the contents of a memory chest she kept there covered the floor. She noticed he held a worn photo of her and Greg from the Fort Worth Stockyards. They sat on top of a fake bull at Billy Bob's. Both held cowboy hats in the air and imitated bull riders.

“My twenty-first birthday.” Charlie leaned on his back, rested her elbows on his shoulders. “We had so much fun. Collin Raye performed that night.” She settled her face next to his. Cheek to cheek, they looked at the photo. A heavy sigh escaped her.

“Can I ask you a question?”

She tilted her head to look at him in profile and nodded.

“How come you and he...weren’t...together?”

Charlie stood and laughed a sad but amused laugh. “Well, he was like my brother. We loved each other very much, like you would siblings. Plus, I wasn’t really his type,” she said.

Bobby stood and turned to face her. He slipped his arm around her waist. “How could you not be his type?” He smiled at her and kissed the tip of her nose.

Her smile warmed and she kissed him quickly on the mouth then pulled free of his grip. “Mr. Wilkenson said he would show you all the crates. He’s waiting for you in his apartment.”

“Me, only? Aren’t you coming, too?” His brow wrinkled.

“No, I thought I would look around my apartment some more. Maybe the disc is hidden in something up here.”

He looked harshly at her. “I don’t think you should be up here by yourself. It’s not safe and I don’t want to let you out of my sight.”

“I’ll be fine. I’ll lock the door behind you. It’s okay, don’t keep him waiting.” Charlie pushed him to the door. He held her gaze a moment before opening the door. They paused as the elevator announced its arrival to the floor. Charlie watched Bobby, slow and defensive, reach around to his back to retrieve his gun from his waistband.

Bertie stepped from the cage into the hall, arms loaded with a day’s shopping. She jerked her head in their direction. A tense smile creased her face.

Charlie raised a hand from behind Bobby and threw a short wave. "Hi, Bertie. How's it going?"

"Good, good. Dismal weather though." She eyed Bobby, apparently approving of what she saw, then winked at Charlie as she pushed through her door.

Bobby turned back to Charlie raising his eyebrows. He rolled his eyes heavenward. "All right," he said. "Lock the door. I'll be gone a little while." He kissed his fingers and placed them on Charlie's lips, then trotted to the elevator to catch it before it left the floor again. He disappeared into its well. Charlie sighed as she shut and locked the door. She grabbed one of the kitchen chairs and wedged it under the door, just as a precaution.

Chapter Twelve

The drizzle which had accompanied them on the trip to the apartment turned into a downpour. Rain pelted the windows and the roof as the clouds opened up and spilled all their worth. A constant sense of dread pulled on her nerves. She didn't want to tell Bobby. He would've made her go with him to the super's apartment. She wanted to search her place, so she could find the damn disc. And be done with the whole ordeal.

She gave up looking in the living room and stood back, scanning the bedroom before searching it. Where would she stash something in such a small room? Her imagination peaked as she remembered in one of her mystery books a PI found stuff hidden in fake electrical outlets and false-bottom furniture.

All the furniture was hers so she didn't bother to look there. She thought about the outlets for a second, but she realized she had used all of them at one point and they had always worked properly. So much for the hidden-article conspiracy.

She stepped toward her bed to pick up her toy bear, torn to ribbons. As her foot slid under the edge of the bed, she kicked something hard. On her knees, she lifted the bed skirt. Her eyes adjusted to the darkened area and saw a large, green book lying there. She slid it out from under the bed and read the cover.

It was the hardbound Agatha Christie book from Mrs. Smith's collection.

Charlie's eyebrows rose. She ran her fingers across the leather, feeling the letters stamped across the front. Charlie opened the cover and found an inscription.

Mom—I know how much you love reading. Enjoy. I love you—Brian.

Charlie sniffed back a tear and cleared her throat. She then noticed a bulge from the middle of the book, like something was stuffed in there, a large bookmark maybe. She flipped through the pages until she came upon the pages surrounding the bulge. Laying the book on its spine, she let it fall open. The pages opened to reveal a shiny CD. No case, no writing on it, a plain CD.

"Ha. I found it." She bounced and nearly fell off the bed. "Cool it." She grasped the disc by the edges with her fingers, mindful not to smudge it with her prints, then went into the living room and emptied out a Rascal Flatts CD. "Sorry guys," she said aloud as she let the music fall to the floor and set the one from the book in its place.

Charlie decided to find Bobby and Mr. Wilkenson, too excited to wait. But a sudden chill ran through her, sunk into her bones. She realized she still wore the wet rain jacket. Stripping it off, she tossed it over the back of a chair. She snagged a dark blue Dallas Cowboys sweatshirt and put it on. She also took out her own dry rain jacket and carried it back into the living room.

Grabbing her purse, she draped it over her head and right arm, positioning it across her right hip so it wouldn't slide. She slipped the CD case into the side pocket of the brown leather bag hidden by the rain jacket.



Mr. Wilkenson stood in his doorway and waited for Bobby when he got off the elevator. Bobby again explained what they were after, showing off his badge.

“The basement is only accessible by a set of stairs off the lobby. We gotta stop by my office in the lobby first so I can get my keys,” he explained.

Mr. Wilkenson was in his mid-sixties. His gray hair, thin on top, showed patches of spotted skin. His age, and shape, was also obvious in his paunch. And Bobby suspected that if he had not had overalls on his belly would show under the bottom of his shirt.

His face was a whole other thing, Bobby realized. He had a kind face, the face of someone who genuinely smiled often. Almost what you would imagine a beardless Santa would look like, kind, gentle and jovial. Bobby could see why Charlie had trusted him about the door locks.

“I appreciate this.”

“I’ll do what I can to help Charlie. Bad business, she got herself mixed up into.”

“It’s not her fault.” Bobby didn’t mean to bark at the man.

The older man narrowed his eyes. “I don’t doubt that for a second. She’s too sweet to hurt a flea. Always apologizes like crazy whenever she has to get me up there.” He locked up his door and they walked to the elevator just as it passed the second floor on its way up. It stopped on the third floor, not seeming to move. Bobby checked his watch and tapped his foot impatiently as he stood staring at the closed metal door.

“Do you mind if we take the stairs down to the lobby?” Bobby asked. “I hate to leave Charlie up there alone too long.”

They both headed for the door. In the stairwell Mr. Wilkenson commented on the lingering smell of cigarette smoke—damn kids—he had said.

Once on the lobby floor, Bobby leaned against the wall by Wilkenson's office and waited for him to locate the right key ring. With his hands shoved deep in his pockets, Bobby stubbed the toe of his shoe on the tiled floor, often checking the clock on the opposite wall.



Charlie headed for the door to find Bobby and Mr. Wilkenson, too excited to wait. She had just reached for the door when a sharp, insistent knock stopped her in her tracks. Her hand froze on the chair shoved under the knob. The knock sounded again.

Charlie chest burned.

She realized she was holding her breath. She forced herself to calm down as she thought, *It's okay. Someone's just knocking. Killers don't knock.*

She took one last deep breath and removed the chair from the door and set it off to the side. She put on a pleasant, welcoming smile over her scared face. Her palms sweated as she gripped the knob and opened the door.

Charlie was greeted with an unfriendly male face and the metal shaft of a gun. He immediately shoved her back into the apartment before she could react. The smell of stale cigarettes and body odor filled her nose. She wanted to cover her mouth to keep from gagging at the stench, but his angry scowl frightened her motionless.

"I want the disc." Spit shot from the corners of his mouth.

"I... I don't know what you are talking about." Charlie backed deeper into the living room.

"I want the fucking disc. I know you have it and I want it now." The gun shook in his hand. "If you don't hand it over, I will shoot you just like your friend in the store."

Charlie's eyes widened. Her pulse raced as she speculated about Greg's last moments.

She patted her pocket for her cell then remembered again she'd broken it at the bar. "Damn."

"Shut up, bitch, and give me the disc."

Her brain went into warp speed searching for a weapon or something for protection.

"Hey, look out behind you," Charlie said.

"Do you think I am stupid or something?" he asked.

"No, but I do." The masculine voice from behind turned the gunman on his heels. Seconds later, his face met with the chair that had been set beside the door. His body fell limp to the floor.

Charlie removed her hand from her mouth and stared bewildered at the tall blond rescuer. His blue eyes smiled at her as she scrambled to get away from the fallen man.

"Oh God, thank you," Charlie said. "I didn't know what to do. He was talking crazy, waving the gun around. I was sure he was going to shoot me. How did you... Oh God, thank you. How did you...?"

"I was coming to look at the vacant apartment next door and saw him holding a gun on you." He peered past her and seemed to search the room. "Are you all alone in here?"

She nodded as she stood next to the stranger.

"Let's get out of here before he wakes up." He motioned her to the door.

She nodded and followed him out to the hall, then closed and locked the door behind them. The pair ran to the elevator. Pushing the button, they waited for what seemed like an eternity. As the doors of the elevator opened, the stranger stepped in first, holding the door open for her.

Charlie followed just as the door to her apartment busted open and the gunman staggered out. He spotted her and ran toward her despite the blood all over his face.

Charlie jumped to the side of the elevator, smashing the button for the lobby and the “door close” button. The doors sealed them safely in as he reached the crack. Charlie leaned against the wall and closed her eyes.

She pounded the wall with her fist. “What the hell is going on with my life?” she said under her breath. Opening her eyes, she looked at her rescuer. “Thank you again. My name is Charlie.” She held out her hand.

He accepted and said, “Scott. Scott Bernard. What did you do to make him so mad? Ex-boyfriend?”

“No,” she fumbled in her pocket for a cigarette, “I have no idea who he is. God, I can’t stop shaking. I have never had a gun pointed at me before. That was unreal.”

“Are you going to be okay? Do you need me to get you some help of some kind?”

“No, thank you. I’ll be okay. I have a, ah, friend waiting for me downstairs. I appreciate the offer though.”

The polite smile slid from his face as they drew closer to the bottom floor. A scowl bent his mouth. Charlie shook her head and thought, *not seeing this*. She chalked it up to an overactive imagination sprinkled with adrenaline. Focusing on something else, she cursed the slowness of the elevator until it reached the lobby.

As the doors opened, Scott grabbed her by the elbow and steered her across the huge lobby floor.

“Hey, let go. You’re hurting my arm.” Charlie jerked her arm, but his grip held firm. “I said let go, damn it.” She pulled harder. “What are you doing?”

Halfway across the tiled floor, a loud crash echoed from the stairwell door. The man from her apartment burst through the steel door, gun drawn. He screamed like a madman as he charged in their direction. Blood dripped from his face and head, spotted the front his white T-shirt and denim jacket.

People in the lobby scattered, dove for cover. Scott pressed firm to Charlie's side and edged her toward the front door, away from the gunman who stopped and stood in the middle of the lobby, breathing heavily.

Charlie spotted Bobby out of the corner of her eye as he ran toward them. She could see his gun, drawn at his side. She tried to turn and face him, but Scott's fingers dug into her flesh, held her in place.

She saw the moment the gunman noticed Bobby—he turned in that direction and, without a moment's hesitation, fired off two rounds.

God, this can't be happening.

A loud sound blasted Charlie's ears—tuning out the world.

But before she could react, two powerfully strong arms lifted her off her feet, despite her kicking and squirming objection. He dragged Charlie from the lobby.

Was Bobby shot? Is he alive or is he lying there dying—or dead?

It had all happened so fast.

Across the street, Scott shoved her into a car and locked the seat belt around her. He crawled over her into the driver's seat. She stared helplessly out the window, her mind blank. She watched as the building disappeared from her sight.

She settled into her seat, the belt digging into her shoulder. As her adrenaline waned, lulled back to a normal level, her mind refocused. She looked around the car at the man who had pulled her from the apartment.

“Where are we going?” She rubbed her cold hands together.

“I don’t know. I just grabbed you and got out of there when the shooting started.”

You grabbed me before the shooting started, Charlie thought.

“That man’s crazy. And the other one who started shooting back, what was that about?” he asked. “I know I’m new to Texas, but do shoot outs in apartment lobbies happen often?”

Charlie snorted. “No. First for me.” She shifted her feet and felt something lumpy underfoot. She bent forward to pick it up. Her heart dropped to her stomach as she held a familiar key chain in her hand.

Five keys hung from the loop connected to a small black box. Two were front door locks, one of which looked identical to hers. Another went to a commercial lock, like the one used for her store.

The key on her own ring had a two-three-eight scratched onto it. She turned the key over in her hand and read the number imprinted on it, the locksmiths’ mark. It matched.

She fought back a moan.

The fourth key went to a Volkswagen. Greg had been so proud of his new car and he had let her drive it several times. The fifth key, she had never known what it went to.

Beads of sweat ran down her neck as she watched the rain beat against the glass and roll off.

“I guess someone left that in the car before me.” Scott motioned to the key chain with his elbow. “I can’t figure out what that thing is. Looks like a car alarm remote, but not quite.”

Charlie swallowed hard and tried to act casual. “My friend...” Her voice cracked as she spoke. She cleared her throat. “Sorry, the rain. I must be catching a cold. My friend had one of these. They’re for people who constantly lose their keys.”

She set them on her lap. “See.” She clapped her hands. The device beeped wildly in her lap until she picked it up and pushed the button in the middle to disarm the beeps.

“Never heard of that before.”

She feigned putting the keys back down but dropped them into her pocket instead.

Her mind flew into overdrive. She had to get him to pull over and let her out, but she didn’t want to alert him. She rubbed her hands together again, biting her lower lip, trying to calm herself. *I have to get out of here*, she thought, *but how? Keep talking casual to him*, she decided.

“So you were thinking of renting the apartment next to mine?” she asked.

“I had, yes. But in light of this morning, I’m reconsidering,” he said.

“Where are you from? I can’t quite place the accent.”

“Chicago. My company is considering opening a branch down here and sent me to scout out the area.”

“Really? What company?”

“Harrington Enterprises.”

Charlie stiffened.

“I’m the chief security officer.”

“Must be an interesting job.”

“Keeps me busy, that’s for sure.”

Something about the way he said that made her shiver and clear her throat. “I, um, I, really appreciate you pulling me to safety, twice.” A strained laugh tickled her throat. “But I think I’m okay now. You can just let me out over there.” Charlie pointed and looked out her window to the mall coming up on their right. She turned back as she spoke, “I can call my friend to...”

For the second time in half an hour, she stared down the barrel of a gun. His, however, was remarkably steady and rigid in his hand. His smirk grew evil as he drove through traffic *and* held the gun on her. He shook his head and laughed under his breath.

“No, Miss Foster. I don’t think I can do that.”

“Damn. I can’t believe this,” Charlie grumbled.

His laughter rose until it filled the car, chilling her, and tears welled up in her eyes. She fought to keep them from falling. She would not let him see her cry, or how terrified she was.



Bobby stood in the lobby with Detectives Collins and Aaron. “The man just burst out of the stairwell waving his gun. He charged at Charlie and some man with her. I drew the gunman’s attention and he fired on me. I hit the floor when the first of two bullets grazed my arm.” He motioned with his left arm.

“Do you know who he is?”

“Not a clue.” He shook his head. “I couldn’t see him well.”

“Where’s Charlie now?”

“With the other guy, I guess. He had her by the arm and was leading her across the lobby when I went down. I ran outside, but didn’t see any sign of her. I ran the length of the block and back looking for her but she was gone.” Bobby punched his thigh. “Everyone in the lobby scrambled and got in the way. I couldn’t find her.” He’d never panicked as bad as when he realized she was gone.

“You want to tell us, now, what’s going on?” Detective Nick Aaron asked.

Bobby ran his hands through his hair.

He recited his exact interest in the cases to Detectives Collins and Aaron. He added all the facts he knew up until that point, and the information he had to back up his suspicions. They eyed him skeptically then took him down to the station.

On the ride over, he pointed out the trails that led up to the most recent events. He also included his thoughts on what everyone was in search of—the disc.

Chapter Thirteen

Scott aimed his gun at Charlie. Time had escaped her as she'd watched the landscape rush past. She knew they'd stopped somewhere between Fort Worth and Weatherford. They sat aside a long-forgotten property. A ratty "For Sale" sign stood out in front of an old farmhouse which looked vacated for the last twenty years.

The gray sky grew darker and more menacing as the clouds thickened with moisture. The fat rhythmic raindrops drummed endlessly onto the windshield. The wipers stopped in mid-swipe as Scott shut off the engine, then he sat half-turned in his seat. He'd switched his gun to his left hand where it rested it on the steering wheel, his right arm over the headrest.

His lips curled up in a snarl as he spoke. "Okay, I am sure you know what I want. Our friend Chris was pretty insistent."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Charlie kept her expression as bland as possible.

"Now, now, Miss Foster. I would have thought we were past this kind of childish game. Between you and Detective Allen I know the disc has been found."

Her mind seized, stuck on Bobby.

Where is he? How is he? Was he shot? Is he alive?

Her breathing spurted out in short, raspy bursts. She bit down hard on her lip, almost drawing blood, in order to reign in her near hysteria.

The auto's windows fogged against her heated breath, closing out the rest of the world around them.

"Sorry. Still can't help you, Mr. Bernard." She drew on her naïve, schoolgirl persona used so often to assuage her high school teachers when she had failed to produce an assigned piece of work. Unfortunately, it netted quite the opposite reaction as his face tightened.

"Fine, that's easy enough to deal with. I will just shoot you here and continue this conversation with Detective Allen."

Charlie's audible gasp widened Scott's malevolent grin.

"I... All right, I have it," she said, and then quickly added, "but not with me. Bobby...er...ah, Detective Allen doesn't know where it is."

"Yeah right," he said waving the gun in a "get on with it" motion. He raised an eyebrow and tilted his head, ready to listen.



Bobby paced the interview room at the downtown police station. He intermittently checked his watch and then his cell phone to ensure his battery was fully charged.

"Damn, where is she?"

He exchanged worried, and sometimes angry, stares with the other detectives as they called to check his statement with his commanding officer who, fortunately, had known the entire story. He had even tried to dissuade Bobby from investigating. They also ran checks on the new corpse on the long mounting list Charlie had amassed, not at her fault, all the while keeping Bobby closely monitored.

Without any hard evidence, the accusations he leveled were met with much apprehension. The man he charged with the allegations had, in the last ten years, accumulated a sizable fortune, not to mention a Fortune Five Hundred company. He was a regular philanthropist throughout

Chicago and the surrounding areas. Bobby's only saving grace was the fact that he was a cop and that made them delve deeper in his facts than they might have wanted to.

Before they had headed to the station, Bobby and Detectives Collins and Aaron had dug through Marilyn Smith's left-behind boxes. As Charlie had mentioned, there was no sign of computer or computer-related equipment. Bobby did, however, find a photo stuffed in one of the dusty boxes of Brian and his mother, which at least confirmed he and Charlie had been on the right trail.

The three detectives had then gone up to Charlie's apartment to look for any clue of what had happened to her. Bobby's anxiety tripled when he saw the broken, blood-splattered chair lying just inside the door. He also found a CD casing on the floor behind the sofa. He knew in the pit of his stomach what it meant, because he himself had replaced all the CDs to their proper casings. A large Agatha Christie book lay open on Charlie's bed. He thought back to the conversation of where the book would have come from. Speaking with Mr. Wilkenson and reading the cover page, he had verified it was indeed the book from Mrs. Smith's collection.

From the car, Bobby had called Grace's house. He'd tried again once they had reached the station. And as he paced the squad room floor, he punched the number, burned into his memory, for a third time. He left no message on the answering machine for fear of it being intercepted, by Grace or whoever had Charlie.

At his wit's end, his emotions were tight. He had fallen unexpectedly hard and extraordinarily fast for this woman whom he, almost literally, had dropped danger on her doorstep. Selfishly, he had not insisted she go with her aunt to Florida because he wanted to be with her. His

hormones and emotions got the best of him, pushing his common sense right out the back of his head.

He now berated himself for putting her in so much danger and *allowing* her to get into some of it herself. But she did have a mind of her own and she would not be told what to do, by anyone. A fact that especially threatened her safety if someone was holding her—against her will.

Detective Aaron snapped him out of his self-reproach and ran down the information they had received on the second, original shooter—the one Bobby had killed in the lobby of Charlie’s apartment building. Aaron read off the many counts that rolled out of the printer.

“Says here, our two dead gunmen were often suspected in muscle-for-hire cases. Looks like most were often plain and simple hits executed, so to speak, without complications,” Aaron said. “The most disturbing fact is together they had never—I repeat, never—been charged in any of their suspected crimes. The second shooter had no rap sheet at all, not even a traffic ticket.”

“Shit,” was all Bobby could bring himself to say.

“The first shooter’s one-time incarceration, however, was for assault with a deadly weapon, attacking his girlfriend’s mother, putting her in a coma for two weeks. He served three months and was later released on a technicality. He was accused, but not proven to have, killed three fellow inmates while there.”

“And now they’re both gone—dead.” Bobby said.

“Yep, the one killed by you, the other by someone else, a more skilled hit man than they were.”

Who was still on the loose, and if Bobby’s gut was right, with Charlie.



"I hid it," she said. "It's safe. That Detective Allen was asking way too many questions so I didn't tell him I had it." *Which was the God's honest truth.*

"Let's say for a minute I believe that load of shit you're handing me, I want to know where it is."

She bit her lip.

"Where, tell me?"

Charlie sat silently and watched the vein in his neck. She had to think of something. Bobby's life was in as much danger as hers, if he was still alive. All depended on how she handled the situation. Scott's eyes narrowed. She gulped several times, couldn't swallow the lump in her throat.

"Head back to Fort Worth," she said finally. "I'll give you directions once we get close." She prayed for strength.

He sat staring blankly at her for a minute and then turned back to his seat. He set the gun between his thighs, started the car then maneuvered them back on to the frontage road in the downpour. The lot Scott parked in was at least thirty minutes outside of the Fort Worth area, judging by the road signs she saw. They made a U-turn under the highway overpass and sped up the onramp and headed for the city.

Charlie wrung her hands in her lap and chewed on her lower lip. She had to figure out what to do—how to get away. She had thirty minutes to formulate a plan. Her mind scanned the area like a tourist map. *Where to take him?* She needed an open space with the fewest people around in order to get away without jeopardizing anyone else's life.

Shifting in her seat, the gun in her waistband dug into her back. She turned to look out the window to hide her surprise. She had all but forgotten about Grace's gun. Could she use it? Could she shoot someone in cold blood?

And was it cold blood if her life depended on it?

She knew she was physically capable of firing the gun. The many trips with Grace to the gun range assured her. But she had not shared Grace's enthusiasm for weapons and had only gone as a favor to her aunt who had wanted her to learn how to protect herself. She was not emotionally prepared to aim the gun at someone and fire, possibly taking a life. However, the situation had come down to him or her, and she was rooting for her.

Charlie jumped as a muffled, electronic Mozart ditty echoed in the silent car. Scott reached into his sports coat and produced a small cell phone. Speaking in affirmatives and negatives, he then turned the phone off and tossed it between them on the seat. Charlie looked at it briefly and turned to her view outside the moving car, her thoughts going back to a plan of attack.

Charlie's mind had drifted from her own safety into thoughts of Bobby. Her chest tightened..

Could he be lying there on the cold tile floor bleeding to death?

Don't think about him, she told herself.

But try as she might, she couldn't block him from her mind. She could still feel Bobby's touch, his warm breath on her skin. She remembered waking in his arms before the morning light broke, to make sure he was really there. To make sure that it hadn't been a dream. And a few hours ago, they had sat at Grace's table, eating breakfast and chatting. She shook her head in disbelief. That had only been a few hours ago, not days like it felt.

"You know it's a shame you got mixed up in all this. Such a waste."

Charlie shivered and opened her eyes.

“Such a pretty young girl.” Scott reached across the seat and fondled her hair. When she flinched away from his touch and glowered at him, he howled with laughter.

Again, he pressed his hand into her hair and stroked her cheek. She smacked his hand away. Driving down the lightly-trafficked highway, he reared back, punched at her face and connected with her left cheekbone.

Charlie shrieked with pain. Tears sprang from her eyes. It was the first time in their brief encounter he had lost his temper. She shielded her face with her arms from further blows. Another punch landed on her just above her wrist.

“Stupid bitch,” he mumbled under his breath.

Charlie’s emotional rollercoaster crested with anger, her decision to get away and—if she had to—kill him, solidified. She sniffed back tears, wiped her face, careful of the welt growing under her eye, and sat straighter in her seat.

“Do you know where the Botanical Garden is?” she asked as they crossed the city line. Scott shook his head and Charlie gave him precise directions. She was counting on the place being deserted due to the dreary weather. She wagered any schools would have postponed their outings thanks to the soggy woods. Few, if any, tourists would be milling about the wet grounds.

I spent many summers, running and playing in the trees. Greg and I had a picnic lunch here just last month. So many memories tied to the gardens. One more would be indelibly embedded into her brain—if she survived.

As they approached the highway exit for the gardens, Charlie directed him to a seldom-used entrance, away from the conservatory. The car sloshed down the small gravel road to a desolate parking area hidden from the road by many trees. Putting the car in park, he turned to her.

“Well, where is it?”

“I hid it. Out there.” She motioned across the wooded area to the left of the car.

He raised his gun to her face. Her breath stalled in her lungs. But he simply removed the keys from the car’s ignition. He motioned for her to get out of the car. As she slid out her door, she grabbed the cell phone from the front seat. Scott’s eye line was just above the roof as she snatched it. She shoved the phone in her jacket pocket, hoping he hadn’t seen.

He rounded the car with the gun trained at her head. Grabbing her by the shoulder, he pushed her forward. She thrust her hands in her pockets, feigning protection from the rain and slight breeze. She wandered toward the south-west corner of the gardens, getting as far away from the conservation building-information center as possible.

She racked her brain, trying to remember Bobby’s cell phone number. Her fingers skittered across the buttons as she mentally shouted at herself to think. The seven-seven-three area code popped into her head. She was usually so good at remembering numbers, but under regular circumstances. Her patience waned and she bit at her lip, thinking hard as she trudged through the sticky, wet woods.

Then it came to her in a rush of exhilaration. She felt the buttons blindly and dialed his number—or so she hoped. She coughed to disguise the touch-tones beeping in her pocket. Her mind flashed back to when she was fifteen, her father teased her she would be able to dial a phone in her sleep. She now hoped he had been right and that she had somehow managed to connect with Bobby.

Chapter Fourteen

“So can I ask you a question?” Charlie wandered through the trees. Scott mumbled something so she continued on, “Why’d you have to kill Greg? He didn’t have anything to do with this.” Charlie’s wet hair clung to the sides of her face and the back of her neck. A musky scent rose to her nose from the wet leaves turned up under their feet.

Her heart pounded. She couldn’t remember ever being this scared in her entire life. In a little less than two weeks, her world had turned nightmarish. She shuddered, thinking what Scott might do to her. Her brain frantically searched for ways to shield herself and escape.

And she wanted to pull the phone from her pocket to see if she connected with Bobby but didn’t dare tip her hand if indeed she had.

Scott laughed, his nasty chortle breaking her from her thoughts.

“Those two assholes,” he said from behind her. “They were sent to do a simple fucking job. But they screwed that up. I guess everyone has a down day. But now they are way down. Six feet under.”

She jolted at the words that Greg had spoken the week before.

“And we have our friend Detective Allen to thank for helping me take care of the situation. Hurry up.” He shoved her. “You know, he may be joining them if you don’t get on with this.”

She slipped on a slick patch of grass. She recovered and asked, “What does Bobby...er...ah...Detective Allen have to do with any this?”

“Bobby’ huh? Are we a little sweet on the detective, now? Bobby always did have a good eye for the women. I remember Kristen, his fiancée. You’re much prettier than she was, though; you have a much firmer body.” He nudged her butt with the tip of his gun. “She was back before Jamie...died.”

Her blood ran cold.

Scott Bernard’s words were hard and uneven, an unforgiving tone that eerily threatened.

“What do you know about the death of Bobby’s older brother?”

“Don’t worry yourself about that.” He motioned her on with the gun barrel. “He and I will take that up later.”

Charlie shook her head. Things couldn’t get more tangled up than they had. *Snap out of it*, she thought. She was running out of time, and forest. They’d walked the distance of the park, near the western edge. With the trees spaced irregularly, the view of the fence and outlying roads was hidden, but she knew they were closing in on it. Charlie steered him toward the northern portion of the park and headed across, almost parallel with the back of the property.

Her soaked sneakers slipped on the wet ground foliage. She put her hands out to brace herself against the trees and got many nicks and cuts from the winter-torn bark that had yet to fall from the trees.

Ironically, she hoped Scott wouldn’t trip. Charlie didn’t want to get shot in the back of the head by accident.

“You’re probably wondering why I would pick the Botanical Garden to hide a disc.” Charlie prayed Bobby was listening on the other end.

“I wanted to keep it safe,” Charlie said. “And I knew no one would look for it here. It’s very valuable, considering how damaging the information on it is.”

“Are you trying to tell me you looked at it?” He laughed. “Yeah sure. Okay.”

“Well, your boss, Mr. Harrington right?” She hedged her bet and turned to see if his face registered any emotion. None...yet, she thought. “He wasn’t very bright to leave such incriminating evidence lying around in the basement archives for any computer geek to find. I mean, really.”

“Just shut up and walk.”

