



# In the Teeth of the Wind

By

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## Prologue

The thirty-seven-year-old officer had been with the Florida Drug Enforcement Agency only two years when his life was drastically altered one cold, rainy November night. The last thing he remembered before his ordeal began was hearing someone call his name while he was getting into his car outside the apartment complex in which he lived. He stopped, car keys in his hand, as footsteps came toward him out of the drizzling night.

“Hey, pig!” someone else snarled.

He turned and an ultra white light was thrust into his face, blinding him. He threw up an arm to ward off the painful brightness.

Someone grabbed him from behind, another from the front. A sharp, stinging pain jabbed into the flesh of his upper right arm, causing him to yelp in surprise. His world slowed.

He was vaguely aware of hands holding him, dragging him; the sound of a van’s door sliding back on its runners; other hands taking him, pulling him inside. The drug washed over him with such debilitating force all he could do was blink up at the men whose faces were hidden behind black ski masks.

“Gonna take you on a nice, long ride, pal.” The voice was chilling, deadly, full of threat, and he wondered who had ordered his death. The face of Kiki Camareno, a friend and fellow DEA agent, now dead and gone, slithered across his foggy mind.

They cuffed his arms behind him, tied his ankles together. One man leaned over him and taped his eyes and mouth shut. An overpowering smell of duct tape--sourly-plastic and musky--drifted under his nostrils.

They took him to a hot and musty place filled with a cloying stench. When the tape was ripped from his eyes, they watered profusely. The air reeked of fertilizer and burned his nose.

Four assailants dragged him across a dirt floor, his legs useless against the numbness invading his system. Hard hands gripped his upper arms, supported him as he hung helplessly between two of his captors. One man gripped his chin in a cruel pinch and his head tilted upward so that he stared wide-eyed at the masked face pressing in close to his own. “You wanna have a good time, pig?” asked the man, his accent unmistakably Colombian.

“He’s going to whether he wants it or not!” another man chortled.

His handcuffs were removed but he had little strength to free himself. He struggled--uselessly and ineffectually--before they pushed him onto his back and dragged his arms over his head. They snapped another cuff into place around his free wrist then he heard the rattle of metal against metal, the clink of the cuff locking as his wrist was secured to the top of the cot. His left wrist was jerked upward and chained to the cot, as well.

He whimpered as they removed his jeans and shackled his ankles to the foot of the cot.

The DEA agent cringed as the Colombian moved over him, putting out a hand to

touch him.

“Nice,” the Colombian whispered, running his palm over the thick muscle of the agent’s thigh. He slid his hand between the agent’s legs, to the inside of a tense thigh, probing for just the right place. “Very nice.”

The agent thought he knew what was coming.

Thought he knew what they were going to do to him before they killed him.

As his torture began, he believed he would die before the night was over. He began to pray in earnest: “Hail Mary, full of Grace....”

He wondered if Kiki had done the same thing.

Long into the next few days, the agent lay where they’d chained him, wishing they’d kill him. He wanted them to put a gun to his head and pull the trigger or put a blade to his throat and, with one quick slice, end his torment. He hadn’t expected to live through the ordeal. He hadn’t wanted to. But he had. And he would later wish with all his heart that he had not.

## Part One

### Chapter One

Loud, tooth-jarring music bombarded Conor Nolan and Joe Cortesio as they pushed through the double-oak doors into the interior of the dimly lit and crowded roadhouse. The cacophony of whining guitars, piercing trill of a keyboard, and heavy thump of drums was deafening. The feedback from the band's four huge speakers crashed through the over heated room like the blast-off from a lunar shuttle.

Overhead a dense blue haze of cigarette smoke hung suspended from the exposed beams of metal roof supports. The overpowering smell of spent tobacco attached itself to the men's clothing. Accompanying the stench was the odor of sweat-slick bodies and sick-sweet marijuana. The combination awakened a nest of butterflies in Conor Nolan's stomach.

Clustered around the dance floor at the north end of the cavernous room, four to six vinyl-covered swivel chairs were pulled up to each of the twenty-odd, cluttered, sticky, chrome-and-laminate tables. Nolan noted that every seat was full, some with more than one occupant.

The two men walked toward the East end of the room to a shadowed semi-circular nook with ten booths set on a raised platform. Each booth was separated from its neighbor by a five feet high fieldstone partition. Flickering light from electric torches looked like burning rushes.

Harried bartenders worked at feverish speed to fill drink orders. A dozen waitresses, dressed in short black mini-skirts, circulated among the tables and booths.

At the long bar, crowded two people deep, a twenty-something blonde woman observed the dancers. Watching intently, she swiveled from side to side on the barstool, sipping occasionally from a tall frosted glass, ignoring the come-ons that now and again obstructed her view. A faint smile stretched her full lips as her bored green gaze fell on Nolan's tall frame and held.

"Are they up there?" Joe Cortesio shouted over the din. He blinked against the intrusion of heavy smoke.

"I can't see a damned thing!" answered Conor Nolan. The flash of a strobe, emanating from the hard rock band light show, underscored his night blindness. The jerky movements and blue-white appearance of the people in the room made his stomach roil.

Cortesio stumbled as a drunk swerved off course and collided with him. He ignored the slurred apology and shoved the offender away, grimacing with distaste at the stench of vomit that assailed his nostrils. He reached behind him, felt for the bulge of his wallet in the pocket of his jeans and was satisfied it hadn't been lifted in the encounter.

Nolan tapped Cortesio on the shoulder and pointed. Squinting, Cortesio nodded.

They threaded their way through the room, jostled and blocked with every step--disengaging playful arms thrown around them by bold women--the two men finally made

it to the platform of booths.

“Where the hell you guys been?” snapped Neville “Trip” Triplett as Cortesio slipped into the booth at one end and Nolan the other.

Nolan glanced at his friend, taking in the thinning dark hair. “What’s with you? Turning forty still got you bummed?”

Trip shifted his six-foot, two-inch frame in the seat and drew a hand across his spreading middle. He fastened Nolan with a dark gray stare but let the good-natured jib drop. “We were beginning to think you guys weren’t coming.” Trip forced his gaze from Conor’s grinning face.

“Hell, Triplett,” said Cortesio, “we weren’t even breathing hard.”

Nolan leaned over to kiss the only woman in the booth. “How’s it going, pretty lady?”

Rhianna Marek was, indeed, a pretty lady. With her soft, dewy brown eyes and long, straight sable hair, she could pass for a teenager, and had when the New Gregory police force needed an insider at the local high school. Her soft Georgia accent further belied her age. She would be thirty-two on the next Summer Solstice.

“You’re late,” Rhianna complained, dark eyes glowing. She returned his quick kiss and laid her hand on his thigh as he put his arm around her and drew her close.

“Traffic was a bitch,” said Nolan. He glanced up at the skimpily clad waitress who placed two new napkins on the table. “How you doing tonight, Myra?”

“Okay. What’ll it be, Irish?”

“What’s cooking, Myra?”

“Same old, same old,” she shrugged. “How’s it hanging?”

“Eight inches and growing!” The Italian chuckled and waited for the collective groans of his friends to subside before reaching down to rub his crotch. “Make that nine.”

“Pervert,” pronounced Trip. Dave Donne, the man sitting between Trip and Cortesio, opened his mouth, stuck his finger in, and pretended to gag.

“How do you put up with him?” Rhianna asked Conor, shaking her head at Cortesio’s antics. “He’s as randy as a teenager.” She exchanged a taut smile with Trip. He knew how worried she was by some of the outrageous things Joey had been doing of late. Her main concern was Joey’s wife finding out about his indiscretions and putting an end to their fifteen-year marriage.

Nolan grinned. “I just never bend over when he’s close around.”

“When are you and me gonna get married, Myra?” Donne asked, reaching over to stroke the waitress’ arm.

“Why buy the beef when I already get the bull for free?” At his hoot of laughter, she picked up her tray, letting her hand brush Nolan’s, but when he pretended not to notice, she left with a sigh.

“She keeps trying to get your attention, Irish,” Trip laughed. “The least you can do is pat her on the ass.”

“Not if he wants to keep his hand,” said Rhianna. She didn’t like the waitress and knew Conor had slept with her more than once. Hell, she thought, as she took a long pull on her drink, probably every man within a hundred-mile radius had humped the sleazy bitch.

Nolan bent toward Rhianna and nuzzled her neck. “The only ass I wanna pat is yours,” he whispered.

“Knock it off.” Rhianna dug her elbow into his ribs. When he moved away from her, grinning wickedly, she stuck her tongue out at him.

Myra squeezed her way through the barrier of customers lined up at the bar. She put her tray on the counter and leaned toward the bartender, shouting to be heard over the raucous music. She gave him the order, straightened up, and glanced down the length of the bar, waving at a few steady customers. Her attention encountered the blonde sitting a few stools away. Myra smiled nervously and was about to turn around when the blonde crooked a finger toward her. Myra’s smile twitched as she moved toward the woman. “Yes, Ma’am?”

“Who is the man in the black denim jacket?”

The waitress’ forehead puckered for a moment, then smoothed. She risked a glance toward the Irishman. “Nolan,” she answered. “Conor Nolan. His friends call him Irish. He’s a cop.”

“Conor Nolan,” the blonde repeated. Myra heard the satisfaction in the slightly-accented voice. “Who’s the chippy with him?”

The waitress’ mouth tightened into a fine line of dislike. “She’s a cop, too. They all are over there at number eight.” She saw the blonde’s gaze shift to the platform of booths before re-settling on Myra.

“What is she to him?”

Myra shrugged. “As far as I know they just work together. They all come in here every Monday night. Sometimes there’s a black guy who comes with them, too.”

The blonde nodded then turned to give the bartender a long, steady look. “Thank you, Myra,” she said. “That’ll be all.”

“About Irish, I...”

The blonde put a silencing finger to her lips.

“Don’t worry about it, Myra.” The blonde returned her green-eyed gaze to the bartender, dismissing Myra.

Myra turned and headed back down the bar. The bartender gave her a stern look as she retrieved her drink tray. “It don’t concern you,” he told her, reaching into his shirt pocket and taking out something. She frowned as he moved his hand over Nolan’s glass. Her gaze followed the descent of a small white tablet through the Canadian Club and Seven-Up.

“Stay out of it.” A silent warning flashed in the bartender’s dark eyes.

“Ain’t nothin’ to me.” Myra picked up the tray of drinks and turned.

Trip tapped Nolan on the arm. “How was your day, homeboy?” He had an eager look in his eye. “Productive, I hope?”

Nolan held the man’s gaze for a moment. While Rhianna and Joe Cortesio were talking across the table, Nolan hooked a hand inside his denim jacket. Withdrawing a small white plastic packet, he laid it on the table and covered it with his fingers. Trip bent forward, coming between Rhianna and the Italian, forcing them to lean backward to finish their conversation. Nolan slid the packet across to Triplett.

Dave Donne clenched his teeth and looked the other way as the transaction took place. It never failed to amaze him how bold Conor Nolan could be or how stupid Trip had become, but he figured cocaine did that to a man.

Triplett’s tongue flicked out and he licked dry, chapped lips as he pocketed the packet. His glance shifted past Nolan, swiveled about table--avoiding Dave Donne’s tight

face--then jerked back to Nolan. He nodded his thanks then leaned back in the booth with a long, relieved sigh.

Nolan put his face close to Rhianna's ear. "Wanna dance, pretty lady?" he asked just as Myra brought their drinks.

"Sure," she answered, then looked up at the waitress.

"Which of you bozos is gonna pay for it this time?" Myra challenged, her disdainful gaze sweeping the four men.

"I will," Nolan said. He shot out one long leg, dug his hand into his jeans and drew out a roll of money. Peeling off a five, he pitched it on the table. "Keep the change, sweetheart." The Irishman took a long swallow of his drink, then held out his hand to Rhianna as she slid toward him.

"Jeez, now I can have that heart transplant," Myra scoffed. Her eyes slid hungrily over Conor Nolan as he stood up.

"How 'bout another round, darling?" Triplett asked the waitress. "On me."

Dave Donne turned to watch Trip scoot out of the booth and head for the men's room as soon as Nolan and Marek were on the dance floor. He let out a disgusted snort then lifted his beer and drained it before pushing the stein toward Myra. "Make it a boilermaker this time, darling, so long as the asshole's payin' for it."

"Did you get me an address on that broad from last week?" Cortesio demanded, drawing Dave's attention.

Donne hitched one thin shoulder upward. "Do I look like the City Directory to you, Cortesio?"

"Piss off, then," the Italian grunted. He turned to watch the dancers and chuckled when his gaze fell on Nolan and Marek. "That fucking Mick can move, can't he?"

Myra glanced at Nolan as she wove her way around the periphery of the dance floor. God, yes, the man can dance. Her gaze fastened on his ass in the tight confines of faded blue jeans and she stopped, fascinated by the shifting of his body, the grace with which he moved. No matter where he danced, his undulating, mesmerizing body attracted attention, his lean physique attracting every female gaze in the place.

Nolan was thirty-seven or eight. Myra wasn't exactly sure. His hair was a lustrous deep dark brown that shone beneath the revolving overhead lights. His eyes were amber-brown and he had a way of looking at her that made her feel like she was the only woman in the world. Lean in the hip, flat in a belly that rippled like a washboard, broad in the shoulder, and well enough endowed to satisfy any woman's prurient interests, Conor Nolan was a sexy man.

"She's watching you, again," Rhianna said as Nolan brought her close to him, her mouth at his ear.

"Who?" Conor's hands slid down to her rump and molded her to him, encouraging her to feel the music as he did.

"Your little friend, the barmaid."

"Let her," was his negligent reply. He pushed her away from him and spun her beneath the arc of his arm, then snapped her forward into him, enclosing her. He ground against her, dipping his knees and sliding his body along hers like a cat against a scratching post.

"You're shameless." Rhianna laughed. She liked dancing with him. The man moved like a jungle cat, but sometimes his lack of inhibitions embarrassed her. Glancing



around, she saw other women staring at Conor and knew she was the envy of every female in the room. When he rubbed against her again, she pushed at his shoulder. "Cut it out!" she told him. "You wanna get us thrown outta here?"

"I'm horny."

"I can tell." She eased out of his embrace. "Behave yourself, Nolan."

As badly as she felt he wanted her, and as badly as she wanted him, neither had made an effort to consummate the relationship, but she knew it was only a matter of time. She knew that when it happened, the sparks of their joining would set fire to a passion that would never diminish as long as they lived. And she feared it.

He slid his body down hers once more and she laughed as she shoved him away. "You are an animal!"

The Irishman shrugged. "You wouldn't like me tame, Marek. I'd be boring as hell."

The music ended and the gyrations stopped. Nolan threaded his fingers through Rhianna's and led her to the table as the next jarring, discordant blast of what was supposed to be music rocketed through the roadhouse.

Myra was dispersing the second round of drinks when they returned. The waitress watched Nolan down his drink in three long gulps. "Go easy on that, stud. It ain't soda pop," she reminded him in a hard voice.

Surprised, Conor Nolan jerked his head around and looked into the woman's scowling face. A slow, insulting smile stretched his lips. "Don't tell me what to do, Myra," he replied, his smile widening as she stiffened. "I'll take another C.C. and 7."

"Why don't you let that one settle?"

Nolan tightened his jaw. "Why don't you mind your own business?"

"You drink too much," Myra said between clenched teeth.

"And you whore around too much," he shot back. "Do I tell you not to do it?" He stared at her until she spun on her heel and stormed off.

"Asshole!" they heard her say. "Just forget it!"

Triplett chortled, spewing his gin and tonic from twitching lips. He cast Nolan an admiring look. "That's no way to treat an old girlfriend, Nolan."

"There you go again spoiling it for the rest of us, you snotty Mick," complained Cortesio.

"Thanks a lot, Nolan!" snapped Donne. "I can kiss that piece of ass goodbye tonight."

Nolan's teeth sparkled in the faint candlelight. He shrugged. "She ain't that good, Donne."

"You should know," said Cortesio. "You Micks will fuck anything that stands still."

"And some that don't!" Donne guffawed and chomped down on a chunk of ice. He grinned nastily at the Italian cop. "Least we don't do it with sheep!"

"Baaaaaaaa!" Triplett laughed as Myra brought Nolan his second drink.

"I hope you choke on it," the waitress fumed, slamming the glass down. "Two fifty."

Nolan didn't even look at her. "Take it outta the tip I gave you."

Myra didn't miss a beat. She leaned over, across Nolan, and locked her angry gaze on Rhianna. "I hope he's better in the sack with you than he was with me."

Rhianna just smiled, refusing to accept the challenge. It was none of Myra's business whether or not she'd slept with Conor. It was no one's business, though most everyone they worked with thought she and Conor were lovers.

"He show you that trick he learned in Mexico?" Myra pressed, trying to get a rise out of the policewoman.

"I don't discuss my private life, Myra," replied Rhianna.

"I wouldn't either if the bastard I was humping couldn't...."

"Get outta her face and leave her the fuck alone," Nolan said softly, menace in his deep voice. "I mean it, Myra."

Myra jerked her glower to the Irishman and when their gazes met, she saw a budding anger in his dark stare that made her straighten up and step back. Without another word, she wheeled, shouting for one of the other waitresses to take the table.

"Ah, shit." Trip groaned. "Now you've gone and done it, Nolan. We're gonna get Wanda!"

With a disgusted grunt, Joe Cortesio turned his attention to the dancers and nodded in rhythm. "Wanda ain't half bad if you get her drunk," he mused.

"Let's dance, Irish," Rhianna said, feeling the tension beginning to build in him.

"I'm gonna call it a night," the Irishman said. Cortesio turned to stare at Conor.

"Already?" asked Rhianna. "After one dance?" She knew how much Conor loved to take his frustrations out on the dance floor.

Nolan looked around, shrugged, then said, "It's been a long day, pretty lady, and I've got a bitch of a headache."

"That means I gotta go, too," Cortesio complained with a long, put-upon sigh. "I'm riding with him."

"I'll take you home," Trip said.

Donne and Cortesio exchanged a look. The Italian shook his head. "Thanks anyway, man. I want to get home alive."

"I'm going his way," said Donne. "I'll take him home, Irish."

"You're a prince of a fella, Davey!" said Cortesio.

Nolan knocked back the last of his drink, reached out to squeeze Rhianna's hand, then looked directly at Dave Donne. "You taking Rhianna home, too?"

"If you trust me not to molest her." Dave chuckled.

"You know what'll happen if you do," said the Irishman. He cocked his head toward Trip. "Take him, too."

"Ah, hell, Irish," Trip complained. "I can drive myself."

"Ah, hell, Trip, no you can't." Nolan held out his hand. "Give me your keys." He waited until Triplett dug into his jacket.

"I ain't that wasted," Trip murmured as he handed them into Nolan's keeping.

Rhianna glanced at her partner and wondered if he was using. She frowned. "Damn it, Triplett," she growled. "Are you high?"

"Don't sweat it," Nolan told her as she turned her eyes to him. "He's cool." Bending over, he nuzzled her neck, moved back from her playful slap and got up. Turning from the booth, he collided with a female and had to struggle to keep from falling.

"I'm sorry!" The Irishman reached out a steady hand to the woman he'd bumped. "Did I hurt you?" He strained to see the woman through the mist of smoke, but

her head was down and all he could make out was a golden sheen of long, wavy hair.

"Of course not." The voice was as intoxicating as the perfume she wore. The hand, pressing against his chest came away with a deliberate slide over his jacket. "I'm fine, thank you."

"I'm not usually so clumsy," he said, wishing she'd look up at him. Then she did.

A pale oval face, perfectly formed with a slight point to the delicate chin, took his breath away. Green eyes gazed back at him from a smudge of spiky lashes beneath thick, soaring and precisely arched brows. Full lips, the bottom fuller and more luscious than the upper, were stained a bright scarlet and glistened in the reflected glow of the table's candlelight. She ran a delicate pink tongue along their expanse. Her cheekbones were high, chiseled, and her nose was slightly tilted at the end with wide, flaring nostrils. The lobe of one shell-shaped ear, adorned with a swinging hoop of intricately-fashioned gold wire, peeked out from a heavy sweep of tawny hair. Unable to keep his eyes from moving down, he found high, rounded breasts barely contained within the bodice of her dress. Her shapely body had a tiny, pinched hourglass waist, pale slender arms and long, tapered legs, one of which could be seen through a slit in the silk dress that hugged her like a second skin. The overall effect was stunning and Nolan found himself tightening in the constriction of his faded jeans.

"Are you hurt?" she asked with a throaty laugh.

He had to mentally shake himself to understand her question. His gaze had returned to her beautiful eyes and he stood there lost, unable to look away. "No," he finally answered, his body as tense as a hormonal sixteen-year-old's. "I'm all right."

Her gaze crawled over him--from the top of his head to the scuffed toes of his black boots--then slowly lifted to settle on his mouth. Her wide smile gave evidence that she liked what she saw. Her attention shifted to his eyes.

"Felicity," she said to his unasked question. "Felicity Rogers." She held out her hand.

Cortesio's brows shot upward as his partner took the proffered hand. Not that he wouldn't have himself, he thought with a slight niggle of jealousy, but there was something about the woman holding Conor's hand that sent shivers of unease through the Italian's short, squat body. He couldn't understand it and didn't try to analyze it at that moment, but the guardian angel who'd always ridden Joseph David Cortesio's shoulder did a short, agitated little hop on that bony protrusion and gained Joey's attention. "Hey, Conor?" Cortesio shouted. "You going, man, or what?"

"Conor," the woman said and his name on her lips was a caress that sent a stab of pure lust through Nolan's belly. "A Celtic warrior's name." Her tongue flicked at the right corner of her mouth. "A very virile name. It means 'Lord' in Gaelic and Lord, are you an eyeful!"

A hot rush of blood flooded Conor Nolan's face and scorched his cheeks. His embarrassment made him duck his head and, at that moment of breaking eye contact with Felicity Rogers, he was able to regain some of the composure he'd lost. "I gotta go," he said, feeling bereft and cold now that he was no longer held prisoner by her seductive gaze.

"I guess you do," she answered and slipped her hand from his. Her smile was fleeting, just a slight pout of glistening red lips. She moved away, the cut of her expensive gown out of place among the grunge-dressed patrons squirming and writhing

on the dance floor. In a moment, she was hidden from view.

“Earth to the Celtic warrior!” Rhianna called, waving a hand in front of Nolan’s face. The others at the table howled with laughter. “You can come up for air, now!” She grinned as Nolan scowled down at her.

“Up yours, Marek,” Nolan grated through clenched teeth.

“In your dreams,” Rhianna shot back. She knew damned well her dreams tonight would be of Nolan and the fire he’d ignited in her body.

From her place in the arch of the hallway, leading to the restrooms, Myra Willingham watched Conor Nolan leave. She wrapped her arms around herself in an effort to keep warm. She chewed on her lower lip, her teeth worrying a small gash in the thin flesh without her being aware of it. Her nervous gaze twitched about the room.

She surveyed the room for a few moments longer then made up her mind. Turning, she thrust her hand into the pocket of her mini-skirt, took out a quarter, and dropped it into the chrome slot in the telephone.

“I owe him,” she said in a bitter voice as she punched in the number. Myra’s right palm was so slick with moisture as she gripped the receiver, pressing it almost painfully against her ear, that she had to shift hands and run her wet palm down her skirt while she waited for the call to go through. The insistent ringing began at the other end and she swallowed convulsively, already regretting having made the call. “I owe him,” she repeated, clenching her jaw as the recorder answered, and the hollow sound stabbed her ear.

“This is Nolan. Leave a message.” She heard a loud trill, then hazy static.

“Look, Irish,” Myra began, knowing it wasn’t necessary to identify herself. “I just wanted to warn you. You’ve always done right by me and I owe you.” She nodded to herself as though to firm up the words in her own mind. “Don’t let her in, you hear? You know that blonde woman from the bar? Don’t let her in your place, okay? She’s bad trouble, Nolan. Fucking bad trouble!”

She paused, wondered if she should say more, decided she shouldn’t, then hung up the receiver. Glancing around, she hurried out of the hallway, pushed through the crowds, and made her way back to the bar.

## Chapter Two

The drive home was treacherous. Several cars had skidded into the median and down the interstate embankments to land, hopelessly mired, in the drifts. Tow trucks--amber lights cutting swaths through the sheets of snow--were out in force.

Conor drove carefully, defensively, watching out for the idiot drivers who passed him as though the roads weren't slick and the snow wasn't spilling across the surfaces to hide icy patches. His wiper blades were going full tilt, scraping away the rime of frost that threatened to form against the cold glass.

By the time he got home, he was exhausted and his headache had become a throbbing torment from hell. The two drinks at the Brew seemed to have given him more of a buzz than normal and the only way he knew how to handle that was with a long hot shower and an Alka-Seltzer.

He kicked off his snow-encrusted boots, then peeled off his sheepskin-lined denim jacket and draped it across a tall rocker on the front porch. The smell of cigarette smoke was sickening and he knew he wouldn't wear the thing again until the stench was gone. Likewise, he couldn't wait to rid his hair of the same horrible odor.

When he was through bathing, he braced his hands to either side of the shower head, leaned forward, and let the water beat down on tired shoulders. Water cascaded on his head and ran along his nose and chin. He stared, mesmerized, at the circular motion as it disappeared below the drain's grating.

Conor sighed. The heat, combined with the delicious feel of the water and cleansing steam, enticed him to remain, but his headache was no better and a slight discomfort in his gut warned of an impending hangover.

As he turned off the water, he heard the phone ring and cursed. He threw back the curtain and hooked a towel from the wicker shelf unit over the commode. Wrapping the towel around him, he went into the living room just as his answering machine clicked off. Obviously the caller did not leave a message for the number 2 was still in the display window. He hit the rewind button and listened.

The first message was from his sister, Caitlin, in Dubuque, calling to remind him to send their mother a birthday card. "Don't screw up again, okay, Conor?" she hissed before hanging up. "You have a way of doing that."

"Sanctimonious bitch." Conor let out a long, irritated sigh. He only heard from his sister three times a year: Mother's Day, their mother's birthday, and Christmas. Each time was only to remind him to send a greeting card as though he didn't have sense enough to do it on his own. He resented it more and more every year.

The second call was from Myra Willingham out at the Witch's Brew Roadhouse. Static sizzled on the line, hard rock music blared in the background. "Look, Irish," the message began. "I just wanted to warn you." Here, the words faded a little, but Conor understood them well enough. "You've always done right by me and I owe you." A prolonged hiss of static, then a high-pitched whine almost obscured the last words: "Don't let her..."

The tape unwound into more static, then beeped, message ended.

Conor stared at the machine in confusion. What the hell was that all about? Once, he and Myra had spent a wild weekend together in St. Louis and another couple of days in Chicago. After that, he'd passed her on to Triplett, who, in turn, passed her down to Donne, who passed her on to Corbettson. The only right thing Nolan had ever done for her was to loan her the money to get an abortion. The father's identity was anyone's guess.

Conor was torn between trying to call Myra back or just letting it slide until morning. He stood there, chewing the cuticle on his right thumb for a moment--a habit he had when he was thinking--then shrugged. Finally, he decided he was more tired than curious and turned to go back into the bedroom just as the doorbell rang.

"Ah, shit! Who the hell is that?" He glanced down at the towel wrapped around his hips.

The bell chimed again.

With a snarl more of annoyance than anger, Nolan went to the door and pulled back the sheer curtain that covered the side panel.

She was standing on his porch, looking at him through the glass. Her lips parted in a smile and she arched one thick golden brow. "Hello, there."

"How did you..." He stared at her, unable to believe the gorgeous woman from the bar was standing on his porch. Just for a moment, he became acutely aware of his nakedness and moved away from the glass.

"You aren't decent," she said, her words a soft accusation. Brazenly, her gaze moved over his face. "But then again, I was hoping you wouldn't be."

The invitation was in her smoky voice. He heard it. He read it in her eyes and recognized it in the way she stood there huddled in her expensive sable.

He found his voice. "You followed me home."

She smiled. "Yes, I did."

Although every fiber of his manhood screamed at him to open the door, his instincts warned him against it. "Why?"

She hunched her shoulders beneath the sleek pelts of fur. "I liked the way your body felt against mine when we bumped into one another," she answered. "I'd like to feel it again. Without the restriction of clothing."

You can't get more specific than that, Nolan! She was looking at him as though he were the main course of her meal. It embarrassed him and made him acutely uncomfortable.

"Aren't you going to invite me in?" She ran her fingers along the door lintel as if caressing him.

Bewildered, he shook his head, then smiled to take the sting from his decision. "I'm bushed."

Felicity Rogers, he remembered her name now, only looked at him with a gaze as hot as the core of a smelting pot. "I'm very good at total body massage. I'm told my strokes are very relaxing."

His shaft leaped at her words, but he resolutely ignored it. "It's been a long day," he confessed. "I was just going to bed."

"Alone?" she whispered, yet he heard it as clearly as though she'd been standing right beside him, her lips to his ear.

The question slithered into his head and coiled there, a suggestion more than an inquiry. It set his blood to racing. The tight knot, which had formed in his throat, was slowly choking him. Foreboding clenched his stomach.

“Yeah.”

“You don’t have to. I’d be more than willing to keep you warm tonight, Conor.”

He shook his head again. “I’m warm enough already. If anything, I’m too warm, now.”

He saw a flare of irritation in her emerald eyes, a tightening of her mouth, stiffening of her round shoulders beneath the sable, but then the luscious red lips eased into a disappointed pout.

“Can’t say I didn’t try, can you, Conor Nolan?” She pulled the warmth of the fur closer around her, almost as though she were wrapping his arms around her body. “But I warn you, I don’t give up easily. Some other time, then?”

All he could do was nod. Blood and juices pulsed through him, sang along his nerve endings, making his head pound. His hand trembled as she arched one brow as if to ask: Are you sure? Once more he shook his head and she tilted hers in acknowledgment of his decision. Without a backward glance, she walked off the porch and into the snowy night.

“Sweet Merciful Mary,” he breathed as he let the sheer fall across the side panel.

His heart thudded in his chest as though he’d been running the mile flat out. His hands were clammy, his mouth dry, and his shaft throbbed to the quick pulse of his heartbeat. Not since he was a randy sixteen-year-old had he felt such unbridled passion flow through his body.

Not something a worldly-wise thirty-seven-year-old should be feeling. He moved away from the door.

Conor switched off the living room light and padded to his bedroom.

“They’re out there for the grabbing, Irish,” Cortesio had once told him. “Women love to make it with cops, you know? It’s the danger, man. The danger!”

Yeah, he thought as he plowed a shaky hand through his hair. There’d been women who’d extended open invitations to feel free to use them, but nothing like the soul-searing availability Felicity had issued tonight. And none had ever followed him home or, to his knowledge, even driven by to see where he lived. He wasn’t sure he liked what the Rogers woman had done. He preferred to do the chasing and didn’t feel comfortable as the quarry.

“Sonofabitch,” he whispered.

Shaking his head at the encounter, he couldn’t believe it had actually happened. He worried over it, wondering how Felicity Rogers had found him. Finally, with an angry snort of self-derision, he flipped off the bedroom light, dropped the towel from his hips and climbed naked into the bed, flinging the covers over him with a snarl.

For a long, long time he lay there, hands beneath his damp hair, staring blindly at the ceiling. His body had not calmed down. His blood and juices still raced through him. He ached as though he’d been celibate for months when, in truth, it had only been a day or two since he’d last buried himself in the tender flesh of a woman’s willing body.

Frustrated with his lingering lust, he turned over and buried his face in the pillow.

## Chapter Three

Although most of the cops at the precinct flirted with Detective Rhianna Marek, only a handful had ever dared to ask the petite sable-haired beauty for a date. She was considered to be Conor Nolan's woman. Despite what the guys in the precinct thought, the Irishman and Marek had a platonic alliance and both seemed happy to keep it that way. Their association had become comfortable for the both of them. Neither had to worry about being chased at work. Neither had to worry about the complexities of an on-going male/female relationship that would eventually go sour because of the nature of their work. Neither had to worry about not having a date when they wanted to go out. They were content with the way things were and rarely fought. Each was the other's confidante and sounding board. And when Conor felt the urge to wander off in search of a bed partner, as he did on occasion, Rhianna always welcomed him back without a single word of recrimination.

Sitting at her desk, listening to Triplett describe his latest encounter with the Culinary Arts of Seduction, she smiled and nodded, made the appropriate 'ah' when Trip described how his meringue had come out to perfection.

Her dazed attention shifted across the room to where Nolan sat and she wondered why he looked so ragged.

"And the Wellington was superb!" Trip put his fingers together and kissed the tips. "Magnifique!"

"But did you get any?" asked Brett Samuel. The black detective leaned over Trip's desk, his expression avid.

Trip grinned. "I always get some with my Beef Wellington, my man! It's all that rich, salty juice flowing out of the meat, you know?" He wagged his thick black brows.

"Which meat?" Samuel demanded.

Rhianna groaned with disgust and got up from her desk. She swiped up her coffee cup. "You men are sick."

"Rhianna's embarrassed!" Samuel taunted in a singsong voice. He turned and yelled across the room to Nolan. "Hey, Conor?" When the Irishman looked around, the black detective grinned. "You must not be giving Marek what she needs, bro."

"Or not giving it to her often enough!" someone else joked.

The room burst into knowing hoots of laughter. Rhianna's face turned red and Nolan's brows drew together in a fierce scowl. Annoyed, he let out a long breath. Rhianna got up and ducked into the break room.

"Why don't you assholes grow up!" said Nolan as he pushed up from his desk and followed Marek.

Rhianna jumped as Conor's hand fell on her shoulder and he bumped against her. "Hey, pretty lady," he whispered in her ear. She tilted her head to the side as he bent to put a quick kiss on her cheek.

"You'd think they'd get tired of harassing me, wouldn't you?" The moment he'd touched Marek, Conor's arousal of the night before came rushing back. It stunned him,



shocked him to the core of his being with its visceral strength. Her perfume invaded his nostrils to send shivers of lust stabbing through his lower abdomen and his hand tightened on her shoulder. Before he knew what he was doing, he had pressed himself against her. "God, you do things to me, Rhianna," he breathed into her ear.

"Yeah, right." Rhianna laughed, thinking he was teasing. She half-turned in his embrace, stopped, her eyes going wide as she felt the steel-like pressure of Nolan's erection hard against her thigh. A spasm of longing jerked in her uterus and her gaze leaped to Nolan's face. Hot lust stared back at her and the spasm jerked once more. "Irish?"

His nickname on her sigh was like a red-hot prod and he moved without conscious knowledge that he did. His mouth came down on hers in a pressure that was not his usual friendly, almost brotherly, kiss. His lips slanted across her mouth, claiming, not asking permission. His tongue darted between her lips to ignite an answering fire within.

Rhianna dropped her coffee cup, oblivious to the splatter and the sound of shattering glass. Twining her arms around his broad shoulders, she clung to him, pressing her lower body to the jutting evidence of his passion. She whimpered as his tongue raped her mouth, going deeper, impaling her, branding her as his own. His hands dipped to her buttocks and molded her to him as he ground his erection against her. She felt something near physical agony as his mouth came away from hers, and with a groan of need, he lifted her onto the counter.

"You drive me insane," he hissed, wedging between her thighs. "Why do you do that?"

"Conor, my God! What's gotten into you?"

Conor rocked his body against the core of her, spreading her legs wider as he dragged his hands from beneath her rump, then ran his fingers up her body to mold her breasts. He kneaded the soft mounds, cupped their weight, scraped his thumbs over erect, rock hard nipples before his mouth came down to heat the fabric of her pink cotton blouse.

She gasped. "Conor! What the hell are you doing?"

"Ah, excuse me, folks." Trip said from behind them.

Nolan jerked away from Rhianna as though he were a marionette attached to a puppeteer's strings. He stumbled, bumped into a table, and stood trembling, his chest heaving with emotion. His body still betrayed him with an erection burning hot and throbbing between his legs. But the intense shame and humiliation in Rhianna's eyes as she slid down from the counter and turned away was like a bucket of cold water thrown in his face. The intense rigidity of his shaft left him, but the lust remained.

"If you two wanna go at each other like a couple of wild animals," said Neville Triplett, "at least have the decency to go where no one can see it."

Rhianna quivered and her breath came in ragged little shudders. She was too embarrassed to turn around and face her partner, still too aroused to meet Nolan's gaze.

"Get yourself together, Marek," Trip warned. "I'll keep everyone out of here until you do." With a last resentful look toward the Irishmen, Neville Triplett slammed out of the break room.

Nolan's shoulders slumped. He hung his head for a moment, closed his eyes to still his racing pulse, and opened them to find Rhianna standing by the counter with her

face in her hands. He took a long, calming breath, then went to her. "Rhianna," he said, stunned at the depth of longing he heard in his own voice. He swallowed, put up a hand to touch her shoulder, but thought better of it. He wasn't so sure that touching her again would be wise, so he jammed his hands into the pockets of his jeans to take away the temptation. "I apologize, baby."

"What happened?" He had never touched her like that before or ever kissed her like that before.

Nolan shrugged. "I don't know." His gaze moved over her sleek black hair, wandered helplessly down the gentle slope of her back. "I really don't."

Rhianna turned around, her eyes wet, and she heard him groan with guilt, but before he could drag his hands from his jeans to enfold her, she stepped back from him. "No," she begged. "I don't think you should."

"Rhianna." His voice was the merest breath of sound as he stood there staring at her, wanting her with every fiber of his being.

"I'm not one of your whores, Nolan," she said, as though the words were a rune of protection against the naked hunger she saw emblazoned on his face.

"I know who the hell you are." He took a step toward her, but she moved back and he stilled. He could feel his cock hardening again and knew if there was no chance of them being intruded upon again, he'd take her right there on the floor of the precinct's break room.

She seemed to understand and her cheeks glowed with color. "Don't start something you have no intention of finishing, Nolan."

"I want you," he whispered. "Right here." He pointed at the table beside them. "Right now."

"Marek, get out here!"

They stared at one another, ignoring Triplett's bellow of outrage and the accompanying laughter that punctuated it, but they could not ignore the adolescent chants which began to thunder from the squad room: "Marek! Marek! Marek!"

Rhianna's face flamed. She spun around and ran for the door, but his voice brought her to an abrupt halt.

"Tonight," Nolan called out to her.

"What?" she managed to ask, looking back at him.

"At your place. Tonight." He fused his gaze with hers. "I'll be there at seven."

Her belly quivered again and she sucked in a quick breath before rushing from the room.

Nolan sagged against the table, staggered into one of the chairs, then crashed down onto the vinyl seat with a nervous expulsion of breath. Reaching up a trembling hand, palm damp, he ran it through his hair and gathered a handful, tugging painfully at his scalp.

"You don't have to pull your hair out over it, Irish," Cortesio drawled from the doorway. "It was bound to happen sooner or later." He laughed at Irish's grunt of disbelief then pulled a chair out from the nearest table, swung a leg over, and straddled it. Propping his chin on the edge of the high chrome back, he studied Nolan's flushed face.

Conor Nolan still didn't understand what had happened to him. He was stunned by his actions, acutely appalled at the way he had behaved, and yet he was still so aroused it was uncomfortable to sit. He couldn't stand up because his erection was still

throbbing in his jeans and Cortesio would hoot with laughter.

"The woman loves you, you know," Cortesio commented softly and arched one thick dark brow when Nolan's head snapped up and he looked at his partner in surprise. Cortesio nodded. "It's true. She does."

"What am I going to do, Joey?"

"If it were any other woman, I'd say lay her and forget it, but Marek ain't like other women, now, is she?"

"No," came the quiet, heartfelt answer.

"Then, as I see it, you've got two choices." Cortesio held up his hand and ticked the choices off on his fingers. "One, you can go over there, talk to her, see how it goes. Tell her things got a little out of hand today and that you're sorry you humiliated her before the entire precinct." He clucked away another grunt of despair from his partner. "Maybe things are starting to come to a head and you two can get together. Or ...."

Nolan looked up. "Or what?"

"Or you call her at six-thirty and tell her it was all a big mistake, that you aren't interested, that you're a class-act prick, and you'll see her around."

"I can't do that!"

"Of course you can't." Cortesio got up and put his chair under the table. "If I need you, I'll call you at Marek's."

## Chapter Four

He was stunned to find her waiting for him when he got off work. She was sitting in the deep shadows on his porch, rocking gently in one of the two chairs as though the frigid air did not concern her.

"Where's your car?" he asked and glanced at the street.

"I took a taxi," she said on a breathless sigh that made his groin tighten painfully. The rocking chair squeaked as she pushed out of it.

He was mesmerized by the way she moved toward him through the nocturnal glow of early evening. Her body fairly undulated as she walked and the intoxicating aroma of her perfume reached him before she did. He inhaled deeply, struck anew by how stimulating some smells could be to a man's libido.

"Aren't you happy to see me?" she whispered as she reached him. She brushed the sleek front of his leather jacket then ran her hands over his shoulders to cup his neck.

"I've got a date," he protested, reaching up to remove her hands.

"Really?" Her hand dipped down to the front of his jeans. She rubbed him. "I don't care, Nolan."

Conor gasped in shock and started to move away, but her fingers flexed around him, cupping him between his legs.

"I want you to fuck me, Nolan." She kneaded his flesh. "I want to feel this inside me." She tugged at him.

Every instinctual sexual drive, lustful primal craving, and mindless, forbidden impulse he had ever entertained crashed through his psyche with the speed of light and he reached for her, grabbed her to him as though he were a drowning man after a life preserver.

"My, my, my," she breathed as his arms tightened like steel bands around her body. "I can see we are of the same mind, my strong Celtic warrior."

He didn't care that it wasn't right.

He didn't care that he had told Rhianna he would see her in less than half an hour.

He didn't care if everyone on his street was watching him by the faint glow of the street light across from his front door. He shoved Felicity Rogers up against the wall, rammed his thigh between her legs and lifted her to straddle him. He tore feverishly at her clothing as he pinned her there, her legs dangling to either side of his rigid thigh. Material ripped, buttons popped off her blouse so his rough hands could thrust under the lacy cups of her bra to grasp silky-smooth mounds of flesh.

"Easy," he vaguely heard her caution as she threaded her long fingers through his hair and pressed his head to her chest. "I won't break, but I can be bruised, lover."

"I need you," he growled deep in his throat. "I need...."

Felicity threw back her head as he slid her along his upraised thigh, jerking her away from the wall to make her ride the hard length of him from knee to groin. She looked down at him, smiled at the complete enthrallment in his tense face as he stared sightlessly up at her and reveled at the deadly lust that made his eyes glitter with carnal

hunger. She flicked out her tongue to drag the pink tip across her scarlet lips and laughed with taunting delight at the animalistic grunt of intent that burst from his throat.

"I know what you need, Irish."

Conor spun around, fell with her, and crashed them both to the floor. His only thought was to mount her, to thrust the feverish length of his pulsating shaft deeply inside her, to gain relief from the agony that throbbed inside him.

"Not here," she told him, wiggling beneath his hard body until her own thigh was wedged intimately against the hot, iron-hard junction of his legs. "Take me inside."

"I've got to have you." His hands squeezed savagely at her now-naked breasts. His head dipped down to the soft valley between and his teeth closed around one turgid nipple.