“Oh sorry. I should have realized you’d be touchy about your boss. After all, when he goes down, well, you go directly to jail. Don’t pass go. Yada, yada. But...” Charlie shrugged, “if somehow you manage to get yourself un-associated with him and stay out of jail, you’re still out of work. That sucks,” Charlie said. “You know, I heard on the news the other day that unemployment has risen. Bad timing for an involuntary career change.”

Scott seized her shoulder and whirled her around to face him. His angry eyes narrowed to small devilish slits as they took in her smug smirk.

Oops, she thought, *one too many*. She’d hit a nerve and didn’t realize how deep until he raised his large arm back and swung. The full force connected a couple of large knuckles across her already-swollen cheek.

Charlie screamed and doubled over.

Blood trickled down Charlie’s cheek, dripped on her rain-soaked sneakers. Pain subsided and she stood to face him, chin held high.

“Does it make you feel good to hit a woman so much smaller than you?” She didn’t wait for an answer. “Do you want me to find the damn disc or not?”

His grip tightened on the gun, but had acquired a slight quiver. “Hurry it up. I’m losing my patience with you, Miss Foster.”

“No kidding.” She marched on. “We’re almost there.” She was still faking every step, then she remembered a maintenance shed nearby. She hoped she could get to it before his patience wore completely out.

“Now you know...there is the possibility that we made a copy or two of this. Bobby will know who to contact with the information,” she said, giving up all pretense of not knowing Bobby personally.

“If he’s not already dead, he won’t live long enough to tell anyone.” Scott’s breathing grew heavier behind her.

Could Bobby really be dead? Was Bobby coming to rescue her? Was the cavalry on its way? She willed herself to calm down and keep him talking. She needed more time. “You’re awful sure of yourself.”

“You underestimate me, Miss Foster,” he said.

“You can’t be too good. None of you. Y’all thought I was a man. Right? That is why Greg got killed, by mistake. Y’all thought he was me. Not real smart.”

“I’m not here to debate two worthless, pieces-of-shit hit men. If you don’t produce the disc in the next two minutes, I will just pop you and go get Bobby, and go home.”

Charlie slowed her steps as they approached the shed. “Which is it? Either Bobby is dead or not, you can’t have it both ways.” The words burned her gut, but she went on. “As threats go, you need to make up your mind.”

His hand whipped out lightning fast and cracked across the same spot he’d hit earlier. “You are one mouthy bitch.”

“Asshole.” Charlie spat the blood from her mouth at him.

Scott Bernard shoved the cold barrel of the gun to her temple. “That’s it.”

“You won’t get the disc this way.” She stared him in the eye. “Do you want it or not?”

Scott lowered the gun. And shoved her toward the building.

"Stop shoving me." She closed her eyes and with a deep intake of air said yet another quick prayer.

"Where is it?" Scott demanded as Charlie turned to face him.

"It's in a plastic bag tucked in the overhang. There." Charlie pointed and hoped she could get away.

"Get it."

Charlie didn't move.

"*Now*," he yelled.

"I can't reach it, it's...too high." Charlie stared at her shoes to hide the fear she knew must show on her face. Her pulse raced, her heart pounded in her chest.

"How the hell did you get it up there in the first place?" he asked. "You move one fucking inch and I will shoot you. You got that?" He stretched his body, up on the tips of his toes, and reached into the roof overhang. His gun hand hung un-aimed.

Now or never, she thought.

Charlie took one more breath and reared back her leg. With all the strength she could muster, she kneed him square in his crotch. Scott collapsed to the ground, writhing and swearing, as Charlie ran around to the other side of the small gardener's shed.

Grunts and groans came from behind the small building as Charlie sprinted for the trees. She dared not look over her shoulder for fear of slowing down. Her own ragged breaths came, spewing from her quivering lips, as she pulled the gun from her waistband.

Rain soaked sneakers slowed her, and she slipped as she zigzagged through the park.

As she passed by a tree, the trunk exploded by her head.

“Shit, he’s shooting at me,” she yelled into the damp air as her brain registered the noise. “Oh God.” She continued to run.

Another shot echoed through the air. At the same time, a burning sensation of white-hot pain radiated from her left thigh. She took a few more steps before her leg collapsed, toppling her to the ground. During the fall, she heard yet another shot. She hit the ground, her left arm numbed.

Charlie rolled from her side to her back covered in wet, sticky leaves. She saw Scott near, and without thinking, she raised the gun with her right hand and squeezed off a shot, grazing his shoulder. He slowed at her first shot, but continued advancing on her.

A natural instinct to survive made her raise the gun again.

Charlie’s second and third shots went wide right. He continued toward her. The fourth bullet ripped into his side and knocked him to the ground out of her line of sight but still she fired and fired.

When the gun did no more than click, Charlie dropped her head back down to the wet earth, unable to hold it up any longer. She closed her eyes to the rain that fell again. The taste of blood and dirt filled her mouth. A musty, muddy smell clogged her nose and gagged her.

She was done.

If the bullets hadn’t stopped him, there was nothing more she could do, her energy drained. Tears blended with the rain. Hysterical cries shook her chest. Her lungs expanded and contracted at a fevered pace, hyperventilating. Her brain was beyond comprehension.

Charlie’s ears rang. She thought she heard shouts of men. The ground around her head shook with a slight tremor. Hallucinations, she decided. But before she could clear her head and open her eyes, someone lifted her off the ground.

Frightened, she thrashed and started to scream when a familiar, reassuring voice penetrated.

"I've got you, baby. You're all right." Bobby's soothing voice broke through her haze and comforted her as he ran with her in his arms.

"He shot me," she said in a small whispered voice. "My leg...hurts... I can't feel my left arm... I shot him... Where's he? D'you get him?" Her words came out in shaky spurts.

She wanted so much to look into Bobby's eyes, to see that she was fine. But she didn't have the energy.

"Shhh, don't worry about him. We have to get you to the hospital." Lips pressed against her forehead.

She heard other voices.

"Let us carry her the rest of the way," one said.

Bobby didn't answer, didn't relinquish control of her to anyone. Her face pressed to his chest, for warmth and protection. Bobby's heart pounded, beating an urgent rhythm against her cheek. He smelled of rain, sweat and his scent, musk and lavender. It soothed her.

Charlie grew weary. Sounds and smells swirled in her head, tightening like a vise. She struggled not to subside to the murky fog threatening to envelope her. She opened her eyes, finally, to push back the wave of dizziness. Bobby smiled a weak smile. He gave her a quick kiss on the forehead then laid her on a gurney. Two paramedics quickly loaded her into the back of an ambulance.

Bobby jumped in beside Charlie to ride along to the hospital. One hand stroked her matted, wet hair as the other rubbed the back of her hand. She whispered.

"I can't hear you." Bobby leaned in, with his ear touching her mouth. "What?"

"I have the disc. It's in my purse."

Darkness pulled her in.

Chapter Fifteen

Charlie awoke. Her head pounded, leg burned and left arm and shoulder throbbed. Her eyes fluttered open to a dimly-lit, bland room. She saw white, empty walls. The only exception was what she presumed to be a big black clock. But her eyes were too fuzzy to make out anything else. Breathing echoed in her ears and she realized that someone else was in the room with her. She moved her head toward the sound to find Bobby sleeping upright in a chair, a blanket pulled up under his chin.

She shifted, uncomfortable in her bed, trying to ease the stiffness in her back. The strain on all her injuries forced an involuntary groan from her. Bobby shot up out of the chair and was beside her, looking down into her eyes.

“Hey there.” He stroked her cheek and kissed her on the temple.

“You’re alive.” She hadn’t registered anything before when he’d found her in the woods. Her heart raced and she tried to smile in return, but her dry, cracked lips broke and burned at her attempt.

“What time is it?” Charlie asked, breaking the stillness.

Bobby looked at his watch. “A little after three.”

“A.M.?” Charlie guessed, due to the dimness of the room.

Bobby nodded. “You went straight into surgery for your leg. The bullet passed through and didn’t hit anything major. But it will hurt like hell for a while.”

“What’s wrong with my arm? Did I get shot there, too?”

“No, you dislocated your shoulder when you fell. You have a nasty bruise on your elbow, too. It’ll be stiff and sore, but it’s okay. All in all you were remarkably lucky. Painkillers and a lot of R and R and you will be back to normal.”

Charlie’s eyes widened. “Did you arrest him? Did you guys get him?”

Bobby said nothing. His gaze fell to the floor, then back behind her head on a spot on the wall.

She thought of what happened and what he wasn’t saying. “I killed him. Oh my God, I killed someone.” She squeezed her eyes shut. Her breath heaved as she fought back tears.

“Well, no. Or at least we don’t know. There was no one around when we got to you. There were bloodstains on the ground twenty feet from where you were.” Bobby paused. “They searched the entire garden area and found nothing. There were more bloodstains in the south parking lot. So you did hit him,” Bobby said it almost as a consolation, which did not assuage the jumbled feelings growing in her.

“Bobby, he’s coming for you. He knows who you are. Things about you.” Charlie, panic stricken, tried to sit up.

He leaned her back with his hand on her uninjured shoulder, soothing her with his touch. “Who was he? Did he give you a name?” he asked.

“Scott something.” Pain fogged her mind. “I can’t remember, I’m sorry.”

“Bernard?” Bobby’s expression grew rigid. “Was it Scott Bernard?”

“Yeah, that’s it. He said he knew Jamie, too.”

“Yeah, I heard what he said over the phone. I couldn’t place the voice at the time, but damn...” He ran a hand through his hair. “I’ll be right back.”

He left the room. As the door opened to the brightly-lit hallway, Charlie saw two uniformed officers standing guard. Bobby walked past them and out into the hall. The door closed before she could see anything else.

He returned moments later with a nurse. She checked Charlie's bandages and her shoulder. After she helped Charlie shift to a more comfortable position, she handed her a much-welcomed glass of water and painkillers. As the nurse left, Bobby scooted the chair up next to the side of her bed and took her hand in his.

Charlie said nothing. Her eyes wet with tears and she clenched her jaw.

"What's wrong, Charlie?" he asked.

"I, ah, never shot anyone before. It was horrible. I mean, it hurt like hell when he shot me and I did that to him, too."

"You didn't have a choice."

She remembered the shoot out in the lobby. "Was that the first time you ever shot anyone?"

"No," he shook his head, "but it's the first time I ever killed anyone."

Charlie hadn't considered the fate of the man in the lobby. Her chest tightened and the tears fell onto her cheeks. Bobby had killed someone. He shot someone to death, someone who was going to kill her. He'd protected her, saved her life from the gunman. She then had to save her own life from the second man—the one who took her.

Thoughts jumbled and rolled over in her mind, her mind too fuzzy to concentrate on anything important. She looked up at his thoughtful brown eyes. Her heart did another extra pitter-patter as he touched her face with the back of his hand, caressed her cheek.

"Bobby." Sleep slurred her voice.

"Yes?"

“I’m glad you’re here.” She closed her eyes and slid off to sleep.

Charlie slept on and off for the next ten hours. Her pains had all settled into an even, overall bearable soreness with an occasional spike just to remind her how truly injured she was. Every time her eyes opened, Bobby sat hunched in the chair next to her bed. An even smile graced her view, as her eyes would focus through a tired haze.

When her eyes opened the next afternoon, the previous gray day had diminished and the sun blazed bright in the sky. The blinds in the room were only open a quarter of the way but yielded much of the day’s offering. Bobby snored in the standard hospital chair, a day and a half of scraggily beard shadowing his tan cheeks.

Deep lines creased his forehead even in sleep. But there he was, next to her bed.

The door to her room opened a crack and shook her out of her thoughts. Charlie raised a finger to her mouth to quiet a familiar face. Detective Aaron entered, arms loaded down with flowers and a plush, chocolate-brown teddy bear. He set the flowers across the room and handed her the bear.

“Bobby showed us the one in your apartment. I thought you might like a new friend,” he whispered and tweaked the bear’s ear.

“Thanks. This is so nice.” Charlie shifted to sit up some and winced, but bit off the pain before she could make it audible.

“My daughter is your age...and well... I’m just glad you’re safe now. The worst part was waiting.”

Their low voices stirred Bobby in his sleep, but he didn’t wake. Detective Aaron moved closer to her bedside and leaned against the frame.

“He hasn’t left your side since they brought you up from surgery.” Aaron looked at Bobby and back again. “How are you feeling?”

“I’ve been better.” The corner of her mouth tilted up.

He nodded. “How long do you have to stay here?”

“What’s today? Friday? I don’t even know what day of the week it is.”

She was amazed at the progression of the last few days. “They said I can go home Sunday. The doctor just wants to keep me here for observation. I think Bobby may’ve had something to do with that.” She glanced at him. Her gaze turned back to Aaron. “Can you tell me what’s going on with Scott Bernard?”

“We are in a holding pattern for the moment. He hasn’t turned up anywhere. But we have our computer guys working on that disc. From what Bobby’s told me and what we’ve found on the disc so far, Harrington Enterprises is in for a rough ride. Harrington himself is probably looking at hard time for embezzlement. Unfortunately, we still can’t tie him to the shooters.”

Charlie tried to hide her disappointment, but released a heavy sigh and shifted her gaze to the light-filled window. Detective Aaron squeezed her hand and said his good-byes.

When he left, she scanned her new temporary digs. Charlie’s only other hospital stay occurred over Christmas break during her junior year in high school when she had her appendix taken out. She hadn’t even been born in a hospital, she mused. Her mother had had her right in her parents’ bed, no doctors, no nurses or drugs, she was told.

“You’re awake.” Bobby sat on the edge of her bed. “You look much better.”

“I wish I could say the same to you, Mr. Snore,” she teased.

He blushed under the stubble as he took her hand in his, mindful of the IVs and other tubes. “How are you feeling?”

“Achy, but I’ll live.”

“Where’d he come from?” Bobby ruffled the bear’s chocolate fur.

“Detective Aaron. He just left.” She raised her hand and patted the stubble on his cheek, letting the stiff hairs tickle her palm. “You should go and sleep in a real bed for a little while. You look totally exhausted.”

“Don’t go worrying about me, I’m fine.” He covered her hand with his and drew it to his mouth, then kissed her palm.

“Seriously though, Bobby, I saw the sentries out in the hall. I’ll be fine, if that’s what you’re worried about. Detective Aaron said you haven’t left the hospital once since I got here. Go get some decent food, sleep in a real bed. That would make me feel better.”

“Are you trying to get rid of me?” He winked at her.

“Never.” Charlie tried to smile despite the quake in the pit of her stomach thinking of him not there by her side. “Besides, I’m lousy company. All I do is sleep.” She rubbed her eyes. “Did you by any chance call Aunt Grace?”

He shook his head. “I didn’t know how to get ahold of her. Didn’t know your cousin’s last name. Do you want me to call...”

“No.” She all but yelled it out. “Sorry. I don’t want to scare her. She’s probably having a great time out there. I’ll call her later. But I do need to use the phone, to call Greg’s dad.” She paused, and rubbed her temple. “Wait!”

Bobby stiffened.

“Where are my clothes?”

“In the cabinet over there.” He motioned to a hospital-size armoire. “Why?”

“His phone is in my jacket pocket. I called you with Scott’s phone. When we were in the car, he got a phone call and left it sitting on the front seat.” Charlie winced as she shifted on the bed. It took her a moment to get her breath back from the sharp pain.

“Are you okay?” Bobby’s face filled with concern.

“Yeah. Still hurts a little.” She smiled with a brief sigh and continued. “I grabbed it when he wasn’t looking. If it was Harrington who called or has called him before, it can tie them together, from the phone records or something. Can’t it?”

Bobby’s face brightened. He leaned over and kissed her forehead. Across the room, he rifled in the cabinet and extracted the cell phone and left the room without another word.

Charlie sat alone for a bit, she needed to get up if she could and pushed the page button for the nurse. When she came, the two maneuvered Charlie to her feet. She leaned on a single hospital-issued crutch. Charlie was in much more pain than she had anticipated. Tears rolled down her cheeks and her breath caught as sharp pains shot through her thigh even with minimal-to-no-pressure.

Her small trip around the room led her into the bathroom. Charlie gasped at the Technicolor montage on the left side of her face. A bruised and swollen cheek highlighted puffy and blackened eyes. She hardly remembered Scott hitting her. It was the least obtrusive of his assaults on her. She tried in vain to smooth out her matted hair, stuck in clumps in her darkened mane.

She was in desperate need to brush her teeth. The nurse left her to stand alone long enough to retrieve the sample-size toothpaste and generic toothbrush from the cabinet. Even Charlie’s teeth were sore, but the minty paste helped revive her with a sense of normalcy. As the nurse helped her shuffle back to bed, Bobby returned. He stayed back, out of the way, as Charlie settled back into the bed. The nurse checked Charlie’s vitals and left more painkillers.

“Why didn’t you tell me I look hideous?” Charlie couldn’t meet his gaze.

“As far as I can tell you look beautiful.”

Charlie raised her eyes in disbelief, mouth agape.

“You’re alive,” he leaned down and with a gentle caress touched his lips to hers, “and mostly in one piece.”

Charlie winced again as she snorted. Bobby poured her a glass of water and handed her her pills. “Take these.”

“Yes, sir.” The cool liquid soothed her sore throat.

Bobby’s smile faded. “I am going to leave for a little while. I have some errands to run. The two officers out front will take care of you if you need anything.” He looked deep into her eyes. The fog from the pills was setting in quickly and she was becoming less aware of her surroundings. “Would you like me to stop at your aunt’s to pick anything up for you?”



Bobby loaded the bag with the items on Charlie’s list and set it by the front door. “Damn, damn, damn.” His fist pounded the wall. He hated himself more than he ever thought possible. Even after Jamie’s death and Kristen’s departure, he never thought he could hurt so bad. And he’d all but done this to her himself.



Scott stood over her. Gun in hand. His evil grin tilted his mouth. “You’re going to pay, bitch.” He cackled with laughter. “Like Bobby did.”

Charlie awoke with a start.



As she raised the end of the bed to eat, Bobby returned clean-shaven and wearing fresh clothes. His face looked well-rested, but he had only

been gone five or six hours. He carried Charlie's bag request from Grace's house as well as a bag from a discount store.

He set her bag down in the cabinet with her torn and tattered clothes. They spoke only about her food as she ate. She was ravenous, not having eaten since breakfast the day before. The food perked up her diminished spirit almost as much as seeing Bobby walk through the door.

She debated telling him about the brief but terrifying dream she'd had, then thought better of it. She could tell he wanted to beat himself up for what had happened even though none of it was his fault. Between her dream and her earlier visitor, her stomach ached and she pushed the half-eaten tray away and stared at her fingernails.

Bobby stroked her cheek with his knuckles. "What's wrong?"

"You just missed Adam. He was here before dinner." Bobby gave her a confused look. "Adam Tucker, Greg's father." Her voice cracked with tears. "The funeral was this morning." She sniffed. "He came by to check on me. Even with all he's going through he just had to make sure I was all right."

Bobby put his arms around her. "I'm so sorry you missed the funeral. In a few days when you're feeling better, you can go out to the cemetery and say your good-byes."

"It's just so damn hard."

"I bet."

Charlie fought back tears. She had been on her own long enough to learn how to keep herself together, but her rollercoaster life took one dip after another. Her head spun.

She wiped at her cheeks and pushed Bobby back. She ran her hand through her cleaned hair, thankful the nurse had come in to help her wash out the muck. The place in her hairline itched.

“Look, they took out my stitches.” She parted her hair, her scalp still tender. She didn’t know how to do this post-sex and a-mad-man-just-tried-to-kill-me dance with Bobby. Normalcy seemed so far out of reach, but she needed to glom onto something before she went insane.

He leaned forward and looked at her head. “That’s great. You can barely even see where they were. No one will even notice.”

When he said nothing else, she lowered the bed and leaned back. “What’s in the sack?”

“Oh, this?” A smile grew across his face. “I bought you something.” From the sack, he pulled out a gaudy pair of lime green sunglasses with rhinestone embellishment around the rims and a bright red, floral scarf. He placed the glasses on her and fashioned the scarf into a sling. “Now you’re stylin’.”

“You are too much. Thank you.” She adjusted the glasses to look over the rims. “You look far too rested to have only been gone a few hours.”

“Amazing what a long, hot shower can do.”

“Tell me about it.” Charlie felt grimy, all bandaged and cooped up, somewhat immobile. “You want to take a walk? The doctor said I need to get up and move around some more.”

“Sure, hang on, I brought your robe.” He retrieved it from the bag and helped Charlie out of bed. When he draped it over her shoulders, Charlie gingerly stepped, using the crutch and Bobby for support.

Bobby gave a nod to the two officers as they came out. “Take ten.”

“Yes, sir.”

Charlie and Bobby walked down past the nurses’ station, where they all admired her new ensemble, as well as her handsome escort.

“The girls can’t help stare at you, can they?”

“What do you mean?” He gave her a curious look.

“Didn’t you see the way...” He hadn’t given the other women a glance.
“Never mind.”

The waiting room was empty except for the sound of the television someone left on. Visiting hours were long past, but due to Charlie’s circumstance and multiple guards, her rules were flexible. Charlie hobbled to the floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked a smartly manicured patio/garden area. The tinted glass prevented anyone from viewing her or anyone else from the ground, but it did little to hide her reflection.

“Aw, man.”

Chapter Sixteen

“You okay?” Bobby let his hand settle into the small of her back.

“Yeah, just caught my reflection again.” She turned her body toward him, leaning on the window for support.

“You sure you’re up for this?”

“No. But I needed to get out of there for a while. Hurts like hell but feels better than being all cooped up staring at the same four walls.”

She wanted to ask him how long he’d be sticking around, but wasn’t sure she wanted to know his answer. No time like the present, though, she decided. “Um, so are you going back home now? Now that you have Harrington?”

“No, not just yet. I still have some time left on my leave.”

Charlie’s heart beat faster. She looked at her feet to hide her smile.

“And I still have to find Scott.”

That slammed Charlie. Her smile faded as fast as it came and her heart beat a wild tattoo of embarrassment.

Bobby put his hand under her chin and raised her face to look at his. He removed her glasses and held her gaze in his. “Someone has to make sure you’re safe. I can’t have him coming after you now, can I?”

So he’s staying out of duty for his job, as a police officer, she decided.

“Can you help me back to my room?” she asked. “I’m getting tired.” Charlie couldn’t bear to see him at the moment. For some silly reason, she’d thought he wanted to stay for *her*. To be near *her*. Young girl

fantasies. Instead, he'd decided to stay for the job. At least she hadn't embarrassed herself and blurted out that she loved him or something.

Her mind reeled. *Love*. Did she? She thought so, maybe, but after the past two weeks, she didn't know if she had one emotion in her body not tied to death and destruction.

Sure, they'd had great sex. But love that does not make.

"Hello, earth to Charlie." Bobby snapped his fingers in her face.

"Sorry. I was thinking..." her mind suddenly switched gears, "...about Aunt Grace. Can I borrow your phone? I still haven't called her."

He frowned. "Sure." He pulled it from his pocket and waited as she hobbled to a chair before accepting his phone as he sat beside her.

"Hi, it's Charlie. Can I speak with Grace?"

"Charlie, how are you darlin'?" Elizabeth asked when she answered the phone.

"Fine thanks."

"Good, good. Your aunt tells me you've met a nice man. Don't let him get away."

"Yeah, sure." Charlie blushed again as Elizabeth called Grace to the phone.

"Hi, honey, how are you doing?"

"Fine, Aunt Grace. How's the trip going?"

"Wonderful. Are you all right? You don't sound good."

"I'm okay. A little tired." Charlie felt guilty lying. "I didn't get a chance to check in with you earlier. I'm still not sure when I might be able to get down there."

"Have you seen much of Detective Allen?"

"Yes. He's here with me right now, as a matter of fact."

"Oooh, goody." Grace laughed on the other end of the phone. Charlie laughed, too, cracked lips and all.

“Grace, he, ah, extended his trip a few days longer so I may not make it down there at all.”

“Not a problem. Don’t worry about me. We are having a grand old time. Does his staying have anything to do with the mess at the store?”

“Kind of. But I can’t say much about it.”

“Oh really?”

“It’s not like that. I don’t know the first thing about police procedures and such. Anyway, I just wanted to keep in touch. I love you,” Charlie said almost too briskly.

“Love you, too, honey. Tell our police officer hello for me.” She hung up still laughing.

“Grace says hello.” Charlie handed him back the phone, feigned a yawn. “I really am getting tired.”



Saturday came and went with no surprises or changes. The extent of Charlie’s day was spent sleeping or walking around. Bobby, again, never left her side. He slept when she slept, helped her exercise her legs, and kept her spirits high—out of duty.

She managed to convince the doctor and the officers to let her eat in the cafeteria. She gained her life back one minute at a time. She realized, too, that she hadn’t once had a cigarette. Not that she didn’t crave it, but her priorities had changed. She couldn’t believe it took a hit man shooting her in the leg to break her of the nasty habit. She wondered if her aunt would see the irony of it all.

Saturday evening, with much persistence and a little bit of pleading, Charlie persuaded Bobby to leave and sleep in a real bed. Just before eleven, he reluctantly decided to leave, taking the keys to Grace’s house. Blowing her a kiss, he slipped through the door.

Nightmares riddled Charlie's sleep. Horrifying flashes of Scott's face plagued her pleasant dreams of Bobby. Guns were brandished, bullets flew. Blood covered everything. She bolted awake. Her hair was soaked with sweat. Getting out of bed, she fumbled for her crutch and covered the gap between her bed and the door with a slow and unsteady stroll. Charlie braced herself against the wall and knocked on the door with the crutch. One of the officers peeked his head in.

"Just checking," she said. She ambled back to bed while her pulse evened out.

Sunday morning, eight A.M. sharp, Bobby walked through the door, eyes bright and cheeks rosy from a good night's sleep. In his hands, he carried an ornate black lacquered walking cane. Charlie had seen one like it before in the woodcraft store in the mall.

"For you, madam." He bent at the waist and offered the cane.

"You know," Charlie smiled and kissed his cheek, "a girl could get used to this." *Even if you are just doing your job*, she mentally added.

They chatted while Charlie waited for the doctor to release her. Once he came in, he did a last check of her wounds and signed the papers. He wrote her a much-needed prescription for Vicodin. Out of modesty, a nurse came in and helped Charlie change into fresh clothing for her departure while Bobby waited in the hall.

Clad in her red floral scarf sling and her lime green glasses, she announced she was ready to roll. She eased into the wheelchair, which was required to leave the hospital, and balanced her crutch on her lap. Bobby shouldered her bag and scanned the room to ensure nothing was left behind. Charlie shook her head and laughed to herself.

"What?" he asked with a silly grin.

“What kind of ad is this for my store?” She wiggled her sock-covered feet. “My shoes didn’t make it. I own a shoe store but have no shoes to wear home. Hope nobody sees me.”



After a stop at the pharmacy to drop off Charlie’s prescription, Bobby pulled to the curb at Grace’s. Charlie realized what a welcome a sight it was. She breathed an easy breath for the first time in many days.

Bobby hopped out of the car and ran to the other side to help Charlie out. She limped up the walk, taking in as much fresh air as her lungs would hold. The smell of honeysuckle brought her back to her childhood visits to the house when her days were carefree and innocent.

He helped her navigate the living room. “You sit.” Bobby herded her to the couch. “I’ll go get the rest of your things in the car.”

The comfort of the small house immediately worked its magic on her. She sank into the navy and white gingham sofa and stretched her aching leg on the coffee table. After taking her duffel bag to the guest bedroom, Bobby returned to the living room and propped a pillow under her foot before taking his seat across from her in the straight back chair.

“You need anything? Thirsty?” he asked.

Her eyes connected with his as they drew her in and he captured her gaze. Eyes so thoughtful and intense. He said so much with just a look of pure compassion that it melted her heart. A warm, and unexpected, rush ran through her. She had been independent for so long she forgot what it felt like to need someone.

She had a wonderful relationship with Grace, but it was different from the love of a man and a woman. Charlie realized, once she’d found Bobby, what had been lacking in her life. Soul shattering love. Pure,

unadulterated love. Love for another human had come rapidly and impetuously.

But he was only there for his job. She was unfinished business to him. He didn't feel the same way toward her.

Charlie had mentally wandered off, brought back by Bobby's strong dulcet voice. "Charlie? Are you in there?" He paused. "You okay?"

"Oh sorry, I was lost in my thoughts." She smiled at him. "What'd you ask me?"

"If I could get you anything. Would you like a drink?"

She shook her head and looked at him sideways. Her cheeks pinkened, and she quickly looked away.

"What?" he prompted.

"Nothing. I can't ask." She dropped her eyes to her hands and fumbled with her shirt hem. "Never mind."

"What?" He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees.

"It's just... I haven't..." Her cheeks flamed.

"Yes?" he prompted her.

"I can't raise my arm, and I need a shower... But I can't ask you to..."

"Why, Miss Foster, are you asking me to shower with you?" He pretended to be flustered, fanned his face with his hand.

The heat in Charlie's cheeks intensified. "Never mind."

He stopped and looked in her eyes. "I'm sorry. I'm just teasing. I know you need help. Say *when* and I'm at your service." A blush sneaked under his tanned skin.

"Could we...?" She motioned with her eyes.

"Say no more." He rose from the chair and scooped her up in his arms. "Please don't take offense if I don't kiss you or anything," his breath tickled her throat, "even if I want to. I don't need any distractions when I play nursemaid."

“O-okay.” She shivered at the thought of his mouth on her once again. Not that he would anyway. He’d made the point to tell her she was just a job.