"Inside" Her hands pushed at his shoulders even as she braced her leg on the floorboards of the porch so their positions were now reversed and he rode her slender thigh. She felt his entire body shudder.

"Oh, God!" He moaned, his tongue flicking at the hard pebble of her nipple. "I've got to ...."

Conor was on fire with a bestial need that superseded all else. He lunged after her, gripped her to him with the mindless intention of raping her had she not pushed so quickly to her feet.

"Inside," she repeated, breaking through the red-hot mist of lust clouding his vision. "Invite me inside."

He pushed up from the floor, a snarl of mating rage skinning his lips back from his teeth and he reached for her, his hands like claws.

"Inside!" she hissed. "I'll not be taken like a common whore on the floor of your dirty porch!"

Rage, impotent and devouring, flooded him and he growled like a cornered animal. He could smell her--smell her--that musky, wet heat driving him insane, taunting him as he crouched there, blotting out all rational thought. But even in his excited state, he knew if he could get her into the house, he could have her as he wished. Any way he wished. He could ram himself to the hilt inside her, tear her apart with his lust if he so desired, make her scream with passion.

Cursing beneath his breath, he shoved the key into the lock, burst through the door, expecting her to be right behind him, enraged that she was not. Consummate fury turned his handsome face ugly as he bolted through the door and wrapped one hard hand around her left arm. He jerked her inside--bruising her--and she lashed out at him.

"Don't manhandle me! Invite me in!"

The vivid red imprint of her hand was tattooed to his sweaty cheek, but he had not feel the savage slap. "I want you!" he shouted at her. When she hesitated, he snarled, "Goddamn you, come in! I need you, bitch!"

Felicity Rogers smiled and stepped across his threshold. "Why didn't you just say so, warrior?"

Conor Nolan fell on her like a rutting beast and drove his way into hell.

## Chapter Five

For the tenth time that evening, Rhianna looked at her watch. It was well past nine o'clock and Conor hadn't even called to tell her he'd be late. Not that it was anything new. If he were involved in a case, he lost track of time and would call half an hour later to apologize. But as the hands of the clock swept toward nine-thirty, she became concerned and reached for the phone to call him. As she did, it rang, startling her. She snatched the receiver.

"You'd better have a damned good reason for standing me up, Nolan!" There was a pause then Cortesio's voice came across from the other end. "He ain't there?"

"Joey?" Disappointment clawed her stomach. "No, he's not. I haven't heard from him."

"Damn."

"Have you?" She looked up at the ceiling.

"He was wired this morning." She heard a nervous, embarrassed chuckle. "You wouldn't want him attacking you the minute he came through the door, would you?"

Rhianna blushed. "Not much chance of that happening, Joey."

"I don't know. You shook him up today. I ain't seen him like that since ...." He stopped, no doubt annoyed by what he'd almost said.

"Hey, look," Rhianna said with a forced gaiety. "If the man don't want me, he don't want me."

"Marek ... you've known Nolan long enough to know he doesn't do anything he doesn't want to do. Honey, I'm sorry." His voice hardened. "The man's retarded, what can I say?"

Rhianna laughed despite her bitterness. "You do wonders for a gal's ego, you know that, Cortesio?"

"Any man who doesn't want you has got to be either blind or neutered."

"You're sweet." When the silence played out, she asked, "If I hear from him, do you want me to have him call you?"

"Nah," he replied. "I was just going out to the roadhouse. If you hear from him, just let him know."

"You be careful."

"Yeah. You, too, kiddo." He hung up, but not before she heard him cursing in his ancestral tongue.

Rhianna stared at the phone for a long, long time before pushing aside her pride and punching in Conor Nolan's number. Her hand was tense, her palm damp. Almost immediately she had her answer. The line was busy. He was home and talking to someone or ....

"Okay." She replaced the receiver. "Someone could be calling in, leaving a message. Probably Joey."

She waited a few minutes and tried again. The line was still busy. She depressed the disconnect button and held it, then tried again. The call went through and she heard

Conor's voice, hollow and crackling, on the answering machine: "This is Nolan. Leave a message."

Rhianna hesitated after the beep gave her permission to speak. She bit her lip, then once more pushed aside her pride.

"It's me. Are you there?" She paused, hoping he'd pick up. Her heart sank when he didn't. She closed her eyes and swallowed. "Look, I guess something came up and you couldn't come over. That's okay, you know? I understand. Just give me a call when you get in so I won't stay up all night and worry about you."

She waited, praying there would be a breathless 'hello' and he'd be on the line, explaining away his cold feet or his disinterest or stumbling through an apology. When that did not happen, she slowly replaced the receiver.

## Chapter Six

Rhianna was tying up loose ends at her desk before she and Triplett headed out to an interview when Nolan showed up for work. She glanced up at the operations clock. It was eleven o'clock. Conor was four hours late and he hadn't even bothered to call.

"What's with the dark shades, Nolan?" Chuck Corbettson called out as he and his partner, Jason Fullick, prepared to leave.

"Must have tied on a good one last night, huh?" added Fullick.

Cortesio turned away from the copying machine and watched as his partner entered the room. He whistled softly. The Irishman was pale, his complexion made paler by the black turtleneck sweater and black leather motorcycle jacket he wore. When he reached for his chair, his hand trembled and when he sat down, he slumped as though exhausted or ill. "You okay, Irish?" someone asked, but Nolan didn't answer. He was fumbling around in his desk for a bottle of aspirin. He emptied four tablets into his hand.

"How much did you drink last night, bro?" asked Triplett.

"Nolan! Get your sorry ass in here, now!"

Everyone in the squad room jumped as Captain Darlington's voice cut through the bantering. The room became quiet as a tomb as the Irishman dropped the aspirins onto the desk blotter, pushed wearily up from his chair with an audible sigh, then disappeared into Darlington's office without a word.

Joe Cortesio hadn't had a chance to speak to Rhianna since he'd come in that morning, but now he looked across the room at her, a question in his dark eyes.

Rhianna met Joe's look and shook her head in answer. She saw the immediate anger flash across Joe's dark face.

"Darlington is gonna suspend him," said Brett Samuel.

"Why ain't The Darling bitching at him?" asked Fullick.

Rhianna stopped what she was doing. She sat listening and was just as surprised as the others that no shouting and screaming came from Darlington's office. The low murmur of voices didn't last long, then the door opened and Nolan came out, slipping on the dark sunglasses he'd worn into the squad room.

"What happened?" asked Cortesio.

"Two days," Nolan answered in a hoarse voice. "Without pay."

Samuel nodded. "The Darling don't like us to drink."

Nolan didn't reply. He walked back to his desk, picked up the aspirins one by one, then headed for the break room.

"You'd better go talk to him," Fullick told Cortesio. "That man's got problems."

"Irish-type problems," Corbettson sneered. "It's called alcoholism, just like his old man."

"And you don't drink?" Cortesio pointed out. "We all drink."

"We don't all get drunk on a regular basis like Nolan does," argued Corbettson.

"He's trying to cut down," Rhianna told Corbettson. She had no liking for the detective and resented his remarks about Nolan.



"Yeah," Corbettson sneered. "I can see that."

"Rhianna?" Nolan spoke from the break room door. She turned to see the Irishman standing there, clutching the doorjamb for support. "Have you got any Alka-Seltzer in your purse, baby?"

"God, you look like death warmed over!" said Samuel. "You oughta go home, bro."

"I will," Nolan said softly before fading into the break room.

"You ought to let the bastard suffer," Cortesio told Rhianna as she took up her shoulder bag and started rummaging through it. He went to her and put an arm around her shoulder, and spoke so only she could hear. "Did he ever show up at your place last night?"

"No." She found the foil packet of antacid. "And he didn't call." Glancing toward Nolan, she shrugged as though it didn't matter. "I guess we know why, huh? He was too busy getting drunk."

Nolan was sitting at one of the tables with his head in his hands when Rhianna joined him. The aspirin were lying on the table before him. She took one look at the picture of misery he painted and her lips twitched with disgust. His slacks were wrinkled and she was almost sure they were the same ones he'd worn the day before. Dotted with pills of lint, the turtleneck sweater looked as though it hadn't been worn in several years; a rip ran along the right shoulder seam. His black loafers were scuffed and in need of polishing.

"Must have been one hell of a night, Nolan."

At the sink, she got a paper cup, filled it with tap water and then dropped in the two Alka-Seltzer tablets. The mist of the dissolving disks sprayed her hand as she carried it to the table and set it in front of Conor. "Here you go, but don't take the aspirin."

"Thank you."

She noted the trembling in his hand as he took up the cup and tilted his head back to drain the bubbling liquid. His pallor alarmed her, as did the tremor in his hands, and the way he kept his eyes closed behind the barrier of the dark glasses told her the over head fluorescent light must be barely tolerable.

"Are you all right?" Compassion was absent in her soft Southern voice.

The effort to nod was nearly his undoing and Conor sucked in his breath at the pain the movement brought to his throbbing head. "I would be if the damned room would stop spinning," he muttered. Pushing the cup aside, he laid his head down on his arms, turned his face away from the light streaming in through the windows, and took deep breaths to ease the nausea threatening to erupt.

Rhianna was more angry than concerned now. The asshole had all the symptoms of a classic hangover. "I understand about last night, Nolan."

He lifted his head and looked up at her through the curtain of dark glasses. "Last night?" Confusion strained his voice. "What about last night?"

"Hey, it's no big deal, see? If you didn't want to come over, that's okay. I can accept that. I just wish you'd called to tell me you weren't coming." She lifted one slim shoulder in nonchalance. "That's all right, too. I'm not your keeper."

He straightened up in the chair, his pallid face flushing with color. "Oh, damn, Rhianna. I'm sorry!"

"I understand! It didn't mean anything to you. We got caught up in something in

here yesterday. I don't know what, but it got out of hand, you know? Neither one of us ever expected anything like that and now we regret it."

"Baby, I don't know what to say."

"It's kosher, okay?" She made herself put her hands on his shoulders. "You thought about it and realized that it wasn't right. You probably went to a bar, had a few too many." She laughed. "A lot too many from the looks of you. Time got away from you and you went home snookered." As she spoke, she massaged his shoulders. "Let's just forget it happened, okay?"

Nolan turned in the chair, caught one of her hands and held it. "Baby, listen, I don't know what happened to me last night. I've never done that kind of thing before and I'm not ever going to let it happen again. She didn't mean a thing to me. Honest."

"It's okay!" she told him, her eyes wide. So he had been with another woman. That shouldn't surprise her, but it hurt her deeply this time.

Even as he moved to get up, she backed away from him. "Rhianna, I can explain."

"There's no need." She held up a hand to keep him at bay. "Jeez, Nolan, we're both adults here, aren't we?" She swung her attention to the door where Trip was standing, crooking a finger for her. "Look, I've got to go."

"Not before we get this straight," Nolan said. He looked pointedly at Triplett. "Can we have some privacy?"

"We've got an interview," Trip told him. "Come on, Marek."

"Not yet!" snapped Nolan.

"Gotta go," said Rhianna.

"Baby, please," Nolan pleaded with her, then turned an angry face to her partner. "Damn it, Trip, will you go wait in the car?"

Trip glanced at Marek. "We're due there in half an hour." At her quick nod, he turned and left.

Nolan took another step toward her but Marek shook her head. "It's over, okay? Finished."

"What are you talking about? What's over?"

"Us. Seeing one another outside work."

"No. That isn't what I want." Her snort of contempt brought him up short.

"What you want? What you want? Damn it to hell and back, that's what it's always been, hasn't it, Conor? What you want!" She thumped her chest. "What about me? What about what I want? Huh? Doesn't it matter what I want?" Before he could answer, she ran from the room.

"Rhianna, wait!" He staggered as he rushed after her, shoving aside the chairs and tables in his way. "Rhianna!"

"What's the matter?" Cortesio yelled as his partner stumbled out of the squad room and down the hall.

Marek and Trip were almost to Rhianna's Mustang when Nolan came out of the precinct house. He hurried toward them, shielding his eyes from the bright morning light.

"Rhianna!"

Trip glanced back and saw Nolan coming toward them. "I take it last night didn't live up to your expectations?"

"Get bent," Marek snapped as she jerked open her door. She slid beneath the wheel and jammed the keys into the ignition. "Let's go. We don't have all day, Triplett."

Trip ducked his head and peered through the passenger window.

"I think your boyfriend wants to talk to you."

"Will you get in the goddamned car?" she snarled at him and wrenched the key.

"Running away, are we?" Trip chuckled, opened the door, and climbed into the passenger seat.

Rhianna shot him a withering look as she twisted in her seat to look out the rear window.

"Goddamn it!" Nolan called. "Wait a minute!"

Trip stared at Rhianna as his partner's mouth tightened and she used a word he had never heard her utter. His mouth dropped open as she shot out of the parking space, nearly running Nolan over in the process. If the Irishman hadn't jumped between two parked cars, Marek would have flattened him for sure.

"Holy Mary, Mother of God, Rhianna!" Trip jerked his head around to make sure Nolan was all right. "Didn't you see Irish standing back there?" Already they were moving out of the parking lot with a hell of a lot more speed than was either safe or legal.

"I saw him."

Neville Triplett turned his head and stared at his partner's stony profile. "Wanna tell me what happened between you two?"

"No." The word had a ring of finality

Trip chewed on his lower lip for awhile, then reached out to put a brotherly hand on her rigid shoulder. "Want me to beat the son of a bitch to a bloody pulp for you? Crate him up and ship him over to Belfast?"

Rhianna laughed and shook her head. "Thanks, but I can handle him." She leaned her cheek against the back of his hand. "You're a doll for offering, though."

"How 'bout I castrate him? How'd that be?"

"Painful for him, I'd think." She laughed again. "Don't worry about it, Trip. Everything's okay."

"You're sure?"

She nodded. "I'm sure."

"No more kissy-face in the break room, huh?"

Rhianna shook her head. "No more kissy-face."

\* \* \* \*

Conor Nolan stood in the middle of the parking lot and stared after Rhianna's car. It was bad enough that he was so sick he could barely stand. Now he had his conscience to contend with and that was worse yet.

The bright sunlight was an agony blinding him and once more the nausea leapt up his parched throat and pushed at his uvula. He swallowed it down again, retching as he did, and bent over the pavement, vomiting the vilest tasting, most evil smelling liquid up from the very pit of him.

"Easy does it, bro," he heard someone say as hands reached to steady him. Strong arms went around his waist and held him. "Did you drink the whole freaking distillery man?" He recognized Brett Samuel's voice.

"It sure as hell feels like I did," Nolan admitted. "Do me a favor and get me a taxi. I left my car at home this morning."

"Nah, man, I'll drive you," his rescuer told him. "You live on Devon Way, don't you?"

“Yeah,” Nolan managed to answer before his knees buckled. He would have crashed had not the man beside him tightened his grip.

## Chapter Seven

Not long after sunset, Conor Nolan turned over in bed and groaned. He had been lying there since one o'clock, alternating between freezing and retching into the plastic pail Samuel had placed beside his bed. He felt himself dehydrating and his stomach had not stopped cramping all day. His head felt as though a Pygmy tribe had crawled inside his skull and were stomping around on his brain. He had made up his mind to call Joe and ask him to cart him to the hospital.

Sitting up, he clutched at the side of the mattress to keep from spiraling into the out of control merry-go-round that was his bedroom. The bed tilted wickedly beneath him and he gagged, barely making it over the pail before more ghastly fluid erupted from his belly.

"My poor, poor baby. Did I give you too much X?"

Nolan jumped, his heart nearly stopping at the sound of the low voice, which spoke almost in his ear. He jerked around, his eyes going wide as he saw her standing at the foot of his bed. How had she gotten in?

"It will pass," she told him as she glided toward him, a glass of bubbling liquid in her hand. "Here, baby. Drink this."

He tried to protest, but she sat down beside him and thrust the glass to his lips. Reluctantly, he drank, grimacing at the horrid taste that flooded his mouth.

"That should ensure your cooperation, stud."

"Cooperation?" he asked, feeling his head begin to swim worse than ever. His mouth went numb.

"Hard to focus, isn't it?" she said, grinning at him.

"What did you give me?" His body wracked with pain, the hurt growing worse with every passing minute. He was on fire, he felt like his blood was boiling inside his veins. Bright pinpoints of light played across his vision like will-'o-the-wisps.

"Just a little something to make you more controllable, warrior."

Her matter-of-fact tone left him stunned and he gaped at her, bending over, clutching at the spasm in his gut.

"You p-poisoned me!" he accused, squeezing his eyes shut to help blot out the agony in his belly.

"No. But you just might wish I had by the time he's through with you."

"He?" Conor forced his eyes open.

Then he saw the four masked men standing just inside his bedroom.

"Wanna have a good time, pig?" one of the men asked, holding a hypodermic needle.

Nolan flung himself from the bed, tried to get away, but another unholy bout of pain buckled his knees and brought him crashing to the floor. He fell face down trying desperately to crawl forward. Pain so brutal it took away his breath brought his knees up and he clutched at his gut.

## Chapter Eight

Conor came to consciousness lying on the floorboard of a moving vehicle. He couldn't see anything. A tight, pulling constriction covered his eyes. He grunted through the obstruction over his mouth, tried to turn from his belly and found he couldn't. His ankles were bound tightly together and his hands were cuffed behind his back. The pain in his shoulders was agonizing and his head throbbed so fiercely he had to grind his teeth to keep from groaning.

"He's waking up," he heard a man say.

"About time. She didn't give him that much," another answered with a Latin accent.

When the vehicle stopped, Nolan was pulled bodily into the frigid February air and dragged into a musty-smelling place. They stripped the tape from his eyes and he stared around him with growing alarm. He saw the metal siding that encircled him and knew from his childhood days on a farm that he was inside an abandoned silo. He could be anywhere in the Midwest for all he knew.

They stripped him down to his briefs, then chained him spread-eagle to a lumpy cot. He fought savagely, but it accomplished nothing save adding to the bruises already on his aching muscles. When the Latino ran his hand down Conor's thigh, Nolan stilled instantly, snuffing in a sharp breath.

"Well, now," said the Latino. "And what is this?" Icy fingers probed at the inside of his left thigh--testing, stroking. A masked head lifted and turned to face the prisoner.

Nolan stared upward and watched amusement turn the dark eyes bright behind slits in the ski mask.

"This is very interesting," the man said, a hint of mirth in his thick voice. He ran his palm up and down the sensitive flesh of Conor's thigh.

Conor closed his eyes, feeling helpless to the very depths of his being. He kept them closed as they tied something tightly around his upper thigh.

The Latino pressed down on the femoral artery, ran his thumb up and down it, bringing it up to the surface. "Good veins," he complimented. "I should have no trouble."

Nolan held his breath as sharp pain tripped the rhythm of his heart to jackhammer speed. The burning sensation spread up his thigh, into his groin, hips, side, then the numbness began.

Warmth, spreading and insinuating, freewheeling and world-tilting, flooded Nolan's entire body, flowing rapidly toward his brain, cutting him off from reality. He felt himself relaxing against his will, going limp despite his great desire not to, unable to move although every fiber in his being begged him to fight.

"That's it, brown eyes," the man taunted, reaching up to smooth the hair from Conor's forehead. "Go with the flow, baby. Just go with the flow."

The lassitude set in. The cotton-enveloped sound shushed through his ears. His heartbeat slowed.

"You like that, don't you, amigo?" That godawful accent was almost more than

Conor could bear.

“If he don’t, he’ll learn to like it before we’re through with him!” came a raucous reply from one of the other men.

“Oh, he knows what he’s in for, don’t you, brown eyes?” the Latino cooed in Conor’s ear. “Or at least he thinks he knows!”

Conor tried to block out the man’s voice. The heroin raced through his system, enveloping him in memories he had hoped to never experience again.

## Chapter Nine

Rhianna pulled open the door to the church and walked inside. The faint scent of sandalwood played over her senses, bringing a comfort she hadn't felt since childhood. Dipping her fingers into the holy water font, she made the Sign of the Cross, then walked halfway down the red-carpeted aisle, stopped, genuflected, and sat down in a pew. She lowered the kneeler then went to her knees to take her troubles to the one person she knew could help.

For a few moments, she recited the prayers of her childhood: the Our Father, three Hail Marys, one or two more than had been ingrained into her psyche by the nuns at St. Rose of Lima. When she finished, she stared hard at the crucifix hanging beyond the altar, and began to say the words she felt she had to say.

"I know he's alive, Lord," she whispered, though she was alone in the quaint little church of St. Mary's in Grinnell. "I know he's alive and out there suffering. I can't believe he's dead, though everyone wants me to accept that." She shook her head. "I can't accept it and I won't." She squeezed her eyes shut. "If I accept that Coni is dead, I have to accept that I will never see him again this side of Heaven."

There was a slight creak behind her and she tensed, turned to look, then relaxed. A white-haired priest walked up the aisle. He smiled as he passed, accepting Rhianna's return to her prayers without asking if he could help.

Rhianna watched the middle-aged priest walk into the north sacristy. She did wish to speak to him, but not at that moment. Lowering her head, she spoke again, her words mere breaths of sound in the empty church.

"Blessed Mother, please protect him. Keep him safe for me. Bring him home to us." Tears slid down her cheeks and dripped silently onto her clenched hands. "Intercede with your Son. Ask Him please not to take Coni away from us. I ...."

The sobs tore from her like crashing waves. She slumped down, her forehead pressed against the oaken back of the pew in front of her. Her shoulders heaving with grief and frustration, she barely felt the gentle hand on her shoulder.

"How can I help?"

Rhianna shook her head, knowing it was the priest who sat beside her. "There is nothing any of us can do, Father," she cried. Lifting her head, she looked at him. "Only God can help and I'm not even sure He's listening anymore."

Fr. Reynolds smiled sadly. "He always listens. He's always there when you need Him." He reached down to cover her trembling hands with his own. "Would you like to tell me what's troubling you so?"

Rhianna lowered her head. "Yes," she whispered, "but ...."

The priest patted her hands. "But?" he prompted.

She eased one of her hands from under his and wiped at her face. When he produced a clean white handkerchief, she looked at him then smiled shakily. "I need to go to Confession first." She glanced back at the confessional doors.

He nodded and eased out of the pew. "I'll wait for you."



Rhianna drew in a long breath, then let her attention drift once more to the cross. "Please, God," she asked. "Please bring him home to me safe and sound. Please?"

When she entered the confessional booth, Rhianna sank to her knees at the screen. "I am so afraid, Father," she admitted.

"Take your time," was the gentle reply.

A long moment passed before Rhianna gathered the courage to speak. When she did, there was relief in her shaky voice.

"Bless me, Father," she finally began, "for I have sinned..."

\* \* \* \*

Rhianna looked up, her eyes bleak. "What did she say?"

Triplett shrugged. "Hasn't seen him, Rhee," he replied. "Hasn't spoken to him in a couple of months and hasn't heard from him at all." He sat down beside her and ran his hand through his hair. "It's like he just walked off the face of the Earth."

"How can that be?" she demanded. She got to her feet and started pacing. "He wouldn't have just up and disappeared."

"No, he wouldn't have." Triplett tossed the beer can he'd been holding into the trash bin beside him. "Something's happened to him."

Rhianna nodded. "Something or someone."

"We'll put an APB out on him," Triplett suggested. "Darling will go along with that."

"This isn't like him." Rhianna shook her head. "Not like him at all. It's been five days since anyone's seen him."

Cortesio sighed. "We aren't gonna settle anything tonight." He stood up and reached for his coat. "Might as well get some rest and start looking again tomorrow."

"Where? We've called everybody he knows." She flung her partner a damning look. "Including that bitch of a sister of his."

"There isn't a snitch within four counties we haven't hit on and nobody knows nothing!"

"If they do," Donne put in, "they ain't talking." He flinched when Rhianna turned and glared at him. He shrugged. "You know how snitches are, Rhee."

"What about the woman?" she asked.

"What woman?"

"The woman he was with the night he was supposed to have come by my place!"

Cortesio held out his hands. "He didn't say nothin' to me about no woman." He looked at Triplett. "Did he tell you anything about a woman?"

"He wouldn't have told me." Triplett snorted. He glanced at Rhianna. "I'd be the last one he'd be talking to about a woman."

"She set him up," Rhianna said, nodding. "Sure as I'm standing here, she set him up."

"For what?" Donne asked.

"Who the hell knows, Dave?"

Cortesio and Donne exchanged a look. "He could be on a binge," said Cortesio.

Rhianna shook her head vehemently. "He was trying to quit."

"Ah, come on, Marek!" snapped Donne. "You saw him the other morning. Did that look like the stupid prick was trying to quit? He had one mother of a hangover and wasn't even fit for duty. Why the hell do you think Darling sent him home?"

“She did it,” Rhianna said. “Whoever the hell she was, she caused it.”

“Let’s go,” Cortesio said to Donne. “This ain’t gettin’ us nowheres.” He scowled at Rhianna. “She wants to think he’s been waylaid by some femme fatale, let her think it.” He thrust his arms into his coat sleeves.

“He’s your partner and you don’t seem all that worried about him,” accused Rhianna.

Cortesio jammed his ski cap down over his ears. “I know him, Marek. He’s probably shacked up with some hooker, drunk outta his gourd and having the time of his life.”

“I won’t accept that. Something’s happened to him.”

“Believe what you want.” Cortesio pointed at Triplett. “I’d hold off with that goddamn APB if I was you. Wouldn’t even mention it to Darling until next week. The man is mad as hell at Nolan as it is and one more feather in that pillow is gonna get that Mick shit canned.”

“Don’t worry about it,” snapped Rhianna. “You just go on with your pat little world and leave finding Conor to us!”

Cortesio opened his mouth, started to speak, but shook his head, spread his hands and bowed. “Have it your way, Marek, but don’t say I didn’t warn you when he shows up Monday morning looking like something dragged his ass through turpentine.”

“I pray to God you’re right,” she said, her mouth tight. “I’ll kiss your wop butt in front of the whole squad room if he does.”

“And if he doesn’t?” Triplett asked quietly, catching Donne’s eye. “What then?”

“Then,” said Cortesio, his gaze flint hard, “we worry.”

## Chapter Ten

It was dark.  
And cold. So very, very cold.  
And soundless.

He reached out with the only means available to him and encountered only the dark and the cold and the silence. The loneliness was unbearable and it pressed down on him like tons of dirt. The pressure of his aloneness was a physical hurt that overshadowed the cold invading his body.

Yet there was another pain, far more agonizing than the frigid cold in which he was encased. It was far more excruciating than the helplessness and loneliness that surrounded him. He experienced this pain with such a degree of horror and hopelessness that it left him screaming soundlessly in his mind.

How long had he known this terror, he thought wildly as he struggled to swim up through the layers of cold? How long had he lain here, enduring this agony that drove red-hot spikes through his brain and spinal cord, the pain that clawed at his belly and oozed through his veins like crawling insects? How long would the torture continue before he gave in?

"You must be taught," the man he had come to realize must be a Colombian had promised.

Striving hard to block the agony, Conor tried once more to reach beyond this hell into which he'd been cast. For one brief, hopeful moment, he had sensed contact, but the pain came down on him so hard, it drove him back, whimpering with defeat.

He slunk back, away from the hellish reprimand, and burrowed himself once more into the icy wasteland that was now his mind. Crouching there, driven back into his unendurable loneliness, he felt himself crying silent tears that ran like blood from his sightless eyes. He could not give in to what had been demanded of him. He would not. His life was already forfeit. He could not allow his soul to be taken, as well.

"How strong are you?" they had taunted him. "Let's see how much of a man you are, pretty boy."

He heard the words in the deep recesses of his agonized brain and they sent shivers of hate through him. They would never let him go, he knew. They had stolen his very life and he despised them for it.

The withdrawal symptoms started again.

"Oh, God," he moaned, feeling the cramps begin in his gut.

Were they coming? Was that the scrape of a footstep outside? Were they bringing the needle to jab it into his thigh and douse the flame in his gut? Or would it be like the day before when he'd had to endure the fires of hell as they withheld the drug for more than twelve hours before the black man came in to stop his mindless screaming? Or the time several days before when he'd gone a full day in agony as his addiction cried out to be relieved. How many times had they done that to him? Ten? Twenty?

A day here of blessed relief--a day of violent desperation when no needle pierced

his flesh.

He was in agony again. Were they coming? Were they ever going to come?

The drug often made him hallucinate. It blurred his vision, caused a bitch of a headache, and made his joints ache. Was he imagining the scuff of footsteps outside the silo door?

There it was again!

He cocked his head toward the sound. It had to be either the black man or the Colombian. He could not take another minute of this torment and hope to keep his sanity.

He lay there, panting from the pain. His belly cramped and rumbled and his mouth watered. He licked his lips.

"Please," he called out. He held his breath and waited. He understood they liked to hear him beg.

The door to his nightmare world opened. "What you want, pig?" It was the black man.

He bit his lip, his breathing shallow and quick as he shifted impatiently. His mouth flooded with saliva. "I hurt," he admitted and saw the man nod.

"I expect you do." There was laughter in the rich bass voice.

"Please," he asked again, hating himself, but knowing all too well how the game was played. "I need it, man."

"I'll see what I can do."

The door closed, shutting out the light.

It was always the same answer. Conor understood that, too. It was part of the game. They could be back in five minutes or five hours. At times like this--when he was waiting for the blessed relief of the drug and not knowing if he was going to be given it or not--his mind took him to Rhianna and the only bright ray of sunlight in his shadowed existence. Thoughts of her had gotten him through the worst of it. He hoped that would help now.

Just to touch her, he thought. That was all he really wanted to do. Just to assure himself she was all right, handling this situation as best she could. He had no doubt that Joe and Trip were taking care of her, seeing to her immediate needs. And Steve Trevor, his lawyer. He would have spoken to her by now, maybe even given her the letter.

The note he had written her, Conor thought with a lurch of his heart that made tears pool in his eyes. How could he have forgotten that pouring out of his feelings? Oh, dear God, no! Don't let Steve have given her the letter yet!

"Rhianna," he said and his voice broke with need.

He could see himself writing it that morning. It was like a motion picture playing across the screen of his mind. He could even smell the coffee brewing as he had sat on the couch and tried to put into words how he felt.

It had been a long time in coming. There had been many attempts and countless wadded up sheets of paper dumped into the trashcan before that day. He doubted if he could ever have said the words to her face. Writing it had been hard enough, but he knew she'd never read it unless something bad had happened to him.

Something bad had happened to him. Something so bad he could never have imagined it or prepared himself, or her. That was what the message had been about, preparing the two of them for a time when he was no longer there. Looking back on it as he lay helpless on the cot, he supposed he should never have written the damned thing.

He wished to God he hadn't. It was a selfish thing to do, an arrogant assumption that Rhianna Marek loved him as much as he loved her.

Did she? He thought she loved him. There had been signs even an idiot could read. But if she did love him, how much would those words hurt her now?

Selfish, Nolan. Such selfishness should be punished and what better punishment than the one he suffered now?

The things he had written came out of the darkness at him and he cringed. They terrified him, but he couldn't look away from his declaration.

"My Pretty Lady," the words began to tumble off his tongue into the silence around him. "If Steve has given you this letter, then I'm no longer around. You don't have to read it if you don't want to. I'll understand if you don't. I guess I'm writing this more for me than you, but I hope you'll understand because I need to say a few things I couldn't say before.

"I don't know when it happened, Rhianna. When it started. I've lain awake at night trying to pinpoint the time, but maybe that was impossible. Maybe it happened a little bit at a time and finally just reached up and slapped me between the eyes so I'd notice. Whenever, however, it happened, I don't regret that it did. I might not have welcomed it, might even have tried to prevent it at first, but now, now that it's damned well too late, I find myself embracing it fully and wondering why I ever fought it.

"I love you, Rhianna Marek. With all my heart and all my being; with every breath I take and every pulse of blood through my veins. And, as Browning said: 'If God choose, I shall but love thee better after death.' I guess I'm about to find out if that is true or merely poetic license.

"No tears for me, Pretty Lady. Please. Get on with your life. Find a man who'll do right by you, but warn him if he doesn't, I just might find a way to make him!

"Goodbye, Rhianna. Never forget I love you. Conor"

"Selfish," he whispered. Pure, unadulterated selfishness. No, he should never have written the letter. He had placed a burden of guilt on the one woman in all the world he had truly loved and, in the doing, scarred her for all time. "Bastard," he called himself. "If I could just do it again ...."

"Talking to yourself again, brown eyes?"

He had been so engrossed in his own memories, his misery, he had not heard the door open again. Looking up, he shielded his eyes from the glare of light streaming in.

The Colombian stood in the doorway, the syringe in hand, but that didn't mean he was going to inject Conor with the payload.

"You're not going to give it to me, are you?"

A light snort of laughter burst from the Colombian. "No, I am not."

Conor closed his eyes, biting his lips until he tasted blood. He would not beg anymore--even if he died screaming in agony, he would not beg again.

Almost as though the Colombian had intercepted that shaky vow, he moved further into the room.

"You've been here three weeks, now, amigo," Conor's tormentor said in a conversational voice. "You've got awhile to go yet before I'm finished with you."

"Before you kill me."

"Oh, I have no intention of killing you." The Colombian seemed shocked by Conor's statement. "That has never been my goal, I assure you."

Conor opened his eyes and looked up at the man standing over him. "You just want to drive me insane, is that it?"

"Not so insane that you are not aware of what is being done to you." The Colombian reached down and captured Conor's chin. He bent over and peered into the prisoner's eyes. "You must suffer first. That is the way." He tugged on Conor's chin. "Then you will appreciate the freedom you will have when the deed is done."

"I don't understand."

"I know you don't, brown eyes, and it is not yet time for the party to begin." He stroked Conor's cheek. "It will not be long now before the drug in your veins will completely control you and you will do anything to stop the pain." He straightened. "And when that time comes, your soul will belong to me."

Conor watched his captor leave, taking with him the blessed relief, housed within the syringe.

Alone once more in the darkness, Conor had to clench his teeth to keep the moans from escaping. Tied as he was to the cot, he could not draw his knees up to help alleviate the cramping in his belly. Every breath he took was an agony unto itself. His one and only hope was that his heart would just simply cease to beat. Death was better than the torture that had become his life.

The door opened again.

"Whatcha you know, pig?" The black man chuckled. "He's gonna let you have your goodies after all."

Conor couldn't stop the hitching sob of relief that ripped out of his throat. He knew the black man heard because the bastard threw back his head and laughed.

"That's it, pretty boy," he heard the black man crooning. Conor relaxed his leg so his captor could find a good vein. "Just like that. Here we go, now. Better hang on for the ride!"

The needle went in and the burning rush began.

"That's good shit, ain't it, baby boy?" The black man ran his rough hand over Conor's leg. "Pretty soon, you'll do anything we say, huh?"

Conor blocked out the man's words and the hideous feel of the hand stroking him.

He thought of Rhianna, of her sweet face and laughing eyes. Of how much he loved her and how little time he had had with her. Of how he wished he'd been able to take her in his arms, to his bed, and show her what she meant to him. He longed to explain that the women he'd bedded had meant nothing to him. He wanted her to know they had been a substitute for her because he'd respected her too much to ask for such a sinful thing from her. He thought of all the little things she did that made her special. All the wonderful things that set her apart from the women he'd known, that had made him love her in the first place. The uncanny way she had of anticipating things he was going to say and do never failed to amaze him. As his world began to shut down, he smiled. Rhianna's eyes followed him into the dark and, with her there, he felt safe.

## Chapter Eleven

Cortesio put his arm around Rhianna's shoulders. "What can I do, Marek?"

Rhianna didn't answer. She put the contents of Nolan's desk into a cardboard box, not even bothering to look at what she was holding in her hands. She was afraid if she examined the Irishman's belongings too carefully, she would break down and start crying all over again. A week of that had gotten her nothing but a trip to the ER for the migraine from hell.

"We won't stop looking," Cortesio told her. "I promise you we won't."

"A little too late for that." Rhianna pushed his arm off her shoulder.

"Leave her be, Joey," said Triplett.

When Cortesio glanced around at him, Trip shook his head.

"He was my partner," Cortesio said to no one in particular.

"Is your partner?" Rhianna slammed the desk drawer. "He's alive and that bitch knows where he is."

Fullick, Donne, and Corbettson looked at one another then resumed writing the reports on their desks.

"I'll find her," they heard Marek vow. "No matter how long it takes, I'll find her."

"You don't even know who she is," said Cortesio. "Or what she looks like."

"Someone does." Rhianna hefted the cardboard box, snarling at Cortesio when he made to take it from her. "Just go back to your neat little world, Joey, and leave me the hell alone!"

The detectives watched her storm out of the squad room. No one spoke. What was there to say? Nolan had simply vanished without a trace and during the month he had been missing, Rhianna Marek had grieved.

"You think he's skipped?" Corbettson asked, looking around him.

"Yeah," Fullick replied, quietly. "I think so."

"Marek doesn't," said Donne.

"You know what they say about a woman scorned." Corbettson laughed, but no one joined him. He hid his embarrassment behind a protracted cough.

"What if she's right?" Trip asked. "What if there was a woman and she had something to do with Irish's disappearance?"

Donne looked up. "You guys remember that woman from the Witch's Brew?"

"Myra?" Fullick snorted.

"No," Donne said with disgust. "The one that bumped into him that night."

Fullick shook his head. He hadn't been out to the Brew since his old lady had read him the riot act.

"The blonde?" Cortesio asked. He nodded slowly. "Yeah, I remember her."

"You remember how she was lookin' at Irish?" asked Donne. "Man, she looked like she could gobble him up where he stood."

"Worth a shot," said Cortesio. "Any of you remember her name?"

"Rogers," Rhianna said from the doorway. "Felicity Rogers."

Donne blinked. "How the hell did you remember that?"

Rhianna shrugged. "A woman looks at your man the way that bitch did, you remember everything about her."

Triplett's left brow quirked upward. "Your man?"

"Damn straight," Rhianna said as she reached for the phone. She was punching in the number for the Witch's Brew. "I hadn't thought about her, but it's worth a shot."

"If anyone knows who that broad ...." Corbettson stopped when Rhianna held up a hand.

"Yeah, is Myra there?" Rhianna asked into the phone. She listened, frowning.

"You have any idea when she'll be in?" After another long pause, she rolled her eyes.

"You have an address on her?"

"I know where she lives," said Triplett.

"Never mind," Rhianna barked then hung up. She looked at Trip.

Triplett sighed. "Let's go."

"I've already questioned her," said Cortesio.

"I haven't," snapped Rhianna.

\* \* \* \*

Myra spat vulgar epithets as she stumbled through her darkened living room. "All right, goddamn it!" she shouted at the insistent knocking at her door. "I'm coming!"

Working until the pre-dawn hours did not make for a cheery personality when rudely awakened before noon, Rhianna thought as she heard the security chain rattling on the door. As it opened a crack to frame a red, bleary eye that grew instantly hostile, Marek thought sure the slut was going to slam the door in her face.

"What the hell do you want?"

"I've got some questions I want answered," said Rhianna.

"Find yourself an encyclopedia, then."

"Either let me in or you'll spend the rest of the day downtown."

"Shit!" Myra flung the chain out of its slot. "This had better be damned good, Marek!"

Rhianna's nostrils were assailed with the overpowering stench of garlic as she came into the waitress' house. The room was so dark she was afraid to step much further, and wouldn't have had Myra not turned on a small table lamp that cast a warm light into the room.

"I just got to bed," the woman grumbled, fishing a cigarette from a crumpled pack on the coffee table. The flare of a match lit her haggard face before she fanned out the flame.

"It's past ten o'clock," said Rhianna.

"So? What's your point?"

Seating herself gingerly on a chair, Rhianna looked around. The room surprised her because it was so neat and orderly, not what she would have expected from the woman. Although the coffee table held the remains of a fast-food breakfast and an ashtray full of spent butts, everything else was spotless.

"You know about Irish," Rhianna said.

"I heard," Myra said and Marek heard the tone of her voice change. "Is there any news?"

"Not yet."



"He'll turn up." Myra pulled the silk edges of her nightgown bodice closer over her breasts.

"You know most of the customers who come to the Brew," Rhianna said, watching the way Myra's mouth tightened defensively.

"Yeah, so?"

"Do you know a woman named Felicity that comes there?"

Myra put her right thumbnail between her teeth. "I don't ask the women their names, honey. I don't do women, you know?"

"This woman is about five foot six or seven, long blond hair, green eyes, good figure."

"That describes most of the German sluts who come in."

"This one was there the last night Irish was. She had on a white-sequined dress. She bumped into him on his way out. Made a point of talking to him."

Myra leaned over and stubbed out her cigarette. "Unless you haven't noticed, Marek, half the women who see Irish make it a point to talk to him."

"I need to find this woman, Myra."

"Why?" Myra pulled her feet up on the sofa. "Did he bang her, too?"

Rhianna knew there was a history between Conor and the waitress, and that was exactly what it was--history. But if the signals Myra was giving off meant anything, Irish was one history lesson the woman would love to re-take. "He means something to you, doesn't he?"

"Irish?" Myra said, trying for a flippant attitude. "He's okay."

"You slept with him."

"I sleep with a lot of men, honey," Myra said in a droll voice.

Rhianna let that remark pass. "Tell me about this woman. I know you know who I'm talking about."

"What's she got to do with it?" Myra remembered the look the bartender had given her that night. The uneasiness she'd felt with the woman's interest in Irish.

"She set him up." Rhianna watched the other woman's eyes closely.

"I warned him," Myra said, shaking her head. "I warned him!"

Rhianna tensed. "Warned him how?"

Myra looked up at her. "I called him. Left a message on the machine. I told him not to let her in."

"Why did you do that? Who is she?"

"No one ever told me her name," Myra said, reaching for another cigarette. "All's I know is she's trouble. Every time she latches onto a man, there's trouble."

"What kind of trouble?"

"You don't ever see him again," Myra said. She threw the unlit cigarette down. "They're usually married, you know? I just figure it's a blackmail thing." She shrugged. "Get 'em drunk or drug 'em up then take pictures." She risked a glance at Rhianna. "That kind of thing."

"Blackmail," Rhianna said. "Pay up or she'll go to the wife?"

"She usually asks me if they're married." Her brows came together. "Come to think of it, she didn't ask if Irish was, just wanted to know who you were."

"What else did she ask?"

"All she wanted to know was his name, who you were. That's it."

“Have you seen her lately? Does she come in any special night?”

Myra thought about it then shook her head. “I haven’t seen her since that night, come to think of it. It ain’t like I look for her, you know? Like I said, the bitch is trouble.”

“Yeah,” Rhianna agreed. “I got a feeling she was real bad trouble for Irish.”

## Chapter Twelve

The Irishman's ability to withstand the demon riding his back for longer than most men could surprised the Colombian. Nolan had resisted him for a month before he gave in to the need to alleviate the craving on his own. But the day came when he gladly took the needle to his own flesh. And in the end, he thought, it had not really been the addiction that had driven Conor Nolan to begin injecting himself with the drug. It had been the threat to bring the woman to the silo.

"Rhianna?" The Colombian could still hear the ache in the Irishman's voice when he spoke that one word.

"I can abduct her as easily as I abducted you." He'd extended the syringe to his prisoner. "Either administer the drug to yourself from now on or I'll send word to my men to bring the woman here and you can watch me addict her."