After he lowered her to the quilted bed, he stepped into the bathroom to start the shower. He, so carefully, undressed them both.

Charlie kept her eyes averted, not wanting to see his naked body. It was only out of sheer necessity that she’d asked him to shower with her.

Yeah, right.

He was doing a job, and she was taking advantage of his servitude.

Oh yeah.

Nothing sexual, getting clean.

Uh-huh.

Think of something else, she warned herself. She ran over the first rack of shoes in her stock, did a mental recitation by color and size, but nothing helped. She knew he stood an arm’s length away, naked as a jaybird.

Then a pain tugged at her shoulder and pulled all thoughts from Bobby.

Charlie made a conscious effort not to move anymore. She tried unsuccessfully to stand alone without her cane. The strength in her leg was returning gradually but required more time to mend fully.

Bobby lifted her once again, not releasing her until they were both inside the curtained bathtub. His hands supported her while she positioned herself up against the tiled wall and steadied herself on her own weight.

They both stood, letting the hot water run down, knead their shoulders, wash away thoughts and tensions.

Bobby pulled her hair from her neck and put it on the top of her head and lathered it in the strawberry-scented shampoo.

“How’s this?” He worked his fingers nimbly through her hair, massaging her head and neck.

“Mmm, good.”

Something between a moan and a growl rumbled through Bobby’s chest.

“I’m going to wash mine real quick, ‘kay?”

Charlie nodded while his hands hurried through his own hair.

He chuckled, shampooing quickly. “This is a first for me.”

“You’ve never showered with a woman before?” Charlie fought not to run her hands up his thighs. So far, she’d managed nothing more than a quick glance or two at his remarkable physique. If she had anything more, she didn’t think she could stop herself, or worse yet, be able to handle whatever he might need.

“Well, okay, I have, but it was a long time ago. Nothing like this though.”

“I’m glad to know you don’t often have to help wounded women with their bathing.”

He chuckled again as she shifted and leaned against him, his strong chest against her back, as the water washed the lather from both.

He took the frilly, raspberry-scented shower gel and soaped up his hands and ran them smoothly across her body, with gentle caresses over her skin. Delicately, more than she thought a man could be, he washed her; his hands, almost graceful and tender, cleansed her. She could feel his heart race against her back and his breath on her neck in spite of the water. Her own breath grew heavy.

Sure seems like he’s doing more than a job.

Bobby dipped his head beside hers and nuzzled her neck. “I’m sorry,” he whispered into her ear.

“For?”

“I can’t help myself.”

Her body melted to his as his hands cupped her breasts then trailed lower to touch her, arouse her. His hard shaft pressed against her hip and she moaned and closed her eyes.

Raising her right arm over her head, she ran her fingers through his wet hair and pulled him closer to her, brought his mouth to hers, lips warm, and asking for more.

He hugged her close to him as his finger dipped inside her.

“Bobby, I can’t...”

Water rolled off pert nipples, splashed around.

“I’ve got you.” He took a nip at her ear as he continued to bring her to climax. So close.

Charlie fisted her hand in his hair, bit her lower lip until she couldn’t hold back then shook with release.

“Do you trust me?” Bobby turned off the water and kissed her neck. When she nodded he said, “Put your hand on the wall.”

She did as he asked, then he shifted until he could slip into her from behind.

His hips rocked into her, and for a moment, she didn’t think she’d be able to hold herself, but he wrapped his other arm around her, held her tight to him.

“Charlie, my God.” He nipped at her throat. Pumped his hips.

“I’m so close, again. I can’t, oh, I ah...” She had never experienced anything like this before. Bobby pushed and pushed her until she exploded, and a moment later, he followed.



On the bed, Bobby intertwined his fingers with hers and brought her hand to his mouth to kiss her palm gently as he stretched out beside her.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that.”

“Why? Did you do something wrong?” She smiled up at him. “It felt right to me.”

“That’s not what I meant. You’re hurt...” A frown pulled his mouth down.

“Bobby, I could have stopped you if I didn’t want to, right?”

“Well, yeah, but...”

Charlie kissed his hand. “Trust me. I’m not complaining.” She shivered uncontrollably from her wet hair and the wet bedding beneath her.

“Let me get you something.” Bobby rose and retrieved two towels from the bathroom. He wrapped her in both to warm her and kissed her once more before locating his jeans and dressing.

She watched his muscular physique, graceful and strong, move across the room. As he bent to pick up his shirt, Charlie noticed the gash in his arm.

“What the hell is that?” She motioned with her head at his arm and pushed herself up against the headboard.

“The guy from your lobby,” he answered.

“Oh God, Bobby. I didn’t realize he actually shot you.” Tears popped out before she could stop herself. Somehow, she had managed to block all the bad that had happened only days before. But the evidence was too much to ignore. “No one told me you were hit. I just assumed...”

“Charlie, I’m fine.” He sat next to her on the bed. “Really, the bullet just grazed my arm. It’s a scratch.”

Charlie broke down crying, nearly hysterical. “This is all too much. I get shot...you get shot...Greg and Brian get killed...even way back when,” she paused, “your brother is tied into all this. And the worst thing is, a man is still out there after us and I’m sure he’s pissed at *me* for shooting *him*.” Tears flowed down her face, absorbed into the plump terrycloth towel around her.

She pushed at his hands. “I’m sorry... I’m fine. I’m frustrated and scared to death... I hurt.” She shook her head. “And I’m just exhausted. I’m sorry...venting.” Her rant ended on a sputter and she released a heavy, tear-cleansing sigh. “And I am hungry. Can you help me get dressed? In the closet, there’s a pair of sweats and a T-shirt.”

Chapter Seventeen

Bobby put on his shirt and helped Charlie into her clothes and plugged a hair dryer in next to the bed to help her dry her hair.

Charlie looked up at him when he finished. “I apologize for freaking out.” She ran her hand through her dry hair. “You know, you may want to reconsider staying here the next few weeks. I’m an awful lot of trouble.” She offered him an out. A weak one, but nonetheless an out. It was the least she could do. How pathetic was she to want him around even for a few weeks, even if it was only out of obligation?

“I know it’s hard for you. And it’s going to be, but it’s not like you have this sort of thing happen to you everyday—right?”

She shot him the evil eye as he helped her limp into the living room.

“Kidding, kidding.” He feigned choking as she tightened her grip around his neck. His button-down shirt still hung open and exposed his well-chiseled chest when he helped her to the sofa.

She grabbed him by the shirtfront and pulled him to her, kissed him hard. “Button up your shirt. Too tempting.” She winked. “You want lunch now. I’m an excellent take-out orderer. How about pizza?”

He nodded and she phoned the local pizza place. She left her cane next to the sofa and slowly hobbled into the kitchen, using the furniture as a prop. She readied a tray with soda, napkins and paper plates and dug into Grace’s cookie jar to extract a crisp twenty-dollar bill. One-handed, she attempted to carry the tray into the living room. With only

the first step, her weight shifted to her wounded leg and unable to support her self, the tray fell crashing to the floor.

Bobby charged into the kitchen and almost laughed at the pile of paper dinnerware covering the floor at her feet.

"I'm useless. I can't even get lunch taken care of." She wanted to kick at the pile but didn't have the strength to do it.

"It's okay. I'll get it." Bobby kissed her forehead, bent down and picked up the mess, restocked the tray. He grabbed two fresh sodas from the fridge, carried it all into the living room and set it on the coffee table. Charlie meandered behind, grumbling under her breath. The smile he turned to her with melted her icy frown.

"You know the doctor told you to take it easy for a while. He said you had to be patient getting your strength back. You're not very good at being dependent on others, are you?"

"That's an understatement! I'm used to taking care of myself—living alone. This is difficult."

"There's no shame in needing help, you know?"

"Oh really? Bobby, when was the last time you needed help and asked for it? Huh?" Charlie raised an eyebrow and tilted her head to the side.

"You got me there. But there was a time when I should have asked. And because I didn't it cost me," he paused, "a lot." His eyes cast down.

"Sorry." She cleared her throat. "You know I'm usually a much better date than this."

"Oh so this is a date now?"

"I, ah...well... I didn't mean..."

"I know what you meant." He squeezed her knee. "By the way," his brown eyes scrunched together, his mouth tightened, "I meant to have a word with you about that gun you had."

“It’s Grace’s.”

“I know that. Aaron ran a trace on it. My question is, why didn’t you tell me you were carrying it?”

“I thought you might try to take it away from me. And I thought I might need a little extra protection. Silly me.” Anger tightened her chest. “If I hadn’t had it, I’d be dead right now.” The words caught in her throat.

She hadn’t truly considered the fact. They both fell into silence, side by side on the sofa. Bobby slid his arm next to hers, captured her hand in his. Charlie laid her head on his shoulder and closed her eyes, letting her mind empty.

The front bell jarred her awake. Bobby left her on the sofa and he paid for the pizza. They ate quietly. Greasy, fatty food, as always, perked up her mood. After the meal, they relaxed on the sofa, watching television. Charlie leaned up against his chest, his arm warmly, protectively, draped around her. She wanted to never leave this position or time. Duty or not, for the moment, he was hers.



In the late afternoon hours, they walked the length of the block. Charlie mastered the use of her cane as they strolled in the crisp early evening. When they returned, they retired to the back porch swing to let Charlie rest. Together, they watched the sun fade into night, arm in arm, on the swing.

Later, Bobby offered to make dinner for the two of them. He found chicken breasts in the freezer and thawed them in the microwave. In the pantry, he found several single-serving, quick-fix pasta dinners. He prepared two fettuccini dinners and cooked up the chicken with garlic and onion.

After their peaceful meal, Charlie grew sore and tired. “Oh man, we forgot to pick up my pain pills.” She rubbed her shoulder. “It’s been sore, but I’ve been distracted all day and forgot.”

“I can run out and get it.” He rose from the couch. “I have to get some clothes from my hotel room anyway.”

“You’re staying here—tonight? I didn’t even think about that.” Pain and fatigue had skewed her thinking.

“I’m not about to leave you here by yourself, Charlie. Especially since you refused police protection. Someone needs to be here.” His brows knitted together, a frown pulled down his mouth.

“There’s no way that Scott would know about Grace’s house. I’ll be fine here.” But she wanted him to stay. She needed him, in more ways than just to help her get around. She needed to feel a human connection.

“This is non-negotiable.”

“Fine,” she said with a hint of annoyance to hide the fact that she was secretly thrilled he was staying and it was his idea. “Well then, you might as well check out from there and bring your stuff here. No point in wasting anymore money on a place you’re not staying at.”

He agreed, decided to make a short grocery list and said he’d be gone no more than an hour. He kissed her on the forehead and went on his errands.

After only fifteen minutes, Charlie grew antsy being all alone. She looked through Grace’s bookcase for something to read and pulled out a thin tourist book on Williamsburg, Virginia. Grace had a trip planned there for early summer.



The phone on the end table rang as Charlie finished chapter five. She checked her watch, wondering if Bobby was calling to check in on her. He had been gone for more than forty-five minutes.

“Hello?”

Silence.

Not dead end of the line silence, but someone saying nothing silence. She repeated her greeting, netting the same empty silence.

She hung up, resumed her read. She’d gotten another two pages in it when the phone again rang.

“Hello?” Just as her earlier call, no sound traveled through the wire. “Hello?” No response. “This is getting tiresome.” Charlie hung up the phone.

She looked at the book on her lap but did not bother to pick it up. Her mind was too preoccupied to focus on the pages. Her gaze shifted to the phone, waiting for the next call. She quickly stole a look at the clock to wonder about Bobby’s return. She debated calling his cell phone to check on his progress, but he was due back soon enough.

She lifted the cordless handset, tried to convince herself to call. Before she could make up her mind and dial, the phone rang in her hand, startling her. She closed her eyes as she pushed the talk button.

“Hello?”

Empty, silent air.

“This is enough. Stop calling here.”

“*Bitch!*” was screamed through the earpiece.

Without turning off the phone, she threw it across the room. It landed with a crashing thud into a porcelain figurine she had made in summer camp some twenty years back. Her shaking hand ran through her hair, fear shortening her breath. She fiddled with the sling, checked

the knot's security. Thinking of anything and everything but the telephone.

She nearly leapt off the sofa when someone pounded on the front door. She held her breath, eyes wide, staring at it. Her imagination ran scenes from teeny-bopper horror films. She waited for the door to come alive, breathing on its own. Only to explode, revealing a portal to the nether world. Or a deranged ax murderer splits the door in one fell swoop. The masked assailant, having gained entrance, pokes his head through with an evil laugh that curls the toes...

"Charlie. Are you going to let me in?" Bobby called from the other side of the door.

The second she opened the door, she launched herself into his arms and told him of the three anonymous phone calls—the last, being vicious and frightening. Bobby tried to calm her, telling her it was probably just a prank, though his voice didn't sound too convincing.

Finally, she settled down with his comforting words and a hot cup of tea. Bobby brought her the painkillers, a glass of water and an apple. She accepted all three without argument. She rubbed her temple and thanked him for the snack.

"You know, you haven't had a cigarette in several days," he said out of nowhere.

She chewed a bit of apple for a moment. "Two reasons. First, I realized how winded I was running from...through the woods. Second, I was in the hospital for three and a half days, and they don't let you smoke. Don't think I haven't considered it," she said before taking another big bite out of the apple.

After finishing her snack, she asked, "Would you mind if I went to bed? I'm beat."

"No. Go on." He smiled at her and kissed her cheek as she passed by.

She slipped into her bed fully clothed, too tired and deciding it was too much trouble to change. Despite her fatigue, she lay awake and stared at the darkened wall. The pain medication fogged her thoughts. An overall numbness filled her body, removed her from the pain, but sleep still stayed at bay.

Bobby's face filled her thoughts. His face, his body, his touch. Her heart beat faster just thinking about him.

Could she truly be in love with Bobby? They'd only just met, but Charlie'd had an instant attraction. She'd dismissed her feelings the first night, chalked it up to too much beer. But when Bobby had come to her apartment after the destruction, the moment his eyes met hers, she knew. The night they made love confirmed her feelings. *Now what do I do? Enjoy it while it lasts*, she finally decided.

She could still feel his strong hands on her. And his hot breath on her neck. Her heart raced as she remembered his strong lips on her skin. Finally, she slid off into the fantasies in her head, sleep warmed by her thoughts.



Bobby sat awake in the living room, worried about the phone calls. He had hoped their problems were over. He should have known better. He'd been naïve when he had thought Scott might try to flee the country, escaping any jail time or retribution from William Harrington's wrath. Bobby knew deep down, Scott only had revenge on his mind.

For hours, Bobby sat in the living room and waited. Waited for anything unusual to happen. Waited for an attack. He kept the sound on the television low and the lights mostly out. Several times, he walked throughout the house, checked doors and windows to ensure they were locked tight.

Bobby had called Detective Aaron and asked him to send by extra patrols. If they received any further odd phone calls or threats, he would get her the hell away from there. Maybe that would be running away, but Charlie would be safe. And her safety was the only important factor.



After midnight, Bobby undressed in the hall, so as not to wake Charlie. He climbed into bed with her after much debate with himself.

He knew he needed to try and distance himself from her. He only had three more weeks on his leave before it was back to Chicago and what was left of his real life.

They were on borrowed time.

But he couldn't stay away. He needed to feel her beside him, know she was okay. The last few days left his nerves raw and exposed.

He heard her sigh when he slipped his arm around her stomach, pressed his chest to her back and whispered to her, "Charlie, you mean more to me than I can tell you right now. I've never felt this way about anyone before in my entire life. I'll just die if anything happens to you." Tears fell from his eyes. "I can't believe I've put you in so much danger. I jeopardized your whole world. I'm so sorry. I promise I will protect you with all my power."

He realized it was too late to protect his heart. Charlie had it now. And if he had to he'd... He didn't know. Maybe up and quit the force. Relocate to Texas. Or better yet, beg her to come with him. But he knew she wouldn't. Her life was too entwined in Fort Worth to up and move. Just as his own was in Chicago. He shook his head.

"All I know," he paused for a long breath, "I love you."



Her eyes opened, adjusted to the orange haze of morning light. The room was quiet and still, all but for their breathing. Birds were, however, singing and stirring outside the window. She lay on her back with Bobby's arm still across her stomach. His face, only a few inches from hers, was calm and mellow in sleep. She smiled as she gazed at his full lips and sharp cheeks, his body, soft and comfortable lying next to her. So natural, so right.

She freed her right arm, pinned to her side, without disturbing his sleep. Her fingers trailed from his shoulder down to his elbow, stopping briefly at the cut on his arm from the lobby man's bullet. Her heart dropped briefly. She hated that man. Dead or alive, she hated him. Guilt washed over her, more by her feelings, not his death. He had tried to kill her, so it was as it had to be—unfortunately.

And now Scott Bernard.

Where was the bastard? Had the police found him? Would his harassment end?

Lost in thought, she jolted as Bobby's arm tightened around her waist. He tilted his head up and kissed her. He removed his arm from her middle and gingerly touched her puffy cheek. His fingers slid to her lips and trailed across them. Bobby lowered his mouth to hers again for a brief but riveting kiss before he rolled off the bed.

Charlie watched him walk across the room for the door. Just clad in pajama bottoms, his defined back and shoulder muscles flexed and rolled as he stretched before he slipped quietly out of the room.

Charlie struggled to sit up on her own, her entire body stiff. Even her hair hurt. She discovered a knot behind her ear, in her hairline. She couldn't imagine where it came from.

Dropping her legs off the side of the bed, the hardwood floor chilled her feet.

She twisted at the waist from left to right, lifted her left elbow until the pain halted her progress. Back down to her side, she straightened her arm and tested her shoulder, tried to move it up and down. The stiffness and pain quickly made her stop. She let her arm go slack and draped it around her waist, looking for the sling. It lay at the foot of the bed. Gingerly, she stood trying to carry her weight mostly on her right leg. She would have a limp for a while, the doctor had said, but the strength was ever so slowly increasing. Winded, she rounded the bed and retrieved her red floral sling as Bobby returned with two steamy cups of coffee.

She propped herself up on the bed and accepted the hot cup. She blew on the liquid and took a cautious sip. "Hey, watch this," she told Bobby. She repeated her lifting action with her arm. She lifted her elbow halfway to shoulder level. She smiled and grimaced at her accomplishment.

"How's your leg?"

"Getting better. It doesn't hurt as bad. Do you think we could go out somewhere this afternoon? I feel so cooped up."

"I suppose." He scratched his matted hair. "I do need to go up to the station today, to talk to Detective Aaron."

"Sounds like loads of fun." She rolled her eyes. "How about another shower first though?" She waggled her eyebrows at him.

Chapter Eighteen

Detectives Aaron, Collins and Bobby sat with Charlie in one of the interrogation rooms. The bare gray walls seemed less ominous to Charlie, being there as a part of the conversation rather than a suspect accused of a crime. After an update on Charlie's health and physical progress, their meeting got underway.

She chewed on her bottom lip as they ran down the lab technician's findings.

"We dug a bullet from a tree in the gardens and it matches the one we found in..." he scanned a piece of paper in front of him, "Randy Cozart. He's the one we found the three-fifty-seven on that killed Greg and Brian. We found Chris Scanlon's belongings, he's the one Bobby shot in your lobby," Collins said to Charlie. "His car was out behind your apartment building.

"A plastic cup in his back seat led us to a motel about ten miles away. He left abruptly the day of the hit on Randy, destroyed the hell out of the place. We found the briefcase and its contents scattered throughout the room. He also left all of Randy's clothes behind.

"The motel manager recognized a photo of Chris and his partner. Both as having checked in two weeks ago, the day of the hit on Brian McMillen."

Detective Aaron pulled out the coroner's photos of Chris and Randy and passed them across the table to Bobby and Charlie.

She peered down at the photos. She remembered Chris's drawn face. He'd seemed unnerved and frightened when he'd busted into her room. She pointed to him and Bobby nodded. "That's the one from the lobby."

Charlie quickly looked away from the emotionless face of death.

"We've had absolutely no news on Scott Bernard. We have sent out notices to all the hospitals in the area. But you know that nowadays you can always find what you need at the right price. Even doctors can be bought. We aren't even sure how badly he was hit.

"One other bit of news," Aaron rattled on, "William Harrington has now liquidated all his personal and company assets and has apparently skipped town. One of your guys was tailing him," he motioned to Bobby, "and he went to his lawyer's office. After three hours, the detective got suspicious and went in after him, but he had slipped out a back exit no one knew about—except of course the lawyer."

Charlie jumped when Bobby cursed under his breath and slammed his fist against the table.

"Harrington's name is out there. People are looking for him. He won't be able to get anything going in the States again." Nick Aaron shook his head. They all knew how much money Harrington had amassed in the liquidation. He would never hurt for cash.

"Well, that's something." Bobby sat and thought for a moment. "Here's what I think happened, Harrington had his own tail on Brian up in Chicago. When he ran, they took him out but failed to get the disc. They must have figured he had it on him, but then couldn't find it.

"For whatever reason, they missed the briefcase and took out Greg," he squeezed Charlie's hand under the table, "thinking he was Charlie and had already found it. Hell, I thought Greg was Charlie at first."

"I guess I could see how that might happen, all the news reports had Charlie, not Charleston. Not that that is an overly feminine name

anyway.” Detective Aaron smiled at her. As a matter of fact, all three men sat with amused, crooked smiles.

“Ha, ha, very funny.” She nudged Bobby’s arm.

“My guess is,” Bobby said, returning to the topic, “Scott was sent down here to clean up Randy and Chris’s mess, including them. When Charlie had him on the phone, he said something to that effect.

“But now that the disc has been recovered and exposed, I just don’t know what to expect. He’s on pretty shaky ground every which way he turns. A rational person would cut their losses and hightail it out of here. But he’s not a rational person. Never really was.” Bobby shook his head.



“If I had known Scott was in town and involved in all this, I would have put you on that plane to Florida myself,” Bobby said in the car on the way back to Grace’s house. “You would never have been in any danger.”

“Why? What does Scott have to do with this, other than a hired gun?”

“He has a grudge. We go back almost fifteen years.”

“I gathered that, but what is the grudge about?”

“I got him kicked off the force just after Jamie died,” he said with no emotion.

“He was a cop?” Charlie’s mouth fell open. “What did he do...to get kicked off the force, I mean.”

“He got mixed up with the hard stuff while he was on the job.”

Charlie scrunched her forehead and looked at him, blank.

“Cocaine. He was flying high more often than not and he got to be a danger for whoever he was out with. Which most often was me.

“He and I caught a case together and he nearly got me killed because he wasn’t paying attention. The guy we were after had a partner and

Scott missed him when we were checking out his apartment. He came out of one of the closets shooting. The only fortunate thing was the suspect's friend was higher than Scott and couldn't shoot straight. Missed my head by two inches."

Charlie's stomach lurched.

"I couldn't let it go and turned it over to my captain, who had had too many complaints not to turn him over. IAD got a hold of it because come to find out Scott's biggest narc was also his supplier. Someone the department had been trying to bust for years. He got kicked off the force."

"So how did he get involved with the mess down here?" She turned to look out the window as they drove the streets near Grace's.

"Rumor has it that when he left the force he began working for Harrington as a 'private security firm'." He snorted. "More like his own personal muscle. I've never been able to tie him with Harrington before."

"Do you think he knew you were involved down here?"

"Maybe, but I don't know. I was quietly working on this, and as far as I know, Brian hadn't told anyone he had talked to me. Coulda just been a hell of a coincidence."

Charlie sighed. "Where do you think he went? Are we safe?"

"I don't know how he could find out about your aunt's house. He doesn't even know her name," he said as he pulled to the curb in front of Grace's house.

In the mail at Grace's, a solitary postcard stuck halfway out from the box.

Bobby read it aloud as they ventured up the walk to the door. "Elizabeth and I walked along the beach yesterday for two hours. It was glorious. Hope you and your cop are having fun. You know you might consider Chicago for your next vacation. Love ya much, Aunt Grace."

“Well, she’s real subtle, isn’t she?” They both laughed.

Bobby opened the door and allowed Charlie to pass through first. Her uneven gait slowed her, but Bobby never said an impatient or unkind word to her.

The hairs on the back of her neck pricked up the instant she crossed the threshold. Something felt off, but she couldn’t place it. A rush of uneasiness swept through her as she looked around the living room. Although finding nothing amiss, she still had to tell Bobby that she felt spooked. She turned around as he came through the door behind her.

Her eyes widened in fear. Shock stole the breath from her lungs, and she was unable to scream. Bobby landed unconscious at her feet, face planted flat on the looped rug. His back rose and fell with labored, but evident, breathing.

Scott Bernard stood over him, hand raised from the blow to the back of Bobby’s head with the butt of the gun. Never taking his eyes off Charlie, he shut and locked the door before he stepped over and around Bobby’s limp body. He laughed aloud, a deep guttural growl. Almost a howl.

Charlie’s body froze, while her mind raced.

Run, she thought, run.

Scott stood over Bobby, his gun pointed down at his head.

He’s going to shoot Bobby. I can’t run and let him die.

“Oh, God. Please don’t shoot him.” Tears rolled from her eyes. “Just leave. You can still get away from here. They aren’t looking for you.” She swiped at her cheek. “They think you’ve already left the country. My aunt has a stash of money in the freezer. It’s not a lot, but it can get you just about anywhere. Please take it and leave.”

“Shut up, you stupid bitch.”

Charlie clamped her mouth shut.

His eyes narrowed on hers. "You bitch. You're gonna pay for this."

He charged at her from across the room. Charlie bolted for the kitchen, using her cane for momentum. As she rounded the dinette table for the hallway, he lunged at her, kicking her cane out from under her. She crashed to the tile floor.

In an awkward prone position, Charlie tried to bring her knees up under her. She dragged herself down the hallway.

Adrenaline overrode any and all pain, but her stiff and weak leg slowed her. She grabbed her cane and whacked Scott on the temple as he advanced on her again. He stumbled backward, catching his rump on the corner of the counter, and yelped.

Charlie continued down the hallway toward Grace's bedroom, her right arm and leg in frenzied motion.

Damn, the department still has Grace's gun, she thought, frantic to protect herself. She remembered the twenty-two-gauge rifle Grace had had as a child. Charlie's grandfather had taught her aunt and father to shoot. Grace still had the gun in her closet and kept it in working condition. *If I can just reach it.*

Heavy footsteps rushed down the hardwood floor behind her. Two arms encircled her waist and hauled her off the floor. Scott carried her to the first door on the right, Grace's room, and kicked the door. The wood splintered at his touch. Charlie grabbed the doorframe, holding on with what remaining strength she had. But Scott pounded her hand loose with his fist, bruising and bloodying her fingers.

Help me, she thought. Then she realized no one could help her. She was at Scott's mercy. Of which she was sure he had none. *I'm going to die* repeated over and over in her head.

Scott threw Charlie down on the bed, puffing and grunting.

I will not go easily, she decided.

Rearing up her uninjured leg, she kicked him. Her first attempt landed heavily in his side but didn't slow him. On her second attempt, he grabbed her leg and pinned the lower half of her body under his. Open fisted, he backhanded her across the face, stunning her still.

"You're going to pay for this, you bitch," he repeated over and over again through tightly-clenched teeth.

He covered her throat with his big beefy hand, holding her to the bed, allowing very little oxygen, as he undid his belt with his other hand. He pulled the leather strap free from his pant loops with a final twitch of the wrist.

Releasing her neck, he grabbed her right wrist and wound the leather tight around it. Then looping it through the iron headboard, he raised her arm over her head. He went after her left arm and she screamed, wrestling under him to free herself, useless under his weight as he straddled her stomach.

"Please, my shoulder was dislocated. I can't move it over my head." Fat tears streamed down her face.

"Oh poor baby." He seized her left wrist from the floral sling, whipping it over her head.

Charlie screamed a blood-curdling cry. White, hot pain ran through her, ears rang and the world turned to blackness.



Charlie awoke to Scott's slaps, her entire face burning from his large hands. She discovered her other wrist was bound to the bed, above her head.

She wished she were having another nightmare. Hoped she would wake from a fitful dream and find Bobby asleep beside her. But it was not. It was stark reality that sat only a few inches above her as her mind

cleared. She could see into his bloodshot eyes as they bore into her own. His breath, sour and stale, rustled her hair.

“I want you awake for this.” He scowled at her.

He straddled her, sat low on her hips, raised his face inches from hers and stroked her bound arms. Charlie cringed and looked away when fear and disgust pleased him, excited him.

“I’m going to enjoy this,” he said.

Every inch of her shook beneath him. “Someone help me.”

“Not gonna happen.” His steady hands groped the bottom of her floral T-shirt then ripped it up the length and exposed her pink bra underneath. He bent down onto her body again, put his face between her breasts. Charlie felt his teeth, rough and biting on her skin. She bucked under him, tried to throw him off her legs.

Laughing, he sat up, turning at the waist. When he faced her again, he revealed a knife. Charlie stilled instantly.

He ran the flat side of the blade across her chest then slipped the blade under her bra, between her breasts, and sliced through the thin material. Settling the knife by her head, he used both hands to tear away the cotton bra. His hands fondled her as more tears ran from her eyes. Scott’s fingers glided over her trembling skin, touching whatever he pleased.

“Get the hell off me, you asshole!” Charlie screamed and thrashed. Fear had turned to cold, hard anger, an emotion she didn’t think possible. “Get off! Get off! Bastard, get off of me!”

He smiled at her, as if amused, and continued to grope her. “Aw, come on, Charlie. You’ll enjoy this, I know I will.”

“Go to hell!” She spat in his face.

“That was real stupid, bitch.”

He snatched up the knife from the pillow so fast Charlie could feel a breeze from his hand. He waved the shiny blade in front of her vision before settling it on her right cheek. At first, the tip of the knife just touched her face. Then the cold blade pressed in firm and hard, then bit into her skin.

“Real stupid,” he said.

He pushed the blade harder into her flesh, which burned for a minute before it numbed. Warm blood ran down her cheek. Shallow breaths hissed through Charlie’s nose, her lips tight in a straight line. She refused to scream.

She closed her eyes and tried to imagine she was somewhere else. But her thoughts focused on Bobby lying helpless, unconscious on the living room floor.

I wish I had told you how much you mean to me, Bobby. I love you.

Thoughts of Grace surged. Guilt she couldn’t say good-bye and worse for Grace to come home to find such a horrific scene.

She prayed a silent prayer.

Charlie’s eyes flew open as he slithered his body down her legs, rubbed a hand against her jean-clad hips.

She craned her neck to watch him, afraid of what he might do, as sharp tugs of pain rippled through her injured shoulder. Scott attempted to remove her jeans with one hand. The other held the knife too near her stomach for her to concentrate. He wrestled with the button on her jeans.

“Stop squirming, for God’s sake,” he said. “Make this go easier on you.”

Charlie stared at him in disbelief. “Like I am actually going to help you, you freaking lunatic.”

He set down the knife beside them on the bed and muttered “bitch” through clenched teeth as he grabbed the top of her jeans and broke the button from the denim. He pulled the zipper apart, ripping the teeth free from its hold. The sound of the tearing metal sickened Charlie as much as his rough hands. She tried to clinch her legs together, hoping to prevent him from removing her jeans. But he was too strong and she grew weaker.

“Please don’t do this. If you go now, no one will find you. Please!”

He ignored her.

“I’m begging you! Please just leave now.” She had to school her voice not to show anger.

His progress halted for a moment, his eyes hardening. “You just don’t get it, do you? I’m already a dead man. Do you really think Harrington’s going to let me walk around after screwing up? After *you* screwed everything up?” His eyes were wild, the pupils dilated. “There’s not a damn thing you can say. You’re going to die for what you did to me. But I’m going to enjoy you first.

“Then I’m going to drag Bobby’s ass in here and let him see what I did to you. He’s going to die, too.” He laughed a sick, demented laugh.

He’s totally insane.

She could think of no way out. No way to protect herself or fight off the inevitable. Helpless and hopeless, tears again welled up, and surprised her. She couldn’t believe she had any left.

His baleful grin grew as he tugged at her jeans. His cold hands glided over her as he pulled the denim the remainder of the way off, her skin shuddering at his touch. He let the jeans fall to the floor, stood at the foot of the bed and stared at her. His gaze danced over her body. His hand settled on her bandage, before he ripped off the gauze and tape to

expose the bullet wound from his gun. Charlie sucked in her breath as it stung when his fingers grazed the puckered edge of the raw, red wound.

Next, he groped for her panties with both hands, leaving her legs free. Mobility back in her legs, adrenaline pumped anew. She wiggled. Her knee caught him in the stomach and she heard the breath whoosh from his lungs. He released her underwear, moved away from her on the bed.

Charlie fought vigorously. Scott swatted away her feet until the heel of her right foot connected with his nose and a sickening crunch followed. The momentum of her kick had him flipping ass over head off the bed with a loud thud to the floor.

“Bobby!” Charlie screamed at the top of her lungs. “Bob—” A sharp pain pierced her ankle, stopping her words. She cried out, salty tears flowing into her open mouth. *How did he get the knife again so fast?*

Scott rose from the foot of the bed, the knife in his hand dripping blood, her blood. Scott’s own blood flowed from his nose. His breathing sputtered and spit from his mouth, coating Charlie’s legs with a warm spray.

Scott climbed back on the bed, pinning her legs together as he straddled her. He cut her panties away, slicing her hip.

How much more can I take?

He then dropped the knife to the floor. She heard the clang of the blade on the hardwood.

She watched as he undid his own jeans.

Oh, God please help me. I can’t stop him. God, please someone help me. Her throat tightened.

Scott’s grip went lax on her legs as he struggled with the denim.

I’m loose. My legs are loose. It’s now or never.

Charlie thrashed again. Her foot knocked heavily into his crotch, bending him at the waist, his hands clamped over his injured groin. Charlie drew her leg back and aimed for his bleeding nose.

She kicked, missed his nose but hit him on the chin and she heard his jaw pop.

I can do it. I might get out of this.

She reared back again and kicked. The heel of her foot landed on his Adam's apple, thrusting his head back.

Scott's hands flew from his crotch and clawed at his throat. A sickening wheezing sound emanated from his bubbling mouth. His eyes widened, fear replaced the madness. Charlie watched in horror as the blue of his eyes rolled up into the back of his head. He crashed heavily onto her chest, his head wedging itself under her chin.

His chest rose and fell with shallow, slow breaths until there were no more. He was dead. She had killed him. Joy and sorrow warred within her. She had protected herself and by doing so had taken another life. His for hers. *I can live with that*, she thought.

Charlie's lungs burned, she discovered with a start. She was having trouble getting air. Dead weight pressed down on her chest, hampering her own breath. The more she struggled to shift Scott's body off her own, the more it cut off her air.

I'm going to die. Help, she thought. She couldn't find enough breath to speak. *Help, I'm dying.*

She could no longer focus her eyes. They rolled upward, her lids closed.

Charlie's ears rang as she sucked for breath. Strange clatter plagued her imagination, pulling her from the room. A low growl spread through her mind, a foreign sound. Her ears strained to register it as she realized it wasn't from her mind but somewhere near. She opened her eyes and

moved her face toward the noise. A flash of blue flew past her vision, taking Scott's lifeless body with it.

Confused and frightened, she sucked in a deep breath. Cool air rushed to fill her burning lungs. Her chest felt as if she had just returned from a deep, free dive. She wiggled on the bed, releasing some of the pressure on her shoulder. Straining her head and neck as far as she could, she tried to see what had caused Scott to fall from the bed. A large mound of clothing lay on the floor, incongruous in her dizzied state.

Her breaths came with rapid succession, too much oxygen getting to her brain. On the verge of hyperventilating, Charlie closed her eyes, willed her lungs to cooperate.

The bed shifted. Someone mounted the end. *God he's not dead, it's not over.* She prepared herself for further torture and prayed again.

It wasn't until she heard her name repeated in a soft, familiar voice that she dared open her eyes. Bobby's shaking body hovered just beside her. His wild eyes softened as she looked into them.

"Bobby! Oh God, are you okay?" she asked, hoarse. He nodded. "I was so scared," she whispered, lacking the energy to speak any louder. "He hit you so hard."

"I'm fine. Don't worry about me," he said.

Charlie saw tears fall from Bobby's eyes as his crazed hands tore at the leather strap binding her to the bed. She cringed as he rotated her shoulder forward, laying her arm awkwardly across her stomach. Dislocated again, she guessed. Bobby wiped her face and cheek, pulled the quilt from the bed around her. She lay shaking even under the heavy covers.

"I thought you were dead, Charlie. I came in here and saw you lying there all bloodied..." Bobby bent his head down to hers. His wet tears fell

to her cheek. He pulled his face back and looked into her eyes. "Are you okay?" he asked.

"I... I don't know." And she didn't. Most of her body had gone numb long before. The initial pain and shock had ridded her of any feeling. She remembered the blade of Scott's knife piercing her skin many times but could feel nothing other than a pounding in her head.

"Is he dead?" she asked, calmer than she expected possible.

"Yes." Bobby looked back down at the floor for a moment. "His throat looks like it's crushed. Did you...how did you...?"

"I kicked him." Charlie's body shook harder. "I had no choice. He was going to kill us both. I had to do something." Tears fell from her eyes.

"Oh Charlie, I know." He ran a hand over her hair, then wiped the tears from her cheeks.

"Are you sure he's dead?" Her warped reasoning had seen too many horror films where the dead come back to be killed again and again. The reality of death, of killing such a horrible monster, baffled her tired brain.

"Positive." His face relaxed, grew tired and sad in one shift of his eyes. He stroked her cheek before reaching across her for the telephone.

He spoke efficiently with the nine-one-one operator. He asked that they send an ambulance and coroner. He then called the downtown station and spoke with Detective Aaron in a low, hushed voice. She caught a few words, knowing he was telling Aaron how he found her and how Scott died.

After hanging up the phone, Bobby scooped Charlie up in his arms. He held her until he heard the wail of the ambulance's arrival.

Charlie sat up against several plump pillows as the EMT reset her shoulder and cleaned her numerous cuts. The young man bandaged her dislocated shoulder and fingers.

The other young man dressed her ankle and the cut Bobby received on the back of his head from the butt of the gun. Charlie had refused to return to the hospital. She'd had her share.

When the medical technicians left, Bobby joined her on the bed.

"They found a broken window in the laundry room. That's how Scott got in," Bobby said.

"Oh." Charlie looked down at her hands, avoiding Bobby's intense gaze.

"Hey, what's the matter?" he asked.

"I, ah... I thought it was all over and I wouldn't be able to tell you how I feel."

Bobby stroked her cheek. Charlie grabbed his hand and pulled him to her. She put her hand on his face, guiding his lips to hers. With a gentle kiss, she looked up into his weary, but smiling eyes. "I love you, Bobby."

His face pinkened. "I love you too, Charlie."

The phone rang, breaking their gaze. He looked at Charlie to see if she wanted to answer it. She shrugged her shoulder and he handed the receiver to her.

She smiled at the first sound of the caller's voice.

"Hi, Aunt Grace."

Bobby smiled at Charlie and relaxed beside her on the bed.

"Hi, honey. How are you doing today?"

"Much, much better," Charlie answered with great relief in her voice.

"That's...good," Grace said, tentative. "I was calling to see if you've made any plans yet to come down here."

"Well, no, actually I..."

"Oh good," Grace said. "Elizabeth and I have a surprise for you. We went to her Bingo game last night. Sunday nights are always 'big prize'

night. Well, I only got three cards. I didn't want to waste my money, you know. We played for two hours and I didn't win a single thing. As we were about to go I decided to try one more time, it was time for the big one. Well guess who won the grand prize? Me. Can you believe it?" Grace never stopped for a breath.

"That's wonderful," Charlie said. "What'd you get?"

"A weeklong cruise to the Bahamas," Grace said.

"Super." Charlie rubbed her temple.

"How would you and the detective like to use it?"

Charlie raised her eyebrows with a laugh and looked sideways at Bobby. "You want to take a vacation?" She grinned at Bobby.

Part II

Chapter Nineteen

Charlie sighed, looking out the window, as the plane touched down at the D/FW Airport.

The trip to Chicago was the third to see Bobby in the last two months. On the trip home, Charlie realized two things: She loved Bobby more than she ever thought possible; and, with the physical distance between them, she couldn't make the relationship work.

Charlie collected her luggage and found her aunt at the parking garage across from the terminal. Her sixty-one-year-old frame bobbed as she squealed with delight once she spotted Charlie in the crowd. Her current green hair, tied back in a grandmotherly bun, gave her an incongruous look. Her most recent endeavor, besides the new hair color, had been karate lessons. She took to it quite well.

She hugged Charlie to her and cooed with excitement.

"I've only been gone a week, Aunt Grace." Charlie laughed once Grace released her powerful grip.

"Can't an aunt be happy to see her one and only niece?" Grace asked. "Tell me all about your trip. How's our detective? Is he keeping the streets of Chicago safe?" Grace hooked her hand into Charlie's elbow and walked toward the fourth row of cars.

Charlie took a deep breath and readied herself for the discussion she didn't want to endure.

Her gaze fixed on an oil spot on the ground. "Bobby's fine. We had a great time. That is, until yesterday." Charlie paused and cleared her throat. "He asked me—to move up to Chicago."

"Judging by your attitude, I take it you said no."

"I can't, Grace. I don't want to leave here. You're here. My store is here. I just can't sell my store. Dad started it for us—for me. There's too many memories."

"Honey, your dad wouldn't want you to stay here and hang on to the store if it meant losing Bobby. You do have options in that area. You don't have to sell. Keep an open mind to all the possibilities." Grace grasped Charlie's hand in hers stopped her before she could lift her bag to the trunk. "The most important thing is—do you love him?"

"You know I love him, Aunt Grace. It's not that easy." Charlie looked down at her feet, hiding her watering eyes. "We had a huge argument last night." She sighed. "I don't want to talk about this anymore." Charlie left Grace at the trunk and slipped into the passenger seat.



He waited in Charlie's apartment to surprise her when she got home. The package, adorned with sparkly gold paper and a bright red bow, sat in the center of the glass-topped coffee table. The thought of Charlie's face as she unwrapped the gift ran through his mind. His heart leapt with anticipation.

He remembered the first time he'd seen Charlie's face, her gorgeous blue eyes. She was such a beauty, more so than he could ever have anticipated. He'd been instantly attracted to her—love at first sight.

Charlie filled the room. Photos hung in perfect alignment on the living room wall, all capturing the shining essence that flowed through Charlie. The close-up shot of Charlie, her blue eyes sparkled with laughter and her blonde hair hung just so, his favorite. The smattering of freckles that covered her nose made her look like a girl just out of high school.

An endearing quality.

And her smile so natural, he couldn't help but smile back at the glossy photo.

But patience not being a strong suit, he paced the floor behind the sofa. His shoes glided over the new white Berber carpet. The green and blue flecks woven in matched the sofa and love seat. Blue, green and white plaid throw pillows lay on the sofa. A hand-stitched quilt hung across the back of the love seat.

His fingers trailed over the fabric bow as he walked past to enter the kitchen, hoping a drink would settle his nerves. There was no alcohol in the apartment. He knew she wouldn't have left much in light of her weeklong trip to Chicago, so he had to settle for a diet soda.

After finishing the drink, he deposited the can into the recycle container and sat back on the sofa to run through the surprise again. Deciding to leave the box on the coffee table where Charlie would see it when she walked through the door, he hid in her bedroom so not to reveal himself until she opened the package.

Such a clever plan, I have.

His hands clasped tightly in his lap, he glanced occasionally from the door to the wall clock. His breaths arrived and discharged in short bursts. He fought to contain himself in the short wait.

Any minute now. Charlie will be home any minute now.



"Home, sweet home." Charlie said aloud. She hugged a photo album to her chest and unlocked her apartment door. Grace had surprised her with the monogrammed leather album when she'd retrieved her car. Somehow, Grace had collected photos from Bobby's childhood and their brief but intense relationship, and presented Charlie with a wonderful treasure.

Grace always knew how to put life into perspective.

A cleansing sigh crossed her lips as she backed into her new apartment, dragging the suitcase in by its handle, only far enough to

close the door behind her. She dropped her keys and her new photo album on the foyer table. As she turned to the living room, her eyes caught the glitter of a package on her coffee table.

Her brows scrunched as her brain processed the gift. Her hands pushed through her hair, anger bubbled. Charlie had given her super explicit orders not to deliver things unannounced. She clenched her teeth and heaved breath out her nose.

She made a mental note to have a long talk with him.

Hesitantly, she approached the table and scanned the area but found no card. She tugged at the ribbon. The red fabric fell from the box, freed from its tight wrap. Charlie ripped at the golden paper. With shaky fingers, she pulled the white flap loose from the medium-sized box. Red tissue paper lined the inside and surrounded the prize. Charlie peeled back the layers of delicate paper, uncovering a silver frame lying face down.

Another photo from Aunt Grace?

She lifted the frame from the box, turned it up in her hand. A gasp escaped her mouth, echoing throughout the apartment. Her hands trembled, her eyes glued to the photo encased in the ornate sterling frame, horrified.

She and Bobby sat in front of the fountain near downtown Chicago, holding hands. Charlie remembered the afternoon only three days before. Her chest tightened as she looked at the blood drawn on the photo, which coated both she and Bobby. Small, black circles covered the faces and upper torsos.

She dropped the frame back into the box and stood, nauseated by the grotesque artwork, then staggered back a few steps, drawing one hand to her mouth, the other to her stomach. Her knees regained strength as she edged between the love seat and the sofa, reaching for the cordless phone. From the corner of her eye, she caught a shadow. A large figure,

face half-hidden by the insufficient lamp light, emerged from her bedroom.

Charlie froze, all but her mind. It raced to make sense of what was going on. She bolted for the front door, but was stopped by two strong, male hands holding her shoulders. She tried to scream, but one of the large hands slid to her mouth, muting any attempt. He surrounded her waist with his arm, lifting her from the floor. Charlie thrashed and kicked against the grip, but she was no match as he towered over her. He dragged her back to the sofa and sat, pulling her into his lap.

“I will move my hand from your mouth, but if you scream I will shoot you. Do you understand?” He whispered into her ear as he pressed something into the small of her back.

Charlie nodded under his restraint. The hand slid from her mouth. She could feel his body move as if he were digging in his jacket pocket. The smell of stale cigarettes assaulted her nose.

The telephone rang.

Charlie stiffened, but he seemed unfazed. She shook uncontrollably as the gun pressed harder into her spine. His body shuddered against hers as quiet laughter rose from him, chilling her. A cloth covered her mouth. Before she could protest, a metallic taste filled her mouth and dizziness took over her senses. Charlie tried to even her breathing but choked on the fumes that radiated from the wet cloth. Darkness engulfed her.



On the third ring, before the machine picked up, he slammed the phone down. The sudden outburst startled his partner, across the desk. He ran his hand through his disheveled hair. Curls broke at the end from lack of attention; his last haircut, before he'd met Charlie, had been several months passed.

Charlie had even commented at the beginning of her visit that she liked his “shaggy” appearance.

“Man, you got it worse than I thought.” Thomas O’Reilly, Bobby’s partner of the last four years, could read his moods. “I told you it was going to get harder to say good-bye every time she left.”

“Yeah, yeah. You told me.” Bobby swiveled his padded chair to stare out the window. The gray day outside mirrored his desolate mood. Twisting his chair back, his eyes returned to Charlie’s photo on his desk.

Bobby again rubbed his hand through his hair. His eyes slid from the frame to the pile of work on his desk. His mind, however, could not leave her. He remembered the argument they’d had the night before. He regretted it. But he couldn’t understand her reluctance to move from Fort Worth.

“Bobby, you have a call on line two,” his partner said.

“This is Detective Allen.” His fingers played with the deep scratches in the old wooden desk.

“Hey, Bobby. It’s Nick Aaron. How are ya doing?”

“Hey, man. Good. How’re you?” Bobby asked.

“Same. I’ve been thinking about you. I ran into Charlie up at the mall last week. She’s looking real good,” Nick said.

“Yeah, she’s doing great.”

“The real reason I called,” his tone changed, “my friend with the FBI got a line on William Harrington. He was spotted as late as four days ago in Mexico, but he slipped out of sight before they could get a good line on him.”

“Damn.”

“Yeah. I just wanted to keep you in the loop. Don’t forget. We still have an opening if you want it. And Bobby,” Nick paused. “Watch your back.”

“Thanks.” Bobby hung up the phone. *Yeah, Nick. I’ll watch my back, but who’ll watch Charlie’s?*

Bobby eyed his partner. "He offered the job again."

"What're you going to do?"

"I have no idea." He shook his head. "I do understand why she doesn't want to move. The store is her only link to her parents. She feels connected to the place. And since my mother moved to Arizona, I don't have any family ties left here." He shrugged. "I just don't know."

Bobby sank his hand into his pocket and removed the small, black box. He opened the squeaky lid. His fingers grazed the one-carat, square-cut diamond set in white gold.

"My grandfather saved up for five months before he proposed to my grandmother." He told his partner. "In those days, a ring like this was more than extravagant. But he'd wanted nothing but the best for her. They got married six weeks later. Said he couldn't wait any longer. Married sixty-seven years."

He flipped the lid shut, replaced the box in his pocket and stood. "I'm going to follow up on some of the leads from the Cramer case." He had to get out of the office. Get his eyes off Charlie's photo and his mind back into work.

As he hit the street, he pulled his cell phone out of his pocket and tried Charlie's number again.

He decided to leave a message. "Hey. Just called to see if you got in okay. Call my cell when you get a chance." He paused for a couple of beats. "I love you, Charlie."



Bobby's interview hadn't gone well. After searching for her for two hours, the lead suspect's sister wouldn't cooperate. She didn't trust cops and didn't want to get her brother in trouble, so she gave bare minimum answers to his questions. He could tell she was holding back info. But

his mood and temper were not the best to conduct more interviews, so he decided to head back to the station.

As Bobby waited to cross to his car, his cell phone rang.

"Detective Allen," he answered.

"Bobby, it's Grace."

"Grace? What's wrong?" The hairs on the back of his neck stood. She had never called his cell phone before.

"I'm not exactly sure. Jaleel, you know, Charlie's new manager, called my house looking for her. Apparently, she called him from the car and told him she was going to be up at work after she dropped her bags off at her apartment..."

That sounded like Charlie, ever dedicated to her store.

"...But she never showed up. That was a couple of hours ago."

"Maybe she decided to go shopping or something." His patience thin, he fought losing it with Charlie's aunt. "She's a grown woman, Grace. She doesn't have to check in with anyone. She's quite independent." As she so eloquently pointed out to him the day before.

"You don't understand, Bobby. I was worried, so I came over to her apartment. She's not here but her car is."

"So she walked. Grace, she lives within blocks of a lot of stores."

"No, damn it, listen to me," she shouted into his ear.

He stood on the street corner, unable to move. He had never heard Grace curse before.

"I found a package opened on her coffee table. It was gift-wrapped like a present. But...but it has a horrible photo in it."

She sobbed, scaring the hell out of Bobby. In the time he'd known Grace, she'd never once been out of control of her emotions.

"There's a picture of you and Charlie with...with bullet holes and blood drawn in."

"*What?*" Bobby shouted, nearly dropping the phone. "In Charlie's apartment?"

"Yeah." Grace sobbed again into the phone.

His chest constricted and he fought to even his breathing. "What the hell is going on?"

"I wish I knew. What should I do?" she asked.

"Call Nick Aaron. You remember him?"

"Yes, sure."

He rattled off Nick's number. "Tell him what you found. He may want to come over and see it. I'll get started on this end, see what I can do. Do you have a cell phone?"

"No."

Who the hell doesn't have a cell phone? Apparently, Grace.

"Why don't you head to the police station..."

"I am not about to leave here. What if she calls? Comes home?"

"You'll be safer away from there."

"Not gonna do it. Sorry."

"Grace." Bobby sighed. He knew she needed to get out of there but she was as stubborn as her niece. "Fine. Sit tight and try not to worry."

"Easier said than done."



Grace and Nick poked through every inch of Charlie's tidy apartment. Grace said everything looked to be in the usual and expected places—as best as she could tell. Other than the ghastly gift box, there were no signs of anything foul.

Nick stood in the living room. Nothing—no sign of a struggle or break-in.

He checked trashcans and the bathroom for indications of who might have been in her apartment and for how long. An empty soda can in the recycle bin and the crumpled corner of the bed his only clue someone might have waited there for her, but he couldn't be sure. He took a

moment to get the can into a plastic bag so they could have prints run on it then he joined Grace.

“She must have come in, seen the package on the table, opened it, probably thinking it was from you or Bobby, and then someone just grabbed her. They were probably waiting in her bedroom so she couldn’t see them.”

Grace rubbed her eyes with the palms of her hands then crossed the room to the phone. She called the super and left a message for him to come to 3C.

“What’s the reasoning, Detective Aaron?” Grace finally asked. “Why does this keep happening to her?”

He didn’t answer her, just looked out into nothing for a moment, then turned back to her. “I’m not sure if this is directed at her or Bobby. The photo has them both covered in blood. Do you know when this was taken?”

“No. I’ve never seen it before. Bobby just sent me a bunch of their photos for the album I made.” She nodded toward the leather album on the foyer table. “I don’t remember any with them around the fountain. It’s actually a lovely picture, if it wasn’t—damaged.” She paced the space between the living room and the kitchen. “Don’t kidnappers usually call someone? To demand money or something.”

“Not necessarily. Has she complained about being followed or harassed by someone?”

“No, not since...you know. I’m sure she would have let you know, what with that Harrington man out there.”

He nodded.

A knock at the door drew both their attention.

Nick rose and opened the door a quarter of the way.

“I was called to come here. I’m Jim Reiner...the super.”

“Come in please.” Nick opened the door and shifted to let him pass into the apartment. Nick motioned Reiner to the living room to where

Grace sat. The gray-headed man in his late fifties, clad in tan pants and a button-down denim shirt, his rolled-up sleeves exposing muscular forearms, crossed the room. His heavy work boots were silent on the thick carpet.

Grace stood with her hand out. “Mr. Reiner, thank you for coming up.” Reiner leaned in and briefly shook her hand. “I don’t know if you remember me—Grace Foster, Charlie’s aunt.”

“Of course.” He seemed to relax. “You helped her move in.” His questioning look still hung on his face.

“Yes. I need to ask you a question,” she said. “I was hoping you could help me. Did you, by any chance, let someone into Charlie’s apartment today?”

“Yeah, sure. Her brother stopped by my office and...”

“Her brother?” Grace interrupted.

“Yes, ma’am. He had a birthday gift for her.” He leaned over a bit and pointed to the table. “That’s it. Said he came into town to surprise her and could I let him into her apartment because he lost his copy of the key.”

“Mr. Reiner, she doesn’t have a brother.” Nick tried to hold his anger back.

“She doesn’t?” Reiner shook his head. “But he said—he knew she was out of town and when she would be back. He was a bit older than her, but hey, I have a brother seventeen years younger so I didn’t think about it.”

“Can you describe him to me?” Nick asked, showing Reiner his badge as he pulled out his field notebook, then poised his hand to write.

“Sure. He was taller than you. ‘Bout six-four, maybe six-five. He had blond hair, real short. An executive-type cut. He was pretty dark-skinned,” Reiner continued.

“You mean Latino or such?” Nick prompted.

“No, white but tan. Like he’d just come from a vacation somewhere where there’s a beach. He was a big guy but not fat. He works out, I’d say—muscular. I can’t remember the color of his eyes. Sorry.” Reiner shifted from foot to foot. “He was very well spoken—very polite. God, I’m sorry. I hope this hasn’t caused a big problem. He looked enough like her that I never thought... He knew things, I figured he had to know her.” Reiner’s expression paled.

“It’s not your fault, Mr. Reiner,” Nick lied. “I think that’s all we need.”

“If I can help in any way, let me know,” he offered.

“Thank you.” Grace shook his hand then led him to the door.

“Okay. So there was a man here, presumably when Charlie got home,” Nick said as soon as the door shut. “Can you try Bobby’s cell phone again?”

Grace dialed the number. “Voice mail.” She left another brief message. She also called her own home to check for messages, but there were none.

“Where is Bobby? Why hasn’t he called yet?”

Chapter Twenty

Charlie awoke with a splitting headache. A gag, packed tightly in her mouth, prevented her from speaking. Her hands bound in front of her, she lay on her side on a cold concrete floor. She tried to raise her head from the floor and look around the room, but the rhythmic pounding in her brain forced it back. She closed her eyes to pinch away the pain and bring the spinning to a minimum. Nausea threatened in waves, rippling through her stomach.

Hefty footsteps fell on the concrete floor from a distance away, but in her state, she couldn't be sure of anything. Charlie stiffened and feigned unconsciousness.

She heard a door open and close. A hand stroked her hair, almost tender despite the situation. Then it moved to her shoulder with a vigorous shake.

"Wake up, Charlie," his raspy voice whispered. "Time to get up."

Charlie fluttered her eyes open, but saw no one before her. The person behind her dragged her to a sitting position using her elbow and underarm. Pressed into a chair, Charlie focused on the cinder block walls, trying to un-double her vision. She glanced up at the ceiling to find the exposed innards of whatever warehouse she sat in.

No sound beyond breathing fell in the room. The thick primer-painted walls held out, or in, all. Dust threatened her sinuses as she sat at a folding table in the corner of the room. She breathed in short, shallow breaths for fear of sneezing.

She spied two small windows a foot apart and close to the ceiling like basement windows, with taut dingy-yellow shades pulled shut. Her head snapped back as the stranger tugged at the back of the gag.

“I’m going to take this off now. Not a sound. Understand?”

Charlie nodded.

After the cloth fell away, she swallowed a dry, empty gulp. Her lips cracked on the sides as she worked the kinks from her jaw. A Styrofoam cup appeared before her face. She sniffed before drinking. Despite uncertainty, the cool water was a welcomed relief. She slurped every drop, then the cup disappeared.

The stranger crept from behind the chair. His dark clothing spotted with dust, he remained facing away as he stood in front of her. Hands rested in his slacks pocket, he twisted on the balls of his feet to face her.

His blond hair, cut close to the scalp, showed hints of age. Tiny lines ran through his round, tan face. His gray eyes were emotionless as he stared at Charlie. His malevolent smile revealed straight white teeth, and a small dimple appeared in his lower left cheek.

Charlie sat gape-mouthed, staring at a face she never dreamed she would have the misfortune of meeting in the flesh.

Oh, shit!

“What do you want from me, Mr. Harrington?” Charlie’s hoarse voice croaked out through her dry lips.