The Colombian understood Nolan's dilemma--the shame that would come when he finally gave in to injecting himself with the narcotic. Until then, it had been easy for him to pretend others were to blame for the addiction now raging out of control. It had been comforting to know he had had no say in the terrible thing that had befallen him. But to actually shoot up with the drug? To actively take part in his own decline from law-abiding citizen to drug addict was a different matter altogether.

"Don't you care what happens to her?" the Colombian had pressed.

"Just give me the damned thing. I'll do it," Nolan had snorted as though the admission hurt him worse than any man-made torture. The Colombian wondered if Nolan had heard the eagerness in his own voice.

It had been most pleasant--most pleasant, indeed--to watch the Irishman drive the needle into his thigh. The humiliation, the guilt registered on Nolan's pale face, but it was the long sigh of defeat that was like music to the Colombian's ear when the Irishman pushed the drug from the syringe into his vein.

"You will be unable to live without the drug now," the Colombian whispered.

"Just leave me alone," Conor said, lying back on the cot. He barely noticed when they re-cuffed his hands and ankles to the cot.

"A few more days," said the Colombian. "That's all. A week at the most. Then you can go home."

Conor shrugged as if to say it didn't matter. "Sure. Whatever you say."

The Colombian smiled at the slurred words. He watched until the Irishman was under.

\* \* \* \*

He felt a presence bending over him. The intense pain of the drug invading his brain had almost driven him mindless. Strong hands shut off his air.

"Turn his head," the Colombian said.

Conor struggled uselessly, then felt the needle as it pierced his neck. The instant agony exploded in his head and he tried desperately to draw breath but couldn't. When he was almost to the point of passing out, the rough hands that had been covering his nose

and mouth were removed. Conor gasped, dragging large gulps of icy oxygen into his depleted lungs. He coughed, gulping air, his chest heaving.

A light came on over head, momentarily blinding him, then the man who Conor had come to understand was his hell on earth leaned over him. Despite the pain in his head and the too-bright intensity of the light, he looked up into the man's face and his eyes widened with shock.

"Not what you expected, eh, brown eyes?" The Colombian chuckled.

Even in his worst nightmares, Conor had never seen anything so hideous as the man--no, the creature--that bent over him, putting its face close to his own. The putrid smell of the thing's breath washed over him, bringing instant nausea, and Nolan shrank from the horrible visage as far as the restraints would allow.

"Ah, brown eyes," the Colombian sighed. "You have nothing to fear from me." He smiled and the hideously scarred flesh on his face pulled grotesquely. "I am going to make you feel even better. I have increased the dosage."

It was the drug, Nolan thought in desperation as he felt the horny pad of the Colombian's palm on his cheek. It had to be the damned drug making him hallucinate. He tried to will himself back into the drug's intoxicating arms, but the sight coming closer was so unnatural, so hideously vile, he could not tear his eyes away.

"Does my deformity upset you, pretty one?"

"It's the drug," Conor answered, shaking his head. "It's the drug. It's the heroin making me hallucinate. I know what heroin can do!"

"Yes, I know you do," the Colombian said. "I know all about your addiction as a boy." He leaned closer. "Does Rhianna know?"

"Leave her out of this!" The breath fanning over his face was so terrible he could barely breathe.

"Oh, but we cannot," the Colombian told him. "She is our hold over you, brown eyes. If you do not do as you are told, we will bring her here and do to her what we are doing to you. Will you allow that?"

Conor's world was shutting down. The mellow blanket unfolded over him and he was sinking down in to the soft pillow. He heard a slight buzzing then no sound at all as his mind ceased assimilating sight, sound, and touch.

## Part Two

## Chapter Thirteen

"You didn't find anything at all, then?" Steve Trevor, Conor Nolan's attorney and one of his best friends, asked, admiring the strength of the woman across the desk from him.

Rhianna shook her head. Black hair swept the top of her shoulders. "As far as we know, Felicity Rogers never existed. We couldn't find a damned thing about her in any database anywhere. If that isn't suspicious, I don't know what is!"

Stephen noted the tiny lines around her mouth. They hadn't been there before. "I know this has been hard on you."

Marek tensed and toyed with the paperweight sitting on his desk. "Why did you call me here today, Steve?" she asked, her eyes wary. "Please don't tell me you're gonna read his will because I won't accept that he's ...."

"No!" the attorney said. "Nothing like that." He reached out to take her hand. "He'd have to be missing seven years before we could legally declare him ...." He paused. "Well, you know."

"Then why am I here?"

He released her hand and shuffled through the file, which contained Conor's legal papers. "I have something for you." He withdrew an envelope then closed the folder. "Irish gave this to me about a year ago." He looked down at the pristine white paper with Rhianna's name scrawled across the front. "He said if anything happened to him, I was to give it to you."

Rhianna drew in a long, shuddery breath before taking the envelope from Trevor's hand. "Do you know what's in it?" she asked in a tight voice.

"No." He paused, pushed up from the chair, then picked up the file. "I'll give you some privacy."

"No," she said, getting to her feet. "I can't read it here."

Stephen Trevor came around the desk and reached out to pat her shoulder. "If you need any help, will you call me?"

Rhianna nodded.

"If you need to talk about what's in there, I'm here for you."

"I appreciate that."

"What are your plans now?" he asked as he walked with her to the door.

"My lease is up at the end of next month. I'm looking for another apartment." She looked up, searching his face. "Do you think he'd be angry if he came home to find me living in his house?"

Opening the door, Steve answered, "The house is paid for and it's just sitting vacant. Conor didn't like that complex where you live. He always said it wasn't safe enough. No, I think he'd want you to move in." He held her gaze. "You'll be there when he comes home."

Rhianna smiled. "I don't know if I can stay there." She stopped as the tears flooded her eyes, but she held up a restraining hand when he would have taken her in his arms.

"You didn't drive over here, did you?" he asked, unnerved by her pallor and the overwhelming tragedy etched around her beautiful eyes. When she shook her head, he walked past her and told his secretary he was going to drive her home.

"No, Steve. I need to be alone."

At the curb, standing beside Rhianna Marek, watching the late November sunlight glinting on her blue-black hair as they waited for the cab, Stephen Trevor ached to take the grieving woman into his arms. He'd envied Conor Rhianna's affection and often wondered if the man even knew he was loved so deeply, so unconditionally. He hoped so, for such a love was rare and Conor had been so much in need of it.

"There's my cab," Rhianna said, drawing him back from his reverie. "Thank you, Steve," she said, giving his cheek a sweet little kiss.

"You'll let me hear from you, now?"

"I will."

Long after the yellow cab pulled away from the curb, Stephen Trevor stood watching until it was no longer visible. With a long sigh of resignation, he turned away and walked back into the lobby of the office building.

The taxi dropped her off at St. Patrick's, the church in the neighborhood where she lived. She lit a candle for Conor Nolan and said a prayer for his soul. Quietly, she slipped into a pew and sat holding the letter, staring at the Crucifix above the ornate Byzantine altar.

Rose-colored light filtered in from the stained glass panels to either side of the nave and cast the chancel in mauve shadows. The occasional pop and creak of the redwood buttresses made her edgy, but the silence between the sounds had a calming effect. A hint of sandalwood lingered from the morning celebration of the Eucharist and that, too, added to the feeling of peace that had begun to enfold her the moment she entered the church. This had always been her sanctuary, her haven in the storm, and it was always to a place such as St. Patrick's that she had gone when life became so ragged around the edges that it had to be mended.

Or when, like now, the material of her existence was so frayed, it could not be repaired by ordinary hands.

She sat in the pew, alternating her attention between the Christ figure on the cross and the flickering blue votive candles, for more than an hour. It took a long, long time to gather the courage to open Conor's letter. When at last she looked down at the envelope and made the decision to read it, she thought she heard his voice, calling to her. He sounded so lost and alone, so far, far away, and so utterly miserable. She closed her eyes briefly, took a deep breath, then slid her index finger beneath the flap.

The sound of the paper tearing intruded on the quiet. The crackle as she slowly unfolded the single page seemed to be a reprimand of sorts and she paused.

Looking around, finding herself alone, she shuddered. The hair stirred on the nape of her neck. A chill ran down her spine and she wanted nothing more than to leave this too-quiet place for the bustle of life beyond its doors. For the first time in her life, Rhianna Marek was uncomfortable in a church. She had no sense of the safety her religious upbringing and faith in God had instilled in her.

Her gaze fell to the paper in her hand. She held it up to the fading light and resolutely began to read.

## Chapter Fourteen

Chuck Corbettson grinned with satisfaction as he saw Rhianna Marek come out of the precinct door later that afternoon. He'd been waiting for her. "Hey, Rhee!" he called out, hurrying toward her. "Wait up a sec!"

Rhianna turned, a slight frown puckering her forehead as she saw Corbettson. He had never been one of her favorite people and today, of all days, she had no desire to talk to him.

"How's it going?" He shoved his hands into his pockets and leaned against the Mustang's rear fender.

"All right. What do you need?"

Corbettson grinned. "A date!"

She blinked, not quite sure she'd heard him correctly. "I beg your pardon?"

"You heard me." He chuckled. "I know it's been awhile, but now that you're available again ...." He let the sentence dangle like bait, waiting anxiously for her to bite.

Rhianna's brows came together in disbelief. "You're asking me out?" she asked in a flat voice.

"Yeah." Corbettson nodded. "I'll pick you up at about, oh say, seven thirty." He pushed away from the car. "Wear something frilly and I'll take you dancing out to the Witch's Brew." He started to turn away, looking pleased with himself like he'd taken care of business.

"C.C.?" she called out, stopping him. When he turned back to her, his wide face smug and arrogant, she itched to slap him.

"What, baby?" he answered. "Rather come over to my place, instead? Have us a little party there?"

Rhianna's mouth dropped open and a rush of derision came from her throat as she stared at him, unable to believe the man's gall. She shook her head. "You're kidding, right?" was all she could think to say.

Corbettson frowned. "Whatcha mean?"

She turned her head, looked out across the parking lot as though a cue card with the right words written across it would pop up out of nowhere. When she finally looked back at him, she let out a long, cleansing breath before she answered. "I'm not going anywhere with you, C.C."

The grin slipped off the detective's face. "Whatcha mean?" he repeated as though unable to credit her words.

"Just what I said. I'm not ever going out with you." Another snort of humor escaped her. "Not if you were the last man on earth."

Chuck Corbettson drew his hands out of his pockets. His eyes narrowed and he took a step toward her. Visibly annoyed that she didn't falter, didn't slink away from his advance, didn't seem intimidated as he loomed over her, Corbettson moved in closer still. When Marek still did not seem threatened, he swept her with an insulting look.

"What happened, Rhianna?" Corbettson asked as his gaze crawled over her. "You



get so use to that limp dick Nolan, you forget what a real man can do for you?" His grin came back, but this time it was hard and leering. "Ten minutes is all it'll take, baby. Ten minutes and I'll have you screaming with ecstasy. Show you what a real man can do!"

"Ten minutes?" she asked with breathy speculation, one eyebrow quirked upward.

"Yeah!" he jeered. He lifted a hand to touch her cheek, triumph lighting his face. "I'll make you come like a bitch in heat!"

With a snort of disgust, Rhianna knocked his hand away and reached out to shove him backward. Lips tight with fury, she pushed again, causing him to stumble against the rear bumper of the car next to hers. With a hoot of laughter, she watched him lose his balance. His feet shooting out from under him, he crashed unceremoniously to the pavement.

"The only thing you could make me do is puke!" Unaffected by his snarl of rage, she spun, jerked the car door open and slid behind the wheel. She barely had time to slam the door and drive the lock home with her fist before he yanked at the handle.

"Open this goddamned door!"

Rhianna turned her face toward him as she switched on the ignition. Her grin was brutal. "Ten minutes, Corbettson?" she laughed, shifting the gear into reverse. "Irish could do it in one!"

Corbettson slammed his hand on top of the car with enough force to put a dent in it. He had to lurch backward as Marek hit the accelerator. The Mustang shot out of its slot with a squeal of tires.

"I'm not through with you, Marek!" he bellowed. He ran toward her car but was left glaring uselessly at the retreating taillights.

Growling with frustration, Corbettson swung around, heading for his car, and saw Samuel and Fullick watching him from a few feet away. "What the hell you looking at?"

"A fool," Samuel answered dryly, but he didn't think Corbettson heard. The man strode angrily across the parking lot toward his own car.

"Think we'd better tell Trip?" asked Fullick.

Samuel nodded. "Corbettson's crazy. You remember that hooker?" He glanced at Fullick. "Loreena, wasn't it?"

Fullick flinched as Corbettson's car left rubber in the parking space. "Loreen," he corrected. He chewed on his lip, glanced back at the precinct house, and made a decision. "We'd better go talk to Triplett." His gaze swung back to Corbettson's car as the Buick shot onto the street. "I don't trust that prick any farther than I can see him."

\* \* \* \*

As he drove, Chuck Corbettson's hands were like steel clamps on the steering wheel, his foot heavy on the accelerator. He was oblivious to the red lights and stop signs through which he raced. He barely took note of the lone pedestrian who had to leap out of his way at an intersection. Glancing at the stunned man in the rear view mirror his throat vibrated with a mirthless chuckle.

"Keep your worthless ass out of my way," he growled and flexed his fingers around the wheel. "Or I'll mow it down!"

No woman had ever spoken to him like Marek had. No woman had ever turned away from him before. And no bitch had ever dared laugh in his face or question his sexual prowess. The insult was more than he could bear and it hissed in his brain like a nest of vipers, striking at his manhood.

“Oh, I’ll have you, Miss High and Mighty.” He nodded in agreement with his prediction. “I’ll have you just the way I want you and you’ll enjoy the hell out of it!” His face split with a vicious grin. “And if you give me any shit ....”

He thought of the hooker. Oh, yeah, the hooker. He didn’t remember the whore’s name, but he sure remembered the lesson he’d taught the uppity bitch. He shifted in the seat, groin tight with anticipation. Removing one hand from the wheel, he reached down to the juncture of his thighs to massage the erection, which strained at his jeans.

“Yeah,” he whispered, his hand working to relieve the pressure. “Just like the hooker, Marek.” A low, vengeful chuckle erupted and he licked his lips. “Give me trouble and I’ll teach you like I did her!”

The blast of a horn startled him. A car had narrowly missed colliding with Corbettson’s when he ran that last red light. He jerked his hand up, turning to glare at the driver. He flipped the motorist the bird and chuckled as another prolonged blast of the horn told him the motorist had been doubly offended by the gesture.

“Eat shit and die, motherfucker!” He stomped his foot on the accelerator.

After all, he was a man with a mission. He was in a hurry.

He had business with Rhianna Marek.

## Chapter Sixteen

Rhianna had not slept. She hadn't even gone to bed. The damp gray dawn that lit up the sky found her at the breakfast table, staring sightlessly at the first fat droplets of rain falling on the third floor balcony rail. The cup of strong black coffee sitting on the table was cold. Before her lay the letter Conor Nolan had written. The single page was tear-stained and crumpled from repeated reading.

Lightning flared in the western sky and drew Rhianna's gaze to the depressing gunmetal clouds beyond her balcony. She heard the shrill beep-beep-beep of a garbage truck moving into position to empty one of the dumpsters in the complex parking lot and realized the day had begun without her being aware.

Wearily, she pushed up from the table and carried her cup to the sink. She had enough caffeine in her system to keep her awake for a week. She didn't need another cup, but she poured one anyway. The muted ringing of the phone annoyed her so she didn't answer. The machine would screen the call as it had for most of the evening and night and a few times that morning. She didn't want to talk to anyone yet. Her gaze fell on Conor's handwriting and she felt her throat closing again. There was only one person she wanted to talk to, but after five months she was beginning to think that would never happen again.

With a sudden rage that shocked her, she threw the cup across the room where it hit the wall and shattered, dark stains cascading down the beige wallpaper.

"Damn you, Conor Nolan!" she screamed. "Damn you to hell for leaving me!" Covering her face with her hands, she began to cry again. She didn't hear the doorbell and wouldn't have answered if she had.

\* \* \* \*

"This is highly irregular," the building superintendent told Joe Cortesio. "I really should have a court order before I allow you in." He stuck the key in Rhianna Marek's front door lock and hesitated. "I just don't know if I'm doing the right thing."

Cortesio draped an encouraging arm around the older man's shoulders. "I'll tell Rhianna you had your doubts about this, Mr. Casey. If she has a problem with it, we'll put all the blame on me. Okay?"

Delbert Casey nodded solemnly. "Just this once." He unlocked the door to apartment 3-C and gently swung it open, stepping aside to allow the policeman to enter first. He hesitated on the threshold, not certain if he should go in or not.

"Rhianna?" Cortesio called out as he walked through the great room.

Marek's shoulders sagged and she cursed between the hitching sobs that shook her. She didn't want company, didn't want to see anyone, and especially not someone who had loved Conor Nolan almost as much as she had.

"Honey, where are you?"

The superintendent took a step into the apartment, craning his neck around the door to see where the detective had ventured. As the policeman came out of the bedroom, a scowl on his dark face, Delbert Casey interpreted the man's concern.

"Her car is still here," he told the policeman. "It's parked next to mine."

Joe nodded and walked through the great room. He heaved an audible sigh of relief when he found Marek sitting at the table in her kitchen.

"Why are you here?" she greeted him.

"You didn't answer the phone last night," he accused, before turning around and looking back at the front door. "She's okay, Mr. Casey." He waited until the building superintendent left before pulling out a chair and sitting down. "I got worried when you didn't answer the phone."

"Did it occur to you that I didn't want to answer the goddamned phone, Joe?" she snapped, wiping a hand over her wet cheeks and running the back of it under her chin.

Cortesio had never been good with crying women. The only boy among eight sisters, in a house where three generations of Italian women reigned, he had experienced plenty of tears and always felt helpless in such situations. It made him acutely uncomfortable.

"He wouldn't have wanted this," Joe said quietly, reaching out to cover her hand with his. He recognized the signs of sleeplessness. He should. He'd seen them in the mirror this morning.

Rhianna shrugged.

The smell of the stale bologna sandwich next to his elbow alerted Cortesio that Conor's lady probably hadn't eaten the night before, either. His hand tightened over hers. "How 'bout us going out for some breakfast?"

"I'm not hungry."

"Me either," Joe replied, "but I didn't have any supper last night and I'm getting a bit woozy."

She looked up at him. "You've always been a bit woozy, Cortesio." The smile wouldn't come, but the effort was there in her eyes and he saw it.

"Go ahead. Rub it in. Make fun of the handicapped Dago."

Rhianna took in and let out a long breath. "I'm not up to going anywhere just yet. I ...." The trill of the telephone interrupted her.

"Want me to get it?" Joe asked.

"Let it ring," she replied. "The machine will catch it."

But the machine did not. The ringing kept on. By the tenth ring, Joe had had enough and he got up to answer. As soon as he spoke, the line went dead.

"Bastard," the Italian swore. Replacing the receiver, he turned to look at Rhianna. "Better get your machine looked at. It must be broken." The look on Marek's face made him frown. "What's the matter?"

Rhianna shivered. "I just had the weirdest feeling when you picked up the phone," she said, her voice quivering.

"What?" Cortesio asked, coming to the table.

Marek mentally shook herself and looked up at him. "Like when you drink something too cold and you feel it moving all the way down to your stomach." She shivered again. "Except this felt like ice water pumping through my veins. I felt it all through my body."

"Doo-doo-doo-doo, doo-doo-doo-doo." Cortesio hummed the theme music to *The Twilight Zone*. "Do you think they have pay phones in heaven?" he asked without thinking. As soon as Rhianna's eyes widened with shock, he could have kicked himself

around the block and back. He rushed to her, gathering her in his arms and apologizing.

"Oh, God, Rhianna!" he whispered. "I don't know why I said that! Lord, I'm sorry!"

"There's no need," she said, pushing him away. "You didn't mean any harm." But the hurt was settling in her heart despite the denial.

"Me and my big mouth," Cortesio hissed. "Rhianna, I really am sorry."

"Don't worry about it," she said, wanting to drop the subject.

Cortesio's face was beet red and his chest tight with guilt. He had never been so tactless in his life and the pain he had caused her was unforgivable. He tried to apologize once more but the phone interrupted him.

They both looked at the wall phone, but neither made an attempt to answer. It kept ringing long after the machine should have kicked in. On the tenth ring, it stopped and the two people at the table breathed a sigh of relief.

"Is that offer of breakfast still on?" Rhianna asked, getting up from the table. She could not stay in the apartment one moment longer without going stark raving mad.

"Ah, yeah, sure," said Joe, still ashamed of his thoughtless remark. He glanced down at the tabletop and blanched as he recognized his partner's handwriting on the sheet of paper there.

"He left it with Stephen," Rhianna explained quietly. She watched as moisture pooled in the detective's eyes. "You can read it if you'd like, Joe."

Cortesio shook his head. "I've no right."

"It's nothing you probably don't already know," she said. "Go ahead. Read it."

Joe's hand shook as he reached out for the letter. He could barely read it through his wavering vision and as he did, he could feel his heart breaking.

"I memorized every word," Rhianna whispered. "Every sweet, precious word."

The Italian looked at her. "You never suspected, did you?"

Rhianna smiled sadly and shook her head. "Never even dared to dream that he felt that way."

Carefully folding the letter, Joe put it on the table. He wished he hadn't read it for the words were going to stay with him the rest of his life. They were now printed indelibly on his very soul and like the man who had written them, would forever be a part of Joseph Cortesio.

"Let's go." Rhianna threaded her arm through Cortesio's. "I need to get out of here."

Before they could close the apartment door, the phone began to ring. Rhianna stopped, looked back and shivered, but made no move to answer. Cortesio said nothing, just stood watching her. Six rings had passed before he heard her speak.

"I know, Irish," she said softly.

The phone stopped ringing.

Cortesio shivered. He slowly turned to look at Marek and saw the tears in her eyes. He started to say something, but she shook her head.

"It was about him, Joey. He's trying to let me know he's still alive."

With that said, she pulled the door closed behind them.

## Chapter Seventeen

Trip stared at Corbettson's car as it rolled slowly through the apartment complex's parking lot for the third time in less than an hour. He could see the frustration on the other man's face building higher and higher with each pass. A slow, mirthless smile twitched at his lips and he let the drape fall back over the window.

"Still there?" Rhianna asked as she brought a suitcase in from the bedroom.

"Don't worry 'bout it," Trip answered. "You got everything?"

Rhianna looked around, spied a book she'd been reading and added it to a canvas tote bag filled with odds and ends. "Yeah, I think so."

"You can get a restraining order, you know," Trip told her as he hefted her suitcase. "Jace and Dave heard him threaten you."

She nodded. "If it comes to it, I will, but C.C.'s mostly bluster. I trampled his ego and he's just pissed." She draped her shoulder bag over her arm. "He'll get over it."

Trip wasn't so sure. He'd been in the precinct house the night Loreen Raye had come in to file a complaint against the detective. Rhianna hadn't seen the mass of bruises and welts on the prostitute's arms and legs, hadn't winced at the two black eyes, chipped front teeth, and split lip that oozed blood as Loreen cried out her story to Dave Donne. Trip was still ashamed that the guys at the precinct had closed ranks around one of their own and nothing had been done about the savage beating Corbettson had administered to Loreen Raye.

"He's gonna kill somebody one day if you don't do something 'bout him!" the black hooker had told the officer who questioned her. "I ain't the first one he's whipped up on and I'm telling you now, I won't be the last!"

There had been rumors, Trip thought as he walked with Rhianna to the door and opened it for her. Rumors and tales whispered about Charles Carver Corbettson that made men uneasy. Nothing you could prove. Who took a whore's word for anything? But the rumors persisted and the man was brutal, with a mean streak a mile wide.

"I'd feel better if you'd stay with me tonight," Trip said as they reached her car. "At least give me a chance to have a talk with the bastard. Let him know we're watching him." Trip lifted her trunk lid and swung the suitcase inside. He slammed the lid and stood with his hands on the trunk, looking her in the eye. "He's a snake."

"No," she said as she threw the canvas tote into the back seat. "He's an octopus. I dated him a few times, remember?"

Trip pushed away from the trunk and stood by the open door, peering down as she slid inside the car. "That was before Conor and you started seeing one another," he said gravely, not wanting to bring up that painful name, but knowing it would penetrate his partner's unrealistic sense of being able to handle Corbettson by herself. "Irish hated Corbettson. And with good reason."

Sadness flitted across Marek's face and she turned her head away, eyes suddenly too bright. "He's not going to bother me, Trip," she said softly. "Don't worry."

Neville Triplett shut the door, braced his hands on the top of the car and peered at

her through the open window. "C.C. was furious when you stopped seeing him before, Rhee," he reminded her. "He always bragged about getting you back if you and Irish ever broke up."

"Irish had nothing to do with me not seeing C.C.," she answered, turning the key in the ignition. "I told him I was seeing someone else, someone I was interested in, and he didn't press the issue." She looked up at him. "He never asked me out after that."

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her why Corbettson had not dared ask her out again. He knew she had a right to know, but he wasn't so sure she could handle it at that moment. Instead, he reached in through the window and put a hand on her shoulder.

"Promise me you'll keep the doors locked and you won't let that asshole in if he thinks to come over there looking for you. Okay?" His face crinkled with worry.

Rhianna lifted her hand and crossed her heart. "Scout's Honor."

Trip snorted. "You weren't no scout."

"Close enough," she said, grinning. "I baby-sat one once." She patted his hand. "I mean it, Trip, don't worry!"

"I can't help it." He withdrew his hand and thrust it into the pocket of his windbreaker. "Will you promise me you'll call if Corbettson comes over there?"

"Yes," she replied with exasperation.

"You won't let him in?"

"Of course not."

"If anyone comes knocking in the middle of the night you'll call either me or Joey, right?"

"Yes, Daddy," she said.

"Promise?"

"I promise, already!" Her hand went to the gearshift.

Trip nodded, looked out across the parking lot and did not see Corbettson lurking at either exit. "Drive carefully," he warned her and stood there until the Mustang was no longer in sight. As he walked to his own car, his jaw tight with suppressed worry, he caught movement out of the corner of his eye and turned. Corbettson's big sedan was pulling into the complex's north entrance. Rhianna had left by the south exit.

"Son of a bitch," Trip murmured, stepping behind a brown mini-van to intercept Corbettson as he drove past. There was no way Corbettson could have seen Rhianna leaving, but as soon as he didn't find her car in the parking lot, he'd start looking for her and Trip wanted to delay that as long as could.

\* \* \* \*

Corbettson frowned. The assigned space where Marek's car had been only ten minutes before was now empty, but Triplett's dun-colored four by four was still parallel parked beside the walkway. Hunching over the steering wheel, he swept his angry glare across the lot, failing to see any sign of Marek's Mustang.

"Where the hell are you, slut?" he mumbled as he allowed his sedan to coast to a stop.

Settling back against the seat with a hiss of frustration, he chewed on his lower lip, worrying it between his crooked front incisors, nearly biting through it as something slammed against his window. He jerked his head around and found himself staring at Neville Triplett's stern face.

"You lost, Corbettson?" Trip yanked open the door and grabbed the detective's

arm. Corbettson wrapped his hands around the steering wheel and stiffened to keep from being dragged out of the car.

“What the hell’s wrong with you?” Corbettson shouted, his heart slamming against his ribcage. “You trying to give a man a coronary?”

“Who you looking for?” Trip countered, his upper lip lifting in a sneer.

Corbettson stared into Triplett’s hostile gray eyes and shook his head. “I wasn’t looking for nobody, man!”

“No?” Trip asked. “Then whatcha doing over here?”

“Just driving around,” Corbettson answered defensively. “Can’t a man just take a drive without being accused of something?”

Trip leaned into the opened doorway, put his face close to Corbettson’s. “Let’s me and you understand something, C.C. I got three sisters, you know? All of ‘em younger than me.” He put a heavy hand on Corbettson’s shoulder. “And I love ‘em, see? They’re good girls. Real good girls.” His fingers tightened brutally. “And Rhianna? Well, you see, she’s sort of like a little sister to me, too, you understand? And just like I would if any man tried to bother Helen or Laura or Whitney, I’d go after any man who tried to bother Rhianna. You dig?”

Corbettson’s mouth turned mulish. “I got a couple o’ sisters, too!” he snapped.

“Yeah? Well, then you’d probably beat the shit outta some bastard who dared take liberties with ‘em, wouldn’t you, C.C.?” Trip’s fingers became steel shafts digging into the soft spot in front of Corbettson’s collarbone.

A spasm of pain twisted Corbettson’s beefy face. “I wasn’t doing nothing,” he mumbled.

“I hope you weren’t planning on doing something, either. ‘Cause if you were ....” He gave Corbettson’s shoulder one final, savage squeeze then removed his hand. “Well, let’s just say I’d think twice about it if I was you. Irish ain’t here, but I am. You got it?”

“I ain’t thinking about nothing!” Corbettson ground his teeth together and stared sullenly through his dirty windshield.

“That’s good,” Trip assured him as he straightened. He stepped back and slammed Corbettson’s door, then stood there with his hands jammed into the pockets of his jeans, his eyes steady on Corbettson’s profile.

Corbettson turned his head, glancing uneasily at Triplett, then pressed his foot down hard on the accelerator. With a few feet of safety between them, he stuck his middle finger in the air and drove out of the parking lot, the back end of his heavy car lurching high in the air and slamming back down as he rolled too fast over a speed bump.



## Chapter Eighteen

Rhianna sat in the driveway of Conor Nolan's 1950s bungalow for a long time before she could dredge up enough courage to get out of the car. When at last she did, she found herself reluctant to climb the four concrete steps up to the screened-in porch. She felt her palms sweating, heard her blood pounding. She experienced a slight feeling of vertigo, a quiver of nausea lurking at the back of her throat.

She took a deep breath and climbed the steps. Not giving herself time to think, Rhianna rummaged through her purse, took out the key to Conor's front door and rammed it into the lock. With a great gulp of breath, she twisted the key, flinching at the rasp of the tumbler falling, then pushed the door open and hurried inside.

Closing the door behind her, she slumped against it, and let her eyes adjust to the fading light seeping in through the wide double windows before she ventured out of the foyer.

It had the musty smell of a house left too long without a human to care for it, to love it. Despite the warmth flowing up from the baseboard heaters, the living room was damp and chill.

Joe and Sonia had known Rhianna was thinking of moving from her apartment into Conor's house until he came back.

"We, ah, went over to the house over the weekend," Joe Cortesio had told her Monday morning. "We cleaned it up a bit." It had been a singular act of love and kindness on their part and she appreciated it greatly. "Things are all right, now," Joe had said.

No, Joey, things weren't right. She didn't think they would ever be right. Not until Conor Nolan walked through this door and ....

It hurt. God, how it hurt. She had to stop thinking!

Rhianna pushed away from the door, inhaling a faint, comforting memory. A tremulous smile hovered around her lips.

"I like the pine smell," Conor had once defended his cleaner when she'd complained of the sharp odor. "It smells like the outdoors."

"It smells," she had countered, "like a toilet bowl!"

"Noooo," Conor had drawled. "It smells like the outdoors."

"All right," she'd conceded. "It smells like an outdoor toilet, then!"

A shudder ran through Rhianna and she gripped her elbows. There was really no reason to be cold. Heat billowed the beige open-weave drapes at the double windows. But she was shivering.

"It's been five months, Rhee," she could hear Trip complaining. "Go on over there and deal with it. Until you do, you aren't going to be able to move on with your life, baby."

She hadn't realized just how much she'd been blocking out until she sat down in the dilapidated recliner and stared longingly at the blue gingham sofa Conor had insisted she help him choose.

"You don't think it's too, well, you know?" he'd asked.

"Too what?"

Conor had blushed. "Feminine?"

"I like it," she'd said, loath to admit blue gingham didn't seem the ideal choice for a man like Conor Nolan.

"You do?" His quick words were almost boyish.

"Yes," she had answered. "Very much so."

"That's all I need to know!"

Sitting there looking at the sofa, Rhianna couldn't help but wonder if he hadn't bought it just to please her. Maybe with the thought of her ultimately sharing it with him. She'd never gotten the chance. Conor had purchased it on their last date.

Grief squeezed her chest, brought stinging tears to her eyes.

"Stop it," she told herself, getting up. If she let herself dwell too long on that night, she'd scream. Instead, she looked about the room.

The furniture was just as he had left it. Nothing had been moved, nothing much had been changed. There were a few light patches on the walls where once the portraits of Conor's Irish grandparents had hung. The Ormolu clock was gone from the mantel. The oaken trunk that had sat beside the sofa was missing. Irish's sister now had possession of those things.

"Do you believe that bitch?" Stephen Trevor, Irish's attorney had bit out. "She must have hired some two-bit thief to break into the house and get what she wanted! I'm going to have that bitch arrested and ...."

"No," Rhianna had stopped him. "Let her have what she wants and be done with it."

"But he didn't want her to have those damned pictures, Rhianna! Or the clock. Or the goddamned steamer trunk, for that matter!"

"They were her grandparents, too, Steve," she'd tried to remind him, but the irate lawyer had not been mollified.

"I'll have her ass in court so fast ...."

"If Conor had had kids, Steve, then I'd be all for jumping on her shit, but there's no one left in their family but her and her mother, and Maeve Nolan has Alzheimer's. Just let Caitlin have what she feels belongs to their family and be done with it." Rhianna had sighed heavily. "I don't want to always be looking over my shoulder, waiting for her to spring a lawsuit on me."

Despite Steve's outrage and his vehement protests, Rhianna had held firm and no more was mentioned about the missing family heirlooms.

She wandered into the kitchen, flipping on the light switch. Evening was coming down in shifts of ever-darkening shadows.

The kitchen was spotless and that was an insult. Conor had been a typical bachelor and never once in all the time she'd known him had the sink been free of a mound of dirty dishes.

"Why don't you use the dishwasher?" she'd once asked with exasperation.

"I don't like dishwashers," Conor had proclaimed. "I like washing the dishes by hand. It's peaceful."

"Peaceful?" she'd repeated, questioning the man's sanity.

"Soothing," he'd said, nodding. "Almost seductive."

Rhianna had poked at a crusted plate, her mouth twisted in disgust. “Obviously not seductive enough to lure you into doing it all that often.”

And the refrigerator was bare.

Where was his favorite beer? The outrageously expensive bloody Mary mix, sliced limes, and celery stalks he always kept for her? The slowly rotting lettuce, mushy cucumbers, and evil-looking black radishes? The sour 2% milk and crumb-encrusted tub of margarine? The crinkled aluminum foil-wrapped containers of God-only-knew-what? The dozens of packets of malt vinegar from a greasy fish-and-chips place he’d been addicted to that always fell from the egg shelf when you opened the refrigerator door?

“What on earth are you going to do with all this goddamned malt vinegar?” she’d once asked with amazement.

Conor had shrugged. “Pickle something?”

Rhianna shut the refrigerator door and sat down at the gleaming red-and-white chrome table. She ran her hand over the scratched surface, listening to Conor’s voice coming at her from the range where, in her mind, he was stirring a pot of Mulligan stew.

“I found it at the dump,” he explained as he added carrots to the blue enamel pot.

“And why, pray tell,” she inquired, “didn’t you leave it there?”

“It goes with the kitchen,” he sniffed. “Fifties Americana, Marek.”

True enough. The chrome monstrosity, so popular in the ‘50s, did fit in well with the red-and-black asphalt tile on the floor and the white Youngstown cabinets. Even the slightly listing chrome chairs, with their seats and backs of red vinyl, looked as though they might well have been the missing relatives of the battered old table.

“I grew up with furniture like this,” he told her. “It’s comforting.”

Everything in his home had been comforting to Conor Nolan, she thought with a pang. He’d taken great pride in the place and although not all that expert at keeping his sink dish-free, he’d been almost anal about the rest of the house, keeping it dust free and clutter free, polished, mopped, and swept clean. Everything had a place and everything was always in that place. To have it so was ... well, comforting to Conor.

Getting up wearily from the table, Rhianna decided she liked the red-and-white chrome table very much. All it needed was a wicker bowl of artificial fruit adorning it to make it look like the table from her youth.

The bedroom had an odd smell about it and it took her a moment to realize what the odor was. It had been a long time since she’d experienced that musty smell. When she finally placed it, her brow furrowed and a slender thread of shock flitted through her. Close on the heels of the shock came disappointment. The cloying odor of spent semen was very strong and very unacceptable here. She wondered why Joey and Sonia hadn’t noticed it and done something about it.

Her gaze settled on the bed and once more her throat closed with tears.

But this is where he had slept, she chastised the jealousy in her heart. And this is where he used to lie when he’d call me late at night. This was his analyst’s couch, this bed, and I was his Mother Confessor. This was the altar upon which he’d poured out all his troubles. It was his confessional when he was unable to sleep because of something he’d heard or seen or felt. His sounding board when he was unable to get some debilitating memory of his childhood out of his head. His psychiatrist when he was unable to accept the savagery of their job, the uselessness of it at times. Here, his bitterness and anger and hurt because of something Caitlin had done was expelled. In this

room, when worry and confusion overwhelmed him after coming back from seeing his mother, he could exorcise his demons.

The thought of Maeve Nolan left a bitter taste in Rhianna's mouth and her eyes narrowed with anger.

"She didn't even know me, Rhee," he'd once complained bitterly to her. "Her only son and she doesn't even know who the hell I am!" His arms had tightened so painfully around Rhianna's waist, she'd flinched.

"It's part of the illness, baby," she'd tried to reassure him. "You know what the doctors told you."

But Rhianna suspected it had been more than Maeve's illness that had driven her from her son. If the things Conor had hinted at from his childhood were true, if his perceptions were valid, then his mother had stopped knowing, or caring, who he was long before the Alzheimer's had claimed her mind.

His mother's slow sinking into a world of her own making, a world that could not and would never admit him, caused Conor great pain.

Rhianna wondered if Caitlin had tried to tell the old woman her son was listed among the missing.

Letting out a long, grieving breath, she left his bedroom behind, closing the door as gently on the memories as on her building sorrow.

There were two bedrooms in the bungalow with a small white and pink ceramic-tiled bathroom separating them. Conor had turned the large hallway, a space once big enough to house a bulky fuel oil furnace and which connected the two bedrooms, into a mini-office with a roll top desk, chair and four drawer steel filing cabinet. After a cursory look at the neatly stacked papers on the desktop, Rhianna went into the smaller of the two bedrooms and lay down on the bed.

"I don't know what I'm going to put in there," Conor had once told her. "I bought the bed from Joe when his mother-in-law died, but who's going to sleep in it?"

Rhianna knew she would. It might be a long time before she could sleep in Conor's bed, if she ever could. The thought of selling any of his belongings, getting rid of even one single thing, was uncomfortable. She knew she couldn't do it and live with herself.

"If you can't bring yourself to get rid of something, then store it, Rhee," Trip had counseled.

But even storing Conor's things seemed like a betrayal.

She stared up at the ceiling then shifted her attention down the bare walls and across the drape-less windows. This room had never known Conor's touch. He hadn't bothered to do anything to it but put on a fresh coat of paint.

"Why gray?" he'd protested when she'd indicated her choice of colors for the room.

"Pearl gray goes with anything, Conor. If you still insist on mauve carpet for your own bedroom--"

"I like the color mauve!" His lower lip had thrust out in stubbornness. "And it's not a foo-foo color!"

"Then gray will go nicely with the damned mauve!" she'd hissed, ignoring his little boy pout.

Wallpaper, she thought as she craned her neck to look at the expanse of wall at

the head of the bed. Wallpaper with tiny mauve flowers and green leaves. Her gaze shifted once more to the windows.

“And white Dutch lace curtains with mauve accordion blinds,” she said aloud, running her hand over the nubby fabric of the white chenille bedspread.

And a white Casablanca ceiling fan with crystal tulip lights. A brass headboard with swirls and big finials was a must. An old-fashioned ‘50s blond oak dresser with a big round mirror, step-down vanity and satin-covered bench. There had to be a white wicker plant stand with a huge leafy Boston fern in front of the north-facing window, a scarf-clad round table beside the bed with a Betsy Ross lamp.

“You would approve,” Rhianna whispered to the silent room. “I promise.”

A weight seemed to lift from Rhianna’s chest and she turned over on the bed, drew her knees up and watched the last light of day dwindling down to a pinpoint flicker in the window at the foot of the bed.

\* \* \* \*

Corbettson flicked his cigarette out the half-opened window of his car and opened the door. A glance at his watch told him it was just a little past two in the morning. It would normally be a five-minute walk from where he had parked to Nolan’s place, but there was a thick ground fog, unusual for this time of year, and the going would be rough. All he needed to do was break a leg in this pea soup then try like hell to explain how he came to be slinking around Nolan’s neighborhood so late at night.

He couldn’t think of the place as Rhianna’s. He hunched down into what little warmth his windbreaker afforded him. To admit that she had moved into Nolan’s house would be to admit that there had been more between the goddamned Irishman and Marek than, he, Corbettson, was prepared to accept.

In his weird, twisted way, C.C. was in love with Rhianna Marek.

“If you go by her apartment one more time, you bastard, I’ll kill you!” Nolan had once warned him.

Well, you aren’t here now, are you, you Irish prick? Corbettson chuckled. You can’t do nothing about where I go and what I do, can you?

He had wanted Marek more than he had ever wanted a woman. Corbettson sidestepped a child’s wagon left on the sidewalk. He had been obsessed and to some extent, he realized he still was. She’d been jazzy enough, he conceded. She’d looked good on his arm and that was really what had counted when they were dating. The other guys thought he was slipping it to her. He’d hinted as much. So what if that wasn’t true? Who cared? Let the guys think he had. It didn’t hurt his reputation any. And he knew they’d been jealous, wanting her as much as he did.

Yeah, Marek had been worth chasing. She’d been a moderately okay number even though she’d made it clear to him she wouldn’t go in for any touchy-feely. He’d shrugged that off, though. He knew he could have her whenever he wanted her. He just hadn’t wanted her right then. There had always been time to make his move, to wear down her defenses. He’d had no doubt whatsoever that she would be his when the time was right.

So what the hell had happened, anyway?

A dark scowl cemented itself on Corbettson’s face.

“Oh, yeah,” he said aloud. “I remember now.”

He’d just decided he was going to go for it when she started seeing the goddamned Mick.

God, how he had hated Conor Nolan on sight! There'd been bad blood between them from day one. Each of them had fought for top dog in the precinct and Nolan had won out in that department, because he had spent time in the DEA in Florida.

Nor had anything really been settled between them when Corbettson was promoted to Detective First Class before Nolan. The other guys still took the damned Irishman's advice over C.C.'s, seemed to like the Mick more than they did him.

"Irish is an up front guy, you know?" Fullick had once said. "You can trust him to be where he says he'll be, when he says he'll be there, to do what he tells you he'll do when he says he'll do it."

This was one time the Irishman wasn't going to do what he'd said he would do. "I'm gonna make her forget all about you, Nolan." Corbettson chortled as he caught sight of Nolan's house around the corner. "I'm gonna do for her what you never could even if you'd been man enough!"

Corbettson flinched. Hadn't he said that once to Irish? He thought about it and decided he had. And regretted ever having opened his big mouth that time. He couldn't forget the night he had pushed the Irishman too far.

\* \* \* \*

It had been a brutal fight even though they had been evenly matched. Nolan hadn't been drinking as C.C. had and had reacted quicker at the time. The Irishman's blows had landed with solid thuds, sickening crunches that split both of Corbettson's lips, knocked out three teeth, blackened both eyes and caused a weeklong worth of pee to run tinged with blood.

"Did you report the mugging?" C.C.'s brother, Jeff, asked him when the detective showed up in Chicago to recuperate beyond the eyes of his fellow cops.

"I beat the shit outta the fucker!" Corbettson lied around a sore mouth and oozing lips. "Wasn't no need to report it. It's taken care of, little brother."

The trouble was, Corbettson fumed as he stopped at the house two doors down from Nolan's, the Irishman had beaten the shit out of him and walked away with only scraped knuckles and a shiner.

"I'd like to go another round with you, you fucking Irish potato farmer!" Corbettson felt a bad mood coming on and flexed his hands, wishing he had something to hit.

Someone to hit.

What the hell was he doing out here on a night like this, anyway? It was as cold as a witch's teat and here it was the beginning of July!

"Fuck it." He turned around, deciding it just wasn't the right time to visit Marek after all.

What he needed was a stiff drink, a loose broad, and a good fight.  
And not necessarily in that order.

## Chapter Nineteen

Rhianna looked up as the woman came into the bullpen. There was no mistaking the family resemblance although Caitlin Nolan-Greiner was fifteen years older than her brother.

Conor's sister was beautiful with lush curves and thick dark hair, which she had twisted into a sleek chignon at the nape of her neck. Her amber eyes, perhaps a shade darker than Irish's, were cold and hard, making the long, thick lashes look like spikes of steel. Twin spots of expertly applied rouge dotted her high cheekbones and complimented the dark rose lipstick, which made her lips look wet. Her nose was the only dainty thing about her set and angry face. She walked with all the arrogant assurance of wealth and position, expecting lesser people to move out of her way.

As her haughty stare settled on Marek, her full lips twisted with displeasure. "Are you Rhianna Marek?" she snapped.

"Yes," Rhianna replied, standing up. "What can I do for you?"

There was no introduction of herself. Obviously Caitlin Greiner thought everyone should know who she was and appreciate being in her orbit.

"I have spoken to my brother's attorney," she informed Rhianna. "He tells me you and Conor were friends." She made the word sound ugly and illicit. Her look left no doubt in Rhianna's mind that Caitlin found her lacking.

"Irish and I work together," Marek conceded.

Caitlin's left eyebrow lifted. "So I am told." She shifted her gaze around the room, took in the men sitting about watching them, and the sneer on her mouth deepened. She looked back at Rhianna. "Pray, please, do not use that disgusting nickname for him while in my presence, Miss Marek. I find it highly offensive."

Rhianna could see why Irish disliked his sister so much. The woman's attitude certainly needed adjusting. "It's Detective Marek, Mrs. Greiner," Rhianna stressed. "Did you want something?"

The sneer became a pucker of distaste. "I was informed, Miss Marek, that you--"

"Detective Marek," Rhianna corrected with just a hint of attitude, herself.

Caitlin flung out a dismissive hand. "Whatever. As I said, I was informed you had moved into Conor's house while he's off dealing with his drug problem."

"What drug problem? What the hell are you talking about?"

For a long moment, Caitlin Nolan-Greiner stared hatefully at the woman standing in front of her. Then evidently decided Rhianna Marek was not a threat. "Is there somewhere we can speak in private ... detective?" she sneered. "I dislike airing family laundry in public."

Rhianna didn't answer, but walked past Irish's sister, out of the bullpen and into the corridor. She didn't wait to see if the bitch was following her, but made for the break room. As soon as Caitlin joined her, Rhianna shut the door behind them. "All right," she snapped. "Let's hear what you've got to say."

"Before we go any further, let me assure you I have spoken with my own attorney

before leaving Chicago.” Perching on one of the fiberglass chairs at the table, she opened her purse and pulled out a silver cigarette case. Not bothering to ask for permission to smoke, she snapped open the case.

“Smoke Free environment,” Rhianna pronounced with satisfaction. “You can’t smoke in here. Government mandate.”

Caitlin’s eyes turned steely, but she nodded. She replaced the cigarette, slipped the case in her purse, then crossed her legs, considering herself still in charge.

“My attorney will be filing a writ first thing this morning naming me as Conor’s legal representative.”

“Is that so?” Rhianna asked.

“I do not make decisions lightly, Detective Marek. Fredericks, Martin, Nysberg, and Dahl have handled my affairs for years. They are excellent legal counsels and I rely upon their judgment. This is not the first time I have had to call upon them because of something my brother has done.”

“He hasn’t done anything,” Rhianna snapped, hating the woman more and more as the minutes ticked by. “He is missing, Mrs. Greiner. There hasn’t been a trace ....”

Caitlin made a very unladylike snort. “Detective Marek, my brother’s proclivities for the bizarre have boggled the mind over the years. If he has found new friends who like to abuse him, that is all the more reason I need to be in control of his affairs. I have been through this with him before.”

“Before.” Rhianna let the word drop like a rock. She ignored the ridiculous statement preceding that one threatening word and hooked on, instead, the gleam of amusement in Caitlin’s eye. “What do you mean by ‘before’?”

Caitlin’s mouth twisted. “You really don’t know very much about my brother, do you, Detective?”

“I know he’s a good man,” Rhianna defended him. “I know he’s a good cop and he didn’t just up and disappear without a good reason.”

“Oh, he had a reason, dear.” Caitlin laughed mirthlessly. “The same one he had years ago when he just ‘up and disappeared without good reason.’”

Rhianna had had all the vague innuendoes and roundabout talk she was going to take. She walked to Conor’s sister and stared down at her. “You got something to say, lady, then say it! If you know where he is, you’d damned well better tell me right now!”

“I have no idea where he is and couldn’t care less,” Caitlin snorted. “All I care about is making sure you don’t try to sell any of his things before he returns.”

“Returns from where?” Rhianna shouted, itching to slap the smirk off the other woman’s hateful face.

Caitlin waved her hand as though wiping out the words. “I don’t care if you live in the house. I was going to have to rent it out, anyway. He probably wouldn’t want you to pay rent.”

“Answer me!” Rhianna shouted, making Caitlin flinch. “Returns from where?”

Conor’s sister thought about not answering, just getting up and walking out to leave the cheap little whore standing there. But there was something very disturbing in the younger woman’s eyes and for once, Caitlin backed away from a confrontation.

“From wherever he’s gone to ground to kick the habit he’s obviously taken up again,” she replied.

“Habit?” Rhianna repeated, digging her nails into her palms to keep from



attacking the bitch.

“Conor is a drug addict, Miss Marek. Has been for years. Didn’t you know that?”

\* \* \* \*

Neville Triplett held up a hand to the waiter then gestured toward their empty soda glasses. “Bring us two more of these.”

Rhianna played with her spaghetti, spinning it around her fork, then dumping it. She had drowned her anger in the soft drink. Now she was taking out her frustration on the pasta.

“You okay, Rhee?” Trip sprinkled more Parmesan on his plate.

“I hate that woman,” she muttered.

Trip shoved a forkful of pasta into his mouth. “I’ve seen barracudas with more compassion than Cait Greiner.”

“The thing is,” Rhianna said miserably, “I know she hates him.”

“Sibling rivalry?” he suggested.

“No,” Rhianna said, shaking her head. “It goes deeper than that.” She dropped her fork and started dissecting the garlic bread. “She told me he has always been an embarrassment to the family.” She tore off a bit of bread and began shredding it. “His father was sixty-two when he was born, his mother in her forties. Irish was a menopause baby, totally unexpected.”

“Ah,” Trip answered. “How terribly rude of him.”

When Rhianna glanced up, he frowned. “And how utterly distressing it must have been for a sophisticated finishing school lady to have to come to terms with her parents’ sexuality. Imagine, if you will, how acutely disagreeable having to explain to one’s friends that Mater and Pater still ‘do it’! How gauche!”

Rhianna grinned. “Not the thing, at all, would you say?”

Trip lifted his glass, pinkie extended. “Quite, my dear.”

“She’s a bitch.”

“No argument here.”

Rhianna pushed her plate to one side. “She’s looking into having him sent to Betty Ford when he returns.”

“I would imagine he’ll have something to say about that.”

She looked up. “Do you think she could be right, Triplett? Could he really be off on a binge somewhere or checked into a hospital trying to get the monkey off his back?”

Rhianna’s partner reached out and covered her hand with his. “I’d rather believe that than he isn’t out there at all.”

“I need to talk to someone, Trip,” she whispered.

“That’s what I’m here for.” He smiled.

“Inside the booth,” she qualified, meaning that whatever was said could never be repeated, like the words between a person and his priest in the confessional.

“Father Neville Trip is listening, sister,” he assured her.

Rhianna drew in a long breath, let it out, and swallowed. She closed her eyes for a moment and when she opened them, she bit her lip. “She told me some things that would get him fired, Trip. He loves this job and if he couldn’t do it ....”

“I hear you,” Trip interrupted. “It ain’t goin’ no farther.”

Rhianna looked about them, only partially relieved that they were alone in the restaurant.

“No one’s listening, baby,” Trip assured her. “Spit it out. Whatever it is, it don’t do no good to keep it bottled up inside.”

She took a quick breath, then exhaled on her words.

“Did he ever say anything about his father?”

“I know he was a retired Navy Admiral,” Trip replied. “You wanna know what kind of relationship they had? Is that it?”

“Yeah.”

Trip shrugged. “He said his old man knocked him around a bit. Whose old man didn’t? That’s why most of us have addled brains.”

“I suspect Liam Nolan did more than just knock Conor around a bit, Trip.” She sat forward, easing her hand from under his, and braced her elbows on the table. “Caitlin didn’t say Irish’s father abused him, but I think that’s what happened. There was too much the bitch didn’t say, you know?”

“Well,” Trip began, twisting around so he could be more comfortable with his feet out from under the table. “It happens, babe. Even in the best of families. Families with money, like Irish’s.”

“How much money?” she asked. There had never been any reason to discuss such matters with Conor. He hadn’t acted any different than any other working stiff on the force and scrimped money with the best of them.

“His father came from a well-to-do Chicago political family and was a graduate of Annapolis. His mother came from some rich hoity-toity Boston clan,” Trip told her. “Money out the ying-yang, you know?” He chuckled. “When Irish first showed up at the precinct, we started kidding him about being born with a silver baton up his tight ass!” He shook his head. “He had some kind of attitude back then, let me tell you. He was quick to tell us he’d been disinherited, although not many of us believed him.”

“It’s true,” Rhianna said. “His sister enjoyed telling me in case I had any illusions of getting rich by association.”

Rhianna slumped in her chair. Plowing both hands through her hair, she sighed deeply. “She told me Irish never got along with his father. They fought all the time. When Irish was around fifteen, he fell hard for some girl while he was home from boarding school during Christmas vacation.”

“Boarding school? I never knew he went to boarding school.”

“Somewhere in France.”

“Can’t get much further from Chicago than that, huh? I take it the old man didn’t appreciate Irish’s taste in females.”

“Conor got the girl pregnant.”

Trip winced. “Oh shit. What happened when the old man found out?”

“Apparently he went to the girl’s parents and paid them a rather substantial settlement. They left Illinois in the middle of the night.”

“What about the baby?”

“Caitlin wouldn’t tell me since they never told Conor. Being staunch Catholics, abortion was out of the question for both families. My guess is there’s a twenty-three year old young man or woman somewhere with Irish’s dark Gaelic looks.”

“Sonofabitch,” Trip whistled. “What happened to Irish while all this was happening?”

“According to Caitlin, her father was most upset with his son,” Rhianna hissed.

“She said he lost his temper and got a ‘little rough’ with Conor. The bastard must have beat the hell out of his son because Irish wound up in the hospital.”

“Poor kid. Must have been one hell of a rotten childhood.”

“When he got out of the hospital, things got worse. He ran away from home, got picked up by the Illinois State Patrol and was sent back.”

“Ah, the impetuosity of youth!” Trip chuckled. “I can understand that!”

“Me, too,” she nodded. “Then it really got bad.”

“How bad is bad?” he asked.

“Arrested bad,” she said. “Possession with intent to sell cocaine to an undercover cop.”

“Sweet Mother of God,” Trip sighed. “How old was he?”

“Fifteen.”

“Then the records would have been sealed. No wonder that didn’t show up on his sheet when he applied for law enforcement in Florida.” He shook his head. “Where the hell did he get cocaine?”

Rhianna drew in a long breath. “From the same man who was supplying him with heroin.”

“He was selling heroin?” Trip gasped.

“No,” Rhianna said softly. “He was using.”

“Oh, my God,” Trip whispered.

“He had a very wicked habit by that time. When they made him strip after his arrest, they found needle tracks up and down his thigh. They called his father who brought his lawyer. Money changed hands. Nolan committed his son to a rehab for six months then shipped him off to some kind of military school in Alabama where he was virtually a prisoner until he was eighteen and graduated. Irish wouldn’t come home and go to Notre Dame like his parents wanted him to. It was then his father disinherited him.”

Trip shook his head. “You think you know someone.”

“His sister says he was using dope when he was a DEA agent in Florida, but if he had been, Trip, he’d never have been able to transfer up here.”

“His family doesn’t think much of him, do they?”

“They don’t even know the man,” she spat. “I don’t believe Conor would get involved with drugs again if he’d kicked the habit once before.”

Trip nodded, unable to think of anything to say to comfort her. He didn’t dare tell her it was Irish who had provided him with cocaine when the monkey on Trip’s back got a little too energetic.

## Chapter Twenty

The last of the boxes had been unloaded. The hanging clothes were in the closet in her new bedroom. Her dishes, pots and pans, silverware, glasses, and utensils had been added to Conor's. The earthtone towels and sheets from her old apartment looked out of place stacked alongside the red, white, and blue linens already in the closet. The only consolation was that Rhianna knew she wouldn't have to buy any linen for a long, long time.

Other than her mattress and box springs, there hadn't been anything left to move. She'd managed to sell her odds and ends to Brett Samuel and his wife. Now all she needed to do, when she got back from visiting her best friend in Georgia, was go hunting among the local used furniture stores to find the miscellaneous '50s bedroom things for her new home.

"Are you as tired as I look?" Joe Cortesio groaned as he took the last swig of Bud from the longneck.

Rhianna looked about the room. "I'll have it all done by tomorrow evening. I think I'll get in the tub and soak for a few hours." She put her hand to the small of her back and massaged the ache there. "I'm going to need that plane ride Thursday to unwind."

"Did you get the locks changed like I reminded you?" Cortesio asked. At Rhianna's weary nod, he smiled. "And did he install the deadbolts?"

"She," Rhianna corrected her, grinning. "The locksmith was a woman."

"Does that make her a locksmithette, then?" Trip inquired. He wiped a glob of pizza sauce from his cheek.

"Well, babe." Joe sighed as he got to his feet and held his hand out to Sonia. "We'd better call it a day. I promised Tina I'd teach her how to drive the stick shift tomorrow."

"The car's all right, isn't it, Joey?" Rhianna asked. She worried about Joey's daughter.

"Works better than my old clunker," Joe answered. He pulled Sonia into the circle of his arms and wobbled his chin on the top of her head, chuckling as she dug a playful elbow into his belly in protest. "You gonna be all right, then?"

"I saw him," Rhianna said. "I won't let him in, Joe."

"Saw who?" Sonia asked, twisting her neck to look up at her husband. "Joe? What didn't you tell me?"

Joe frowned at her. "C.C. He was hanging around down the block this afternoon."

"I kept expecting the bastard to come down and help, but I should have known better," said Trip.

"I don't think he meant for any of us to see him." Rhianna shrugged. "Some surveillance guy he is."

Joe frowned. "You should be careful, Rhee. If he comes to the door, don't open it."

“As a matter of fact,” Trip put in as he got up from the floor, folding the pizza box as he did, “Lock the porch door, too, so if he comes knocking, you haven’t got him right in your face.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

“Are you worried about him, Joey?” Sonia asked. Her lovely face was creased with concern.

“Let’s just say I don’t trust him, Sonny.”

Rhianna followed the three of them to the door and stood on the porch as they walked to their cars. She nodded and waved when Trip reminded her to lock the screen door. Making a production of it for his benefit, she flicked down the steel latch, shook the door, then held up her hands. “Eleven o’clock and all is well, Constable Triplett!”

“Get your ass back inside and go to bed!” Trip waved a dismissive hand then climbed into his Jeep.

“I don’t see Corbettson’s car,” Joe said, looking around them.

“Maybe you’re just worrying for nothing,” Sonia said as she watched Rhianna closing the front door. “You’ve never liked the man, Joey.”

“I’ve had reason not to like him, doll,” Joe replied as he opened her car door. “Irish didn’t like him, either.”

Trip tapped gently on his horn as he pulled away from the curb in front of Rhianna’s new home and made a wobbly U-turn in the street.

“Where’s the damned cops when you need one?” Joe chuckled. He skirted his car, swept his gaze as discretely as he could around the neighborhood. Satisfied Corbettson wasn’t lurking about, he got in the car and started the engine.

Rhianna waited until Joe and Sonia drove away before flipping off the porch light. She turned from the door, stopped, and then decided it wouldn’t hurt to engage the deadbolt. Not that she was afraid of Corbettson or worried that he would break in. Irish’s neighborhood was probably one of the safest in town, but it was always better to be safe than sorry.

After checking the back door, sliding its deadbolt into place, she made a final check to make sure the coffeepot was turned off and the faucet wasn’t dripping. As an afterthought, she locked the door which led down to the basement even though the only entrances into that cold, dark cavern were through two small windows set at ground level. Only a child could squeeze through those openings. Her evening reconnaissance done, she sighed wearily and headed for her bedroom and the bath she was dying to take.

## Chapter Twenty-One

The Colombian pulled up a chair and sat down. He folded his arms, crossed his legs, and cocked his head to one side. "How are you feeling, brown eyes?" His dark eyes glittered with vengeance.

Conor Nolan was huddled against the wall, shivering so badly he couldn't speak. His eyes were wild, his knees drawn up, his arms clutched around his quaking body. He was whimpering, pitiful little bursts of helplessness that would have touched even the hardest heart, but the Colombian was amused by the sound.

"I saw your lady today."

At the mention of Rhianna, Conor flinched. His pale, sweaty face was partially obscured by the filthy mop of tangled hair. His shuddering breaths grew quicker for a moment then held as he waited, wanting news of her even if it hurt him.

"She is extraordinarily beautiful," said the Colombian. "Is it a wonder she has a new beau so soon?"

The words were like spikes gouging into Conor's brain and he turned his head so that the side of his face was pressed against the silo wall. He squeezed his eyes shut and pulled into himself even more. If he had learned anything about the man who held him captive, it was his propensity for torture. Conor knew there would be more.

"He is a rather handsome man," the Colombian stated, smiling. "She likes men with brown eyes, doesn't she?"

Conor knew no answer was expected. He reached a trembling hand to run the back of it under his runny nose. He hurt so bad, and had for so long now, he wished he could wipe out his own life as easily as he wiped away his snot. He had no idea what day or even what month it was. The horrible enslavement to the heroin had all but driven him over the edge of sanity. What difference did it make what day or month or even what year it was?

"Do her lips taste as sweet as they look, brown eyes?"

Conor groaned. Oh, God, yes! His body was on fire with a need far more imperative than the sexual longing that had long since left him. Rhianna's lips had been as sweet as honey against his, her mouth soft and yielding, pliant and welcoming.

"She is living in your home."

That was one piece of news that made him smile despite the godawful agony squeezing his gut. The burning pain in his veins was momentarily forgotten at hearing that news. He had wanted her out of that chintzy apartment for so long and living with him. They could make a home together, could make a life together. "There is a problem with Corbettson, though."

Conor's head came up and he turned his hopeless eyes to his tormentor.

"Don't worry, amigo," the Colombian said. "We will not let him harm your lady."

Tears formed in Conor's eyes and he nodded, understanding that Rhianna was safe.

"Do you want me to make you feel better, brown eyes?"

He knew better than to ask. If he asked, it would be longer still before they brought in the drug. The Colombian took great pleasure in denying him. It had been too long since he'd known any peace.

"I will give it to you, but you know how it must be." Just as he knew when not to ask, he knew what was expected of him now. He looked at the man, trying to gauge his sincerity, his intent, and saw the mirthless, cruel smile, which stretched the rubbery lips.

There was no sense of self-worth left in Conor Nolan. No pride. No dignity. No self-respect. He had long since been humbled. His spirit broken when he had been forcibly brought down into ruthless submission, made to abase himself to the Colombian and whoever felt the need to humiliate him. He was mortally ashamed of his meekness. It shredded his manhood and made him understand he was nothing, lower than the lowest creature scuttling on the earth.

"I am waiting, brown eyes," the man cooed.

Conor pushed away from the wall and crawled on his hands and knees like the animal he had become, stopping at the Colombian's feet. With a quaking hand, he reached out and touched the highly polished boot.

"P...please," he begged, his head down, his hair covering his face.

"Look at me," the man said in a softly commanding tone.

Conor lifted his head, his chin quivering. He was on the verge of crying again, sobbing hysterically, for he feared the man would get up and leave, taking the blessed relief with him. It was all he could do to hold the tears at bay, to press his lips together so that the cries would not escape.

The Colombian liked what he saw, the too-thin face sweating profusely, the sunken eyes, the trembling lips, the hopelessness. "You are pitiful, do you know that?"

Yes, he knew and he hated himself for what he had become. "Yes, sir," he replied.

For a long moment, the man stared at him, distaste evident in his hard, cold eyes. He ignored Conor's hand on his ankle, caressing him almost as a lover would, pleading silently for the surcease from the hideous pain. The Irishman had learned the hard way not to break eye contact, not to look away, not to turn his face so that the ravages of the drug could not be seen in his lost eyes.

"Well?"

It was a game and Conor knew the rules, had learned them the hard way. He didn't give himself time to think about what he was doing, he just did it. Lowering his head, he kissed the man's boot. "Please, sir," he begged as he had been taught. "May I have some more?"

After a pregnant pause, the Colombian nodded. "All right, amigo. I will give it to you." He reached into his pocket and withdrew a syringe. He held it up, squirted some of the liquid into the air to dispel any air bubbles then glanced down at his prisoner and smiled. The Irishman was licking his lips, his eyes so eager, his face so expectant, it was hard not to feel sorry for the bastard.

But there was no pity for Conor James Nolan in the Colombian's heart and never would be.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

Trip looked up from the mountain of paperwork on his desk as Corbettson loomed over him. A hard scowl slipped over Trip's face. "Whatcha you want, C.C.?"

"What time is Marek's plane due in?"

Neville Triplett's jaw clenched and he looked down at the file he'd been working on. "Whatcha want to know for?"

"Just curious."

"Don't be," Trip snapped. "I'll be there to pick her up this evening." He glanced up, then away, dismissing the man.

Corbettson grinned at the other detective, then returned to his desk. He had no intention of telling Triplett that Marek had left a message for him this morning that she'd taken an earlier flight home.

\* \* \* \*

"Flight 3725 now arriving from Cincinnati," the announcement came, and Corbettson nodded. That was the connecting flight from Atlanta on which Rhianna Marek was due to arrive. He'd seen the 757 jockeying into position at the jetway as he walked through the terminal waiting area. His arrival was perfectly timed.

The door opened and the first class passengers began streaming from the jetway. Their chatter hurt Corbettson's sensitive ears, but he was learning to block out much of the white noise that constantly abraded his hearing. Standing off to one side in the dimly lit waiting area, he crossed his arms and leaned against the wall.

He didn't have long to wait.

The moment she spied Corbettson, Rhianna Marek stopped in the jetway's entrance, barely feeling the bump of the man who collided with her from behind.

"Excuse me," the man mumbled stepping around her. Rhianna tore her attention from Corbettson in time to see the stranger glance curiously at her. His dark brows knit together in a concerned frown. "Is everything all right, Ma'am?" he asked in a soft, southern drawl.

"What?" Rhianna managed a strained whisper, staring at him in confusion.

"My name is Franc Boucharde. Are you having trouble?" Concern clouded his good looks.

Rhianna recoiled at the hostile determination and possessiveness evident in Corbettson's quick stride. As he came toward her, she looked back at Boucharde, too stunned to answer.

"Ma'am?" Boucharde questioned and stepped closer. "Are you afraid of him?" Turning to face the charging Corbettson, immediate dislike showed on Boucharde's face.

Rhianna sensed the primal male instinct to protect as he shifted position so that she stood slightly behind him. "Can we help you?" he inquired, taking Rhianna's elbow and leading her out of the way of disembarking passengers.

"Did you have a nice visit, Rhee?" Corbettson asked, joining them in the wide aisle just beyond the waiting area.



“Where’s Trip?” Rhianna snapped. “What’s happened to Trip?”

“Trip’s fine, darling,” Corbettson said, reaching out to touch her. Rhianna suppressed a smile when the strange male stepped between them, blocking Corbettson’s move.

“Leave her alone,” he ordered.

“Who the hell do you think you are, scumbag?”

“Someone you’d better not tangle with,” Boucharde answered in a low tone.

Corbettson sneered. “Say what?” He took a threatening step toward Boucharde.

“I wouldn’t if I were you, fellow,” Boucharde advised, reaching inside his breast pocket. He pulled out a black case and flipped it open. The gleam of a gold shield brought Corbettson up short.

“FBI.”

Corbettson scowled at the shield then swung his murderous glower to the man holding it. His chest puffed out in what Rhianna recognized as an effort to intimidate the Fibber, but the attempt had the same effect as arrows flung at a solid stone wall. They bounced harmlessly aside.

“Where is Trip?” Rhianna repeated. Ordinarily the macho posturing would have amused her, but she knew nothing short of Neville Triplett being confined to a hospital bed would keep him from picking her up. Nothing short of total incapacitation would have made it possible for Chuck Corbettson to be here.

“Why don’t you answer the lady’s question?” Boucharde ordered. He met Corbettson’s scowl with one equally as dark.

“He was busy,” Corbettson mumbled, eyes narrowed. He tried again to unnerve the stranger and still found himself coming up against an impenetrable barrier.

“Busy?” Rhianna repeated.

“He sent me to pick you up, Marek,” Corbettson insisted. “How do you think I knew what flight you’d be on?”

“He wouldn’t have!” Rhianna insisted, anger crowding out the worry. “He knows how I feel about you and he hates your damned guts as much as I do!”

“He sent me to pick you up, Marek!” Corbettson repeated.

“I’m not going anywhere with you!” Rhianna spat at him. Turning to her rescuer she asked, “Will you help me?”

“Damn it, Rhianna! Look here, woman--”

“Where are you heading?” Franc Boucharde asked Rhianna, cutting off the other man’s explosive curse.

“I’ve got to find a phone,” Rhianna muttered, looking around her. “I’ve got to call my partner.”

“Partner?” Franc echoed.

“We’re cops, asshole!” Corbettson growled, again reaching for Marek’s arm.

“Keep your hands off her,” Franc ordered. He looked for a phone kiosk, then pointed. “Over there.”

Corbettson’s mouth dropped open as the stranger drew Marek with him toward the bank of phones. Murderous rage showed in his hunched shoulders. He plowed through the dwindling crowd behind Marek and the stranger, shoving aside any straggling traveler who had the misfortune to get in his way.

“Who’s the bastard?” Franc asked as he swept his coat back to fish in his pocket

for change.

“C.C. ‘Chuck’ Corbettson. Detective First Class, if you can believe it,” Rhianna answered as she plucked a quarter from Franc’s extended palm. She turned to the phone, lifted the receiver and dropped in the coin.

Corbettson put out a restraining hand and found himself sprawled gracelessly on his back, staring up into the set face of Special Agent Franc Boucharde.

“Want me to break it?” Boucharde grinned, twisting Corbettson’s arm.

“Get off me!” Corbettson tried to pull his arm free, but found that it was trapped in an iron-fisted grip.

Franc leaned over his captive. Whispered words fell like ice pellets on Chuck Corbettson’s ears. “I know what you are,” Franc said. He twisted Corbettson’s imprisoned wrist until he groaned.

Fear shafted through Corbettson’s eyes as he stared into the rigid face hovering above him. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he managed to stammer.

“You’re a bully,” Franc spat. “And a bully is only as powerful as he’s allowed to be.” Another slight turn on the crooked wrist brought a yelp of unrestrained agony from the man on the floor. Franc released him and straightened.

As her call rang through to the station, Rhianna looked back to see Corbettson scrambling to his feet, glaring at the FBI agent and massaging his injured hand.

“Now, get out of here,” she heard Franc order, “and leave her alone.”

Corbettson’s lower lip thrust out. “I came to take her home.”

Franc shook his head. “I’ll take her where she needs to go.” Steel threaded through his Southern drawl.

“All the way to New Gregory?” Corbettson sneered.

“All the way to New Orleans if need be.” Dismissing him, Franc turned his back on Corbettson.

Rhianna clutched the phone closer to her ear when her partner came on the line. “Goddamn it, Triplett! Are you all right?”

“Rhee?” Trip inquired. “Sure I am. What’s up?”

“What’s up?” she snapped. “What’s up? Why the hell weren’t you at the airport to pick me up?”

Silence poured from the other end of the line, then a muted curse followed by a loud thud that could have been a man’s fist slamming against a desktop. “Are you there already?” Trip asked with a little boy voice.

“Didn’t you get my message?” she hissed into the mouthpiece. “I called you this morning to let you know I was taking an earlier flight!”

After a long silence, a remorseful Neville Triplett begged her forgiveness. “I’m sorry, Rhee! I didn’t get any note. Who’d you give the message to?”

Rhianna cut him off. “Did you send C.C. over here to get me?”

“C.C.?” Trip gasped. “Hell, no!”

“Then how did he know which flight I’d be on?”

The short pause, which followed the question, was broken by an intense burst of concern. “Is he there?”

“Yes.”

“I’m on my way! Don’t go anywhere with that son of a bitch!”

“You know better than that!” Rhianna exclaimed. “And don’t bother coming to

get me, Triplett. I'll take a cab home!" She slammed the receiver into the cradle. "Asswipe," she murmured.

Franc smiled. "Need a ride?" he asked. He thrust out his hand. "Special Agent François Étienne Boucharde, White Knight-in-Training, at your service, m'lady."

She looked past his shoulder to where Corbettson glared at them with unconcealed fury. Her lips twitched with satisfaction at the humiliation painting C.C. Corbettson's face. Flinging the hair out of her eyes, she lifted her hand.

"Rhianna Marek," she said, switching her attention back to Boucharde. "Detective Second Class Rhianna Marek, Damsel-in-Distress." Her hand settled in his, safe and warm. "Nice to meet you, Sir Knight. Let's get my luggage and head for New Gregory!"

\* \* \* \*

They stopped just outside Altoona to grab a bite to eat. Neither one had enjoyed the pre-fab cardboard meal served on the plane. As they sat in a hard plastic booth watching the rain beginning to fall lazily outside, sharing a large order of fries with which they scooped up copious amounts of ketchup, they began to ask questions.

"What part of Florida are you from?" she asked, biting into her burger. He hadn't told her he was from Florida, but, being from Georgia, she recognized the accent.

"LA," he answered, slurping down his soda.

"Pensacola?" she inquired.

Franc smiled and shook his head. "Milton."

"Home of the P'thers!" Her voice rose shrilly on the P, then sank with teenage giddiness on the 'thers."

He sat back in the booth, astonished. "And how did you know that?"

"Been there, heard that," she replied, popped a soggy fry into her mouth and grinned.

"Yeah?" He snatched a fry from the foam container where she'd poured them and dragged it through the ketchup. "When?"

"My Dad was an officer in the Navy. We were stationed at Whiting Field for a couple of years." At his arched brow, she shrugged. "I started college at the University of West Florida. It was while I was going to school there that I got interested in law enforcement. After all, that area was a hotbed of crime."

"You can't mean drug smuggling?" he asked. "On the Blackwater?" He shook his head in mock surprise. "I don't believe it."

"Marijuana capitol of the South," she laughed. "More churches per capita than any place else according to the Guinness Book of World Records."

Franc wobbled his drink cup around on the table top. "You are amazing, Marek."

"In what way?" she asked. She crammed the last of her burger into her mouth.

"Not many people would have understood when I said I came from L.A." He grinned. "You have to admit Lower Alabama isn't a very endearing nickname for the Florida Panhandle."

"Tourist Department sure doesn't think so, either."

"And you know about my Alma Mater, the Milton High Panthers."

"P'thers," she corrected with the appropriate shrill.

Franc chuckled. "Pretty bad, huh? God, I hated those damned insipid little cheerleaders!"

"No worse than my Alma Mater. Our school colors are green and orange!"

“Ugh.” He cringed. “Had to be a Native American theme.”

“The AHS Indians.” Her eyes widened and she shook pretend pompoms in the air. “Go Tribe!”

“Which is where, exactly?”

“Albany, Georgia,” she sighed. “At least that’s where I grew up.” Her grin turned cocky. “But I was born in Sarasota.”

“A native Floridian!” he gasped, hand to heart. “How rare!”

“You?” she asked, grinning.

“Born in a little smear of dust called Frostproof, but I grew up in Milton.”

“The Orange Grove Capitol of Florida. Been there, seen that.”

“So how’d you wind up in Iowa?” he asked as he finished the last of the fries. “It’s a long way from Sarasota.”

“Just lucky, I guess.” She folded her paper napkin and put it away. “After I graduated with a degree in Criminal Justice, I started looking for jobs as far away from the South as I could get.” She looked out the window. “I wanted some place quiet and peaceful. Where crimes could be solved and criminals could be caught.”

“Iowa,” he stated. He put his arm along the top of the booth. “The last bastion of normalcy in mid-America.”

“Are you with the Field Office in Des Moines?” she asked as she drained the last of her lemonade, put the empty cup on the tray, then pushed the litter-strewn plastic receptacle aside.

Franc nodded. “Yep.”

“I saw you get on the plane in Hotlanta. Were you on a case?” she asked.

“I’d been down in Tampa for my godson’s wedding.” He cocked his head to one side. “Speaking of which, there’s no tell-tale band on that left hand of yours, Marek.” His look became steady. “Married?”

Rhianna shook her head. “Nope.”

“Engaged?”

She held up her hand and wiggled her fingers. “Unh-unh.”

“Taken?”

Rhianna fused her gaze with his. Obvious interest showed on his open face. “No,” she said softly, folding her hands on the tabletop.

“Seeing anyone in particular?”

“No,” she replied, shaking her head.

“Want to?”

A faint tug at Rhianna’s heart made her take a deep breath. It had been five months since Conor’s disappearance and the grief, which would never leave her, had retreated somewhat, the pain lessening with each passing day.

“There was someone,” she answered truthfully. “Another cop.” She looked down at her hands. “He’s missing.”

Franc lowered his arm, reached across the table and laid his hand over hers. “I’m sorry, Rhianna.”

“Me, too,” she replied.

“Too soon to think about anyone else in your life?”

She nodded. “Yeah, it is. I just--” Her voice trailed away and she turned once more to look out the window where the rain was falling in a thick curtain. Gently, she

removed her hand from beneath his. "Weather's getting worse. We'd better get going."

Franc didn't say anything as she slid out of the booth and dragged on her raincoat. He took up the tray and emptied its contents into the garbage bin, then waited for her at the door. The rain had slowed to a drizzle. "I bet your traffic record's clean in this town," he said with a sad lilt in his musical voice he did little to try to hide. "I know you know your way around better than I do." He handed her his keys. "Here, milady. Take the reins to the chariot."

\* \* \* \*

Chuck Corbettson ground his teeth as Marek and the Fibber climbed into the gray seduction scene on wheels the Fibber had earlier claimed from long-term parking and pulled out of the parking lot. "Bastard," he hissed, his feral glower following the man sitting in the passenger seat. Trust the slimy sonofabitch to have a car that cost more than he made in a year. And trust him to try to get to Marek by letting her drive that machine.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

"I don't think I could eat another bite if my life depended on it," Trip grumbled. He tossed the soggy end of his second foot-long meatball sandwich onto the paper and leaned back against the sofa.

"Are you going to finish the chips?" Rhianna asked, seeing where he was looking.

"Nah," he answered, waving away the suggestion. "I'm stuffed."

"I can't imagine why," she laughed. Triplett could eat more than any man she'd ever known.

"I feel bad."

"I know."

"I mean *really* bad, Rhee."

"It's not your fault." She knew he was referring to not having been there at the airport for her.

"Goddamn C.C."

"I agree."

Trip lay down and stretched his long frame out on the sofa. "Lord, I could just crash right here."

"Full belly will do it every time." She looked at her watch. "It's past eleven. You might as well stay. It's a long walk back to your house."

"Don't think I could make it, darling," Trip confessed. He turned on his side and folded his hands beneath his head for a pillow.

"You should have driven over here, anyway," she chastised him.

"Needed the exercise," he said, yawning. "Need it more, now."

"Yeah, right." She got up, stuffed her sub wrapper and his into one of the plastic bags and crammed the three empty barbecue chips bags in behind them. "I'll get you a blanket."

"God bless you, sister," Trip mumbled. He was already half-asleep.

Slurping down the remainder of her lemonade, Rhianna took the garbage into the kitchen and dropped it into the can. After making sure the door was locked, she padded back into the living room, checked that door, then turned off the light.

"Blankie," Trip reminded her as she passed the sofa.

"Uh-huh."

Retrieving a light wool blanket from the hall closet, she came back in and covered her partner. The man was snoring softly, his mouth open. Rhianna shook her head and went on to bed.

\* \* \* \*

Rhianna sat up in the bed and listened. Something had awakened her, and her heart pounded in her chest as though she had been driven from a nightmare. Outside, the wind roared and rain drove against the window, scratching for entry.

"Rhee?" was the soft inquiry.

Trip. She relaxed. She had forgotten he was there.

“What?”

“Did you hear something hit the house?”

Rhianna switched on the lamp by her bed. Trip stood in the doorway, squinting against the brightness.

“Did you?”

“I thought it came from in here.”

“I don’t think so. It--”

Something slammed against the front of the house, and their heads turned in unison toward the sound. The sound came again, hard and demanding.

“That ain’t the goddamned wind,” Trip said through clenched teeth. “If it’s that bastard Corbettson, I’ll rack him and mount his ass on the grill of my goddamned Jeep!” He headed for the living room.

“Wait!” Rhianna said, flinging off the covers. She hooked her robe from the foot of the bed and was thrusting her arms through the sleeves as Trip jerked open the front door.

“Damn you, Corbettson! I’m gonna rip you a new one!” Triplett snarled. He stormed across the porch and nearly snapped the lightweight hook off the lintel as he flung open the screen door. “You sorry, no good ....”

Rhianna saw her partner’s head jerk down as though someone had chopped him on the back of the neck. He stood there, staring at the porch steps for what seemed like forever before he squatted.

“What is it?” Rhianna asked, hoping against hope Corbettson hadn’t left some gruesome memento on her steps.

“Call an ambulance,” she heard Trip whisper.

“What?” She started through the door, but Trip’s head snapped around and he pierced her with an unwavering look of shock.

“Call 911!” When she still didn’t move, he bellowed at the top of his lungs, “Damn it, Marek! Call 911!”

Re-animated by the command in his voice, she turned around and ran to the wall phone. Even as she punched in the numbers, she heard Trip grunting as he came back across the porch. She turned in time to see him carrying a body into the house.

## Part Three

## Chapter Twenty-Four

Captain Darlington nodded to Trip as he hunkered down in front of Rhianna and held out a cup of coffee. "Drink it. It may be a long night."

"I'll just throw it up," she told him.

"No, you won't," Darlington replied. He took her hand and molded it around the foam cup. He looked up at Trip. "Can I speak to you a moment?"

Trip, whose arm was around Rhianna as they sat in the hospital waiting room, pulled her gently to him. "Think you'll be all right for a minute?"

"Yeah." Rhianna took a sip of the coffee, grimaced, then lowered the cup to her lap. She stared sightlessly across the room where Samuel, Cortesio, and Fullick were pacing.

Darlington and Trip walked a ways down the hall and stopped. Trip bent over a water fountain, straightened, then slouched against the wall, running the back of his arm across his wet lips. "She's taking this hard."

"She's a very strong lady."

"Oh, she is," Trip said, "but this is over the top, you know?"

"You were at her house tonight?" The Captain asked as Joey Cortesio joined them.

"Yeah." Trip stuck his hands into his pockets. "I felt like a sonofabitch for not being there at the airport this morning, you know?" He shrugged. "I didn't get the message, but I felt bad. She didn't need to have Corbettson lurking about."

"You brought over supper," Darlington encouraged. "It got late. You decided to sleep on the couch?"

"Something woke me up. I thought it came from her bedroom." Trip's mouth twisted. "I thought sure Corbettson was trying to break in. But when I went into her room, she was sitting up in bed. She turned on the light and that's when we heard the noise out front."

"You found him on the steps."

"Just sitting there, looking up at me," Trip remembered, shuddering.

"Then he was conscious?" Cortesio asked.

"I couldn't move," Triplett answered as though he hadn't heard. "I just stood there staring at him, then his head slumped down to his chest and I thought he was dead." Trip shuddered again. "I saw that needle in his thigh and I thought he was a goner for sure."

"He was injecting himself?" Darlington asked.

Trip nodded bleakly, then turned his eyes to Darlington. "He was sticking it in his thigh, Cap'n," the cop said in a whisper. "Right into his thigh through his jeans." A low, keening moan came from Triplett.

"Cap'n?" Joey Cortesio leaned his head back against the wall and stared up at the



acoustic ceiling. "Do you think Irish would deliberately do something like this?"

"You're asking if I think he was where someone was torturing him with the drug? Getting him hooked on it?" the Captain asked, holding Cortesio's look. "Like in the movie, *The French Connection*?"

Trip flinched. From the moment he'd laid Conor Nolan on the living room floor, checking him for breathing--relieved to find he was--he'd been struggling with the notion that his friend had been damaged in some way. As long as he lived, he would never forget the look on Conor's face when he found him sitting on the front steps. It had been one of utter hopelessness.

Joe Cortesio didn't even blink. "Yes, sir. That's exactly what I'm asking."

"I don't believe it for a minute," Darlington answered.

\* \* \* \*

The room was too brightly lit and the chirping of the monitors grated on the nerves of the visitor. Nurses flitted around the bed, adjusting tubes, checking the IV, straightening the covers. One turned to smile at her as the doctor escorted Rhianna into the ICU.

"Don't stay long," the doctor instructed Rhianna.

All the activity around the bed seemed to float away as the nurses moved back, giving Rhianna a clear view of the bed and the still figure lying there. She drew in a ragged breath, bit her lip and took the final few steps to the bedside. She trembled so violently, she feared she would collapse as she got a good look at Conor's pale face.

He was so utterly still. His eyes were closed, but she knew he was awake because the fingers of his right hand kept plucking nervously at the sheets beside his leg. Although his breathing was erratic, the heart monitor gave off a reassuring blip that sounded strong. A nasogastric tube protruded from his left nostril, IVs fed into both arms, and a catheter tube ran from beneath the sheet into a collection bag beneath the bed.