“Well, well, well, I guess introductions are not necessary. Now that that is out of the way...” Harrington paused and reached into his jacket pocket. Charlie flinched, which drew another smile to his lips. He extracted a hard pack of cigarettes. After banging the box on the table, he popped a rolled stick in his mouth. He lit it up with a swish of his hand, concealing the lighter.

“Where are my manners? You?” Harrington offered her the pack.

Charlie had not strayed after her forced cold turkey stint in the hospital a month ago.

"I would love to. But I seem to be a little tied up at the moment." Charlie lifted her shoulders.

Harrington seemed to weigh the possibilities as he eyed her with a crooked head and an evil smirk. "I guess it would be okay. We want you comfortable—for now." His grin chilled her. He moved behind her, pressing a bit too close. He unsheathed his knife, bringing it close to her face before sinking it into the gray, heavy-duty tape, releasing it from her bare wrists.

Charlie rubbed her tender wrists and flexed her numb fingers, trying to get the blood flow moving. She accepted the filtered cigarette and inhaled as the embers ignited. She exhaled and raised the stick in a toasting gesture to her captor.

"Thank you," Charlie said, feigning gratitude. Her heart pounded in her chest.

What am I going to do?

Harrington set the other chair directly in front of her, almost knee to knee. He regarded her for a moment before he again reached into his pocket. A small cell phone was produced and placed on the table near her hand. "Let's give Robert a call. Tell him what fun we are having."

"And say what?" She eyed the phone sitting by her hand. Charlie quaked inside and prayed Harrington could not see it.

Think. Think. Think. What am I going to do?

She forced herself calm. "You haven't said what you want."

"Very simple. I want Robert to suffer—to feel loss. Like the numerous losses he has caused me. He took my life away when he destroyed my company. It wasn't the first time he has taken from me, but I guarantee it will be the last," he said, his face devoid of emotion.

"And you hope to accomplish this how?" Charlie asked, trying to keep an even tone, hiding her growing fear and contempt. She took a long drag on her cigarette, finishing the remaining smoke to the filter. She dropped

it to the floor and rubbed it out with her sneaker before returning her gaze to his.

"I already have, my dear. I have you. Something he will, no doubt, trade his life for. Quite literally."

Charlie shivered.

"Call him." Harrington pushed the phone at Charlie.

"Can I have another cigarette first?"

She tried to stall while she thought what to say. She had to somehow give Bobby a clue, though she had no idea where she was being held. But maybe the "who" would help.

"First, is there a restroom?" She played a mild wince across her face.

Harrington sighed, exasperated. He rose and with his large hand indicated that she should follow. He walked her through double metal gray doors into an empty hallway. The windowless hallway bore the same dull gray cinder blocks as her "cell", but some paint peeled off to expose a muted, yellow cement color. Four other doors lined the sparse hallway.

Harrington led her to the closest door. It opened to a small locker room, lined with ten to fifteen faded metal lockers. Signs on the walls indicated the male side from the female with poorly drawn stick figures in someone's failed attempt at art.

Rust coated the dented areas of the lockers; some had doors that hung askew. No posters or signs of any kind hung on the walls, but darker spots indicated where they'd once hung. Dust was the predominant decorating accessory. Charlie absorbed as much detail as she could with such a quick glance.

Inside the restroom, a smaller room off to the right held three stalls. Missing doors exposed old and filthy toilets. Charlie looked from the room to Harrington and back before she stepped away. She studied her pale reflection in the cracked mirror above a chipped porcelain sink. Her disheveled hair stuck every which way, while her ocean blue eyes looked stained with fatigue and fear.

The faucet sputtered as she turned the knob in hopes of cool water on her weary face. A few rusty squirts preceded the clear liquid which flowed without hesitation. Charlie let the water run over her hands and splashed her face clean. She made quick use of the facilities and returned to the sink to wash her hands, amazed there was still soap in the wall container. After rinsing the suds clean, she cupped her hands and helped herself to several drinks from the tap.

As she dried her hands on her jeans, she caught sight of a pile of papers in the corner. She tiptoed across the restroom to keep her sneakers from squeaking on the marred tiles. She shuffled through the papers and found it to be a pile of old store circulars for a department store that had closed down four months earlier.

The corporate headquarters, a small distribution center, and the main store in Texas were a few blocks from downtown Fort Worth. *Could he have brought me here?* she wondered.

"Hurry it up in there." Harrington pounded on the locker room doorway and shattered her shaky nerves.

"I'm coming." Charlie walked out. Harrington grabbed her just above the elbow, digging his fingers into the fleshy part of her arm.

Back in the room, he shoved her toward the chair and sat across from her. He offered her the cigarette she had asked for before the restroom break and also handed her the cell phone. Charlie took a deep drag from the lit cigarette, tried to settle her frazzled nerves. Releasing the lungful of nicotine, she dialed Bobby's cell number.

"Voice mail came on." She handed him the phone.

He listened for a second or two and punched the talk button to disengage the call as he stood.

"We will try him again later. This is really something that he needs to hear firsthand." Harrington paced the small room. "I will run out and get you something to eat, and then we can try again. We want you comfortable. For now." He snickered to himself.

Yeah, sure.

She followed his every move with her eyes. He knelt by the door and dug in a duffel bag Charlie had missed seeing before. He extracted a large roll of silver duct tape and something that looked like hospital gauze. In front of her, he squatted with the tools.

“Give me your feet,” he demanded. “It’s not that I don’t trust you, but you know how things are. How would it look if your kidnapper let you run amuck?” He laughed at his own miserable attempt at humor. “If you are real still, it shouldn’t hurt—much.”

He pulled the tape tight around her wrists after taping her ankles together. He stuffed a balled piece of the gauze into her mouth, secured by two revolutions of tape around her head.

“Just a precaution.” He patted her on the shoulder as he stood. “Behave.” He slid the door shut. The locks clicked.

Charlie sat with her eyes closed as her mind reeled with the unbelievable turn of events. Her brain slowly processed the gravity of her circumstances.

I’m going to die.

Deja vu rippled through her.

She decided on a worst-case scenario—Harrington would kill both her and Bobby. Best case, as far as she could figure—Harrington would only kill her. She had no idea how he planned to carry it out, but she thought it was a given. Now, she had to figure out how to make it her and only her.



“What in the hell are you doing here?” Nick moved aside, letting Bobby enter as he clasped his shoulder.

Grace rushed to Bobby and embraced him tightly, losing more tears. He released both bags, letting them crash to the floor as he allowed his

arms around her shaking body. Grace's tears soaked the shoulder of Bobby's sports coat, mixed with a few stray tears from his eyes.

"I'm so sorry." She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand as she stepped out of Bobby's arms. "My poor niece. Hasn't she been through enough the past few months? This is just too much."

Yes, it is and it's all my damn fault. Again.

The entire plane ride, he'd berated himself for the horror he'd brought into Charlie's life. If only Bobby had let his brother's death drop. If only he'd put Brian in protective custody.

If only... If only...

There were too many to list anymore. Now Charlie's life was in danger *again*, and he was certain it was...

"Where's the photo? I want to see it," Bobby said.

Grace pointed to the box on the coffee table. Bobby stiffly walked to it. Taken aback by the grotesque drawing, he willed his mind to become neutral, like the trained police officer he was. But rage and fear spread throughout his body knowing someone had invaded his world with Charlie.

"This picture... It's from... This was taken when we were at the fountain—three days ago." His hands shook as he set the photo down.

"We got a description, somewhat generic, of a man that the super let in here." Nick read Reiner's description.

"You mean he just unlocked the door and let him in without so much as an ID or anything?" Bobby tried to control his temper. He ran both hands through his hair and paced in tight circles around the living room floor. "Is this guy an idiot? Wait a minute," he said, as thoughts fell into his mind. "Read back that description." Nick obliged.

Son of a...

"Does that sound familiar? Do you have an idea who it is?" Grace sat straighter from her perch on the sofa arm.

“Unfortunately, it does. It sounds like Will, Will Harrington. I could see Reiner thinking he looked like Charlie. They have similar features.”

“Shit,” Nick blurted out. “That’s what I was afraid of. I just wanted you to confirm what I thought. I’d hoped I was mistaken.” Nick said. “Okay, if Harrington is involved, won’t he try to contact you?”

“I would think so.” Bobby fiddled with the phone in his pocket. “The damn thing’s still off. I forgot to turn it back on when I got off the plane.”

Bobby pushed the power button and checked to see if his message display came on. With no messages, he slid it back into his pocket. “All right, we need to get moving on this. Grace, you go back to your house in case someone tries to contact you there. Nick, can you get someone to watch her house?”

Nick nodded. “Yeah, I’ll call in a few favors to keep this as low key as possible. If the Feds find out, it’ll be out of our hands. I’m going up to the station to get everything in motion. Bobby, do you want me to send a guy over here?”

“No. I’ll be fine. I’m almost positive he’s not coming after anyone else. He doesn’t need to. He has the one thing he knows means anything to me. I’ll call as soon as I hear something.”

Bobby spotted Charlie’s bags by the door as Grace and Nick headed their way. As he reached for them, he saw the leather album he knew Grace made for Charlie. He flipped through the first few pages, grief gripping his throat as his and Charlie’s happy faces stared out at him from the pages.

Tears rimmed his eyes. Bobby dropped to the tiled foyer floor with the album held to his chest. Weighed down by emotion, his heart sank in a tug-of-war with his mind. Mentally, he needed to prepare. Kidnapping, especially by someone as devious as Harrington, seldom had a desired conclusion. But emotionally, he had to let himself believe she would be okay, that he would get Charlie back and be able to love her.

War raged in his gut.

He knew if he ever laid eyes on Harrington, he would kill him. Damn the consequences. The man had wreaked havoc long enough. Bobby could not stand for anyone else to be damaged by this man's ambition and self-satisfying lifestyle. Damn him.

He wiped away the splattered tears from the plastic-covered photos and replaced the book on the foyer table. Back on his feet, he hauled Charlie's suitcase and overnight bag into her room and set them on the bed. He busied himself putting away her things, as she would have done.

He found the cotton nightgown she had worn over the trip. The same gown he had bought her. He lifted it to his face, breathing in her scent. Bobby then laid it across the pillows and stored the suitcases in the top of her closet, then unpacked his own bags.

His stomach reminded him he'd neglected to eat since breakfast. On the plane, his nerves chewed on the empty stomach, forbidding the prospect of food. He stood in front of a bare refrigerator, all but for cola. He should have known there would be nothing. She had just returned from a trip and adored take-out. He scrounged through the junk drawer, rewarded with a local pizza delivery ad—her mainstay.

Forty-five minutes later, he sat in front of the TV, flipped through the channels and ate. His eyes hazily registering the pictures that rolled across the screen. Flashes of light and color reflected around the room as his mind blanked out.

The evening news came on and he pulled himself back into reality. He turned up the volume and tuned in.

Another high school shooting in middle America filled the airwaves. A car-jacking victim had been rushed to the hospital after thugs beat him up for his brand new, off-the-lot Lexus. A young, hot movie actor died from a drug overdose in a trendy Los Angeles nightclub. Evil and sadness took a break for no one or nothing.

No media coverage reported Charlie's disappearance.

As far as the world knew, Charlie Foster had no problems. With no ransom or other demands, authorities had no actual case. In fact, there was no actual assailant. Only a man believed to be Harrington, by Reiner's description, had asked to enter her apartment. And as far as they knew for sure, he could have left without ever seeing her. Only the people who knew Charlie, and knew her well, had any inkling something was considerably off in her life. But everything was purely speculation. Speculation Bobby knew in the pit of his stomach was true.

After watching Leno, Bobby crawled under the covers and pulled the quilt up under his chin. In the darkened room, he snuggled her nightgown under his head, held in a clenched fist. The smell of her surrounded him as his weighty lids closed and sleep graciously rescued him from the horrid day.

Chapter Twenty-One

A long time passed before Charlie heard any sounds. The rustle of paper jolted her. Having not heard the door unnerved her. Harrington sauntered into the room with two large take-out sacks and then set them on the table.

“Hope you’ve been a good little girl,” he joked. He appeared quite amused by his moronic sense of humor.

He is completely insane. She wanted to scream at him, knock him down and get the hell out of there, but with no food the last few days she didn’t think she could make it across the room.

He unsheathed a knife from his hip, slid it effortless under the tape at her feet and wrists. His knife hand paused by her cheek. His empty hand played with the ends of her matted hair. Harrington’s face hovered behind her head, seemed to breathe in her scent. The gleam of the knife sparkled in his eye before he moved it out of view and cut the gag free.

Charlie smacked her lips together, called up any saliva she could, swallowed dried hopes. “Can I stand and stretch?”

He grunted his assent.

She bent at the waist, popped her hips. With raised arms, she worked kinks from her back and shoulders, stiffened from hours of confinement. She became disturbingly aware of Harrington’s eyes following her every movement, taking in her every bend and twist. She fought the urge to shudder visibly.

“Now...” Harrington tossed Charlie the cellular phone. She fumbled to grab the small, black device. “Let’s try our friend again.”

Charlie dialed the phone but didn't push the send button. She cleared the screen, holding her breath. She needed more time to come up with a plan. "Voice mail again."

Harrington, without even looking at the phone, snatched it out of her hand and hung it up.

She had to hold in her sigh of relief for fear of tipping him off to her deceit.

"He probably has it turned off. He sometimes forgets to check to see if it's on."

"For your sake, let's hope he turns it on—soon." He nudged the take-out sack toward her. "Eat, you must be famished."

Charlie tore into the bag, removing a burger and fries. From the other sack, Harrington removed two large colas. Her hunger erupted, betraying her body as her stomach growled. Too many hours had passed without food, and the smell made her nauseous, but she devoured the food, nonetheless. Her inherently polite manners forced her to thank him for the food as she drank the cola.

Although renewed by the food and soda, her eyelids grew weighty. Thick yawns escaped her.

What's wrong with me?

Harrington smiled at her.

Can't think straight.

Elbows on the table, she held her head up with her hands. Tingling pricks ran down her neck and extremities. An overall numbness washed through her.

Harrington reached across the table, stroking her cheek. She was too tired to object. "Are you feeling a bit sluggish? Sleepy? It may be the pills I snuck into your food. I thought it would help you rest."

"You...you drugged...me?" Charlie's eyes narrowed to small slits, her words slurred. "You...bastard." She put her head down on the tabletop,

pillowed by her arms. She fought to stay awake. But her eyes slammed closed with a final yawn.

As darkness closed around her she heard, “I know what our friend Scott did to you, or tried to, before you killed him. I will be much more rewarded.”



Charlie’s mind fought to process, unsure at first where she lay. A concrete floor chilled her cheek. Hands and feet bound, she lay on her side. Her eyes fluttered open to the dully-lit room, which reminded her of the concrete cage she’d inhabited.

She listened, strained to hear any sounds around before she raised her head. The room itself was in utter silence. She struggled to push herself to a seated position. Her breathing rolled and caught from the effort and rushed from her lungs then she stretched her legs straight out in front of her, pumped her knees to get blood flowing.

She wiggled her wrists, to loosen the tape, succeeding only in twisting it into a tighter vise. Then, she tried to free her feet. Her stiff fingers lacked the dexterity to pull the tape loose.

Why me? What did I do to deserve this?

“Charlie, you’re awake.”

Again, without the forewarning of a creaky door, the rustle of paper bags startled her.

Harrington set the food sacks on the table, then lit a cigarette, taking a forceful drag on the white, rolled tobacco. Ashes fluttered down, falling on her face and hair. She held her breath as he let his hand fall to his side. The cigarette hovered close, taunted her with injury and pain.

“Be still.” Harrington put the cigarette back in his mouth and leaned over her. He slid a knife from his pocket. The blade, angled to her face, swayed in his hand. “No funny business.” He grabbed her hands, cut the

tape free, then pivoted on his feet and sliced through the tape at her ankles.

He kept his back to her and walked to the table, then unwrapped the breakfast, making two places at the table. Coffee and sausage biscuits perfumed the room. Charlie's stomach growled as her nostrils filled with the warm, fragrant food.

"Come on. Let's eat before the food gets cold." He bit into his breakfast sandwich. Mouth half-full, he continued, "What's the problem?"

Charlie sat on the floor. Her eyes flicked between him and the food on the table. But she maintained her position, tentative about eating anything from Harrington. She wiggled her feet, re-circulating the blood through her legs, her eyes never leaving him.

"There's nothing in the food this time, Charlie. I promise. I want you awake for a while. You need to eat. Hurry, it's getting cold." He took a sip of his coffee, turning his attention back to the food.

"And you've been so honest and above board." She stood and grabbed her aching head, pounding from the movement. "Man."

Harrington clucked his tongue at her but made no comment.

Legs straight, she locked her knees to keep from falling back to the hard floor. Still half-bent at the waist, she let her hands drop from her head and placed them on her hips to right herself.

"I apologize that the accommodations aren't more to your liking. But you have Bobby to thank for that."

Charlie made no comment. Muscles she never knew ached and protested movement after such a long and tight confinement. She could almost hear blood rush around her body, moving through areas that had been sufficiently lacking for so long.

"I apologize for my appearance. I hadn't had time to prepare for my trip." She approached the table and dusted her clothing in vain before sitting. Her mouth, dry as paper, eagerly accepted the coffee and the

food. It slid down her throat, awakening her system. Most of the heat had escaped from the Styrofoam coffee cup, but it was still welcomed.

"You're more than I expected. I can see why Bobby took a shine to you."

Charlie limited her vision to her food or her side of the table, not venturing to meet his gaze as she scarfed down the cherry danish he presented her. Finishing the last of her food, she gathered up the wrappers, tidying the table.

"You know, Bobby probably doesn't even know I'm missing. I don't have any family or anything that will have missed me to alert him. As far as he knows, my life is as usual." She cleared her throat. "He and my business are all that I have. Had. Bobby and I, well...there's not much there anymore. We kind of had a falling out the day I came home. I really don't expect him to try to contact me any time soon." Her words tumbled out.

"Ms. Foster, you have quite an imagination. I saw the two of you in Chicago. The two of you were all over each other. So much love. It was more than apparent."

She tried not to blanch. *He'd been in Chicago?* She remembered the photo. Of course he had.

"Mr. Harrington, why would I lie?" she asked.

"For my benefit, surely. It is admirable that you would try to protect your man at your own expense. Quite admirable—but useless."

"Think what you want, but I'm telling you he won't care. You are wasting your time to use me as bait. You don't..."

Harrington held a condescending grin on his face, tilting his head with raised eyebrows. "Go on, Charlie. I find this quite entertaining."

"Look, Mr. Harrington, this is embarrassing enough as it is without you making me say it out loud." Charlie lowered her gaze to the table.

Make him feel sorry for you. Make him believe it.

"I'll play along for a little bit..."

Charlie flinched. *Is he reading my mind? No, it's just the lack of food and the drugs.*

"What could have happened that changed your entire future so quickly?"

"I..." Charlie released a sigh. "Well, we were having a wonderful time. He took me out to a couple of nice restaurants. We saw a movie and a show at the Chicago Shakespeare Theater." She glanced up at Harrington. "Shakespeare, for God's sake. We took a lovely walk through downtown, but I guess you know all that." She narrowed her eyes. He held her gaze, saying nothing.

"Anyway, the last night he had a romantic evening planned. Dinner on his balcony with candles and wine. Soft music played. I was so overwhelmed, so... I ah, I asked him to marry me."

"You're making this up."

"Nope." She hoped the blush that came to her cheeks looked like embarrassment, not out-and-out lying. "I only wish. He said no. He said that we were having fun and why ruin it by getting tied down together. Tied down," she threw her hands up in the air, "his exact words. Said I was fine to hang around with, but not the kind of wife he wanted."

"Well, that did it for me. I laid into him, told him he had been stringing me along just to have something to do. You know what he did? He laughed at me. Told me to grow up. I spent the rest of my trip locked in his bathroom," she said. "I honestly don't think he'll be calling anytime soon." She hoped he was buying it.

He rose from the table, turned his back on her.

"Miss Foster, you are such an incredible liar. I saw the two of you together. And I know Robert. He would never treat a woman that way. He was, and is, so obviously in love with you. I don't like being lied to, Miss Foster."

He turned to face her, anger spread across his face. Charlie's cheeks burned hotter. She opened her mouth to protest, but he held his hand up, silencing her.

"You know, Miss Foster, I have to hand it to you. That was very clever trying to persuade me that our Robert used you. But, you see, I have known him longer than you, my dear," he said. "He is one of those noble kind of men." Harrington's disgust was audible, as if it were a character flaw in Bobby.

Charlie sat with her eyes focused on her folded hands on the tabletop. She never blinked, nor flinched as he moved around behind her chair. She glanced over her shoulder once. He paced with his hands held behind his back, like a professor addressing a class.

"Did he ever tell you about Kristen, his fiancée?" Charlie sat stone faced. "She was beautiful—still is. Looks a lot like you. She has the most wonderful blue eyes, almost electric." Harrington seemed to drift back in time.

"She wore her golden brown hair just a little longer than you. Now it is cut just under her ears..." He motioned with his hand. "But still quite striking. She has the most endearing laugh. Every male that passed her stopped for a second look. Sometimes even a third."

Why is he telling me this? Why does he have such vivid memories of Bobby's ex-fiancée?

"We met my senior year in college. She was a freshman. The most beautiful girl on the campus. After four months of running into one another, I finally worked up the nerve to ask her out," he said. "We dated for three years. Once the business took off, I planned to ask her to marry me.

"We had a huge party for family and friends as a celebration of our success. Jamie and I. At that party, she met Robert. They chatted most of the night, but she was just being polite, talking to my partner's brother, being sociable, or so I thought. She apparently fell for him that

night. I'm sure you can relate. Can't you, Miss Foster?" His voice turned acrid.

"And, well, of course, he was smitten with her. I found out later that they had begun seeing one another behind my back. But like I said, he's a noble man. He came to me, told me he was in love with Kristen and planned on asking her to marry him. But first he had to..." Harrington trailed off in a pained laugh.

"He said he had to make sure I understood. He explained quite apologetically they had never meant for it to happen. What a bunch of bullshit!" he screamed, startling Charlie.

He grabbed her by the upper arm, hoisted her to her feet. Though a good foot taller than her, he stood with his face in hers, eyes filled with anger.

"He took her from me. Stole her. And when Jamie died, Robert couldn't handle anything anymore and dropped Kristen. But did she come back to me? No. She moved away. To California. She didn't want to stay in Chicago with him anymore, needed to get as far away as possible. She left me twice."

Charlie tried in vain to avert her eyes. But his face hovered so close in front of hers she had no choice. Angry hands seized both her arms so tightly, the nails of his fingertips cut into her skin, drawing blood.

She had been compliant from the time he took her until that moment, but fear and anger swept her up. "Of course she did. You're a bully. Let me go." She jerked her arms, trying to free herself from his grip. Shooting pain halted her. Deep furrows rutted his brow, red hot lines tinting his eyes.

"Then that son of a bitch ruins my company. Takes that away from me as well. Ruined my life for the second, and final, time. It's not going to happen again. This time *I* am in charge. He has to play by *my* rules."

"It seems to me, Mr. Harrington, that you have been playing by your own rules all along. You ruined your company all by yourself," she said.

"You cheated people, stole their money. I don't see how you can blame Bobby for that."

Harrington's face reddened as Charlie found the courage to continue. "And...and you had your partner killed. Bobby's brother. How stupid could you be? You knew he would come after you."

Her accusation elicited no response from Harrington.

"You have some nerve blaming any of your problems on him. You are a bastard. And I'm sure that has as much to do with why Kristen left you as anything. I hope you burn in hell for everything you've done." She spat in his face.

Hard, raspy breaths flew from his lips through clenched teeth. He raised his large hand, struck Charlie hard across the face, knuckles crushing her cheek and nose, knocking her to her knees. She drew a hand to her face, using the other to hold herself up as she cried out in pain. Blood ran from her nose, pouring onto the concrete floor, pooling around her hand.

"You bitch. You stupid bitch." He kicked her in her unprotected side.

Charlie crumbled to the floor, sucking at the air, trying to fill her emptied lungs. The pain, like a white-hot poker, stuck in her side, burned, and eventually numbed. She shook on the concrete floor. Harrington kicked again, the impact lifting her off the floor. He started to raise his foot once more, but instead turned and stormed out of the room, slamming the door in his wake. The lock clicked, and Charlie let her head fall to the floor.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Charlie awoke, in the fetal position on the cold concrete floor. She touched her tender face, jolted by pain, her cheek puffy and nose swollen. Dried blood clung to her lips, flaked off as she moved her mouth, checking her teeth, all firmly in place. Her right eye, semi-swollen shut, obscured her dim view of the dreadful room.

She raised herself on weakened arms, her breath fleeing from the pain, and she fell back to the floor. Lungs afire, she sucked at the air and tried to keep from fainting again. Ribs and side ached from Harrington's physical tirade and possibly broken bones. Wincing and biting her lip, she pushed herself up on her arms to a sitting position. Her breath caught and she grabbed her side with one arm as she pulled the chair closer to her with the other. After much struggling, she managed to raise herself into the chair despite her spinning head.

She lifted her shirt and examined her side. A purple and blue bruise covered her from under her bra to the top of her jeans. As she let her shirt fall back in place, it occurred to her that Harrington, angry when he left, neglected to re-bind her. Freely, she roamed about the small confines a little at a time, but had to stop often to take shallow breaths before she could move forward.

First, she checked the door only to find it locked. Then she pulled her chair under the window. The chair groaned under the weight, and her body groaned from extensive movements.

Mindful not to pull on the yellowed shade, fearful it might quickly roll up, she lifted it away from the dirty window. Her chin rested on the dusty

sill as she peered out, hoping to confirm her location. She looked out across an empty parking lot.

She craned her neck to each side. On the left, she could see cars rushing by on a road. She searched for something with a sign or landmark she might recognize, but nothing stuck out to her. Then she caught sight of the trees on the far side of the road, familiarity rang through. A park. The park that held “Summer Shakespeare.” Her heart leapt.

An idea ticked in her brain. She reached up as far as she could and tried the lock. It easily opened under her thumb. Panic struck her. The windows might have an alarm tied into them.

Would the place be wired? she wondered. *Would he have thought to activate it?*

She ran her fingers around the seal, tried to find anything unusual about the window, but could find nothing. Even still, if it had an alarm, it would most likely be in the base of the window and sill, going off when the connection broke, possibly triggering a silent alarm that would catch her completely off guard if she tried to escape.

Ribs pinched in protest and she realized she couldn’t lift herself up to get through the window, with her side so badly injured, arms weak. She re-locked the window, releasing the shade. Back on the floor, she scanned the room, finding only the table any use to her. She tested the table to see if it could hold her one-hundred-twenty pounds. It should support her, but she didn’t want it to collapse under her.

Tentatively, she sat in the middle of the table, shifting from side to side, seeing if it would sway with her. It held firm. She stood, despite the table’s creaking and wobbling, and ultimately satisfied, she dismounted. She was in the process of pushing it under the window when she heard the lock in the door jiggle.

Charlie snatched the chair from under the window, putting the room back in order. She sat at the table, laying her arms on the table to cover

the shoe marks left on top then, put her head down and feigned sleep as he came through the door whistling. The door shut, and a moment later, she felt the table shudder as he bumped into it, sitting across from her.

“Wakey, wakey, Miss Foster.”

The rustle of a sack and the smell of tacos filled the small room. He crunched loudly, humming to himself. Charlie raised her head, searching out his eyes. The anger and hatred she expected to see were nowhere to be found—instead, an evil amusement hung on his face.

“Oh sorry. Were you hungry? I didn’t think you’d want anything.”

“I’m fine.”

“Ooh. That’s quite a shiner.” He popped the rest of the food into his mouth then tossed the last of the taco wrappers into the sack. “Here you go. You know what to do.” He slid his cell phone across the table toward her.

She stared at it before looking at him. “What day is it? I have no idea how long I have been gone.” She scratched her head and rubbed her fingers through tangled hair.

He laughed at her quietly. “It’s Monday afternoon, my dear. About...” he looked at his watch, “three in the afternoon. You’ve hardly been gone a day.”

Charlie eyed him for a long second before taking the phone. She knew she would have to speak to Bobby if he answered. She couldn’t put it off any longer.

She held her breath as the phone rang on the other end. Her heart pounded in her ears so loudly she barely heard when Bobby answered.



“Hi, Bobby. It’s Charlie.”

His heart all but leapt out of his chest. “Oh God, Charlie, are you okay?”

"I'm fine, thank you. How are you?"

Why is she being so formal?

"You're with Harrington, right?"

"Yes, my flight was good. Landed on time."

"He's there with you right now, huh? I understand." Bobby lowered his voice even though Harrington could not have heard him. "I'm here in Fort Worth. At your apartment," he said. "He hasn't hurt you, has he?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact."

Bobby cursed into the phone. She must have covered the phone with her hand. He barely heard her say, "He doesn't know I'm missing. He's being a little cold. I told you he already blew me off."

God, she's trying to protect me. I'm the one that should be protecting her.

"Charlie, honey, are you still there?" Sweat broke out across his forehead.

"Yes, I'm still here."

"Do you know where he is keeping you?" Bobby probed.

"Yes."

"Are you still in Ft. Worth?"

"Yes, I am..."

"Hello, Robert, long time no see—or talk rather." Harrington interrupted.

"Harrington, what the hell?" He gritted his teeth. "What are you..."