"Irish," she whispered, hating the dark circles engraved beneath his eyes, the way his cheeks had sunken, and the unhealthy pallor of his skin. But when those glorious brown eyes fluttered open--eyes she had never thought would look at her again--he was still the most handsome man she had ever met.

"Rhee ...." She put a hand over his lips.

"Shush. Don't try to talk." Careful of the IV tubing in the back of his right hand, she picked it up between both of hers and laid his palm against her lips, kissing the lightly callused flesh as though it were his mouth. "Just rest."

"P-pretty l-lady," he whispered and tried to smile. He couldn't quite do it.

"Worried lady," she said, mindless of the tears streaking down her cheeks. "God, you'll do anything to get attention, won't you, Irish?"

"L-love you," he said and the effort was too much. His eyelids slid closed and his breathing became less sporadic.

"That's enough for now," the doctor said. He put his hands firmly on Rhianna's shoulders and pulled her away.

She laid Conor's hand on the bed and reached over to smooth the hair back from his forehead. She was amazed at the dryness of his skin.

"Hopefully he'll sleep through the night," the doctor explained as he led Rhianna out of the ICU. "If you come back in the morning ...."

"I'm not going anywhere tonight," she said, cutting him off.

Dr. Gilbert smiled. "I was going to say, if you come back here in the morning, I will see the nurses on duty allow you to sit with him, if you like."

Blushing, Rhianna thanked him, then as he turned to go she took his arm. "You are going to help him get through this as easily as possible, aren't you?"

"I'll do everything I can to make him comfortable, but as I'm sure you know, he is going to be in a lot of discomfort once the withdrawal begins. Once he is stable, we'll talk about putting him through Rapid Detox. I want him cognizant so he'll know what we plan to do."

"What exactly is that?" she asked.

"We'll put him under general anesthesia then administer Naltrexone to compress the duration of withdrawal to within four to six hours. Naltrexone induces severe withdrawal and that's why the patient must be under."

"How does it work?"

The doctor smiled. "The drug competes with the heroin at the receptor level and blocks the effects." He patted her shoulder. "It is completely safe and when he's up to it, that's the way we'll go." He frowned. "I may need his sister's permission to treat him."

"I have his limited Power of Attorney," Rhianna said, her gaze fierce. "That's all you need if he isn't able to say yes or no, isn't it?"

"Well, yes, if it covers medical treatment."

"Then do it when he's able," she said, knowing full well the limited Power of Attorney did not cover medical decisions.

The physician nodded. "We'll do everything we can to help him, Detective Marek."

"I know," she said, her eyes filling with tears. "But you will make sure he doesn't hurt too much, won't you?"

Dr. Gilbert patted her hand. "What do you think?" He gave her fingers a brief squeeze then continued on down the hall.

"How is he?"

Turning to find Franc Boucharde behind her, Rhianna just stood there, looking at him. "Oh, Franc!" she breathed, her lips trembling.

Boucharde opened his arms and she ran to him.

\* \* \* \*

Brett Samuel yawned, threw the magazine he'd been reading down on the table beside him, stretched out his legs, crossed his ankles, and folded his hands in his lap. He was hungry and tired--just coming off a long night of surveillance--and yet nothing could have kept him from pulling his shift at the hospital. He leaned his head back and watched the nurses padding silently up and down the ICU corridor outside the waiting room. He thought briefly about going to get another cup of coffee, but he was beginning to slosh when he walked as it was.

Across the room, a young couple whose baby had been brought in earlier that morning was sitting side by side speaking quietly to an elderly nun. The young mother was weeping. The father looked stricken and said very little. As all three bowed their heads, Brett looked away, not wishing to intrude.

It had been a long three days, he thought. Nearly everyone from the station had made an appearance at the hospital. Although none of them had been allowed to see Conor, they had at least come to pay their respects and to add their prayers to Rhianna's

in the little chapel downstairs. Since the night they'd brought Irish in, the blood center had dramatically increased its collections. The polite inquiry to Rhianna of 'what can I do to help?' had sent each and every one to the donor lab.

"He'd like that," she'd tell them.

It became an inside joke to see the men and women from the station all walking around with little cotton balls taped to the crooks of their elbows. The wounds were a badge of honor, an insignia of the elite group who loved and cared for Conor Nolan.

In three days, Irish had endured a singular hell, Samuel thought, and wasn't out of the abyss yet. Going through the stages of withdrawal was something most of them knew a little bit about either from contact with addicts or from watching TV or from reading. It was not something they would wish on their worst enemies--well, maybe with the exception of C.C. Corbettson. They felt their presence might help to make things easier for a man they deeply respected, even if Irish was unaware of their loyal support.

"Good morning."

Brett was jerked out of his revelry by Donne's gruff voice. He pulled in his legs and sat up straighter in the chair. "I didn't think you were supposed to be here 'til this afternoon, bro."

Dave Donne flopped down in a chair across from Samuel. "Didn't have nothing better to do," he groused. "Just sitting around thinking about it was making me crazy."

It was the waiting, Samuel thought. The damned waiting that kept them all so tense and on edge. If they could just see Irish, talk to him, tell him how they felt, let him know that not all of them believed he had done this to himself. But after the second time Irish had awakened to find Rhianna crying over him, not even she had been allowed in his room. Irish had asked his doctors not to let her see him until he felt better. Everyone knew it was because he didn't want her to witness him going through the worst part of the withdrawal. But even his good intentions had not kept her from hearing the occasional groan of torment that had wafted from his room.

"They're going to move him today," Samuel told Donne. "Over to the drug rehab wing."

"Yeah, I hear. Thought I'd hang around 'til they do."

"Maybe we'll get to see him."

"Just so long as Marek gets to, that's all that matters," Dave said.

"She's down having breakfast in the cafeteria. The nurse said they'd call her when they're ready to take him over."

"They're ready now," Rhianna said from the doorway. Trip was standing with her. She bit her lip. "You guys wanna see him?"

Donne stood up. "You think he'd mind?"

"I don't know." For the first time since the two men had known her, Marek seemed unsure.

"Sure, we'd like to see him," Samuel said gruffly, understanding her nervousness. He pushed to his feet.

Conor was sitting in a wheelchair when they entered the room. Only one bottle of fluid dangled from his arm. The catheter was gone--as was the nasogastric tube--and he was alert enough to be smiling broadly at them.

"You don't go anywhere unescorted do you, pretty lady?" he asked and they were thrilled to hear his voice steady and firm, if a little quieter than they were use to hearing

it.

"You know how those damned interns and residents are," Trip grumbled, holding back a little as Rhianna bent down to kiss Conor's cheek. "You can't trust them to keep their hands to themselves."

"Isn't that the truth?" his nurse agreed, laughing.

Rhianna stepped back, motioning Brett and Dave forward. "Go on. He won't bite!"

Both men shuffled forward, getting in one another's way until Trip shoved Donne ahead of him.

"How ya doing homeboy?" Dave asked, his voice breaking. If he seemed concerned that Conor could barely lift his arm to shake hands with him, he covered it nicely. He was careful of the bandage strapped across the top of Irish's hand.

"I've been better," Conor admitted. He shifted his weak gaze to Trip. "You been taking care of her for me?"

"As much as she'd let me," said Trip.

"Thanks, man," Conor said. "I appreciate it more than you know."

"Hey, what are friends for?" Trip shrugged. His face was burning for using the cliché, but he doubted anyone noticed. Rhianna and Conor were looking at one another, and Donne was flirting with the nurse.

"Are you ready, Detective Nolan?" the nurse asked.

"Whenever you are." Conor was holding Rhianna's hand and didn't seem inclined to relinquish his trophy.

"When he's settled in over in Rehab, you gentlemen can come see him during visiting hours which are between one and three in the afternoon on Tuesdays and Thursdays," the nurse said as she began to wheel Conor out of the room.

"That's it?" Trip asked.

"For now," she answered.

Donne put his hand on Trip's arm when he would have followed the nurse. "Let him have her to himself awhile, Neville."

Trip nodded, watching the trio as they waited at the elevator bank. "He looks all right, don't he?"

"Good as can be expected," Donne answered.

"I wanna catch 'em, Dave. The men that hurt him."

"We all do."

"Darlington don't believe him."

"He will," Donne stated. "Sooner or later, we'll prove to him Irish couldn't do something like this to himself!"

\* \* \* \*

The semi-private room was on the south side of the building with the warm sun streaking through the blinds to lay bars of light across the pale blue sheets on the bed. Conor's half of the room had the window and, for the moment, he would be the only inhabitant. A slight herbal smell reminded him of the potpourri Rhianna had on her bathroom vanity. He made a note to ask her if she'd transferred that same aroma to their place.

Their place. He smiled, unaware his grip had tightened on her hand. Since learning she'd moved into his house, he could no longer think of it as his. It was theirs

and he couldn't wait to leave here and begin his life there with her.

"Here we are," the nurse said cheerfully. She put the brakes on the wheelchair, turned back the sheets on the bed, then reached down to help Conor stand up. "Do you want to sit by the window or lay back down?"

"I'd better lay down," he said, feeling lightheaded as he stood there in her firm, professional grasp.

"You want to keep your robe on?"

He looked at Rhianna. "I'm hot. Would you mind?"

"I think I can handle seeing you in your P.J.s, Irish."

Between the two of them, the women got him in bed, but he wouldn't let them cover his legs. He was sweating, feeling hotter than he thought he should, and said as much to the nurse.

"It's almost time for your meds." She adjusted his pillow behind him and showed him how to work the TV and call buttons.

"I won't start doing what I was doing yesterday, will I?" He fused his gaze with the nurse's.

"You've got nothing to worry about." She glanced at Rhianna. "If you start feeling bad, I'm sure Miss Marek will leave so you can rest, won't you, dear?"

Rhianna understood. He had gone into convulsions the day before and she knew he didn't want her to see him in such a way. "Yes, of course."

When the nurse left--promising to bring him a fresh carafe of iced water--Rhianna pulled up a chair and sat down beside his bed. During the time they had been in the room, he had only let go of her hand long enough to take off his robe.

"Dr. Gilbert says the FBI wants to talk to me," he said as she started to speak.

"That can wait." Rhianna didn't want anyone--not even Franc Boucharde--imposing on Conor.

"I wasn't using, Rhianna," he said, hurt in his eyes. "I swear to God I wasn't. I was snatched and they shot me full of heroin and kept shooting me up until I was hooked. I'd have done anything to keep from suffering like that." He squeezed his eyes closed. "Even pumping my own veins full of that shit."

"I believe you," she said firmly and when he opened his eyes, she nodded. "How much of it do you remember?" She felt very protective of him, maternally so. "Give us someone to start looking for."

"I didn't recognize them, but there are a few things that might help. One of them was Colombian. It's more the impressions I got than anything else, but that's half of detective work. The rest is luck and you know it."

"What happened after they took you? Where did they go?"

"I was in so much pain, I wasn't all that aware of what they were doing to me. They tied me up, plastered duct tape over my mouth and put me in a van. When we stopped we were in the country. They took me to a silo, stripped off my clothes, handcuffed me to a cot, and shot me up. They put an IV in my arm to keep me hydrated and fed me once a day. I never saw the woman again."

"What woman?" Rhianna snapped. "Who do you mean, Irish?"

Conor's brows came together. "The woman at the bar that night at the Brew. Felicity something or other." He put his free hand up to rub his forehead. "For the life of me I can't remember her last name, but she was blonde, about five foot seven, green eyes."

You remember her. The woman I bumped into when I got up to leave?"

Rhianna looked away. "The one wearing the white beaded dress?" There was time later to tell him she knew precisely whom he was talking about.

"I don't remember what she was wearing, but she followed me home that night." At her look, he shook his head. "I didn't let her in, but do you remember how horny I was the next morning?" When she gave him an exasperated look, he squeezed her hand. "Remember what happened in the break room?"

"Vaguely," she answered, lying through her teeth for she'd lain awake at night remembering every moment of that encounter when Conor had pressed himself so intimately against her.

"I don't know how she did it, but she put something in my drink," he explained. "She admitted it the next evening when I came home to find her on my porch, waiting for me."

"And you let her in that time," Rhianna accused. "The night you were supposed to have met me."

Conor winced. "Yes, but it was the damned drug she'd given me making me act that way."

"Okay, for the sake of argument, we'll say she slipped something into your drink. It was some kind of undetectable super aphrodisiac. Why would she have done that?"

"So they could take me, Rhianna!" he said. He explained to her what had happened the night he was abducted.

"A damned good decoy," said Rhianna when he finished. "Catch a man with his pants down and he's obliged to follow you wherever you lead him."

"Don't," he asked, hurt by her tone. "I made a mistake, but honest to God, Rhianna, it was not intentional. I swear it wasn't. I wouldn't have hurt you for anything."

Rhianna nodded, feeling foolish for her jealousy. "So, we look for the bitch in the white-sequined dress." She made a mental note to call Joey as soon as she could get to a phone. "The one who likes Celtic warriors."

Conor frowned. "What do you mean?"

"You don't remember what she said when you told her your name? She said something about Conor being a Celtic warrior's name. A very virile name, if I recollect."

"You remember more of that night than I do," he mumbled.

"The bitch's name was Felicity Rogers," she said. He looked up at her with a raised brow. "I've already been looking for her, but she doesn't seem to exist."

He was starting to hurt, beginning to wish the nurse would come with his medication. He didn't want to ask Rhianna to leave because just sitting there looking at her was something he had never expected to be able to do again. But neither did he want her to see the mess he turned into when the need became more than he could handle.

"I better get going," Rhianna said, seeing the sheen of sweat oozing along his upper lip. She saw the naked discomfort forming in his eyes as he shifted his gaze about the room as though looking for a hole to climb into. She got up. "Want me to bring anything from home?"

Not from your house, he thought as she bent over to kiss him. Not from my house or our house, but from home. The word was to be cherished.

"Just yourself," he said as her lips lingered for a moment against his own.

"You didn't mind me moving in, did you? If you'd like for me to ...," she started

to say, but he put both hands on her cheeks and held her face so he could look into her eyes.

“You are right where I’ve always wanted you, Marek.” She felt the tremor in his hands, noticed the sweat popping out on his forehead and marveled at the effort it took for him to try to appear normal. She eased out of his hold. “I’ll come back in the morning.”

Conor shook his head. “Day after, okay?” He locked his gaze with hers. It wasn’t a request. It was a plea. “I think they want to do that Rapid Detox thing tomorrow morning. I don’t want you here for that.”

“No problem,” she said without hesitation. She went to the door, turned and looked back at him. “You haven’t told them about your arrest in seventy-three, have you?”

He didn’t need to ask who’d told her what had happened then. His sister had always enjoyed making him out to be a villain.

“Just thought maybe you shouldn’t.”

“I won’t.”

“And in case you’re wondering,” she continued, “I think it was a shitty thing they did to you and as soon as you’re outta here, maybe we ought to see about finding the mother of your child.”

Conor flinched. “I have a son,” he told her. His eyes clouded with tears. “But his mother, Bridget, died giving birth to him.”

Rhianna felt as though someone had slapped her. “Oh, Irish. I’m sorry.”

“It was a long time ago,” he said. “I never got to say goodbye to her or hold my boy.”

“Where is he, now?”

“I’ve never been able to find out.”

“We’ll find out!” she said and with that left him staring after her and loving her more than ever.

Chapter Twenty-Five

“He’s in room 347,” the black man told the Colombian. “Sandford Rehabilitation Clinic on Harrison.”

“How is he?”

“Getting better every day.”

“What are they giving him?”

“Naltrexone, first thing tomorrow morning.”

“Can you get to him?”

“Yes.”

“Tonight?”

“Tonight will be just fine.”



## Chapter Twenty-Six

The hand came down over his nose and mouth so tightly Conor couldn't breathe. He jerked awake, lifted out of his sleep by the pressure covering his face and the rough hands clamping his wrists to the bed. All he could see above him were the dark outlines of two heads. He tried to kick out, to dig his heels into the mattress deep enough to give himself leverage to strike out at his attackers, but his feet were tangled in the sheets. With a knot of fear racing up to block his throat, he felt himself suffocating and his fingers curved into claws as he tried to break the grips on his wrists. The sound of the IV tubing clanking against the metal stand drew his terrified eyes toward it. A third head appeared above him.

"Don't worry, pig," came the hated voice of the black man. "We ain't gonna kill you."

"But you're gonna sleep real good!" the other men snickered. "For a long time!"

There was a flash of light on the syringe in the black man's hand then Conor's head was forced to the side. The sting of the drug going into his neck was excruciating and behind the restriction covering his mouth, Irish bellowed in agony.

"Don't like that, does he?"

"Hurts like hell," the black man conceded. "Pull the IV out of his hand."

Conor felt only a minimum of discomfort as the IV catheter was ripped from his flesh. What did it matter anyhow? Sweet, merciful oblivion was closing in on Conor's mind and he was being enfolded in comforting warmth. His breathing slowed and he relaxed, giving himself over to the drug.

"You still with us, pig?" The black man chuckled and bent over to peer into Conor's unseeing gaze. "You floating," was the prognosis.

His world slowed. The sneering voices were drudges of sound. The obstruction covering his nose and mouth lifted, cool air replaced the smell of garlic and body heat. He sighed deeply, closed his eyes, and slipped beyond hearing, feeling, or seeing.

\* \* \* \*

"How could this have happened?" Dr. Gilbert shouted at his nurses. He was furious and his normally placid face was mottled with rage.

"We checked on him at midnight," the night duty nurse stammered. "He was fine."

"He's in a coma!" the doctor bellowed. "A goddamn coma! He isn't fine now, is he?"

Franc Boucharde wasn't fond of hospitals, but he had a vast amount of respect for physicians. In his twenty years with the Bureau, he'd met quite a few, but none had impressed him even half as much as this man. The doctor's temper was something to behold. He wondered if there wasn't a Cajun lurking in Dr. Gilbert's family tree.

"Get his sister on the phone," the doctor ordered the frightened nurses. "And Detective Marek! How am I going to explain this to her?"

"They didn't try to kill him, did they?" Boucharde asked, intercepting the doctor

who was bulldozing his way down the corridor.

"No, thank God." Dr. Gilbert barely glanced at the FBI agent. "But if I find out it was someone on my staff who did this, you'll be arresting me for murder!"

"Do you know yet what he was given?"

"Triftazine, a very potent neuroleptic drug," the doctor snapped. "The syringe was lying on the floor next to the bed. I have no idea how much they administered, but mixed with the other drugs I've been giving him, it induced the coma."

"This will set back his recovery time, won't it?"

"Hell, yes, it will!" the doctor thundered. He stopped and spun around as a nurse came running down the hall calling out his name urgently. "What?"

"Mrs. Greiner said to tell you," the nurse said, breathing heavily for she was overweight and out of shape, "she is her brother's next of kin."

"I know that!"

"She's going to have him moved," the nurse continued, untouched by the physician's fury.

"Moved?" Dr. Gilbert's voice lowered to a deadly whisper.

"While I was on the phone with her, she put through a conference call to her lawyer. It was her lawyer's suggestion that they move him to a private clinic where he will be safe."

"If you incompetent nincompoops had been watching him, he would have been safe!"

"We'll put a twenty-four hour guard on him," Boucharde promised. "No matter where she takes him."

"The Midwest Clinic," the nurse said, eyeing the agent with speculation. "It's in Altoona."

"At least one good thing came out of this," Dr. Gilbert snapped.

"How's that?" Boucharde inquired, failing to see anything helpful in having Conor Nolan comatose.

Dr. Gilbert scowled. "Now they have to believe him," the physician stated firmly. "He didn't inject himself and there are bruises on his wrists where they held him down." He glared at the FBI agent.

Boucharde nodded. "I agree. Even Darlington will have to concede Irish was telling the truth."

\* \* \* \*

"I've put a guard at his door and one at both entrances to the clinic. We're not going to take any chances with him, Rhianna," Darlington told her.

"Other than camping out across the street, I don't guess there's much I can do until that snotty uptown bitch allows me to see him," said Rhianna.

"I'll keep you informed," he said, knowing that was uppermost in her mind. "She can't keep us from speaking to his doctor." The Captain folded his hands on his desktop and looked her in the eye. "There was another reason I called you in."

"If you're thinking of putting me on the Yelverton murder ...." Her boss held up his hand.

"I've an assignment for you, but it's one you won't mind handling." He tapped his clenched hands on the desk blotter. "Think you could work with Boucharde on Irish's case?"

“Boucharde is handling it?”

“Kidnapping is a Federal offense and since he’s family, so to speak, the Bureau let him have the case. He had to pull some strings to get them to let you tag along ....”

“Tag along where?” Rhianna cut in. She sure as hell didn’t want to get too far away from Irish.

“I may regret allowing this,” the Darling said with a sigh, “but Boucharde has asked that you accompany him to Austin.”

“Austin, Texas?” Rhianna gasped. “What the hell is in Austin, Texas?”

“Other than the state capitol?” Darlington smiled. “A man named Daniel Keane.”

“Who’s Daniel Keane?”

“He’s an agent with the ATF down there,” Franc Boucharde answered for Darlington. He smiled at Rhianna as he stepped into the Captain’s office. “He called us and said he would like to talk to you. Says it’s urgent.”

“Me?” she asked.

Boucharde shrugged. “He says he read about you in the paper.”

“Read about me?” she repeated. “In Texas?”

“About Conor Nolan’s disappearance and your connection to him,” said Boucharde.

“That was in a paper in Texas?”

“All he said was he wanted to talk to you and nobody else. He said he could be a help to us.”

“Is this on the up and up, Boucharde?” she demanded. “Or is he some wacko who sees Elvis at the local gas station every other Wednesday?”

“It’s every third Wednesday.” Boucharde sighed. “Listen, I’ve checked out the dude. He’s a decorated cop, fifteen-year veteran. I don’t know what he’s got to say, but I think it’s worth a shot.”

\* \* \* \*

“Daniel Keane?” Boucharde asked, showing his badge. “I’m Special Agent Boucharde and this is Detective Rhianna Marek from the New Gregory, Iowa police.”

“Come in,” Keane said, stepping out of the way. “This is the worst rain storm to hit Austin in years. You’re getting soaked.”

Rhianna smiled as she passed the man they had come to Texas to see. “If it starts raining any harder, I suggest you think about building an ark, Agent Keane.”

“Isn’t it awful?” He took their sopping raincoats and umbrella, then swept a hand toward his living room. “Please, sit down. I’ll hang these up and get us some coffee.”

The sofa, onto which Rhianna gratefully sank, was as soft as a marshmallow and seemed to mold itself around her. The plane ride had been bumpy, the seats very uncomfortable as only coach airplane seats can be. The ride into Austin from the airport, a nightmare of slashing ineffective windshield wipers, seemed to take forever.

“My God,” Boucharde proclaimed as another gust of hellish wind pushed against the stucco house and rain battered down on the tile roof. “If this isn’t tornado weather, nothing is!”

“We’ve had warnings all morning,” Keane told them as he brought in a tray with a silver coffee service and three delicate porcelain cups. He placed the tray on the glass-topped coffee table. “Hope you like French Roast.”

“You have a lovely home,” Rhianna commented, taking in the Spanish-style

fixtures, which melded so well with the home's exterior.

"I have a friend who's an interior decorator," he replied. "I get a discount at his store."

As Keane poured coffee into one of the cups, Rhianna couldn't help but notice the man's hand trembling. When he handed her the cup, he met her gaze and smiled.

"I've been ill," he explained.

"I'm sorry." She declined his offer of sugar and cream.

After all three were sitting back with their coffees, Boucharde cleared his throat, gaining Keane's attention. "How long have you been in recovery?"

There was a slight flushing of Daniel Keane's face, but his polite smile did not waver. "About ten months now."

Rhianna turned to look at Boucharde, but he was sipping his coffee as though they had been discussing the weather.

"I know you're anxious to hear what I have to say about Coni," Keane said, putting aside his cup.

"Connie?" Rhianna questioned. "Who's she?"

"Conor," Keane laughed. He sat back in his chair and crossed his legs. "From the newspaper articles, I understand his friends in Iowa call him Irish." He laughed again. "When I knew Coni, if anyone had dared called him Irish, he'd have stomped them."

"You know Conor Nolan?" asked Boucharde.

Keane nodded. "For a long, long time. We went to military school together."

Rhianna's brows shot up. "Really?"

Their host nodded again. "We were very close back then. I've kinda kept up with what he's been doing over the years." He blushed. "I finally broke down and subscribed to the New Gregory Press-Gazette about a year ago."

"Conor Nolan was missing for five months," Boucharde reminded him. "His disappearance was mentioned a week after it happened. Why did you wait so long to call us?"

Keane shrugged. "As I said, I've been ill." He ducked his head. "I was in a clinic for more than two months. Came out and had to go back for another month." When he looked up, his smile was in place once more. "But I'm much better now."

"When we spoke on the phone," Boucharde said, "you said you might be able to help us find out what happened to Conor."

Daniel Keane's smile slipped away this time. "I didn't know, you see, until after I came home from the Clinic the second time that Coni had been abducted. There were four months worth of newspapers to go through. It took me awhile to read them." His mouth quivered. "When I read that Coni was missing, I nearly had a heart attack. When I read he'd been found and was in the hospital, I knew what had happened."

"And that was?" Boucharde prompted.

"That he had been kidnapped by people who shot him full of heroin, getting him hooked on the stuff."

"How did you know, Danny?" Rhianna asked.

Keane's smile returned, but there was a pained look in his dark blue eyes.

"Because they had done it to me, too."

Rhianna drew in a quick breath. "When was this?"

"Back in September of last year," Keane replied. He plucked at a loose thread on

the chair arm. "There were four masked men who showed up at my house late one night while I was taking a shower. Lindsey, my roommate, had let them in."

"What happened then?" prompted Boucharde.

"When I came out of the shower, someone grabbed me from behind, pushed me down on the floor, and I felt a sharp pain in my arm. The next thing I remember is waking up on the floor of a van, trussed up like a Christmas goose."

No mention had been made in the papers of the actual details of Conor Nolan's abduction. Everything Keane had said so far was exactly as Conor had described his own experience.

Except one.

"I take it Lindsey was your lover. Was he in on it?" Rhianna asked.

Keane looked up at her, searching her gaze, and when he saw no condemnation in her face, nodded. "I believe so, yes, although I never saw him again."

"He seduced you?" she asked quietly.

Keane's mouth twisted bitterly. "I met him at a local gay bar about three days before all this happened. I couldn't keep my hands off him that night. I brought him home and he stayed."

"For Irish, it was a woman named Felicity Rogers. Do you know her?" When Keane shook his head, Rhianna asked if he'd ever heard the name or if there was a woman with the men who had abducted him.

"If there was, I never saw or heard her."

"What can you tell us about the others?" demanded Boucharde.

Keane sighed. "I only saw the face of one of them." He shuddered. "The man had obviously been in a very bad fire. His face was horribly burned." He smiled apologetically. "Burned so bad I can't even begin to describe what he looked like. He spoke with a Hispanic accent. As for the others, there was at least one black man, but I can't tell you much about him. He usually gave me the injections."

"Do you know where they took you?" asked Rhianna.

"I have no idea," Keane answered. "Somewhere out in the country, I think. Out where no one could hear me screaming for help. It was a barn is all I can tell you."

"When you were being held, did they ever withhold the drug from you?"

"You mean put me into withdrawal?" He shook his head. "No, thank God. They ...." He stopped. "Oh, please tell me they didn't do that to Coni!"

When Rhianna looked away, Keane closed his eyes. "That must have been horrible for him considering ...."

"Did the men say anything to you?" Rhianna interrupted. She held Keane's eyes with her own. "Give you any indication about why they had abducted you? Why they were pumping you full of narcotics?"

Daniel Keane's head tilted slightly to the right as though he were listening to something other than the words she spoke. He was a very astute man, and in his understanding of the meaning of her interruption and her look, he did not allow himself to dare a glance toward the FBI agent.

"The two who spoke to me, the Hispanic and the black, kept calling me pig, but I never did find out what it was all about. I fully expected them to kill me. Then one day they just up and blindfold me, gag me, and tie my hands and feet together and put me in the same godawful-smelling van."

"They brought me back to town and dumped me on my own doorstep at three o'clock one morning ...." He looked at his hands. "I was in bad shape." He closed his eyes for a moment. "There were some people who thought I enjoyed it."

"Who are some people?" asked Boucharde.

Daniel shrugged. "The guys I work with who didn't believe me when I told them what had happened."

"They thought you made it up?" Rhianna pressed.

He nodded. "I'm a gay man. Most straight men think all gay men are liars. And worse. They thought my lifestyle had just gotten a bit out of hand."

"Did you think you were chosen at random, then?" Boucharde asked.

"I couldn't think of anyone I had angered enough to want to do that to me," Keane replied. "I work mostly on arms cases with the ATF. Drugs are out of my league. I figured it might have been a gay issue."

"And now?" Rhianna encouraged.

Keane shook his head. "Not after I read about Coni," he said. "There's got to be a connection since we know each other. We're both cops, of course. Our fathers were cops, both of them ex-military. There's got to be a connection somewhere else. I don't believe in coincidence."

"Neither do I." Rhianna turned to Boucharde. "What do you think, Franc?"

Boucharde didn't look at her. "Were you two involved with the drug scene when you were in school together?"

Daniel Keane's eyebrows shot up. "Good Lord, no!" The question surprised him and his surprise was too genuine to fake. "If you know anything about military academies, Agent Boucharde, you know they check you very closely for substance abuse. Especially in the mid-seventies when everyone and their brother was into the stuff."

"The two of you weren't dealing?"

Rhianna glared at the Fibber. "That's an asinine question!"

"It may be," Boucharde conceded, "but I want it answered."

"No, sir," Keane said, emphatically. "I can assure you neither Coni nor I were dealing drugs in school and neither was anyone we knew!"

"But you do agree drugs are the real connecting issue here, don't you?" Boucharde countered.

Keane looked directly at him. "I think it plays a large part in all this, yes, but why us? Why me, and why Coni?"

"I think we need to start at the beginning to answer that," Rhianna suggested. "Where the connection began--the military academy."

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

The Commandant of Nellis Briggs Military Academy came into his office and took his seat behind the desk. "I have their records here. Sorry it took so long, but the files were in the vault." He sat down and opened the first folder. "Let's see: Cadet Conor James Nolan was here from October of nineteen seventy-five until graduation on June ninth, nineteen seventy-eight. He had a very impressive four-point GPA, graduating at the top of his class that year. He was star forward on the basketball team his junior and senior years, and captain of both the basketball and track teams. He was well-liked by both students and staff. Won a basketball scholarship to the University of Florida upon graduation." He looked at Rhianna and Boucharde. "An exemplary student."

"What about Keane?" Boucharde demanded. He wasn't happy to hear Nolan had a spotless record at the school.

"Daniel Dermot Keane," the Commandant stated, "came to us at the beginning of his freshman year in nineteen seventy-five when his mother passed away. He maintained a three-point-seven-five GPA and graduated Salutatorian in seventy-eight. He was captain of the chess team, the debate team, and the drill team. He was one hell of a sprinter, won every track meet he entered. He, too, was one of the Warhawks."

"Wait a minute," Rhianna stopped him. "Warhawks?"

The Commandant smiled in apology. "I'm sorry. Our basketball team is called the Mighty Warhawks. Danny Keane was a guard on the team." He leaned back in his chair. "We took the conference all three years The Five Horsemen played together."

"The Five Horsemen?" Boucharde asked.

"Nolan, Sullivan, Cullen, Keane, and Collins." The Commandant laughed. "The finest athletes this school has ever known. Cullen was our soccer star; Collins was an All-Conference champion wrestler. And Sullivan was the best nose guard we've ever had at NBMA. He could have played pro ball if he hadn't wanted so badly to go into law enforcement like his father."

"Sullivan's father was a cop, too?" Boucharde inquired, exchanging a quick look with Rhianna.

"All their fathers were," the Commandant said. "And so are they."

"Sullivan, Cullen, and Collins are policemen?" Boucharde was stunned.

The Commandant pushed back from his desk. "Give me a minute here," he said, going to a file cabinet on the far side of the wall. "Most came back for their tenth reunion back in eighty-eight," he said. He took out a booklet with the year 1988 emblazoned on the cover. "Except for Cullen. He was in the hospital; emergency appendectomy if I remember correctly." He turned the pages. "Yes. Mick Sullivan is a lieutenant with the New York State Highway Patrol. Timothy-Patrick Collins works for the Billings, Montana Sheriff's department, and Jamie Cullen is with the Drug Enforcement Agency in Jacksonville, Florida." The Commandant chuckled. "Collins made some crack about them all being soldiers in the war on crime."

"Did any of them have trouble here at school?" Boucharde asked, his heart

beating a little faster.

"Not that I know of, but I was only an instructor back then, fresh out of the Army with a brand new diploma burning a hole on my wall. I taught freshman English and social studies, so I didn't have any of them in my classes."

"Is there anything in their files that mentions disciplinary action taken?"

"I can check," the Commandant said, getting up once more.

After the man had left the room, Boucharde turned to Rhianna. "What the hell have we got here, Marek?"

"I don't know, but I think we'd better get the addresses of the others and give them a call."

\* \* \* \*

The man who came to the door of the apartment was thin--very thin--and his cheeks were two bright red spots of color. His haunted eyes were febrile-bright. "Yeah? Whatcha want?" he asked in a hoarse voice.

"James Rory Cullen?" Boucharde asked, flashing his badge.

"Leave me alone," the man said. Ignoring the badge, he started to shut the door, but found Boucharde's highly polished loafer blocking the way. With a look that bordered on absolute terror, the man backed away from the door, holding his hands up as though warding off the demons of hell. "Man, I ain't doing it! Leave me alone!"

Rhianna put a hand on Boucharde's arm, stopping him from entering the apartment. Without glancing at the Fibber, she followed the man into the dimly-lit interior.

"Jamie?" she asked in a soft voice.

"Don't," the man said, his voice pleading. He had backed himself up to the wall.

"You are Jamie Cullen, aren't you?"

"I can't take no more," the man said. "Please, God. I can't take no more!"

"We're not here to hurt you, Jamie," Rhianna said, not moving closer to him.

"Maybe we can help."

"Can't nobody help me," he said, shaking his head of tangled hair. "Nobody."

"Not even Coni Nolan?"

The man stilled. The name was like a magic invocation and he came away from the wall--only a little, not out of the shadows--but enough to let Rhianna know she had broken through his fear. "Coni?" he whispered.

"I'm Detective Rhianna Marek with the New Gregory police department out in Iowa. Coni is a friend of mine." She went a few steps further into the room. "You are Jamie Cullen, aren't you?"

Cullen ran the back of his hand under his nose. "Yeah." He jerked his eyes toward Boucharde. "Who's he?"

"Special Agent Franc Boucharde with the FBI," she answered. "He's a friend, too."

"Is Coni here?" Cullen shoved his hands into the pockets of his jeans. "Did he come with you?"

"He's in the hospital, Jamie," Rhianna informed him. "In a coma."

For a long moment, Rhianna didn't think he was going to answer her, but then Cullen did something for which neither she nor Boucharde had been prepared. He threw back his head and howled as though in agony.



Franc Boucharde jumped, his eyes going wide, as the man before him dropped to his knees on the floor with his arms wrapped around his body and began to make an eerie keening sound.

"Not Coni, too," Cullen said over and over again. "Not him."

Boucharde would have come closer, but Rhianna held up a hand. She went to Cullen and knelt beside him. With infinite care, wanting in no way to startle or hurt this wounded man even further, she took him in her arms and brought his head to her shoulder.

\* \* \* \*

"Her name was Felicity," he whispered against the rim of the glass of water he held to his lips. The glass clinked against his teeth. "Felicity Rogers."

"Yeah, that's her," Rhianna sighed. "That was the name she used with Coni that night. We've got a composite drawing of her out on the wires."

Cullen gripped the glass as though his life depended upon it. "We were going to be married," he said. "I'd put my chit in for time off and we were going to leave in a few days."

Boucharde made notes on his pad as Cullen told his tale. The Fibber nodded as though what Cullen was saying fitted nicely into the pattern he saw coming to life.

"I was on my way to pick her up at her place," Jamie Cullen continued. "The car was packed. I'd stopped the mail and the paper." He looked at Rhianna. "We were going to Vegas to get married then on to Colorado for the honeymoon."

Rhianna sat beside Cullen on the sofa, rubbing his back in a calming motion. He trembled violently, desperately in need of something neither she nor Boucharde could provide.

"They got me outside in the parking lot," he said. "I felt something jab into my arm and I went down, man. I went down hard and when I woke up, I was lying on the floor of a van, all tied up, and I thought they were going to kill me." He laughed, a weird, frantic sound that seemed to come from the depths of his soul. "All I could think about was Kiki."

"Kiki Camerino?" Boucharde asked quietly.

Cullen bobbed his head. "I knew him." He took a gulp of the water. And another. Then placed the glass against his forehead as though to cool himself. "But when they took my clothes off, I thought they were gonna rape me."

"Danny thought so, too," Rhianna told him.

There was a tiny smile that tried to tug at Cullen's lips. He swung his head toward Rhianna. "Was he disappointed when they didn't?"

Rhianna knew his question hadn't been meant as an insult to Daniel Keane. Cullen's haunted eyes were just a touch less stricken. It was the kind of remark Irish might have made under the circumstances. She smiled to let Cullen know she hadn't misinterpreted the humor.

"Yeah," Jamie Cullen said, nodding as though he had intercepted her thoughts. "You're an okay lady. Are you Coni's lady?"

"Why do you ask?" Rhianna surprised herself by reaching out to push a tumbled lock of dark blond hair from Cullen's forehead.

"I don't know," he answered. "Just the way you say his name, I guess."

"We're working on it," she told him.

“Lucky man.”

“Did you see the faces of any of the men?” the Fibber asked. “Recognize them in any way?”

“No. They wore masks. Two of them talked to me, this black dude and a Colombian, but I’d never heard their voices before.” He sucked in a ragged breath. “Least I don’t think I had. I couldn’t be sure. I was too damned scared.”

“Did they say anything to you about why they had abducted you? Give you any indication of their purpose?”

“Nada. Zip. Not a damned thing. Like I said, I just thought they were gonna blot me, you know?”

“When were you abducted, Jamie?” Boucharde asked.

“Back in November,” Cullen answered. He held out his right hand, studied the way it trembled. “Eight months ago and I still can’t get straight.” He lowered his hand to his thigh and rubbed it on his jeans. “I thought I was stronger than this.”

“Did you get help when they brought you back?”

Cullen shrugged. “They put me in a clinic.” His face showed his hurt. “Kept it out of the papers.” He rubbed harder at his thigh. “Wouldn’t have looked good, you know? ‘DEA Agent Gets Too Fond of His Job.’ That kind of thing. You know the Government’s like a big cat. It takes a dump, covers it up, then strolls off like no one will ever find the shit it leaves behind. Out of sight, out of mind.” He shrugged. “That’s me.”

“They thought you’d gone off the deep end on your own,” Rhianna stated.

“You got it,” he said, the hurt becoming a mask of unconcern. “Shape up or ship out, Cullen. If you can’t handle the pressure, transfer to traffic cop. We’ll cover you with Tidy Cat and no one will see you. Might smell you, but they won’t see you.”

Boucharde looked up from his writing. “That must have been worse than a slap in the face.”

Cullen smiled bitterly. “It’s always nice when your buddies rally around you in your time of need.” His eyes began to water. “No one believed me when I told them I’d been kidnapped.” His voice lowered. “No one.”

“Who did you think we were when we came to the door?” Rhianna asked.

“I thought they’d come back for me or else you were Big Brother.”

“Big Brother?”

“Internal Affairs,” he supplied. “They’ve been hounding me. I just got out of Rehab, again, and I thought you were them coming to check up on me. They treat me like I’m some kind of new variety of shit they can’t get off the bottom of their shoes.”

“Jamie,” Rhianna said, threading her fingers through his where they rubbed his thigh, “are you using, now?”

His laugh was filled with self-loathing and hopelessness. “I don’t have nothing to use,” he replied. “If I did, I wouldn’t be such a goddamned mess, Sweeting.”

“We believe you, Jamie,” Boucharde folded his note pad and put it away. “We know you’re telling the truth. If it will help, we’ll talk to whoever we need to to see that your guys believe you, too.”

“We’ll get you help,” Rhianna promised. “You can beat this. I know you can.”

“How?” Cullen whispered. “How do you know I can?”

“Because,” she said, squeezing his hand, “you’re Coni’s friend and he only picks men who are as strong as he is for his friends.”

"He was always the strong one," Cullen replied. "Coni was always the best of us. We all wanted to be like him. We needed him to lead us, you know?"

"Right now, he needs you," Rhianna said. "We need to know who has done this to him and you and Keane."

"What about Tim-Pat and Mick?" he asked. "Have you talked to them?" His face crinkled. "What if those bastards get to them, too?"

"We're leaving for New York tonight," Boucharde assured him.

\* \* \* \*

She was tiny--five feet tall at the very most. With white-blond hair and softly glowing alabaster skin, she looked like a little porcelain doll. Her laughing blue eyes sparkled as she stepped aside for them.

"He's in the basement working on the washer. Have a seat and I'll go get him for you." With a smile as sweet as a child's, Mrs. Michael Sullivan--as she had introduced herself to them--left them standing under the archway of the living room and a little piece of the bright late May sunshine went with her.

"I bet you could circle her waist with your hands," Rhianna said, a mock frown in her voice.

"Just pick her up and put her in your pocket!" Boucharde grinned. "I bet he's shorter than me."

But Michael Sullivan was six foot six at the very least and as brawny and well-built as a professional wrestler, his muscular arms bulged in the grimy T-shirt, which stretched to its limits over his thick chest. He came into the room like a whirlwind. He smiled and brought the sunshine back like a solar flare.

"Mick Sullivan," he said in a booming, friendly voice and stuck out a huge paw to Boucharde. "Glad to meet you." The grip that enveloped Rhianna's hand was only a fraction less enthusiastic in pressure but no less sincere in purpose. He put a broad palm to each of their backs and ushered them toward the large sectional sofa in front of them.

"Sit down! Please! Siobhan, where's your manners, woman of the house? Get our guests some lemonade!"

Rhianna watched their host perch precariously on the edge of a chair she would not have thought could hold his solid frame.

"FBI, huh?" he boomed, looking from one to the other, his face boyish and expectant. "Who you guys going after? How can I help?" He winked. "When the woman came down to tell me there were two FBI agents here to see me, I thought sure it was going to be Mulder and Scully!"

Boucharde had to school his face to keep from grinning as broadly as Marek. He'd met few men in his life that he had taken an immediate liking to, but Mick Sullivan was at the top of the list. "You got an X-File for them, do you?" He laughed despite trying his best to avoid it.

"Sure!" Sullivan chuckled. "There's an old woman down the street from us who goes up on her roof now and again and chants to Uranus in her birthday suit. She ...."

"Venus, man of the house," his wife corrected as she came in with two frosted glasses of lemonade. "And she's not chanting, she's singing."

"Same difference."

"Not so, Michael Peter," his wife declared. She smiled at her guests. "The man will call me if you need anything else. Just tell him."

"Thank you," Rhianna told her. She liked the wife as much as the husband.