"So Robert, how have you been? Good I hope," Harrington said. "I'll bet you're wondering what your girlfriend and I are doing together."

"Crossed my mind."

"We have some business that needs to be settled, you and I. And I thought Charlie here could help us even up the score."

"Harrington, I swear to God if you hurt her, I *will* kill you. I promise you that."

"Now, now, Robert. You are in no position for idle threats."

His hand gripped the phone so tight he wondered that it didn't break. "I guarantee you it's not idle."

"Hmm. Well." Harrington paused. "I don't buy for one minute that the two of you are any less than you were a few days ago—especially, after your outburst. Otherwise I wouldn't have wasted my time."

"May I speak with her again?" Bobby asked.

"I suppose."

"I'm here," Charlie said softly.

Images of what Harrington could and would do to her flew through his mind. "Are you okay?"

"No, not really."

Bobby sucked in a heavy breath. "How bad did he hurt you?"

"Pretty bad, but I'm managing."

Tears wet his cheeks. "Charlie, I love you so much. I *will* find you, I promise you."

"I love you too," she said.

Harrington laughed. "That's enough, Robert. I suggest you hop on the first plane and get your ass down to Texas as soon as you can. I'll be in touch."

Bobby was dialing Nick's number from Charlie's phone as Harrington cut their conversation short. When his cell phone cleared from Harrington, he dialed Grace at home. Nick answered first, then Grace. A phone on each ear, Bobby went into his call from Charlie. He asked them to both get to Charlie's apartment as quickly as possible.

A half-hour later, they all sat around the table as Bobby went over the conversation word for word, though omitting the abuse for Grace's sake.

"Okay, we have two things going in our favor. One, Charlie is still in Fort Worth and knows where she is. Unfortunately, she couldn't tell me where. And two, Harrington thinks I'm still in Chicago. That will buy us some time to try to work out a plan. Try to locate her."

"Bobby, she could be anywhere," Grace said, her face pinched and tight. "How are we supposed to find her before he hurts her?"

Bobby cleared his throat. "We'll think of something. She'll be okay. I promised her and I promise you we *will* find her."

"How did she sound, scared?" Grace asked.

"She said she was okay," he lied. "She did sound tired, but you know her, she's feisty. She even tried to convince Harrington that I'd left her," he said with a sad laugh. "He didn't buy it. But she's strong, she'll be okay."

Grace rose from the table and busied herself in the kitchen while Bobby and Nick covered the information Nick's source came up with. "Harrington used Bill McAlister as his alias to get around. He flew here from Chicago the night before Charlie. He was registered at the Renaissance Worthington downtown..."

"God, that's only a few blocks from here," Bobby realized.

"But he checked out first thing this morning," Nick continued. "Paid cash. We missed him by a couple of hours. None of his other known aliases have come up around here. He's either got a new one or...he's planning on leaving soon." Nick trailed off.

"He's not going anywhere yet. He wants me here. He wants to show me whatever he has planned. And he doesn't have anyone watching me, or he'd know I'm already here." Bobby ran his hands through his hair. "I have to assume he's working alone. He's too much of a control freak to trust anyone to do something like this for him. Especially after how bad things got screwed up last time.

"I just don't know what he hopes to accomplish by taking her. He knows damn well what I will do to him if he hurts her." Bobby lowered his voice to keep Grace from hearing. "He's already hurt her pretty bad from what she said, and he knows I'll kill him."

Peering into the kitchen, Nick leaned in close to Bobby. "I hate to even suggest this... But I think he *does* know exactly how you will react.

I don't think he has any intention of letting her go—ever. I think she's not only the bait but the revenge." Nick paused. "If we don't find her soon, Bobby, she's dead," Nick said bluntly.

Bobby stood so fast his chair fell back onto the kitchen floor, echoing through the apartment, startling Grace as she brought coffee to the table. She eyed the men suspiciously.

Bobby tucked his fidgety hands into his pockets as he paced behind the sofa. Nick walked over to him, putting a hand on his shoulder.

"I know it's hard, but you have to look at this from a cop's view," he whispered. "You've got to pull back from your heart or you won't be any good to us."

"Bullshit. I can't do that, and you damn well know it. You can't pull back either, so don't give me this shit." He raised his voice, walking back to the kitchen table.

"You're right." He shook his head. "You're right."

Grace sipped her coffee. "Is there any way to narrow down where he might be holding her?"

"I'm afraid not. There're just too many places. He could be in a hotel room or apartment or an abandoned building. There're hundreds of possibilities," Nick answered.

"God damn it! God damn it!" Bobby slammed his fists on the table, sending his coffee cup crashing to the floor. Grace hurried to clean up the mess before it could stain the floor.

"I'm...sorry." Bobby sulked off into the bedroom.



Harrington had sat staring at Charlie for what seemed like hours. He had allowed her another bathroom break. She'd gasped at her sallow complexion in the mirror. Bruises stood out predominately over once-rosy cheeks..

She hadn't taken more than a few sips from the faucet when he called to her and demanded she return to the room. He ordered her in the chair to bind her hands and feet yet again. Charlie groaned as he tightly wrapped her wrists together, her feet, and then gagged her.

Charlie's thoughts turned to Bobby. She worried for him, not for herself. He must be going crazy. And Aunt Grace. Charlie owed so much to her aunt for stepping up when her parents died. She hated ever to hurt Grace.

It was the incident with Scott all over again. How could she have managed to get so embroiled in death and destruction in such a short period of time? Even with the situation out of her hands, she hated to put her loved ones through Hell.

It wasn't until she looked around the room Charlie realized she was alone. Harrington had slipped out unnoticed as she lamented over her misfortune.

She watched the windows darken. The room plunged into night. Sleep taunted her mind and she slid from the chair. A shooting pain ran through her right wrist as she crashed to the concrete floor. The pain in her side registered mild irritation from the jostling.

Her body twisted in a near-fetal position next to the table, with her hands bound tightly and hugged under her chin, the right wrist swelling beneath the tape. Despite the pains striking through her body, she could no longer keep her weary eyes open. Her head lowered as she succumbed to sleep.

Charlie's mind snapped into awareness, waking her with a start. Tears coated her face. Aches riddled her body. Something had awoken her, she realized. She had the uncanny feeling someone else inhabited the small, dark room. She listened intently to the silence as her eyes focused from sleep. Scanning the area, even in the dead of night, she could see she was alone. Still, a shudder ran down her spine, the remnants of an intrusion upon her sleep.

Breathing heavily, she struggled through pains and stiffness to sit up. She tugged at the tape around her ankles, tried to find the end, hoping to unravel it. But Harrington had bound it so tight, the end disappeared into itself. She did however find a loose corner on the gag and peeled it free from her face and hair.

Relaxing her mouth, Charlie ran ideas through her brain. But only cloudy images formed. Her stomach rumbled in empty protest, reminding her of her weakness. Her strength had faded. The pain radiated through her body, the only actual assurance she was not in the throes of a horrendous nightmare, but a horrendous reality.

Again struggling, she crept to the chair and table and, after a time, rejoiced as she pulled herself to a standing position. Dizzy and out of breath from the exertion, she plopped herself down in the chair to rest.

Her head cleared as her breathing calmed. The window above came into her thoughts.

I've gotta get out of here. I only have one chance.

She would die in the empty concrete cell if she didn't try to escape. But Charlie still had a small problem—her bound hands and feet.

She bit at the tape around her wrist, angry she hadn't thought of that sooner. Gnawing at it for what seemed like forever, it broke loose. She pulled the tape free of her wrists, the right puffed immediately. She worked the kinks fighting to stay in her wrists and fingers.

Discovering the flattened, nearly flush end, she scraped at the tape on her ankles. The smallest portion of the corner stood out. With her left thumbnail, she picked at the corner until enough gave way to pull up with her fingers.

The sound of the tape ripping apart as she unwound it filled her ears with noise sweeter than any music known. Charlie unraveled six rounds from her ankles, balled it up, and tossed it aside. She stood, but fell back to the chair as her head swam in protest from sudden movements.

Charlie stood again, slower, holding her head until she regained her equilibrium. She dragged the table under the window and, using the chair beside it, climbed up on top. Her head and shoulders stood even with the glass as she pulled the dingy shade down and let it roll back up inside.

The parking lot was vacant of light, movement, or anything alive with the exception of a lone ant crawling on the outside sill. She scanned the area in search of any people and thanked the stars for granting her wish of emptiness. She didn't imagine Harrington would camp out behind a vacant building, but one could never be sure.

Charlie tugged again at the lock and slid it to the open position. But even with the added height from the table, she still lacked the leverage she needed to hoist herself up and through the window. Especially with her injured wrist and side. After a moment's scrutiny, she lifted the other chair on top of the table. They both wobbled as she climbed on top of her contraption. She had to duck to keep her head level with the window.

After a deep breath and a little prayer, she lifted the window with great effort. The cool, fresh air blew across her face, exhilarating her. She sucked in air, as if for the first time, letting it fill her lungs. With her head still crooked half out the window, she listened for the sound of an alarm or an approaching car.

Once satisfied no one lurked nearby, she hoisted herself through the window. The cold ground rested only a foot below as she lowered herself on her hands and her hips wiggled through the frame. On all fours, she crawled several feet, moving away from the building.

Rocks and broken glass bit into the palms of her hands and into her knees, despite her jeans. A welcome pain, reminding her she'd escaped from the building. She crawled to a stairway that led up to a loading dock. Even in the dark of night, she could read the store's worn name still etched in the metal.

"Damn, I was right." Urgency welled inside her. "Bobby."

With the help of the metal railings, she pulled her weak and stiff body up. She could hear the roar of the street from out in front of the building. Traffic never ceased, even in Fort Worth.

As she advanced a few steps, the roaring of the street turned into a loud annoying buzz. Her head grew tight and very heavy. Charlie felt herself sway. She grabbed for the railing to steady herself. Unfortunately, her hand missed, and she fell hard against the concrete stairs, grazing the side of her head. The world turned black.

Chapter Twenty-Three

She groaned as she came to. Her dry lips cracked as she moved her mouth. Her eyelids, weighty to open, parted to a dim, unfamiliar room. Lying still, her head pounded. She raised a stiff arm to find a bandage covering her hand. She raised the other to find the same strange bandage, both her palms wrapped.

With uncovered fingers, she explored her head from where the pain seemed to radiate. A knot the size of a golf ball protruded from the right side of her forehead just below the hairline. She flinched at the touch. White, hot sparks of pain shot through her blanking her mind and shortening her breath.

“What...what happened to me?” she wondered.

She licked her lips in vain, tried to bring moisture to them. And as if by magic, a cup appeared in front of her face. A ragged hand held it, hovering by her mouth. And as mysteriously, another hand slid behind her neck, lifting her, gently, up to the cup.

She drank slowly at first, letting the water soak into her tongue and slide down her throat. She then greedily slurped the remainder down. She wanted more but couldn't find her voice to ask. The detached hand, with careful ease, lowered her head back to the bedding.

Her eyes focused somewhat on her surroundings. Concrete everywhere. The curve of the walls to the ceiling had the look and feel of a tunnel. The light from behind her flickered and cast an orange glow about the small, stuffy room. She could hear movement behind her, but as she twisted to get a better view, she found no one.

A tarp-covered doorway shuddered as if someone had passed through. She saw piles of clothing or rags or both lying beside littered walls. She assumed she was on top of a cot of sorts because she seemed to be off the ground, and a bit away from the walls.

Who was that?

She pushed herself up on her elbows, slowly rising to sit even through the pain and dizziness. She cupped her head. It weighed too much to stay up. She dropped her legs off the side of the cot and tried to stand, but too weak and unsteady, she sat back onto the rickety cot.

Looking around the small room, she remembered a movie she had seen once about homeless people with a dark, dingy cave-like place where they might stash their belongings. It had a homey quality to it, though. She looked around wondering about the contents. Who did they belong to? They looked masculine at an initial glance. But she just wasn't sure.

Can't think straight.

Her mind was in jumbles, information folding in on itself.

Where am I?

A twinge of pain tightened her left side. She raised her shirt, aghast at the sight of her ribs, covered in dark, fresh bruises. And her right wrist swelled over the bandage.

A squeaking, rattling noise from the other side of the plastic tarp covering the door drew her attention. A shadowy figure appeared, distorted by the plastic. A haggard-looking old man wheeled a rusty shopping cart into the room. A shy smile curled on his thin lips.

"You're up." A raspy voice came from underneath a long blond beard. "I brought you something to eat. You've been asleep almost ten hours, ever since I found you. You must be starving."

"You found me? Where?" she asked, panicked, finding her voice. "Where are we? What day is it?" Her every instinct told her she should be afraid of this virtual stranger, but she wasn't. And if she believed he'd

found her, then he'd already had every opportunity to harm her in any number of ways. Maybe he had.

"Did you..." She looked down at herself, unable to finish the question.

"Hold on now. Slow down. One question at a time," he said. "No. I didn't hurt you if that's what you were about to ask. I found you that way, late last night, in the old department store parking lot."

She shivered. The hair on her arms and neck stood.

"It looks like you fell and hit your head." The man continued. "There was blood all over your face, and you have a huge goose egg."

"What day is it?" she asked again.

"Thursday."

"Hmm." She closed her eyes, tried to remember anything. "Did you do this for me?" She raised her bandaged hands. He nodded thoughtfully. "And you found me, unconscious?" Again, he nodded. "I don't understand what's happened."

He moved in closer to her and presented her with a white greasy sack. "The bakery, not too far from here, lets me have the donuts when they've been there too long. They're real good. A little stale, but good enough to eat."

She looked at him for a moment and considered the offer, but her growling stomach answered for her.

"Thank you." She took the food. "My stomach feels like I haven't eaten in days," she said after eating two donuts. "I think I might have been in a car accident or something. I'm covered in bruises." She lifted her shirt just below the bra line and showed her side.

"Well, I'll tell you. I saw no signs of a car in an accident anywhere around where I found you."

She shook her head, her mind a total blank. "I can't remember anything."

"It'll come back to you. That's a pretty nasty bump."

"You don't understand. I can't remember *anything*. Not my name, not where I live, absolutely nothing is coming to me."

He stared at her. "You don't know your name?"

"No. Nothing. The harder I try to remember, the more my head pounds. Where are we?"

"Fort Worth."

"Texas?" she asked.

"Yes. You see, there are some things that aren't gone. You know Fort Worth is in Texas." He smiled and motioned to the cot, asking to sit. She nodded her head and moved over to one end to allow him room. "Now, I have heard of people losing their memory when they hit their head or something traumatic happens to them. And I'm pretty sure it almost always comes back. It just takes time," he said, removing his dingy coat, laying it on a pile of clothing near the cot.

"This is all so strange. I have this feeling in the pit of my stomach that there is something urgent I need to do, but there's nothing coming through." She shook her head. "I'm sorry. I don't even know your name. And you have been so kind to me."

"My name is Wynn. What should we call you? Let me think." He paused. "My late wife's name was Ruth. I've always been partial to that name. How do you like it?"

A smile crossed her face. The name warmed her. "I like that name. That sounds like a wonderful name to me. Ruth it is," she said, patting him on the knee. Feeling safe, and feeling as though it had been a long time since she had, she surveyed the room. "So where are we? Where is this place?"

"It's safe," he said, as if reading her thoughts. "It's an old access tunnel under a bridge near downtown. The city stopped using it years ago. I've been living down here for nearly three years. It beats living outside in a box," he said, a bit defensively.

"Do you think that I live on the streets?"

He let out a small laugh. “No. No, ma’am. I don’t think you do. Except maybe just recently. You have had something real bad happen to you, but you look as though you come from a good place.”

“How can you tell?” she asked.

“If you live out here for as long as I have, you can just tell. Your clothes are somewhat expensive, and even though they’re dirty, they’re in good condition,” Wynn answered. He paused and looked at her. “I don’t want to scare you but...” he paused again.

“But what?” The food roiled in her stomach.

“Your bruises...look like someone beat you up pretty bad. They don’t look like something you could get elsewhere. I mean, where I found you, it’s not exactly an overly rough area, but there are several abandoned buildings there,” he said. “How do they refer to those things—a dump job? I think you were left there, probably to die. Something that traumatic can explain why you lost your memory.”

“Oh God. Do you think someone could be after me?”

“Was—maybe,” he said. “I don’t know about now. But when you—or your body rather—doesn’t turn up in the next few days, they may come looking for you.”

She shivered again, thinking some unknown person may be after her. She rubbed her temples. Sleep crowded her mind again, slowed her thoughts as she sighed and closed her eyes for a moment. Through narrowed slits, she looked at Wynn. His dark blond hair hung inches below his shoulders. The lines in his face made him look as worn as his tattered jeans. His hazel eyes hung in a hound dog expression, but were attentive.

He appeared to be in his late sixties, but it was hard to tell. His exposure to the outside and the harshness of the streets had surely added lines to his already-lined face. And his toothy grin, a bit yellowed. His voice was calming and soothing. He had to be an incredibly caring man or else he wouldn’t have bothered to help her when he found her.

“Ruth, you look tired. Why don’t you lie back down and get some more rest. I’ll leave you alone.” He rose from the cot and retrieved his coat before disappearing through the plastic tarp. She relaxed back onto the cot, sleep coming quickly.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Harrington parked his rental car in the usual spot behind the building. He climbed out toting a food sack and whistling an upbeat ditty. His chipper mood guided him across the blacktop.

“Not long now, Miss Foster. Not long now.” He had to refrain from skipping.

His footsteps echoed in the empty hallway as he approached the metal door to Charlie’s holding cell. He balanced the sack in one hand while he unlocked the door with the other. Pushing through the door, the sacks of food slipped and crashed to the floor. Coffee burned the lower half of his leg.

“I don’t believe...”

The breeze from the window mussed his hair. The chair and table perched tauntingly under the window. Two piles of tape littered the floor. Anger rolled his gut as his fists balled at his sides and shook.

“Shit, shit, shit,” he screamed at the walls. “How the hell did she do this?”

He paced the floor, pounding his fist into his leg. Anger clouded his thinking. He snatched the chair from the table and hurled it at the window. Followed by the table.

He stopped in his tracks, stopped breathing, listening for sounds of approaching sirens. Nothing. No sounds that put him in immediate danger.

“Surely she would have told the police about this place,” he spoke aloud. “There’s no way Robert would give up a chance to get at me. Maybe she didn’t make it. Didn’t get very far.”

He tore out of the room and raced up the stairs to outside the window. He scanned the parking lot surrounding the building. He saw nothing that would indicate which way she might have gone. He walked to the edge of the lot and peered into the wooded edge. All branches and bushes appeared undisturbed, as if no one had passed through in quite some time.

At the far-eastern side of the lot, he looked down at the Trinity River. He scratched his head and wondered if she would have gone that way. He started to walk down the embankment a few steps before he slipped on the slick, wet grass. His feet came out from under him, sending him to the ground. He cursed profusely as he scrambled back to his feet, trying to gain purchase with his expensive Italian loafers.

He craned his neck and looked for signs she may have fled down the embankment.

Any chance she could have done that trip alone?

He doubted it. Not in her condition. And he could not go traipsing off down the embankment dressed in his shoes.

“She must have left on foot, down the street.” Harrington swiped at his pants with his muddied hands. “But where is she?”

He headed to his car and left the parking lot.

For the next two hours, he drove around the building in fifteen-minute increments. Never once did he see a patrol car, or any other car near the building for that matter. When the two-hour mark passed, he pulled into his hotel parking lot and returned to his room where he collapsed on his bed, covering his eyes with his arms.

Harrington waited in the room for several hours before venturing out again. He cruised by the abandoned department store. No signs of any police activity or otherwise.

Harrington spoke aloud to himself as he drove around Fort Worth. "She obviously didn't go to Robert or to the police." He tapped the steering wheel. "I just have to alter my plan slightly. Instead of killing her in front of him, making him suffer like he did me for so long, I will simply kill him instead. It won't be nearly as satisfying, but just as exciting. I'll call him and keep the original plans." He laughed as he pulled back into his hotel parking lot.



Bobby searched the city. Looked for any and every place Harrington could hole up with Charlie. Despite the cool spring afternoon, Bobby's skin gritted from sweat under his touch. When he returned to Charlie's apartment, he needed a shower.

He stepped under the powerful stream. Hot needles of water pelted his skin, massaging the knots from his broad shoulders. The floral scent of Charlie's shampoo filled his nose as he lathered it into his hair. His mind fled to days earlier as they woke together in his bed, his face buried in her hair, breathing in her scent, the scent of roses.

He hadn't realized his mind wandered again until the frigidity of the water hit him like ice. He washed away the shampoo and stepped from the shower. Wrapped in a plump peach towel, he returned to the bedroom.

Bobby's cell chirped as he buttoned his shirt.

His hands shook as he plucked the phone off the table. "Hello."

"Robert, hello. How might you be this evening?"

"Harrington." He forced himself to stay calm. "I want to speak with Charlie."

"Tut, tut. Now let's have patience. Are you in town now?"

"Yes." Bobby paced the living room floor. "I've been waiting for your call."

“Good, good. Nice accommodations, I hope.”

“Stop the damn chit-chat and get to the point, Harrington.”

“It will be tomorrow.”

“What will be tomorrow?” Bobby asked.

“Our meeting. I will call you tomorrow afternoon and inform you where we shall meet. Now I know you didn’t involve the police who in turn would invite the Feds and leave you out of the loop. Not to your advantage.”

“I would like to speak to Charlie now, please, if that is okay,” Bobby said, with a harsh edge to his voice.

“No, not today. I’m afraid she is a bit... indisposed at the moment. You will have to wait until tomorrow to see her for yourself.”

“I want to speak to her *now!*” His chest heaved.

“No.”

“Why not, Harrington? What have you done to her?”

“Nothing, Robert. I haven’t touched one precious hair on her lovely head. But I can’t allow you to speak with her at this time.”

“If you do so much as...”

“You’ll what Robert? Keep in mind who is in control here.” Harrington broke the connection.



Detective Robert Allen, ten-year veteran of the Chicago Police Department, sat chugging beer after beer at Charlie’s small square kitchen table. He’d been in a foul mood ever since his phone call with Harrington.

Nick had arrived at the apartment ten minutes after the call ended to find Bobby scowling. Over the hour that passed, Nick made several phone calls as he kept a sharp eye on Bobby and his consumption of beer, frankly pissing Bobby off.

“Why’d he refuse to let me speak with Charlie?”

Nick hung up his last phone call and sat across the table from Bobby as he popped open his seventh beer. “Don’t you think you ought to slow down?” Nick asked with concern etched on his face.

Bobby glared at him across the top of his cans lining the table.

“Talk to me, Bobby.”

Bobby drained the last of the can, crushing it into the table. “She’s dead, Nick,” Bobby said with no preamble.

He registered the shock on Nick’s face. He rose and got himself another beer from the refrigerator and one for Nick as well.

“Harrington didn’t *say* she was but...he wouldn’t let me talk to her.” Bobby shook his head.

“You can’t be sure.”

Bobby shrugged. “Maybe he hasn’t yet, but he will. There’s no way he’s going to let her go, just walk away. We both know that,” he said. “He’s a sick man. My brother started to distrust him even before he found out about the embezzlement. And Harrington had him killed. His partner, his best friend.”

He had told Nick the entire story.

“Kristen was scared to death of him when I met her. It was dumb luck that we fell in love, and I’ll always wonder if she latched on to me to get away from him. And it’s okay if that’s the case. He’d have probably gotten bored with her eventually and hurt her, too.

“I have no idea what his plans are for me. And frankly at this point, I don’t care. He already killed me when he took Charlie. If he does hurt her, it’ll be all my fault. Damn it,” Bobby growled. “I’m going to kill the bastard the minute I lay eyes on him. He’s not going to know what hit him.”

Nick sat with Bobby while he polished off another four beers and listened to him rant and rave. Just after midnight, Bobby passed out.



A beautiful couple sat at a small café table. The red and white checked, cotton tablecloth blew with the breeze while the pair held hands and laughed into the setting sun. His brown eyes danced as she spoke to him. After paying the check, the two walked along a busy street, arm in arm. Oblivious to all the bustling noise and activity around them, only the other occupied their thoughts. Clearly they were so in love.

From the shadows of a darkened doorway, a large man with an evil face jumped out in front of them, grabbing the woman by the arm, wrenching her from her lover. She cried out in fear as he held a gun to her head, snarling. Her lover, angry and frightened, tried to talk to the man, tried to reason with him to release her. The evil man laughed while he pulled the trigger.

Her lifeless body fell into a heap on the ground. Crimson blood flowed onto the sidewalk. Her lover collapsed at her side, screaming a name. But it was not her name; it was a man's name. A familiar man's name. The evil man hovered over the two, relishing every moment. A smile, a satisfied smile, lit his face. Laughter rang out in the air, competing with the sound of the lover's cries.

The evil man strolled away as the sun went down, never to look back. No words had been uttered from his lips. No sound emanated other than the God-awful cackle. Louder and louder, the cackle echoed through the night. The laughter rang in her ears. But she's dead. Lying on the ground, dead.

"Oh God, help me, help me," she screamed out.

"Ruth. Ruth, calm down. It's just a dream. Ruth, wake up."

Pulled from the laughter, a new but familiar voice beckoned her. The laughter subsided to nothingness. Wynn's kind voice called to her. She opened her eyes and found Wynn's worn, leathered face in front of her.

“Wynn, I’m sorry. I was having a bad dream.”

“What was it about? Can you remember?” he asked.

She detailed the dream as best as she could recall. “But I couldn’t see her face. The two men though, *felt* familiar to me. I can’t place them, either of them. I don’t know,” she said, rubbing her hand through her tangled mat of hair. “It may have just been a dream that has nothing to do with anything. But I just don’t know.”

“Maybe not. Your brain has a way of working things out while you sleep. Give it some time. It’ll all come back to you.”

“You don’t understand, it feels like I don’t have time. Like if I don’t remember whatever it is soon, something terrible is going to happen. I’m not sure why, but it feels urgent.” She creaked out the last tension from her neck, letting her eyes drop to the floor. “What time is it? I’m so turned around I don’t know what’s what.”

“It’s morning. A little after seven. I brought you some food.”

He handed her a bag from a taco chain. She cringed as she looked at the logo on the sack. Fear ran down her spine. She shuddered, still staring at the sack.

He shoved it into her hands. “You need to eat, get your strength back.”

“I can’t take your food. You need to eat.”

“Don’t you worry about me, young lady. I get plenty to eat. I also brought you some more water. You look like you need it more than the food.” He handed her two plastic bottles. She took it begrudgingly at first, but hunger prevailed. “If you’d like, the shelter’s open tonight. I can take you there if you want to shower. You can even sleep there overnight if you prefer.”

“Thank you. Let me think about it.” She unwrapped the taco and took a few bites. Even cold, it tasted wonderful. She wiped her mouth and continued speaking. “Can I ask you a question, Wynn?” He nodded, so she went on. “How’d you come to be on the streets?”

He paused as he sat.

“Why are you so surprised by my question?”

“In all my years on the street, most people make little or no eye contact, much less take the time to interact, to have a simple conversation with me. There’s that mentality ‘if you don’t acknowledge, it doesn’t exist’. And they never ask...” He shook his head.

“Seven years ago,” he sighed, “my wife, Ruth, and I were enjoying retirement. She’d been a teacher for thirty years. She was a good teacher, but got tired of how much the schools had changed over the years and decided to call it quits. I made enough working as an air-conditioning repairman. When we were sixty-five, I retired, too. We both had nice pensions built up so we wanted to take it easy.

“A year later, right before our forty-sixth anniversary, she went in for her annual check-up, and they found an irregularity with her heart. They ran test after...” He cleared his throat. “And they found she had two blocked arteries. She was in surgery by the end of the week.

“Weeks later, she still hadn’t fully recovered, and they had to go back in and clear another artery. She was a strong woman, but it was too much too fast; her body couldn’t take it. She died a month to the day of her original check-up.”

“Wynn, I am so sorry.” She reached over and patted his gnarled hand.

“If all that wasn’t bad enough, the health insurance left from my work only covered about a third of the bills.” He looked away from her, staring down at his feet. “It took all my savings, and I was still short. I finally got to the point where I couldn’t make ends meet. I looked for a job, but...” He shook his head. “I lost my house, and before long, I had to sell my car. That money only lasted a few months and I wound up here, on the streets. I was lucky to find this place. It’s dry and private.”

“That’s awful. My parents died in a car accident when I was eighteen,” she said.

Wynn's head jerked toward her, eyes wide, frightening her. He grabbed her arm and his eyes twinkled as he spoke. "You remembered something."

Excited and wary, she massaged her temple and tried to smooth out the rough edges of her thoughts. Still only blanks. "That just came to me when you were talking, and I knew it was true. But I don't know why." Her face scrunched in disappointment.

"Can you remember anything else?"

She shook her head.

"Hey, that's a start. It means your mind is working, trying to fight through."

"I guess so." She looked around the small room, suddenly quite claustrophobic. "Do you think we can get out of here and walk around for a while? I feel a little cooped up. Maybe even go to that shelter later. A shower would be good."

Chapter Twenty-Five

Harrington, restless in his suite after checking with all the local emergency rooms, decided to drive around downtown again. An idea struck him.

At the first of two shelters, he told the gray-haired director that his company wanted to donate to a local charity. He asked if he might look around to get the lay of the land to decide if it would meet his company's criteria, a ruse to move about the shelter without having to answer questions. He said he wanted to get a feel of the people and the work that took place in the shelter.

The director obligingly took him on a tour of the facilities and offered to take him to the office for the appropriate paperwork needed for such a donation. Harrington said he would be along shortly, he wanted to look around by himself, and then he would join her in her office. He assured the director he was fine by himself and proceeded to wander through the wards of the shelter.

To no avail, he examined face after face. He hadn't actually expected to find Charlie, but for peace of mind, he continued to check. He slipped through the front door, out onto the street and around the corner before the director could look for him.



The slight breeze blew her tangled hair in tufts around her face, letting her taste the dirt and grime as it landed inside her mouth. She

tried to pull it back, away from her face, only to have it slip from her fingers. Her jeans with a few holes and tears, and her thin, cotton shirt were hardly appropriate for the mild evening weather. Wynn had lent her a spare jacket as they journeyed the downtown area.

On her first venture out, she worried that someone might see her and trap her before she could react. But she quickly discovered people ignored her. She was invisible. No one gave her a second glance if even a first. Relief of anonymity soothed her heightened nerves.

Later, filled with more confidence, she and Wynn walked down streets toward the shelter. She stared up at the surrounding buildings, hoping to elicit memories, to find anything familiar. But no spark of recognition lit, no warm and fuzzy moments. She wondered if she'd ever been to the city before.

"You know, Ruth, I'm not one to suggest the police lightly, but maybe you should go to them. Consider talking to them."

"I don't know," she said. "If you're right, that someone did this to me, I can't take any chances until I get my memory back. I don't know yet what I'm up against. But I'll think about it."

Someone, somehow, had taken everything away from her. Taken her life and thrown it away, or had hoped to. Someone had endangered her life and left her lying injured and alone in a parking lot. And worse, most likely had left her to die. Someone who knew her face and her name, but she couldn't remember. She couldn't defend herself against an unknown.

Anger filled in the holes of the fear as it dissipated. Anger at her amnesia, anger at the need to be in control of her life and so far from it. Anger at her injuries, so that she couldn't defend herself.

But at the same time, she was thankful for Wynn. His kindness restored something in her that must have been lacking, a warmth for her soul that she would never forget, could never forget. He, willingly and selflessly, had helped a total stranger and seemed to have not thought twice about it.

“Here we are.” He tapped her on the shoulder and pointed to a lit doorway.

Walking up the three short steps, they crossed the threshold into the shelter. The brightly-lit room held tables and serving lines for the meals. Some heads turned with in recognition of Wynn, but most kept to themselves.

Wynn directed her through the side door and showed her to the women’s facilities to wash up.

She looked at the door and back at him. “I don’t know if I can.”

“I’ll stay right here. I promise.”

She stepped through the door and looked about the bland room. Four ceramic sinks lined the closest wall and hung under faded mirrors. A small row of shower stalls took up the opposite side of the room. The uninhabited room echoed with her every move, causing her to slowly, tentatively move about to ensure her solitude.

Horror struck her as she looked in a mirror at what had become of her face, a face vacant of clues. Her hair color was un-determinable for all the dirt, grime, and even dried blood that held to strand after strand. Dark bruises circled her right eye and most of her nose in the most vibrant shade of blue-purple. Dirt, hiding the worst shades of abuse, dulled her features. Swelling distorted the shape and contours of her face, affording her a fun-house mirror version of herself, whoever she was.

Veins threatened to take over the whites of her eyes, making her ocean blue irises dull. Just above her left eye, almost in the hairline, was the goose egg of a knot.

She was so absorbed by her face she barely heard the call to her.

“Ruth?” The voice, from the doorway, startled her once it registered. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you. Wynn asked me to come in and check on you.”

The thirty-something, redheaded woman, with beautiful ivory skin, held no hostility on her face. Warmth and compassion hung in her eyes. Her plump, motherly body stood still, unthreatening, while she continued to speak in a soft, gentle voice. "I brought you a couple of towels and a robe if you'd like me to wash your clothes. Sorry, I forgot my manners. My name is Lisa. I work here," she offered.

Lisa extended her hand but remained in her spot. Ruth judged the distance from the door and wondered if she could overpower the woman if need be. She accepted and returned the sentiment, ingrained manners pushed her where she might not wanted to have stretched. Lisa's smile shifted into sympathy. "I hope you don't mind, but Wynn filled me in on your situation."

Ruth recoiled, physically and emotionally. Betrayal ripped through her chest as she stood dumbfounded at Wynn's lack of discretion.

Oh shit.

She crossed her arms over her chest and backed away from Lisa.

How can I get away?

"No, please. I won't tell anyone," Lisa said. "Wynn's a good guy. He knows he can trust me. He asked me not to say anything to anyone, and I won't. I understand. Really I do." She closed the distance from her to Ruth, laying a hand on Ruth's forearm. "If there's anything I can help you with, I will. Just ask."

Ruth's rigid body relaxed as Lisa handed her the towels and robe. "Tonight is a slow night. It won't take anytime to wash your clothes. You take as much time in the shower as you would like. No one will come in and bother you."

"Thank you. It's so kind of you. Wynn has been a godsend," she admitted. "I don't know what I would have done..." She let her words trail off. Lisa gave her a knowing look that confused and comforted Ruth.

Ruth undressed in a private stall and handed the woman her clothes under the door. She waited until Lisa left and stepped into the shower.

The water stung the palms of her hands and face. She discovered more bruises covering her legs and sides. But despite her injuries, the water felt wonderfully refreshing. The sweet, clean smell of the soap filled her nose and picked up her spirits.

The subtle floral scent of the shampoo had almost a reminiscent quality. A thick fog held back memories in her mind as if on the cusp of revelation. But nothing came forward.

After a half-hour shower and wrapping in the terrycloth robe, she stood before the mirror, towel drying her hair, a not-quite-blonde, not-quite-brown shade with a slight curl to it. The left side of her face showed off unblemished, peaches and cream skin with a faint nick of a pink scar just under her eye. Her cheek had a healthier glow absent the layers of dirt.

Ruth stood staring at her reflection, lost in time, willing her mind to reveal anything that might lead to her past. Lisa returned to the washroom, startling Ruth again, but she smiled when she saw the hot cup of coffee and her freshly cleaned clothes.

“Thanks,” she said as Lisa made a hasty retreat.

As Ruth redressed, she caught her reflection in the mirror again and a flash of a face appeared in her mind’s eye.

It was too odd though. She pictured an older woman with a similar smile and a kind face, but the hair, the hair was green in her mind’s eye. Ruth wondered if the face belonged to her mother, the one she spoke of to Wynn, but that didn’t feel right. She couldn’t explain it but she knew it wasn’t her mother.

And as quickly as it came, it fled. Ruth shook the thought from her head and focused on the coffee.

The warmth filled her body, and the rich aroma soothed her more than the shower had.

Cup in hand, she joined Wynn in the cafeteria. As she walked to a table, a tall, well-dressed man came into view. Ruth stopped dead in her

tracks, a cold sweat erupting from her every pore. She grabbed Wynn's elbow as he caught the stricken look on her face.

He followed her eyes to the strange man walking through the shelter with the director. The man had a searching eye as he looked about the room.

"I haven't seen him here before," Wynn answered as if he could read her mind.

"I...we have to go. *Now.*"

Lisa must have noticed Ruth's demeanor. "Are you okay?"

"We need to get out of here fast," Ruth heard Wynn say.

She stood stock-still to her spot, until she found Wynn tugging her sleeve. He and Lisa guided her to the rear exit, blocking her from the view of the man and the director.

Out on the street, Wynn and Ruth walked three blocks without stopping or looking back, before speaking.

"He...was looking for me. He...came to find me," she said in a hushed voice.

"You recognized him?" Wynn asked as they stopped in a darkened storefront.

"It was the m...man from my dream. The evil man that just kept laughing. I... It was him, I'm positive."

"Let's get back to the tunnel." Wynn grabbed her hand.



Harrington caught a wisp of golden brown hair as two street people moved to the back of the room. He asked the director about the odd couple, but the director hadn't seen well. He, however, caught a woman as she passed.

"Lisa, was that Wynn I saw leaving?"

"Yes, sir," she answered.

“Who was that with him? I don’t think I saw who it was,” the director continued.

“Um, that was, uh,” she stumbled with her words, “Old Marty. They weren’t looking to stay tonight, just stopped in for a bite.”

“Are you sure?” he asked. “That didn’t look like Marty.”

“Positive, sir. I have to get back to work.”

After a few more glimpses of the shelter, Harrington thanked the director and hurried out in the direction the street man and his companion left. The shelter aide, Lisa, had been a little too slow with her answers and appeared quite nervous, which struck him as odd.

Why would she lie for Charlie?

And why would Charlie have gone to a shelter and not the police? Or to Bobby? His mind ran over far too many scenarios to consider. But he decided his adventure was growing more interesting by the minute.



Wynn and Ruth crossed Sundance Square as they headed back to his underground dwelling. Evening crowds covered the streets in front of restaurants and bars.

A group of six or seven young adults poured out onto the street from a bookstore and headed into a nearby restaurant. A young, baldheaded man with an ebony complexion stared at Wynn and Ruth from across the street, his attention torn between the pair and his group. Even from that distance, she could see his large, muscular physique. She noted his size and unwarranted attention with alarm.

He waved his sculpted arm in the air and yelled, “Charlie. Hey, Charlie.”

Wynn and Ruth continued walking at a determined pace, but Ruth glanced back over her shoulder, watching him. As they got another block away, the man gave up and returned his attention to his own group.

"Do you know anyone named Charlie?" Ruth asked. "He seemed to be yelling at you."

"No. But it was as if he recognized *you*. Calling to *you*. Did you recognize him?"

"No." She looked back over her shoulder. "He was yelling Charlie. That's not a girl's name."

"It can be. Short for Charlotte or Charlene," Wynn suggested.

Ruth's mind rolled it over in her head, shifting gears to her dream. The man had called to the woman and it had been a man's name. It, however, eluded her.

They got back to the tunnel and Ruth collapsed with fatigue. The adrenaline rush had run its course and had depleted her system. She wanted nothing more than to lie down and sleep. Her yawns came more , spaced at regular intervals. Her eyelids grew heavy.

"Go ahead and get some rest," Wynn offered.

"I can't take your bed again. You need to sleep, too."

"I insist. I'll be fine. I'm a tough old bird. Besides, you need it more than I do. And I'm used to roaming around late at night."

"Are you sure?" Wynn nodded as she sat on the end of the cot. "I don't know how I will ever thank you for all you've done."

He shrugged off her thanks and left. She curled up on his cot, pulling the covers up to her chin. Her eyelids fluttered until sleep snuck in and sealed them shut. Her breathing evened under sleep.



Bobby awoke with a horrible headache. He blamed it on sleeping on the sofa, but he knew it was from the umpteen Budweisers he had consumed to excess the night before. The many beers, though, had done little to numb his heart. He'd wanted his heart to have a reprieve from the agony that welled up inside. But instead, his tongue weighed triple

its normal weight and his head swam as he moved about the living room. He cursed the furniture as he bumped his way into the kitchen where Nick prepared breakfast for the both of them.

“What are you doing here?”

“Making sure you didn’t do anything stupid last night. Though once you passed out, I figured you’d be out for a while.”

“Thanks. I think.”

The two ate in silence, both avoiding the framed picture of Charlie that hung only a few feet away. While Bobby had slept, Nick had apparently gone to the store for food, and he picked up the morning paper. The paper sat on the corner of the table as of yet untouched.

As Bobby forked the last bite of his eggs, he picked up the paper and rifled through it. His fork crashed to his plate.

“Son of a bitch!”

Nick jumped. “What? What’s the matter, Bobby?”

Bobby shoved the paper at him in disgust.

“Damn it.” William Harrington’s face peered out from the page. The article revisited his crimes and his ability to evade the police for the past month. And his possible connection to the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

“Why the hell would they run this now? Could someone’ve leaked to the media that he’s in town?” Bobby stood and started pacing.

“I don’t know how they could’ve found out. No one knows but us. It’s probably dumb luck. Look, they buried it inside the paper. Just a filler story. Calm down. Maybe Harrington will see it and get scared off.”

“Yeah, right.”



The beautiful couple again walked together along the busy street. Hand and hand, they chatted and laughed. She wore her hair loose around her shoulders, feathering as the wind blew.

The sun set into a blood-red sky. The red-orange glow above the buildings sank fast. Darkness closed around them, circling them like a heavy blanket. Her hand slid from his as she lost him.

He called to her, yelling her name. Again, though, it was a masculine name, not that of a woman.

The man ran through the streets as light radiated from the doorways, searching for his lover. Tears stained his face. His brows furrowed with worry. Block after block, he called to her, looking in every doorway and un-shaded window, hoping to find his love.

From the shadows, the evil man emerged. He held an unwavering pistol in his giant hand. The muzzle of the gun aimed at the lover's head. Laughter erupted from the evil man's lips while his prey stood stoically facing him. The lover held his chin firm, his shoulders square, never batting an eye.

The evil man grew enraged by his prey's lack of fear. He wanted the man to beg for mercy, to plead for his life and that of the woman. Impatience swelled in the evil man as he drew closer, the gun zooming in for maximum destruction. His eyes hardened as his prey looked at him, not challenging but also not surrendering.

He lowered the gun to the man's heart, already destroyed by the loss of his lover. In a blinding flash, the bullet ripped through the man's chest, his limp body dead before it folded on itself to the ground in a heap.

The evil man stood over him with a satisfied grin on his face. His eyes searched the darkness for the lover, nowhere in sight. Replacing his gun under his coat, he walked off without a backward glance.

"Bobby, no," she cried out in her sleep. "Bobby."

"Ruth, Ruth. Wake up."

She moaned, unable to pull herself from her sleep. Tears filled her closed eyes.

"Ruth. Ruth. Charlie, wake up. Charlie." He shook her again. "Charlie, can you hear me? Charlie, wake up."

She gasped as her eyes flew open. “Bobby,” she screamed, clutching her hands to her chest. Eyes focused, Wynn’s face hovered above hers. Her surroundings finally registered as the remnants of the dream cleared. Her breathing slowed from its erratic pace as she groggily sat up.

“Are you okay, Charlie?” Wynn patted her on the back.

“Yeah, I’m okay. I had...another dream. Kind of...kind of like the one yesterday, except the woman disappeared and the man killed her boyfriend instead. It was the man from the shelter—the bad man. I’m sure of it.” She ran a shaking hand through her hair, with her eyes closed as she revisited her frightening dream. Suddenly Wynn’s words crept into her thoughts. “Why’d you call me Charlie?”

“That’s what that young man called out last night. He seemed positive to whom he was speaking. And in the dream before you said the woman—who is presumably you—had a male sounding name,” he recalled.

“This one too.”

“And you did wake to it when I called you.” He took both her hands, trying to help steady her nerves. “You also called out ‘Bobby’. Which one is he in the dream? The boyfriend?”

“Yeah, I think so.”

“Do you remember him? Did you know him before?” Wynn asked.

“I’m not sure. It seems... It’s so clear when I’m sleeping, but when I wake, it doesn’t come in completely, stays jumbled. It’s hard to remember.” She pulled her hands back from his and rubbed her still-sore palms on her pant legs. Anxiety welled in her chest. “I need to get out of here. The fresh air and seeing different people may help. Is that okay?”

“We could do that. Tonight is a big celebration downtown. It’ll be crowded. We could move around unnoticed.”



The phone rang at a quarter of one as Grace headed out the door. "Hello."

"Miss Foster, it's Jaleel."

"Hi Jaleel. What can I do for you?"

"I was calling to check on Charlie. You said she had the flu. And when I saw her out last night, I called to her and she acted strange, ignoring me," he reported.

"What! What do you mean when you saw her out last night? Where was this and when?"

"Downtown at Sundance Square around seven," he answered. "Some friends and I were going into a restaurant. She and some old man were crossing the street away from me. I called to her, but she looked at me as if she didn't know me. I'd have called sooner but waited to see if she would be at work, then we got swamped."

"That's fine. Can you describe the man she was with?" Grace asked, trying to calm her voice as she grabbed the pen and notepad beside the phone.

"He was old. I'd say seventies or so, long blondish-gray hair and beard, about her height. He looked kinda scraggly, like a homeless man. But they were definitely together. He was talking to her as they walked off. Is everything okay, Miss Foster?" he asked.

"Everything is fine, Jaleel. Thanks for calling." Grace hung up before he could ask any more questions she couldn't answer.



Nick had run up to the station, leaving Bobby alone at Charlie's apartment for the first time in many hours. Angry and sulking, Bobby clomped around the living room, kicking at imaginary dust bunnies. His head swam with possibilities of what would, could, and probably had

already happened to Charlie. He reeled with the horror, knowing that, ultimately, he had brought all the misery and havoc on her, whether indirectly or not.

He jumped as the melodic chirping of his cell phone and Charlie's phone broke the deafening silence at the same time. Forgoing Charlie's phone, he grabbed his cell.

"What?"

"Now, Robert. That is no way to answer the phone. How are you doing today? Well, I hope." Harrington's saccharine-sweet words burned Bobby's ears.

"Can the pleasantries, Harrington. I want to speak with her. Now."

"No, I think we can save all of the chit-chat for the meeting." Harrington had an unnerving lift to his voice.

"Harrington, if you don't let me speak to her, I won't show up." He pushed the off button to silence the other phone without even looking at the caller ID.

"Why would you want to do something stupid like that, Robert? Because you know that would leave me with only one option. The one I am least in favor of." Harrington's voice tightened. "You will show up if you know what's good for you. Be at Sundance Square near Houston and First at eight tonight. We will find you." Harrington hung up.

Bobby sat staring at the phone in his hand.

Someone will die tonight.

The pit of his stomach pitched. His head pounded and anger radiated through every ounce of his being. His chest tightened with fear despite the adrenaline surge.

Thoughts rolled as he went into the small kitchen to clean the morning dishes. After finishing the kitchen, he gathered up his tossed laundry and crammed it into the washer. Plans formulated as he worked off excess energy. Looking around the apartment, there was little else for him to do. Charlie kept a tidy place.

He contemplated going out for a jog, but instead he opted for a shower to work out the kinks from his hard sleep on the sofa. As he was about to step into the shower, Charlie's phone rang. He had forgotten someone had called just as Harrington did.

He wrapped a thick, terrycloth towel around his waist and snatched up the phone.

"Oh, God, Bobby. Where have you been?"

"Grace, calm down. What's the matter?" He tensed.

"Jaleel saw Charlie last night."

"What? Say again." He didn't believe his ears.

"He was downtown and saw her out on the street. He said she was with some older man who looked like he may be a homeless person. Jaleel said he called to her, but she acted like she didn't know him."

What is going on?

"What'd Jaleel say the man looked like?" He wanted to be sure of what the man saw.

"He said he was Charlie's size, old with long, blondish-gray hair and beard. He was real scruffy-looking."

"I don't understand. That's not Harrington, unless he has help. I seriously doubt it, though," he said.

"Maybe she got away," Grace said. "Surely, he wouldn't parade her downtown where people might know and recognize her."

"Yeah. But, Grace, why wouldn't she call me? Or at the very least, you? She has to know you're frantic."

"I don't know, Bobby. I just don't understand what's going on."

Me either.

"I promise you I will find her." They hung up and Bobby remembered the water running in the shower.

He wished he could believe what he had told Grace.

I promise... He hoped he could keep his word.

As he lathered the floral soap, an odd feeling ran through him. Renewed hope. Harrington might not have Charlie.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Nick spoke briefly to his lieutenant before grabbing the items he needed from his squad room. He fought and begged to hold off one more day before informing the Feds. Lieutenant Barry agreed but reminded Nick the focus was now to capture the suspect and recover the body. His heart tore at the thought. But as a veteran police officer, he knew the procedure.

He shook his head in disgust as he left the squad room, mentally pumping up his mood for the next emotional journey.

As his feet descended down the last few stairs, the desk sergeant caught his eye and called him over. Sergeant Teddy Woods finished his conversation with the young officer beside him and turned his full attention to Nick. Teddy scratched his balding head, tightening his almost black eyes on the box Nick carried under his arm.

“Whatcha got, Nicky?”

“What, this?” Nick moved the box under his arm. “Just cleaning out the clutter. What’s up, Teddy?”

“You were the one working on the Harrington case, right?”

Nick bent his head toward the aging man. When Harrington took Charlie, only two other people in the department knew besides him. “Yeah I was, why?” His heart thumped heavy in his chest.

“I got a call from a woman this morning. She works at the Taylor Street shelter. She swears a man looking like Harrington came in last night ‘snooping around’—her words. The man gave the director a

different name though. What was it?” Teddy asked aloud as he stared out into the air. “What was the name...”

Harrington was out in public. And he was looking for someone. In a shelter? Who was it? Charlie?

Sweat beads popped out on his forehead and the box under his arm suddenly weighed triple what it had. Unease rippled through him as he tapped his foot, waiting for Teddy to finish.

He’d grown so close to Charlie and Bobby in the past months. It was killing him to see Bobby hurting this way. And, God, he loved Charlie like his own daughter, who was close to the same age. The pain in his heart was more than he thought he could bear, he could only image the pain Bobby felt.

Teddy thumped his forehead. “...Allen. That’s it. He told the director his name was James Allen.”

Nick almost dropped the box. “Are you certain?”

“That’s what the lady said.”

“Damn,” Nick said under his breath.

“Nicky, what’s going...”

“Thanks, Teddy.” Nick moved toward the door, his mind long gone.

“Sure thing.” The man called after him, “Oh, hey, Nick, one more thing.”

He stopped, hoping the distance hid his annoyance.

“This probably doesn’t have anything to do with Harrington, but there was also a woman in that night with one of the shelter’s regulars, Old Wynn. The woman—youngish from the sound of it—completely freaked out when she laid eyes on this James Allen. Rushed out of the building.”

“Who was she?” Anxiety rippled in Nick’s chest. “They get a name?”

“They called her Ruth, no last name. Supposedly she has some kind of traumatic amnesia. She can’t remember who she is—so she says—and she wouldn’t let them bring her to us or the hospital. The lady at the shelter was reluctant to tell me, but was too worried about that

Harrington fellow. There aren't any missing person's reports the last few days..." Teddy shrugged, "...so she's probably hiding out from someone or..."

Nick was out the door before Teddy could finish. His heart pounded as he raced to find Bobby.

The five-minute drive to Charlie's apartment seemed endless as Nick cursed himself for letting the battery on his cell phone run out. He flipped over the words Teddy said.

"What in the hell is going on?"

A Harrington look-a-like searched a shelter for someone. A young woman, with possible amnesia, sees him and bolts.

Could Ruth be Charlie? Why does the name Ruth sound so familiar to him?

"Damn it, move." He yelled at the car in front of him.

None of it made any sense to him. It had to be Harrington. James Allen clinched it. It could have been a coincidence. It's a common enough name. But what were the odds?

Bobby was seated, waiting on the sofa when Nick arrived. Silently, Nick crossed the room and set the box from the police station on the kitchen table, debating how to tell Bobby. He looked at Bobby, noticing a peculiar look in Bobby's eye.

"Did you get everything at the station?" Bobby motioned to the cardboard box as he stood.

"Yep. Um, I had an interesting conversation with the desk sergeant. A woman down at the Taylor Street shelter spotted Harrington there last night. She saw his picture in the paper this morning and called it in."

"Could have been anyone," Bobby said. "Why's she so sure it was him?"

"She saw the photo in the paper, Bobby. Swears it's him. And it is." Nick answered. Bobby stared at him. "The name he gave..." Nick paused, "...was James Allen."

“What? My brother’s name? Damn.” Bobby ran his hands through his hair. “What in the hell was he doing at a shelter?”

“Well, that’s the interesting part. I think he was looking for Charlie.”

Bobby sat heavily onto the sofa, speechless. After a while he asked, “You think he *lost* her?”

“I think it is a very good possibility.” Nick held his hands up, halting Bobby from speaking. “Wait. The woman at the shelter told the sergeant there was a young woman there with one of the regulars, they called her Ruth.” Bobby’s owl eyes widened.

“That was her mother’s name,” Bobby said in an almost whisper.

That’s right.

“The woman is having trouble remembering who she is. Teddy blew it off, because no missing person’s reports have been filed recently. He doesn’t know about Charlie.” Nick waited for Bobby’s reaction.

Finally Bobby spoke. “That explains a lot then, huh?” He turned his back to Nick. “So Teddy hasn’t told anyone else, right?”

“Correct.” Nick furrowed his brow. “What do you mean ‘that explains a lot’?”

Bobby turned and looked at Nick for a moment and then relayed Grace’s call concerning Jaleel’s encounter the night before. Both men considered all the information floating around them.

“What do you think happened?” Nick asked. “You think Harrington lost Charlie, and she lost her memory in the process?”

“That’s about the only thing that makes any sense. If she got away from him, I can’t think of any other reason why she wouldn’t come straight to one of us. Especially Grace.”

“I don’t know, Bobby.” Nick shook his head. “Harrington acts as though he still has her. You have to wonder why.”

“Well if *I* knew he didn’t have her—for whatever reason—he would *know* I wouldn’t show up. He was adamant about me not speaking to her

the last two times he called.” Bobby rubbed his hands together. “We have quite a bit of an advantage now for my meeting with him tonight.”

“You know why he picked Sundance Square, don’t you?” Nick said. “It’s that movie premiere down there. Tons of people and booths. It’s going to be a mad house.”

“Well then,” Bobby said, “We had better get to work on what we’re going to do.”



She rummaged around the underground room, anxious and claustrophobic from her seclusion. A steady rain welcomed the afternoon and continued throughout the day. She’d wanted to spend time in the city to place the setting from her disturbing dreams. Hoping to piece together her hidden past.

All day she thought about Charlie. It didn’t feel as foreign to her as it had at first. But Charlotte or Charlene, like Wynn had suggested, didn’t suit her. And she couldn’t imagine anyone in their right mind naming their daughter Charles. Her parents might have called her Charlie short for something, but not that.

Her parents—it broke her heart that she couldn’t remember them, couldn’t see their faces. But she knew they were gone. Somehow, the knowledge that they were dead had forced its way through. And even though she had absolutely no recollection, it was as if she were losing them all over again.

What if there were others like that, others that she had lost and forgotten. Would she remember them only to discover them missing from her life too?

And who was Bobby?

Wynn told her she had cried out his name before he could wake her. *Bobby?* Was he the man in her dreams? The man who had lost his love and was searching for her? Was Bobby the one the evil man was after?

A sudden thought stopped her cold. Something tickling her brain. She closed her eyes. Kneading her temples, she tried to flush the memory to the surface. She recalled the first dream she'd had. *She* was the woman in the dreams. The one called Charlie. He had called to her Charlie. The vivid image appeared.

Her eyes flew open. "If the evil man from my dreams is real and in this city, the odds are so is the other man, Bobby. He's in real danger. But how can I find him?" she said aloud.

"Ruth, I mean Charlie, are you talking to someone?" Wynn came through the plastic-covered doorway. He carried a large paper sack.

"No, I was thinking out loud. I just wonder if my dreams could be something that has happened or maybe..." she paused, worrying the hem of her shirt with her fingers, "something that will happen?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not sure... It's just," she wrung her hands, "my dreams seem so real, and I have this urgent feeling like I need to stop something or prevent something. Like it hasn't happened yet but will. Does that make sense?"

"Yes it does. It makes perfect sense. But I'll be damned if I know what to do," he answered. "Maybe we will get some answers tonight."



Bobby and Nick parked near the entrance of the festival. Bobby worried that Harrington would be able to slip in and out unnoticed. And with the rain cloaking everyone unrecognizable, Harrington could walk right up to Bobby and he'd be none the wiser. *Damn him*, Bobby thought, *and damn the weather.*

On the short walk to the square, they tested their hidden transmitters. Both had no interference hearing the other as they separated and got into position. The wetness plastered Bobby's light jacket to him. He feared it would not hide the shoulder holster, snug at the sides, but the bulk of the night's darkness obscured the gun. Neither he nor Nick wore a raincoat despite the steady fall of the rain. Bobby argued that if for some reason Charlie was having problems remembering then maybe she would see him and connect.

Their one big advantage—Harrington didn't know Nick. They both figured Harrington would think Bobby too afraid to contact the local police. So Nick stayed back away from Bobby and scanned the crowd for Harrington and Charlie.

As Bobby paced the area where he was supposed to wait, he scanned every face that passed by. Unfortunately, most were dressed in slickers or carrying umbrellas, obscuring their features. He feared Charlie would be one of the many to pass him by, and he might not even sense her presence. A thought that sunk into the pit of his stomach, making him regret more than he could bear that he hadn't asked her to marry him when he had the chance in Chicago.

His nerves were peaked. His ears overly sensitive to every laugh and groan. Sweat and rain ran down his back. His heart lurched as any golden, blonde-haired women passed. Every substantially-size man passing by caught his eye. Will Harrington's six-foot-five stature haunted his mind's eye, remembering the man from his past.

It had been three years since the two met face to face. Bobby remembered on that occasion Harrington had laughed in his face when he had accused him of being responsible for Jamie's murder. Harrington told Bobby he had quite the imagination and dismissed him like an unnecessary servant.

Bobby waded through the crowd toward the area Harrington had designated. With his body rigid and tight, he had to force himself to act

casual as he scanned the group of people around him. His fingers stiff as he pressed the hidden button under his jacket collar.