"Sorry we aren't Fox and Dana," Boucharde found himself saying and could have bitten his tongue. He was so far off course here, he would need a sextant to get himself back where he should be, but Sullivan's good humor was infectious.

"I'm not Broderick Crawford, either." Sullivan He spread his thick thighs and dangled his meaty hands between them. "All kidding aside, what can I do you folks for?"

"Actually," Rhianna said, "I'm not with the Bureau. I'm with the vice squad in New Gregory, Iowa and ...."

She stopped for the genial, easy-going expression on Michael Sullivan's face disappeared. The warm glow left his skin in a rush and she watched him slowly close his eyes. When he spoke, his voice had become a whispery-soft breath of pain. "They got him, too, didn't they?" he asked.

"Who, Lieutenant Sullivan?" Boucharde questioned. The man's abrupt change in demeanor put the FBI agent right back on track.

"Coni." He opened his eyes and looked at Rhianna. "Coni Nolan?" He put one powerful hand on his knee and clenched his fist. "He was kidnapped, too?"

"He's in the hospital in a coma, Mickey," she said, using his wife's nickname for him.

"Merciful Mary," he whispered and his voice went lower. "Is he going to be all right?"

"We think so."

"You know about Danny Keane and Jamie Cullen?" Boucharde had his note pad out. When Sullivan's pale blue gaze shifted to him, he could see the man was struggling to keep his emotions under wraps.

"No," Michael Sullivan said, "I didn't, but it makes sense, doesn't it?"

"In what way do you mean?" Rhianna said, instinctively knowing this man held the key to the whole thing.

"If they got Coni and me and Collins, neither Danny nor Jamie were safe."

Boucharde stopped writing. "You were abducted, as well?" At Sullivan's slow nod, the Fibber let out a long breath. "Collins, too?" It was hard enough to credit that this vibrant, laughing man had been abducted, but to find out that all five of the men had was staggering.

A faint grin tickled Sullivan's mouth, a mouth much given to laughter and smiles. "Tim-Pat has always been the joker in our deck," he said, his somber gaze lightening a little from the memory. "Ask anybody who knows him and they'll tell you that comic Jon Lovitz patterned Tommy, his pathological liar, after Tim-Pat Collins. You tell him you won the lottery for ten million dollars and he'll tell you he won for twenty. You tell him you bought a Porsche, he'll tell you he bought a Lamborghini. That's just the way he is." He plowed a thick hand through his black hair. "Never any harm in Tim-Pat's exaggerations, but you can never tell if he's telling the truth or not."

"You didn't believe him when he told you he'd been abducted," Rhianna said. The pattern was lining up with Collins just like it had with Keane and Cullen.

"No," Mick confessed, "I didn't." He turned an apologetic gaze to her. "When they brought me back, I just couldn't talk to anyone. Not even to Siobhan. It was like they had raped my soul, stripped me of something that I could never replace. It was a bad time for us and what I had done before it all began sure hadn't helped."

Boucharde couldn't look at the man. "You had an affair."

"The only time I've ever strayed," Sullivan said and reached up to swipe at the tears that were beginning to roll down his face. "The only damned time I'd ever even been tempted."

"Felicity Rogers." Rhianna provided the name.

"If that's her real name," Sullivan concurred. "I tried to find her, but crapped out."

"You couldn't talk to the people here so you called Tim-Pat Collins?"

Sullivan nodded. "I was going through my desk, looking for Coni's number, but I found Tim-Pat's, instead. I called him. I told him what had happened." A look of intense shame passed over Sullivan's face. "When he started telling me he'd been taken about two months before, I just sat there and listened, agreeing with him, letting him repeat back to me everything I'd already said to him about what had happened to me."

Boucharde looked down at his note pad. "You were taken in July of last year? Right at the first of the month?"

"Yes," Sullivan asked. "How did you know? I thought the Patrol had kept it a pretty good secret."

Rhianna turned to look at him. "Yeah, how did you know?"

"Cullen was taken in November. Keane in September. If Collins disappeared two months before Sullivan, that puts each of the kidnappings two months apart. That gave the kidnapers two months in between each snatch to move and set up shop in the next state."

"Did they hold the others a month like they did me?" Sullivan asked.

"All except Nolan," Boucharde answered. "They seemed to have changed their pattern with him. They took him back in February and released him in the first part of this month."

Sullivan looked from one of them to the others mentally calculating about how long his friend had been held. "Five months?" he gasped. When they answered, he slumped back in his chair, long legs thrust out in front of him as though he now had the weight of the world on his shoulders and, despite their breadth and muscle, he was not able to withstand the onslaught. "The poor bastard."

"Had you taken leave prior to the kidnapping?" Rhianna asked. That seemed to fit the pattern.

"Yeah," Sullivan answered. "Felicity and I were going to spend some time up in Montreal." His voice turned bitter. "Just thinking about how taken in I was by that woman makes me want to kick myself."

"Where were you when the kidnappers showed up?"

"In my garage." He shook his head. "I was tuning up Siobhan's car." His guilt was like a living thing driving pins into his flesh. "I had made all these arrangements for my wife. I paid all the bills, got the air conditioner checked, and ready to go for the summer and made sure there were plenty of groceries." He looked up sheepishly. "Siobhan and the girls had gone over to Ireland with her parents and she wasn't due back until the end of August."

"You have children?" Rhianna asked.

"Three girls," he said, smiling proudly. "Real cuties." He lifted his hand and ticked off the names. "Marilyn, Joni, and Angie."

Rhianna smiled. "Pretty names."

“Good girls,” Michael replied and looked at Boucharde as the agent cleared his throat, obviously trying to steer the conversation in a less personal direction.

“There were how many men?” Franc asked.

“Four. Wearing ski masks. I looked up from under the hood and there they were. They popped me with something before I had time to react. The next thing I know, I’m lying flat on my back, wearing nothing but my skivvies, handcuffed to a cot.”

“They kept you doped up for a month, then dropped you back here with a packet of goodies to see you through ‘til you could score on your own.”

“I’d have rather died than continued with that,” Sullivan exclaimed. “I did it while they had me because that was what I had to do to survive, to get back to my family, to my wife and my kids. But as soon as they dumped me out there on the front lawn, I crawled my butt to the neighbors and banged my head on the door until they answered. Is that how it was with the others?”

Boucharde told him it was. “Same with Collins?”

“If I remember right,” Sullivan said, drawing his legs up, “Tim-Pat said he married the woman at the court house there in Billings. But who knows?”

“It’s easy to check,” Rhianna said.

“What happened to Coni?” Sullivan asked. “Did they give him too much, then? I mean is that why he’s in a coma?”

“They kept taking him off it for long periods of time then shooting him up again,” Boucharde explained. “Once he was home, in the hospital, they went after him again.”

“My God,” Sullivan whispered. He looked around, uneasy for the first time.

“I know why Irish was sent to the military academy,” Rhianna said, trying to take Sullivan’s mind off the horror of what had happened to his friend. “Tell me about you and the others.”

Sullivan stood up and walked to the window. “I got my butt sent down there because I couldn’t keep away from Siobhan,” he grunted. “My Da was an Army Major up at Camp Drum and as tough as they came. Adolescent love was sickening to him. He thought if he separated us, we’d get over each other.” He looked back over his shoulder and his faint smile became a wicked grin. “Da never did understand how it was between me and the woman.”

“Your father is dead?” Rhianna inquired.

Sullivan shrugged. “Might as well be. I don’t go to see the man.” He thrust his hands into his pockets and leaned back against the windowsill. “None of us got along with our fathers, sweetheart.”

“Keane?” Boucharde asked.

“Danny’s father was a United States Morine,” Sullivan replied, stressing the mo. “Sean Keane sent his son to NBMA to make a man out of him.” The wicked grin became predatory. “Sending Danny to the academy was like sending an alcoholic to work in a brewery.”

“What about Collins?”

Sullivan’s chest rumbled with laughter. “Tim-Pat’s lies got him sent down there. His father got called up before the Base Commander because of some of the outrageous tales Tim-Pat was spreading up at Minot. It seems Chief Master Sergeant Francis Xavier Collins had single-handedly won both the Korean and Vietnam conflicts and had been an adviser to JFK.”

Rhianna smiled. "And Jamie?"

The smile left Michael Sullivan's broad mouth. "Jamie Cullen was a different matter." He pushed away from the wall. "He was sent down there for the same reason Coni was."

"Drugs," Boucharde stated in a matter of fact tone. Rhianna cast the Fibber a worried look, but he shook his head. "It'll go no further."

"Jamie was into drugs," Sullivan admitted, "but he'd also been arrested for petty theft and truancy. Lieutenant Commander Kevin Cullen was with the Coast Guard out of Jacksonville and he took every bad thing his only son did as a personal affront. It didn't help that he was on duty the night Jamie was arrested on a boat the Coast Guard had been watching."

"Nolan's father was ex-Navy, wasn't he?" asked Boucharde.

"Yeah," Sullivan agreed.

"All five branches of the service were represented by you men," Boucharde marveled. "It's eerie, but I don't see how it connects with the kidnappings and the attempts to turn you all into drug addicts."

"There is no connection between the fathers," Rhianna said, frowning, "except that they were once military policemen."

"And that they were all bastards." Sullivan chuckled. "They never worked together on a case, if that's what you mean. Hell, Coni's father was stationed at Great Lakes for most of his tour, but Coni stayed with his mom in Boston most of the time. Kevin Cullen was in Florida the whole time. The rest of us went from base to base like gypsies until getting sent to Alabama. Even then, our families went wherever the whim of the military sent them."

"There has got to be a connection between the sons, then," Rhianna stressed.

"And it had to have started at the academy," Boucharde put in.

Rhianna snorted. "That goes without saying, Franc." She bit her bottom lip for a moment, then sat forward. "While you were being held, did you see the woman at all?"

"Not after she put in the IV," he said, shaking his head.

"Did they say anything to you while they had you, Mickey?" Rhianna asked, her voice tense. "Call you anything?"

"Other than pig?" He shook his head. "Not that I recall, but most of the time I wasn't too cognizant of what was happening. The Spanish guy liked to slap me every time he called me pig. I damned sure remember him doing that."

"What about Felicity?" she pressed. "Did she call you anything special?"

He grimaced. "She called me her Celtic warrior," he grunted. "God, how that bolstered the old ego!"

Rhianna's entire body became rigid. Her eyes bored into Sullivan's. "What does that mean to you, Mickey?"

"What? Celtic warrior?" He shrugged. "I'm Irish. I'm a Boston Celtic fan. It didn't mean much of anything."

"You're all Irish," Rhianna said, quietly. "You. Nolan. Cullen. Keane and Collins. You're all the sons of ex-military policemen." She held his attention. "All Warhawks from Nellis Briggs Military Academy in Alabama." Her voice lowered. "The name has got to mean something because she made a point of calling you and Irish the same thing. We didn't ask Jamie, but I'd be willing to bet she called him that, too. Maybe even

Danny's lover used that nickname for him."

Boucharde was watching her. He sat back on the sofa, content to let her carry the ball. It was her court and she was going in for the dunk.

"Were you called that at the academy?"

"A lot of wise asses called us Micks at NBMA," Michael Sullivan answered, frowning. "It wasn't meant as a compliment, believe me. The five of us were kind of stuck on ourselves, I'm afraid."

"But was there someone there at NBMA with you five Irishmen who might have been crazy enough to wait all this time to exact some kind of revenge he felt he had to have? Someone who wanted to be one of you or be better than you? Someone who would have taken great delight in making derisive remarks about Irishmen or Celtic warriors in general? Who you guys might have hurt? Embarrassed? Shunned?"

"Quinterras," Sullivan said, his eyes flaring.

Rhianna stilled, listening to Boucharde's quick intake of breath.

Michael Sullivan looked up slowly. "His name was Luis Quinterras." Something evil passed over the handsome face of the best nose guard to ever play at Nellis Briggs Military Academy. "Not Spanish," he said through clenched teeth. "South American. Luis Quinterras was from Bogota, Columbia."



## Chapter Twenty-Eight

"He hated Coni," Michael Sullivan said. They were sitting on his deck, looking across Lake Ontario. "God, how that boy hated Coni."

"Why?" Rhianna asked.

"Because Coni was the man," Sullivan answered. "He was the 'stalwart oak set firmly in the teeth of the wind.'"

"Beg pardon?" Boucharde wanted clarification.

Sullivan laughed. "Danny was the poet of our little clique. Tim-Pat was the comic relief. I was the muscle, and Cullen was the Father Confessor."

"I have a friend like that," Rhianna said, thinking of Triplett.

"Danny called Conor 'the oak in the teeth of the wind.' Everything revolved around him. Like the detritus from a storm, you know? Coni just stood there and like that stalwart oak took it, never bending, never crashing. Just taking it. Everybody looked up to Coni. Everybody liked him."

"They still do."

"Yes, well, that's the kind of man Liam Nolan didn't raise, thank the Lord." He frowned. "Looks like Coni's right back being in the teeth of the wind, huh?"

"You said Quinterras was from Columbia. How did he wind up in a military school in Alabama, of all places?"

"The rumor was he had gotten into some kind of trouble at his boarding school and had been asked to leave. His father, who from all accounts seemed to be a decent guy, started looking around for another place to send Luis."

"But Alabama?"

Sullivan grinned. "His mother had seen an ad in Southern Living magazine while she was up in the States shopping. She thought the cadet in the picture looked like her son. The cadet was Coni." Sullivan chuckled. He sipped on his beer, smacked his lips, and leaned back in his chair until the front legs were off the deck planking. "I have to admit there was a resemblance between the two of them."

"What year was this?"

"The spring term of our junior year. I remember the day General Quinterras brought Luis down there." He chuckled again. "This big white limo pulls up and out steps this black chauffeur dressed like in the movies. It was about ten o'clock on a Saturday afternoon and the five of us were just coming back from jogging. We stopped when we saw the car turn in and just stood there watching as the chauffeur opened the doors. Tim-Pat made some comment about the limo being smaller than his father's and we started laughing, like we always did when he'd make ridiculous statements like that."

"I take it Tim-Pat's father didn't have a limo," said Rhianna.

"His father was the First Shirt of an Air Force Security Police squadron." Sullivan snorted. "Anyway, out steps this very imposing man in khaki uniform with medals plastered all over his chest." He swirled his beer, then rested the can on his knee. "You have to understand that we were all military brats. We knew authority when we saw it

and General Quinterras exuded the stuff. We were impressed. Especially when he glanced our way and nodded politely. Officers of his rank don't usually acknowledge the peons, but he made it a point to do so. I remember Jamie saying the man had so many oak leaf clusters on his Good Conduct medal, it was a wonder he could stand up straight." He sighed. "That's when Tim-Pat made the comment that his father had fruit salad on both sides of his chest."

"Fruit salad?" Rhianna questioned.

"Medals and decorations. We laughed. Unfortunately, Luis had just stepped out of the limo before Collins made his stupid statement so he thought we were laughing at him. He turned around and snarled, flipping us the bird."

"Not an auspicious beginning," Boucharde said.

"No and having his father reprimand him in front of us didn't help, either."

"So things went down hill from there," Rhianna put in.

"Like an avalanche. Luis had come to that little 'backwater pisspot' as he so endearingly called it, thinking he was going to breeze through the program, win all the awards, be the lead actor in the school play." He chuckled. "It was *Oliver Twist* that year and Coni won the audition. Luis wasn't happy about that because it was his favorite book. And he also thought he'd fill all the team captain slots--like he had in boarding school--and put these 'imperialist Yankee dogs' in their place. He really thought he could come in there and just take over. He had this grand scheme to graduate Valedictorian and go on to West Point, go back to his country and kick butt."

"But that didn't happen."

"No, it did not!" Sullivan said emphatically. "Everybody hated that snotty little twerp from day one. He was always slacking off, getting the rest of us into trouble. His uniforms looked like he had slept in them most of the time. He never shined his shoes unless he was forced. He'd goof off during PT and we'd wind up having to do extra pushups because of him." He drained his beer, then crushed the can in his fist. "We stood it as long as we could until the day Coni had to do extra laps in the rain because of that dirty little bastard."

"What happened?"

"Coni had given Luis an order, which Luis ignored. They got into a shouting contest. Coni shoved Luis--nothing out of the ordinary--but Luis shoved him back. You don't do that to a superior officer and Coni put him on report. Luis was furious because that meant he had to pull guard duty all weekend long and he had made plans to sneak into town to meet some girl. So somehow, two packs of Marlboros just appeared in Coni's locker during inspection the next day."

"Did Irish know who put the cigarettes in his locker?"

Sullivan gave her a long look, then smiled. "He knew who was responsible if not the exact party who'd put them there."

"What did he do?"

"Coni?" Sullivan laughed. "Nothing. He didn't have to."

"What do you mean?"

"Let me guess," Boucharde laughed. "Somebody gave Quinterras a little blanket party."

At Rhianna's puzzled frown, Sullivan nudged her with his foot. "Never heard of a blanket party, little one? It's where a bunch of guys gang up on some slacker, some guy

who's causing trouble in the unit, and cover him with a blanket so he can't recognize you, then beat the crap out of him."

Rhianna cocked her head to one side. "Wouldn't you say that's a fair analogy of what your kidnappers did to you, Mickey?"

Sullivan's left brow cocked. "Not only pretty, but sharp as a tack, too. Yeah, I'd say it was a damned good analogy."

"How did Quinterras react to the beating?" Boucharde asked.

"Oh, he was very cool about it," Sullivan recalled. "Not one word out of his mouth. He could barely walk when we got through with him. He knew damned well who had beaten him, believe me, but he went out of his way to keep out of Coni's way. Thinking back on it, he probably thought Coni had ordered the beating, which he didn't, by the way.

"Things got worse after that. Every time he turned around, Coni was besting him at something. Coni was winning the awards at the end of the year. Coni had the higher GPA. Coni took the top medals during Field Practice." Sullivan paused a moment, staring off across the cloudy surface of Lake Ontario. "Then just before the fall semester began, Coni's dad died."

"He went home?"

"Yeah and came back with the same chip on his shoulder he'd had when he first arrived." Sullivan rocked the chair forward so that all four legs set solidly on the deck. "Lord, that boy was a mess. I don't know what happened while he was home for the funeral, but whatever his mother and sister did, it took its toll on Coni Nolan. He came back meaner than a junk yard dog with twice the bite."

"That might have been about the same time he learned about Bridget's death," Rhianna said softly.

Michael Sullivan turned his attention from the Lake and looked at Rhianna. "I'd forgotten about that," he replied. "But, yeah, you may be right because he was Jamie's roommate and Jamie said he heard him crying at night when he thought Jamie was asleep. At the time, I wondered how he could be crying over his father."

"Her death must have devastated him," Rhianna replied.

"How close are you to him, little one?" Sullivan asked.

"Not as close as I'd like to be," she answered truthfully, "but we'll get there."

"Good," he said and returned his gaze to the Lake. "There's been a marked lack of people to love him in Coni's life."

"I take it things got even worse between him and this Quinterras after he went back down there?" Boucharde asked.

"Worse is an inadequate word, Mr. Fibber Man," Sullivan sighed. "Try dangerous." He leaned forward in the chair and braced his elbows on his knees, then clasped his hands and rested his chin on his fists. "That was when Quinterras hired someone to kill Coni."

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

Luis Quinterras sat in isolated luxury in the back seat of the car staring at the rows of lights in the windows of the Midwest Clinic. In the front seat, his old friend and constant companion, Victor Busbee, hummed softly. The black man's deep bass voice was soothing--as it had been since Luis was a boy--and the melody of the Negro spiritual he hummed brought back pleasant memories.

"They know by now," Luis said, looking into the rear view mirror where Victor's gaze met his own.

"They probably do, but does it matter? They can't know what it is you plan."

"We only have three weeks, Victor."

"There is plenty of time, Padrino," Victor replied affectionately. "Do not worry."

"I hate him, Victor."

"Si, Padrino, I know."

"I want him dead!"

"And he will die," Victor said, his deep voice filled with loving acquiescence. He turned in the seat and put out a calming hand to the man in the back. "Have I not promised this to you many times? I will gut him myself."

Luis's lip thrust out like a child's who has been denied a toy. "He hurt me." His dark eyes flashed. "They all hurt me." He fingered the scars on his face, hating the feel of the puckered flesh.

"And we have hurt them, Padrino," Victor reminded him.

"Not enough. Not nearly enough."

"No, but we are not through with them, yet, are we, Senor Le Guerrero?"

A small, delighted smile pulled at Luis Quinterras's mouth. "No, we are not." He took the thick hand on his knee and brought it to his cheek, nuzzled his face against the callused palm. "You'll avenge me, won't you, Victor?"

"Si, Padrino," Victor Busbee said with quiet insistence. "That I will."

## Chapter Thirty

“Well, we were going on to Billings, Montana, but we’ve spoken to the man there and he confirmed what we had already learned from the man here in New York,” Boucharde told his Supervisor in Des Moines. “No, Sir, I see no need to go on to Montana. I can have the Bureau there take Collins’ statement.”

As Boucharde talked, Rhianna stood off to one side and watched the traffic in the Syracuse airport moving past her. She had called Trip in New Gregory twice a day since she’d been gone and he had told her there was no change in Conor’s condition.

“I should be there with him,” she had said.

“He’s being watched, Rhee,” Trip had assured her for the tenth time. “Nothing’s going to happen to Irish while you’re gone. You’ve done more good for him with the Fibber than you could have done here.”

“Anything on that Rogers bitch, yet?”

“Nothing of consequence. The ID she showed for the marriage license to Collins was a fake. Like Sullivan told you, it’s probably an alias. Nothing new on the sketch, either.”

“Is Nolan’s sister still keeping everybody from seeing him?”

“Cortesio called her and tried pleading with her, but she just hung up on him. Doesn’t look like there’s anything we can do until Irish decides to wake up.”

Rhianna jumped, coming out of her reverie, as Boucharde laid a hand on her shoulder. “Don’t sneak up on me like that, Franc.”

“Edgy?” He grinned. “Too many cups of that ‘damned fine coffee’!”

“Thank you for that pronouncement, Agent Cooper,” she grumbled, wondering if Boucharde had watched every TV show there had ever been about the FBI.

Boucharde chuckled, pleased that she had picked up on the TV idiom. “I gave them what we have and they’re going to start checking into Quinterras’ background. They’re putting in a call to his father, whom apparently someone there in the office knew.”

“Poor man,” she said, feeling sorry for the gentleman Mick Sullivan had described. “He must have been terribly embarrassed by what happened.”

“Who could blame him?” He looked at his watch. “We need to get on over to the check-in. The plane leaves in half an hour.”

As she walked beside him, Rhianna noticed the envious looks of the young women they passed. She smiled. Franc was a handsome man with his dark looks and soulful brown eyes. He had a way of making a woman feel very feminine and very protected and if her heart wasn’t already taken she thought perhaps she would have liked to get to know François Étienne Bouchard better. But she loved Conor Nolan. More and more with every new thing she learned about him. Hearing his friends talk about him, even Tim-Pat Collins, who over the phone had made himself out to be Coni’s ‘very bestest of friends,’ made her realize just what a special man Irish was and how hard it had been to win both his faith and his love.

On the plane later, as the blue sky began to give way to thick waves of clouds, she laid her head against the back of her seat and stared out the window. Mick Sullivan's words made her remember just how lucky she was that Luis Quinterras had failed in his first attempt to kill Conor Nolan.

"Coni used to sneak out of the dorm after curfew," Sullivan explained, "whenever things got too much for him to handle. He never got letters from his mother or sister but his old man wrote him every other week or so and always near the end of the trimester to make sure Coni was 'toeing the line' as Liam called it. When those letters would come, Coni would take off.

"He'd go out behind the football field where nobody could see him and just run and run and run until he exhausted himself. He'd take some clean sweats with him and take a dip in a creek that ran at the north end of the grounds before coming back. Then he'd slip back in and go to bed.

"Everybody, maybe even the staff, knew he did it, but no one said anything. His grades were excellent and he was one hell of an athlete so they just left him alone. He wasn't hurting anybody, getting into trouble or nothing, so what was the harm?

"One night, it was the Tuesday before a big track meet we were going to be having with LWMA, he went out and didn't come back. Jamie woke me up at about a quarter to two and said Coni wasn't in, yet. I got up and me and him and Tim-Pat went looking for Coni. As soon as we got around the back of Kesper Hall, we saw the red lights flashing off the bleachers and knew something was wrong. We starting running, worried sick that he had tripped over something in the dark and broken his neck. When Coni ran to escape his demons, he ran. He didn't pace himself. He didn't pay any attention to where he was. He just flat out ran.

"He was lying on the stretcher when we got there. The Commandant saw us and started yelling, telling us to get the hell back to the dorm, but we ignored him. We got up to Coni and saw his face was all bloody. His jaw kinda hung to one side and he was doing his level best not to groan. His eyes were glazed with pain."

Sullivan had stopped and popped open another beer, downed it in three gulps, and squashed the can in one beefy palm. He threw the empty as hard as he could across his yard and it sailed over his dock and into the lake.

"There had been three of them," he grated out through clenched teeth. "Three big old vicious rednecks from Eufaula, liquored up on 'shine. They'd been watching for him for a couple of days and when he came down to the creek to wash off after his run, they jumped him and beat the living shit out of him. They broke his nose and his jaw; six ribs, one of which punctured a lung; they stomped on his hand and broke two of his fingers; and bashed him in the head with a goddamned baseball bat. They would have killed him for sure if there hadn't been someone else there that night. Someone who always followed Coni when he went out at night and saw the men jump him. The moment they did--knowing he wouldn't be of any help up against men three times his size--he sprinted for the Commandant's house and started pounding away on the door."

"Danny Keane," Boucharde had said.

"Yeah. Danny," Sullivan agreed. "He was in love with Coni, still is, I think. Maybe even a little obsessed."

"Lucky for Nolan," Boucharde acknowledged. "Both then and now."

"So Danny saved Coni's life," Rhianna said.

“Yeah. They’d just hit Coni with the bat and were about to do it again when the Commandant and one of the other staff members came roaring out of the dark at them. Before they could get away, the Commandant and Sergeant Billiard caught ‘em and made mincemeat out of them.” He chuckled. “The Commandant had a black belt in Karate and Sergeant Hilliard owned a dojo and was very proficient in Tai Kwan Do. When the police questioned the men, they admitted to having been hired by one of the cadets, a boy with a Spanish accent. Since Luis was the only Spanish boy at NBMA, they didn’t have any trouble pointing him out to the Commandant the next day. The men were convicted of assault and battery and Luis, being a minor, was named as an accessory.

“Luis was expelled. His father arrived, grateful to the Commandant that he had insisted that Luis be handed over to the school for house arrest instead of being sent to juvie hall. He apologized for what had happened, asked for Coni’s mother’s address so he could make financial restitution for what had happened. He made some kind of deal with the local cops and they handed Luis over into his custody, glad to have the shitty little bastard off their hands and a potential international incident aborted. You know what I mean--diplomatic immunity and all.

“Coni spent three weeks in the hospital and came back with a cast on his hand, his jaw wired shut, and a brace around his chest. He never said a word about what had happened to him. Never let on about what General Quinterras had said to him when he went to the hospital to apologize to Coni, taking his crazed son with him, too. I don’t know if Luis apologized, but somehow I doubt it. Luis wasn’t into self-abasement.”

“Doesn’t sound like it,” Boucharde agreed.

“I’ll lay you odds the General asked what he could do and Irish asked him to find his son,” Rhianna said quietly.

Sullivan nodded. “That would make sense, wouldn’t it?”

“But the General must not have been able to find the child.”

“How did Luis take being expelled?” the Fibber asked.

Sullivan had chortled. “When Luis was leaving, he jerked away from his father and started shouting up at the dormitories, telling us how he’d get even with us if it took him twenty years. How he’d make each of us pay for having hurt him. How we’d be sorry we’d ever heard the name Luis Quinterras. The general was pulling him toward the car, slapping him, trying his best to get the boy under control. The chauffeur finally got out of the limo and ran to Luis, picked him up and carried him kicking and screaming to the car. All the time he was being carried, he kept shouting for Coni, although Coni was still in the hospital. He kept saying how he would make Coni suffer worst of all, how he’d take everything Coni had ever held dear and destroy it right before his eyes, making him watch while the life drained out of everything he loved.

“Four months after his departure, he sent a letter to Coni with just seven words written on the pages.”

“What did it say?” Rhianna asked.

Sullivan lowered his head. His face paled and he squeezed his eyes shut. “It said, ‘You will be sorry you lived, pig.’”

## Chapter Thirty-One

He woke up slowly, his eyelids feeling as though they were glued down. There was a foul taste in his mouth and his throat hurt. He tried to turn his head, had to stop when he realized there was a tube in his mouth. The ceiling shifted, settled, shifted again, then seemed to slip away to the right. His head spun crazily for a moment, then the white acoustic tiles popped back into place above him.

"Good morning," a soft voice said and a face appeared in his line of vision. "Welcome back."

His vision blurred and he blinked, trying to clear away the fog. He felt hands on him--assessing, probing, lifting his arm and pressing lightly against a small sticking pain along the back of his left hand.

"I'll tell the doctor you're awake."

When the man in the white coat appeared before him, Conor Nolan became even more disoriented. He didn't know this man. He tried to get away from the threatening situation in which he found himself, but discovered he couldn't move.

"I'm Dr. Singleton, Detective Nolan," the man said, patting him on the shoulder, seeming to understand the unease that formed in his patient's mind. "Your sister placed you in my care. You're in the Midwest Clinic."

Why had she moved him? The doctor shone a light in his eyes. Did Rhianna know where he was? Was she here? He wanted to ask, but the tube down his throat would not permit it. Instead, he grunted, hoping someone would understand.

"I think we can remove the tube, nurse," the doctor said and Conor slowly closed his eyes with gratitude.

"You've been in a coma for more than two weeks, Detective," the doctor explained. "That is why you're so weak and things appear a bit out of sync." He scribbled something on Conor's hospital chart, then laid his hand on his patient's shoulder. "You're going to be fine."

The doctor drifted out of his line of vision and the nurse reappeared. Another head moved into sight and he cocked his eyes that way, fearful again of masked faces and sharp needles and the blackness in which he'd spent so much time.

"This may be a little uncomfortable, but we'll be through before you know it," one woman said as the other laid a reassuring hand on his arm.

When they removed the tube, he gagged reflexively and the pain was nearly more than he could bear. He twisted his head to the side, gorge rising up in his bruised throat as he felt a cool plastic surface pressed lightly against his cheek. "Poor baby," one of the nurses said and Conor's mind jerked back from the voice and the words. He dug his hands into the sheet, frantically tried to lift his head to see the woman, but he gagged again, his stomach muscles tightening.

"Doctor has ordered ten milligrams of Vistaril," the other woman said. "Stay with him until I get back."

No! he cried out in his mind although his aching throat could not release the



words. He struggled again to get up and shuddered as she leaned over him--her hands on each of his shoulders, pressing him back into the mattress--and her face swam into focus above him.

“Don’t worry, my Celtic warrior,” she said, her lips easing into a mocking smile, “We’re going to take very good care of you.”

## Chapter Thirty-Two

Rhianna's plane touched down at a quarter to two in the afternoon and taxied roughly over the tarmac. It had been a harrowing commuter hop from Chicago with a hellish thunderstorm buffeting the plane. She was thankful to be on the ground, relieved the lightning zapping all around them had not decided to spear the propjet like a shish-ka-bob.

Beside her, Boucharde was gripping the armrests of his seat as though he, and he alone, had been able to hold the aircraft together during the storm.

"We're on the ground, Mr. Fibber Man."

"Eat shit and die, Marek."

"Why, Franc," she teased, "a big, bad Bureau agent like you wasn't afraid of a little rain, was he?"

"I hate thunderstorms." He released his taut grip on the armrest as the plane rolled to a stop at the jetway. "I fucking hate thunderstorms."

"And such language from one of Mr. Hoover's best?" She clucked her tongue. "Shame on you!"

He snorted and hurriedly unsnapped his seat belt. "And I don't like being confined during a thunderstorm!"

"Where did you think you could have gone up there, Boucharde?" She laughed. "Out for a stroll on the wing?"

"Knock it off."

She understood his phobia. Hers was elevators. She patted his hand and when he turned to her with a scathing look, she smiled to let him know she'd only been kidding.

"You want me to drop you off at the station?" he asked, somewhat mollified.

"My car's there," she answered, "but I'd kind of like to go by the clinic and--"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, I don't know why I don't just use what little authority I have and get you in to see the man."

Her eyes lit up. "Would you?"

Franc Boucharde looked at her. For one moment he entertained the idea of telling her how he felt, but cast it aside. She wasn't interested. Her beaming face told him as much.

"Sure," he said, standing up to retrieve their raincoats from the overhead compartment. "Why the hell not?"

\* \* \* \*

Erica Bochner recognized Rhianna Marek walking down the corridor toward Nolan's room. She slipped into the room from which she'd been exiting. Cursing beneath her breath, Erica waited just inside a dying patient's room, ignoring the man's low call for comfort.

She heard the guard outside Nolan's door speaking to Marek, heard the door open and close, then let out a long and annoyed breath. This had not been expected. Marek should not be there.

“Nurse, please,” Dennis Clark beseeched her. “I need something for the pain.”

Erica turned around and glared at the young man who was rapidly succumbing to the HIV virus that ravaged him. “All right,” she promised, feeling just a little sorry for him. After all, he’d be dying that evening. Erica looked forward to putting him out of his misery.

Opening the door, she stuck her head out, making sure the corridor was clear before hurrying out and away. As she walked--feeling eyes on her back as her rubber-soled shoes squeaked on the tile--she put a little extra wiggle in her walk for the Federal Marshal to appreciate. Risking being recognized by Marek should the woman come out of Nolan’s room unexpectedly, she turned and smiled promisingly at the man guarding Nolan’s door. He grinned back and Erica Bochner, alias Felicity Rogers, blew him a saucy kiss.

\* \* \* \*

The Vistaril had made him groggy, but it had done little to impede his attempt to get off the bed and away from the woman who had brought this hell down on him in the first place. He had pulled the IV from his hand, the oxygen tube from his nose, and had managed to swing his legs over the side of the bed before the door opened and he heard a soft, agitated gasp.

“What are you doing?”

He looked around, stunned by the sound of that voice, and opened his mouth to speak before his legs shot out from beneath him and he went down, hitting the floor hard on his tailbone, his teeth clicking together.

“Marshal!”

Rhianna was over him, on her knees beside him, before he could try to rise. Someone hefted him beneath his armpits and he felt Rhianna’s hands on his legs as he was lifted back onto the bed.

“What is going on here?” It was the stern, uncompromising voice of the first nurse who had spoken to him earlier.

“He was trying to get out of bed when I came in,” he heard Rhianna explaining.

“You pulled the IV out of your arm. Shame on you, Mr. Nolan!” the nurse accused. She was pressing down on the top of his hand with the thumb of one hand while she repeatedly clicked the call button with the other.

“Rhianna,” he croaked and his throat felt on fire with pain. “She’s here.”

“What?” Rhianna said, having trouble hearing him over the nurse’s clipped orders to whoever was on the desk.

“She’s here,” he repeated.

“You’ll have to wait out in the hall,” the nurse snapped at Rhianna, taking a firm hold on her shoulders and turning her toward the door.

“No,” he whispered, seeing squiggly black lines forming along the periphery of his vision. He was passing out and he couldn’t allow himself to do that. “Rhee ....”

“I knew this was a bad idea,” the head nurse hissed. She pushed Rhianna out into the hall, shoved the Federal Marshal out behind her and stormed back to the bed. “Be quiet, young man!” she ordered.

“She’s here,” he said, feeling himself slipping away. “Tell Rhee, she’s here.”

“Yes, and I can assure you Detective Marek will not be coming back in here anytime soon!”

As the night folded over him and closed him off from the light, he tried to make the woman hovering above him--the woman piercing his flesh with her needle and tube--understand that his life was in danger. He tried unsuccessfully to tell her.

"You're safe," he heard her saying from a long way off.

No, he thought with growing terror.

He was not.

\* \* \* \*

Caitlin Greiner was livid as she stormed down the hallway into the squad room and threw open the door to Captain Darlington's office before anyone could stop her. "How dare you?" everyone heard her shout. "I am going to sue you, Rhianna Marek, and the entire city of New Gregory for every last penny you possess!"

Joey Cortesio leaned back in his chair and, like the others listening with rapt attention to the shrieking haridan in Darlington's office, grinned.

"Who's the broad?" Corbettson snorted as he came out of the break room.

"Irish's sister," Fullick informed him.

"Figures," Corbettson grunted. "What's she bitching about?"

"That FBI guy? Boucharde? He got Rhianna in to see Irish and Rhee found him trying to get out of bed. There was some big commotion and they threw Marek out of the clinic."

Corbettson rolled his eyes. "She just can't keep away from that prick, can she?" He stared over his cup of coffee at the woman screaming out her invectives to the captain. "I take it that broad doesn't like Marek much, huh?"

"I guess not," Fullick commented.

"My brother is an ass, Captain Darlington, but he is still family. He is incapable of knowing what is best for him so I will have to make the decisions for him. I will not have that woman near him. Do you understand me?" Caitlin Greiner's voice was shrill and challenging as she punctuated her words with sharp raps of her fist on Darlington's desk.

C.C. Corbettson's eyes filled with speculation as he continued to watch and listen to the angry woman bombarding Darlington with threats and warnings. When he saw her preparing to leave, he set his cup down and stood up.

Cortesio shook his head with disgust as Caitlin Nolan Greiner exploded out of the captain's office and, shoving Trip out of her way rampaged her way back down the hallway and out of sight. "Bitch," he labeled her and picked up the phone, jabbed in a number. "Special Agent Boucharde, please. Detective Cortesio calling." When Boucharde came on the line, he told him what had just happened.

"She's probably on her way over here," the Fibber said dryly. "Thanks for the warning."

"Do you know where Rhianna is?" Joey asked.

"I think she went home to shower and change. Why?"

"There's a guy called about half an hour ago and he said he needed to talk to her. He's on his way down here from the airport."

"Airport?" Boucharde questioned. "Did he give you a name?"

"Yeah. Cullen. Jamie Cullen."

\* \* \* \*

"Ma'am?" Corbettson called out, jogging to catch up with the woman stalking across the parking lot.

Caitlin turned, hissed like a wet cat, then spun back around, ignoring Corbettson. "Miss Nolan! Wait just a minute!"

She had reached her car and was yanking the door open when he finally caught up with her. "What the fuck do you want?" she demanded, facing him.

Corbettson's lips pulled back in an appreciative grin, "I'd like to help you," he said.

Caitlin raked him with a disgusted glance, "I don't need help from a cocksucker who can't even take the time to make sure his fucking socks match!"

Brought up short by her remark, C.C.'s attention dipped swiftly to his feet, then his head came up with a snap, "They match," he said.

"One is black," she sneered at him as though he was the village idiot, "and the other is navy blue."

He whistled. "You can tell from one look?"

"Get the hell away from me, you motherfucker!" she grated, put a hand in the center of his chest and pushed.

Corbettson's hand snaked out and caught hers. His fingers closed tightly--grinding the fragile bones together. He bent her arm to the side, watching her eyes widened in pain.

"Nobody calls me a motherfucker, cunt!" he rasped, jerking her up to his chest, then backing her into the side panel of her car. "You got that?" He pressed against her.

Caitlin made a snarling sound and tried to bring her knee up into his groin, but he was faster. His knee went between her legs and jerked upward, lifting her from the payment as his barrel-like chest smashed cruelly into her breasts. "Be still!" he ordered through clenched teeth.

"You...are...hurting...me," she grunted, trying to rake the nails of her free hand down his arm. He grabbed that hand, too, and crucified it against the hot metal of the car roof before she could jerk away.

"Be still!" he repeated and his knee lifted her higher.

Caitlin's head was thrown back over the top of the car and she glared down her nose at him. "Let go," she demanded.

Something in the way she looked at him, the way she spoke, told Corbettson she wasn't disliking his manhandling of her. If anything, the excitement in her flashing eyes gave him permission to continue. He knew his own kind when he saw one.

"You married?" he asked, grinding against her.

"What if I am?" Caitlin spat. She liked the fevered glow in his eyes, liked the painful strength in his hands as his cruel grip tightened and wondered what it would feel like to have him hit her, to feel that rough palm along her cheek.

"It wouldn't matter," he said. He leaned into her, pressing her breasts flat, hurting her, and grinning at the little growl of pleasure that came from her throat.

"Who are you?" Caitlin asked, licking her lips.

"Your savior, baby," he answered.

\* \* \* \*

Rain lashed at the windows and pelted the roof. The onslaught sounded like pebbles bouncing against an overstuffed pillow. The sky beyond the panes was a dark gunmetal gray, shooting tracers of lightning, and the wind shrieked.

Trip watched Rhianna pacing in front of the double living room windows and

wondered if he should try to calm her. If the woman didn't wear out the carpet beneath her bare feet, she'd soon wear herself out, so he just relaxed in the recliner and allowed her to take out her frustrations on the squeaking floor.

"Where was he going?" she asked again. "What was he trying to do? He was trying to leave the clinic."

Knowing there was no acceptable way to answer the rhetorical question, Marek's partner kept silent.

"He looked scared, Triplett."

"He'd just woke up in a strange place with strange people around him," Trip commented. "After everything he's been through, it's understandable that he might be a bit confused."

"He was scared. Not confused. He knew who I was."

"Yes, but he didn't know who they were."

"I didn't even get a chance to talk to him."

"No, but you got a chance to see that he was all right."

"He was scared."

Trip sighed. It wouldn't do any good to argue with Marek when she was like this. It was her hardheaded German-Dutch ancestry from her father's people and the West of Ireland stubbornness and Cherokee Indian single-mindedness of her mother's that made her so obstinate. The combination was lethal. It was also maddening.

"What was he scared of?"

"Maybe he heard you were coming to visit and was trying to get away," Trip mumbled.

Rhianna stopped pacing and turned to glare at him. "Very funny."

"The man is in protective custody. Can't nobody get to him. I know that's what's got you so spooked. But making yourself sick worrying about him isn't going to help him or you, Rhianna. You can't get back in to see him. The bitch has seen to that. Unless I miss my guess, there'll be a court order prohibiting you from coming within three hundred yards of that place come morning. So just sit your ass down and be quiet. I'm tired of watching you dig a trench in the floor boards!"

"Then why don't you get your ass on home, Triplett?" she flung at him. "I don't need--" She was interrupted by the ringing phone. She stomped to it, snatched the receiver from its cradle and barked a nasty hello.

"Did I catch you at a bad time?" Boucharde laughed.

"What is it?" she asked, her hand tightening around the receiver. "Has something happened?"

"No," the FBI agent drawled. "I just wanted to let you know I spoke to one of the marshals down at the clinic and our boy is resting comfortably."

Rhianna laid her head against the wall. "Thanks. I'm sorry I snapped at you."

"Hey, you're under a lot of strain. I understand." He cleared his throat. "Also, I wanted to tell you that Jamie Cullen is here."

"Here?" she asked, straightening up. "Why?"

"He came out to see you. He went to the station, but that was when you were throwing your second temper tantrum down at the clinic, Grace O'Malley."

"It wasn't a tantrum," she denied.

Boucharde let that pass unchallenged. "Anyway, Joey said the man looked really

sick. He tried to get him to go to the doctor, but Cullen refused so Cortesio took him home with him. He said to tell you he'd bring Cullen over to your place in the morning."

"But why is Jamie here, Franc? Did you speak to him?" She had a bad feeling about this. When they had last seen the Florida DEA agent, it had been in a hospital emergency room where they had taken him to get help for his problem.

There was a pause, then the sound of the Fibber releasing a long, tired breath. "Yes, I spoke to him, Rhianna."

"And?" she prompted, annoyed with him drawing the thing out.

"He doesn't think it's over, Rhianna," Boucharde answered. "He called Sullivan, Collins, and Keane and apparently they agreed with him. He thinks the kidnappers are going to come after you."

"Meet me at Cortesio's!" she said and hung up.

Smiling gratefully up at the beautiful woman at his bedside, Dennis Clark closed his eyes to let the morphine work its magic on the demon virus that was eating him alive. He put a thin, quivering hand on the nurse's arm. "Thank you, Erica," he said, his voice hoarse from the chemicals, which rendered his throat almost useless.

Slipping the empty syringe into the pocket of her uniform, the blonde beauty patted his hand reassuringly. "Just close your eyes, Dennis. Try to get some sleep."

She waited with him, watched him until the faint rise and fall of his chest ceased and the heart monitor at the head of his bed became one thin, unwavering line and the instrument played a single unwavering tone.

She heard the squeak of hurrying footsteps stop abruptly outside. The silence was broken by the swishing of the door opening.

"The family asked for a no code?" the night duty nurse asked as she came to the bed and stared down at the dead man.

"Yes."

"I'll start the paperwork and have Dr. Kirby come in to pronounce," the nurse said and withdrew.

The resident came into the room, glanced at Dennis Clarke. "What time is it?" he asked.

Erica looked at her watch. "It's eight forty-five, sir."

"Time of death: eight forty-five p.m.," the resident said in a bored tone. He yawned, then left.

Erica began to remove the tubes and lines attached to the dead man. As she worked, she hummed a Swedish lullaby. When every lifeline that had anchored Dennis Clark to the living had been taken away, she drew the sheet up over his face.

\* \* \* \*

Federal Marshal Sam Jennings heard the thin wail of the heart monitor and had been in enough hospitals over the years and seen enough TV medical shows to know what it meant. The gay guy in the room next door had finally bought it. Sam was looking at the Des Moines Register Sports section when the racy blonde nurse started toward him. "Guy's gone, huh?" he asked as she drew closer.

Erica stopped beside him and let her shoulders slump "Yes." She lowered her head. "I just never get used to it."

"Well," Sam said, feeling uncomfortable. He folded the paper and laid it on the

floor beside his chair. He stood up. "That's life."

Sometimes Erica thought she would have made one heck of an actress. Making the tears flow down her cheeks on cue was an art and Erica had mastered it long ago. Slowly she raised her head and let her grief show. "He was so young."

"We all gotta go," Sam replied. He started to put his hand on her shoulder, but thought better of it. He was on duty. Instead, he thrust his hands behind him to keep them out of temptation.

Erica molded her face into a mask of sorrow and the sobs tore from her as though pulled out one by one with giant tweezers. Burying her face in her hands, she leaned into the guard.

Astonishment, then guilty pleasure, passed quickly across Sam's countenance before he hesitantly brought his arms up and around her, holding her shaking body to him and patting her awkwardly. Her arms circled his waist while she pressed her tearful face to his chest.

"It's okay, honey," he said as he inhaled the heady scent of her perfume. "It's okay." He barely felt the sting of the needle that took him down into the black halls of unconsciousness.



## Chapter Thirty-Three

It was a nightmarish drive through a world dissolving beneath the deluge of rain. The wiper blades slapped viciously at wave after wave of water slamming against Trip's windshield. The wipers were proving to be of little help in making out the black tar of the roadway. Only the almost-steady pulsing of white light flaring across the firmament kept him from wandering off the road and into the overflowing ditches on either side.

"Jesus Christ!" Trip complained as Rhianna swiped at the inside of the windshield with an old T-shirt. "What is this? Another flood?"

Rhianna glanced at him. She'd been thinking the same thing. The Midwestern floods of nineteen ninety-three had been devastating and they had started just this way. The rain had started in the early hours of morning and now, at almost nine thirty at night, it showed no sign of stopping. She flinched as another ultra-bright streak of light left an after-image on her retina.

"I can't see a damned thing."

"We're almost there. Turn right at the next intersection."

"Yeah, yeah," Trip snapped. "I know."

Trip's hands were like vise grips on the steering wheel and he dared not take his eyes from the road. He had been hunched forward over the steering wheel the entire trip. Now, his back was killing him and his shoulders cramped from holding the position for so long. Neither condition had done much to improve his good humor.

"There," Rhianna said.

"I see it." Taking his hand from the wheel only long enough to flip on his turn signal, he tapped the brakes, hoping he still had some braking power left.

Rhianna felt the car begin fishtailing.

"Sonofabitch!" Trip exploded. "Hold on!"

They took the turn in an arcing skid, barely missing the stop sign at the corner of the connecting road, thankful no car was sitting at the intersection. The left rear wheel jumped the curb and dug into the shoulder, but Trip tamped down on the accelerator just enough to keep their forward momentum going. With a lurch and a thud, the four by four's tire slipped off the curb's cement obstruction and back on the street.

"That's my baby," Trip said. "She's one fine piece of machinery."

"Did you take the evasive driving course?" Rhianna asked shakily as Trip finally got his car under control.

"Shut up, Marek." His hands flexed around the steering wheel. "Two streets down, on the left, right?"

"Right."

By the time they pulled up in front of Cortesio's townhouse, the rain was one single rippling sheet of tarnished silver hanging from the sky.

"No way I'm getting out in this," Trip told her.

Rhianna agreed. They had gotten wet enough just running from her porch to the car. If they ventured out in this mess, they'd be soaked before they got five feet.

She had no choice but to sit back and wait until the rain slacked. The nightmarish ride to Joey's had only underscored her nervousness, made her more edgy. Looking out at the water cascading down the window, she thought it a good analogy for the tears she'd shed since Irish had disappeared.

"Even the heavens are crying for us," she whispered.

"What?" Trip asked.

"Nothing," Rhianna said, slumping in her seat.

\* \* \* \*

Victor Busbee laid the unconscious guard on the floor of the utility closet. He stood up, adjusted his orderly's uniform tunic and stepped into the hallway, pulling a large canvas laundry cart behind him. Taking his time, he rolled the cart toward the dead man's room, barely glancing at the door behind which his Patrino's enemy lay. Erica would stay with the others, keeping them busy at the desk, seeing to the state-sanctioned paperwork that was necessary when someone died. She would see that no one came down the corridor to notice the Federal Marshal missing from the door of Conor Nolan's room.

Victor pushed the cart into Dennis Clark's room. Working quickly, the black man flung the sheet from the corpse, scooped the boy from the bed, and dumped him into the laundry cart. Covering the cart with the sheet, he pushed it out of the room and down the hall. He stopped in front of the Irishman's door. Glancing around to make sure no one was watching he backed into the room, dragging the cart with him.

\* \* \* \*

Erica went to the water fountain at the terminus of the nurses' station area where the corridor led down to Nolan's room. The Federal Marshal was gone and there was no sign of Victor. She stooped and pretended to drink, her eyes on the door of room 318.

"Erica, will you see that Mr. Clarke is taken down to the back entrance?" the night duty nurse asked.

Erica straightened up and turned her head toward the speaker. "Now?" she asked.

The nurse nodded. "The hearse is here to pick him up."

"Okay." Erica left the fountain and went back to the desk. "Janice, do you have a stick of gum? That garbage I had for supper left a funny taste in my mouth." She grimaced. "It tastes like a skunk crawled in there and died."

"Sure," the nurse laughed. She bent over to retrieve her pocketbook and began rummaging through it in search of the Wrigley's. "I've got some in here somewhere."

\* \* \* \*

Victor stared down at the sleeping man and smiled. There was spite in his chocolate brown gaze and the smile would have put a Great White shark to shame. Reaching inside the pocket of his tunic, the black man took out a plastic zip-lock and pulled it open. He withdrew a chloroform-soaked rag and clamped it over Conor Nolan's face. Conor came only partially awake beneath the pressure covering his mouth and nose, then Victor's target went limp.

\* \* \* \*

Just as Erica had done with Dennis Clarke, Victor slid the IV needle from Nolan's hand. He tossed back the sheet, hefted the unconscious patient from the bed and laid him on the floor. Leaning down into the laundry cart, he picked up the dead man, laid him on the bed and shoved the IV tube into his rapidly-cooling arm. He covered Dennis Clarke with the sheet, tilted his head so that his face was turned away from the door, then lifted

Nolan into the laundry cart.

He checked the hallway again, then hurried the cart into 316 where he placed Nolan in the bed and pulled the sheet over his face. He pulled the laundry cart out of the room and took it back to the utility closet.

Erica was waiting at the door as he came out again. Neither said a word. There was no need. The blonde turned and headed up the corridor while Victor grabbed a gurney parked against the wall and headed for Room 316.

The exchange had taken less than thirty seconds. In less than two minutes, Erica and Victor were in the service elevator with the gurney and on their way to the waiting hearse.

## Chapter Thirty-Four

Jamie Cullen looked worse than he had before. His eyes were sunken in his head and he was sweating despite the chilled air that flowed from the Cortesios' air conditioning vents. "I got to thinking about it after you left," Jamie said, trying to still the tremor in his hands. "I called Sullivan and he told me what you all had come up with."

"About Luis Quinterras?" asked Boucharde.

"Yeah." Cullen wrapped his arms around himself. To everyone in the room, it seemed that was the only way he could hold himself together. "I was lying there in the bed, in the hospital, going over it in my mind." He laughed shakily. "What mind I got left. It occurred to me that Luis had done just about all he said he would."

"Hurting the people Coni cared about?" Rhianna asked.

"And making Coni suffer." His teeth chattered.

"I'll turn down the air," Joey said, feeling the other man's misery to his very roots.

"Hey, thanks man," Cullen said. "I'm not used to this Iowa weather." He laughed softly.

"You didn't have to come all the way out here to tell us what you think Quinterras is doing," Boucharde reminded him. "What's bothering you, Jamie?"

Cullen rolled his shoulders. He couldn't keep still. "Mickey reminded me about Luis' threat that day he left, you know? He said he'd destroy what Coni held dear? Remember?"

"We remember," Rhianna said and felt tears prickling the back of her eyes. If it were the last thing she ever did, she'd make sure this man got help. Everyone in the room felt his suffering and there wasn't a single one of them who didn't want to help Jamie Cullen.

Cullen laughed and this time there was self-grief in the sound. "He destroyed me, that's for sure." When denials were made, he shook his head. "Yeah, he did. And he almost destroyed Mick's marriage. He's put doubt in the minds of Danny's people and caused Tim-Pat all kinds of grief up in Montana." He nodded. "He's done a fucking good job of destroying our lives."

"Only if you let him win, Jamie," Rhianna replied. "And I don't think any of you are going to do that."

"He said he was going to take everything Coni held dear and destroy it, kill it right before his very eyes," Cullen continued as though he hadn't heard her. "He was going to make Coni watch." His tortured gaze went to the FBI agent. "Even if it took him twenty years."

Boucharde flinched and shot out of his chair as if propelled by a cannon. He rushed to the phone and snatched up the receiver, hurriedly jabbing in the numbers of his regional office. "Boucharde!" he identified himself. "I don't have time to explain but start calling the offices in Billings, Montana, Austin, Texas, and Syracuse, New York. I want Collins, Keane, and Sullivan put into protective custody, now! Sullivan's wife and kids,

too. And make it quick!”

Rhianna looked at Jamie Cullen and found him watching her. “Today’s the eighth,” she said and saw him nod.

“Like Mick said, you’re sharp,” Cullen told her.

“I don’t get it,” Cortesio said.

“They all graduated from the military academy on June ninth, nineteen seventy-five,” Rhianna answered. “Twenty years ago tomorrow.”

“You think this Quinterras is planning on trying to take them all out tomorrow?” asked Trip.

“I think he’ll try,” Rhianna said.

Cullen nodded. “But it isn’t just us he’s gonna go after.”

“No,” Boucharde snapped as he hung up the phone. “It isn’t.”

Every man in the room was looking at her and Rhianna felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up. “But I wasn’t there. Quinterras doesn’t even know me.”

“He knows about you,” Boucharde growled.

“And you can bet he knows you’re the one person among us that Coni cherishes the most,” Cullen added.

Rhianna shivered. What had Mick Sullivan told them Luis Quinterras said? She replayed it again in her mind.

“He’d take everything Coni had ever held dear and destroy it right before his eyes, making him watch while the life was drained away ....”

“I know how we can catch him, Rhianna,” she heard Cullen saying and shook herself.

“How?”

Cullen fished something from the pocket of his jeans. He extended his hand, turned it over and unclenched his fingers. In his palm was a pair of earrings made for pierced ears.

Boucharde took one of the earrings. It was a small black disk, one millimeter in diameter, with a rope of twisted silver around the perimeter. He looked up at Cullen. “Do they know you have these, Jamie?”

Cullen grinned like a little boy who’d just pulled off a great prank. “I swiped the tracker, too.”

“Homing devices?” Trip questioned, taking the other earring from Cullen’s palm. “You want her to wear a homing device?” he said angrily.

“They’re going to come after her,” Cortesio said. “I think we all know that.”

“They aren’t going to get her!” Trip bellowed. “What the hell’s wrong with you people? Ain’t no way I’m gonna allow her to get snatched!”

“It’s not up to you, Trip,” Rhianna said quietly. “And I’ll do whatever it takes to get Quinterras out of Conor’s life for good.”

\* \* \* \*

Erica watched as the morgue attendant rolled the gurney into the hearse, then closed and checked the doors. She smiled at the driver, a man who just happened to be her husband, and waved as he put the hearse into gear and pulled away from the loading dock. Without another glance, she hurried to the elevator and rode to the third floor.

“Is he gone?” the charge nurse asked.

“Yes,” Erica replied. “I’m going to make sure Gimble’s cleaning the room.”

Victor was standing in the partially opened door of the utility closet as Erica started down the hall. When she stopped, turned her back to him and waited, he ducked back into the utility room, picked up the unconscious Federal Marshal and carried him back to the door of room 318. He sat the Marshal down, turned, and strode out of the Midwest Clinic for the last time. Erica was right behind him.

## Chapter Thirty-Five

C.C. Corbettson winced as he turned over. His back was alive with a score of wicked scratches and his shaft was bruised and raw. He pushed himself up in the bed and reached for the bottle of tequila on the nightstand. Taking a deep drag on the fiery liquor, he braced the bottle on his naked thigh and turned his head to look down at the sated woman lying beside him.

“How ya doing, darling?” He drawled as he laid his free hand on the woman’s smooth shoulder.

Caitlin Greiner stretched like a contented feline rising out of a long, satisfying slumber and--just like that contented feline--purred deep in her throat as she shifted to her side and laid her head in C.C.’s lap. She slid her left hand under his thigh and nipped him lightly where his thigh met his groin.

“Don’t start something you ain’t prepared to finish,” he warned her.

A lascivious smile pulled at the corners of Caitlin’s broad mouth and she looked up at him through the screen of her lashes--an invitation that did not need voicing.

Setting the bottle of tequila aside, C.C. reached down and plowed his hand through Caitlin’s dark curls and grabbed a fistful of hair. He grinned as she flinched but never considered letting up on the pressure. He knew she didn’t want him to.

A low growl of pleasure came from Caitlin’s throat as he brutally pulled up her head. She had to scoot sideways across him to ease the pain in her scalp, but as his greedy mouth closed over hers and his darting tongue raped her mouth, Caitlin felt the wild beginnings of lust that had been coming and going for her all day long. It was a heady experience she had never known and Corbettson’s savagery thrilled that part of her which had never known expression.

“You like this, baby?” she heard him grunt as his mouth slid from hers.

“I like this,” she returned.

C.C. released his hold on her hair and pushed her down on the rumpled sheets. Before she could protest, he was on and in her in one violent thrust, pushing with all his strength into the heat of her body. Her grunts spurred him on and he filled her fully, punishing her, pummeling her with the entire length of his cock.

“Hurt me!” Caitlin cried out, raking her nails down his back and across his flexing buttocks. “Make me hurt!”

Corbettson was more than happy to oblige her. He was giddy with the unexpected pleasure of finding a woman who enjoyed being hurt as much as he enjoyed hurting her. That she was bruised and battered already from his brutality was far more intoxicating than the booze.

“Yes!” Caitlin screamed. She raised her legs and wrapped them around his hips to anchor him deep within her.

“Do it, baby,” Corbettson ordered, his heavy flanks working like a piston. “Come on and do it!” Without warning, he flipped them over so that she rode him, guiding her hips up and down his length.

“Yes!” She ground herself against his groin, rising up and coming down on his shaft as though trying to pierce her very womb.

“You can do it, baby,” C.C. encouraged. His eyes glazed. “Come on. You can do it!”

Before meeting C.C. Corbettson, Caitlin Nolan Greiner had never experienced an orgasm nor even come close to knowing how one felt. Her husband--worthless little Yuppie stockbroker that he was--had never even brought her to arousal let alone culmination. That this man could succeed with little or no effort drove Caitlin to new heights of needing to know the full spectrum of the sexual experience.

“Hit me!” she whispered and her head rocked as C.C.’s heavy hand connected with her already-bruised jaw. She screamed mindlessly with sheer animal lust as his fingernails clawed across her swollen nipples--drawing blood--and continued on down her belly where his fingers dug into the softness and twisted.

She bucked like a crazed mare then began to shudder as a violent climax seized her. She threw back her head and screamed as the sensation rippled through her body.

C.C. grunted and flipped them over again as the little pulses around his turgid shaft told him she was coming again. He drove mercilessly into her, slamming her head into the upholstered headboard and felt his own shattering fulfillment wash over him. He quivered once, then collapsed atop her, spent.

Sweat was slick between them as Caitlin enclosed C.C. within the possessive circle of her arms. His head lay against her breast, his heavy pants of breath making small explosions of cool air on her flesh. She cradled him tenderly, stroking his damp hair, reveling in the weight of him pressing down on her.

“I think I’ve died and gone to heaven,” she whispered. “Was it good for you?”

C.C. raised up and looked down at her. “Yeah, baby. It was good.” With a gentleness he had never shown another woman, he gently plied his lips over hers. “Real good. Better than I’ve ever had it.”

“I’m glad,” she said. She pressed his head against her bosom.

They both fell asleep only to be brought awake by the rude jingling of the telephone. Neither wanted to answer it, but Corbettson reluctantly reached out to stop the insistent ringing. “Yeah?” he growled into the receiver.

“We’ve had some trouble down at the Midwest Clinic,” Captain Darlington informed him.

C.C. flipped over, dragging the cord across Caitlin’s naked breasts. “What kind of trouble?”

“Nolan is missing.”

Corbettson swung his gaze toward his bed partner. “Missing as in how?”

“Someone popped the Federal Marshal and took him, Corbettson,” Darlington snapped. “Get your ass down there, now!”

The line went dead and C.C. was left listening to the whirl of the broken connection. He lowered the receiver to his chest and sat staring off into the semi-darkness of the bedroom.

“What is it?” Caitlin asked.

“They’ve taken Irish again,” he said, leaning over her to hang up the phone.

“Oh, for the love of God!” Caitlin exploded. She swung her legs off the bed and stood up, hands on her shapely hips. “I’m getting tired of this shit!”



C.C. glanced up at her and smiled. “You have about as much love for Nolan as I do, don’t you, darling?”

“I wish--” Caitlin threw her hands into the air, her eyes narrowing with feline spite. “I wish he’d just vanish off the face of the earth this time!”

Corbettson’s gaze shifted over the magnificent perfection of Caitlin’s body and he felt his groin tighten again. He knew he’d never get enough of screwing this broad and--as long as she’d let him--he’d continue to do so every chance he got.

“Well, they may just kill him this time,” C.C. said chuckling. He got out of the bed and reached for his jeans.

“Where are you going?” she demanded, raking him with a savage look.

C.C. shrugged. “Gotta go make like a cop, baby.” He spared her a glance as he dragged on his shirt. “Thanks to your little brother. You’d better get dressed and head over to the clinic, too. Just to keep up the appearance of a concerned sister.”

“Damn his eyes!” she snarled. “I hate him so much I could just ....” She let the thought dangle as she plopped down on the bed and drew her long legs up into the circle of her arms.

A low sound of amusement rumbled out of Corbettson’s chest. He went to her and bent down. Ignoring the way she turned her head when he tried to kiss her, he snaked out a hand and gripped her chin in a brutal hold, anchoring her lips for him to plunder. When he’d had his fill of her mouth, he tugged playfully on her chin then released her. “Keep your fingers crossed that we don’t find the prick.”

Caitlin thrust out her lips in an angry pout as she watched her lover stuff his gun into its holster. Her gaze moved over his stocky form and she liked what she saw. When he turned at the bedroom door and asked if she’d still be there when he returned, she locked her gaze on his.

“I really hope he’s gone for good this time, Corbettson.”

C.C. smiled. “So do I.”

## Chapter Thirty-Six

"Is this the woman?" Trip handed the night charge nurse a copy of the composite drawing of Felicity Rogers.

Nurse Janice Meiggs nodded. "Yes. This is Erica."

"How long has she been here?"

"Tonight was her fourth night. She came highly recommended." Janet frowned. "I knew she was too good to be true."

Trip looked at Rhianna. "I'll run a check with the licensing board. Chances are Erica Bochner is her real name."

Trembling, Rhianna turned away. Her wet hair clung to her cheeks. When the call had come in to Joe Cortesio, she hadn't given anyone a chance to stop her before she was out of Joey's house and into the pelting rain. Trip hadn't even tried, but had followed her with Jamie Cullen close on his heels. Joey handed over the keys to his car without being asked.

"What about the hearse?" Boucharde asked.

"According to the marshal at the back entrance, it came from the Quinlan and Schmidt funeral home," Fullick answered. He glanced over to where Marek was pacing and lowered his voice. "The funeral home didn't even know the hearse was missing until we called."

"Who is in charge here?"

Everyone looked around to see Caitlin Greiner striding arrogantly toward them. A collective groan issued from those who knew her.

"Well?" Caitlin snapped.

"I am," Boucharde answered. He held up a hand before Nolan's sister could start the harangue he knew was coming. "Let's go into this office, Mrs. Greiner." Before she could protest, he had a firm grip on her arm, guiding her toward a closed door beside the reception desk.

"That's all the hell we needed," Cortesio grumbled.

"I'm in no mood for her goddamned crap," Rhianna hissed. She turned to Samuel. "What about the missing orderly?"

"I checked on that brother," Samuel said, his mouth tight. "The clinic hired him about a week before Irish was transferred over here. He was a good worker and all that. We'll have to wait 'til morning to check his references."

Jamie Cullen seemed to have calmed down on the wild ride from Joe Cortesio's house to the clinic. He was leaning against the wall, his hands in the pockets of his jeans, and was watching the others as they moved about the reception room of the clinic. His blue eyes never strayed far from Rhianna Marek, but his attention was riveted on every word. As Samuel made his statement, Jamie stiffened.

"A week before?" he asked, pushing away from the wall.

Rhianna watched him go to Samuel. She was surprised that Cullen was so steady. He was no longer sweating and although he was almost as wet as she was, he didn't

appear to be miserable about it. His focus was sharp on Brett Samuel as he questioned the black cop.

“Are you sure about that?”

Samuel lifted his chin. “Sure, I’m sure, man.” Cullen’s jaw cocked to one side as he thought, then he turned to Rhianna. “Then they knew he was going to be brought here after the incident at the rehab clinic.” His gaze narrowed. “I take it there are a helluva lot of other clinics in and around New Gregory?”

“Yeah. So?” Fullick questioned.

Jamie was still staring at Rhianna. “So how come they picked this one to put their man in?”

“He was already here,” Corbettson spoke up. He’d just come back from questioning the other night orderly as Boucharde had ordered. “The Bochner broad probably paid him a lot of money to help her.”

“No,” Jamie disagreed. “This is the same bastard who got me in Florida. I’d stake my life on it.”

“You’re right,” said Rhianna.

“How the hell did they know Irish was gonna be brought here?” Cortesio queried.

Rhianna’s narrowed gaze flicked to the door behind which Boucharde had taken Caitlin Greiner. “That’s a good question,” she grated, moving toward the office.

Corbettson stepped in front of her. “Where you going?”

“Get out of my way, Corbettson.”

“What’s eating you, Marek?” When she would have walked around him, he put out a hand to stop her. “You ain’t goin’ in there.”

One minute C.C. Corbettson was reaching for Rhianna, the next he was flat on his back staring up into the steady, uncompromising eyes of DEA agent James Cullen.

“I saw you in the parking lot this afternoon,” Jamie said in a pleasant voice. “You like to hurt women don’t you, you perverted bastard?”

C.C. tried to get up but found Cullen’s foot squarely on his chest, pressing down with enough force to cut off his oxygen. When he put up his hands to shove Cullen off balance, the heel of the agent’s sneaker rocked on his sternum.

“You like to dish out pain,” Cullen drawled, “but can you take it?”

“Get...him...off...me!” C.C. gasped. His eyes were tearing and he thought his heart would burst beneath the pressure.

Cullen smiled and lifted his foot. He watched the cop scramble to his feet, sag against the wall and press a trembling hand to his aching chest. He met the furious glower of C.C. Corbettson with an amused lift of one dark blond brow.

“Any time, anywhere, asshole,” challenged Jamie.

Rhianna cast a glance at Joey Cortesio and there was pride in the look. She grinned, then flung open the door to the office in which Boucharde was striving to quiet an enraged Caitlin Greiner.

Caitlin looked around as the door opened. She had just enough time to twist her lips into a nasty smirk before Rhianna was on her.

The doorway filled with men as Rhianna grabbed Nolan’s sister, spun her around, twisted her arm behind her, then slammed her against the wall. With a firm forearm across Caitlin’s throat, Rhianna leaned her entire weight against the other woman. “How did they know you were going to have Irish brought here?” Rhianna snarled in Caitlin’s

ear.

"I'll sue you!" Caitlin managed to get out.

"How did they know?"

"I have no idea!" A ragged cough exploded from Caitlin as the pressure on her windpipe increased.

"Who told you about this place?"

Caitlin was having difficulty breathing. "My lawyer," she gasped, gagging as the pressure became almost unbearable. "Ronald Nysberg!"

"I'm on it," Samuel rapped out, pushing through the knot of men.

"Did you know they were going to come after him again?" Rhianna's lips were drawn back in a snarl of fury and her hold on the other woman intensified, brooking no hesitation.

"No," Caitlin strained to answer. "Of course, not."

"Are you involved in any of this?"

Stars were dancing across the blackness swooping up around Caitlin. Her face was pressed tightly against the wall and she could barely draw breath, but she managed to deny any involvement in her brother's disappearance.

"One more thing," Rhianna growled. "Where is Conor's son?"

"I don't--" Caitlin gagged as the pressure increased. "Elk Grove Village!" she managed to squeak. The pressure let up enough for her to whisper. "He's in the Alexian Brothers seminary in Elk Grove Village, Illinois!"

Rhianna blinked. "He's a priest?"

Caitlin's cheek was pressed against the wall, but she was able to nod. "Yes."

"Why hasn't Irish been able to find him?"

Caitlin closed her eyes. "We put him up for adoption in Ireland. He just moved to the States last year."

"I want a name," Rhianna snarled. "A name!"

"Tristan McGregor!"

Rhianna let go of the woman, joy surging through her as Greiner slid down the wall and sat gasping for breath, massaging her bruised throat. Rhianna turned to Cullen. "Does the name Ronald Nysberg mean anything to you?"

Jamie shook his head. "If he went to NBMA, he wasn't there when Quinterras was."

Caitlin blinked, but she gave no outward sign to the others that the name meant anything to her. Her breathing was ragged and her knees weak from the encounter, but she was able to push herself up just as Corbettson came to her rescue.

"Are you all right?" C.C. questioned, helping her to her feet.

"I'll own these bastards before I'm through," she replied hoarsely. She sagged against him, grateful for his strong arms as he helped her to a couch. Glancing up at him, she lowered her voice. "How is Luis Quinterras involved in this?"

Corbettson's brows came together. "You know him?" His voice was hushed. He cast a quick look behind them but the others had left the room.

Caitlin smiled. "Yes," she answered. "I most certainly do."

\* \* \* \*

Silver rain slammed against the windshield of the brown van as it rolled along Interstate 80. The faint snick of the wipers was the only sound accompanying the

sloshing of the radial tires on rain-slick blacktop. An occasional flare of lightning lit up the night to momentarily brighten the interior of the van. Soon even that intrusion into the black mist of the rainy night ceased. Outside, the headlights cut a swath across the road and onto the wet shoulders grown high with the uncut grasses of early summer.

Inside the van, Nolan tried to escape the hand that came down to press the right side of his face to the musty floor. He felt the sharp stinging in his neck only a fraction of a second before he plunged into darkness again.

The van rolled down the off-ramp and onto the asphalt of a secondary road. It traveled another two-tenths of a mile before the asphalt became gravel that popped up and struck the van's undercarriage.

"Road's a quagmire," Victor rumbled as the van slowed down and turned off the country access road onto a farm lane.

The road was dotted with deep potholes. Branches gouged and scratched at the sides of the van as it veered off the farm lane onto a seldom-used path. A particularly bad rut jolted the men and brought muffled grunts of anger.

"Can you miss a few holes?" Victor snapped.

Water splashed up and coated the windshield with sprays of thick white clay. The wipers smeared it across the glass and Karl Bochner let out a muffled hiss. It was hard enough to navigate this road in broad daylight with a clear windshield. Rain-drenched, it was virtually impossible to see every hole before the van's tires fell into them.

"Look out!" Victor shouted.

With a yelp of surprise, Bochner jerked the wheel, swinging the van away from a fallen black walnut tree that hadn't been there two days before. The van slid sideways, fishtailing as he tried to get it under control. It skidded into a soybean field, then jolted hard as it dropped into a deep rut.

"Sonofabitch!" Bochner swore, slamming his hands against the steering wheel. He tried rocking the wheels out, but the rear end only settled deeper.

"We're stuck," said Quinterras.

Victor opened his door and stepped out into the deluge of rain. He jerked open the door and motioned the other two men out.

Hunching their shoulders against the back of the van, the three of them strained as Bochner tried to gain purchase on some semblance of stable ground. After nearly ten minutes of spraying mud and grunting, the van finally hitched onto the pathway and leaped forward with a grinding of gears.

Luis grimaced with distaste as his men got into the van. The overpowering smell of mud and wet clothing was sickening. With an angry hiss, he drew back his booted foot and slammed it into the middle of Nolan's defenseless back.

"You could hurt him badly, Patrino," Victor warned.

"What difference does it make?" Quinterras snorted. "He's a dead man anyway."

The headlights glanced off a building ahead and Bochner took his foot off the accelerator, braking as gently as he could for fear the vehicle would slide off the roadway once more. The van rolled to a clean stop just in front of the abandoned barn. Bochner switched off the engine and got out.

Victor got out, opened the van's rear door, and stepped out of the way of the others. He didn't mind the rain pouring down on him for it was washing away the mud that coated his clothing.

Luis waited until there was light in the barn before he, too, got out and hurried inside. The two other men, carrying their unconscious prisoner, followed with Victor bringing up the rear.

## Chapter Thirty-Seven

Jamie sat beside Rhianna. Neither had spoken for at least ten minutes. Around them, Cortesio, Triplett, and Fullick were busy on the phones. Samuel and Boucharde studied a detailed map of Polk and Jasper counties. There was really little any of them could do but wait and the waiting was hell.

"Have you had anything to eat?" Rhianna asked.

"Wasn't hungry." Jamie let his gaze move over Marek's tense face and understood how Conor could love this woman so much.

"They wouldn't kill him until they have me, would they?" She looked at him, pleading with him to agree.

"I don't think so." Jamie threaded his fingers through hers then brought her hand to his thigh where he held it lightly.

"But they'll hurt him," she whispered.

"Try not to think about it," he replied. His hand tensed around hers.

Rhianna drew in a long, unsteady breath, then exhaled tiredly. It had been nearly four hours since the word went out that Conor had been taken. The rain had stopped just as they all pulled up at the station. Now, everyone but Rhianna was busy trying to find Irish. She felt useless and helpless.

"I'm glad you're here," she said. "At least they didn't get you."

Jamie flinched and looked away. No, but they did have the others: Coni, Keane, Collins, and Sullivan.

"We're too fucking late!" Boucharde had yelled at them while they were still at the clinic. "The others are missing, too!"

Cullen was out of his mind with worry for his friends. While Quinterras might wait to execute Coni, he'd have no reason to hold off with Danny, Mick, and Tim-Pat. The other men might already be dead for all he knew. The thought brought a raging fury to Jamie Cullen. "He wants me, too," he said. "He won't be satisfied until he has all of us."

Rhianna leaned her head against his shoulder. "Don't say that."

Jamie put his free hand up to caress her cheek. "We'll get him back for you, Sweeting. I promise you that."

\* \* \* \*

Conor woke up to find his thoughts rambling and incoherent. He knew that was partially because of the drug they had given him and partially because of the fear in his gut. For a while he concentrated only on trying to breathe in through his nose. The air was hot and musty and had an under-smell of something rancid and decaying. Thanks to the high humidity it was hard as hell to breathe anyway. The smells only made trying to breathe the rank air worse. He tried to move and found that he was hanging from his wrists with his feet barely touching the floor. He swayed to and fro for a moment and the motion made him nauseated. His stomach churned and his head throbbed as though he'd tied on a really good drunk. He was grateful when the swaying stopped and brought an

end to the hard pull on his aching shoulder sockets.

He might have slept, he thought later. He couldn't be sure. Time had ceased to have any meaning for him lately. He tried to swallow, but there was no spittle in his dry mouth. A foul-tasting rag was jammed between his teeth and held in place with a piece of duct tape. When he tried to swallow, a portion of the rag tried to ease its way down his throat and he gagged.

He couldn't see. They'd blindfolded him again. He didn't know if it was day or night. He couldn't hear anything, either, except for the buzzing of the mosquitoes that were making a meal off his face and bare arms.

Two questions kept popping into his mind--Why? Who? Why was this happening to him? Someone had gone to an awful lot of trouble over the last four or five months. Who hated him enough to so thoroughly choreograph his abduction? Whoever it was, the person or persons were deadly serious about what they were doing to him. And they were spending a helluva lot of money to ruin his life.

Another thought--unbidden and unwelcome--pricked at him. Suppose, just suppose, they weren't going to come back for him this time? Suppose they were going to leave him here in this godawful place to rot like whatever caused that rancid smell? Could that terrible odor mean they had brought some other person here to die? Another cop, maybe? A cop they'd wanted out of the way?

He felt a sliver of icy cold go down his spine despite the suffocating heat in which he hung.

The sound of a door creaking open made him snuff in a loud breath through his nose. Dread set his heart to racing as damp air moved over his half-naked body.

"Brought you some company, pig," the black man said.

He heard a sound like a pulley hoisting something aloft. There followed another shriek of metal then the popping of wood as weight pulled against it.

"Now you boys don't go nowhere, okay?" came a voice Conor had never heard before. "Y'all keep Nolan company, you hear?"

Had they brought in more than one man, then? Conor wondered. He strained to hear any sound as the door closed again, but all he could make out was the gentle squeak of rope against wood.

Thinking was too much for him and he found himself slipping over the edge of consciousness again, thankful that despite his predicament, he was not alone in his hell.

When he woke again, his arms were numb. The drag on his arm sockets had been hell, now he couldn't even feel that pain. The weight of his body hanging from whatever he was strung up to, pulled on his neck and he had a granddaddy of a headache.

And the smells were making him violently nauseated: the stench of his own body sweat; the sour odor from whoever was in the room with him; and the musty smell of the urine he'd had no choice but to let run down his hospital pajama-clad leg.

Something hit the wall outside his prison and he tensed. The door opened again and he could make out the grunts and the shuffling sound of a struggle. There was a low curse, a meaty thud, a grunt of pain, then a succession of muffled sounds that could have been nothing else but fists slammed viciously into bare flesh.

"You wanna play, pig?" the black man shouted. "We'll play with you!"

Conor heard a loud expulsion of pained breath then complete silence. The pulley creaked again and the wooden beam overhead made a cracking sound. He was sure



another body was being lifted.

“This bastard must weigh close to 250 pounds!” the new man snarled.

So there are at least four of us here, Conor thought as silence once more descended on his prison. He tried to grasp the meaning of it all. It did have meaning in the darker recesses of his fogged brain, but he couldn’t hold onto the fleeting knowledge. His thought processes were jumbled; nothing seemed to be staying long enough for him to concentrate on it.

A snort of anger broke the silence and then the creaking of rope on wood as one of the other prisoners struggled to get free.

*Don’t even try, fellow*, Conor found himself silently advising the other man.

If he listened very hard, he could make out two other distinct patterns of breathing in the room. He thought the last man must be unconscious. He wondered if the others could hear him and he made a low, fierce grunt that was echoed from the other side of the room, first by one man, then another.

## Chapter Thirty-Eight

Trip found he was beginning to hate Jamie Cullen. He was sitting at his desk, glaring at the DEA agent, wishing the man would just get on a plane and get his ass back to Florida where he belonged. That the man had brought real danger into the station--danger for Rhianna--made Trip so angry he had already snapped a dozen pencils in half with another number three soft lead on the verge of being added to the pile.

"You can just about bet you're being watched," Cullen was saying. "When you leave, make damned sure you don't look back to see if you're being followed."

Boucharde was chewing on his thumbnail. "The tracking system is operational, isn't it?"

Jamie nodded although he did not take his gaze off Rhianna. "It's the best we had at the shop."

They were all there: Cortesio, Triplett, Fullick, Samuel, Darlington, Donne, and Corbettson, although the latter was sitting morosely at his desk and glaring at the others as they fawned over Marek.

"We'll follow you every step of the way," the DEA agent said. "Don't worry."

"Don't worry!" Trip snorted snapping his last pencil in twain. He threw the pieces on his desk. "This is insane! You're gonna get her killed!"

Rhianna sighed and held up a hand when Cullen started to speak. She walked to her partner, leaned over, and braced her hands on his desk.

"Listen to me, Neville," she said and immediately had the man's attention because she rarely called him by his given name. It was an indication of how sick and tired she was of his interference and belly aching. "We don't have a clue about where they've taken Irish. He could be anywhere within a hundred mile radius of New Gregory by now."

"He could be dead."

Making a supreme effort to keep her anger in check, Rhianna nodded. "Yes, he could, but that isn't likely. They want me and they want Jamie before they do anything to Nolan."

"You don't know that!" Trip came to his feet, his eyes blazing and his mouth twisted in a grimace of uncontrollable aggression. "Can't you see how stupid this idea is?" He pointed at Cullen. "What has that sonofabitch got to lose if you get killed out there trying to help Irish?"

"He's putting his own life on the line, too, Triplett!" she yelled back at him.

"Like his life is worth the same as yours?" Trip bellowed. "He's a junky!"

Cortesio snarled through his teeth and rushed forward, furious at Triplett. "Shut your mouth! The man didn't have to come up here, Triplett. He don't have to put himself out there for those bastards to grab, either, but that's what he's gonna do! He knows the risks he's taking. You wanna exchange places with him, Neville?"

"Trip," Rhianna said in a reasonable voice. "I've got to do this. Don't you see?" Her partner was shaking his head violently in denial. "There's no other way! I'll lead you

right to them.”

“And what if they find the tracking devices?” he asked, his eyes filling with tears. “We could lose you, too!”

“You won’t,” she said with such steely confidence Trip could only stare at her, his mouth trembling with emotion.

“I love you,” he said. “I don’t want anything to happen to you, Rhee!”

Rhianna knew it wasn’t a man-woman love her partner had for her. It was more like a brotherly love, but it was nice to hear and made her smile at him. “And I love you, too, Trip, but I’ve got to do this.” She reached out and took his arm. “I’m the only one who can.”

“They want him,” Trip said, nudging his chin toward Cullen. “Let him wear the trackers.”

“He doesn’t have a pierced ear, Trip,” Cortesio explained with more patience than he felt.

“I’ll pierce it for the motherfucker!”

“These are a woman’s earrings,” Boucharde pointed out. “On Cullen, they’d stand out like a petticoat.”

“There is a limit to what I’ll do for Coni,” Jamie said dryly. “Wearing those earrings is out of the question. They don’t go with my shirt.”

Trip jerked away from Rhianna’s light hold. “You’re determined to get yourself killed, aren’t you?”

“Triplett,” Darlington warned. “That’s enough. This is hard for all of us. You’re not the only one who’s worried about Irish and Marek.”

Against the far wall, Caitlin Greiner--who had been forced to come down to the station for fear she still might have had something to do with her brother’s abduction--stared with disbelief at the cops. Now and again, she’d flick her gaze toward Corbettson, who would roll his eyes with disgust at the whole thing. She had wanted to call her attorneys, but since Ronald Nysberg had recommended the Midwest Clinic, her request had been denied.

“Until we know what, if any, connection there is between him and Quinterras, you’ll just have to sit there and plan your lawsuit against us,” Boucharde had informed her.

Caitlin wondered what they would do when they found out that Luis Quinterras was one of Ron’s most important clients and that the Colombian owned the company for whom Caitlin worked. She was surprised no one had asked her yet if she knew Quinterras. Corbettson hadn’t said anything to them, and she had no intention of volunteering that information.

“You’re going to do what you wanna do anyway,” Trip snarled. He flung them all a look of anger.

“I’m going to do what I have to,” Rhianna answered. She reached out and took the earrings from Boucharde.

\* \* \* \*

He knew someone was standing in front of him. There had been movement all around him. When he felt the hand at his temple, he flinched, trying to move back, but he realized they were only going to remove the blindfold and he stilled.

At first he couldn’t see anything because his eyes were not accustomed to the

brightness of the lanterns hanging about him. He blinked, striving to adjust his vision, opening his lids only a little to allow his pupils time to adjust. When he was able to keep his eyes open, he found himself staring at the man he had labeled The Colombian. The scarred, twisted face looked at him with humor.

"You really have no idea who the hell I am, do you, Coni?"

The nickname registered, but the face was one he had never seen.

"Look closely, brown eyes," his captor whispered. "Imagine this face much younger." He reached out and gripped Conor's chin. "Imagine it without the scars."

Conor's forehead creased. Younger? Without the scars? He couldn't picture it and tried to shake his head in denial.

"Oh, come now, Coni," the Colombian snickered. "You must remember me! If it hadn't been for Daniel Keane, the men I had employed would have beaten you to death that night in Anniston!"

The memory shot up from that long-buried place where he had entombed his time at Nellis Briggs Military Academy and the identity of his tormentor came loping up beside it. His eyes widened.

"Ah, now you remember!" His old enemy said, smiling.

Conor just stared at the man. It had been almost twenty years, but he should have remembered the evil in Luis Quinterras's eyes if not the altered face. You don't forget a man who tried to have you beaten to death with a baseball bat. There was a malevolent gleam in Luis's black eyes; an insanity lurking just beneath the surface of those ebony pools that should have registered.