“How we doing, Nick?” he asked, barely moving his lips.

Nick’s disembodied voice came through Bobby’s earpiece. “I see you just fine. I haven’t noticed anyone following you.”

“Make sure you keep your eyes peeled for Charlie, too.”

“You know I will. Stop talking, I can see your mouth moving.”

Bobby proceeded down the walkway flanking the games tents. He slowed at the concession stands, feigning interest in the ring toss game and watching the people moving around him.

He checked his watch to find it was ten after eight.

“Shit,” he said aloud. “He’s late.” Still facing the game, he spoke to Nick again. “I don’t see him, or Charlie. Remember he’s a big guy. Maybe six-five. He should stick out.”

“Man, Bobby, with all these umbrellas, Shaq wouldn’t stick out. But I’m watching.”

Bobby turned back to the crowd. A woman on the other side of the street with her back to him caught his eye. He couldn’t see her face, but the way she moved and carried herself, despite the cane, looked just like Charlie. Under an umbrella, she had a scarf covering her head and he assumed she had her hair pinned up judging by the bulge at the nape of her neck. She turned toward him while he moved closer to her.

“Bobby,” she yelled and waved.

His heart stopped.

Getting closer, he realized his mistake. “Grace, what are you doing here? For a second there, I thought you were Charlie.”

“I told you my group was coming down here for the premiere.”

Her group, he recalled, were sixty-somethings that liked everything from antiquing to skydiving to white water rapids rafting.

“What happened to you?” Bobby asked motioning to her cane.

“Would you believe, I tripped over that old rug by the front door. Charlie is always getting on me about it not being secure enough.” Grace paused. “I went rushing out the door this morning and twisted my knee and ankle when the damn thing caught the heel of my shoe. I’m fine. Don’t worry about me. What are you doing here, Bobby?” she asked.

He had to think fast. How should he answer her? If he told her the truth, she might interfere and get hurt. But she could be an extra pair of eyes to help search for Charlie.

In his ear he heard Nick. “Bobby, you gotta get her to go away. She might spook Harrington if he sees you talking to someone.”

Bobby nodded so slightly he wondered if Nick could see him.

“Nick thought it would be good for me to get out of the apartment for a little while,” he lied with too much ease. “He’s manning the phones in case Harrington calls. But I doubt he will—he’s supposed to call tomorrow afternoon to set up the meeting.”

“Did you give much thought to what Jaleel saw?” she asked.

“Nope. He was mistaken. He probably just saw someone who looked like Charlie.” He felt terrible lying to her, but Nick was right—she might spook Harrington. “You better get going. Your friends are waiting for you. Try to have a good time. And I’ll call you in the morning.” He waved as she rejoined her friends. He breathed easier when they headed away from the food section.



Wynn and Charlie blended into the crowd. No one gave them a second glance as they walked through the streets. The wet blast of wind blew Charlie’s headscarf across her face, blocking her view of the people. She was forever pulling it free.

Wynn said little as they wandered around. He seemed to be searching the crowd, too.

“We’ll start at booths and work our way north.” Wynn said.

“Sounds fine. Lead the way.”

Charlie gaped at the small groups of people huddled together chatting and those just milling about, too many people. She held onto the hope that one face would stand out to her. One person in the crowd would be familiar. And she hoped desperately it would be the person from her dream: Bobby.

A small group drew her interest. Four men and two women huddled under a small awning. Two men in the group shouted at one another. The larger man was yelling profanities in the face of a man half his size. Both men held their ground, red-faced, with fists balled at their sides. The others looked on uncomfortable as they stood aside watching the spectacle.

Charlie’s eyes glued to the scene, startled as the smaller man bolted from the group, in her direction.

Panicked, Charlie backed behind Wynn, trying to get out of the man’s path. In an attempt to flee, her scarf came loose and covered her face, blinding her. Screaming, she ripped at the scarf, completely removing it from her head. Restoring her vision, she saw the larger man charging after the other, both straight at her.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Bobby worried about the ruckus the men were causing. It would surely make meeting with Harrington more difficult. As he was about to radio Nick to come break it up, a shrill scream rang out. He tracked the sound to a woman knocked down by a large man running through the crowd. The scarf that hung from her shoulders fluttered to the ground, revealing a bun at the nape of her neck. Then the hair fell loose. For a moment, he could only stand dumbstruck. Charlie.

She tried to right herself from her heap on the wet grass, her hair sticking to her neck and face in the rain. By the size and the manner in which the man moved, Bobby knew that it hadn't been Harrington that hit her, but his fear for Charlie didn't lessen.

"Nick, I found her. Falafel stand!" Bobby yelled into the microphone, running toward her.

"I can't see her. Too many people. But I'm on my way over there," Nick said.

"Charlie!" Bobby screamed over the noise. "Charlie!"



She looked in his direction when she heard her name. Wynn grabbed her arm and pointed at the man calling to her. She pushed her rain-soaked hair from her face, for a clearer view. Her eyes met his through the throng of people. Recognition sparked.

"Bobby!" She ran toward him.

Three steps toward Bobby, the larger man caught the other. Punches flew and all Hell broke loose. Charlie lost sight of Bobby, swallowed up in the crowd.

Seeing Bobby opened the floodgates. Her memories flowed back into her mind. She remembered her last trip to Chicago, then coming home to find the disgusting photo and a man waiting in her apartment—Harrington. She remembered him holding her in the department store basement.

“Wynn, I’ve got to find him. I remember everything.” She held the old man’s hand as fear filled her chest. “Bobby. Bobby, where are you?” Her throat closed as the panic overwhelmed her. She had to find Bobby.

The crowd fell away some and she spotted Bobby searching for her. She waved her arms and again caught his attention. A smile of relief broke across her face. She wanted to rush to him, but her still-sore injuries slowed her.

Charlie watched Bobby cross to her then saw his face contort as he looked over her shoulder. Before she could turn to see what Bobby was frowning at, a strong arm grabbed her around the waist. *Déjà vu*.

“Nick, he’s got her.” Charlie could hear Bobby speaking from a few feet away. “Where the hell are you?” She saw Bobby turn his mouth into the collar of his shirt.

Harrington laughed. The rhythmic rise and fall of his chest pressed onto her back. “So you did tell someone,” Harrington yelled over her head.

Charlie’s body shook, her nerves spastic.

“Let her go, Harrington. She has nothing to do with this!” Bobby yelled back at him.

“On the contrary, Robert. She has everything to do with this.”

“I’m not going to tell you again. Let her go.”

Harrington's laughter soared above the crowd. A few of the gawkers from the fight turned their attention to the scene forming between Bobby and Harrington.

"Not only will I not let her go, but you will watch her die."

"Harrington, I swear..."

"Silence, Robert!" Harrington yelled, his arm tightening around her. "I will make the threats. You have no power here. I have the one and only thing that you would exchange your life for."

Charlie's mind rushed. She couldn't think what to do.

"Robert I watched the two of you in Chicago. I could see how much you love her. I could kill you and be done with it. But I don't want to do that. I want you to suffer. And by killing Charlie, you will."

Charlie watched Bobby reach into his jacket and remove his pistol.

It only took a moment for people in the crowd to notice.

"Gun!" someone shouted.

Everyone scattered, leaving Harrington, Charlie, and Bobby in a standoff. Charlie caught sight of Nick just on the edge of the cluster in front of the games. She tried to make eye contact but stopped, afraid Harrington would sense it. She thought she noticed him wink at her, but she couldn't be certain.

Bobby left his gun loose at his side.

"Could you ease up on your grip on her a bit? She doesn't look so good. She looks like she might faint any moment," Bobby said.

I'm scared, but not faint, she thought. *Oh...*

He was telling her to drop. "Harrington, I don't...feel...so...well." She put a palm to her forehead in full swoon. Her body went limp in his arm.

Her unsteady weight pulled Harrington off balance. He dropped her to the ground, but through the smallest slits in her eyes, Charlie saw him point his gun again at her.

"If you shoot me, I can get two rounds into her before the bullet reaches me and you know it, Robert."

“Don’t try it, Harrington. You shoot her and I *will* kill you. Make no mistake. You can’t kill both of us. You’ll have to kill me first if you expect to get out of this alive,” Bobby said, gun trained on Harrington.

“Maybe I don’t care anymore, Robert.”

Movement off to their right caught Charlie’s attention. Wynn ran toward her, charging Harrington. Unbelievably, he managed to get his old frame off the ground and throw himself into the much larger man.

Charlie scrambled to her feet as the two men fell to a heap on the ground. Several uniformed officers came to the scene. Nick ran from his perch, shield in hand, waving them back. Bobby ran to her.

A shot rang out. Initial screams from the crowd dissipated to dead silence. Bobby grabbed Charlie’s elbow as the fallen heap moved. Wynn rolled off Harrington and onto his back. A dark stain, already visible, covered the front of his clothing.

“No!” Charlie screamed. Bobby restrained her from going to her friend.

A moment later, two shots rang out, whizzing past Bobby and Charlie. Bobby pushed her behind him. Harrington rose from the ground. He aimed and the third shot hit Bobby square in the chest, pushing him back into Charlie. He grunted and groaned as he fell to the ground, pulling her with him.

Bile rose in Charlie’s throat as the images of two beloved men shot to death by Harrington appeared in her mind. Her immediate fear turned to seething anger in the briefest of seconds.

I will kill him.

Getting out from under Bobby, Charlie took the gun from his hand and went after Harrington.

She saw Nick and one of the uniformed officers draw their weapons on Harrington as he raised his at them.

Nick turned to Charlie. “Stay back,” he ordered, distracted from Harrington.

A split-second later, a shot rang out and blood spotted Nick's leg. He crashed to the ground. His arm still raised, he fired, hitting Harrington in the shoulder. Harrington dropped his own gun and grabbed his arm as he spun on his heels and broke for the crowd.

Charlie also broke into a run. Adrenaline pushed all her pain to the back of her mind, giving her unchallenged strength.

A uniformed officer gave chase, yelling for Harrington to halt.

She wondered why the officer didn't just shoot him, remembering the gun in her own hand. Even with her adrenaline pumping and mind racing, she knew he wasn't shooting because so many people crowded the area.

The officer, an older man, lost ground and Charlie passed him. As she followed, Charlie spotted her aunt—with a cane.

She ran up to Grace. "Here." Charlie shoved the gun in her aunt's hand and took her cane.

"Charlie..." Grace's voice trailed off.

Harrington clutched his arm. She saw the blood dripping through his fingers as she got closer. She could smell his soured stench. *Sweat, blood, fear.* Within a few feet of Harrington, she raised the cane like a bat. An arm's length away, she swung at him, hitting the hand covering the bullet wound.

Harrington screamed out in pain, tripped over his own feet, and fell to the pavement. Charlie swung again, hitting him across the temple. A sickly sound echoed in her ears. She breathed in, storing up more energy. The sweet coppery smell of Harrington's blood filled her senses, further arousing her fury and resentment. She hit him over and over again. The dull thwack of the wooden cane on his body filled the air.

She could only think of all the people he had killed either personally or by paying someone else.

"This is for Jamie..."

Whack.

"This is for Brian..."

Whack.

"This is for Greg..."

Whack.

"This is for Wynn..."

Whack.

"This is for Bobby..."

About to raise the cane again, two strong arms encircled her, pinning her arms by her side.

"That's enough, Charlie. He's had enough."

Charlie collapsed, breaking down and crying. Her entire body shook, and fat tears rolled out of her closed eyes. Her adrenaline surge diminished and her arms and legs grew too heavy to move.

Voices sounded filtered, as if cotton filled her ears. Only a murmur or whisper seemed to float by.

She stopped crying as someone sat with her, rocking her. A hand rubbed across the back of Charlie's hair, a kiss left on her temple. She opened her eyes.

"Bobby?" For a moment, she studied his face, confused. He sat beside her, holding her in his arms. "I saw you..." The words caught in her throat. Frantically, she pushed him away and tore open his denim shirt. A black vest, thick and coarse, sat underneath. She ran her eyes and her fingers over the off-centered dent, an inch below his heart. Tears welled up again.

"I'm fine, other than a hell of a bruise."

Her mouth crushed his as she threw her arms around his neck, holding him tight. "I thought you were dead," she cried against his lips. "Don't ever do that to me again."

"I promise." Bobby held her to him, almost squeezing out all her air.

Charlie pulled back and looked Bobby over again to assure her heart she was not hallucinating. Then she spoke, and the words tumbled out

almost too fast to get a breath in. She told him about everything that had happened since Harrington kidnapped her. She found it cathartic to tell him all. It also helped her straighten it all out in her own mind.

When she finished, she just stared at him, looking at his face. She wanted to tell him how much she loved him and missed him. Even when she couldn't remember him specifically, she could feel his absence. She knew she had lost something special.

She kissed him again.

After a minute, she pulled her nerves and emotions together and let Bobby go, long enough for both to stand. She took his hand in hers and held on. Several police officers pushed people back away from the scene. Charlie could see the flashing lights from two ambulances as they slowly made their way up through the crowd.

"Is Nick...?" she started to ask.

"He's fine. Got hit in the leg. Pretty banged up, but he'll pull through." Bobby said.

"What about Wynn?" She knew the answer but wanted to hear it from Bobby.

"I'm sorry. He didn't make it." He released her hand and put his arms around her shoulders.

"I...uh...want to find out where his wife is buried and pay for his burial. So they can be together again," Charlie said with a catch in her throat.

"That can be arranged." Bobby kissed the top of her head.

"Charlie, Bobby," someone from behind shouted.

Together, they turned. Grace hobbled over to them, favoring her right leg.

"Sorry about your cane, Aunt Grace," Charlie said.

"Please." The older woman waved away the comment and grabbed her niece in a fierce hug. "You had us so worried. What happened to you?"

"It's a long story."

“What happened with Mr. Harrington?” Grace asked.

“Once he recovers, he’ll be in jail for a long, long time,” Bobby said.

Bobby turned to Charlie. “Can I speak with you in private for a minute?” he asked. “Do you mind, Grace?” She shook her head.

Charlie looked at her aunt and shrugged. She and Bobby walked to an empty storefront, the most private place they could find. She worried the edge of her shirt with her fingers.

What could he possibly have to say to me at a time like this? Maybe Bobby thinks I’m too much trouble, Charlie speculated. *He’s going to tell me he’s had enough adventure for one lifetime.*

Bobby turned to her and took both her hands in his. “Boy, Charlie, you sure know how to keep a man on his toes.”

Shit, he is breaking things off. What in the hell kind of place is this to break up with someone?

“I haven’t been able to think of anything else but you for the last few days. For obvious reasons.” He chuckled her under the chin with a light tap. “But still...it makes what I’m going to say a lot easier.”

I knew it.

“I should’ve done this sooner. I made a big mistake waiting. The timing seemed off, but now... I can’t afford to wait any longer.”

Get it over with. Charlie mentally rolled her hand. *Hurry up.*

Bobby got down on one knee, still holding her hands. Her mouth fell open as she stood speechless.

“Charlie, will you marry me? I love you so much.”

She stood dumbfounded.

“I’ve already spoken with Nick’s boss,” he rushed on. “They have a position waiting here for me if you say yes.”

She couldn’t speak.

He wants...to marry...me!

Her mind slowed to a crawl.

And...move...here?

“Well?” he asked with a pained expression on his face.

Charlie cleared her throat. “Of course, I’ll marry you. I love you, too.” She pulled him to his feet and into her arms.

“I knew I should have asked before, but I got scared. It all happened so fast. I wanted to slow down and wait. Like I said, I made a big mistake...”

Charlie covered his mouth with hers, stopping his words. *He loves me and that’s all that matters. No more mistakes...*

Denise Belinda McDonald

To learn more about Denise, please visit her website at <http://www.denisebelindamcdonald.com> or send an email to her at: <mailto:denise@denisebelindamcdonald.com>.

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Alex Rossi leads a double life, and it may cost Grace Nolan her son.

72 Hours

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The Devlin Group: A privately-owned rogue agency unhindered by red tape and jurisdiction.

Grace Nolan walked away from the Devlin Group carrying Alex Rossi's child in her womb and his bullet in her shoulder. But a ghost from the past has kidnapped her son, Danny. The ransom—Alex Rossi. To get her son back, Grace will have to step back into the life she'd left behind and reveal her secret to Alex.

With vengeance for his mother's murder nearly at hand and a deadly substance on the loose, the last thing Alex Rossi needs is to find himself at the business end of Grace's gun. Now the clock is ticking as they race to save a child and stop a madman bent on destruction.

But Alex has a secret of his own, and it may be the ultimate betrayal.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *72 Hours*:

Something's burning. The thought hit Grace Nolan a mere second before the alarm shrieked.

"Hold on!" She ripped off her headset, then pounded down the stairs. Dammit, this couldn't happen again. She'd worked so hard to make sure it wouldn't.

The room was quickly filling with smoke, and Grace grabbed a potholder. She yanked open the oven door and took out the smoking cookie sheet. With a curse, she dropped it into the sink and turned on the tap.

The pan popped and warped as the chocolate chip briquettes slid into a black, soggy mess in the sink.

“Crap!” she yelled at the smoke detector, flapping a towel under it to clear the smoke.

She could disable any security system known to man, and sell the CIA its damn own secrets, for chrissake. Why the hell couldn’t she bake a decent batch of cookies? A boy should come home from a long day in second grade to something warm and homemade with love.

When the alarm had chirped its last chirp, Grace rummaged through the cabinet for the Chewy Chips Ahoy. After tossing a few on a plate, she shoved the package back behind the bran flakes and glanced at her watch. Just enough time to wrap things up with Carmen before she poured Danny’s milk.

“Forget to set the timer again?” Carmen Olivera asked after Grace retrieved the headset.

She nodded, then shrugged at the Latin beauty in the high-definition video screen. “I think I forgot the vanilla, anyway. Do they taste the same without the vanilla?”

“Do I look like Betty Crocker? You need to get out more, *chica*.”

If only she could. “Who’d have thought motherhood’s harder than infiltrating Russian military installations?”

“Honey, I *know* it is. Why do you think I run so fast from men?”

“Because they usually have badges from some alphabet agency or another, and want to see you in an orange jumpsuit?”

“That too. You should come back to us, babe. Can you believe Gallagher and I are staying at the freaking Plaza Royale?”

“I’ve been to the Plaza Royale. And I quit the agency eight years ago, Carm. When are you going to believe me when I tell you I’m not coming back?”

“Never. You know the Devlin Group—we *never* give up.”

“Yeah, like Mounties, only a little more juvenile, and a lot more delinquent. And speaking of delinquents, how’s Gallagher doing lately?”

Carmen rolled her eyes. “Not too happy about being the hired muscle, but Dev didn’t have anybody else available. Pretty good money just to hang around and make sure nobody kills me, if you ask me.”

“Damn straight,” Grace agreed. Sean Devlin had founded a very lucrative business brokering assignments for the loose network of international freelancers specializing in just about anything. His primary focus was assisting government agencies whose hands were tied by red tape, but he certainly didn’t do it for free.

“Like hanging out pool side’s such a hardship for him,” Carmen was saying. “You’d think he’s on vacation for all the attention he’s paying me.”

“Based on some of his previous jobs, I’d say this is pretty close to vacation for him.”

“Knowing my luck he’ll try to cut the power to the camera bank and set off the fire alarm instead.”

“What’s the job?” Grace asked, knowing Carmen would tell her if she could, shrug it off if she couldn’t.

“Some pencil pusher from a biochem company got it into his head to sell a sample of a new biotoxin to the highest bidder.”

“Wow! I hope you brought good gloves.”

Carmen pulled her sable mass of hair into a sleek ponytail. “A very unsexy, but surprisingly flexible hazmat suit, actually. It makes blending in a bit of a challenge, though, so the whole thing’s gotta go down like clockwork.”

“And the seller?”

“We’ll leave him for the big, bad buyers to take care of. The client doesn’t want the publicity of prosecuting a guy for managing to steal a very scary concoction out from under their noses.”

“People really have to start taking better care of their scary concoctions.”

“Yeah. Nice to know there are people making up poisons so they can have an antidote to it by the time somebody else makes it up.”

“It’s a scary world out there,” Grace agreed. Just one more reason she had traded in her cat suit for an apron.

“I wish you were still in the field with me, Grace. I’d feel a lot better if you had my back.”

Not a chance. When the Devlin Group had poached her away from the FBI, she’d jumped at the chance to leave her small-town, white bread upbringing behind. Miss Most-Likely-to-Organize-Carpools was going to be an international super agent.

It didn’t take long for the flash to fizzle. Fast cars, hard people, and too much adrenaline. Each mission left her more jaded and more tired. She could barely recognize the person in the mirror at the end of each day.

Not until the doctor treating her for a gunshot wound told her she was pregnant did she have the strength to walk away.

Being a civilian contractor for legit government agencies didn’t pay as well, but it let her be home with Danny. Her mission now was to be both mother and father to one hell of a great kid—the only mission that ever made her curl in her bed and cry in fear of failure.

“You know I can’t raise Danny like that.”

And she did know. Carmen Olivera was the only person connected to the Devlin Group, besides Sean himself, who knew about Danny. Her need to have an ear to bend had overcome her initial decision to never tell a soul. *Nobody* knew who his father was, though. She’d told them it was her doctor, and Carmen and Devlin—the only two people she’d kept in contact with—had no reason not to believe her.

“Maybe when Danny’s all grown up, you can come out and play, huh?”

Grace laughed again and shook her head. "Sure. I'll just stock up on the Geritol."

They chatted for a few minutes, then she severed the digital connection to her former life and returned to Mommyworld.

She was pouring milk into a plastic cup when the screen door slammed.

"How was your—" She turned.

Her throat closed. The clock ticked.

Cold milk splashed over her bare toes.

The man smiled.

"Your son won't be coming home, Ms. Nolan...for now." He held up an 8x10 photo.

Danny, with a large, tanned hand pressing against the backpack he still wore, ushering him onto a small plane. No markings were visible on the aircraft. No other faces in the picture. Only Danny's. The camera captured him looking over his shoulder, his blue eyes under his Red Sox cap wide and liquid.

"You bastard."

Jason Sinclair has to keep his employer's daughter safe from the evil that lurks in the shadows...but he can't forget the love she once offered.

Secrets and Shadows

© 2006 Meg Allison

Sabrina Layne left her wealthy father years ago, vowing to never return. But she's back for his funeral and to evade phone calls haunting her nights. Can she avoid another rejection from her first love

Jason leads a double life working for the CIA—posing as a chauffeur while uncovering terrorist sympathizers among the elite. Murder in his home town forces him to face the friend he hurt years ago.

Together they might uncover secrets that lurk in the shadows before another life is lost. But Jason isn't sure Sabrina will forgive his lies when she learns the full truth.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Secrets and Shadows

She stared out the window of the low, black Mercedes as countless trees rushed by in the outer beam of the headlights.

Everything...everything...everything...

The word echoed through her mind like a mantra. What could one person do with so much wealth?

"Sabrina?" Jason's quiet voice stole through the fog in her brain. She turned her head to look at him.

His long, lean hands smoothly turned the steering wheel, guiding the thousand-pound piece of luxurious steel along the winding mountain road. There were no streetlights to guide them, only the soft white beams of the car, the red aura of taillights glowing behind as they curved ever higher up the sloping road.

"You still with me?" His gaze remained intent on their destination.

Sabrina nodded. “Yes, I think so. It’s just that I didn’t expect this.” Her voice trailed off as he swung the car around a sharp bend. She knew if she could see far beyond her window, the view of the downhill side of the mountain might make her sick.

Sabrina had always had an unreasonable fear of falling. In her mind she could see, almost feel, the ground give way as she tumbled into blackness. The knowledge that this was how her father had died—his car plunging down the placid, tree-covered mountain—had given her very vivid nightmares.

“You mean the money?”

“Yes.” Sabrina turned her body toward him, the seatbelt biting into her neck. “When I told him that I was getting married, he said I wouldn’t get a dime from him. You know my father—he never made a threat he didn’t intend to keep. Now here I am, his sole heir, and I haven’t a clue why. Why did he do that, Jason? Did he ever say anything to you about me or the will or...?” She reached out, laying her hand on Jason’s arm. His muscle jumped beneath her fingertips as if her touch shocked him. Sabrina lost all train of thought.

It happened every time she touched him...electric, sizzling heat and awareness. Ten years hadn’t dimmed the flame. Did he feel it as well? She dropped her hand, clasping it with the other in her lap as she gazed at his profile in the green-tinted light from the dash.

Jason cleared his throat. “I wasn’t privy to his financial decisions and he sure didn’t confide in me where his estate was concerned. After all, I am just the chauffeur.”

Sabrina frowned. “Why are you still working for my dad? And what was that business earlier about a deer scaling a ten-foot wall and that it wasn’t safe for me to drive alone? You want to tell me what’s going on?”

He glanced at her. The tightening of his jaw spoke volumes. Jason was trying to figure out how much to tell her.

“What are you hiding?” she asked. Then, like a light clicking on, it all came together—Vivian’s comments, Jason’s reticence. “It wasn’t an accident.”

She thought Jason’s shoulders tensed beneath the dark fabric of his suit.

“No.” The word was spoken so softly that for a moment Sabrina thought she’d imagined it.

“What happened?”

“He hadn’t been drinking, even though they did find an empty scotch bottle in his car, and I know the difference between brake-lines that have been cut versus the damage that can be done in a wreck. There was also some internal damage in the steering column that seemed very unusual.”

“How do you know all that?”

“You remember Bill Wright? He’s been the Chief of Police here for a little over six years. We’ve been friends forever and I talked him into letting me look at the car. What was left of it.”

She stared at him a moment as his last words sunk in. Her stomach rolled at the image that came to mind—twisted, smoldering metal. “What does the chief think about all of this?”

Jason sighed. “He’s investigating, but thinks I’m overreacting. Besides, he’s got the town council breathing down his neck, stressing how much the upcoming Spring Carnival needs good public relations. They don’t want it getting out that we might have a murder on our hands.”

“Why is the carnival so much more important than my father’s life?”

“It’s not that...it’s because this is a major source of income for Castle’s Grove,” he told her. Sabrina clutched the door handle as they gunned through a rather sharp curve. “Besides, on the surface it does look like an accident. They’d much rather accept the facts at face value—a rich man drank too much and took his ’Vette for a spin off the mountain.”

She swallowed hard, trying to keep her mind on their conversation and away from thoughts of cars falling off the mountainside.

“My father had a lot of enemies. His personality alone would account for that. But I have a hard time believing some well-heeled antiques collector got mad enough to have him murdered. Are you sure about all this?”

Sabrina watched him, waiting for an answer. Then she realized he hadn't been listening. Jason's gaze darted back and forth between the area illuminated by the headlights to the rearview mirror. He frowned, his jaw tense.

“Jason?”

“Quiet!” He glanced in the mirror again as they rounded a bend, then turned his head to the side mirror at his left.

“What's wrong?” Sabrina asked as she looked over her shoulder. They came upon a straight stretch of road. She noticed a car about two hundred yards behind them and closing in fast. Sabrina glanced at the narrow road ahead. There was little leeway for passing. Another idiot tourist trying to get someone killed? Or something worse? Her heart pounded as her mouth went dry.

“Maybe you should pull over and let them by.”

Jason shook his head. “I don't think passing is what they have in mind.”

All the while he spoke, Jason's gaze switched between the road and the rearview mirror. Sabrina turned to watch, a cold lump of fear settling in her stomach. The other vehicle was three car lengths away. Jason pressed down on the gas, giving the powerful engine its head as he smoothly maneuvered down the two-lane road, straddling the centerline around the curves.

“Jason...?” His name left her on a whisper of fear, her fingers digging into the seat and door handle.

“Hold on,” he murmured.

She heard a loud popping sound and the Mercedes' rear window splintered. The other car's headlights illuminated the glass and Sabrina blinked at it in shock. The design created looked like a bluish, crystalline spider web. "What was—?"

"Get down!" He took a hand off the wheel and pushed her head down into the seat. Sabrina lay there for a moment as icy terror wrapped around her like a serpent. She could feel the pressure of his hip against the top of her head. The rich aroma of leather mingled with the scent of Jason's spicy cologne.

Someone was shooting at them. It couldn't be real. That kind of thing happened on TV or the movies, not in the Poconos. People skied the mountain slopes. They honeymooned and bathed in heart-shaped tubs. They came to drink and listen to comedians. They did not shoot at the residents.

Another shot, and more glass shattered. She felt Jason's body jerk, heard a series of sharp cracks and then Jason's deep voice cursing above her.

"Are you hurt?" She tried to raise her head but another shot zinged by, fracturing the windshield. She heard a scream, realizing a moment later that it was she who'd made the sound.

"I'm fine—stay down," he said in clipped tones. "I've got an idea." Her body slid into him as the Mercedes glided around another curve. The squeal of tires—theirs or the other car's, she wasn't sure—made her stomach lurch. "When I count to three, hold on to something and don't let go. You got that?"

Sabrina nodded, then realizing he couldn't see her added, "Yes."

For what seemed an eternity, she listened to the powerful roar of the engine and the squawl of rubber on asphalt. Sabrina felt the road curve under her as the car moved, then they seemed to be on a straightaway. Her body tensed. Her fingers dug into the creamy leather.

"Here we go," Jason said. "One... two..."

Sabrina filled her lungs, wondering if it would be the last breath she ever took.

Don't fall off the mountain...don't fall off the mountain...

"Three!"

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