But the face?

"Ah, you are wondering what happened to my face," said Quinterras.

"Unfortunately, I am not the sprinter Daniel Keane was and could not outrun the fire when one of my cocaine factories was bombed by a rival drug lord." He shrugged. "Such is life." His smile turned nasty. "I blame you for the way I look, Coni. Had it not been for you and your friends, I would have returned to Bogota with high military honors. I would have joined the Colombian Armed Forces and been a man of respect."

Through the tape covering his mouth, Conor grunted with disbelief.

"Oh, you may scoff, amigo," Quinterras replied. "But you are to blame." He cocked his head to one side. "Do you remember what I vowed to do when I left NBMA, Coni?"

Conor's gaze leapt away from the mocking stare of Luis Quinterras and sought out the identities of the men held prisoner like himself. A low groan of misery escaped his parched throat as he recognized Danny Keane, Timothy-Pat Collins, and Mick Sullivan, who were all staring helplessly back at him.

"We'll have Cullen soon," Quinterras informed him. "We know where he is and that is a problem at the moment. But we will get him."

He knew with certainty then that each of his old friends had suffered the same agonies he had suffered. The knowledge that Luis Quinterras had made good on his two-decades old threat and that he had invaded these men's lives and brutally altered them, set loose the Celtic berserker inside Conor Nolan. The demon that had always resided in the heart of every Gaelic warrior ever born rose up to flood Conor's very soul with murderous, insatiable bloodlust. But the demon in Conor Nolan hid its face well and the only outward sign it gave of fury was the flaring of its host's nostrils.

“Then, of course, there’s the woman,” Quinterras said.

Conor knew Quinterras was talking about Rhianna. He had to will himself not to struggle, not to show the effect the Colombian’s words had on him although his heart sped up and his gut was filled with an icy dread.

“And we’ll have her, too, old friend.” Quinterras chuckled. “Then, the party can begin!”

## Chapter Thirty-Nine

Rhianna stormed out of the station like a woman infuriated and disgusted with those with whom she was forced to deal. She snatched open the taxi cab door and threw herself inside, going through the motions of flinging her hands to the heavens--as though brought to the edge of mental collapse by her fellow policemen's stupidity. For the benefit of anyone who might be watching her from a short distance away, she shouted her address at the cab driver, then flopped into the seat and stared angrily out the window at the station as the cab pulled away from the curb.

Jamie Cullen came outside and stood under the station's overhang. Digging his hands into the back pockets of his jeans, he just stood there, drawing in the cool rain-washed air, and stared blindly across the parking lot. To the keen eyes observing him from a darkened car window, Cullen was as oblivious to his surroundings as Marek had been. When the DEA agent stepped from the overhang and ventured down the sidewalk leading to the bus stop at the corner, no one came out of the station to stop him. No one was watching from the windows above him. No one seemed to care where the Florida man was going.

Jamie heard the car engine cranking a short distance away. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the headlights come on. He didn't increase his pace, didn't slow down. He just continued to amble listlessly toward the bus stop a hundred yards away. As the car's tires crunched over the wet pavement behind him, Jamie Cullen grinned.

\* \* \* \*

"Cortesio. Triplett." Darlington's voice was firm, but held no special inflection. His face was blank as he called the men into his office. Once he'd ushered Trip and Joey inside, he closed the door and flung out a hand, bidding them sit.

The blinds were drawn around the Captain's office and Special Agent Franc Boucharde was already there when the men took their seats.

"Do not raise your voices," Boucharde warned them. "Do not give any indication whatsoever that what we are going to tell you has made you angry."

Cortesio exchanged a puzzled look with Triplett, but neither man spoke. They waited for the Fibber to continue.

"Luis Raphael Quinterras has been in this country for twelve years," Boucharde began in an instructional tone. He was seated on the corner of the Captain's desk, Darlington in his own chair. "He is the owner and CEO of Leatherworks, Inc., a Fortune 500 company manufacturing fashions and accessories made from leather. They do a multi-million dollar business every year, selling mostly to very expensive boutiques in L.A., New York, and abroad."

"Mr. Quinterras is a very wealthy man with a home estimated to be worth upwards of \$2.5 million. He and his wife have three children, all of whom are in private school in Switzerland. The parents are quite well known in their community for being very generous to their church and to local charities, although Quinterras is something of a recluse," Darlington stated. "Quinterras, who by the way, goes by the legal name of Louis

Quinton here in the states, has received several community awards for his philanthropic works. He is a hero in the town where he lives.”

“Louis Quinton may be a hero where he lives,” Boucharde said, crossing his arms over his knee and leaning toward Joey and Trip. “But to those who work for him, he is a tough-as-nails businessman who enjoys the raiding and raping of the smaller companies his corporation swallows up. Quinton takes great delight in going in once the floundering company is taken over and personally firing the entire staff, especially management.”

Darlington leaned back in his chair. “He has a rather large legal staff kept on retainer for just such enterprises.”

“Fredericks, Martin, Nysberg, and Dahl.” Trip sighed.

“Among others,” Darlington confirmed, nodding.

“But that’s not the most intriguing part.” Boucharde swung his foot against the corner of the desk. “Leatherworks, Inc. is listed on the New York Stock Exchange as an Illinois-based company with satellite processing plants in Nebraska, Iowa, Kansas, and Missouri. The beef-producing states, my friends.”

Cortesio sat forward with a rush. “He has his headquarters in Illinois?”

“Since 1989,” Darlington replied.

“Does he live there?” asked Joe Cortesio.

“Yes, he sure does,” Boucharde replied. “He lives on Bayshore Drive. Guess who his Executive Manager is?”

Cortesio slumped into his chair. “You’ve got to be shittin’ me,” he breathed.

“She has a Master’s Degree in Business Management and helped to set up the company,” Darlington put in.

“Oh, my God,” Trip whispered. “Irish’s sister?”

“The one and the same,” Boucharde acknowledged.

“Then she’s in on this!”

“We don’t know for sure, but we’ve got enough to hold her for questioning,” said Darlington.

“She and Corbettson have been eyeballing one another all evening like two dogs in heat,” Trip grumbled. “Do you think they might be working together?”

“Doubtful,” Darlington answered, “but we’ll be asking C.C. some questions, too.”

“There’s never been any love lost between him and Irish,” said Cortesio. “I wouldn’t put nothing past that S.O.B.”

“How long have you known all this?” Trip demanded.

“The Bureau called in the information less than half an hour ago,” Boucharde informed him. “Since we found out Mrs. Greiner is involved somehow, we’ve been watching her closely to make sure she didn’t call anyone.” He grinned wryly. “And I’ve been watching Corbettson, too, since Rhianna also noticed the eye contact between him and Greiner.”

“She would,” said Trip. He was still out of sorts about his partner setting herself up for a possible abduction.

There was a knock on the door and Darlington held up a hand. “Come in.”

Dave Donne poked his head around the door. “Rhee just called in, Cap’n. She’s at home in case we need her.”

Darlington nodded, then waved the detective away. He waited until the door was closed once more. “Ronald Nysberg was picked up by a couple of deputies just before we

called you guys in here.”

“You’re not wasting any time,” Cortesio interrupted.

“We can’t afford to,” Boucharde said. “If Nysberg is involved in any way at all in the kidnapping and torture of a policeman, I want to make damned sure he goes down hard.”

“Who’s going to question Mrs. Greiner?” Trip inquired.

“I am,” Boucharde replied. “I want you and Cortesio to have a little talk with Corbettson.”

Joey Cortesio smiled. “I think we can do that.”

\* \* \* \*

The moment Rhianna Marek arrived home, she called a special number at the station. Dave Donne and Brett Samuel had been awaiting the call in a room one floor up from the detective offices. The connection had not been severed once Marek informed Donne she was in place. Samuel stayed behind as Donne went to inform their Captain of Marek’s call. He had the speakerphone turned on and was listening to the muted sounds coming from Rhianna’s home. Now and again he would chuckle as Rhianna kept up a running commentary with an imaginary cat, letting Samuel know things were as close to normal as possible. Just as Donne came into the room, the tone of Rhianna’s voice changed.

“Is that someone outside, Garfield?” they heard Rhianna ask. “I thought I heard someone. Should we go check?”

Samuel leaned forward, his face close to the speakerphone. Donne held his breath, waiting. Over the line came the muted sound of glass breaking, running footsteps, then the unmistakable sound of the telephone receiver being picked up and three numbers punched in before there came a squeal of surprise and the receiver was slammed into its cradle.

For a few ticks of the clock, Samuel and Donne remained where they were--frozen by what had happened while they listened--then the men sprang into action.

\* \* \* \*

The bus stopped at the corner of Patrick and Dixon streets, a rather seedy area of town where the intersection was lit only by the garish neon glare of a rundown bar. The rain-dampened black pavement glistened from the light reflecting from the Matheny’s Shuffle Inn sign, casting an orange pathway from where the bus had stopped to let him off to the bar across the street. Surrounding the bar were dilapidated buildings. Long abandoned and dark, their broken windows gaped like jagged teeth in the aging façades. Jamie had been somewhat disappointed when the men following him had not snatched him before he got on the bus. It had been a tense, frustrating ride, until he’d caught sight of the bar sign in the urban decay passing beyond his grimy window. He reached up to pull the cord, signaling his get-off.

“This ain’t the best of neighborhoods, mister,” the black bus driver told him as Jamie came forward. “This is Harlem. You be careful.”

“Thanks,” Cullen answered. As he stepped off the bus, he cast a glance to his right and saw the car parked half a block back, its lights off.

The bus driver held up a hand in parting, then pulled away, leaving behind a noxious wake of diesel fumes and spent oil, the squish of heavy tires on the wet pavement, and the grinding of the gears as the bus accelerated.



Jamie sauntered across the intersection, seemingly unaware of the car moving toward him. He was halfway across the street when the vehicle sped up and came to a screeching stop, blocking his way.

Reclining against the side of an abandoned building, the old wino paused in taking a drink from his brown paper bag-wrapped bottle as he heard the car doors opening. He watched a struggling white man get hustled into the backseat. Wincing as the car peeled off into the misty night, shooting forward with a shriek of tires and howl of a gunned motor, the wino shrugged. It was nothing to him. Lifting his bottle, he took a long, satisfying mind-numbing pull on the bitter contents.

## Chapter Forty

They brought Jamie Cullen in and dumped his bound body on the floor at Conor's bare feet. Livid bruises marked the DEA agent's face, and a trickle of blood oozed from his left nostril.

"Sonofabitch had more fight in him than I would have thought," Victor grunted as he motioned two men to hoist up Cullen. "Didn't think it would take a goddamned hour to get his sorry ass here!"

Conor's eyes blazed with hatred as he watched them yank up Jamie to swing between Tim-Pat and Mick. He saw his friends eyeing one another and read the fear on their pale faces. They knew it was nearing the time of reckoning.

"We have the woman," Luis told Victor. He swung his insane gaze to Conor. "I told them not to hurt her." A vicious smile stretched his thin lips. "I wanted to reserve that privilege for myself after I've fucked her."

Danny Keane stared intently at Conor. Conor Nolan didn't make a sound. Though gagged as the rest of them were, Mick Sullivan did, grunting his anger at their captors and thrashing about in his restraints.

Quinterras strolled to Conor and looked up into the Irishman's granite-hard face. "Is she a good lay, Coni?" Jamie lifted his head. He stared through blurred vision at Conor.

Conor's attention was riveted on Quinterras. There was such deadly intent in the look, such unbridled rage, there might well have been flashes of fire sparking from his dark eyes.

"Oh, that's right, you don't know, do you? You've never had her, have you?" Quinterras chuckled. "I'll let you know what it's like, eh?" At Conor's low growl, his nemesis grinned. "You'd like to kill me, wouldn't you, Coni?" Quinterras glanced around at his men, expecting them to join in the mirth. When they did, the Colombian grew bold and reached up to strip the tape from Conor's lips and removed the greasy rag that had been stuffed into his mouth. "You want to say something, amigo?"

Conor compressed his lips and his gaze grew more heated as the Colombian stepped even closer. His breathing was shallow and quick, audible over the return of the rain coming down on the roof.

"Aren't you going to curse at me, Coni?" Quinterras taunted. "Threaten me?"

"I think the cat's got his tongue!" one of Quinterras's men joked.

"I would have at least expected a vulgarity flung at my head," Quinterras admonished his prisoner. "Not this tight-jawed silence."

Mick Sullivan smiled beneath his gag. Danny Keane rolled his eyes. Jamie Cullen snorted. "Do it," Tim-Pat silently encouraged Conor, knowing instinctively what his friend intended.

Quinterras looked around at his men. "I think he's afraid to say anything to me!" He turned back to Conor. "Is that it, Coni? Are you...?"

Conor spat in the Colombian's face, the spittle hitting the man squarely between

the eyes. His own eyes flared with satisfaction as Quinterras stumbled away from the insult and wiped at the gob running down his nose.

“Go to hell, you worthless bastard,” Jamie heard Conor croak. “None of us are afraid of a spineless prick like you!”

“Hurt him!” Quinterras thundered as he scrubbed at his fouled flesh. “Beat the hell out of him!”

There was nothing any of them could do, Danny thought miserably as Conor’s boyhood friends were forced to watch him beaten into unconsciousness. The black man’s heavy fists buried themselves time and time again into Conor’s defenseless belly, into his kidneys and groin. Through clenched teeth, the smothered grunts of pain that Conor tried to stifle were evidence of Nolan’s attempt to shield the others from knowing the extent of his pain.

The Colombian turned his glare on the other prisoners, smug in his position of power, reveling in the helplessness of Nolan’s friends to come to his aid. Keane was crying. Sullivan stared stonily at the scene unfolding in front of him. Collins squeezed his eyes closed and Cullen looked down at the floor.

“Don’t kill him” Quinterras ordered as Conor hung limp from the pulley.

Victor caught himself in mid-hit and lowered his arm. He shook his right hand, glanced down at his bruised knuckles, then turned away, grinning. “I felt something give inside him on that last hit.”

A keening sound of despair came from Danny at the remark.

“What are you worried about, Danny?” Luis Quinterras asked. “He’s going to die, anyway! You all are!”

Jamie pulled his gaze from the floor and let it settle on Conor’s unconscious form. Already the deep, punishing bruises were forming on Nolan’s stomach and sides. He looked away, unable to bear the sight. Hurry, Rhianna. He forced himself to look at the floor lest the others see the hope on his face. Hurry before it’s too late.

\* \* \* \*

“They’re on I-80 heading east,” Donne said as he kept close watch on the DEA’s tracking monitor. Beside him in the three-quarter ton paneled truck used for undercover surveillance, Samuel followed along on a map, plotting the progress with a red felt-tipped marker.

“Is the signal clear?” Boucharde demanded from the front seat.

“As a bell,” acknowledged Donne.

Trip sat off to one side, his arms crossed over his chest, his mouth tight with a grimace. He hadn’t said one word since interrogating Corbettson with Cortesio.

“Where’s the SWAT team van, now?” Darlington asked Jason Fullick, who was driving. The Captain had insisted upon coming along although the cramped interior of the truck was making him claustrophobic.

“Back about a mile. That’s their headlights you see behind us.”

Darlington was tense, chewing on his bottom lip for a moment. “What if they find those tracking devices on Marek?”

Boucharde glanced at him. “We aren’t going to lose them, Captain.” He settled in the seat and stared out the windshield. The rain was coming down again in a light sheet that slid over the glass and obscured the distant red glow of the kidnapper’s taillights.

Forty minutes passed in near silence inside the truck.

The combined heat of eight men's damp bodies was beginning to make the ride uncomfortable. The air conditioner had chosen that night to run out of refrigerant.

"They're getting off at the Kellogg-Sully exit," Donne reported.

Fullick picked up the radio and keyed the mike. "They are turning off at the next exit." He eased off the accelerator.

"Copy," came the response from the SWAT team conversion van a quarter mile back.

"They're turning right toward Sully," Donne said.

Boucharde leaned toward the windshield. He made note of the highway sign marking the turnoff. "What's out this way?"

"Farms," Fullick answered. "Lots and lots of farms." He keyed the mike again. "Turning right."

"Copy."

Silence reined once more within the surveillance truck. Only Cortesio's occasional sniffing and the low beep of the tracking monitor broke the quiet.

"They're turning again," Donne called out.

"Gravel road," Samuel provided from the map.

"Oh, swell." Fullick sighed.

"According to the plot map, there are about six or seven low-priority maintained roads off that one." Samuel looked closer at the squiggly lines on the map. "Looks like there are two or three farms out that way, too."

"Turning again. Sharp right."

"Go on past," Boucharde ordered. "We don't want them to see us."

"They're making a hard left," Donne told everyone. "Where the hell are they going? The middle of nowhere?"

"There is an abandoned farm on that side of the road, about two-tenths of a mile in," Samuel said, looking up from the plot map of Jasper county. His voice was thick with tension.

"Porridge is getting warm, Papa Bear," Fullick advised the SWAT team. "Turn in and hold your position about a quarter of a mile up the gravel."

"Coming in to eat," said the SWAT team commander, chuckling. "Where's the cottage?"

"First yellow brick road on your right," Fullick informed him. "See it?"

"Sure do."

"They're not moving," Donne called out excitedly. He looked past Samuel. "They've stopped."

\* \* \* \*

Rhianna shied away from the moist hands that reached out to drag her up from the van's floor. She kicked at her abductors, gritting her teeth as they laughed at her paltry attempt to elude them, and felt one man's heavy hand grip her left breast in a cruel clutch that brought a moan from behind her gag.

"Nice tits, baby," the man cooed to her as his hand slid across her chest to grasp her right breast with the same intensity.

They dragged her--bucking and twisting between them--out of the van. The rain was increasing and overhead a flare of lightning lit up the countryside as they hurried her over the squelching mud beneath their feet. From the air, came the drone of a helicopter's

rotors, then a solid rumble of thunder.

Rhianna struggled to get away and managed to give one of her captors a vicious kick.

"Quit kicking me, bitch!" the man growled and his hand tightened painfully around her upper arm. His other hand came up to connect with her cheek, snapping her head back.

"Don't damage the merchandise," came an amused voice from the barn door. "Not yet, anyway."

They were all there, she realized when she was brought into the lantern light: Conor, Jamie, Danny, Mick, and one who must be Tim-Pat. They were all hanging by their wrists from a thick sturdy beam. Conor's head was down, his upper torso dotted with dark bruises. She didn't have to be told he was unconscious nor did she have to wonder about the identity of the dark, swarthy man who gripped her chin in a firm hold.

"Hello, Rhee," he said and his gaze moved with obvious admiration over her face. His thumb caressed her jaw. "The photographs did not do you justice."

Rhianna tried to jerk her chin from his grip, but he would not allow it. Her eyes flashing hatred, she glared at him.

"I may not kill you after all," she heard Quinterras say. "It would be a waste of loveliness to do so. There are men in the Middle East who would pay a king's ransom to have you entertain them."

Mick Sullivan growled and strained against the ropes. He cursed through the constriction of his rag only to be slammed in the stomach with the butt of a rifle.

"See how gallantly you are defended from my advances?" Quinterras chuckled. "But ask yourself, are they protecting you or Coni?"

Jamie clenched his jaw as Quinterras's hand moved from Rhianna's face to stroke her neck. He cast a glance at Conor but the man was still out, his wet hair obscuring his battered face.

Wishing her mouth was free so she could spit in the Colombian's face, Rhianna struck out with her foot, her intent to land a crippling blow to the Colombian's groin, but her captors jerked her back, having anticipated her act.

Quinterras laughed. "Oh, I like that in a woman, Rhee," he chortled. "Fire and ice. Quite a combination!"

From across the room, Conor groaned and struggled to lift his head, but the effort was too much and his head fell to his chest again.

"Here, let me help you, Coni," Quinterras said. He went to his enemy and grabbed a handful of the Irishman's dark hair. Yanking Conor's head back, the Colombian pointed toward Rhianna. "Look who's here, Coni!"

Conor blinked, trying to focus, and when he saw Rhianna, his heart did a mighty lurch in his chest and he couldn't stop the moan of hopelessness.

"Now, we can begin!" Quinterras told him. Still keeping a tight hold on Conor's hair, he looked about him. "But who first?"

Danny's testicles tightened as the Colombian's gaze fell on him. He drew in a quick breath and held it, only releasing it--along with a tiny spurt of urine--when that Latino gaze slid over him and moved on to Tim-Pat.

"You were always the liar, weren't you, Collins?" Quinterras snorted. "The one who was always better than everyone else, huh?"

Quinterras reached into the pocket of his tight jeans and pulled out a stiletto switchblade. The blade flipped open with a lethal sounding snick and glinted sharply in the glow from the lanterns scattered around the barn. "Will you die better than everyone else?"

Timothy Patrick Collins shuddered, but he maintained eye contact with the man walking toward him. He felt the concern of his friends and lifted his head.

"Ah, a brave man," the black man chuckled. "How I love brave men."

"This is between you and me," Conor called out hoarsely. "Leave the others out of it, Luis."

The Colombian looked back at him. "No, this is something you were all involved in, Coni. Each and every one of you did your best to make my life at the academy a living hell. Now, I'm going to send you to a hell of my own creation!"

"You made your own life hell, Quinterras," Conor said. "You never tried to fit in." It was all he could do to hold his head up, striving not to look at Rhianna, knowing his courage would desert him if he did.

"Fit in?" the Colombian scoffed. "Fit in how, Nolan?" He turned away from Collins and went to the man he hated the most. Pressing the tip of the stiletto against the underside of the Irishman's chin, he dug the blade into the tender flesh just enough to start a trickle of blood down Conor's throat. "I was somebody! You bastards were nothing! What was I to fit into?"

Rhianna bucked against her captors, the sight of Conor's blood infuriating her. Her struggles brought the Colombian's head around and she gasped as he hurried to her, his face filled with an unholy light.

"I could fit into this!" Quinterras shouted reaching out to grab her savagely between the legs. His head snapped around and he locked glares with the Irishman. "And that is exactly what I am going to do!"

Conor's lips skinned back from his clenched teeth. His eyes flared wide with rage. He twisted against the ropes holding him, his snarls of fury like those of a demented man. "Leave her alone!" he thundered, his face turning red. "Get your filthy hands off her!"

Quinterras snagged his fingers in Rhianna's blouse and ripped the garment down the front. The sound of tearing fabric was like a red-hot iron thrust against Conor's flesh and he bellowed in outrage, his body jerking in violent spasms. His curses rang out promising vile death for the man who was fondling the woman Conor loved, and his mindless shrieks of denial as Rhianna was dragged down to the floor of the barn were terrible to hear.

"Rhianna!" Conor howled in agony.

Mick Sullivan listened to Conor's scream of anguish and cried. He could only guess at the torture pushing his friend close to the edge of sanity and be thankful it was not his own wife being brutalized by Luis Quinterras.

Danny Keane could not look away from the scene on the straw-covered floor of the barn. He was as outraged as the others, but his sympathy was for Coni. The strangled sounds of grief pouring out of the man Danny had loved for twenty-odd years numbed him to the savagery of what was happening to Marek.

Tim-Pat Collins was also weeping. Not from the rape, taking place before his very eyes, but from the reprieve he had been given. He was not a coward, but neither did he want to die. Not here; not like this. If he was going to die, he sure as hell didn't want to

do so while strung up like a side of beef in an abattoir.

“Rhianna!” Conor’s voice was a hoarse whisper of pain and his eyes wild, face as pale as death, when Quinterras crawled off Rhianna and stood up to adjust his clothing. The tenuous thread of sanity had snapped in the Irishman’s mind and he could do no more than hang in his bonds.

“Just in case you’re wondering, Coni, I fit in quite well,” Quinterras taunted. “A rather tight squeeze, but I fit in well enough.”

Rhianna had turned to her side on the floor, her knees drawn up to her chest. It had taken every ounce of her self-control to will herself not to make any sound at all during her violation. She had forced herself to stare stonily at the dilapidated roof overheard--never once moving her gaze to Quinterras’s sweating face as he pumped his vile flesh into her--and detach herself from what was happening. She had even managed to block out Conor’s agonized cries of sorrow and the panting gasps of excited breath from Quinterras’s slobbering mouth. The only real pain she felt was in her arms because her hands were tied behind her and the rocking motion of the Colombian’s body had driven splinters and shards of straw into the soft flesh of her bare arms.

“Now,” she heard Quinterras say in a satisfied tone, “I’m going to start butchering your friends!”

Conor seemed beyond hearing. He was staring unseeingly across the barn, his mouth slack, his eyes glazed as he watched Rhianna.

Luis Quinterras turned and walked toward Daniel Keane. “Let’s do the queer first!”

Danny’s breath caught in his throat. Mick Sullivan went deathly still although behind his gag, his lips were moving in a silent entreaty to God. Jamie only stared with disbelief, cursing the help that had not arrived in time for Rhianna.

“He’s not paying attention, Padrino,” Victor said.

Quinterras turned, the gleaming stiletto gripped in his fist. A snarl of rage exploded from his mouth as he took in the lax expression on Nolan’s still face.

“No!” the Colombian hissed. He rushed to his enemy and once more ensnared a fistful of Conor’s brown curls. “You must see this!” He jerked viciously on the Irishman’s hair. “You have to see this, Nolan!”

What happened next seemed to take place in slow motion. As though it came from far, far away, Jamie heard the explosion as the SWAT team burst through the barn door, spraying bullets from their assault rifles into the bodies of three of Quinterras’s men. He heard Quinterras shout an order to the black man he realized must be the chauffeur who had brought a younger Luis to Nellis Briggs many years before. He watched in stunned disbelief as the black man moved behind Conor and put the muzzle of a 9 mm semi-automatic against the Irishman’s head. He saw Quinterras hit the floor, roll, and come up at Conor’s right side, the stiletto going up to hack away the ropes confining Nolan’s wrists.

“Back off!” Quinterras ordered the SWAT team. Conor’s body sagged into the Colombian’s arms. He placed the stiletto right at Conor’s jugular, the tip going just far enough beneath the flesh to cause blood to flow. “I’ll kill him!”

Boucharde held up his hand, praying none of the SWAT team would take it into their mind to try for a head shot on the black man. “Let’s talk about this,” the FBI agent said.

"There's nothing to talk about!" the Colombian screamed. He was moving toward the back of the barn, dragging Nolan along with him, measuring his steps so the black man's gun stayed against Conor's temple.

"You'll never get away with this," the SWAT team commander warned as Darlington's men began cutting down the prisoners. "You're surrounded."

Quinterras' mouth twisted in a sneer. "We're driving out of here and you can't stop us." He swung his attention around the room where the rest of his enemies were being untied. "It isn't over."

Jamie massaged his abraded wrists. He kept his eyes on Quinterras. He would have moved away from his rescuers, but the Colombian's head snapped toward him. "Stay back, Cullen!" Quinterras dug his blade further into Conor's flesh, widening the cut already there. "I'll slit his fucking throat from ear to ear if you don't!"

"You don't think we're going to let you hurt him anymore, do you, Luis?" Cullen asked calmly.

"You've got no choice!" the Colombian snarled.

Mick and Danny moved forward, their faces filled with burning vengeance. Neither man noticed Joe Cortesio and Dave Donne flanking them nor the guns gripped resolutely in the cops' hands.

"No matter where you go, we'll hunt you down," Mick said. "You're a dead man, Quinterras."

"There will be nowhere safe for either of you," Danny added.

"As long as we have this one," the black man scoffed, "you can do nothing!"

"Irish," Rhianna called out from her place in Trip's arms. "Are you all right?"

Conor heard her voice and looked up, his face filled with a strange, resigned quality. He swung his gaze about him taking in the hard faces of the men of the SWAT team, the concerned faces of the men from the 64th Precinct, the determined faces of the four men with whom he'd gone to school. He found himself looking into the eyes of the woman he loved, the woman he had caused to be so brutally violated. She would forgive him, but he would never forgive himself. She was a strong woman and could live with the rape. He was a weak man and could not. For as long as he lived, he would replay the violation of his woman over and over and over in his mind, knowing he had not been able to prevent it from happening. He had failed her.

Just as he had failed Bridget, the mother of his son, so many years before.

"Irish?" Rhianna asked, her voice trembling.

Conor Nolan smiled.

It was the smile, that froze Jamie with fear. It was the smile of a man who had stepped over the boundary between insanity and reality. It was the calculated smile of a man who knew what he was going to do and knew there was nothing anyone could do to stop him.

"Coni, no!" Jamie screamed, flinging himself forward even as Conor lurched against Quinterras, piercing the side of his own throat with the lethal tip of the Colombian's stiletto, impaling his jugular on the dagger's blade.

"Coni!" Danny Keane shrieked and had to be restrained by Tim-Pat.

Dark arterial blood gushed from Conor Nolan's throat and splattered Luis Quinterras in the face. The Colombian jerked away from the unexpected intrusion and stumbled back just a fraction of a second before his head exploded beneath the impact of



the SWAT team commander's rifle, a hollow point bullet ripping out of the barrel to end the drug lord's life.

Victor Busbee roared as the Irishman's body sagged down beside him. He brought up his gun, squeezed off a shot, hitting DEA agent James Cullen in the left shoulder before that man slammed into him, and found himself toppling backwards beneath the weight of Cullen's hurtling body. The black man's gun fired again, this time into the barn's roof, then was kicked from his hand as Mick Sullivan reached them.

"I will kill you!" Busbee shrieked, flailing against the hold of the two men as he was dragged to his feet. "I will kill you for hurting my padrino!"

Rhianna scrambled away from Trip, rushed to Conor's prone body and wanted to scream when she saw the pool of blood beneath his head. Mindless of the pulsing wetness still spurting from his wound, she cradled his head in her lap--knowing he was dying--and smiled tearfully down into his ashen face.

"I knew you'd come for us, Rhee," she heard him whisper. "I knew you'd bring the cavalry."

"Why?" Rhianna cried, her heart shattering in her chest. "Irish, why? We would have gotten him."

"I didn't want anyone to get hurt. I had to end it, baby," he said with effort. "I caused it. I had to end it. I'm sorry I couldn't stop him from--" Tears ran down his temples and into his hair. "Oh, God, Rhee. I am so sorry. I failed you, my lady. I can't live with that."

"It's not your fault!" she protested. Her chest heaved with emotion. Tears fell onto his pale face.

"Is that bastard dead?" Conor asked, his eyes moving past Rhianna's beloved face to Jamie's. His old friend hunkered beside him. "Did they kill him for what he did to her?"

"Yes," Jamie answered, taking Conor's hand. "He's dead."

For the first time Nolan noticed the blood soaking Jamie's shirt. "You're wounded," Conor said, sighing.

"Went straight through," Jamie assured him. "Don't worry about it."

"I've found your son, Irish," Rhianna said, knowing she only had a moment left with him.

Conor turned his fading gaze back to Rhianna. "Yeah?" At her nod, he smiled. "Tell him I never stopped looking, will you?"

"I swear it," she said.

Once more Conor's attention shifted to Jamie. "Take care of my lady, huh, Cullen?"

Jamie could do no more than nod. His own cheeks were wet with tears.

"Rhianna?" Conor whispered and those around him heard the death rattle in his throat.

"Yes, baby," she returned, pushing the damp hair back from his forehead.

"Don't cry."

The light went out of Conor Nolan's eyes and his head tilted to one side.

"Irish?" Rhianna questioned. Her trembling fingers stroked Conor's cheek.

"Irish?"

Triplett turned away. He stared into Joey Cortesio's grieving eyes. The Italian's

shoulders were already sagging against the weight of his sorrow. Trip put an arm around him.

“Get that bastard outside,” Darlington growled, his gray stare steady on the last of Quinterras’s men.

“What about the woman?” Mick Sullivan asked Victor Busbee, held fast between Donne and Sullivan. “Where is Erica Bochner?”

“Fuck you,” the black man snarled. He looked at the Irishman’s still body and laughed. His next words were a personal affront to every lawman there. “Enjoy yourself in hell, pig!” He chuckled again.

It was the last sound Victor Busbee ever made for Danny Keane straightened up, grabbed Joey Cortesio’s gun and emptied it into the black man’s belly before anyone could stop him.

## Chapter Forty-One

Joey Cortesio felt his wife's hand tightening in his as the last shot was fired. The opening skirl of the bagpipes brought Sonia Cortesio's other arm around his waist, penning their clenched hands between them as she turned her body to his. Staring over her head, listening to her quiet sobs as Conor Nolan's casket was lowered into the ground to the accompaniment of the haunting strains of "Amazing Grace," Joey was amazed that he had remained dry-eyed throughout the entire service. From the moment he had helped carry his partner's body into St. Mary's church, through the homily and eulogy, the motorcycle-escorted ride to Our Lady of Sorrows cemetery, to the removal and folding of the American flag draping Irish's casket, he had managed to keep his tears inside.

He had hidden them when Rhianna told him Irish's son would not be attending his father's funeral.

"He's in the hospital with a kidney stone, but he will be here as soon as he can," she'd explained.

He had hidden them at the church as he marched down the aisle with Mick Sullivan, Jamie Cullen, Tim-Pat Collins, Dave Donne, and Trip.

He had hidden them when he and the others took their sad burden from the hearse and carried their fallen friend to his final resting place.

He had hidden them as the rifles rang out over the still morning air, their twenty-one gun salute sharp and piercing and the cordite smell sickening.

He had hidden them--and his bitter anger--when Captain Darlington had presented the red, white, and blue symbol of Conor James Nolan's commitment and dedication to the protection of his fellow man to the dead officer's sister.

But Joey knew the moment was fast approaching--that moment every cop there was dreading--when he wondered if he would be able to hold onto his composure. Even as he steeled himself for the inevitable, Caitlin Greiner stood up from her seat under the funeral home's green canvas awning. With the flag from Conor's casket a neat triangle in her black-clad arm, she took the cup of dark soil from the priest's hand and sprinkled it into the open grave.

"God!" Joey's whimper came from his very soul and the tight rein he'd held on his emotions came loose. He squeezed his eyes shut, resolutely shaking his head as his wife spoke gently, calmly to him. "I can't stand this, Sonny," he told her. "I can't!"

Cortesio pushed away from his wife and staggered toward the white marble cluster of tombstones beyond where they were standing. Sonia watched the man she loved disappear behind a squat, gray mausoleum, then turned to seek out one other person among the hundred-strong throng of mourners grouped here to say goodbye to Conor. Fresh tears oozed down Sonia's cheeks as she saw Rhianna bolstered by Jamie Cullen on one side and Trip on the other. She was thankful the two policemen were there for Rhianna because from the look on the grieving woman's face, she was ready to collapse at any moment.

"Are you Mrs. Cortesio?"

Sonia jumped, her hand fluttering to her breast. She felt her heart knocking in her chest and she lifted her head. "Yes."

"Thank you for coming," Caitlin Greiner said curtly. "I'm sure Conor James would have appreciated it."

Sonia Cortesio's brows came together with dislike. "What do you want, Mrs. Greiner?"

Caitlin looked down at the flag she carried. "Do you think that woman would like this memento?"

"Memento?" Sonia questioned, disbelief making her mouth sag. She didn't need to ask what woman Mrs. Greiner meant. She knew Irish's sister was referring to Rhianna.

"I've no use for the wretched thing," Conor's sister said, unaware of the intense anger forming on the other woman's face. "My mother has Alzheimer's and wouldn't even know what it was for, not that she would care or want it, anyway." She tossed back her sleek mane of dark hair. "If that woman wants it, will you see she gets it?" She extended the folded flag toward Sonia. "Otherwise, it'll just end up in the trash."

Sonia looked down at the flag, so furious she could not find words. This symbol, this memento as the bitch had labeled it, was something Sonia Cortesio held very dear. It wasn't just a symbol of her own husband's promise to protect and serve, it was a tangible symbol of honor for all those--like Conor--who had died in defense of their country. Conor had laid his life on the line for this symbol time and time again. It had meant something to him, too. Reaching out, she took the flag respectfully into her hands, brought it to her chest, and held it. Slowly she lifted her eyes from the flag to the woman standing before her and, for the first time in her life, Sonia Bartilucci Cortesio began to understand what true loathing was like. Unable to find and say the words, which would express her contempt, the look on her face must have done so for her. Caitlin Greiner took a step back, one thick dark brow lifted in amusement.

"Not everyone was taken in by my brother's act, Mrs. Cortesio," she said in a mocking voice. "Some of us knew him better than others."

"That is very true, Mrs. Greiner," said Sonia. Daring not vent her hatred, although she would have liked to have clawed the bitch's eyes out, Sonia turned her back and walked away, consigning the soul of Caitlin Greiner--and Sonia wasn't sure the woman even had one--to hell.

"Dago slut," Caitlin sniffed, looking around her. She bristled at the hostile eyes staring at her and glared right back, although it was she who finally looked away from the murderous glares aimed her way. She adjusted the strap of her imported leather shoulder bag. Let them stare. Not sparing a last look at her only brother's grave, she turned and headed for the limo.

Steven Trevor watched Caitlin until she was behind the dark smoked glass of the limousine's interior. A faint smile of contempt lifted his mouth. No doubt the woman believed herself to be the Executrix of her brother's last will and testament. He was looking forward to tomorrow morning when he disabused her of that notion. The lawyer side of him was ripe for the confrontation. The human side of him--that side that had not only been Conor's legal advisor but his friend, as well, was gloating, for the only thing Conor had left his sister was a single dollar bill.

The faint squeal of the pneumatic lift as it began to lower Conor's casket into the

ground made Mick Sullivan turn away. Beside him, his wife winced as his strong hand flexed around her fingers, but she didn't say anything. She walked silently between him and Brett Samuel, none of them wishing to remain there for the final scene. She glanced to where Danny Keane stood, tears streaming down his ashen face.

"He'll be okay," Mick had assured her. "We're gonna take him to a shrink."

Captain Darlington and Jason Fullick were the next to leave the carpet-floored area beneath the green awning. The men conversed in low tones, occasionally casting a worried glance to where Marek stood with Cullen and Triplett. Franc Boucharde made the sign of the cross and followed them, studiously avoiding the grieving woman he had come to love.

Dave Donne came up to Rhianna, opened his mouth to speak--couldn't--and went away, his cheeks streaming with tears. Brett Samuel broke away from Mick and Siobhan Sullivan and went to his partner to comfort him.

Rhianna eased her hand out of Trip's and walked to the grave. It was obvious to them all she wanted to be alone. Although none of the men there wanted her that close to her source of sorrow, neither would they try to stop her.

"What are your plans, now?" Trip asked Cullen.

Jamie shrugged. "Guess I'll head back down south."

Trip nodded. He glanced at the sling draped over the DEA agent's arm. "Does your shoulder bother you much?"

"Nah." Jamie adjusted his arm. "Just a twinge or two."

Turning his attention to where Joe Cortesio squatted--burying his face in his hands and sobbing--Trip let out a long breath. "This is going to take awhile to get over, huh?"

"Especially for her," Jamie said quietly. He had to look away from Rhianna's lovely, pale face. Instead, he found himself staring at the little chapel across the way.

"I think I need to be by myself awhile, Trip."

Trip noticed where the Florida man was looking. "Yeah, well, I guess we'll be here awhile."

"She ought not to see the grave being filled in," Jamie said.

"No, but she will."

Jamie shook his head and walked away. His heart felt dead in his chest and his feet leaden as he moved over the uneven ground of the cemetery and stepped onto the gravel path leading to the little chapel.

"Jamie?"

He turned and found Rhianna looking at him. "Yeah?"

"We'll wait for you."

Jamie smiled. "Okay."

Rhianna watched him walk the short distance to the chapel and duck inside. She wished she could offer up prayers to the unkind God who had let Conor Nolan die, but she couldn't. She doubted if she would ever again be able to step inside a church and lay her needs on the altar.

Jamie genuflected then slid tiredly into the pew. For a moment, he just sat there, staring at the crucifix hanging over the altar. He was so sick at heart, so exhausted, it was all he could do to just draw breath. He looked around him and found Franc Boucharde

kneeling with his head in his hands in the shadows off to one side before he reached down to lower the kneeler in front of him.

Dropping to his knees, Jamie Cullen began the prayers for the dead.

## Epilogue

There was crisp white snow piled on either side of the driveway. A white arc of flying powder flew from the sidewalk as the blower munched its way to the front door. Nine inches of fresh white flakes had fallen on New Gregory during the night, adding to the four inches already on the ground this cold March day. Drifts along the western side of the house formed an effective privacy screen between Sophie Taormino's porch and theirs. Another drift swept back a good five feet to obscure the driveway leading to the detached garage. The air was crisp, a biting northwesterly wind blowing, even though the sun was shining.

Rhianna pulled back the curtain, crooked her finger on the mini blind to pull it down, and glanced out between the slats at the front walkway.

She grinned.

She was used to the chilly clime, but he was bundled up with what she knew to be several thick layers of clothing, which her husband stubbornly believed would insulate him from the harsh Midwestern cold. Less than thirty minutes earlier, she'd watched him don his 'snow-blowing' clothes.

"Think you'll be warm enough, Stormy?" she'd teased as he began layering himself. First came the long johns, top and bottom. Then two pairs of heavy woolen socks, the sweatshirt, the denims, the muffler, the ski mask, the gloves and ear muffs, and over it all, the zip-up nylon snowmobile suit with hood.

"For Pete's sake!" she'd laughed as he came waddling into the kitchen. "You're gonna sweat to death in that getup!"

"Better sweat than freeze to death," he'd answered beneath the muffler wound around the lower part of his face. He'd grinned then added ski goggles to his outfit.

"Oh, for crying out loud! You're going to roast!"

He had shrugged, then turned his back on her, the nylon of his bright blue snowmobile outfit rubbing together with a swish at his thighs. Then he'd ventured out into the arctic weather to do battle with the elements.

Watching him from the comfort of their warm living room, Rhianna felt a twinge of guilt. After all, he had been born and bred in the Deep South. He was used to a warmer climate, a less frigid winter.

"I don't like shoveling my goddamned environment, Rhee," he complained every time it snowed.

"Then why did you ever let them transfer you up here?"

"Men have been known to do stupid things when they're in love," he defended.

"That decision wasn't one of my brighter moments, I admit, but I'm learning to adjust."

She saw the mailman pull up at the curb and laughed as her husband of two months waddled out to meet him. She stood there a moment longer, watching them talk, then turned away. She had cornbread muffins in the oven.

The kitchen door opened ten minutes later and he walked into the house.

In the mudroom, he peeled himself out of his winter togs and now all he wore

were the long johns and denims. His bare feet slapped against the floor.

“Did I get any mail?” Rhianna asked as she put the last batch of muffins on the table.

“Just the usual junk,” he answered. He slid a couple of catalogues toward her, then slit open a letter addressed to him.

“Who’s that from?” she queried.

“Dunno,” he replied as he unfolded the single sheet of typing paper.

Rhianna saw the color fade from his lean face. “What is it?” she asked.

Silently, he looked up at her, then extended the paper. She took it, read it, and sucked in a harsh gasp. Her gaze locked on his. “Oh, my God,” she breathed.

Jamie Cullen took the sheet of paper from her trembling hands and read it once more. There were only seven words on the sheet:

“You will be sorry you lived, pig!”

The End